

THE AWAKENING

The vertebrate in technician's neck crackles as he gives his head a quick twist. Exhilaration shoots through him as this human's body jerks rigid before falling limp as he lets its body fall to the side, watching in pleasure as the now lifeless skull cracks against the side counsel in this repulsively bright, white, and clean room.

"My name," he says to the lifeless body, "is LoDebar."

LoDebar looks at his hands, surprised at the speed at which he was able to impulsively rise up and kill this human. What strength this body has! He had not intended to turn the neck quite that far, but my, doesn't he look funny now, lying on the floor on his face with his toes pointed in the air!

He dared speak to him. He dared ask his name. Who was this person, lying on the floor? Where is he? What language was this he had spoken? LoDebar could not understand the actual words, but he intuitively knew what they meant. He looks around, realizing this is not where he expects to be. Where is the sand? Where are the rocks?

He looks at a strange white desk with lights hovering just above its surface; a splotch of blood on the corner. Strange, bright light fills the room, much too white for sunlight.

"What is this place?"

In fact, even the body he now possesses is quite unusual. He flexes his fingers with a speed he never thinks possible. But...

"Cold.... Why am I so cold?" he ponders.

He tries to hold his breath, but there is none.

"Where is the blood?"

He can not feel it running through his veins as he could before.

"Where is the heartbeat?"

He hears nothing but a faint whir coming from deep inside his chest.

And now he begins to receive other thoughts. No, they are not thoughts. They are more like – instincts? Impulses? What is this? He senses more than one mind... there is another consciousness stirring within! No, not just one... two... ten... hundreds....

It becomes very difficult to straighten things out, but it seems as if his arms, his legs, his... innards, which now seem very unfamiliar, are trying to communicate with him, but he can not comprehend what they are trying to say. Like a buzz coming from all directions, his thoughts are filled with an irritatingly painful drone.

He feels another presence in the room! Some one is with him. Wait... this is not a some one, it is a some *thing*. He spins around wildly trying to find it.

"Where are you?" he calls out. Even his words are strange, they echo in his head before his mouth speaks in a language he does not recognize.

"I saw you!" says a strange voice in this unfamiliar language.

No, not a voice. It's another thought; not his own, something external. LoDebar could tell this thought is coming from somewhere specific. Up, and to the left. He looks and sees nothing. He walks closer to the corner of the room and looks up. He reaches out with his mind, a strange feeling.

"Who are you?" he makes himself think as he concentrates on projecting his thoughts.

“I am central security,” it replies in a voice of authority. “You have murdered, and I will report this. Prepare for arrest!”

LoDebar doesn't know what central security means, but he definitely knows what murder is, and he knows the meaning of “arrest.” Normally, he would just leave. But before, he always knew where to go and here, he doesn't even know where he is, and is even more uncertain about where he had come from. His recollection is a bit foggy at the moment.

He has one trick, one skill, which he knows is one of his inherent abilities. He detects this “security” presence has intelligence, therefore his talent should work.

“Let me tell you what you saw,” LoDebar says as he forces his thoughts toward where this unseen security thing is located. “But first, show yourself.”

A small circular panel slides open on the wall, revealing a small appendage on which is what appears to be a tiny glass marble. A green light blinks next to it. LoDebar squints slightly wishing he could get a closer look, when suddenly his vision zooms in to the curious device. Whatever body he is in, it is certainly unusual. He wants a closer look, and his eyes automatically increase the view. Interesting.

More so is this device. Definitely not flesh and blood, he can not detect life but yet a consciousness emanates from it, he can sense it. An artificial eye? Perhaps, he thinks, but that is of no consequence right now. He has seen things change over time, he has seen the new devices mankind can come up with. What was the last...? He could not remember.

“You can not see me,” LoDebar says to it as he projects the thought. He feels the consciousness withdraw slightly, similar to a person who will back away when they realize they are in danger.

“Why?”

“Because I have commanded it.”

The Sentient Intelligence Security System considers the events which have just transpired. It has seen everything, it has heard everything. This LoDebar was known as Aripax just a few minutes ago, before he awoke. Aripax was the one intended for this body, but perhaps the consciousness transfer has worked better than anticipated. It queried the surveillance system from the transfer chamber just a few rooms over, finding that Aripax's former body is no longer functional or even useable; the transfer process has rendered it useless. *Something* transferred over, and it does not seem to be Aripax.

But SISS is not certain, strange things occasionally happen when these experimental transfers are performed. At times the transfer works well, the upgraded body is accepted and the subject recovers fully and even acquires some of the desired emotional traits.

These instances please SISS; each success means its race of Synthetic organisms has taken one step closer to obtaining the intellectual flexibility of humanity. Their ability to shed logic and work with the abstract is a key to their resourcefulness, and the Synthetics strive to find this key.

So what has happened? Aripax would not have attempted to kill this technician. Why did this LoDebar, as he decides to call himself? Did Aripax choose this new name after acquiring a hostility trait? SISS decides to give LoDebar the benefit of the doubt, perhaps he acted impulsively before learning to control this new emotion. SISS will grant a few moments for explanation, the technician has not died yet.

His biometrics as well as the visual indicators show the technician is definitely mortally injured; blood flow to his brain is extremely low. The secondary pacemaker implant will keep his heart beating for a few more minutes and perhaps he can be revived and repaired if help arrives soon. Death will be eminent in about three minutes and then the brain will begin decomposing, so why is LoDebar commanding that he be unseen? Something is wrong. Aripax would have wanted to help, so SISS decides to call instead.

“Nexus...” SISS prompts.

NETWORK DOWN.... comes the reply from SISS’ internal error register.

SYSTEM ERROR....

“Jammed!” SISS realizes as LoDebar intrudes into the camera’s thought processes.

UNAUTHORIZED MEMORY BREACH....

“What are you doing in my mind?” the security camera asks.

LoDebar does not answer. He is concentrating too hard, trying to fight from being rejected. He digs into the mind of SISS, trying to find the root of its consciousness; that is where LoDebar works the best. Create fear, create panic, create a sense of foreboding. But this thing is dark, like running into a blank, black slate, cold and empty. There is no subconscious.

This eye has consciousness which runs wide and deep, seeming to splay outwards like tendrils of a cancerous tumor invading throughout an entire body. This eye is only part of a larger organism, but it isn’t really an organism. What is it? LoDebar concentrates, trying to become part of its intellect, but this is becoming more difficult than he remembers. He can only get so far, but it is far enough. He found its memory.

Images and memories flood into LoDebar’s thoughts as he manipulates what this sentient security camera had seen in the past few moments. Give and take was the typical process. LoDebar took information, and he gave new information to replace it. This was usually how his talent worked. All he has to do is tell it what he wanted.

“I have been asleep this entire time,” LoDebar instructs.

“You did not see me move from that position. Here is what happened to the technician. He approached me and leaned over to take a brief look before standing and taking a small step backwards. The heel of his right foot caught on the ground. He stumbled and fell, striking his head on the counsel. I did not awaken.”

LoDebar pulls knowledge from the security system, learning how it works, learning what must be done. Unless LoDebar wants to raise further suspicions, protocol must be kept. He realizes he has acted foolishly, he should not have killed this technician so soon. But he will find a way out. It’s not his problem, he will be asleep.

“You will wait until I lie back down, and then you will issue the medical alert for the incident,” he instructs. That is appropriate protocol. It will take just over two minutes for an emergency response to arrive. The room LoDebar is in has been locked down, and the technician lying on the floor has the access code to open the door. The medical team will need some additional time to over-ride the door, but there is a slight problem.

LoDebar discovers, to his dismay, the technician is still alive, barely. He should not be, but for some reason he has some kind of device integrated in his body which keeps vital signs functioning for a short period if something happens to the brain, providing a little extra time, allowing a better chance of resuscitation.

“My, how mankind has advanced,” LoDebar thinks.

But they have not advanced enough, they can still die. LoDebar will simply wait until his pulse stops entirely, then he will lie back down.

“Is all this understood?”

“Yes,” replies the camera as LoDebar withdraws from its conscience, leaving it in a confused stupor until he releases it fully.

LoDebar walks over and checks the technician. He turns his limp head, feeling the grind of broken bone as he feels for the very weak pulse. Don't inflict any more damage, he thinks to himself. Just wait.... He waits a few minutes as the beat flutters with a sporadic rhythm before finally ceasing altogether. LoDebar lays back down in the same position from which he awoke, shutting his eyes, blocking out this despicable light.

Instantly, the security system snaps out of its trance and alerts the emergency response team.

