

When Once We Dreamed
Age of Transcendence Saga: Short Story Two

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Dream Feeds

2296 Orthodox Western Calendar
4994 Universal Chinese Calendar, Year of the Dog
Paris, France, Earth

I can't face this, thought Michel.

He fell back and the bed cocooned over him. Dream feeds he couldn't afford rippled around his face and he blinked them away, disgusted.

Got to get up. Il me faut faire quelque chose. But he couldn't. He just couldn't. Really, there was nothing else he could do. He'd tried. He'd already blinked through the unemployment feeds today. There weren't any jobs. There weren't any on the infostreams this morning or the day before or the week before or the month before.

J'en peux plus. Got to do something. Anything. He pulled the pillow over his face.

It was strange not to have a job. He couldn't get used to it. When he'd gotten out of school there weren't enough people to fill the jobs. It was a glorious time. People had finally blasted into space. The tiny orbital settlements mushroomed into massive city-states and economies exploded everywhere. New companies burst onto the exchanges daily and made massive profits. The engines of wealth churned frenetically. The queen of diamonds beckoned everyone. Companies couldn't hire people fast enough. They wanted more, more, more.

Economists predicted the worst. It wouldn't last they said, couldn't last, and eventually their doomsday prophecies proved true. Companies dominoed. They couldn't fire people fast enough. The queen of diamonds was fickle. Michel was out, like so many others.

Several new job alerts blinked in and he didn't even want to look at them. He pressed down on his eyes to relieve his tension headache. It wasn't working.

Just look. Reluctantly, he brought up the listing and scanned one quickly on his innervation. He only had to read a paragraph to realize they wanted someone with a ridiculous skill set, another example of a company that eliminated ten jobs and hired one person to do all of them.

They want people who don't exist!

He deleted it in a rage and killed the rest of the alerts.

They all wanted people with ridiculous skill sets now. Sixty five plus years of school meant nothing. Who didn't have that? It was hard to stand out anymore. "You know three languages? We need seven."

Do something. But still he couldn't get out of bed. His legs and arms felt heavy, wooden, worn and wet. He'd atrophied, gotten stuck in the quicksand of his own sadness. He couldn't even make himself turn on the sleep exerciser. *Can't just lay here all day.* But he could. He had. For days, he hadn't gotten up except to eat or piss. He thought of his wife, grinding away at two jobs. *My stomach. I've got to help her.*

And his daughter, his pretty little girl, she needed him too. The school had her most of the day and night. The nannydrone took care of her the rest of the time. At least they still had a nannydrone. An antique maybe, wouldn't last once Lidia got older, but for now they had one. It needed a doc though. It was aging fast, its skin peeling and spotted.

Outside, he could hear the rain hammering the roof. His head pounded. Lots of migraines lately. He pasted an enderm on his temple. It kicked in quick.

Do something. Anything.

He pulled himself up, the bed crinkling back. It was a good bed. They'd found it in one of the other abandoned apartments. They couldn't believe none of the other squatters snatched it.

He trudged around the house, poked at the food synth, rummaged the cabinets, blinked through some mindless action syms. He knew he had to look at the rest of the job feeds but he couldn't bring himself to it yet.

He finally sat in his favorite window and watched the rain eating away at the ancient Parisian buildings. Centuries of grime and dirt clotted their stone pores. The rain just ground it in further. It rained incessantly, because nobody ever got around to fixing the notoriously unreliable micro-climate generators. Too expensive. It made him sad to see so many shops closed in Belleville, their eyes permanently sutured.

There were so many buildings with no lights on. It looked like a blackout in some third world country. People were gone, a product of the space push. Nobody wanted to live on the Old World anymore. He looked up at the sky and wondered how many people were up there now, living a new adventure, starting a fresh new life.

Just go back to bed. No. You lazy bastard. Come on. It was time to face the feeds. He blinked them into his eyes. *There's nothing new here. Rien à voir.* He scanned through them fast and noticed something different near the bottom. An adhead waited impatiently and he waved it forward. It blazed towards him and expanded, flower like, rippling.

