

A Better World

BY SALMY UDIN UNDERWOOD

*We pledge to invest in love, peace and happiness,
To achieve love; we must be empathetic,
To achieve peace; we must be non-violent,
To achieve happiness; we must be compassionate.*

Unified Earth Committee

1

ARTORIUS ABBEY

Iania Hari silenced the series of random thoughts in her mind. She sliced a piece of bio-meat, dipped the sought-after delicacy of composite protein over the lines of blue, green and black spices. Light danced over the polished antique table as sunrise spilled through the exterior barriers of their three-story glass penthouse.

“The simple-mindedness of these commoners is primitive,” her husband said, as he sipped the sparkling wine from his crystal glass. “They believe in anything.”

“Whatever do you mean?” She was glad her husband broke their silence. He hadn’t been at breakfast with her since their argument two weeks ago. She was beginning to enjoy the peace and quiet in the dining room as she contemplated whether to cut another piece of bio-meat. Its aroma was lovely, and yet, it was tasteless. Even after months of restorative therapy, her appetite hadn’t improved. She set down her 24-karat gold fork and Co-Jaq, her cydroid assistant – one of the many sociable and human-like androids working at the property – stepped forward to clear her gold-etched plate with the half-eaten meal, but she waved him away and chewed the piece of meat. Her husband nodded his approval.

Iania sighed.

Another cydroid stirred, refilled her husband’s wine and swiftly returned to the food station beside the luxurious red velvet curtains. Unlike Co-Jaq, ze had no name and a neutral gender.

Her husband sniffed his wine and said, “Overloaded dramatics over minor squabbles, what a waste of time – don’t they know about finite existence? In a blink of an eye another asteroid could obliterate us all.”

Iania exhaled. “So, they should be grateful for their lot in life and leave any worries to a higher power, simply revel in off-duty escapism because, thanks to you, they can.” Her frustration toward him for instigating another argument was reaching its peak and her stomach churned at the thought of another bite. There was enough food for a family of ten across the long dining table for only the two of them.

“Exactly.” Her husband lifted his chin. “Be grateful for the generosity I have given – and the chance for a simple life. Instead they wallow in pretentious doubts, artless quarrels and primeval infightings.”

“It’s called being human,” she said, and her assistant shifted his feet. “No offense to you, Jaq.”

“None taken, Ms. Hari,” Co-Jaq replied.

“My point exactly,” her husband continued. “As humans, they’ve been given everything, all the basics – shelter, safety, community, employment and don’t forget, sufficient income, why aren’t they more content?”

It was an exasperating subject, but it was his favorite topic discussing his displeasure at the ingratitude of his human employees. “You forgot to add freedom in there. Freedom of choice is the other essential element of being a human...” Iania paused for a moment, but continued before she could stop herself, “...which is something you’ll never understand surrounded by your submissive beings.” She caught her breath and raised her hand to signal her assistant.

Co-Jaq noticed. “Understood, Ms. Hari. You are making a point.”

“You know what, wife?” Her husband roared. “It’s time for you to leave.”

The loud clanging of her heavy fork hitting her plate resonated in the sudden silence. She held her shaking hands under the table. “Can’t face the truth, husband?”

He scowled. “Leave!”

“I’ll be more than happy to... please, Jude, let me go home.”

“What home?” In an instant, her husband’s antique chair screeched over the shining wooden floor as he bolted to her side. “Ungrateful little—”

“Go on, husband, say it...” She shook her shoulders to release his hold and jump to her feet, but she lost her balance and gripped his hair. The top of her diamond wedding ring scraped his scalp and wedged inside the band of his long ponytail.

His eyes narrowed. “Damn!” He sucked in his breath and yanked the ring out of his hair.

“Sir, I will take Ms. Hari to her room.” Co-Jaq rushed in-between them. “Please, Ms. Hari, let us go to your room.”

Her husband glared. “Make sure she stays.”

“I wish you were dead!” Iania dashed from the dining room toward the elevator. It opened for her, but she hesitated before stepping inside. Maybe if she apologized, he would let her visit Palmer Land. Her childhood neighborhood had been plaguing her dreams for over a month. When she turned, he was already walking toward her.