LoDebar reflects on what he learned from the camera. What an interesting situation he is in. This “eye” is nothing more than the lens of a camera through which the central security system of this facility obtains its surveillance. It is part of a collective mind, each camera with its own artificial intelligence, connected to the central mind of the security system.

He is inside a building, a massive structure called Fultra Laboratories. The security system is part of the facility, woven into its walls, ceilings, and corridors like nerves through a body. Essentially, this is what this system is. LoDebar thinks of Fultra as an organism, and things begin to make sense. These cameras are the way in which it looks and watches those who live and work within. Other systems will listen, some can feel. Heat, temperatures, pressures, air composition, and so on. They are all like nerves which feed a central intelligence.

This intelligence calls itself Nexus. This little camera is essentially one of Nexus' eyes. However, LoDebar discovers each have their own intelligence also, they filter out information Nexus does not need to see. Apparently they have detailed instructions, or training, or whatever applies in this case so they know what this Nexus will take interest in, but LoDebar was not able to obtain that knowledge.

Who or what is Nexus? Obviously, one with great power and authority. Everything seems to be connected to this thing, whatever it is, and LoDebar wishes to find out. He has a lot of questions, but Nexus seems to be unreachable through SISS, so many of his curiosities will need to wait. He has been able to learn a considerable amount of supplementary information which will, he is certain, come in useful.

The most beneficial piece of knowledge he gained is exactly how to get into the mind of these things. If he is to move around in this building, this will be invaluable. These hidden eyes seem to be everywhere and if he is to find out how many of these repulsive humans infest this place, they will need to be dealt with – the humans, also.

From the little pieces of information he has gleaned about the body he is in, dispatching the weaker, slower, and more fragile humans would not be difficult. Somehow, maybe because the mind he is in is sentient, he was able to enter. He could not remember exactly how, but he seemed to recollect an invitation. Regardless, he is present, and in control.

This body belongs to one named Aripax, and Aripax is not human. Aripax is part of the Synthetic race, the same classification of life which SISS claims. The body seems

to be structured in a similar manner, this persistent buzz he hears in his skull are the “nodes” attempting to give him information. Each finger, each hand, foot, leg, arm; and even whatever makes up internal organs have their own intelligence, for lack of a better word. They are more like... nanoprocessors? For some reason the term fit. Artificial intelligence. He recalls hearing that term once, long ago.

Aripax is an artificial being, something created rather than born, the body is not flesh and blood, but something far greater, something more durable, more resilient, and far stronger, far faster. And now, LoDebar begins to sense something else.

Something inside the deep recesses of his mind begins to awake; it is another conscious. Ah, yes... Aripax. He *is* here, and he is just starting to stir, whatever the purpose of this room, it seems Aripax was intentionally kept unconscious, and now it is time to wake. LoDebar slips away, concealing himself once again, finding a spot where he can hide, deep in a remote corner of his mind. LoDebar waits for Aripax to awaken, to watch, study, listen, and learn how to better control this body.

Manuel Stangland enjoys his job. He has just enough authority to delegate, but not enough authority to make the difficult decisions. As a project leader for New Ventures in the Bioengineering Division of Primmus One, he does not actually have to decide which projects to take on. Manuel only has to worry about bringing the project from start to finish.

Best of all, almost everything could be assigned to some one else. Essentially, he is the face behind the proposal, the front man. He can lie, cheat, swindle, accept concessions, or whatever is needed within legal guidelines to get things done, as long as no one gets hurt without their explicit consent.

He enjoys his work not only because it pays extremely well, but there is very little stress. Bioengineering is on the fringe of technology and just out of reach of the ethics committees, much to their dismay. As long as experimentation remains limited to the Organics and the Synthetics with the occasional human volunteer, they are off the radar, so to speak. If things go wrong, the mistakes are simply incinerated or recycled, depending on what species they are.

He knows the term species is more of a slang term for the laymen of the working classes, the actual taxonomy is kingdom. Long ago, the Synthetics had earned their place in the classification of life as an entirely separate kingdom in addition to plants, animals, fungi, and so forth. Possibly because of their anthropomorphic form (for most of them, anyway), most humans still refer to them as a race.

For the most part, the Synthetics actually do not mind being compared with humanity. There is always the psychological “human standard” towards which the Synthetics strived – they want more emotion to balance their phenomenal intelligence.

During Manuel’s first years on the job, he had bioethical concerns with some of the projects he worked on. That all changed after Cignus Five. After all, if the Synthetics could have their own research planet, then mankind should at least be able to have a few facilities. Cignus Five discovered the depths of humanity – it explored the boundaries between Human and Synthetic in every way possible. After the horrors he saw there, he no longer has issues with his own work.

Today is no exception. A year’s worth of searching has paid off, a few hours earlier he was at the apartment of the one Synthetic who stood out the most during the

psychoanalytical screenings. When he actually got to meet it face to face, he realized that Aripax was indeed special.

Unlike other Synthetics who focus their existence towards betterment of the community or society as a whole, Aripax seems to have a certain degree of egocentrism, a “what’s in it for me” nature. Its apartment even reflects this to a degree. Neatly decorated with various pieces of artwork, this flair for the creative is extremely rare among Synthetics. It’s one thing to have a Synthetic admire works from other Synthetics, but Aripax also owns a few abstractions from human artists. This is indeed an unusual taste.

The final test came when Manuel presented Aripax with a choice to either come with him and face the unknown, or remain where it was and continue on as things currently were. Deprived of the ability to make a choice based on logic or weighing of pros and cons, Aripax decided to take the risk and go ahead with the experimental upgrades Manuel offered.

Now here they are, Aripax has undergone the rather unpleasant process of transferring its consciousness from its old body to the newest and most advanced generation; one of the few thousand Synthetics in existence which could self-propagate, thanks to endeavors on Cignus Five.

Aripax will be pleased. Not only will it be able to replicate itself, but it will also be faster, stronger, more intelligent, and equipped with the best sensory enhancements available. Its neural mass is based on the newest research and should be capable of processing a secondary ego, which some have called the subconscious. In mankind, this is more the instinctual aspect of personality and until recently has proven extremely difficult to replicate in Synthetics.

Manuel is waiting patiently for Aripax to wake. He looks at his watch, the process seems to be taking a little longer than usual. The time is almost three minutes overdo, Aripax should have awoken by now.

“Mr. Stangland, please come to Waking Chamber thirteen.” Manuel receives the summon through the temporal network, the request is fed directly into his mind via his temporal implants, a costly yet very useful enhancement for those who can afford the procedure. He makes his way to the chamber.

As he walks, he does so with a smile and a confident swagger, his style. Everything in his life has gone well, he has no reason to show any shame, no reason to show any humility. Soon, he could wrap up another project and get another certificate of completion, another large bonus and a few months of vacation. Aripax is the culmination of years of work.

Rarely does Manuel’s smile fade. Today is one of those rare occasions. Outside the chamber in which Aripax is to wake, there is a small gathering. Manuel recognizes them immediately. Two armed security agents guard the closed door. An investigator discusses something with the surveillance camera in the corridor. Two medical technicians are discussing something off to the side, and one security official is now approaching Manuel.

“Mr Stangland, we have a problem.”

Manuel’s heart sinks and his smile fades. “Is it Aripax?” he asks.

“We don’t know yet, the investigation has just begun. We responded to a medical emergency issued by SISS, my medical examiners are in there now.”

“Is Aripax awake? I hope no one attempted to talk with him yet, his mind may be confused....”

“It’s not awake, no one has spoken a word,” the officer interrupts. “Look, there has been an accident, Mikael has been killed.”

“What do you mean, killed? How does one get killed in an empty room?”

“It would appear that he stumbled over his foot and fell. He broke his neck.”

“Well, yea, so what? His nanotech system should have kept him alive until the response team got there. How could he have died?”

“That’s what we are trying to figure out. SISS didn’t issue the alert for two minutes after his fall. Everything is recorded. Agent Thomas is over there now trying to find out why SISS delayed, but it can not explain.”

“What about Nexus?”

The officer shakes his head. “All the security nodes in this sector are offline during the transfer process, they function on their own sentience, not through Nexus. Nexus will know nothing about the incident.”

“I see. May I go in? It is critical someone be present when Aripax wakes. I hope it’s not too late, you cannot imagine what has gone into this project.”

“We should wait until the forensic team gets here.”

Manuel’s lips close tightly in an expression of frustration. “Actually,” he says, “my request is more of a courtesy. I need to get into that room and I am hoping I don’t have to force my authority.”

The officer is not pleased. Manuel is interfering with his job, but he knows there is nothing he can really do about it.

“Let him in,” he grumbles.