"Out of work? Frustrated?" said the pristinely beautiful adhead. "Well now there's a way out. Join the millions who've happily chosen Leptic surgery. Unemployment services will even pay for it and there's very little risk. Leptic surgery eliminates the need to sleep. And that means you can work without interruption while others doze, making you much more valuable to prospective employers. Leptics have an amazing employment rate of 98%. Don't delay. Call today. Your future is waiting."

Rapid fire, barely audible legalese followed: "Not everyone may qualify...complications may result...slight disfiguration...see infospace for details...Leptic surgery generally not reversible," but Michel was no longer listening.

The adhead drifted away. A flashing mediaglyph that meant "would you like more info" replaced it.

Michel hesitated for a moment, rubbing his bristly chin, then blinked yes.

Leptic Dreams

2296 Orthodox Western Calendar

4994 Universal Chinese Calendar, Year of the Dog

Jovian Concatenate, CircumJovian space, Jovia for short

"I've had that goddamn job for thirty five years," said Farid. He had a hard, dark beard, intense eyes and leathery brown skin. "I deserve some fuckin' respect. I mean, come on. That's thirty-five fucking years I've been fixing those drones for the same place. Fifty-five years before that I fixed 'em. I'm goddamn good. Real good. That's why they kept me. And now they're sayin' it's worth nothing? That all that time I put in wasn't worth shit? That's not right. Not right, I'm tellin' ya. Somethin's gotta be done."

“What are we gonna do?” said Kane. “I mean what am I gonna tell my wife? We’re goin’ on strike? There’s no money comin’ in and I can’t take another job ‘cause the union says so? How’m I gonna explain that to ‘er?”

They floated across the bridge on the autowalkway into old Xiao-Xing City, a bizarre hybrid of intense corporate culture and ancient architecture and gardens. Aggressive ad ghosts hunted after the people who lived there, chasing them down the streets, appearing suddenly in front of them, dancing and warping until people ignored them to death and they slunk away. Super bright holos overlapped and covered every available wall. In the stores and massive gridmalls, super-charged air made tourists hungry to buy. Yet, through all of this corporate monoculture, gentle rivers ran and gondolas drifted next to the hoverwalks and dazzling hollusions of butterflies and mythological creatures swirled and dipped through fantasy gardens. Old ladies hawked jade figurines and caged mantises on folding tables, under the soft light of hovering Chinese lanterns.

“I’m ashamed to go home,” said Kane.

They pushed their way through the crammed crowd.

“Fuck that. Not your fault. You done your job. They screwed you.”

Farid nudged someone angrily. “Why don’t these people understand the concept of personal space?” he said.

“I’m scared. Never been without a job. Don’t know what I’m gonna do. What if I can’t get another one?” said Kane.

“You shouldn’t be scared. You should be fuckin’ angry,” said Farid. “They screwed us. We gotta do something about it. Can’t just sit here and take it. We don’t deserve this.”

“But we’re not the only ones. Everywhere it’s like this. There just aren’t any jobs,” said Kane.

“So that makes it okay? Look around you. It’s their fault.” He waved his hand over the crowd. “All these goddamn freaks coming in on the liners every day, takin’ what I earned. And the goddamn company hires ‘em, because they’ll work for less, ‘cause they’ve got no pride. Or worse, these fuckin’ Leptics, they’ll work all night. That’s the problem. I know my job. I’ve been doing it forever. And now they want more? Want me to work all night? It’s not right. I mean I got the damn pattern surgery. What more do they want? Makes me sick. And anyone who gets that surgery is a fuckin’ blood sucker with no self-respect.”

With a sneer, Farid eyed a nervespider, her multi-eyes fluted on stalks as she gestured wildly to a friend in front of a café.

“These are humans for God sakes,” said Farid. “Look at ‘em. It’s sick. It’s everywhere, all the young people disfiguring themselves like that. Nobody even looks human anymore. It disgusts me.”

They pushed through a crowd of tall, spongy posthumans, their walks loping and odd. A man with gold, spiked eyes passed. A woman at a shop reached behind her to grab something from a bag, her arm bending the wrong way.

“We can’t blame those guys. They’re just people trying to do a job, like us,” said Kane. “It’s the company’s fault. Greed. That’s what it is. People are always the first to get cut. They never think maybe companies ain’t supposed to grow all the time. Maybe it’s okay to maintain. Or maybe they should cut costs, or drop expectations. But no. It’s always people who go first.”

