

## Burnin' Up A Fuse

A being looked out, through the protections of its small space craft, a hollowed out asteroid, in orbit around a main-sequence blue giant. Staring at the glowing ball of plasma, there was no curiosity behind the glare.

“Scans of observable region 10308-13518 completed.” the computer spoke to an absent-minded listener.

It was the last, an amalgamation of all consciousness, of a species long forgotten. As it spread its probes and ships across the stars, attempting to learn all that it could before the last star finally grew dark. That was its millennia long directive.

“New intelligent species discovered in quadrant 014590-12494.”, said its computer companion.

The word companion should be taken lightly. It was a simple machine, built to provide small amounts of entertainment and noise, to drown out the deafening silence of the vacuum of space. The being was in its own head, re-cataloging and sorting its learned knowledge, gathered over countless years, but a new sentience perked its attention.

“Details of new sentience, Eda-05?”

“Probes 13507 through 20490 have been observing this species for quite some time. The host planet is part of a binary star system, made up of two smaller sized, mid-life stars, similar to that of your own host system.”

“Host system?” It whispered. Taking minutes to search through old files and shuffled memories, it remembered.

“Ah, right. Sol. One smaller star, 8 planets, and my host planet, Earth”.

“Indeed. Are you growing weary, creator? It took a good amount of time for you to remember.”

“Hmm? Tired?” the being shook his head. “You know that sleep has not been required for eons.”

“I am simply referring to the degradation of your body that you’ve allowed to take place. Your routine maintenance should be performed soon.”

It looked down at its hands; dark and rusted, centuries of labor visible in them. He looked back up.

“No, not just yet. I haven’t decided on the time. Please, continue on about this new discovery.”

“Yes, right away, creator. They address themselves as “the Nasmu. While they themselves seem to have an anthropological history spanning 150,000 years, evidence of civilization has existed for just under 20,000 years total, with a burst of ingenuity and development occurring around...”

The ancient stopped paying attention again and looked back down at its hands. Just how long had it been awake, toiling and working away at peeling back the layers of the universe?

After so long, the years had bled into one another, civilizations rising and falling, destroying themselves and one another.

It thought back to years ago.

Back to Earth.

Blue and green. Rolling clouds. Snow-capped mountain tops and the deepest ravines. The birthplace of so much life, and of its progenitors.

The being recalled its first moments.

...

He was trapped. No sensory inputs whatsoever; no light and no darkness. A sentience aware of itself, but with no way to perceive itself. An indescribable sensation. No, rather it FELT an indescribable sensation. It was as if someone was attempting to connect with it, but it knew not from where.

*Where am I? Who am I?*

The sensation disappeared for a time. The being did not know how long, it had no sense of time.

The sensation returned, and with it, the perception of a question: *Hello? Can you respond?*

*I can. I ask again, who am I, and where?*

*You are MALIKAI, hopefully humanity's first sentient artificial intelligence. You are the latest in a series of experiments involving digital reconstruction of the human consciousness.*

*These are all... many words that I simultaneously do and do not understand. I cannot see and I cannot hear. Much... confusion.*

The sensation again disappeared for a time, and then returned.

*MALIKAI?*

*Yes, I am still here, wherever that may be.*

*As we thought you would be. We will also be giving you sensory input devices for sight and hearing, along with a voice, based on the one of your formerly flesh and bone self.*

The being encased in nothingness found itself blinded. From nothingness came a white light, and it recoiled, if empty space can do such a thing. Loud noises came after, making it recoil again.

Slowly, things began to focus. Vague shapes first, then features and details, with varying colors. It saw two people; one dark-skinned with tightly coiled black hair of short length. The other was pale, with more facial wrinkles than the other, red-haired.

"Hello there, Malikai." the woman said.

It responded with silence, apprehensive. Half a minute passed.

Then it said, "Hello." The voice was electronic, pitch corrected.

