



XPOSURE
PART I: ANTEBELLUM

Fiery storms mercilessly lashed for what seems like hours. The blazing bolts of lightning and roaring thunders continued to shake the entire rusty structure Ody had taken shelter underneath. He tried to ride the passing time by catching some sleep after the excruciating day he was forced to spend in this new reality. This new existence seemed so absurd to him.

The hell with that, it was just two days ago that he was another ordinary citizen, working as a journalist for "The FortWeb Globe", the city's second-largest media conglomerate, usually covering some insignificant items about city politics. Granted, most people would have found this boring - Why the hell bother covering and interviewing the only political power and its highborn representatives that existed for decades? He could do science, sport. Even city regulation changes sounded more interesting. But, Ody saw the sheer beauty behind every political move and ploy. Although he didn't always agree with some decisions, he could still appreciate the wisdom behind each decision .

That changed, however, the evening Ody stumped upon the edge of a sinister cobweb of a big scandalous plot of corruption. He wasn't even close to disentangling this conspiracy, but pieces of its grand design were starting to become evident to Ody. And for that, he came to realize when the raging tempest subsided and dwindled, he was exiled. Exiled to DarkWare .

Several hours into the storms, Ody drifted into sleep. Nightmares terrorized him, and not ordinary ones. In his dream, Ody was chased by giant strange mechanical creatures. He could feel himself running endlessly, unable to catch his breath. Ody's mind was so agitated at this rare occurrence of a dream, it could not cope with such a powerful dream. Ody body's jerked, and he woke up, jolting in panic .

Several minutes it took for Ody to realize what he had experienced. It was a vivid Darkdream. He heard of these, but Darkdreams were usually attributed to the Disturbed. Ody was hardly a one. He wondered if this place was somehow afflicted with radiance, causing these DarkDreams. Ody shook off the scraping pieces of smelly canvas he used to keep himself warm during the blazing storms. He realized that he had fallen asleep when the storms diminished, but only for a short time. Beads of sweat poured from his head, trickling on his face. "How long was I asleep, and why is it suddenly so hot inside", he asked himself.

Ody grunted, trying to get up, realizing temperature had, indeed, increased while he was Darkdreaming. If several hours ago it was way below Coldening point, it seemed painfully clear to Ody that it was hotter than on that Virtuvacation he had

with three of his peers from the Globe. Most Virtuvacations are temperature-monitored, but Ody's colleagues insisted they wanted a simulation of a pre-Copula real beach. Records of those and other landscapes were still well-preserved and encoded into some of the more luxurious Virtuvacation recreation sites. Memories of the hot weather, humidity, and all the wonders and lovely people they had encountered that time resurfaced in Ody's mind. He smiled bitterly, before shedding more bits of metal and other substances that were air-carried inside the habitat he took shelter in. Some of it got into his messy dried mauve-dyed hair.

"Damn it. I need to find some comestibles." The surprisingly tasty can of potatoes Ody had found while searching and raiding this place down was enough for him to survive the night if one could even tell the passage of time in this shithole place. His stomach had made its presence known, making noises of irritation, signaling Ody to be on the move. But it was damn too hot. What was it, 300 heat units? 350? He could not tell. And it seemed to increase even above that. He would not dare get out in such hostile weather. Indeed, it wasn't bad as damned storms, but he wanted to ride this and see if this gets better. "I wonder if this was how the weather would be in FortWeb, weren't for Grace's ability to control every aspect of the climate". Ody had not reflected on how he had taken his life for granted, now stripped away from him. Stable weather, accessible food, accommodation, family, and friends ...

The heat rose to 400 heat units, and decent gusts of sirocco entered the habitat. The air was mixed with crumbles of disintegrating metal pieces and a lot of crusted thick sand. Ody tried to rip a piece of his canvas turned-blanket to have some sort of face cover but was unable to tear the thick fabric. It was pitched black, so he bent down and pried blindly for something useful. His dry palms were punctured several times from what seemed to be shards of other sharp objects, yet eventually, Ody had finally found some sort of cloth large enough to put on, tie around his head and cover his face.

Ody wondered what caused such extreme weather and radical changes of it. Living in the city, the weather was usually stabilized, usually warm and sunny, with occasional rainy days to allow replenishment and growth of plants. But this? This was unbearable. Ody would have to search for food soon or starve. After an hour, he noticed it. Faint rays of light cracked through into this crumbling structure. His eyes adjusted, and Ody could finally gaze upon his surroundings.