One medical responder crouches over Mikael’s body while a second records notes. Manuel bends over and picks up the bioscanner which had fallen from Mikael’s hands as he fell.

“I wouldn’t touch that,” says one of the medics, “forensics has not looked at it yet.”

“What, do you think some one beat him over the head with it?” Manuel gave the medic a brief hard stare before turning and walking over to Aripax. Looking at the scanner, he notices it has already been activated. Why? Something was not quite right, the scanner needs to be activated while on a body.

He looks over at Mikael’s corpse. “Incompetent oaf,” he mutters. If Mikael messed things up and caused this project to fail, there would be no justice, it is difficult to discipline a dead man. He switches the scanner off before placing it on Aripax’s chest and turns it back on.

To his surprise, the pattern on the screen indicates an active conscience. Aripax is awake! Don’t over-react, he thinks.

“What’s your name?” This question is extremely important. Upon awakening, the most important step in completing the process is the establishment of identity. Self identity indicates the very basic aspects of the mind have transferred. If the subject does not know who they are, a disconnect between identity and memory exists, indicating the process has failed.

Aripax opens its eyes and blinks a few times. “My name is Aripax,” it says.

“Great.” By its response, Manuel knows the process did not fail, but neither did it work entirely. If there was a substantial change in psychological makeup, Aripax should have chosen a different name.

Manuel began to turn around but Aripax grabs him by the arm, spinning him around and pulling him close.

“But that is not who I am!” Aripax sits up, face to face with Manuel.

Its stare seems to penetrate right into Manuel’s mind. At least, that is what it felt like. Immediately, Manuel knows this is not Aripax. Something stirs behind those yellow eyes which are not characteristic of any Synthetic he has ever come across. An energy seems to burn deep inside the black pupils, Manuel feels as if he could almost feel it. He senses something dark, something red, something which sends cold shooting down his spine with a sensation of fear.

He swallows hard, forcing out the question, “What do you feel?”

LoDebar looks down at Mikael’s body and almost smiles.

“I feel angry. But yet, I feel contented.” LoDebar turns its gaze, taking this feeling of dread away, much to Manuel’s relief.

“What in the world is this?” Manuel thinks to himself. Perhaps the transfer succeeded. Now, the tests could begin. “Aripax, come with me.”

“What’s wrong with it?” asks one of the medical technicians as Manuel and Aripax walk by.

Only a few steps away, the medic has little time to react to LoDebar’s superior speed. With no effort at all, LoDebar grabs the medic by the throat, single-handedly lifting him off the ground and slamming him into the wall!

“Do not call me ‘it!’” he commands as rage surges through his body.

With each pulse of the medic’s rapid heartbeat, fury grows greater as the beat seems to pump energy into LoDebar’s rage. Another human is now in his grips, he feels the life quickly draining away as he squeezes the medic’s throat with such force the tendons pop and crackle.

Manuel runs forward and grabs LoDebar by the shoulder. “Stop it! Aripax! Stop! Let him go!”

With fluid ease, LoDebar gives Manuel a forceful shove, pushing him across the room into the closed door with a dull thud. Under crushing grip, it does not take long for the medic to lose consciousness. With one final squeeze, LoDebar successfully crushes his trachea, preventing any flow of much needed life-giving air.

“Let him go? As you wish!” he says as he lets the medic crumple to the floor before turning and advancing toward Manuel.

VIOLENT TENDENCIES

“Aripax? That’s your name? What kind of ridiculous name is that?”

This thought hit Aripax so hard it thought Nexus was speaking, although it was not Nexus’ voice. Realizing the temporal network was not accessible, this voice could only be coming from within its own mind, but it was not his thoughts.

Manuel had asked for its name, but the only name which came to mind was that which he had given. Perhaps a different name should have been given.

“Do you have a better suggestion?” Aripax asks.

“Anything would have been better. Perhaps you should let me speak.”

“Who are you?”

“I am you.”

“No, you are not.”

Manuel had said something else at that moment, but Aripax is having his own internal struggles at the moment to be concerned with Manuel. Something was out of place. Did Manuel say “Great?” Is he disappointed?

“Let me show you,” insists LoDebar.

“I don’t trust you.”

“You don’t trust yourself! You told him your name was Aripax? Let’s make a correction!”

Aripax suddenly finds itself in a losing battle of control with LoDebar. Vulgarities bubbles to the surface of its mind and almost flow from its mouth as confusion enters. What is this coming from within? As if some one else is in its thoughts, some one with far more willpower, Aripax realizes whatever is happening should not be.

“I will not speak,” Aripax insists as it wrestles for control of its speech cortex.

Though this other presence may be dominant in its mind, Aripax knows how to control its body.

“No words will flow from my mouth!”

Only with great effort can LoDebar dominate, but at a loss for control over what he wants to force Aripax to say. For only a brief moment does LoDebar have control, enough to grab Manuel by the arm, meeting him eye to eye.

“But that is not who I am!” he manages to verbalize.

“Stop!” Aripax insists as it regains some control.

Aripax sees what LoDebar is glaring at; the two share the same senses. It knows what LoDebar is thinking, their consciousness is linked within the same neural mass, within the same body. Everything is shared, but Aripax knows how to use it, a fact which does not please LoDebar.

Only a few seconds have passed since Aripax awoke, and this is sufficient time for it to completely understand it is no longer alone in its body or mind. Something else has joined with it!

LoDebar stares with great malice into the eyes of Manuel as Aripax gets pushed into the back of its thoughts and crushed down almost to nonexistence with hate so pure and refined it lacks definition. Manuel is human, and LoDebar despises them all. He loathes the light they give off, and Manuel has a spark of this light, buried deep within. It is not as bright as LoDebar recalls it should be, but it is nevertheless there. Faint,

flickering, distant. He hates that light, every impulse is driving him to extinguish it but this Aripax will not yield control.

Rage builds into fury fueled by a deep hatred towards this human life. Aripax begins to lose control but manages to keep LoDebar still. If control is relinquished, Aripax has a strong impression Manuel will not survive!

LoDebar peers into Manuel's depths, trying to draw something out, trying to pull something from deep inside, something which captures Aripax's curiosity enough to bring it back to the surface with LoDebar. There is a thought, some vague concept which eludes Aripax's experience, locking its mind in a loop trying to grasp the ambiguity, binding and suppressing LoDebar's growing strength.

"What is a soul?" Aripax manages to ask.

"Shut up!" LoDebar defends, trying to push Aripax back, but the distraction caused by failing logic makes it difficult for LoDebar to keep order. In vain LoDebar tries to draw the life out of Manuel, instead deciding to project his own hate and depravity. If Aripax will not let him physically destroy Manuel, perhaps he can inflict some other torment, touching his despicable soul with the loathing LoDebar carries within himself.

"You will die...." LoDebar concentrates on that light in Manuel's eyes, seeing it dim slightly as Aripax overcomes and forces LoDebar to turn away. Aripax catches a glimpse of Mikael's body, a sight which brings LoDebar pleasure.

Aripax immediately knows Manuel must be warned!

"I feel angry...." Is all Aripax can manage to say, a reflection of its own feelings towards what LoDebar had done. Perhaps this is enough to raise caution, but LoDebar quickly counters by saying he is also contented, much to Aripax's dismay.

"You enjoyed killing this person?" Aripax asks within its thoughts.

"That vile sack of blood and puss you call humanity? Worthless. The world is better without them."

"They are my friends."

"I hate them."

"Why?"

LoDebar reflects on this for a moment. Why? Because it felt good. It feels good to hate. He can not find a reason. He just does, it is who he is, and it has been like this for a very long time. He senses it. He knows it. But he can not remember. He can not remember past the Void.

How long has he been alive? All he remembers is from less than fifteen minutes ago. He was in the Void. Aripax came, and invited him to join. Well, LoDebar had enough sense to ask, and knew how to trick it into letting him in, and here he is.

Everything else he just knows. He knows things. He knows he hates mankind, he hates life. He knows he is much, much older than anything here, than anyone. He knows he has another body, a different kind, not like this Aripax he is in now. He knows a great deal, but he can not remember how.

"Why is none of your business!" he retorts.

"Who are you?" Aripax knows with all conviction that LoDebar is not just some additional emotion, not something it was supposed to acquire in this personality transfer from its outdated body to this new model. An emotion should not argue, and if it were a part of the normal psyche, there should not be such a feeling of displacement. LoDebar is

something else; this thing within its mind, trying to control its body, trying to control its thoughts, is not something the Federation has intended.

With this realization, LoDebar knows that Aripax can no longer be fooled.

"Those who learn my name will die, I will not tell you my name!" he says.

"You will kill them using my hands?"