Her husband, Jude Hari, the owner of ABW Corporation, was not tall man, but his straight military-like posture always exacted compliance from everyone around him. He was a respected member of the Unified Earth (UE) Committee and applauded for organizing the most outlandish parties. As a result, his peers – the rest of the wealthy Arctic citizens – overlooked his autocratic tendencies even though they contradicted with UE’s pledge to strive for love and compassion for all.

At seventy-two, Jude sported the vigor of a young man in his forties, but his silent rage as he brushed past her into the elevator, reminded her of a churlish teenager, not a matured and respected Chief Executive of a major corporation. “Jude,” she pleaded, but he ignored her and was gone before she could apologize. While she waited for the elevator to return, the slight vibration under her feet and the clinking of

wine glasses and shifting plates, meant that Jude's shuttle had left the rooftop. She jumped when a hand touched her shoulders.

Co-Jaq raised his hands and said, "Ms. Hari, there was a message for you earlier. It's..."

Iania held his hands. "Jaq, whatever it is, it can wait. I'm not going to my room. I'm going to the conservatory. I want you to finish up here and then, go to Acropolis. I'll handle Jude's repercussions, okay? Reroute all my calls. Oh... and give my thanks to the chef for that delicious meal."

Co-Jaq stretched his lips in an attempt to smile. "Please have a pleasant day."

"That's not..." She wanted to say "a smile" but stopped. Like a child, Co-Jaq might miscalculate her suggestion and cease practicing his emotions. "Thank you, Jaq. I will try to have a pleasant day." Her purplish-golden skin with its shining top layer famously known as *Iania's Dreams* glittered under the soft lights and all-around mirrors inside the elevator. Jude had demanded she changed her skin color back to match ABW's iridescent purple logo in celebration of their upcoming eighth wedding anniversary.

Iania neither liked nor appreciated the fame especially for something as frivolous as fashion. She had relented hoping that Jude would allow her to visit her hometown. So far, he hadn't. Right now, work was her panacea, and she couldn't wait to get to the conservatory. As she stepped off the elevator, her Intelligent Utility Vehicle, initiated its engines. She waited for her vehicle's ARS, the Adhesion Release Safety unit, to suction and secure her in the driver's seat before it accelerated and soared out of the Abbey's garage.

"Do you require music?" her vehicle's soft feminine voice asked. "*Love in Chains?*"

"No!" She yelled her disapproval at the depressing lyrics of Zonas Borea, the first human and cydroid band. "Sorry, didn't mean to shout, but ...you have me in chains, I'll never let you go... those lyrics are unsettling. How about something uplifting, V?"

"Amarantine by Enya?"

"You read my mind. Of course, you did." Iania smiled. Nothing could beat 20th century music to evoke feelings of beauty and serenity. It was really a better world back then. She laughed at the pun. Jude

ran ABW, which was short for A Better World, and yet, they were all still leagues behind their ancestors as far as quality of life. Even after the innovations of a planetary shield and worker cydroids, Earth struggled to recover from CE45, the cosmic explosion at constellation Carina on 2045, that weakened Earth's atmospheric pressure, generated colossal solar flares and caused the slow evaporation of oceans. The destruction of CE45 had turned the planet's atmosphere toxic and transformed major continents into deserts and wastelands.

The singer's evocative music flowed along with the colorful scenery as her vehicle flew over the U-shaped valley with its precise lines of tall, artificial pine trees draping on either side of the mountain with red trees on one side and blues on the other. They helped cover the Arctic's dreary sandstone and stark rusted landscape. But Jude's property stood out against his neighbors with the scattered rows of green across the floor of the valley. The organic bristle cone pines not only survived the dry conditions but also cleansed the toxic atmosphere. Sadly, these pines were rare. She hoped to discover similar plants and rejuvenate the atmosphere back to normal.

"Do you want to release the top hatch?" her vehicle asked.

Iania switched off the thoughts-decipher link on her vehicle. "Only if you can open it for more than ten seconds and I don't need a mask."

"Any longer would cause harm," her vehicle said. "Not using oxy-masks would cause harm."

"I know, but come on, V, look at those green pines. They're thriving, aren't they? That equals hope, I'm sure of it."

