THE SHOULDER OF ORION

A life-changing experience.

BY ERIC GARSIDE

Ric Williamson was lying on the grass and watching the stars fly by overhead. Judging by the constellations, he estimated that they were about halfway between Saturn and Uranus.

"Ric, query," announced the small grey-skinned being lying next to him.

"Go on then, Norbert."

"What will happen to my consciousness; after I am dead?"

Ric grinned, laced his fingers together and put his hands behind his head.

"Well, nothing. That's sort of what dead means, Norbert."

"Have I done something to upset you? Do you no longer have a need of me?"

Ric laughed a bit.

"Oh we do, Norbert. We will always have need of you. In fact, you'll start being reprinted once the *Gaia* exits the gate."

The smile faded from Ric's face. This wouldn't be the first time he'd prepared a Synthetic to die, but that didn't make breaking your friend's digital heart any easier.

"How many times have I died, Ric?"

"Eleven."

Waves of sadness and confusion crashed upon the silicon shores of Norbert's mind.

"I don't want to die, Ric."

"Hold out your hand," Ric said, reaching deep into the soil and grabbing a handful of earth. "Do you know what that contains? Death. Bits of dead star, of dead planet; traces of plants, fragments of animals. All things die, Norbert. But in their death, new life takes root."

Norbert used his fingers to push the pile of dirt around in his palm.

"Our lives and deaths rest in your hands, Norbert. We *need* you to stay behind and destroy the jumpgate once the *Gaia* is through. If the Black Mass finds out where we've gone, they will follow."

Without breaking his gaze from the dirt, Norbert replied simply: "I understand."

Norbert climbed the ladder to the cockpit of his starfighter, with Ric close behind. As Norbert strapped himself in, Ric reached into his pocket and fished something out of it. Dangling from a small plastic cord was an oddly shaped bit of metal, which he placed in Norbert's hand.

"It's a good luck charm."

"But you told me luck was just people taking probability personally, Ric."

Norbert's stoic gaze met one last sly wink from Ric before the flight shield secured in place.

"Think of me sometimes, Norbert," Ric yelled, his voice muffled almost entirely by the shield.

The *Gaia* lurched painfully slowly towards the jump gate. Beams of pure chaos erupted in every direction as the gate powered up. A splash of brilliant light, and the moon-sized mothership was gone. As the engine trails of the *Gaia* faded into the dark, the onboard computer in Norbert's craft snapped to life.

PRIMARY OBJECTIVE COMPLETE; THE *GAIA* HAS LEFT THE SECTOR.

NEW PRIMARY OBJECTIVE ENABLED: DESTROY THE TANNHAUSER GATE.

The weapons system of the craft enabled, and Norbert set to work. The gate was massive. Simply to fly round its circumference took almost an hour, and destroying it was very systematic work. First the shield generators needed to be taken out. Then the back-up reactors, followed by the primary reactors, and finally the data centres.

Explosion after explosion tallied Norbert's progress, each pass over the gate leaving less of it than before. After long gruelling hours of work, the final data centre erupted in a quick burst of flame.

PRIMARY OBJECTIVE COMPLETE; THE TANNHAUSER GATE IS DISABLED TABULA RASA ENGAGED.

Norbert looked towards the computer, his face contorting in distress. The flight systems of the craft were disabled, and a new waypoint was assigned at the centre of the gate. Fear so dominated Norbert's emotion core that it automatically shut down to prevent an overload.

REACTION LIMITERS DISABLED; OVERLOAD IN APPROXIMATELY 5 MINUTES.

His emotion subsystem came back online just in time for him to appreciate the crushing realization of his own mortality. Panicked, the synthetic humanoid frantically tried to activate any control to avert his imminent demise. Every button played a denial sound, every controller moved freely without responsive feedback.

If mechanical men could cry, Norbert certainly would have done. Instead, he was forced to come to grips with the knowledge of his death simply by hanging his head forlornly.

That's when he noticed it, hanging by a plastic thread on his chest; the odd bit of metal Ric had given him. He took it in his hands, running his fingers over the channels and grooves in the amulet. It reminded him of …

A key! A spark of realization hit, and Norbert reached under his seat and pulled back the floor panelling to expose the manual-override panel. He slotted the key in place, closed his eyes and turned it. A small metal click sounded. Norbert tossed away the panel face.

Within the chamber was a rather large, rather red button surrounded by caution tape and labelled "Thermonuclear Engine Ejection". Norbert smashed the button with incredible force, and a comically small reactor fired backwards out of the ship.

With the ship running on reserve power, all non-essentials (such as automated control) were disabled, returning command of the craft to Norbert.

His chances of survival were slim, there was no doubting that. He might have enough power to outrun the explosion, but did he have enough to get anywhere after that? And to what end? And for how long?

And that's when he realized it; the meaning of life.

It was wanting to live.

In this moment, a perfect storm of chaos and clarity overcame him. Norbert became more than wires, diodes and synthetic emotions; he became truly human.

Grasping the controls firmly, he fixed his gaze on the stars, and took his chance. ∎

Eric Garside is an educational software developer with a passion for science, technology and astronomy.

ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY