

Steel Dreams

By

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"I'm just a head. What harm could it do? You could even call it an early Christmas present for me. It is *only* four months away now."

"No!" The exasperation in the voice echoed clearly in the small chamber.

"Please? It doesn't have to be a very good one. As long as it has a few decent years left in it. Oh, and no communicable diseases would be nice."

"I said no. You haven't been here long enough to earn a neck, let alone a full body. Now get back to your units." There was a crackle as the audio feed switched off. Mountjoy mentally grimaced then went back to his outstanding work.

He re-tasked the rear sections of his brain to process the data feeds that were hard-wired into his skull, the only remaining bit of bone he had. Within a few seconds data was being shunted in to his granule cells and the remaining unused forty percent of his brain was bored. He tried looking around his compartment, but could not see anything other than the steel grey wall in front of him. If he strained his eyes he could just make out the corners of the place he called home, but those were just a deeper grey. The gentle, sterilising, violet light that illuminated the walls was the only other colour he could see. Occasionally a fine moisturising mist was sprayed over him, only to be followed by the low hum of an extractor that ensured it did not get too humid.

If he still had a neck at least he would be able to see the sides, or maybe even the back of the chamber, he thought. There might be a stain or a mark on one of those walls that would relieve the boredom of the constant processing. Without a neck though he could only see straight in front of

him, and he knew this view would not change for free. He focussed back on the sanitised grey steel and sent a command through his neural interface to activate a display feed. It would cost him a few dollars to use the feeds but he needed something to relieve the boredom, and he was earning more than they cost.

A white rectangle appeared on the steel in front of him. It flickered once and then images from Earth monitoring satellites came into view. Blues, greens and greys filled the view and he started zooming into details that caught his attention, then zooming back out when he became bored. He could zoom right down to make out windows in planes and cars, but not far enough to make out faces.

Aircraft, ships, and bridges were his favourites to watch, though he was partial to an erupting volcano if he could find one that was just starting. He could tap directly into GED, the Global Earth Database, to get real time alerts to volcanos and other events, but he preferred to try and find them on his own. He felt some satisfaction if he could find an event before GED, though he had only managed to find two in the six weeks since he had been housed there. Also, for every volcano or other major event he found and registered before GED he got a dollar bonus.

A high flying jetliner caught his eye and he zoomed down on it to watch the contrails forming behind it. After a while he focussed on the aircraft itself. Mountjoy loved the way the steel caught the light, and as the aircraft travelled round the globe, he watched the reflected sunlight slide along the bodywork as if it was a fiery pulse only he could see.

The aircraft crossed the wake of a ship far below and his attention dived down to sea level, where he watched a huge container ship for a few hours as it crossed the Indian Ocean. The seas were calm and its wake spread out for miles aft of it. A single ring of a bell interrupted him and brought him back to his container, indicating he had finished processing the data set. He shut down the satellite feeds, concentrated on his neural interface and shunted his work units back out into the grid. He

could let the GED handle it all, but he liked to retain some sense of control. It had taken him nearly a week to master the interface, almost as long as it took him to get over the shock of living in the chamber. Now he could flick through channels, commands and data units with the minimum of effort. He set the allocated section of his brain for a wipe and waited the three and a half minutes the machines took to completely erase the previous work set and prepare the section for new data.

Once the wipe had finished Mountjoy opened up the connections and the new data units flooded in. He could not actually read or understand the data, but the systems they had affixed to his skull used his brain as an ultra-fast computer. He was not told what data he was processing, just that it related to earth studies and simulations. If he was honest with himself he did not really care; he just needed to earn money as fast as possible.

Once the big corporations had worked out how to plug directly into the human brain and use it it quickly became apparent they were more powerful and more flexible than silicon and graphene chips. Once they understood how the connections worked it had been a simple process to keep the brain alive whilst it processed data. With over 50 billion cerebellar granule cells that could be used when a brain was out of a body they proved to be cheap and powerful processors.

The work units finished loading and Mountjoy started processing again. He turned his attention back to the satellite feeds as he re-opened the visuals on the steel in front of him. Somewhere over the Pacific Ocean he found a giant cargo plane and started to follow it.

“How about a new body now? It’s only two months to Christmas.”

“Mountjoy, you’ve just started to do some really good work, especially since you increased your commitment level. That extra 10% you’ve signed up for has really burnt through some data. Another few months at this rate and I reckon we’ll have a good case to take to the boss to get you on that list for re-housing.”

The mention of re-housing caught Mountjoy's attention. Re-housing was why he was here, processing this data for months on end to earn some dollars. His body had succumbed to a particularly nasty cancer which meant he had found himself in a hospital bed just before his thirty seventh birthday. After two days of doctors' head shaking and nurses' gentle administrations GED approached him. Two reps appeared at his bedside, with smart suits, sympathy in spades and a shiny leather briefcase.