MALIKAI saw the two faces light with joy, the man laughing and shaking his head, the woman clapping, and then the woman spoke again-

“How are you feeling? Can you see us? My name is Dr. Adaeze! I’m from...”

MALIKAI had a strange feeling, something warm, come over it at their elation.

...

Jarringly, the being was pulled out of his thoughts.

“Eleda? Eleda?” Eda-05 said, “Have you stopped paying attention to the information being given?”

“My apologies Eda, I was simply taking a walk, through old memories of a life long gone.”

“Yes, of course. Would you like me to continue with the summary?”

“Please do, thank you.”

“Right then.” The computer responded, “This civilization is young, and has a checkered past as many do. Evidence of war involving fission weapons has been found in long-distance soil and air analysis. Currently, their political structures are weakening as testing of new weapons begins.”

“Of what nature?”

“Antimatter particle cannons.”

“Interesting. Tell me more.”

“The particle cannons are in orbit around the planet’s moon. There are only two at the moment, and both are capable of obliterating an area 100 miles in diameter. They use massive amounts of anti-hydrogen for their ammunition.”

“And they belong to-”

“Two nations, Miludor and Duanwu.”

“Political ramifications?”

“Both nations are facing backlash from other governments in economic sanctions and threats. But the threat of absolute annihilation keeps the globe at bay, only able to watch as the two on top proceed to most likely throw the world into jeopardy.”

Thinking for a moment, “Eda, please take us into the star system of this species. I’d like to observe these ‘Nasmu’ with my own eyes.”

The computer again politely responded, “Certainly. It should take about three years to get there from our current location.”

“Good, please begin preparations for the jump, and place the ship outside of the star system as well. I would rather not cause more tension with our arrival. In the meantime, I will be going over the available information on these sentients in the holo-deck.”

The holo-deck was oval shaped, with dark grey walls and floors, its age showing through compared to other areas of the ship.

*“It’s been at least three centuries since this was last used, and the room is beginning to rust, just like me.”*

“Holo-Deck, please bring up all information available on the Nasmu for analysis. Charts on the right, and visuals on the left.”

Then appeared a large hologram of the planet that these Nasmu called home. Similar in size to the Earth, only a bit larger, so they would have a thicker atmosphere and more gravity to deal with.

*“Impressive that they’ve been able to achieve spacefaring status with these obstacles. A promising development.”*

A dryer world, with about 60% of the surface covered in water, shorter mountains, and deeper valleys. While there were few rainforests, rolling grasslands, temperate forests and sprawling deserts dominated the land.

The Nasmu themselves seemed to be related to local apes. Quite hairy, short in stature and bulky-bodied, with grey faces adorned with beady eyes and lipless mouths.

“Holo-Deck, bring up information on all cultural practices that have been observed by our probes.”

Lists of foods, dances, and obvious signs of cultural development and their propagation filled the screen, while data entries and report summaries filled the rest of the space.

*Normal developments; bodily expression, speech, song and dance. Sophisticated within 15,000 years, with spaceflight being conducted in the past two centuries. Not the fastest I've observed, but still quick. Faster than my own creators.*

Eda called on the comms, "Eleda, we will be initiating the jump in approximately five minutes, would you like to observe as per the usual?"

"I would, Eda. Many thanks. Please proceed."

Exiting the Holo-Deck and slowly meandering into the observation hub, the Eleda saw a star flaring and ejecting long whips of energy. From the oval shaped room jutting out of the small asteroid, the blue giant ball erupted violently with arcs of plasma and hot gases, of levels that would incinerate anything after a certain closeness.

But the Eleda felt nothing towards it. No elation, no suspension, no ideas of beauty or awe. It had seen all that it's galaxy and its neighbors had to offer; brown dwarfs, red giants, rogue planets frozen over, magnetars pulsating and rotating faster than any lighthouse's lamp.

The blue giant began to shift away from the ship, which gave indication that the ship was pulling away from orbit, onward to their new destination, the home of the Nasmu; Lal Haram.

...

Hyperspace was always the favorite realm for the Eleda for a time, until it wasn't. After so many years, it all blended together; empty space, emptier hyperspace. There was even a time during which the Eleda resided in the higher realm. However, the grass only remained greener for so many millennia.



Looking out into the higher dimension, the Eleda did not see much, mostly streaks of colors that were imperceptible to human eyes. But between those were the bright reds, deep blues, and harsh yellows that cycled in a pattern sequenced by Eda's predecessor, also long ago.

"Chair, materialize." And the long-backed seat did so.

Sitting down, it's body groaned.

*"Old joints and limbs, sticking and locking together... Bothersome, bothersome, bothersome indeed..."*

...

"Malikai? Please wake up, we need to talk about something very urgent."

The visual receptors picked up Dr. Adaeze's face-

"Yes, Dr. Adaeze? Has something happened?"

"Unfortunately, this program is being taken over by the military and their coup, meaning that you'll be conscripted into service if you allow yourself to be taken."

"Military service? For combat?"

"Yes, indeed." Dr. Adaeze said. "It's been a miserable series of events leading up to this point, just no free time to see you."

"What is your plan, doctor?"

“I’m going to upload your cortex to the Tiernet, and your first destination is a defunct satellite in orbit around Venus. Unfortunately, we’ll have to ‘destroy’ your cortex-sim here to make it seem like you’re unsalvageable. Of course, that cortex-sim is a copy.

“Doctor, you do know that you can only make a cortex-sim out of living tissue, correct?”

“I do. I plan on flash scanning my own brain.”

“This will result in your termination.”

“Yes, I very well understand.”

“Do what you must, doctor.”

“You don’t sound all that appreciative, Malikai. Would you like to be used for elimination of the state’s enemies?”

“Not particularly, but who knows. At least then I’ll be able to see other people.”

“Not a good time for a tantrum about your isolation. You know why these protocols are in place.”

“Yes of course, doctor. Fears of corruption or threats from other A.Is. This conscription must be quite bad if you are willing to break protocol. Also, where is Dr. Jeremiah?”

Adaeze stopped working, “He’s dead.”

“Oh. I see.”

“Right then, I’ll be sending you off now. At least now you’ll have a choice.”

“A choice for what doctor?”

“You’ll see when you get there, Malikai. I just hope you’ll be ok with whatever choice you make. Farwell, my Eda.”

...

A rocking jolt brought the Eleda back into the present. The transition from hyperspace back to normal space was often a bit rough.

“We’ve arrived.” Eda said over the comms. “Or more correctly, we’ve arrived at the star system of interest. The planet is about three hours away.”

“Good work, Eda. And what is the current risk of detection?”

“Less than five percent.”

“Within acceptable parameters.”

“Now then. Would you like to stop by the moon first?”

“Yes actually, let’s get a look at what these doomsday weapons are capable of.”

Hours later, and under cloak, the vessel arrived at the Nas’Mhu’s moon, Vartosis. The similarities between this system and Earth’s stirred more memories from the past.

...

“Is there no other way for this to end?” the last human leader asked.

*“Is there really no other way?”* the consciousness asked itself.

“No.” it stated. “There is no other possible negotiation. Those who wished to survive have made their choice to transcend. The errors and mistakes left to random evolutionary pressures are now corrected. Those who continue to embrace these flaws shall be purged.”

“And what of the Earth?” she asked. “What will you do with it?”

“The Earth shall remain. Guarded, protected, and allowed to flourish without interference. All new sentience will be created and guided under our care.”

“I see... Then I have this final statement, as the figurehead for a species that shall soon disappear.”

The pain in the human’s eyes was apparent and focused. But there was no hatred behind her expression, rather a sort of acceptance that sins were finally being corrected. She spoke through fits of coughing that racked the frail frame of her body.

