

MOM

monday blues

worldsday

Naked, Cisco awaits the attack.

Fragrance of flowers and musk heralds her approach, followed by the brush of thermal currents against Cisco's skin. His opponent is also naked. This is revealed by the unmediated quality of her scent and body heat, her rustle-free stealth. The sum of sensory clues also indicates she's coming at him from ahead and to the left, from about ten o'clock.

A clatter explodes in his head. She has thrown something against the wall behind him, and he's too slow to reduce the audio. Pressure waves from the impact bounce off everything, including, it seems, the inside of his skull. But echolocation turns her move to his advantage, confirms her position.

Both combatants are blind. Cisco gropes this dark world with all his remaining senses. He minimizes breathing and heart rate, and he waits. Audio back at maximum, he listens to the pump of pulse, the rasp of air in his passages. He hears a gurgle of gastric juices, the snap of a tendon in his foot as he shifts his weight. His opponent, he knows, is also attuned to all the uproar.

Odors of earth and vegetable matter suggest a potted plant against the wall four meters behind him; it's infested with some buzz-clicking insect. Nice detailing. (Always the Worlds pilot, Cisco notes this in passing.) His attacker, meanwhile, is now poised in front of him and to the right, partly obscured by a piece of furniture the echoes have suggested is something rigid

and hollow, maybe a console. This narrows the field of attack, and leaves just two main sectors to monitor.

The buzz-clicking of bugs is muted by an auditory shadow — something passes behind Cisco, between him and the plant. Briefly, he believes it must be her. But she's there, in front of him; no way could she have gotten behind him undetected. Equally, however, there can't be a third person in here. Can there? The mere idea triggers cardiac and respiratory telltales.

“Two o'clock!” She yells this at the same time she makes her move from ten o'clock. This hurts Cisco's ears but doesn't confuse him. He springs back off his front foot, firing a straight right punch in his wake. She knows this trick. He connects with nothing, only hears the crackle of elbow tendons. Her counterattack kicks miss; traces of their passing whip at the supersensitized skin of his face and his thigh.

She retreats, regroups. She's back under control by the time he reins in his own pulse and respiration. There follows another round of the waiting game. Then he has her again. South by southeast, at about four o'clock. Meanwhile, though he can't be sure, he senses a smaller and less distinct echo of her diagonally across the space from where he believes she's really located. But he shelves this anomaly for now.

She's closer than he thought. Again, her fragrance arrives ahead of her warmth, the air barely stirred by her movements. She's good. Her smells and his commingle. He hears her heartbeat quicken and syncopate with his own. Cocked and ready for battle, if that's what's going down, he's equally prepared for alternatives. He hears her breath before he feels it on his face, then in his ear. “Cisco,” she murmurs, almost blowing his eardrum out. Before he can reduce the whole sensurround spectrum, she strokes his face, a rasp of sharkskin.

“Dee Zu,” he says.

“Who else?” she replies.

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This world, designed to provide workouts for test pilots, is off limits for the average mallster. On those grounds alone, Cisco knew his opponent was Dee Zu. Just three test pilots survive, and the third, aside from Dee Zu and himself, is a man.

“I knew it was you,” he says.

“And who else would it be?”

Who else, indeed? Despite himself, he kind of wishes she were instead Sky. But this isn't Monday, and Sky only appears in Monday worlds, never mind that contravenes mall law. Dee Zu tugs at him, pulls him over to a sleeping platform, capacious and nicely cushioned.

“Surprise!” she says. This is Dee Zu, and yet it isn't. Not quite. She has adopted enormous breasts, unrealistically firm and skyward pointing. “But I like you just the way you are,” Cisco tells her. Not that he knows what her wet master looks like. Ever obliging, in any case, she deflates her bosom to familiar proportions.