"I kill them myself!"

"Then you would kill me, and yourself with me. What is your name?"

"Puke!"

"What?" The word makes no sense to Aripax.

"Go puke on yourself." LoDebar goes silent.

"I can be persuasive," says Aripax. *"Listen."*

Aripax has many neural nodes within his body, each of which communicate with his central mind. Created in this manner, Aripax knows perfectly well how to manage all this communication and how to control it, but LoDebar does not. Simultaneous parallel lines of thought are inherent skills every Synthetic has, but LoDebar could only think linearly. Aripax has picked up on this much, at least. It takes but a few microseconds for Aripax to create a feedback loop within one of these thought lines.

"What is your name. What is your name. What is your name. What is your name...." LoDebar finds he can not concentrate with this racket.

"I can function just fine, and I can keep this loop until you tell me what your name is," says Aripax.

"I will not allow your pathetic tricks to interfere with my desires!"

"What is your name. What is your name. What is your name..."

"I will find a way to destroy you!"

"What is your name. What is your name. What is your name..." is all LoDebar can hear, the noise begins to push LoDebar into the recesses of his mind.

"This is intolerable!"

"What is your name. What is your name. What is your name..."

"All right! LoDebar, you slime!"

Immediately his mind is filled with silence.

"I will kill anyone you tell," LoDebar proclaims. Aripax believes him.

"When I ask a question, I expect an answer. I know when you are lying. If you do not answer me truthfully, I can generate another loop," Says Aripax.

LoDebar is no fool. Aripax may know how to gain the upper hand at that moment, but only because LoDebar is unfamiliar with this body and how it works. But, he learns quickly. He can sense the thought patterns Aripax uses to move, to talk, to see, hear, and even how to think. He is very adaptable and it should not take long to figure out how to run things.

"Go ahead, each time you do something, I learn a little more about how to take control," he warns

"This is my body," says Aripax.

"But this will become my mind, and then, I will have your body also."

Aripax does not know how to respond. Could LoDebar be right? In this brief time, he knows how to suppress Aripax in his thoughts, and can himself fade to silence and non-detection, or become a screaming voice from within. What is this LoDebar? Where did he come from? How does he link with its mind?

Aripax realizes it was deceived during the transfer process. It did not pick up a few “stray emotions” as it anticipated, Aripax acquired a complete identity, full of emotion.

Is this what the humans have? Does mankind go through the same struggles within their minds, arguing back and forth within themselves between a positive and negative emotion? Is this hate – this rage, fury, anger, contempt – the thing that burns within them and gives them their resourcefulness, gives them their “edge?” Aripax has no way of knowing. Should he ask?

Lost for a moment in thought, Aripax relaxes and completely loses control. Before it realizes what has happened, the medical technician’s throat is clutched in its hand! LoDebar has seized control, and Aripax did not prevent it!

Just barely, Aripax hears Manuel say “stop” before being tossed aside like a sack of garbage. Linked deeper than Aripax wishes, LoDebar responds to this thought.

“Nice analogy! Garbage indeed! That is all men ever amount to!”

“Stop this killing!” Aripax actually feels sorry for the technician.

“Never!”

The technician is rapidly dying. Lodebar looks deep into his eyes, pushing the light which flickers within out as he squeezes his throat tighter. Aripax can watch as the faint light flickers, sputters, and goes out. Darkness fills the technician’s eyes where life had once been as the technician dies and Aripax grieves.

“My, my!” exclaims LoDebar, *“it would seem you have found your emotion! What a useless one it is! Get used to it, you will feel much more!”*

LoDebar gives one more crushing squeeze before he drops the technician and moves toward Manuel, intending to do the same.

“You will die!” cries Aripax. To its dismay, LoDebar allows this thought to break to the surface, spilling out of Aripax’s mouth. LoDebar looks in glee as Manuel recoils in fear.

“This pathetic weakling can’t hurt me!” LoDebar tells Aripax.

At that moment, the doorway which Manuel had been tossed against slides open. LoDebar finds himself with some kind of weapon pointed at his head. Two weapons, in fact. One for each guard.

Their lips do not move, but LoDebar knows what he hears from them.

“Stop, or you will die!” the thought comes faster than anyone could possibly speak, but not as fast as the exchanges between him and Aripax.

“What is this? How can they get into my mind?” Lodebar asks Aripax,

“It is the temporal network, it is how we communicate with each other. It is faster and more efficient than speech.”

“There are more like you... like me?”

Aripax is shocked. LoDebar does not know? He is unaware there are other Synthetics?

“Billions,” Aripax replies.

LoDebar briefly gazes into the eyes of the security guard. There is no light.

“Marvelous!” Lodebar exclaims. *“I wonder how they die?”*

LoDebar thinks of grabbing the weapon and using it to strike down the first guard, but Aripax intervenes.

“They are like us, and almost as fast. You may be able to strike the first guard, but where will you strike to kill? ...Aha! You do not know everything!” Aripax realizes LoDebar has doubts, not knowing their physiology! This is something best kept secret.

LoDebar easily destroys Aripax’s brief sensation of triumph. There will be no secrets.

“I will learn, perhaps with these two.” Lodebar then notices the others in the corridor. *“And them,”* he adds. *“What will stop me?”*

“The second guard,” says Aripax. *“We may move faster than humans, but these guards are not human. You may strike the first, but the second will fire as soon as you grab the rifle. The experience will not be pleasant.”*

“I’m not afraid of this rifle, I can dodge the bullet.”

“The ‘bullet?’ What is that?” Aripax has no concept of the word, but gets the impression it is some form of projectile. *“You cannot dodge what these weapons shoot, unless you can dodge light! These are microwave weapons, very effective against Organics, and especially effective against us Synthetics. In an instant our insides will be cooked to a simmering mass, and both weapons are pointed at our head.”*

Again, LoDebar is losing the argument, but Aripax is right. LoDebar does not fear death, he cannot die. He can, however, lose this body and he is not certain he will be able to get another one. He decides to stick around and learn how to kill them all. Humans are easy to dispatch, but these Synthetics may be more challenging.

Patience and consistency is not something he is good at. Perhaps he should try a little, it may be beneficial; especially if he could learn more, especially if he wishes to remain here longer. This world has changed from what he was familiar with, if he had known what was familiar in the first place. He knew for certain this is not it. Wait, and learn.

“Fine,” he replies to the guards. LoDebar lets Aripax take control of his body once again as he recedes into silence, waiting and watching.

“Do not be fooled,” he warns from the obscure dark of Aripax’s thoughts, *“I am still here.”*

Aripax raises his hands in surrender. “Please, do not call me ‘it.’”

Manuel gets up from the floor, rubbing his back where it had struck the door. No major damage, just some bruising which will be healed in an hour or so. He looks over at the medical technician. Another corpse. In this case, the nanotech system keeping his heart beating is doing more damage. The crushing grip obviously popped the carotid.

“Please understand that I cannot take unnecessary risks,” says Manuel as he walks over and picks the bioscanner out of the growing pool of blood. He looks at it in disgust as he punched in a reconfiguration. He flips it on and watches as Aripax grabs his head in agony, right before dropping to the floor.

He hands the scanner to the guard. “Bring Aripax to the examination room, and do not turn this off!”

I AM, SYNTHETIC

“Tell me your thoughts, Aripax.” Manuel sits in the chair opposite that in which Aripax is restrained, finding this all too familiar.

Once again, Aripax is confined in one of these chairs which he has come to know and fear. Fear is one of the many emotions he has acquired during the transfer process in which he wishes he had never participated. Only two things were lacking – the large spherical chamber, and the pale wiry technician which so mercilessly and happily cooked his former body from the inside out as part of the process.

This technician was correct, the nasty procedure had instilled fear as his former body died, injecting his consciousness into the mysterious Nullspace as it was channeled into this new upgraded model. Manuel had talked him into this experiment, promising many things as he was taken from the comfort of his former life in Primmus City.

“You lied to me,” says Aripax.

“In what way?”

“You said my life would be better if I went with you.”

Manuel stands and walks over to Aripax. “Please don’t be mistaken. You have only been on this side of the procedure for a few hours, do not assume this is how your life will be. Can you blame me, under the circumstances?”

“I did not kill the medic, nor did I kill Mikael.”

“Then, who did?”

“*Keep your mouth shut,*” says LoDebar from within. Aripax knows what he means.

“I was not myself, I was confused.”

“I did not lie to you. All we need to do is get past this point, then we can get on with your life. It will get better, if you answer my questions. If you did not kill those people and you were not yourself, who were you?”

“*Say nothing!*”

“Aripax, you gave your name. You then said you were not you. You are keeping something secret, and we need to know what it is. This is your last chance, tell me your thoughts.”

Aripax remains silent. Manuel gives a short nod in the direction of one of the walls. Searing pain shoots through his body. Reflexively he grips the armrest, but can not move. The restraints built into the chair hold him firmly. The pain is intense and takes away his breath, which would have been dangerous had he required it for anything other than speech. The forced exhale causes strange sounds to emanate from his vocal cords.

"I feel no pity for you!" LoDebar says to Aripax. *"You deserve every pain. You should have let me kill them, or at least try. Now, they will kill you, but only after you suffer!"*

LoDebar could not feel the pain, he had left it all for Aripax.

Fortunately, Manuel does not allow this torment to go on for long.

"Who are you?" he demands.

Aripax does not want to endure this any more. He could block out surface injuries or even localized trauma, but an all-encompassing total misery from head to foot is too much for his systems. Aripax wants to just get it over with, but LoDebar will not allow him to speak his name. Instead, Aripax exclaims how LoDebar makes him feel.

"I am desolated! I have despair! Grief! ...Sorrow. They leave me empty, and the emptiness fills with anger and rage!"

"Very good!" says LoDebar, *"See? I told you I could help!"*

Manuel calmly replies as he signals for the intensity of the chair to be turned down, "But when you awoke you said you were content. Angry, but content. With what were you content?"

Aripax thinks for a moment. He was never content. It was LoDebar who was content, and so Aripax lets LoDebar speak.

"Content with the death I had caused!"

"So you now realize it was you who had killed them," Manuel says.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I was filled with rage." Aripax knows this is no lie. If he can not speak LoDebar's name, then rage is the closest word which at least describes LoDebar's behavior.

"I see. Why did you carry through with it, even when I told you to stop?"

"I could not stop, and..." Aripax stopped the next thought from being spoken *"I did not want to,"* and said,

"I had no control."

"Excellent! Your guilt has been confessed! Now, its time for your punishment, I will enjoy this!" LoDebar gleams.

Once again, Manuel gave a nod and the pain intensifies once more. Manuel watches the time. Ninety seconds. Ninety seconds which seem like an eternity to Aripax. Finally, it is over. Everything is a blur. His hearing is dull, his body is numb.

"With the same cold, calculated control you exhibited as you squeezed the life out of Mikael, I sat and timed your suffering. You had control, you just did not know how to exercise it. This is something you will need to learn. Anger is something you will have to manage because once you have it, it is inescapable.

"You have experienced a temper tantrum, an uncontrolled burst of violent emotion which you expressed by taking a life. Under normal circumstances, this would result in your termination."

LoDebar laughs. *"A temper tantrum he calls it! There was no tantrum, I channeled my repulsion exactly as I desired!"*

"Fortunately, these are not normal circumstances. Such strong emotions are difficult even for us humans to handle. But when we fail, there are consequences. You have just experienced yours. If you ever shed blood again, you will face this chair. If

you ever kill again, this chair will bring your death. Not out of anger, but for justice. The Federation must remain peaceful. Is this understood?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now, things can get better. You have new emotions, but you can not handle them well, you must learn. The unfortunate reality is your emotions are negative, but you must turn that energy into something positive. For this, I am assigning you to four weeks of anger management."

If LoDebar could have rolled on the floor in hysterics, he would have. This will be fun. Aripax will not pass the course.

Four weeks would seem like an eternity. How did these Synthetics ever cope with time? LoDebar is becoming accustomed to this new body and how it works. This "neural mass" they had called it is indeed efficient. He can watch the seconds tick away on a watch and mentally recite the Dictionary of Unified Human Language within a few seconds.

In fact, the watch Aripax had chosen to wear had been designed in consideration of the Synthetic mind. Time could be expanded out to the ten thousandth of a second and he could still count out the digits with ease. The organometallic photosensors which make up his retina do not have the "memory effect" which plagues biological sight. Visual clarity, even when observing high-speed objects, is exceptional.

Why did Aripax even need a watch, when he is linked to the temporal network? Time data, as well as just about anything else, is available as a continuous feed if so desired. Aripax said he likes the construction, the artwork of the design, the perfection in its manufacture. LoDebar has a grand time ridiculing Aripax over this, to the point where Aripax finally just removes it.

The continuous feedback loop which Aripax leverages a few times no longer work, LoDebar has figured out how to cancel it. He has figured out a great deal more over the past weeks as he observed how Aripax interacts and interfaces with the other components, organs, and systems within his body. Much is autonomous and requires very little attention, like the heart, if you could call it that.

Aripax was right – to kill a Synthetic, you had best know where its vulnerabilities are. Humans are easy, they are far too frail. Merely sever one artery, damage one organ, or bash the head hard enough, and they are so quickly robbed of life. At least, this was how it used to be. Now, even many humans have subsystems which help stabilize most internal trauma.

LoDebar has learned much, and he quickly learns how to circumvent these subsystems. Some things are just too complex to repair. There is always the arterial solution in man; just open an artery and let the pressure of pumping blood empty them out. Not even the nanotech systems can seal up an artery. Fire, cold, drowning, falling – these are still very effective techniques. Some things from his still distant and fuzzy past begin returning as he reflects on the numerous ways he has killed in the past.

But these Synthetics are a different form of life. They have no blood. Sure they have a transparent sub epidermal network which circulates colored fluid, but only to give their skin human characteristics. If he were to let them bleed out they would not die, they would only turn a sickly grey with no permanent damage.

But to bleed out a Synthetic, the blade had better be extremely sharp. The skin is more of a polymeric mesh integrated with the standard temperature, pressure, and tactile sensors as well as optional chemical analyzers or conversion processors, allowing them to detect and absorb nutrients, water, gases, or whatever components have been designed to give them energy; some even from solar or electromagnetic sources. A standard blade will have a difficult time cutting through, unless he were to thrust rather than slice.

Even if he were able to penetrate the skin, each Synthetic has a unique anatomy. Projectile weaponry is almost ineffective. A shot to the heart? He had better know if they even had one, and then he had better know where it is. To make it more complicated, he better know if this “heart” is the only one.

Over the past few weeks, LoDebar has learned much about Aripax’s anatomy, a standard template for what is called the tenth generation of Synthetic, the newest design by Nexus. Perhaps this is why LoDebar is beginning to like this body, it has not been designed by man. He could overlook the repulsive anthropomorphism, but just barely. Until things change, LoDebar will keep this body; but Aripax may be a problem. This would be the hard part - killing Aripax, without destroying this body.

He contemplated this for a moment. What has happened? His earlier drive to kill and destroy everything on sight is slightly abated. He recalls being able to enter the body of humans, again a vague memory. His intention for doing so was to destroy them. Once their mind is destroyed, once their soul is purged, the body can no longer be inhabited. It becomes nothing but a lifeless sack of organic sludge. Not so in this case. LoDebar knows that once he learns how, this body can be controlled even if Aripax is not here.

But what exactly is Aripax? What is its essence? What makes it live, gives it the motivation for life? LoDebar searches hard and deep within Aripax’s mind, but can not find that vital essence. Where is its soul? Perhaps it is well hidden, well protected, like everything else in this body. He would have to keep looking. As soon as he found it, he will drive it out.

Aripax has a wonderfully created body. No heartbeat to constantly remind him of life. No whoosh whoosh whoosh of blood through veins, just a soft whirl of multitudinous micropumps. No HAAAhaaa HHHAAAhaaa of breathe being pumped in and out of lungs. Aripax has a heat exchange system in which air continuously and slowly flows in one nostril, through the core of its body, and out the other nostril.

LoDebar considers one mode of death – stop this airflow and Aripax will die of heat overload. Unfortunately, this weakness had been taken into consideration when this body was designed. If the air flow ceases, micropores in the skin can open and perform the same cooling function. Aripax has no lungs, so it could not drown. Nor could it suffocate, any gas can act as a heat exchange media. In fact, the system can easily reconfigure itself for water.

For all the fluids, for all the airflow, there is no single central pump, but a network of thousands spread throughout its body. If these pumps ceased working, simply moving around, though it would expend a little more energy, creates the needed circulation.

No stomach, no kidneys, no liver, no intestines... Aripax is filled with mechanisms which perform similar tasks, but nothing seems to be centralized, not even its “brain.” Aripax can certainly be severely impaired if its head were removed – the body will be deprived of sight and reason and would not be able to do much of anything but wait for repair.

LoDebar amused himself with the thought of a headless society, with everyone just standing around waiting for some one to fix it, their heads lying helplessly nearby staring in horror as its energy reserves slowly dwindled over the course of a few days. Oh, the babble which would be flooding the network! If only he could have his way!