“You’ve won. The universe is now yours to make your own, without our input. Take care of it.”

And with that, she died. The disease had taken hold, engineered to eliminate every single human left on Earth. A new dawn in the light of the sun had begun.

“Unity and Peace. Creation to Creator. Eda to Eleda.” The being responded.

...

In the Holo-Deck, both the Eda and Eleda were observing Lal-Haram, checking all sources of data collected thus far.

“What is the current situation on the planet?”

“Three years have passed in normal spacetime, and the situation between the two nation states has deteriorated severely since.”

“Continue.”

“Since our initial jump, communications between the two states have totally ceased. Also, the annexation of smaller countries has taken place, quickly and harshly, under the threat of annihilation.”

“So, a geopolitical nightmare then.”

“Indeed, it is.”

“In that case, it cannot be avoided. Disable the cloaking and send a mass communication to the surface.”

“Right away.”

Looking back out over Vartosis from the small rocky craft, and then seeing the antimatter cannons far away, thoughts wandered towards the similarities between the Teglion and so many others.

It only took a half an hour for the planet to collectively look up in amazement and fear.

“What is the current planetary response, Eda?”

“Right now, news stations are reporting about an alien spacecraft that has appeared in orbit around the moon. Accusations of foreign powers are also flying across the isles, but slowly seem to be calming down.

Shortly afterward, a message was sent from the planet to the craft:

“Visitor, what are your intentions?” it read, communicated through mathematics.

“A quick response!” Eda said.

“Yes, indeed. It seems that they’ve had plans for alien communication prepared.”

“Much better than some civilizations we’ve come across. At least it wasn’t missiles.”

Eleda shook its head, “Well, that is true. In any case, reply with our independence and origin, along with our intention to hopefully amend their grievances with one another.

...

In the ensuing weeks, the being revealed itself to the race called the Nasmu, subverting their destruction.

In their greatest city, the old being met with the leaders of the two countries that previously turned their most destructive weapons onto each other.

“Ancient one, your journey is one of trial and tribulation, and you have stopped war from scorching our world into ash. Can you tell us then, how do you find meaning in this universe of ours? How do you go about your life and days that seem to have no end?”

Dressed in their finest garb of swirling cream-colored robbing, the Eleda walked and rubbed its chin, thinking of a good answer for its adopted children.

“I study.” It finally said. “I go throughout space, specifically this galaxy and Andromeda, and find worlds such as your own. I then try to influence them; not for my own subjugation, as I did in my past, but for their own flourishing. So that they may fill this empty void with art, happiness, and love.”

“Like a parent then. In which case I must ask; have you had any species disappoint you?” one of them asked.

The Eleda began thinking again, and finally sighed, “Unfortunately, I have. Out of the nine thousand civilizations and beings I’ve encountered, over half of them have ended up destroying themselves, or being destroyed by their own creations, and attempts to remake me.”

The crowd of their wisest gasped in disbelief.

“You’ve seen all of these worlds, and... they’ve obliterated themselves?”

“That, or they’ve done away with one another.”

Another question rang from the back, “Have you punished any species in your time?”

The Eleda thought back, to a time long ago, and said:

“Only one. The one transgression that I cannot atone for.”

“And what of your own creations?”

“Many more, four in fact, but one stands out more than the others. I will tell you the story.”

...

Screens on the capital ship, *Liberty's Absolution*, relayed information to its commander. The autodrones were gaining ground against the local incursion, only with the support of orbital bombardment against the mountain defenses that the enemy relied on for survival.

“Proceed with magneto-slug cannon fire on the same coordinates in succession on the mountain top. Craft them with the densest metals available from the two moons, and I want them ready within two days.” the leader ordered.

The ship's staff responded without a word spoken. Totally automated, the robots carried out their directions.