“That’s exactly why they’re hiring these freaks. Greed. Make people work longer, cut the one’s who won’t. It should be illegal. And they’re not ‘people.’ They’re nothing like you and me. Something’s gotta be done about it,” said Farid.

“*Chéri, Je sais pas...* I don’t know. I just don’t know how I feel about this,” said Virginie. “I’m tired. I’ve got to get up early tomorrow.”

“Okay. No problem,” said Michel.

To Michel, his wife seemed more than tired. She seemed frayed, unraveled, broken.

“It’s just I hate to see you like this, having to work so hard. Two jobs are killing you. I think it could be good,” said Michel.

They lay in the warm cocoon, a soft light painting their faces. He could see the tiny wrinkles on her forehead like fissures in an old sidewalk. Worry lines were everywhere. Their fifty year treatment approached like a tsunami. They wouldn’t have the Standard Dollars. That meant they’d get old, die early like the poor or the Catholics who forbid age resetting.

“But when would you sleep?” she said. “When would we sleep together? I like sleep. I can’t imagine working more with no break. It doesn’t sound good.”

“It would only be for a little while, just while we got back on our feet, until the economies pick up. Then I can get another job,” he said.

“I don’t know. When would you rest?” she said.

“I could lay down with you sometimes. It’ll be all right. I promise. But I don’t know what else to do. What else can I do?” he said, caressing her hair.

“I don’t know. I need to sleep.”

The door to his daughter’s room untangled and slithered into the walls as Kane approached it. He could hear Carina snoring softly in her pod. Giant stuffed animals lay sleeping, their eyes closed, next to a fluffy spread of multi-colored toys. The nannyball hovered quietly in the corner, tethered to the juice, its seven arms slack. On the walls, the red trees of a fantasyscape swayed gently in imaginary wind. Japanese animals peeked in and out of the leaves and skipped merrily down the winding roads towards a mist cloaked castle. Kane flipped the mediawall to another setting and the dreamscape transformed into a Van Gogh night sky, shimmering with playfully warped stars.

He stood over her, watching. She lay face down, head turned just so, diaper covered butt in the air. The gentle rise and fall, rise and fall of her breathing made him sad. Cyrillic holograms surrounded her, their mediaglyphs telling him she slept peacefully, but he felt guilty.

“What am I gonna do, baby?” he whispered. “What am I gonna do?”

He bent down and kissed her delicately.

“I’m so sorry.”

The procedure went swiftly for Michel. A mist filled the room and he felt giddy, slightly chilled, happy. He laughed as docballs floated into the room, like cotton on a summer breeze. The green biowalls convulsed and expanded, surgical arms extending, their pulpy flesh rippling, forming surgical lasers and unrolling monitors. He was in the room, but somehow not. The mistdrug carried him to an idealized, ancient American cottage with wraparound canopied decks,

on a sparkling yard that rippled like a green lake in the wind. Such a wonderful hallucination! He'd never felt more peaceful in his life. Under the hazy light of an oil lamp he read from thick yellowed parchment manuscripts. His fingers caressed the finely grained paper and he smiled. In the mornings, his mom called him down to steaming breakfasts of peppered eggs and freshly smoked apple bacon.

Then the docball opened a door in his brain and said "Congratulations, sir. The operation went perfectly." The hallucination switched off for a moment. It made him angry that the docball would disrupt his dreams like that, step into them so callously.

"We'll transfer you to the relaxation ward."

He could see the hospital for a moment as the bed hovered from the surgery ward, the track lights trailing above him. Then the docball evaporated, leaving him to his cottage and slowly twisting fans. The dreams dissolved gradually, as he chased rabbits into the woods beyond the back yard. A deep sadness filled him as the dreams dithered away, the sadness of colors gone. The rabbits raced wildly, ducking under bushes and brambles, as the walls of the relaxation ward bled through. The rabbits looked translucent now. They ran through other patients' beds like ghosts. In the distance, he could hear a tinkling stream and he ran toward it, trying desperately to stay in the mistworld, but it withered away.

He woke up, on his bed, and saw the manmade waterfalls of the relaxation ward dribbling down the walls. A doctor appeared as a hovering hologram over him.