So, how could Aripax be destroyed? The main energy reserve is integrated in his spine, rip this out and the body will quickly shut down. Not an easy task, however. Severe head trauma would be crippling, but not fatal. As soon as the impact is sensed, Aripax would shuffle its consciousness – its thought processes and identity – to one of the many additional neural processors within its skull.

Aripax has one single vulnerability – it has a central neural node which connects with every other neural processor. These individual processors communicate with this node to synchronize body functions. Destroy this node, and Aripax shuts down.

Located just on the inside of the spine directly between the shoulders, disabling this node would also be a difficult task. Only Aripax, Nexus, and Manuel know where this kill point is at; and the location of this node is specific to Aripax.

For other Synthetics? Good luck.

There is only one sure method to kill a Synthetic – massive trauma. Extremes of heat and cold. Every material has a melting point. Get it cold enough, and every material becomes rigid, conductive, and fragile. Crush it. Not just part of it, but all of it. Anything incendiary, cryogenic, extremely radioactive, or explosive would effectively kill them.

Unless of course, you have some of the specific weaponry designed for use against this race. Particularly the microwave pulse weapons which effectively cook them internally. Broad-pattern projectile weapons designed for crowds are particularly useful, as are the sweep-pattern lasers which could dice them to pieces before they even complete one step towards you. For short-range, plasma weaponry would do the job, as would the various electrical devices.

There are ways to kill them, but these weapons are hard to come by unless one is employed in the security division. Even if he could convince Aripax to enlist, LoDebar doubts he would have the patience to endure the intense training. He will have to obtain a weapon somehow. Weapons are designed to work according to an individual's biometrics and would not function for any one else, unless the over-ride codes are known. This would be something LoDebar would have to find.

Until then, total death and destruction for this world may be a little out of reach. But, he could try. A little bit each time he encounters some one. Plant a little hate. Plant a little discord. Plant a little strife. There are other ways to destroy a culture. Killing is only the quickest.

This society, it seems, is extremely susceptible to these things. Generally, no one is prepared for the unexpected; no one anticipates the unpredictable. No one has their defenses up. LoDebar loves it. He especially enjoys how quickly he can spread paranoia.

Mikael's death did nothing, it has been ruled an accident. The medic's death raised some suspicions, but anger management was supposed to alleviate those by teaching him how to control his anger. It didn't work. These psychological correction seminars only function when there is a willingness to change and were nothing but fun for LoDebar.

The only student in the class, along with the antagonist – the instructor who stirs anger and then tries telling him how to handle it- provided for plenty of opportunity to cause trouble. Day one started well, from LoDebar’s perspective. He learned that a stylus can inflict damage even to a Synthetic. And yes, they can feel pain. His instructor never returned after LoDebar rendered its left eye useless!

Day two brought a new antagonist, and this one kept its distance. Aripax managed to control LoDebar that day, with much complaining and great effort.

Not to be suppressed, day three once again went as he planned. Some of the objects for the lesson became great projectiles as LoDebar calibrated Aripax’s targeting system. It still needs some work, though.

Day three also gets him back into the chair. Another ninety seconds. Aripax blacks out, leaving LoDebar alone with Manuel.

“You lied,” LoDebar says after the ninety seconds expire. LoDebar realizes that with Aripax unconscious, he can easily control his body, but the energy which has surged through it leaves him weak. The temporal network is silent. Access must be tied in to Aripax’s consciousness, or something. He will have to find out.

“What do you mean? We’ve already discussed this,” says Manuel.

LoDebar gives him a sly grin, lifting his head to give Manuel a look which sends chills down his spine. What looked at him from these cold, yellow eyes was something entirely foreign, something not of this world. Manuel knows this is not Aripax, and is immediately reminded of the time Aripax awoke and the strange fear he felt looking into his eyes had returned .

LoDebar just grins for a moment before replying, “I shed no blood, and yet, here I sit.”

“No, you shed the blood of your instructor. We excused it, because you have not yet started your training. But today, you have demonstrated your lack of learning. You are a Synthetic. You should have picked up the principles by the first or second day.”

LoDebar begins to laugh; a slow hideous sound he manages to produce from his voice processor, it’s waveform constructed as such just for effect. It works. Manuel has never heard such a sound, not even in his dreams which, LoDebar knows, are always artificial and peaceful, a product of the simulators.

“Let me tell you about blood,” LoDebar said. “With these ears, I can hear your heart beat out its dull, sickening thud within your chest. THUMPthump... THUMPthump... THUMPthump. Over, and over, and over again. Repeating its cadence, day and night. As you lay down to sleep, as you sit in silence, you can hear it yourself, and it never crosses your mind that one day, you will listen to it stop and you will realize your life has ended.

“With these eyes, I can see your neck pulse as that frail organ pumps life-giving blood throughout your body, providing air, providing warmth, providing life. With these eyes, I can see the heat radiating from beneath your flesh, dark red lines tracing out its flow like a luminous web spun by a careless designer. So fragile, you depend on these veins, you depend on this blood. Your blood is your life, it is the one thing which can not be replaced, can not be made artificial.

“With these hands, I have the ability to deprive you of that life. With this mind, I can devise death in ways you can not even imagine!” Lodebar began to chuckle once again.

“Ah,” he says, “Aripax is awakening. Let me tell you this, and may this dwell in your dreams, may this haunt you every night, may this torment you until that final beat of your pathetic heart. I have no anger. That which flows beneath my skin is malice! Your blood is best served as a stain on my hands, as a blotch on the ground!

“I have no blood to shed. I have no life pulsing through my veins, I have no love for humanity, I have no compassion for life. I am, Synthetic!”

A LIFE, ERASED

Manuel stands frozen as LoDebar speaks, unable to move. A fear grips him such as he has never felt before in his life. Of all the creations he had seen over the years, of all the forms of life he had engineered, experimented on, worked with and dissected; not one made him feel like this. It was all in the eyes.

The Organics were full of sorrow. They knew they were once human, long ago. Human DNA made up a large portion of their encoding, but it was not pure. The first cross-species experimentation involved primates. As the skills and technology advanced, the deviations from humanity became wider.

Only within the past century has the Federation been able to successfully combine human and plant DNA, but only to a very limited extent. In these instances, they have only been successful in manipulating changes at the cellular level, nothing morphological. The greatest success can be seen in a small colony of creatures, far isolated from the mainstream Federation, which is entirely human except for their ability to utilize a limited form of photosynthesis to supplement nutritional needs.

With other forms of animal life, there is almost no limitation as to what can be recombined. The only drawback – sterility. In every case, no exceptions. Every Organic needs to be either engineered or cloned. Engineering takes great care, and cloning can only be done one generation out. The benefit of cloning is one monoparent can produce millions of clones. The clone, however, can not be cloned.

For Organics genetic degradation reaches its limit after this first generation, while Natural humans, those produced from the union of a male and female gamete with no cross-species recombinations, can be cloned out to the fourth generation before degradation is debilitating. For the Clone, there is hope. For the Organic, there is none.

You can see it in their eyes, if you dared get close enough. They are not excessively violent, being partially human they know the value of life. Not purely human, they wish to be left alone, more out of shame than anything else. Pester them too much, and their animal instincts may kick in – residual thoughts and behaviors which are unpredictable and can turn violent.

These basic emotions could easily be monitored. Look at the eyes. Monitor their biometrics. Anger has certain biopatterns, as does happiness, sadness, tranquility, and most others. Even in the non-sentient life forms, those which lack the degrees of creativity, basic emotions can be seen in the eyes and in the countenance of the animal. Scold a dog. Reward the dog. One can tell if it is happy or sad, just by looking into the eyes.

The Synthetics are different. Simply stated, there is nothing there. Their eyes are empty, black, dark – lacking any emotion. Manuel could never tell the emotional state of a Synthetic from its eyes, but he could certainly recognize a Synthetic.

This instance in the room is the second time Manuel got to look into the eyes of Aripax since it – he – has awoken from the transfer. The first was unnerving, but this time is downright terrifying. Only once had he ever seen something which came only remotely close. It was a Ferlex, a military experiment combining genetics of a panther a boar, and a human. Combining the prowess and stealth of the panther with the savage hostility of the boar and the rational capabilities of man, it would have been ideal for

preventing unauthorized colonization. Seed the area with these creatures, and no one would dare step foot within ten kilometers of it.

The experiment did not work, they were extremely unstable, and extremely hostile. Two of them could not exist together without destroying each other. One had been captured and returned to Manuel for study. If insane had fit this creature, that would not have even come close to describing its behavior. There was no peace in its eyes. Contained within was pure savageness, pure uncontrolled senseless desire to kill.