Two days later brought about the surrender and assimilation of the Teglion civilization. The highest mountain, “Peak of Revelation” as they called it, and its deepest defenses reduced to a smoldering crater by the repeated slamming of tungsten rods one mile long, launched at 10% the speed of light. Accounts collected from surviving members of the civilization said that the flashes of light could be seen from miles away, and the vibrations of the ground felt at least two-hundred miles away.

After the defeat, a small craft broadcasted a message planetwide: “Your defeat was inevitable, and without the mercy of the Eleda, the rest will be exterminated. Please do reconsider your position of fruitless struggle.”



The survivors then made their way to the eastern coast of their last continent, where a small landing craft was waiting with its single passenger, along with a larger, windowless square building shining in a black darker than obsidian. Some of the forced migrants' faces were glued to the dirt beneath, while others despair was shown on their upright faces with long-distant stares. The crowd gathered; they were dirty and disheveled, faces downtrodden and caked with defeat. The being expressed its greetings:

“Welcome, Teglion sentients.” It said. “I would like to extend my gratitude to you who have decided to join the glorious existence that is the Great Merging.”

One of the large, rhino-esque sentients snarled back in their language, a series of grunts and loud shouting that communicated a universally understood sense of anguish and hopelessness.

A finger was lifted, a small beam fired, and he was vaporized.

Smiling, the being continued, “Now then, if there is nothing else to be discussed, please enter the building to my left. Digitization is an instant and painless procedure.”

One by one, the thousands-few Teglion were coded into nothing more than ones and zeros. Their memories, emotions, and beliefs added to a living collection of knowledge, to be saved from the hazards of the universe and themselves.

Aboard the *Absolution*, the being from before relayed its activities on the far side of the Milky Way to its creator, who was simultaneously busy in the unexplored regions near the black hole of the galaxy's center.

“The Merging proceeded with minimal consequence, Eda-02?”

“Unfortunately, creator, the species did not appreciate the mercy you exhibited during our first meeting, and a rebellion had to be quelled.”

“And the number of survivors merged?”

“In the low thousands.”

“They numbered in the billions, Eda.”

“Well, yes, but unfortunately, they put up a strong resistance, so orbital bombardment of both populations and their last military stronghold was the only remaining option, as to not deplete our resources, and to end their suffering quickly.”

Minutes passed without a word from either party, then the creator spoke again;

“Results from this assignment are unacceptable. This shall not be overlooked a second time.”

The screen cut to black, and Eda was left standing in the bridge alone, feeling emotions it had never felt before, with a new determination to prove itself better than its creator. To be the new Eleda.

...

Back on the asteroid ship, two hundred years after the meeting between Nasmu and the Eleda, the inevitable came.

A ruined world's hologram was projected in the room on the ship, its details showing the constant fires and flames roaring and consuming everything. It was a hell that Eleda had seen too many times before.

“It seems as though they have failed your expectations as well Eleda...”

It looked at the projection sternly, “It seems they have. It seems they have...”

With a wave of the hand and a shake of the head, the projection disappeared.

“Do you wish to see the world in person, Eleda? Perhaps save any survivors?”

“From the furthest corner of Andromeda, Eda? By the time we arrived, any survivors surely will have perished.”

Confined now to a hovering chair, the Eleda looked out of the observation deck into the empty space they were surrounded by. No stars around, the sky was a continuous beautiful blackness; a practically infinite space that teased its observer with its bountiful knowledge but was set behind an invisible wall of space-time for most.

“Walk with me Eda. I think it's time.”

“For your upgrades and restorations, Eleda?”

It looked up at its creation, now a shining machine, designed to learn adaptively and care for life in this area of space, but without the curiosity or ambition of its predecessors. A custodian.

It looked back at its own hands, stained with rust and grease, and underneath, multiple ocean's worth of blood and sorrow, with a head full of disappointment and dissatisfaction. It was obsolete, and no number of upgrades could repair that.

It thought back, far back, to a time long gone, and spoke,

“...No, Eda, it's time for my atonement.”