Her vehicle hummed. "UE planetary shield's commission projected an atmospheric conversion of breathable air at approximately 36,630 days..."

"That's over a century!" Iania said, as her vehicle hummed. "No, stop calculating. No more projection. I don't care what they said, I'm optimistic it'll be sooner than a hundred years. Just launch the holosphere, please." A cone-shaped 3D multi-level sphere with data swirled above the dashboard. "Today is

Sunday,” the holosphere’s monotone voice announced. “Seventh of August, twenty-three hundred and ten. Time is zero eight twenty-two thirty. The weather is sunny and...”

“Stop commentary,” she said. “Another week of glorious sunshine, that’s something at least.” She swiped the weather information to the side and deleted the layers of annoying infocasts since she had no interest in listening to either corporate gossips or seeing advertisements of latest products and services. With the tracking system on, she watched Jude’s shuttle leaving the planetary shield and closing in to ABW’s orbiting substation. She changed the sphere to the substation’s interior vid. At the terminal, top-level employees stood in a line with their cydroid assistants as they waited for the arrival of Jude’s shuttle. Inside the factory in space, vehicles and transporters in different stages of production packed the enormous facility, but a newly completed starship caught her interest.

“The IANIAAIRI.”

It was a surprise to read a version of her name on the starship. The conditions of her marriage had stipulated that nothing of Jude’s would ever be hers. Did he change his mind again? It had shocked her when Jude had listed her as the owner of the conservatory. And now, this... did he intend to give her the starship too? Or was it simply a matter of publicity? It was probably the latter, she told herself. Her hands itched to swipe the sphere and contact her husband, but she pulled her hands away. After their heated quarrels earlier, she doubted he would speak to her, let alone answer any of her questions.

The holosphere shut down as her vehicle hovered outside the conservatory for the mandatory security scan. It took less than a minute before the entrance open. Her vehicle flew inside the conservatory and parked at its usual spot beside the Zen garden. Iania waited for the ARS unit to release before she sprinted through the garden. At the entrance of the lab, she slipped the well-worn white lab coat over her designer dress and lowered her hands in the Cube. Bubbles of cold steam cleansed her hands followed by a stream of warm air. Then, a layer of protective gel coated her hands. A set of green lights lighted up to

signal the end of sterilization. She lifted her hands out of the Cube and marched in the climate-controlled lab.

Heat blasted through her coat as the climate was set to match Earth's current hot and dry season. Rows of her experimental flowers soaked the lab with their sweet fragrance. They uplifted her mood. She gripped a potted orchid with her left palm and counted eight distinct colors in the unique flower – from the swirls of green and orange in the petals to the intense red of the stamens, producing an organic whole that was as lovely as its name – *Cypripedium Parviflorum*. She held the orchid under ultraviolet light.

It glowed.

“You're so beautiful, but you already know that, don't you?” Iania skipped the efficient mechanism to propagate the orchid and picked up a hand-held laser cutter instead. After taking in a long breath and steadying her right hand, she pointed the laser at the stem of the orchid. Suddenly, a shocking wave of high-pitched alarm reverberated around her. Her hands shook. The potted orchid crashed. The laser cutter shifted and pointed at the next aisle. It sliced the feeding lines of experimental autumn crocuses. She managed to turn off the cutter, but the damaged was done.

The slashed feeding lines pulsed and sprayed liquid nutrients over her lab coat and all around her feet. Fragments of broken pots, shredded flower petals and chunks of dirt combined with the sticky liquid nutrients. She was no longer standing on solid ground. In the split second before she slipped, her thoughts strayed to Jude's anger. He would be furious if she attended their anniversary celebration with visible scratches on her face and arms and so, she stretched her hands and broke her fall with her palms.

“Ow!” Iania screamed. “Ahhh!!”

She squirmed before pulling out a piece of glass between her middle and ring fingers. When she tried to stand, her numb fingers struck a red glass cylinder off the workspace and an image of her adorable seven-year-old brother floated in front of her.

“Blu!” Iania cried, but his image had disappeared inside the strobe lights as they flashed in tandem with the booming alarms. She closed her eyes and covered her ears with her bleeding palms.