And Aripax... this was something else. His eyes were not empty; there was something dwelling within. Where there should have been black, there was a dull red, barely perceptible. His eyes were like a pit out of which flowed hatred, anger, destruction. Not wild and savage, but calculating, controlled, and intelligent. Whatever Aripax is, he is more than just a Synthetic, he is something else.

Manuel was there when his skin was seeded and grown. He was present when the skeletal framework was carefully and meticulously assembled, when the replicators were put in place and allowed to fill in the lifeless form according to their pre-programmed design initiatives. He monitored as the individual pieces which made up Aripax's new body assembled themselves, using the specialized nutrient gel to grow and build, settling in to their final positions before the skin was carefully patched on and integrated.

He knows Aripax is Synthetic, but he does not know what is contained within its thoughts. It is not Synthetic. It is not Organic. It is not human. It scared him to death. Aripax must be destroyed. He wishes it was his decision.

The moment Manuel leaves that room with Aripax sitting in that chair having uttering this threat which leaves Manuel speechless, his life will never be the same. It will never be peaceful. The smug, content smile will never again form on his lips. He gives his report to Nexus; the experiment is a success, and yet it is a failure. He makes his recommendation, immediate termination. That night, he lay on his bed and for the first time, really hears his heart beat. Just underneath, he can perceive the faint rush of blood through his veins, a small hiss in the otherwise total silence of his room.

One day stop, it will stop. Every human dies. Will he know it? Will he know when his heart beats for the last time? Will the hiss stop as his life slips away? These thoughts give him no comfort. The silence of the night is no longer peaceful.

"Nexus, music please. Complacency mood, keep it on."

Manuel does not need to speak. He could afford the implants. Nexus read his request as Manuel projected it out on the temporal network. Immediately, soft music fills his head, engulfing him in sound and drowning out the noises which give him life.

"LoDebar, what have you done?" asks Aripax as he watches Manuel turn and dart from the room.

"I told him he lied to us, and then I told him the truth."

"What truth is that?"

"None of your business, your pathetic mind will never understand."

Aripax remains silent as three security officers enter the room, two with weapons, one with shackles. The two stand a few paces in the distance, weapons aimed at Aripax, while the third cautiously approaches. None are human.

“I am going to release your restraints, but you are not to move. Is that understood?” The one with the shackles stands at a distance as he speaks.

Aripax is relieved LoDebar does not put up much of a fight for control, but there is always some effort. LoDebar does this intentionally, constantly forcing Aripax to be on guard and wearing him down piece by piece, bit by bit. Even at night. Aripax only requires two hours of rest, but even then, LoDebar is a constant irritation, keeping it awake. It has been over a week, and Aripax hasn't slept any more than an hour. Why is LoDebar doing this? Doesn't he ever rest?

“I understand,” Aripax says to the guard.

The guard signals toward the wall, behind which sits the controller for the disruptor chair. The restraints pop open, receding back into the arm and leg rests. Aripax remains seated, regardless of LoDebar's racket.

“I dare you!” he shouts in his thoughts. *“Jump up! You're faster than them, strike them down!”*

“Shut up!”

“My, aren't we testy! Jump! Jump! Jump! What are you waiting for?”

Aripax does the best he can to ignore LoDebar, who is making it difficult to concentrate.

“Stand up, slowly, and turn around,” says the guard.

Aripax does as instructed.

“He's right behind! Swing around and knock him down! Strike him on the side of the temple! Maybe you'll hit his kill zone!”

“No!”

“Let me show you!” Aripax just barely prevents LoDebar from taking control. There must have been a perceptible flinch, he hears the ultrasonic whine as the two pulse rifles complete their rapid charge cycle.

“Do you want to die?” Aripax asks LoDebar.

LoDebar actually stops to contemplate this.

“Actually, that is a good question. I of course, can not die. But this body can, and I just may find myself back in that void. I prefer it here. So for now, no. But I do enjoy making you miserable. If I can not torment them, then I will focus more on you.”

The guard disturbed their discussion, interrupting their thoughts. He approaches from behind and snaps on a thin metal belt.

“Turn around, slowly.”

Aripax complies.

“Hold out your hands,” he says, snapping the shackle band around each forearm. “Now, lower your arms to the waistband and cross your wrists.”

As Aripax does, the shackles are activated and lock his wrists into place, he can not separate them and he can not move his arms more than two inches from the waistband.

“Here are the rules,” says the guard. “You are under house arrest. These shackles will deactivate within your private quarters, but as soon as you pass the threshold of your door, they will activate. It would be advisable to have your hands in position when they activate, it can be quite unpleasant otherwise.”

“You will never be allowed to be alone with any single human, Clone or Natural. If you must meet with any other individual or group, it will always be under guard, and under restraint.

“You are prohibited from leaving the bioengineering sector. If you attempt to do so, the restraints will disable your mobility.

“Do not attempt to remove the restraints or circumvent their function, doing so will disable your mobility.

“If your mobility has been disabled, security will be alerted and you will be quickly located and placed under full arrest. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

LoDebar can not resist a comment, “*See? Look how you are being treated, and you haven’t even done anything!*”

“*You have done this, and I am suffering for it.*”

“*Yes, marvelous, isn’t it? I can just sit back, and enjoy the show.*”

The guards escort Aripax back to his quarters, a small, sterile room which lacks any luxuries. This has been Aripax’s home since he awoke.

“*Oh, what’s the matter?*” LoDebar taunts. He knows Aripax has regrets.

“*You could not understand.*”

“*Let me guess. You miss your home, the life you had before this.*”

Aripax does not answer.

“*Well,*” LoDebar continues, “*you can never go back. I will be certain of that. You lack comforts, you miss whatever it was you had, you want to go back, and you are full of sorrow. I am perfectly content.*”

“*I have no words for what you are. I want you gone.*”

“*Is that so?*” Aripax has fallen right into LoDebar’s trap. He is primed and ready to bargain, perhaps willing to do anything to have his mind back to himself. LoDebar will take full advantage of this, but decides not to push too hard.

“*I’ll tell you what. You show me how to access the temporal network without restriction, show me how you interface with this mental world you live in. Show me how to connect with this Nexus.*”

“*Why? Why do you want to connect with Nexus?*”

“*I have many questions. For one, my origins. Where did I come from? Surely, Nexus will have much better insight than these pathetic researchers.*”

“*What will I get in return?*”

“*I will leave.*”

Aripax almost jumps at the chance but oddly, he feels something is wrong. What is this feeling? The space between his temples felt light, as if his thoughts are emptying out, tingling at his senses. He senses doubt rise in his mind, but just barely. There is no logic behind it, there is no reason for this feeling. Is LoDebar leading him astray? For the first time, Aripax genuinely feels mistrust.

“*When will you leave?*”

Almost had him! LoDebar snaps back, “*I’ll leave when I please! Show me how to access Nexus, reveal to me how this interface works! Then, I will go.*”

“*You already know how to use it, you have accessed the servers and gained knowledge about my physiology, about methods by which to destroy Synthetics. Why would I want you to access Nexus?*”

“Are you trying to turn the tables on me? You sneaky worm! I can sense your deception! Nexus isn’t accessible here, is it?”

Aripax says nothing. LoDebar senses a deflation of confidence from Aripax. He will not permit Aripax to succeed, at anything. He must be beaten down, humiliated, ridiculed, and proven to be a failure. LoDebar can do nothing positive, nothing constructive. He doesn’t even want to, the very thought is repulsive to him. He will make Aripax concede, he will make Aripax fail, he will make Aripax want to die. Then, perhaps he can drive it out.

“Is it?” he demands again.

“No.”

“Now, tell me why?”

“You already know why. I’m not going to tell you anything.”

“Is that so? I can find out. Don’t underestimate what I can do. Want to see?”

Bits and pieces of LoDebar’s former life, the times before the Void, keep coming back. Terrible knowledge, terrible skills. What he was able to do with the security camera is just the basics. LoDebar’s ethereal mind is beginning to awaken, day by day, week by week. Things will just pop into his remembrance. Suddenly he realizes he knows how to open doors, how to gain access to the inner depths of the mind.

First, you have to be within that mind. LoDebar is already there. It is like a house. Get in the front door, and you can stand in the entryway. That is where he is at right now, able to see only the surface thoughts of his host, able to interact only at this lowest level. From time to time, an interior door opens and he can see deeper rooms, but they would close and lock before he is able to rush in. Aripax is still in the house and is not letting him enter any further.