And what a great idea: Dee Zu has pebbled her skin. Only slightly. So he does the same, establishing a borderline painful friction between their two surfaces. Cisco has reduced his audio to monoland standard, but he sets tactility at two hundred percent. He makes another adjustment, adding lubrication at once astringent and soothing; as things heat up, this gives off pleasing fragrances. Dee Zu takes to punctuating her moans with yelps, and Cisco has to dim the audio. Now the yelping comes hot and fast, ever-more-furious counterpoint to Cisco's own climax. They come together in a dark storm of near sensory overload, every sense but sight and

sound amplified and fully engaged. Thinking Dee Zu has given final voice to her pleasure, Cisco edges up the auditory rez, regretting this as she sighs a last great roar of release.

At the same time an unpleasant shrilling assails his ears and his whole body begins to vibrate as with electric shock. It's emergency recall.

Dee Zu is on her feet. "No!" Her voice quavers with the vibratory alarm and with disappointment. "*Now?* What a drag."

MOM is calling them home. Demanding immediate withdrawal. It's now officially, and presence in a World, any World, becomes an offlining offence. So it's back to mondoland. Just like that, they're headed home to Monday in ESUSA, Eastern Seaboard, United States of America Mall. Most likely to face a breach. Experience suggests Mondays and breaches are connected.

Dee Zu has gone already. Cisco gives the space a full sensurround sweep before he leaves, but fails to find any sign of supernumerary worlders.

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Here comes the transition. The twinge of extinction in one sphere, an instant's vertigo at the abrupt emergence in another place altogether. Here's the brief "fall" that's really no fall at all, even though it feels like a three-meter drop. Then the four-second, womb-like comfort of null gravity in the cradle's suspension field, a quick quarter-rotation, and, still within the cradle's embrace, a few tottery seconds on his feet.

Cisco steps from the cradle into his apartment. The alarm has ceased its nag. Smoke, as always, is waiting, a minimalist cat sculpted in mercury. Cisco enters his living room to find Dee

Zu's telep, her telepresence, standing there in his holotank. The residual pebbling of her naked skin makes him think of a sleek lizard.

"This is crap," she says. "So there was a breach. Big deal. It's already contained. And why declare a Monday? The trouble is way off in the Southeast Quadrant. We didn't have to bail."

Cisco isn't happy either. They were enjoying themselves. And he'd like to know who was in the World with them. He has encountered too many anomalies in the Worlds over the past few cycles. For reasons that remain obscure to himself, he decides not to include this trespasser, or trespassers, in his report. Nor does he mention it to Dee Zu, who hasn't said a thing to him about visitors. Cisco is also unhappy, of course, at this most recent evidence that the PlagueBot is eroding MOM's defences here in mondoland. More and more often, he gets the feeling that everything is falling apart.

And now it's Monday, besides all that, and there's no telling how long it might last this time. There's a bright side to this, of course—the way is now open to another illicit Monday rendezvous in the Worlds.

He'd like to discuss all this with Leary, but he can't talk about Sky.

full of it

(a chronicle of Leary's second half-century and beyond)

Leary here. It's Monday again. Seems like it's Monday half the time, these days. And on Mondays I've got nothing to do except scribble these notes, for whatever that's worth, and putter around my apartment, never mind my apartment can look after itself without any help from me.

I get lonely sometimes. I get lonely a lot, truth be told. For one thing, it looks like I'm the last person in this cell. For all I know, I could be the last one in ESSEA. Which is kind of scary. Maybe I'm being saved for something, though it's hard to say what that might be. I'm an anomaly. That's a fine word, and it means out of place. Like the Baiyoke Tower, which is all you can see of Bangkok these days. In fact that's pretty much all that's left of the entire Eastern Seaboard, Southeast Asia. ESSEA.

Guess what I'm doing for excitement right now, aside from chewing on a tasteless substitute for beef jerky. I'm looking out my window. Me and Rexy. My robopet. I neutralized the holoport —goodbye Waikiki— and telescoped the view so I can see all the way to the Baiyoke II Tower. Ninety-four stories and up to its butt in seawater. The Baiyoke I is drowned, right up over its ears. I recall when the Baiyoke I was the tallest building in Bangkok. That was way back in the twentieth century when Bangkok was booming, and the local movers and shakers had a bad case of Singapore pecker envy. Not just in Bangkok. Right across Southeast Asia, everybody wanted the tallest skyscraper. Right across the world, come to that. But now there's nothing standing where New York used to be except the Millennium Mall, what's left of it. Old Singapore and the mall down there would be nothing but a bunch of highrises poking out of the sea by now, if there's anything left at all. Of course the government there might have passed a law against the PlagueBot. Maybe busted it for chewing gum or peeing in the elevators. I doubt it, though. Haven't heard from anybody down there in quite some time. Haven't heard much from anybody anywhere, lately. Whatever. With no children getting born, it's natural enough to see us dying off.

Just look over there, on the other side of the Baiyoke. Three cumulo-nimbus cloud towers stand side by side like giant mushrooms. Black and gray and smeared with red, which tells you

the sky in the west, back on the other side of the mall, must be like fire. We've got these external monitors and, what with the mall perched up here on hundred-and-fifty-meter stilts the way it is, they let me see all the way east to Bangkok, to where Bangkok used to be, so why can't they give me a look at what's happening on the other side? I'm no meteorologist, but it's strange. You've got hot, humid air condensing out there over the sea instead of over the mainland, the way it should do. The way it would have done in the old days. Who knows what's really out there, though; it looks like sea, but who can tell?

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Here I sit, dictating these notes to my wallscreen. Nothing better to do.

Be that as it may, writers are extinct. In fact, there aren't many jobs of any description out there. MOM and her Dolls look after everything anyone needs. Pretty well everybody's a welfare bum these days, but no one even remembers what a welfare bum is, so we can just go ahead and enjoy it. Though I tend to feel kind of useless. So would most people, if they stopped to think about it. But they don't. They don't dare to.

The Kid, now, there's one man still doing a man's job. I wonder if he knows how lucky that makes him.

monday

It's nice to have his sight back. Nevertheless, he feels disempowered. Kludgy. Cisco Smith turns from the 'tank to gaze at the view from his apartment window in the ESUSA Mall. What was once New York City and the whole Eastern Seaboard, United States of America, is now a featureless desert of gray beach marked off from gray sea by a low-relief jumble of anonymous gray flotsam and jetsam. He telescopes the view and reveals explosions of spray where the

Atlantic Ocean smashes up against what's left of Manhattan. Aside from a long patch of troubled sea, this consists of nothing more than the ruins of Millennium Mall. Breached and uninhabited these past twelve years, it soars twenty stories higher than the New World Trade Center ever did, and the fact that it alone remains is perennial cause for speculation as to why. Some say it's meant to serve ESUSA continuing notice that it is similarly fated. But this suggests the PlagueBot is intelligent. Which it isn't.

The much-feared Gray Goo Scenario never materialized. They did get a plague of self-replicating disassembler nanobots—blurs—threatening to diss the whole planet. But that was soon followed by the onset of self-organization, and the emergence of this thing they call the PlagueBot. It's hard to say how big it is. Some believe it mantles the world in much the way Archaean microorganisms did billions of years ago. And who knows what it thinks it's doing. Or whether it thinks at all.

“Try this on for size.” Eddie Eight's voice issues from Cisco's holotank. “The PlagueBot is a self-organizing system. Okay. But the mall itself is just one more species of bot assembly. What if it decides to disassemble? It's not the PlagueBot we have to worry about. What if MOM's going nuts; what if she decides to op out? That's a fucking big pile of dust. But, hey. Dust to dust, eh? An old story.”

Outside, a slowjoe shambles towards the perimeter. One of its limbs—supposedly an arm—keeps morphing. The simulacrum's chest swells as the arm grows shorter, collapses as it grows longer. Then the slowjoe waves two appendages towards the ESUSA Mall, a parody of some kindred soul in need of sanctuary. Not something you're likely to find these days. Venturing outside, it is said, means instant death—victims blur and disintegrate before they have proper time to scream. Dust to dust. Nobody can say what molecular disassembly feels like; no one

survives being dissed to talk about the experience, including the unfortunate human beings who supplied the template for the monstrosity, this ill-formed and twice-too-large foglet simulacrum that's currently attempting to penetrate the local defenses.