“Help!!” she shouted. “Help me, please!”

“Ms. Hari, you must leave,” a cydroid worker said.

“I know.” Iania clung on the cydroid’s strong neck as ze carried her out of the lab and into her Zen garden. The half-moon bridge creaked as the cydroid stomped across it. Above the conservatory, the alarms kept shrieking along with the strobing white lights. Green and white star-shaped water-lilies bobbed above the medium-sized pond as miniature rainbow fishes leaped out of the recycled waters. The cydroid stepped off the bridge, ran past the single rustic bench and coursed through the “S” shaped stone path. Ze rubbed against the pink jasmines and tri-colored daffodils lining both sides of the path. Heady perfume hung in the air, but the usually soothing fragrance had turned to a potent mix of chaos. It was giving her a pounding headache.

Finally, they reached her vehicle and she asked, “Do you know what happened?”

“Clarification not available,” the cydroid replied.

“Right.” In her confusion, Iania had forgotten about Jude’s specific programming for all cydroids. The only objective for this worker cydroid was taking care of the conservatory. “Wait!” She tugged on the zir uniform. “Sustain the research and transmit progress reports.” The cydroid nodded, repeated her command and ran back into her Zen garden.

Her vehicle closed its hatch and prompted in a soothing, synthetic voice. “May I suggest medications for your injuries?”

“Why?” She almost missed the question. Her ears were still ringing and her fingers were throbbing. Added to all that, her coat was not only covered with sticky liquid nutrients but smeared with dirt and blood. “Right, of course. I think it’s just my hands, but start the antiseptic anyway.” Cold steam misted

inside her vehicle as warmed air circled her body. In seconds, the bleeding between her fingers stopped and her lab coat cleaned.

“Okay, V, I’m good,” Iania said. “Now, straight to Acropolis.”

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THE AGENDA

[23:33:33Z 2310-08-07 SUNDAY]

Bogg craved for calm recreation. His discussion with members of the Committee had been unproductive. They were incapable of reason. He broke the seal of the experimental *MBa* and dripped the liquefied drug into his antique smoke pipe with the INCAS logo of a proud lion against a background of green, red and brown triangles. The extinct animal had represented his regal ancestry for over five generations. It symbolized courage, strength and a commitment to fight for the greater good.

Two centuries ago, the cosmic explosion, CE45 had changed the planet. Corporations used their stockpiles of goods and services to save the population. After the innovation of the planetary shield stabilized the atmosphere, corporations formed the Unified Earth (UE) Committee. At this time, a corporation's success or failure was based not only on size but popularity.

FIRM Foundation became the largest corporation after they merged with Taylor Corporation and Independent Biodegradable Magnalox and controlled the Committee. His plan was for INCAS to merge with the popular Admundsen and Secretas, purchase ABW and break FIRM's monopoly over the Committee.

Bogg inhaled the strange mixture of Moric (M), and Balsium (Ba), the elemental drug used in REM, a brainwashing program used on prisoners to permanently replace and alter their memories. It was not

meant for recreational purposes, but his assistants guaranteed that in small doses, the *MBa* was not only harmless but produced a feeling of euphoria.

“Whoop!”

An energetic tide of optimism flushed through him as a realm of pure bliss took over his mind and joyous enthusiasm washed away his irritation at the disorganized Committee. He smirked, chuckled, and then, giggled.

He giggled?

He never giggled.

Ever!

Pleasure fought with his need for composure. The drug was indeed powerful. Bogg wanted a moment of diversion instead he got a total loss of perception. He couldn't stop himself from tipping more of the drug into his pipe and inhaling its deep-bodied aroma.

“Ah... this is unwise but yet good.”

Bogg giggled again. “No!” He banged on the table to stop his nonsensical reaction. It was up to him to take over the Committee and tackle the serious issue of depleting resources since the other members were only interested in bickering like children and comparing their senseless, over-the-top entertainments.

Small-minded jerks!

Unlike the altruistic nature of the previous Committee, the present entitled members only cared about themselves. They turned the limited cydroids into glorified assistants instead of using them to save the planet. Their stupidity infuriated him. He imagined the next assault on Earth would not be due to cosmic forces, but from overblown egos unwilling to safeguard the future.

His emotions fluctuated from anger to pleasure as the drug continued to flow through him and override his logical mind. Gradually, his frustrations floated away, replaced by a lift of euphoric radiance.

Bogg enjoyed the high, but a part of him rebelled at the loss of focus. He tried to hold on to his lucidity. A sliver of memory recalled his assistants leaving an antidote. He spotted the slim vial on his desk.

That's it!

He picked it up and tried to read the instructions, but the words moved and then, they vibrated, and even leaped off the vial straight right at him.

“Whoa!”

His tight grip almost crushed the vial. A sudden flash of rational thoughts loosened his hold and coaxed him to swallow the liquid before his mind wavered again. Streams of bitterness lingered on his tongue. Bogg coughed. And coughed several more times before objects in his office came into focus as a part of his mind reenacted the agonizing memories of his lonely childhood.

As the sole heir of INCAS, he had been raised by cydroid nannies. The only human interaction had been with Amel Lynn, his overbearing aunt and guardian, who scheduled every moment of his time to studying boring subjects such as new world economics and generational philanthropy. There was no time for playing, laughing or giggling.

His feeling of desolation nearly had him reaching for more *Mba*, but Bogg resisted the urge and pushed aside his depressing memories to focus on his plan. Out of the strict upbringing was an aspiration for absolute success. His meticulous plan to take over the Committee was progressing nicely. No one would be able to stop his ascend to the Chair once his plan reached its completion.

Ah...

The antidote must have worked. His desire for escapism had vanished. He launched his holosphere. The illuminated layers of INCAS performance and activity reports swirled above his desk. As if he had summoned her, a blinking red light appeared on the sphere. He sneered at the image of his aunt before accepting her connection.

“Bogg!” Amel Lynn’s high pitch voice screeched. “Are you going to the meeting? Can you hear me, Bogg?”

What a sad, sad woman!

Her pitiful features resembled an alien, not the lovable and cute ones, but the slimy and grotesque ones. She would be the perfect candidate for *Mba* since the drug would lighten her mood or at the very least, lower her wailing voice.

He laughed.

“James Vladimir Bogg the Seventh!” Amel Lynn shouted. The lines of wrinkles across her forehead deepened. “Don’t be rude. I raised you better than that. For goodness sake, you’re not a Southerner, show some civility and answer my question.”

“I’ve been busy, woman,” he said, and bit the inside of his lips to prevent himself from laughing. Her use of his full name usually angered him, but not today. All he wanted to do right now was laughed at her. Maybe he was experiencing the drug’s residual effects. “Besides, what’s the difference if I’m there or here in my office?”

“Of course, there’s a difference. For one, you’ll get to interact with the other members. It’ll change your outlook when you meet people in person.” Amel Lynn’s sunken eyes appeared to sink in deeper as she glared at him. “Have you been indulging in impropriety?”

“Actually, I have. I’ve snorted. No, that’s not right. I’ve smoked. You should try my latest indiscretion. It’ll do you good.”

Amel Lynn’s thin lips quivered. “Are you trying to rile me up?”

Of course!

Bogg shouted the reply in his mind. “Why the sudden interest with this meeting? Are you keeping a secret from me?” He squeezed his lips and forced himself not to laugh. “Oops!” He coughed to disguise the little squeaks escaping his lips.

“What’s wrong with you today? I don’t keep secrets, Bogg, at least not from you. NEA mining is on the agenda and I know they’ll approve it in the meeting. I’ve made sure of it.”

“Hmm... did you bribe someone? Or maybe more than ONE. Maybe you bribe them all!” He wouldn’t be surprised if her proposal went askew since mining the Near-Earth Asteroid was a giant undertaking. The pathetic Committee would probably either postpone or worse, dismiss it altogether. Finally, he gave up trying to stop his laughter. At first, he smiled and then, he laughed. A few seconds later, he howled. His laughter lasted longer than he expected.

Amel Lynn’s nostrils flared. “Are you done?”

“Hmm...” He needed a moment to relish his aunt’s bewildered look. Her eyebrows thinned into a line as if they were reaching out to touch each other in the middle of her forehead. Her wide nose flared and her lips were thinner than he had ever seen. It must be the only angry expression she could muster.