"Feeling better, sir?"

"*Ouais*," he said. "Yeah, I'm fine."

When she vanished, he cried, realizing that the cottage may have been the last dream he would ever have.

The Economics of Dreams

2296 Orthodox Western Calendar

4994 Universal Chinese Calendar, Year of the Dog

Jovian Concatenate, CircumJovian space, Jovia for short

At first it wasn't too bad, not working. Secretly, Kane actually liked it. No obligations, nowhere to go at a specific time, no one telling him what to do and when to do it. But as a month eroded and then another, it wasn't much fun anymore. He slept little, tormented by dreams of drowning and choking. He woke up tense, angry, unsure, depressed.

He went to the picket lines every day. They got ugly sometimes, as striking workers screamed and hurled splatterballs at the scabs. Kane didn't do much but show up, thinking it might all just be over soon, that the company execs at Dreamlines, Inc. and the union leaders would work it out soon.

An array of faceless corporate security drones, megalithic and monstrous, inhuman, stood guard, unmoving, unmoved, blocking the rallies from reaching the front doors of the company. The union leaders made zero progress. Time inched by. Execs wouldn't budge, didn't care, hired cheaper. There was talk they'd never go back to work, that the execs would just dump the whole union once they had enough replacements. Hard to do, but it could be done.

Farid and a dozen other strikers hurled splatterballs at a passing pack of Leptics. The paint in them erupted against the unyielding energy of a huge protest shield set up to protect the scabs. Farid came back jacked up, panting.

“These fuckin’ Leptics,” said Farid. “Run ‘em all the fuck outta here.”

But Kane wasn’t sure who to blame just yet. He’d noticed the crowd pelted Leptic scabs more than anyone else. The strikers considered them especially pernicious and they stood out because of their slightly elongated heads, a byproduct of the surgery.

At first, not sleeping was wonderful for Michel. The worst part was waiting for his wife, Virginie, to fall asleep. They’d often make love and snuggle afterwards. He’d wait and wait, filled with a maniac energy, hungry to sneak out of bed quietly and run around, to do things. There were so many things he wanted to do, he’d just never had the time before. Now there was so much of it!

Before his days had been filled with “have tos.” Most days crawled by as he went from obligation to obligation. Nights, he would collapse, desperate to escape the mounting piles of chores and “must dos” and favors.

But now he looked forward to the evenings. He met his responsibilities happily, knowing that he would have all night, to do all the things he always wanted to do. Days meant chores, but nights meant lazy leafs through adventure holobooks, wild syms, puzzles, and pet projects. Some days he could barely wait for the days to end.

The job changed everything.

The unemployment agencies had been right. Companies hungered to hire Leptics. He’d gotten a job after only a month, at the Dreamlines company. They’d booked passage for him and his family on a titanic liner, eager to have him start as soon as possible.

At first, Virginie hadn’t wanted to leave Paris, leave Earth, leave her family and friends behind. But Michel had pressed, saying it was best and how she wouldn’t have to work two jobs anymore and how they could visit whenever she wanted to. His new salary would cover it. The company would even pay for much of the new house. Eventually she’d relented.

As Michel stood on the observation deck watching the colossal red giant of Jupiter fill the screens, he’d felt calm and happy for the first time in months and months.

It didn’t last.

Extra time was the commodity he’d sold to get the job. The shifts were two days long, with barely a break. The company had robbed him of the gift surgery had given him. Now instead of offering release from the day’s work, nights meant more work, more of the same, more pain. But now there was no break, no place to hide for a little while, no refuge.

Every day Michel passed the picket lines, crowds filled with twisted faces. People screamed and threw things. Spatterballs exploded against the thin screen that protected them from the union. They knew he was a Leptic. He touched the back of his warped head in shame. He couldn’t hide it.

None of the people he worked with spoke French or English. Almost no one spoke the same language. The company had imported workers from everywhere, creating a new Babylon, a hundred different Phyles of Posthuman, each with their own languages and dialects. Though they had earplug translators, they sometimes mangled what people said, so people kept to themselves or kept conversations simple. Michel longed for a lazy discussion of philosophy or

sports or syms, anything but work. But the invisible walls of culture and language separated everyone.

The company didn't care about anyone. "I've got a thousand guys ready to take your job if you don't want it," he'd heard his boss say, multiple times. Any screw up meant probation and any serious screw up meant he'd be fired. Michel and everyone else labored in desperate fear of making a mistake.

How would I pay bills? Then I'd be stuck in this damn place, no money, no friends, no way back. What would I tell my wife? I can't screw up. I won't screw up. Come on. No problem. You know this stuff. You've got it down. You're good. But he wasn't so sure anymore.

What can I do? I'm stuck.

The bills blinked in constantly.

Kane set his answering machine to "pretend" to avoid creditors. When they called its expert system pretended it was him.

"We need to get these bills taken care of immediately, sir, to restore your good credit standing."

"No problem," said his faux self, "I agree. I'm ready."

It fooled most of them for the first couple of months, then they caught on. They started leaving messages instead of talking with the machine.

"You must call us back immediately, sir, or we will take legal action..."

"Don't waste time..."

The baby cried. Things fell apart. Kane couldn't seem to get anything done. He couldn't sleep and vicious dreams still ripped him at night, like blackbirds picking at a corpse. He drifted around the house, started one thing, put it down a minute later, picked up something else, gave up.

"We're gonna lose the house," screamed his wife, Harmony, with her face warped, hysterical.

"We're not gonna lose it," said Kane.

"What can you do? You've got to get something else, some other job."

"The union says—" he said.

"Screw that damn union. Look where it's gotten us. You've got to do something," she said.

"Listen I need your support on this. This isn't helping me. It's hard enough without you—"

"Without me what?"

"Nothing. Forget it."

"No I won't forget it. You're going to blame me now? You've got the gall to blame me? For your laziness? For your problems? I hate when you do this. You always do this," she screamed, her face like a Henny mask.

"Do what?"

"Blame me for your screw ups. You always blame me for everything. It's always my fault."

"I'm not blaming you—"

"Oh just shut up."

"No, you shut the fuck up. I'm sick of your shit. I need your support and all you do is fuckin' harp on me—"

It went on a lot like that. Kane didn't sleep much, his neck and shoulders like a rock. He started printing up heavy tranqs from stolen synth recipes. Since he couldn't sleep he'd been up late at night hunting the darknets looking for illegal recipes to download. Farid was good with computers and he'd installed a new smartware that unlocked the synth. He couldn't escape his nightmares and they were starting to bleed into his reality.

It had been almost a year now without work. Kane defied the union directives and secretly looked for other work, but found nothing. Companies wanted skills he didn't have.

Not long after, his wife left him, took the kid and went to her parents' house.

"I can't live with a lazy bastard like you anymore..."

She took most of the furniture too. After all she'd picked out most of it. Every day Kane went home to empty rooms. He slept on the floor. The way things were going the empty rooms wouldn't be his for much longer either. The union gave him a little stipend and he'd worked out a payment plan, but the stipend was almost gone. Nobody expected another. He ran out of nanobar and couldn't use his own synth anymore. At least the food recycler still ran. He ate recycled food every night, after looking for organic scraps to feed it in dumpsters. Sometimes he even snuck down to some of the public food synths late at night.

Everyday at the rallies, Farid chirped in his ear, "Fuckin' Leptics, cocksucking Leptics," and Kane was starting to listen. Maybe Farid was right all along? What had they ever done for him but take his job? And his wife? His daughter?

He didn't know what to do. Something had to be done.

Michel came in and saw his wife, Virginie, staring out the arched, synthetic diamond windows of her big house, watching the squat grass droid cutting the lawn in precise lines.

"How are you?" he said.

He'd just finished a four day non-stop shift.

"I'm fine," she said, not turning around.

"I don't believe you, *mimi*. *Tu semblent déprimés*. You look really down."

"I hate this house. *La maison de la torture*. I hate everything it does for me. I hate the way the kitchen cleans itself, the how do you say, dust bunnies, they get zapped and the clothes get washed and stacked in such neat little piles."

"*Je suis désolé*," he said.

"You're sorry? I'm sorry. I should have listened to myself."

She took a sip of wine.

He didn't know what else to say. He was tired in his body. Everything hurt. He needed the massage chair badly.

"I hate not working too," she said. "Going *farfelu*...just going crazy. I never liked working two jobs but a year at home now...I just want to do something. Maybe I get a job?"

"We've talked about this. I want to do this for you. You had to work too hard before. It's my turn."

"I don't care what you want anymore, Michel. I'm talking about what I want."

"Please. Let me take care of you for a little while. Please."

"A job might be good."

Michel fixed himself a drink from the synth. He dialed up the perfect Scotch with a round cube and glass and it materialized in front of him. He took a big gulp.

“I don’t have anyone to talk to,” she said. “I don’t have any friends.”

“I know. Me either.”

“I’m not saying this to say it’s easier on you...I’m just talking. We’re just talking. I don’t even know where to meet people anymore.”

She took another drink.

“What about that cooking class you took, didn’t you say you’d meet someone there?”

“Didn’t hit it off with anyone. Took a few museum tours too. Same.”

Michel took a big gulp and made another. He really needed to sit down. *I do not have time for this.* It was hard to pay attention to a woman who had an amazing house and she didn’t have to work and she was complaining? *Is she really complaining? Of all things, complaining?*

“Can’t we talk about this later?” he said.

“Sure,” she said, her face falling.

“What?” he said.

“Nothing.”

“No. What?”

“You’re not going to bring it up later,” she said. “You never do. We never talk about things.”

“Look, I can’t believe I’m listening to this,” said Michel. “There are people who would kill to have what we have right now and you’re complaining? I’m so sick of hearing that. I don’t need this. I have enough problems at work. I don’t need you making more for me at home when there’s nothing wrong. Just get over it.”

He stormed to the bedroom and collapsed. He didn’t need sleep, but he did need to lay down, his muscles exhausted and knotted. He looked at the ceiling and wished he’d never heard of Leptic surgery.

“Please, Harmony. It’s my kid. I need to see my little girl,” shouted Kane.

“I told you to get the fuck out of here,” said his wife from the window.

“Please, I really need to see my kid.”

He heard the siren then.

“I fucking told you,” she said. “You don’t fucking listen.”

A cop drone got out of the hovering aircar, its blue organometal armor shimmering, its badge blazing in holographic light. Two spider drones crawled out after it, their guns trained on him.

“Sir, please remain at least 500 meters away from this property or you will be under arrest.”

“Shut up you piece of shit machine. I want to see my kid and that ain’t got nothin’ to do with you. This is between me and my wife—”

“You have 15 seconds to demonstrate compliance with the law,” said the drone, moving forward.

The spiders crawled towards him.

“What kind of law lets a woman just take my little girl? You wouldn’t understand that because you’re just a goddamn, idiot machine.”

The cop sprayed him with a dark liquid that hardened instantly and froze Kane in place.

“Get this bastard out of here, officers,” taunted his wife.

“Goddamn you, you fuckin’ bitch. You don’t get to take my girl from me.”

“I just did, you worthless fuck. You ain’t never seeing her again. How you like that, huh?”

“You fucking whore.”

“Sir, you will cease with the verbal threats or you will be restrained further.”

“Fuck you, you stupid—”

The officer blasted him in the face and the gel hardened instantly over his mouth. He could barely breathe. The spiders crawled towards him and broke apart. They fired monofilament tethers and then lifted off, carrying him to jail.

He spent the night there. His cell had a mediawall that played propaganda.

“You’re here because you broke the law,” said a beautiful AI officer, her face massive on the cell wall, her makeup simple and stern. Kane could hear her whispering in all the other cells too.

“Take this time to think about your life and what brought you here. What changes do you need to make? Who’s to blame?”

He tried to plug his ears, but the system saw him doing it and raised the volume.

“Think about becoming a productive member of society. Some of our sponsors can tell you how.”

Her face disappeared and was replaced by a pristinely beautiful ahead.

“Out of work? Frustrated?” said the ahead. “Well now there’s a way out. Join the millions who’ve happily chosen Leptic surgery. Unemployment services will even pay for it and there’s very little risk...”

Kane wasn’t listening anymore. He thought about all the times Farid had whispered to him. In the last few weeks they’d even starting laying off some of the other scabs, the non-Leptics, and bringing on more and more Leptics.

Leptics. Those Leptics.

He turned away from the stream and stared at the blank wall.

