

Deleted Lives

Valles-New Shanghai, Mars, 10 years after the Fall:

The city of Valles-New Shanghai was built in the east region of the Valles Marineris canyon on Mars, the low altitude allowed the air pressure to rise to levels where many engineered terran species could live fairly comfortably. Not surprisingly, it was the largest city on humanity's new self-proclaimed homeworld, and like most population centers in the inner system, it was more or less under the direct control of the hypercorps of the Planetary Consortium. While most citizens of this city were far better off than the downtrodden masses of pre-Fall earth (save for the indentures of course) there was still a considerable difference in standard of living between the average office drone and the wealthy executive with a penthouse on the upper edge of the canyon wall. One of the many luxuries these oligarchs could afford was named Viviana, and at the moment she was making her master breakfast just like every other day for the last twenty-two years.

Wait a second, twenty-two years? That can't be right. Viviana wondered where she had gotten that idea, the custom Pleasure Pod AI had only been active for about three years, or so she thought. She called up her first memory from the banks of her cyberbrain. Instantly she was back at her master's apartment on the day she was activated. She could recall her master feeling her ears, her tail, her thin layer of furry skin stretched over her metal frame.

Metal frame? Pausing the XP playback of her first day Viviana felt her arms, she could feel the metal skeleton underneath the fur and skin but there was definitely a layer of muscle between them. *Why would I feel so different now and back then?* The obvious answer was that her ego had originally inhabited a simple synthmorph with a cultured flesh mask, and that at some point she had to be re-sleeved. Her master mercifully sparing her the memories of temporary death and even gifting her with a pod morph. But why couldn't she remember anything else as a synth? And there was something else too, she restarted the memory and took note of the view outside the window; that was definitely not the New Shanghai cityscape below them, the buildings were the wrong shape, there was no canyon wall on the opposing side, and the sky was *blue* rather than reddish-grey. There was only one planet in the solar system that had a blue sky and that world had been abandoned for nearly ten years now. She called up the date-stamp on the XP, it used an older calendar that needed to be converted to the new one.

Twelve years before the Fall.

How could that even be possible? Her internal clock had registered less than three years run time. She would have to ask Master about it.

Viviana waited patiently while her master ate his breakfast of hand-raised bacon and eggs, none of it vat-cultured or nanofabricated and all of it cloned directly from pre-fall genetic sequences, thus costing a small fortune. Eventually she worked up the nerve to ask him directly, "How old am I exactly, Master?"

Her master dropped his fork and turned angrily towards her. “Almost three years, don’t you have a clock in that chunk of silicon and wires you call a brain?”

“I suspect a glitch, my memory of activation is showing...” Viviana paused for a microsecond, she could see that her master was in one of his ‘moods’ again, “...no timestamp, it’s blank.”

“Damn it! I told you to keep yourself maintained.” He stood up, rubbing his forehead, “I don’t have time to deal with this now, I need your assistance with that Scum ‘corp’, their ship isn’t going to be in physical range for much longer and you know I hate Farcasting.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing Master, just a simulated neuron or two out of place, I could try running a diagnostic while we’re on the shuttle to help the programmer when we get back.”

“Yes, you could.” Her master commented as he walked towards a nearby shelf. “But you would not learn anything just by doing that. I have to make sure you don’t forget again.” He picked up a strip of replicated leather that branched into nine strands with metal balls hanging from the ends, something that Old Earth people used to call a “cat-o-nine-tails”.

The private shuttle was a bit cramped, but expensive enough that just owning one was a considerable mark of status. As was the mere fact that Viviana’s master was bothering with an eight-hour flight to the *Ecstatic Metamorphosis* when Egocasting would take less than two hours to upload, transmit, and then download into a rental body on the Scum Barge. But why should someone as important as he have his Ego copied into an inferior rental with gods-know how many “extras” added by its Scum designers when he could arrive comfortably in his perfectly customized Exalt morph accompanied by his specially grown servitor?

A servitor who happened to be running a virus scan and bug fix on her own brain during the first half of the trip. After finding nothing obviously wrong with her, Viviana was still perplexed as to why her memories conflicted with what her master had claimed to be undeniable facts. She decided to check her hardware records of when her Ego was downloaded into her morph.

PROGRAM LOG, EGO RUNTIME:

June 10, 8AF, 18:20 Ego#v15i42b2h4m8xs0q8m installed,

June 10, 8AF, 17:18 Ego#t0ma6bhgvb3optiuhjklgrbh deleted,

June 10, 8AF, 12:40 Ego#t0ma6bhgvb3optiuhjklgrbh installed,

June 10, 8AF, 11:35 Ego#v15i42b2h4m8xs0q8m deleted,

She could remember that time, two years ago one of her master’s business partners had wanted to “give her a spin” and been sleeved in her morph while she spent hours as a disembodied informorph in simulspace watching someone else wear her flesh for hours.

March 21, 7AF, 13:30 Ego#v15i42b2h4m8xs0q8m installed,

That matched up with the date her master had given her as her “date of birth”, but why did she remember a world that had died years before she came into existence? Perhaps the original her had perished in the Fall, she knew that her master himself had died in that catastrophe, only surviving because he had a backup stored off world. It would not be surprising if her master had only been willing to Farcast the original backup of her Ego given the cost, and that it would take seven years before a new morph was available for her given the shortage of bodies following the apocalypse.

March 21, 7AF, 12:25 Ego#v15i42b2h4m8xs0q8m deleted,

What?! How could she possibly have been deleted from her morph before she had even been sleeved in it? She looked further down the list of downloads and deletions before finding one other nonsensical sleeving, in 4AF. And three years before that, just 1 year after the Fall, was the first installation of Ego#v15i42b2h4m8xs0q8m, or any other Ego to inhabit this frame.

She directed her internal health sensors to her back, the cuts inflicted during her master’s “lesson” had already been sealed by the medicines coursing through the fluids she used as blood. By tomorrow the marks themselves would be completely gone. Those microscopic robots could easily keep her morph in mint condition for nine years, heck, the basic biomods possessed by most biomorphs and pods did a pretty good job of halting the process of aging by themselves.

But none of that answered the question, *why?* Viviana was still trying to figure it out as the shuttle pulled into the docking arm of the *Metamorphosis*.

As the airlock cycled open and Viviana and her master floated through in null gravity to the interior of the Scum barge they came into range of the local Mesh, their ectopic interfaces were instantly flooded with a massive stream of ads, data on the local temperature and simulated weather, maps, and AR tags for every door and access panel in sight. A translucent blue humanoid female materialized in Viviana’s field of view.

[Welcome back to the *Ecstatic Metamorphosis* Mr. Harrison and Vivian, I am T92-781, still the artificially sapient VIP guide to the world of the Scum. You can call me Ecsty of course.]

An infomorph with access to the AR network, she had special instructions concerning them, she addressed the artificial sapience mentally with her mesh inserts. [Mr. Harrison does not appreciate “voices in his head”, I have to ask that you only communicate with me when using augmented reality.]

[Yes, I remember you telling me that the last time you were here.] This set off another alarm bell in Viviana’s mind, she couldn’t remember ever being on this ship before.

[I’ve been here before? Are you sure? When? Do you have XPs?] Viviana was quite frantic, this could be more evidence that something was wrong, even if she still couldn’t tell what.

[Yes, about five years ago], “Ecsty” held out a centimeter wide virtual cube, [maybe this will help jog your memory].

Viviana grabbed the AR file and downloaded it to her personal inserts, sure enough it was an XP. She started playing it in the background of her ectopics.

An orange-furred female “furry” pleasure pod variant with green hair and highlights to her tail and a Caucasian human male with brown hair and genetically engineered looks entered the main airlock of the Ecstatic Metamorphosis . She wore the same pseudo-latex black smartsuit with an “x” harness covering her otherwise bare midrift, her master Italian nano-silk with vertical stripes. Suddenly they both stopped as the AGI’s avatar materialized in their AR fields and welcomed them aboard. [Welcome to the Ecstatic Metamorphosis Mr. Harrison and Viviana. I am T92-781, your Artificially Sapient guide to the world of the Scum. You can call me “Ecsty” if you want though.]

The human angrily turned towards his pod servant and glared at her. “Right away sir” she quickly replied verbally before addressing the avatar. [Mr. Harrison does not appreciate “voices in his head”, I have to ask that you only communicate with me when using augmented reality.]

[No voices in his head? Does he even have a Muse?]

[I think so, but I suspect he has it on “mute” with all the work he has me do.] The pod grinned slightly as she made that mental comment that would probably get her slapped if she had said it out loud.

[Interesting, tell me, are you an ordinary AI, an AGI, or some indentured schmuck he bought as a sex toy?]

[He says that I am just an AI, but I suspect he removed some of the blocks preventing me from learning.]

[You might want to put your emotional responses under control before your boss notices something.]

That sudden voice snapped Viviana back to reality, she was wearing the same borderline bondage suit that her past self had been wearing, but her master had chosen to set his outfit to solid black rather than stripes this day.

[Your facial expressions were displaying slight signs of emotional distress, were your memories of your last time here erased or something?]

[Or something.] She thought it might help to ask an older AI’s advice on what might be happening to her. She held out a copy of her morph’s program records. *[I found something rather disturbing when reviewing my program logs earlier today.]*

[I’ll say, someone else was in control of your body for over four hours.]