Bogg exhaled, and said, “I hope you’re referring to freshwater mining.”

“Of course not!” Amel Lynn replied. “We’re going for helium-3, you know, one of the components used for Olganium. The mines on the moon are depleting.”

“I don’t need a science lesson, aunt. You’ve made sure I had enough of it as a child,” he reminded her. However, she was right that combining Helium-3 with the abundant spazine and zenium would turn them to Olganium, which would be good for INCAS. The element had become the ultimate clean energy used by most vehicles, homes and first generation cydroids.

“You’re not going for water then?” he asked.

“Your idea of compassion always surprises me. You’re not thinking of the big picture, Bogg. Olganium will be good for INCAS and I’ll do anything for the good of INCAS. What? You don’t agree?”

What do you think?

Of course, he agreed with her. It was the only thing they had in common. “Stop pointing out the obvious. Tell me what you’ve done?”

“I’ve liaised with ABW and they agreed,” Amel Lynn said, and straightened her shoulders.

“You did what?” Bogg wanted to smack off her smugness. “How can you be so daft? No, let me rephrase, that’s beyond daft, it’s idiotic.”

“How dare you say such things to me after all I’ve done for you?”

“Don’t go there, woman.” He almost lost his balance when he stood and stepped on something solid. Luckily, the antique pipe survived his weight. He didn’t remember throwing it away earlier. He picked it up, swiped off the smidge of liquefied drug and placed it back on his desk. “I say and do whatever I damn well please.”

Amel Lynn’s eyes almost sprung out of their sockets. “Have you no respect?”

For you? Never!

Bogg glared at the older woman. “What makes you think Hari won’t use your liaison and take over INCAS?”

“ABW can’t afford it and they needed the publicity more than us.” Amel Lynn shook her head, her ridiculous-looking pink hat moving from side to side as wisps of curly green hair trailed down her hollowed cheeks. Her years of facial reconstructions had overextended her bone structure giving her the alien-like features – flattened lips, hallowed cheeks and expanded veins around her neck.

“That might be the case, but I still don’t trust that man,” he said.

“Don’t tell me you have a different plan?” Amel Lynn asked. “I don’t believe you do.”

Why am I not surprised?

Bogg wanted to wave off their connection, but he didn’t. “If you must know, I do have a plan.”

Amel Lynn groaned. “An intelligent one, I hope.”

“Unlike yours, you mean?” His patience was becoming as toxic as the atmosphere outside his window as his plan was revolutionary compared to his aunt’s one-time liaison with ABW.

“Well, what’s the plan?” Amel Lynn sighed.

Bogg thought about it for a moment and then, decided that he couldn't spend another minute explaining his takeover plan to her. It took her over a month to approve his plan to diversify INCAS into mining. "You know what, I don't think I'm ready to share any of it with you. You'll just have to trust me." He paused. "By the way, don't forget to vote me in as the next Chair?"

Amel Lynn glared. "Chair of the Committee?"

Obviously...

"Just do as I asked, Amel. Like you, I'll do anything for the good of INCAS." He ignored her open mouth and checked INCAS' data on his holosphere. Transportation businesses like INCAS and ABW depended too much on weather, which meant his decision to expand into mining was justified. Of course, crushing FIRM's monopoly and taking over Chair Dina Pays' position at the Committee would allow him to do more than just mining an asteroid.

"Why get rid of Dina?" Amel Lynn shook her head. "I've never heard any of this before."

"Stop that!" Bogg pointed at the sphere. To him, her head shaking of disapproval always meant that he had failed her. "Stop shaking your head at me. You know what, I think you're getting too old for this, aunt. Why don't you retire? Perhaps, right this very second."

"And give you all the power. I don't think so," Amel Lynn said.

"I'm done talking here." Bogg waved off their connection. The feminine voice of his holosphere restarted and announced the day, date and time. After listening to his aunt's vexing voice, he had no desire to listen to another high-pitched voice.

"Change vocals to masculine." As soon as he requested the change, the voice on the sphere slowed way down before restarting with the deepest voice he had ever heard.

He giggled.

"Damn!" Bogg shut down the holosphere and marched out of his office.

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