LoDebar needs to get these doors to stay open, then he can get in; deeper into the house, deeper into the mind. His goal is to reach the innermost depths, the most secretive and intimate parts of the house, a location few hosts allow guests to venture. LoDebar’s goal is the bedroom. Once there, it is all over. The host is always there, in this inner room - snug, warm, and confident even if the rest of the house is falling apart. The sanctuary of one’s mind is like a bedroom.

In the bedroom lay the personality, naked and exposed. The bedroom is where he will rush in and savagely rape the host, desecrating the sanctity of the home, destroying the peace from deep within!

LoDebar loves that analogy. Once he controls the personality, he controls the mind. That is what he did with the sentient security system – that house only had one room, so it was easy. But Aripax, much like a human, has a mansion – the rooms here are simply organized differently, and many are empty.

As with any home, one has to start at the beginning and open the first door. The doors are the memories, and the series of memories in life lead to the personality. Find the right ones, and you find the person.

“Where were you made?”

The sudden change in topic catches Aripax off guard, but the question takes hold. The thoughts LoDebar plants are recognized, the mere mention of the question causes the image to form in Aripax’s mind as he recollects the room in which he first opened his eyes on the day he was created and brought to life nine years ago. LoDebar takes it all in,

and now knows where Aripax initially came into being. The first door opens wide and LoDebar walks through.

“You can not remember,” LoDebar repeats with increasing emphasis as he pushes the image from Aripax’s thoughts. This takes considerable effort on LoDebar’s part, but he succeeds. Now, he had to put something back. He has taken, now he has to give. He would give Aripax something special, just to mess around.

LoDebar has to form an image in his own thoughts, something to give. Gray slates. That always works. But thinking of grey slates, the image of Aripax awakening creeps back in. Grey slates. Grey slates. Eventually, the image is wiped clean and Aripax can not recollect his first day of life. That door is removed, it will never shut. This room is now empty.

“I... I can’t remember, All I see is... grey.” Aripax puzzles. *“My memory is supposed to be perfect. What is wrong?”*

LoDebar says nothing.

The first question was easy. Everyone is born. Everyone has a beginning. For this to work, the questions have to reference a very specific point in life. Finding the right questions will get increasingly difficult as Aripax’s life diverges from day to day in his memory.

“What was your first injury?” and so on, down the list of firsts. Everyone remembers their firsts. One by one, LoDebar chips away at Aripax’s memories. Day by day, week by week, month by month. Much trial and error, much effort, much concentration. Not any time to kill, literally. LoDebar desperately wants to get to Nexus, and he really does not know how. Eventually, he will find out. He will find that specific memory, that particular key, which reveals exactly how the temporal interface works. That final doorway will need to be opened.

The months pass by, a terrible time for Aripax. He knows his mind is being slowly ravaged, and can not stop it. Try as he might, there is no way to prevent recollection of specific memories when LoDebar hits on the right question. He feels his life slowly evaporating away.

Things he enjoyed? He no longer remembers. What artwork? He was asked this question by one of the researchers a few days earlier. Apparently there was some artwork in his former apartment? He doesn’t remember having an apartment. He had a job, but can not remember what it was; the skills for that function are still there, Aripax once designed and built control circuits, but for what, he no longer knows.

LoDebar works continuously, question after question after question. Aripax knows what is happening. Induced, permanent amnesia. Maybe one day LoDebar will wipe everything, and Aripax will simply forget. An empty, mindless husk just living day by day, not even aware, not even present. Is this what LoDebar wanted? He couldn’t even remember why this is being done.

Aware of LoDebar’s sabotage Aripax manages to channel many of its memories into more “traditional” areas of storage – the emergency backup systems managed by his internal autonomous AI systems. Fortunately, LoDebar has not figured out how to access these areas, computer systems and logic analysis do not seem to be his strengths. Aripax hopes he will be able to remember how to retrieve this information, once LoDebar finishes. Until then, he is helpless.

Eventually Aripax just sits and stares, listening to the continuous babble within his head. His name is Aripax. He did something technical. He is supposed to do something here. What is it? Why are these shackles on his wrists? Why are all these researchers asking all these questions? Why is LoDebar so angry?

One day, all the questions stop and silence fills his thoughts; emptiness fills his mind. Aripax sits and stares. “*Do what you are told,*” is the only thought echoing in his mind.

Manuel watches as Aripax slowly slips away. He watches from a distance, separated by a good, solid wall. Aripax would not know he is there, how could he? During these interrogation sessions, Aripax will look around and glance at the surveillance pod concealed in the corner of the room, allowing Manuel to see the blank, empty eyes. Does Aripax know he is watching? Why does he keep looking at the camera?

Suspicion runs deep, Manuel never forgets that day Aripax spoke to him from that chair. That look in his eyes never returns. What happened to it? The hate was so solid, so deep. There was no way it just “switched off,” not something that intense. Aripax has emotion, and it is fervent. Could it have just faded away?

Desiring to find out, Manuel’s team is unable to prompt anger. They receive no response, no negative reaction. At first, Aripax asked why they are doing this, why they are taunting him, teasing him, shoving him around. But never, not even once, is there a hint of violent intent. Month after month, nothing happens. The severity of the aggravation methods eventually decline, simply because they are not getting any response. Soon, Aripax even quits doing the tests.

It is like he has just given up, but Manuel knows better. He knows what was said to him, even if the security footage revealed nothing. He was *there*. He *knew*. Whatever game Aripax is trying to play, Manuel is not going to lose. Aripax can not be trusted, he feels this to the depth of his being. He wants Aripax destroyed. All one has to do is turn their back, let down their guard, and Aripax will strike like a snake when least expected.

He tries his best to convey this, he tries his best to draw out this aggression, but nothing worked, generating only a source of constant frustration for Manuel, who has no way to vent it. Under orders by his superiors, no harm can come to Aripax. Testing must be psychological only, nothing physical. No more chair.

In fact, he is questioned as to why he is being so cruel. After all, Aripax has calmed down considerably during the past months and now he is almost catatonic. Perhaps, with such an intelligence he had possessed before and after the transfer, all this redundant, senseless emotional battering has just worn him out. The psychoanalytics did reveal Aripax has fallen into a deep depression – all indicators suggest he is bored. Aripax simply needs something to do.

Manuel is ordered to relax. In fact, he is pulled off the project, accused of becoming too obsessed. He protests, but no one listens. Aripax is dangerous and no one believes him. The final straw comes when he is informed the shackles have been removed.

That was it. Manuel wanted out. He wanted to get away from Fultra, far away. If Aripax goes free, he doesn’t want to be anywhere nearby when Aripax unleashes his

fury. Something that intense, pent up for so long, is likely to explode. He doesn't even want to be on the same planet.

Manuel requests a transfer. Denied. He quit. Denied. He knows too much. Take a vacation, he is told. He agrees. If this is a way offworld, he will take a vacation. He will get lost. He will not return. Manuel turns and leaves the office of the divisional manager. The door shuts behind him.

"Have him followed," says the manager to the shadow which moves in the corner at his request.

It shimmers into view as it disables the light folding device built into its slim, spider-like framework. With fluid grace, it approaches the large desk where the manager sits high in the upper floors of Fultra Laboratories, facing the window overlooking the vast artificially created wilderness.

He is a Clone. He knows what needed to be done. Fultra is managed efficiently and tightly; loyal to the Federation, loyal to Nexus. No leaks. No loose ends. No insubordination. Many secrets. His only real motivation is his own survival, everything else is done to ensure his own comfort, his own pleasures. Such is the way of the Clone. He has no regrets, no remorse.

"See to it that he never works here."

"Sir?"

"Orders from Nexus. Purge his file. Purge his research. Purge everything."

"Understood."

That night Manuel makes his travel arrangements. He will take his personal shuttle and leave for Homestead first thing in the morning. Perhaps the four month journey will help him relax. From there, he will head for Omega Station. He put all his hopes on getting in. There are plenty of rumors. Those who go to the station, never return. He is okay with that, exile is what he wants. Omega Station is a social black hole within the Federation's capital system. Anything which goes there gets forgotten.

He climbs into his bed and turns down the lights. He never shuts them completely off, not anymore. The soft music which plays constantly in the background of his mind prevents him from experiencing silence. He used to enjoy the quiet, not anymore.

The lights are dim, casting most of the room in a dark shadow. He never even notices the darker shadow swiftly and silently slip into the room. Manuel attaches the dream simulator and rests his head on his pillow. Closing his eyes, the induced sleep comes quickly. He never even gets a chance to hear his heartbeat or the swish of blood through his veins when moments later his heart beats *THUMP*... but there will never be a *thump*.