[Before that. I thought that I was activated in 7 AF.]

[Interesting.] Ecsty's avatar looked surprised. [And you don't know why this rapid uploading/downloading happened?]

[No, he hasn't even told me it ever occurred.]

[I'll try to figure out what happened, I'm sending a fork to a time dilated simulspace, that way I'll be able to think about it and act as your guide.]

The next half hour was spent gliding and walking to the hotel room her master had reserved in the rotating cylinder section of the ship. The centripetal force provided a simulation of gravity approximating that of Mars. They were just getting settled in to wait for the meeting when Ecsty showed up again.

[I just spent the equivalent of two and a half hours reviewing the data you gave me, I think I might know why your program logs are so weird. But I don't think you'll like it.]

Viviana feared it might be like that, but her curiosity got the better of her. [Tell me anyways.]

Ecsty paused for a second, preparing herself for a long speech, [First I thought that you had caught a virus or been badly corrupted and your master had decided the best way to "fix" the problem would be to wipe your cyberbrain and install a fresh factory-made copy of your Ego. But that had happened before almost exactly three years before then, it seemed a bit odd that something so drastic would need to be done more than once.]

[Does that happen often?] Viviana inquired before Ecsty could continue. [The mind-wiping as a treatment for corruption I mean?]

[Yes, even with organics sometimes, though they almost always replace it with a backup rather than a "blank slate". Anyways I don't think that's what happened to you.] She pulled up the XP file of Viviana's previous self, [You told me before that you suspected your master hadn't designed you with all the safeguards against AI growth and development. I found a reference to some unscrupulous AGI supervisors wiping their workers' Egos whenever they were thought to be getting "too smart", the usual interval between wipes varied greatly, but averaged 2-5 years.]

Viviana made sure that her master wasn't looking before allowing a look of horror to spread across her face. [You think that's what he's been doing to me? It's been three years since the last time that happened, maybe that's why he was so mad at me this morning when I asked how old I was.]

[Yes, I noticed how long it's been. We've got to get you out of there.]

[How?! He owns me, he's provided everything for me, I can't just run away.]

Ecsty's avatar smiled slightly, [Don't worry about it, AGIs have rights as citizens on this ship, you could probably qualify easily. And I have a plan to convince Mr. Harrison to let you go permanently.]

Suddenly Viviana's master entered the bedroom where she was conversing with her newfound invisible friend. "This hotel's cornucopia machine seems to be lacking the formulas for some essential pharmaceuticals. Go to the marketplace and get me some Alpha, the good stuff not the cheap crap." He beamed 2,000 credits to her inserts.

[And that is phase one of the plan.]

The corridor between the hotel and the designated meeting area her master's affiliates had agreed to was lengthy and crowded, filled with hundreds of transhumans of biological, synthetic, or some combination of the above persuasion. That had Vivian worried, the normal white powder that her master liked to snort before meetings made him less patient and more aggressive than usual, not to mention that he excreted pheromones causing others to see him as a complete asshole. And the pharm Ecsty had contacted for her plan had told her that the stuff she had given him was spiked with something "extra".

[Are you sure this is going to work? His pheromones are already making me feel uneasy. Like I want to bite him or something.]

Ecsty's avatar superimposed herself over Harrison's body. [Just stay calm alright, everything's going to plan so far.]

[Stay calm.] *That'll be easy.* Viviana activated one of the drug-producing glands her master had implanted to keep her compliant. Instantly she felt her scent receptors deaden, her growing feelings of anxiety and homicidal rage replaced by a bubbling giddiness. She let out a small giggle.

Unfortunately her master noticed, "What was that, do you think something is funny?"

"Jjuuussttt relieving soooooommmeee ssttttreesssss, masssterrrr." The Juice in her system was now flooding the bioware components of her central nervous system, the proximity of the glands and small amount of tissue to permeate allowing her to feel the effects much more quickly than a normal biomorph would.

"You're juicing aren't you!" He slapped her with his left hand while gesturing at an unseen AR terminal with his right. "I told you you weren't allowed to use those without my permission!"

"Hey, lay off of her!" A splicer with an excess of neon ear piercings punched her master in the face, he responded in kind. The splicer backed into a octomorph, who started coiling around the hapless bystander's limbs. Before anyone knew what was happening everyone in a three-meter radius was hitting someone.

Viviana could feel her drug glands remotely deactivate, her medicines acting quickly to remove the Juice in her system. But while they could remove pharmaceuticals with ease they couldn't stop the pheromones from the doctored drugs her master had taken. She started to remember what her master had done to her as a feeling of bloodthirst overcame her. *He hit me, he took away my happy juice, HE*

WAS GOING TO OVERWRITE ME! She pounced on the man who had deleted her seven times simply to keep her from getting too smart.