The structure seemed to be some sort of storage or warehouse. Tens of shelf units were scattered inside, some fallen on the floor. Torn carton boxes laid, with some small cans seemed to have been rolled over from the boxes once torn. "Maybe these are some sort of canned food", he thought to himself, remembering he heard of

those outdated forms of food administration. This archaic use of food that used to be given to prisoners in the city before the Amended Reform had been established and prisons weren't needed anymore for some reason. Nowadays, food was dispersed directly, and in the form of soluble tablets. Eating, actual physical eating, was some leisure activity often shared by high-class citizens or Hierarchists of the city's theocratic government. Ody himself enjoyed it with his friends on that Virtovacation. It was a good memory. However, he doubted these cans contained such rich tastes of food, but he was in no condition to be fastidious. The hot winds seemed to wane, and temperatures were dropping slowly. He picked one and looked at the label. Canned milk. "Ugh! That tastes horrible", Ody scowled and threw it away. He continued to scavenge and found cans of conserves. The date imprinted on them was 285 BCP. "That is two years from now!", he exclaimed, happy he had found something to eat. Later on, he would ask himself how it was possible, assuming this place was deserted for decades. But, right now, he kept busy lavishing at the food he was eating.

By the time Ody had finished eating, he felt the temperature dropping to normal levels. Combined with the darkness dissipating and turning into dusk, Ody felt it is the right time to search and explore the vicinity. He dusted himself, thankful for his clothes being in one piece for the most of it. He will have to find new ones somehow, but that was not the first thing on his list.

Ody sneaked outside the small bunker he was hiding in and looked around. He was amazed at what he had seen .

Nothing.

There was nothing out there. Ody was gaping at vast plains of... nothing. He looked in all directions and saw only the flat ground he was standing on. There were no buildings or any sort of structure safe the one he had taken for shelter. "What should I do?" Ody asked himself. "I can't stay in this place, food will eventually run out, and I need to find some way back home". Home. He had always taken his life in FortWeb for granted. Everybody did. Only now, Ody had come to realize how even the basic things such as access to water or stable weather were not trivial. Don't pity yourself, Ody, he said to himself, motivating himself, Go and explore.

Ody was about to do just about that. But then, a thought entered his mind. How will I find my way back here should the weather become harsh again? A wise thought. He remembered an old tale of three girls who marked their way home by dispersing some Orange peel on the ground every few steps. This idea was ruled out quickly - If the gale returns, any item would be thrown in the air a terrible distance. No, he

had to find something else. Entering the bunker again, Ody was scanning for anything that could help. He searched on the shelves and some small crates but found nothing. When he was about to give up, his eyes located a crate full of broken-up devices .

“What the...?” He wondered. He saw some old models of commphones, dates probably tens and hundreds ago, which were obsolete after the Copula had been established. The link with Grace, the supreme artificial intelligence, monitored by the theocrats, was a given fact since the day you were born. A small micro-subcutaneous implant just below the shoulder was injected several days after birth and that was it! you are already linked and monitored by the government for the rest of your life, unless... Ody brushed his arm, feeling the scar, and wondered if he was still linked. He assumed that was no longer the case. At least, he hoped so .

Ody continued to investigate the crate’s content. Most of the outdated devices were broken or required some sort of old power source, no longer found. “Wait, what’s this?” He picked out an odd round device, encased in glass. The glass contained two needles placed on some sort of a round platform with scale marks. The shapes of the scribes looked alien to Ody, but that’s not the strangest thing about this device. When he moved a bit to the left, one of the needles moved right, pointing to his former position. He moved backward and forward, but the needle wouldn’t budge. “Could this device point to a specific location relatively?” Ody thought. That pathfinder device could be the answer to avoiding getting lost. This was the second time that day he felt some sort of comfort. Clues. He needed to find more clues .

Leaving the bunker, he went in the direction of the needle. He could see dark clouds multiplying high above, and the dusk light moved from his right to his left. Minutes passed. Temperatures continued to drop. He didn’t have much time. An hour? Two hours? Well, he better start exploring right now, or it gets colder and the storms return .

It seems almost an hour has passed before Ody felt the cold invading his body beneath his clothes. Although he was wearing typical adapting clothes, for some reason they were worn and lost some of their embedded weather-adapting technology. Thoughts of giving up reached his mind. “I probably need to go back and... AUGH!”, he grunted after stumbling on something and tripped, hitting the moist soil with his left cheek. It hurt like hell.

Luckily for Ody, he didn’t break anything and the bruise was mild. “Damnit, what did I stumble upon?” He wondered. Ody stood up, examining the strange elliptic shape buried in the ground beneath him. Ody dusted the pieces of dirt and was

surprised to see the object's color was almost shiny white. When he dug around the object, Ody noticed the thing was larger than he originally had thought, and could probably reach his waist. It was also heavier than he presumed. Ody kept examining the surface of this... it reminded him of an old robot he once had seen in a museum. A small cranny. He touched it gently, afraid to activate this quasi-robot. Seconds later, he felt an itching in his nose. All the dust and dirt in the bunker and outside were too much for his respiratory system, and then, it happened. Ody sneezed. And press the cranny. "Shit", he said. The concave layer was an activation switch. The thing vibrated .

Bzzz... Bzzzzzzz... Woop Woop Woop... "Why is this model making such a strange noise? This must be a really old one", Ody thought out loud. It rose up from the dirt, and Ody realized it had two white-covered arms and an additional pair of what looked like lower limbs, legs. The model had something that looked like an almost round head that seemed like a screen, and in its middle, there was some sort of embedded glass, maybe... a lens? Was that an old camera robot? He had heard of those, but never saw a real one, not even in a museum. Ody put his hand on the robot's body, trying to see if more switches would reveal themselves, but the second he did that, the camera robot got frantic, using his two arms, twirling them in the air at a high speed. Ody was scared and backed one foot away. He was afraid the robot would cut him. After several seconds, the robot felt more secured and stopped flapping its arms. It arose, adjusting himself to stand steady on the dirt. Then, it activated a mini-jet system, levitating a foot above the ground. Ody wondered if he could somehow communicate with this robot.

"H... Hello?" All biomechs I know can understand human language, Ody figured. The robot didn't respond. "Do you understand me?" Ody insisted. Nothing. He sighed, stood up, and was about to turn away when he felt something pulling the sleeve of his pants. Surprised, Ody turned and saw the camera-equipped robot looking at him, his lens narrowed. A faint aura coming from his back. Baffled, Ody didn't know what to say or do. Eventually, Ody grasped the robot's arm and released his pants. He pointed at himself and said. "Ody. I am Ody. Who are you?" The aura expanded from the robot's back as if reacting to Ody. "Can you understand me?" Ody asked again but wasn't expecting an answer.

"Frames". A slightly metallic but childish voice emanated from the robot caused Ody's pupils to widen with astonishment. It can talk. But what did it mean? "What frames?" he asked the robot. The aura flashed and now circled the robot from top to bottom. Each flashing was accompanied by the robot repeating the same word. "Frames."

“Frames... frames”, Ody thought, Is it telling me its name? “Are you Frames?” Ody asked. The aura flashed again, but now the robot said “Yes”. Ody was filled with exuberance. He had just made first contact! Maybe Frames knew something that could help him to get back to FortWeb or know how to do so. “Do you know where we are?” Ody asked Frames. At first, no aura flashed or lit, but after a few seconds, Ody heard something buzzing and could notice a tiny antenna-like device coming out of Frame’s head. Is it trying to hear something? pick up a transmission? Ody wondered. Then the tiny rod changed formation at the tip forming a miniature tetrahedron. Pre-copula triangulation system? Frame emitted buzzing noise and then flashed once. “DarkWare. 320 kilometers west of FortWeb”, replied Frames. I am really in DarkWare... Ody thought, trying to get accustomed he was in this cursed and afflicted terrain. “Kilometer? What is a kilometer?” Was it an old distance measurement unit? “How many days by walking over there from here?” he asked Frames. Ten seconds of computations yielded “Human walking?” Ody almost chuckled. “Yes”. Frames flashed and said “Sixty-Four hours.”

Oh no, I’m that far from the city? Ody’s face turned grim. He could never survive such harsh terrain without traveling such a distance without finding more shelters. “Frames?” he turned to the robot. Frames flashed once but kept his back aura on as if signaling it was waiting. “Will I be able to harbor a lodging or hideout on my way to FortWeb?” More computations. “Yes” was the answer. That’s great! “What is the nearest hideout on the way to the city and how far is it?”. Ody asked. “Old repository 10 kilometer north from here.” Flash replied and then added “Two hours”, pointing to the direction from which Ody came from. That’s probably the bunker I hid inside. “Are there more this way?” He asked frames, praying that’s not the only one. Frames triangulated and calculated. “Yes, 200 kilometers northeast. FortWeb’s Fifth Vault. Forty hours that way.” Vault? What is that? He would never survive such a walking distance without proper provisions and clothing against the terrible weather, and he already felt the cold coming back and afar, Ody could hear thunders. What can he do?

After pondering a couple of minutes, Ody decided. “I better return to the... old repository. He was about to walk and then something occurred to him. “Frames, would you like to tag along?” He smiled at the robot. Frames didn’t flinch or beam but just answered - “Yes .”

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The storm continued for hours while Ody and Frame spent the night at the old warehouse. This time, the place was well-lit due to Frame’s bright aura, and Ody had actually managed to find a big board and an old dusty mattress and turned them

into a bed. Using Frame's sensors, he located some more canned food, and some empty bottles he filled, by letting the rain gradually accumulate inside. Curious of the circumstances that got Frames to be buried, his journalistic instincts kicking in, Ody decided to decipher his new companion .

"How long have you been here, Frames?" he asked Frames. "Six hundred twenty-eight years, seven months", came the shocking answer. "That is almost three centuries before the Copula", Ody exclaimed. "And how long have you been deactivated?", he continued to probe.

"Nine months", Frames replied. Ody was shocked. How is it possible? Why would a pre-Copula robot be active in DarkWare for so long without his power source depleted and no one to..." Oh wait. But... That was impossible. DarkWare is plagued. Everyone knew that being exposed for so long here would make the body succumb to numerous deadly diseases, collectively known as the DarkWare Blights. "Frames, have you met or known other human beings during your stay here?" The illumination that came from Frames followed by a short "Yes" answer. "How, how is it... How many, Frames, I need to know?" He pleaded with Frames as if Frames was holding back the information. Frames seemed to struggle with the question, "How many, O-dy?" He asked, saying Ody's name for the first time. "How many people have you met?" Ody replied. "One hundred and thirty-nine people, four of them embedded ."

So many people, Ody thought. And what embedded meant? Is it possible that... that people can survive here? Were those people sick? Where did they live? With every answer, came more questions. More inquiries. Relax. You need to relax, Ody, he told himself. "What does embedded mean, Frames?" Frames considered the question and then started to glow alternately in four different shades - sienna, peach, dark blue, and cyan. And then, a light ray beamed from what could be considered as Frame's shoulder and a display of four different persons - two men and two women, were screened upon the shelter's wall. "Those are embedded within me", said Frames, and then emitted a strange sound. Was that a sigh? "You have their memories?" Ody asked. "More. Their consciousnesses. They are remembered through me, and to some extent are part of my programming". That sounds like... like... blasphemy! Ody remembered the core belief that once you are about to depart from this world, you would be unified, through copula, with the city itself. No one has ever been departed otherwise, and to suggest so was considered sacrilegious. Moreover, since DarkWare was considered to be plagued with the Blights, then everyone there would die without any unification. What more would I uncover? Ody was afraid but had to gather his strength and understand.

He breathed out and then turned to Frames. “Is DarkWare really plagued with the Blights?” It took Frames exactly two seconds before he replied. “No, there is no plague or any known disease localized in DarkWare safe from some unsanitary conditions-related diseases.” Ody felt his world collapsing. The more time he had spent in DarkWare, he came to realize everything he knew, or rather taught about this place was false. Why? It’s not like people would want to suddenly move out from FortWeb and live in this forsaken and hazardous landscape. Ody needed answers, and he knew exactly how to get them. “Have your embedded used to live somewhere? Some sort of a hidden colony?” he asked Frames. “Yes”, Frames replied .

“Could you take me there? How much time would it take us”?

“I can take you, O-dy, it is a two-day journey”, Frames warned him. This means Ody would be needing better clothing, he wouldn’t survive the vicious gales. “Frames, is there any shelter we can hide from during the storms? I won’t survive such a trip”. Frames put out his triangulation device and started to flash, calculating. “Yes, O-dy, there are two shelters on the way there. One is twenty-six kilometers south, and has some old clothing you might use.” How does he know that? Ody wondered. “That will be great. How about we go out when the current storm starts to soothe?” He asked Frames, not realizing at first it didn’t really matter for his new companion, but Ody chose not to say anything about that. “Yes, O-dy. We can embark on the trip in five hours and forty-two minutes.” Ody smiled. “Would you mind waking me up half an hour before that time?” he asked Frames, feeling guilty for treating him like an alarm device. “Yes, O-dy, I will”. Ody nodded, and then tucked his head against his improvised bed and dreamt of sun .

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They were walking for two hours in almost total darkness, with Frames shedding some light on their way. There was no road or even a trail. Just wet soil. Ody had really wished for a good pair of boots, but at least his own pair of shoes was somehow water-resistant. He counted on finding something inside the shelter they were heading for. Light has been penetrating through the gray clouds, and contrary to the past two days, the clouds dissipated, allowing the red sun to shine on the dark land. Ody found it refreshing to be able to see the landscape all around him. It was a desert of damp, but still, he was pleased to soak up some sunlight.

They had arrived at the shelter by the time temperatures dropped and the clouds returned to hide the sun and became darker. Ody raided the shelter and managed to find a water-resistant raincoat, umbrella add-on for Frames and himself, and some old boots. There was some decent canned food, and Ody was relieved he didn’t

have to waste his rations. They had spent the stormy night inside the big structure and left first thing when the storm calmed. The next day was much pleasant for walking - although the sun almost didn't come out, Ody felt more comfortable walking in DarkWare's hostile weather. While on the first day, Ody hardly exchanged any words with Frames and talked to him most when they made camp, today they talked on and on, Ody telling Frames about living in FortWeb, his job as a journalist, and even a former ex-lover of his. Frames told Ody his embedded's life stories, how they had met with him. Ody found it all interesting and wondered what had happened to them, but Frames seemed to not have witnessed their demise, stating he doesn't have any memory of that. Ody inferred something isn't right, and although he was sure Frames did not lie, he suspected someone or something tampered with some of Frame's memory. I need to be careful, Ody told himself.

After several hours walking in rainy but bearable weather, Ody noticed it. First, he hardly saw its outlines, but after asking Frames to try to illumine ahead, he could see the complex more clearly. The Colony. From afar, the sight which invaded Ody's eyes was a mix of beauty and grotesque. It looked like an old and decaying skyscraper, but as Ody got closer, he was astonished to see its top part looked as if a giant monster had taken a bite into it. "Frames", Ody turned to his companion, who returned a bright flashing light, "Yes O-dy?"

"Do you know what had caused this damage to the colony's infrastructure?" Ody asked his friend". "Unknown, I cannot access this data", came the answer. This was added to the ongoing mystery that was behind Frames' existence. It was obvious that on one hand, he held a vast amount of useful information about DarkWare, but at the same time, critical information was somehow blocked. Ody rejected the idea that Frames was the accomplice, so who was it? Maybe the answer would be found in the colony somehow.

As they approached the Colony, Ody spotted a moat and a wall defending it. "Frames? Do you see any guards on the wall?" Frames computed and calculated, assessing the environment ahead. "No, O-dy" Strange. Why would the only seemingly populated area in DarkWare not be guarded? They continued and reached the moat. It was not wide at all or deep, and a manual mechanic barge was located on this bank of the moat. They hopped on it and used the rusty steering wheel to pass to the other side in mere seconds. Still, no one seemed to be greeting them. Or threatening them.

Bolts of lightning and thunder blasts ran wild about an hour north of their current location. The rain got heavier, almost stabbing Ody's body. "I'm glad we have arrived at the Colony on time", said Ody to Frames, who didn't reply. "But where is

everyone?”, he wondered. “There are two hundred fifty-six people inside, but their location is unknown”, replied Frames. He can locate items in a warehouse but not one single person in here? “Two hundred fifty?? That’s a lot of people. Well, let’s try to find one, Frame”.

They entered through a broken passage which resembled a revolving glass door, though Ody could not move it at all. He meandered forward and saw numerous individuals roaming the exedra .

“Hold it, forti”. He heard a menacing low-pitched voice behind him and a sound of something being clicked, indicating some sort of a weapon. Ody and Frames stopped. “We come in peace”, said Ody. “Yes, yes, we heard this before”, said the voice. “Turn around”. Ody adhered and was facing a nasty-looking man, probably in his late twenties, pointing some old dark small weapon at him. His face was scarred across the eye and right cheek. His curly hair was missing from the right side of his head, and his skin had several bruises. He looked at Ody, and then noticed Frames, and gawked. “YOU AGAIN!” The man pointed his pistol at Frames who did not react. Ody, however, jolted and pleaded with the man. “Please, we have just traveled a long way to come here, I don’t know what Frames did to you, but he’s harmless. I was banished three nights ago from FortWeb and I need some help to find my way back, I will repay you, people, as much as I can ”.

“FRAMES? Is that how you call yourself now? How simple”. The scarred man chuckled. “Do you know that your friend here had appeared several times, always with someone who was banned from the city, promising to help us? And it’s always the same thing, They come to HER, she entrusts them with a mission, they fail and who pays the price? They? No, they are already dead! You little robotic clutter? No, it is just put to a comma in some random place, waiting for the next gull-in-trouble. HER? No, she just uses the next dupe-in-line. It’s always the settlements. Grace and their corrupted Theocracy starve us more and more, and these recurring infiltrations give them an excuse. So, no, your friend and you are definitely not welcome here. We don’t want anything to do with that accursed stupid robot. Now, LEAVE. If you want help, make your case with HER!” He flapped his pistol, showing the way back out of the Colony.

Ody tried to make his case and explained the weather was getting worse, but immediately was hushed by the colonist. “Go to HER, stranger, go to Organa. She surely will help you, hahaha”, he chuckled sinisterly for a couple of seconds before choking on his own laugh. After he straightened his voice he added, “You may rest near the gate, but leave immediately when the storm mollifies.” He whistled a

strange hiss. An adolescent female arrived. She held a similar pistol. “Yes, uncle Tyze? Who are those FortWebbers?” she chuckled .

“Yve,” Tyze said to his niece, “Take our friends here to the gate and keep an eye on them during the storm, and on the first sign of soothing, show them one-way out. ALIVE”.

“Awww, uncle, you no fun!” Yve chuckled and then turned to Ody and Frames. “C’mon, FortWebbers, I dunno why my uncle dislikes you, but that’s your rotten luck and my rotten luck is to escort you out. Move ”!

“Come on, Frames,” Ody turned to his friend. “We’ll rest and then go to this Organa. You and I need to talk after we leave”, he frowned, his face sulky. Frames did not react, but his lights seem to dim, maybe signaling sorrow. Yve smirked and forced them to the gate. Ody leaned on the wall near the gate, and Frames just hovered near him, as if trying to make conversation with him, unsuccessfully. Ody had closed his eyes, feeling all alone in the world again.

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A mild punch in his shoulder woke Ody up. Groggy, he opened his eyes and realized it was that strange girl, Yve, rudely waking and getting him up so he and Frames leave. The sun was covered by grey clouds, but that was misleading. Ody could feel again the ravaging heat waves, slapping his face every couple of seconds. Half-dried sand grains had entered his nostrils when he yawned .

“Go, stranger,” said Yve, swaying her pistol and pointing west. “Organa’s z... Organa’s place is about three hours that way. I hope you find your destiny with peace.” She actually sounded sincere, which frightened Ody even more. What had he gotten himself into? He rose, dusted his pants and turned to the gate, and then remembered something. Someone. He took a gander at where Frames was, but could not see him .

“Your robopal has left thirty minutes ago,” Said Yve.

“What? What do you mean? By himself? Have you noticed that? Why didn’t you wake me up?” Ody was irritated. But it was not this strange girl not informing him, nor by the disappearance of his companion in this bleak world. It was being angry at Frames for not telling him his past experience with the Colony the night before, without trying to get to the bottom of it. Ody then shook his head in disbelief - was he thinking just now that Frames was insulted or hurt? That made no sense. He

gathered his provisions, said nothing to Yve, and strode outside the gate, and set to find Frames .

But where to start? DarkWare was devoid of anything matter. Just darkness. Frames could either go to Organa by himself, or just return to their shelter, or maybe just... deactivate himself for feeling bad? That sounds so out of touch, how can Frames even feel anything? Was it his embeddeds that made him able to understand feelings in some capacity? Does this what copula with Grace mean? That thought was somewhat encouraging. But that also meant Ody had hurt his friend and that made him feel bad. Without noticing, Ody started padding his way west. He walked for several minutes, thanking some light beams that were finding their way outside the ornery clouds, so it wasn't total darkness. The dry sirocco winds assuaged sooner than expected, and Ody was thankful to whomever that luck was a little bit on his side. He had two or three hours of reasonable weather .

Kept walking westward, fear was crawling inside Ody's body. What will happen to him if he does not find Frames? Had frames really felt remo ...

“O-dy”!

“Ha?” Ody startled, recognizing that faded voice and the way his name was pronounced. “Frames?” He called out loud “Where are you??? Do you see me? Light my way towards you, please.” A dimmed flash was shot towards him, indicating Frames was about five minutes of walking or even less. Ody found himself actually running towards his robotic friend. When he drew near, Ody noticed Frames was hovering on a small boulder. He panted quickly for several seconds, his heart still racing .

“Frames, hmfff, where did you go? Why haven't you said anything?” Originally, Ody planned to sound annoyed or disappointed, but he actually sounded worried and compassionate. Computing Ody's question, and calculating outcomes, emanating Grey and grey-red lights, Framed replied “I apologize O-dy, you were upset with me”. He paused for five seconds “Why were you upset with me?” Unexpectedly, the question pierced Ody's heart. If Frames was a human being, Ody would feel Frame's inquisitive gaze. But Frames was right. What was the reason for that ire? He could have just got to the bottom of things, instead of feeling disappointed and resenting his only friend in the world right now. Surprisingly enough, a tear trickled down his dry cheek. Ody sniffled. “I am sorry, I just didn't understand why the people of the colony were upset with your presence. You are not to blame, if anything, I should have been upset with their inhospitality.” If someone had said to Ody he would be apologizing to an old-model, he would have laughed to their faces. And yet, there

he was. "I apologize, Frames. I will be upset with you no more, I promise." In light of those words, Frames' lights changed from a mix of red and grey to a more colorful blend. Relief spread all over Ody's body, and at that second, he thought he had a reason to be optimistic.

Two hours later, the skies got even darker and daylight was about to diminish into the rainy night. Yet, there was no sight of any structure ahead, which would imply of this Organa's whereabouts. Ody was worried. Does she even exist? Could this be some sort of a trap? He turned to his friend. "Frames? how far are we from... from where Organa lives?". Frames seemed to dim his own lights, but then his lens dejected partially, tuning itself forward. What is he doing? After ten seconds, the lens returned to its original position and Frames replied.

"We are here, O-dy ."

"Pfft, what?" Ody was amused - Was Frames pulling a joke on him? That makes no sense. They were in the middle of nowhere. A dark barren land. There wasn't even a hint of a structure or an entrance to such a place. "Frames, is something wrong with your processing unit or huff-duff?"

"I am functioning well, thank you O-dy", Frames replied in all seriousness.

"But... there is nothing here, Frames." Ody was disturbed "No living creature, no building or even sort of a lair? Where is this Organa?"

A sudden gust of wind traveled near his ears, almost whispering to Ody of a presence, and he shuddered. "H... Hello?"

Another gust. Frames' lights darkened. "Frames?" Ody whispered to him. "Are we in danger?" Frames did not respond other than shutting his lights all completely. Was he afraid? Being cautious? And then, it happened.

At first, Ody thought it was his imagination playing some sort of tricks on mind and vision. Green and red flashing lines in the skies shimmered briefly in the sky, and Ody thought he saw a gargantuan hybrid humanoid and spider-like creature in front of him, hovering over an enormous ziggurat. This sight flashed twice for about less than a second, and Ody thought it was probably a phantasmic induced mechanism someone had planted in this area. But then a second, longer flash appeared in the sky, and he could spot the giant monster and the ziggurat in front of it, but instead of being upfront, they appeared hard to the left. More flashes of this vision recurred, and Ody felt his eyes being stabbed. It was a pyrotechnic show of the occult and also

displacing and alternating location after every flash thus worsened Ody's brain's capability to deal with it. And when the series of flashes intensified, he could notice the creature moving its mouth, in a manner of laughter .

“Ha, ha, ha”, It sounded feminine and fragmented. It only sounded when the skies flashed. Was it HER? “Th- p-wn and h-s --ight are he-- for th- --een's en--ame”. Ody managed to deduce that the creature was talking to him and about him. Pawn? Queen? What does that mean? Ody looked at Frames who seemed turned off. Puzzled, he then looked again to where he last saw the ziggurat. It wasn't there. Yet, the skies continue to flicker. Where has it gone?

And then, everything went white.

* * * * *

Eons had passed, but mere seconds were gone. Ody lost his balance in those seconds. He lost his consciousness. He lost his world. Where was he? Everything was white all around him, no trace of the dark wilderness of DarkWare, no ground, not skies, nothing. Had he been transported somehow? This technology did not exist, but in the past few days he had spent in DarkWare, Ody came to realize this place is very different from FortWeb, and everything was possible. He was alone and didn't see Frames .

“Hellooooo?” He cried in every direction. “Fr-aaaaaa-mes? Where are you”?

Then, the ziggurat appeared in front of him, but this time, it was actually a few steps ahead. It was at least twenty-story tall and six rooms wide at its base. There was a half-opened portal at this side .

WELCOME ODY. WELCOME TO MY REALM. COME IN.

The words boomed inside his head and echoed across the space he was occupied. How did she know my name? “Are you Organa? Where am I? What have you done to Frames? What is...” Ody had so many questions.

HA HA HA. YOU ARE AN INTERESTING HUMAN, ODY. THE FIRST TO CARE ABOUT YOUR FRIEND.

His cochleas trembled and beat hard inside his ears. “What have you done to him?” Ody was becoming irked, feeling he was played with, he didn't like feeling like a toy.

YOUR FRIEND IS OKAY AND WILL JOIN US SOON. PLEASE, ENTER MY ZIGGURAT, ODY.

Reluctantly, Ody entered the huge pyramid-like structure. Inside, the white which covered the entire surroundings were replaced by black and dimmed shades of colors. A partial-lit passage was leading him inside this stone-made maze. For some reason, he didn't feel the warmth coming from the torches. When he walked he didn't feel his feet stomping on an actual floor. As if this place defied the laws of nature itself. Curious, he stopped after a couple of minutes and looked at a torch. On a pure whim, Ody shoved the palm of his right hand into the fire and closed his eyes .

Nothing. An Illusion. Then, Ody reached his hand to grasp the torch. His hand moved right through it. A sophisticated illusion. But something still seemed off to Ody. He turned and lifted his left leg off the ground and then slowly pushed it towards the ground, relaxing the muscles of his calf and thigh. Bewildered, he watched as his leg submerged under the floor. He didn't feel anything engulfing his leg. Frantic, Ody quickly pulled his leg out. A terrifying thought came across his mind - Was he dead? Did this place even exist? He pinched himself hard and jerked. Pain means Life. Still, this place remained a mystery. No other option but to keep striding forward to meet this Organa .

Three minutes later, the passage led him to a huge well-lit arena. He stepped inside and walked toward its center, but stopped several steps before reaching the heart of the hall. All of the sudden, a light shone upon the place where he stood, and another shone next to him and Frames appeared .

“Frames! Is that you?” Ody exclaimed, and Frames replied using his light, confirming his identity. “Where have you been? What is this place”?

YOU ARE IN MY REALM, ODY. I HAVE DESIGNED IT TO MATCH ANYONE WHO ENTERED. IN MANY WAYS, THIS IS HOW YOUR MIND IMAGINED IT.

This isn't real. We're not actually here. I can't feel anything but myself. I need to be careful. Ody thought .

NO NEED TO WORRY, ODY. I AM HERE TO HELP YOU .

Organa seemed to read his thoughts. “Can you help me return to FortWeb”?

I CAN HELP YOU REGAIN YOUR PLACE. TELL ME YOUR STORY .

Ody told her. Everything. His life in the city, his job as a journalist, his family, his friends. Ody spoke of his recent experience with the city's bureaucrats, revealing some disturbing documents linking top-ranked members of the theocracy with deep malicious corruption. And lastly, he told Organa of his misfortunes in DarkWare, how he teamed up with Frames, and the colony. He had done all this while wondering where she was .

YOU WANT TO SEE ME? I HAVE MANY FACES. TO SOME - I AM TERRIBLE AND MENACING, TO OTHERS - I AM BEAUTIFUL AND COMFORTING. WHAT AM I TO YOU, ODY?

Ody thought of this for a second which seemed to last a millennia, and replied, "Hope."

THAT IS AN UNUSUAL ANSWER .