Leptics. Leptics. Leptics.

“Why is this happening to me?” he shouted suddenly. “What did I do? I didn’t do anything. They cheated me. They all cheated me.”

“No,” said the wall smartware. “This is your own fault. Only you are to blame.”

He wasn’t listening. It could talk at him all night. The fucking cops would not break him.

Someone’s to blame for all this. Ain’t me. I tried. They can’t tell me what I know. Something’s to blame. Someone.

Caged Bird Dreams

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Jovian Concatenate, CircumJovian space, Jovia for short

Michel looked out the office windows, checking behind him to make sure his boss wasn’t looking. The rallies had been going on out there since he’d started with the company.

Who’d want this job? Can’t believe they’re still out there.

Under the lamplight, his left hand quivered. He grabbed it to make it stop. Looking around quickly, he saw the side effects of Leptic surgery in other workers, the side effects no one had bothered to explain to him. A curly haired Spanish man’s eyes twitched rapidly. The American

working the heavy loader had lost too much weight and couldn't put it back on. The short Indian guy from downstairs had a haunted, hunted look, and his skin had broken out in blotchy patches. All these side effects were supposedly rare, so they were only mentioned in the literature, never by the surgeons.

Don't seem so rare to me. At least he'd only gotten the shakes.

He just wanted to sleep. But of course he couldn't anymore. He wanted to go home, wished he'd never brought his kid and wife here to this damn place. They barely saw each other anymore. When he got home he just wanted to zero out, get into a sym, avoid everything. His bosses and this stupid job were killing him.

How could they do this to people? This is the worst mistake I ever made.

He requested a bathroom break, went to a private stall and wept.

The first thing Kane did when they let him out was head for the rally at the northern Dreamlines offices, burning inside. He wanted to stomp and scream, to smash. The rows of security drones stood guard like mountains at the door. But he could move mountains today. Insect sentries buzzed, hovering, circling. The crowd was swollen and massive for the first time in months. Desperation and hunger, the need to work, to feel safe, had driven them here. They wanted someone, something, anything to give it to them, to take their pain away, to make them believe and feel happy. They would listen to anyone, anything, respond like a windstorm to a booming voice.

Kane rushed the podium.

Michel looked up and stopped crying suddenly.

What am I doing? Why am I crying like a little girl? It was suddenly clear to him, crystalline, pure. *This is nobody's fault but my own.*

Sure he'd lost his job. Sure. There were lots of circumstances. Bad things happened. But here he was blaming everyone but himself. Nobody forced him to come here. Nobody had forced him to drag his family out here. He'd made the choice to get the surgery. He didn't have to.

It was my decision, my choice. Seemed like the best one at the time. But I made a mistake. So what? I just have to admit it. That's all. Admit it. Move on.

It was hard. His mind didn't want to admit that. The mind never wants to blame itself. It's everything else: other people, the bosses, the economy, taxes, God, friends, children. He'd tried all those.

Nothing left to blame but me.

What would it mean? It meant he'd have to change. God, he hated change. Hated the disruption and pain of it, the unfamiliar looming and the unknown. Sometimes it just felt better to go along doing something that he knew wasn't right, because the other options didn't look any better. It looked like no matter what he chose it was going to be wrong, that he wasn't going to be happy. But that wasn't the way to think about it. Until he freed himself from his current mess he wouldn't even have the chance to make another one.

And maybe the next time won't be a mess? Maybe, just maybe, there's something better out for me, waiting, if I just take a chance?

He didn't want to face it. He was going to have to quit and start all over. But he had to. It had to be done. There was only one thing to do.

He marched out of the bathroom, heading straight for the door.

"Where are you going?" shouted one of his overlords.

"I quit. Screw you," he said. "*Ta mere suce le penis d'animaux pour l'argent.*"

God how magnificent to say that! He felt like a convict who had finally chiseled his way through unyielding stone and crawled into the bright sun beyond! The door in front of him was so many things now: an opportunity, a new chance, a new start, a better day. His eyes sparkled.

What am I going to do now? He didn't know and it didn't matter, because he was free.

It was the happiest moment of his life.

Kane stood before the surging crowd. They were plugged into him now, juicing from him, salivating for more.