After some general chitchat about his failing health they got down to business. Did he know there was another way? It didn't have to end now. They talked through his options, both of them. Death in a couple of days with a paupers' burial was looking most likely, but they did have a suggestion. He could not afford re-housing himself, and had no real family that either cared or could afford, and yes, they assured him, they had checked him out thoroughly. However, and it was fortunate they were in the area right now, GED had another option, one that suited him right down to the ground. The cancer hadn't spread into his brain, so if he signed up to GED for a minimum term processing contract, once he had done enough work they would re-house him themselves. It wouldn't be the greatest body he would get, but at least he would be back out and about in the real world. What was better they asked, sacrificing a year or two or sacrificing sixty or seventy years?

It was an easy choice for Mountjoy, a real no brainer, he thought. If he signed himself over to GED for a processing contract he could earn a new body that would give him the life he was, as they put it, being so unfairly robbed of. Just a year or two of processing and he would be re-housed.

It did not take him long to sign the forms they had bought with them, and the following day they euthanized his body and extracted his brain. When he regained consciousness he found himself in this steel box. The first week had been tough, with constant phantom itches on his legs, eyes that relied on a mist spray instead of blinking, and the worst of all was his brain telling him his bladder that was no cremated somewhere back on Earth, was constantly full.

Re-housing!

Mountjoys' mystery controller, who had always refused to give his name, had never mentioned the possibility of Mountjoy getting back planet side in the eight months since he had arrived. The grey steel box he currently occupied was housed in a commercial satellite floating in low earth orbit, where it could easily vent the enormous heat generated by the brains it housed. Though they required little upkeep, having nutrients and oxygen supplied by a yellow slime that was pumped through them, they did need to be kept cool. As with silicon chips, the more they did the hotter they got, so space proved an ideal place for venting the excess.

When he had earned enough his chamber would be picked up by a maintenance shuttle and shipped down to Florida for the re-housing procedure. He could end up with any body type as anyone could donate their body for re-housing, though they would always match gender. Some came from donors that were tired of life, some from rare instances of the brain completely failing, and there was rumoured to be a thriving black market in bodies.

A small thrill coursed through his thoughts and he had an idea. If he committed a few extra percent it would help re-enforce his case, especially now that they were talking about re-housing. He called up the authorisation forms in his interface and signed them, upping his usage to 75%. He felt no change as everything was handled by the implants and they quickly and efficiently activated the required extra cells. Mountjoy turned his remaining attention to the screen in front of him.

He opened up the connections to GED and hunted for something to watch. He liked to watch aircraft and ships as they moved across the globe. He loved the way grey steel sprang to life as it reflected the sun. He found a ship steaming through the North Atlantic Passage and followed it for a while.

Contentedly Mountjoy watched the world.

“Happy Christmas Mountjoy.”

“Thank you boss.” Mountjoy flashed back through the interface, but he was pre-occupied keeping an eye on his totals. His display screen showed the total work units he had processed, and the backlog of units that seemed to be forever increasing. GED had recently added a new feature to his interface that showed how much work he needed to get through to get on the re-housing list. The target was constantly moving as he was being compared against others wanting a new body. Every time Mountjoy thought he was getting closer to the end, someone else would increase their processing and overtake him.

Mountjoy had something to ask his controller, though he could not remember what. He struggled for a while, trying to recall, but in the end decided it was not important.

There had been no further conversation from his controller and he focussed his free attention back on the grey steel in front of him. He turned on the links to GED and found a plane to follow as it flew high over the oceans. He loved to watch planes, and the way their grey wings caught the light. Fresh data shunted into his brain and he started processing the new units, leaving his free 10 percent to watch the world.

“Happy New Year Mountjoy.”

Mountjoy did not respond. The grey steel in front of him reminded him of something, but he could not think what. A document flashed across his vision, digitally imposed on his retina and interrupting his work. He tried to ignore it but it stayed in the periphery of his vision. A blinking cursor in one corner would not go away. He looked away but the document was still there, waiting for him to acknowledge it. He had seen these forms before so he did not need to read it; it would just eat into his time if he went through all the small legal print. With a mental gesture he signed where the icon

was flashing. Then he turned off the GED feeds and focussed on the grey steel wall. As the data swept over him the dim violet light in his box faded completely and the grey faded into black.

Outside of the steel box a display panel chimed softly and then turned from yellow to green.

“Integration Complete. Processor core #32,117 100% functional” lit up in the middle of the panel.

A display panel far above the thousands and thousands of grey steel boxes that surrounded Mountjoy’s box changed.

“GED Processing Station #7. 32,117 Active Cores. 84.57% Utilisation”