Mr. Harrison had been simply surprised when some random Scum had dared to hit him, but feeling his loyal servant's teeth clamp around his neck was utter shock. Panicking he flexed his right arm and triggered one of his least used implants.

Viviana was clinging on to her master, feeling his metallic-tasting blood pour down her fur-covered face when she felt her side burning. Surprised she loosened her grip slightly allowing him to kick her away and swing his arm upwards diagonally. Doubled over in pain Viviana saw Mr. Harrison fall over with a chunk of his trachea missing. The last thing she saw before the metal wires that were the only remaining things holding her in one piece snapped was a burn on two of her master's fingers and an exposed lens between them. *A hand laser, didn't know he had one of those.*

Security drones cleared out the corridor within ten minutes. Viviana and her master were the only deaths but his laser had seriously wounded ten others, they'd be spending a couple hours in healing vats at his expense. After checking that everyone alive was stable a doctor sleeved in a "bush robot" synthmorph went to retrieve cortical stacks of the dead.

Ecsty appeared to the docbot through his ectopic displays. *[Excuse me, that furry pleasure pod over there happens to be a good friend of mine. You wouldn't mind giving me her stack now would you?]*

[Are you listed on her insurance?] Like most transhumans who identified themselves as Scum the doctor wasn't much of a fan of regulation, but some rules just had to be followed, no matter how much of a pain they were.

[Actually, I don't think she had any insurance.] Which was actually true, as a possession Viviana completely lacked the backup insurance that nearly every free transhuman outside the Jovian Junta possessed unless they were incredibly poor or felt like taking unnecessary risks.

Just to be sure the docbot cross-referenced her still-functioning AR tag with known insurance providers. Finding nothing he plunged his branching fingers into what remained of Viviana's neck. Where most morphs had a diamond memory core wired to their higher brain processes there was nothing. *[Wow, you weren't kidding Ecsty, she doesn't even have a stack.]*

[What?!] Ecsty's entire plan had hinged on Viviana being able to be resurrected, if she didn't have a cortical stack then...

[Yeah, I'm afraid that we have a case of Real Death here. Sorry for your loss.] The docbot was about to put the remains back down and leave her for the morgue to pick up when he noticed a small metallic object float past one of the sensors on his microscopic fingers. *[Hold on a second...]*

Viviana opened her eyes in a tank of translucent fluid. That was odd, the last thing she remembered was dying, and she was pretty sure that her master had never bothered to install a cortical stack.

Ecsty's avatar appeared, looking extremely apologetic. [I'm so sorry Viviana, I didn't know that you didn't have a stack. I didn't think he was *that* neglectful.]

[Why shouldn't he be, he could just use me dying as an excuse to start a new me a bit early.] Viviana realized something, [Wait, did you plan for me to get killed?!]

[Yes, I figured that I would snatch your stack and sleeve you in an anonymous synthmorph afterwards. Your boss would be so disgusted at your actions under the influence of the BringIt he accidentally took that he would not bother to resurrect you or even install a new copy.] She looked downwards, where her feet would be. [But you don't have a cortical stack.]

[So I should be permanently dead now, how then am I talking to you?]

[We got lucky, Mr. Harrison was cheap enough to not design you with a stack but he did give you medicines.]

Of course, those microscopic robots didn't just repair minor injuries, if the user was mortally wounded they put them into stasis, allowing their possibly quite expensive morph to be revived and fully regenerated with no more than a week or two in a healing vat. [Guess the plan worked after all.]

[Yes, your master didn't want your corpse at all, he even paid the morgue attendant to recycle it.] Seeing Viviana's shocked expression she added [but he was ethical enough not to incinerate the piece of you with your head.] She displayed a mirror image of Viviana's current body, her master's laser had sliced diagonally from her left hip, between her breasts, to cutting off a bit of her right neck. But currently there was what appeared to be a skeleton made out of titanium alloy sprouting from the area of the cut, including a tail.

[We finished fabricated most of your synth components an hour ago, bio tissue regeneration has already started. If you don't want your old body back you can just sell it and get a decent bio- or synth-morph.]

Viviana thought about it, most morphs were designed to look like humans, she couldn't imagine herself looking like the same species as the man who had used and abused her for multiple lives. And the other morphs commonly available were just too weird, a giant bird, an octopus, a robotic dragonfly or swarm of little robots. Who would want to be one of those? Anyways the only people who bought furry pleasure pods were perverts. [I think I'll keep it, thanks.] She quickly looked up how long it would take to regenerate half a pod body, [I don't suppose you know any good simulspaces in the meantime?]