Breach... breach... breach...

As though the mall is reading Cisco's mind, the alarm sounds. The shrilling gives him the willies. It's the Southwest Quadrant. According to the monitor, this is the first action down that way in many cycles. The racket stops after a few seconds.

All clear. Breach contained. All clear.

"It's only a matter of time," Eddie Eight says. "The last of the malls are crumbling."

The supplicant slowjoe, a badly sketched apeman, staggers closer and then disappears in a flash of light—either a satray, a satellite beam, or the mall's force field itself. Reduced to half its bulk, the slowjoe slumps to the ground, an amorphous lump that melts into a circular, steel-gray pool and starts bubbling. A badly corroded flitter—another anomaly in that PlagueBot-homogenized panorama—slides off its edge and begins to dissolve. Now, it appears, the bot superorganism is trying to tunnel under the force-field bubble. It's persistent. Some people say the thing is also intelligent, but in fact it never learns. Whatever. Smart or stupid, the PlagueBot seems to be winning out over the malls.

Cisco shrugs. "That's frig all," he tells himself, sounding just like Leary. But he isn't convinced. He tells the Doll to make him a peanut butter and banana sandwich. It refuses.

leary's chronicle

It's the bots that changed everything. They're everywhere these days. Take the Dolls. I've got this talking head, reminds me of Gloria White who used to live next door when I was a kid,

and this blonde head sits there in a holobox above something that looks like a dumbwaiter. But the goodies don't come up from the basement or wherever. They're built right on the spot. Assembled by billions of tiny little robots. Nanobots. 'Bots. Isn't that something? And there you have it. The ProvidAll. My Doll. All I have to do is ask, and I can have pretty well anything I want. The Age of Unlimited Goodies.

Except the steaks it builds don't taste like the real thing. I know they'll tell you they're basically the same, molecule for molecule. Only better for you. And they'll say I'm getting on in years and my taste buds are shot. But I'm telling you—they're not the same.

Darn it, I don't want a chair. Frig off.

This is what they call progress. In the old days, if I wanted a chair I'd just reach for one. Now the floor thinks it knows better than me. I swear, things have gone to heck when you get your apartment morphing as fast as mallsters cycle styles. Chairs popping up like magic mushrooms. Another thing I don't like is this idea you need a licence to get certain items. I say, "C'mon, be a real doll, okay? Get me a Jack Daniels on the rocks. Lots of ice, no water. Okay?" And it tells me, "You are not cleared for alcoholic beverages. Would you like a nice fruit shake?" A fruit friggin' shake. I ask you.

Gloria White, last I saw of her, was working the checkout counter at a Mosey Mart. Smiling away just like my Doll here, but Gloria would've never told me no, you can't have that bottle of Jack Daniels. In fact, Gloria wasn't the type to say no to pretty well any proposition you came up with. I can say that now, it's about ninety years later and Gloria isn't likely to mind.

How about that memory? Gosh. Gloria White. And they say I've got some brain atrophy.

Never mind. The rest of me is in better shape than it's been for years. Lean and mean. Didn't always look like this. Gosh-darned sixteen hundred calorie long-lifestyle has kept me firing on two or three cylinders most of the time. But it brings tears to my eyes, thinking about a two-inch t-bone steak, lots of fat, grilled till it's nice and brown, nearly black. I'm talking more than five centimeters thick. But you wouldn't know anything about that.

For sure you wouldn't, Rexy. You're only a machine, and could care less about the finer things. C'mon over here and sit yourself down for a spell.

There I go, talking to my 'pet again. But it does get lonely here sometimes. It'd be nice to talk to the Kid, except it's still the middle of the night over there in ESUSA. What used to be New York, sort of. Halfway 'round the world.