Organa has paused. And then something was materializing before his very eyes. First, it was a strong blindsiding aura, so bright and white as snow, Ody had to cover his eyes. When the aura dissipated, he looked through the cracks of his fingers and saw a feminine figure standing in front of him. He lowered his hands and saw her .

IS THIS THE HOPE YOU WERE LOOKING FOR, ODY?

She was astonishingly beautiful, almost mesmerizing. Her hair was radiant blue-dusk and was waving in every direction, although no wind was even gusting. Her eyes were blue as those oceans Ody was seeing in his virtuvacations and they seemed to almost capture and devour him. She was wearing a bright white and black cloak and her body emitted out of worldly aura .

"Y... Y... Yes", he stuttered, confused .

HA, HA, DON'T MIND ME, THIS IS ONLY HOW YOUR MIND IMAGINES ME. MY TRUE FORM HAS NOT BEEN KNOWN TO ANYONE .

She walked by him and circled him. Ody felt as if he is touched by a divine presence. He felt elated. Comforted. "I... We need your help, Organa. They said... I... I want home.", he almost wept, but tried to suppress those feelings. "Will you...", he gulped the words "help us"?

HMMM... I WANT TO HELP YOU, ODY .

Oh-oh, here comes the “but” section, Ody’s face fell, thinking all hope was lost.

AND I WILL HELP YOU .

Oh? Have I misjudged her?

I JUST WANT YOU TO DO SOMETHING FOR ME IN RETURN. ONCE YOU FULFILL THE TASK I SHALL ENTRUST UPON YOU, I WILL LAY OUT THE WAY OF YOUR RESTITUTION. DON’T DISHEARTEN, ODY. THIS IS IMPORTANT. YOU WILL PLAY A PART OF MY GRAND DESIGN, MY PLOY FOR A BETTER, MORE FREE WORLD.

Frames lights seemed to flash, as if these words meant something to him, or had heard them before, but the moment he did so, Organa turned to him, smiling, and sure enough, Frames stopped flashing. Ody’s mind was running fast and did not notice that. A decision was made in his mind.

“We will help you, Organa. What will you need us to do”?

THERE ARE SIX SUPPLY AND MAINTENANCE STATIONS AROUND THE CITY OF FORTWEB. I NEED YOU TWO TO INFILTRATE THOSE STATIONS, PLANT A SPECIAL DEVICE OF MINE IN EACH STATION’S COMPUTER CORE, TIME THEM ALL A FORTNIGHT FROM NOW. FURTHERMORE, YOU WILL TRANSFER SOME RAW INFORMATION AND STORE IT INSIDE A SPECIAL DEVICE.

Ody was stunned. That sounded impossible to do. How does she expect me to accomplish this? I am a journalist accompanied by an old model robot?

TO ACHIEVE THESE GOALS, I WILL EQUIP YOU WITH SPECIAL TECHNOLOGICAL ENHANCEMENT LINKING YOU BOTH TOGETHER MENTALLY, ALLOWING YOU TO ACCOMPLISH GREAT THINGS AND USING THE FULL POTENTIAL OF EACH OF YOU. EVERYTHING YOU WILL NEED WILL BE HANDLED TO YOU AFTER THIS MEETING. COME TWO WEEKS FROM NOW, YOU WILL COME HERE AGAIN AND I WILL FULFILL MY PART OF OUR DEAL. WHAT SAY YOU, ODY, AND FRAMES, DO YOU AGREE TO MY TERMS?

Ody looked at Frames, who looked almost discouraged as himself, but what choice did both of them have? She was his only chance to return to the city, to his friends, his family, his work ...

“I agree”. He looked at her, not even blinking, feeling a mix of hope, the promise of getting back home, and fear, fear for failing Organa’s quest. She looked at him, eyeing him intensely .

I AM PLEASED. UPON EXITING MY ZIGGURAT, YOU SHALL FIND YOURSELVES CONNECTED. A SPECIAL CHIP, MY OWN PERSONAL CREATION, WILL BE IMBUED IN BOTH YOU, ENABLING YOU TO ACT TOGETHER AS ONE AND ENJOY EACH OTHER’S ABILITIES AND THOUGHTS. A SCHEMATIC OF YOUR GOALS AND MAPS WILL BE UPLOAD INTO YOUR FRIEND’S MEMORY. I WISH YOU WELL, ODY. THIS WORLD IS COUNTING ON YOU BOTH. IT WILL BE BETTER ONCE YOU SUCCEED. AND I KNOW YOU WILL. I CAN SEE YOUR UNIQUE POTENTIAL. WE SHALL MEET ONCE AGAIN, ODY.

So, no pressure, Ody thought sarcastically. Organa dematerialized in front of him, prompting him to turn around to exit the strange existing but not existing structure. Looking for Frames, Ody noticed he was gone, too. In any other case, he would be worried, but something told Ody Frames would be waiting for him the moment he went out of this place. All the while, a shadowed figure was watching Ody leaving, thinking of the last time this sort of task was appointed on an exiled denizen of FortWeb. And the time before. And the one before that...