"...and they fucking treat us like dogs," shouted Kane to the crowd. "They fuckin' replace us with eggheads who got no self respect, who don't gotta sleep. We're like goddamn rats to them. And you burn rats. We worked hard. All we asked is to be treated fair, right? Am I right?"

"Yeah—"

"Right on—"

"Fucking A—"

"We're the fuckin' backbone of this fuckin' company and they robbed us. They straight stole from us. The company should be begging us to work for them. The company *owes us*. And these fucking Leptics, these egghead low-lifes just roll right on by us with no shame to steal a man's job—"

The crowd cheered, a massive, all enveloping sound that rolled under the skin in a wave of goose bumps, that set peoples eyes on fire, that brought tears, that inflamed their hearts.

The crowd erupted, moving wildly now, a boiling river shattering its dam, ready to stream out and smash, to rage and crush. Kane spotted a group of Leptic workers getting off.

"Fucking charge that barrier, tear this whole fuckin' thing down and get those fuckers, get 'em all, those scabs, beat 'em to death."

The crowd stormed the energy shield at once, shorting it out under the tremendous strain of so many bodies.

Bottles, splatterballs, stones and sticks arced from the crowd. The guards raised their personal energy shields.

Michel stepped through the front door of the building, lost in his own ideas, sucking up huge draughts of air, feeling exalted, ecstatic. He smiled brightly. Things were going to work out all right for him.

Kane saw the stranger coming. By now, Kane knew most of the scabs' faces, but he'd never seen Michel before. Something about Michel's face really irked him. Here was a man who had *his* job, who'd *stolen* it from him. Envy burned inside him. But that wasn't it. What was it? His smile, his *smirk*. That was it. This guy seemed to be laughing at him. *This nobody, this Leptic, laughing at me? That fuckin' smirk. Goddamn bastard mocking me.*

All at once, the crowd exploded. Kane charged Michel, moving like a raging sandstorm.

The security guards, overwhelmed, fell back, unleashing a furious barrage of tear gas, freeze foam and paralysis juice, their arms splitting into multi-arms, blasting, blasting. The insect sentries' sirens screamed and sent desperate signals for backup. But still the crowd came, trampling men, even as they fell, clawing their eyes.

Kane caught Michel first. He could barely see through his rage now. He tore into Michel's mocking face, knocking him to the ground, stomping his nose, smashing his ribs with a heavy boot, loving the sickening crack. He felt brilliantly alive. As he hammered Michel, he felt such release and power! The crowd gushed in around them, all fists and feet and barred teeth. Screaming, kicking, crushing, tearing, biting.

But Michel wasn't beaten yet, he felt like he could heave boulders today. He scrambled up, through the hail of punches, and in an animal frenzy he ripped into Kane, punching him with everything he had, the bright blood spurring him on. He licked his lips. Nothing would steal his freedom now that he had it. Nothing!

Kane regained his balance, his hunger to live and to kill swelling inside him like a tidal wave, and struck back in utter fear and desperation now.

One of these men would not live. It hit them now. This was a final battle.

They coiled and struck like electrified serpents. They struggled wildly, clashing, striving, the crowd all around them filling their ears, each man pounding, thrashing.

Three guards tore through the crowd, hurling people aside. They locked onto the battling Kane and Michel and tried to assess the situation, but the crowd was overwhelming their systems: voice and spacial recognition, crowd visualizations, movement tracking, depth perception, cascading decision trees, threat assessment, damage reports, medical diagnostics, tactics, team movements, reflexes, subroutines piled on subroutines, all blasting madly, demanding immediate processing. Algorithms fired crazily, running into each other, like blind ants on speed. The drone's backbrain crisis control center seized power and cut off the rioting processes. The situation demanded a decision now! No time to finish thinking. Decapitation attack! Strike the leader, stop the insurgence: the simplest machine logic. Swiftly, they turned to Kane and raised their guns together.

Their guns shook.

They hit Kane and Michel with a massive blast of shockjuice. Too much. It struck them viciously, their muscles seizing, locking them together, burning into skin and bone, ripping through lungs and kidneys, racing through their blood and detonating their hearts.

They fell, the demented crowd rampaging around their tangled bodies, stomping them, but still they lay, seared together, like two lovers in a frenzied embrace.

END