

# The Value of Mice

## Chapter 1: A new Upgrade

“Please hand me one of those new mice, will you?” Natalie asked her lab assistant, Nicole. Nicole reached into the cage and grabbed hold of one of the mice.

“We want to see how well these new gene-therapeutic nanobots are for the kind of gene therapy we want to do, so I’m injecting them into its bloodstream,” Natalie explained. “I want you to observe and document its behaviour closely and to do the usual measurements.” Nicole nodded.

“Very well, time for me to go,” Natalie said, after having injected the mouse. “See you tomorrow.”

Natalie headed for the doctors private area to change into her civil clothes. As she entered, a familiar woman turned towards her.

“Oh, hi Cindy,” Natalie said.

“Hi Natalie, you look gorgeous as usual,” Cindy said. “But wait, there’s also something more, isn’t there? There’s more to you than meets the eye.” Cindy smiled.

“Is it because you know, or can you sense it?” Natalie asked.

“I know, yes, but I also felt it the moment you entered the room. And if I didn’t, it wouldn’t really be worth all the money you paid for it, would it?”

“You are right,” Natalie said. “I got my charisma upgrade this week. Since I was part of the group working on this particular upgrade, I got a big discount. I’ll tell you about the upgrade in detail, but let’s first find a good restaurant, and I can tell you over dinner.”

Natalie and Cindy was seated on a large balcony at *Your Hearts Desire*, one of the finest restaurants in the area, and Cindy looked at Natalie with excitement.

“So, here we are. Now tell me,” Cindy said.

“Well,” Natalie said, “first there is the eyes. There are tiny genetic changes in the eye region, adding not only a bit of colour change to the iris, but also in the placement and orientation of the eye. Then there is the skin. The skin is softened a bit, there are some changes in the perspiration, not only in how and how much, but also in the chemical composition of the sweat, which, well, makes me smell nicer.” Natalie smiled.

“Then some wrinkle alteration stuff, some things around the mouth and in the lips, body fat distribution, better muscle control for increased grace, and improved metabolism. But the most powerful improvement of all is pheromonal secretion. Changes in the pheromones will cause me to be more attractive to those in my vicinity. And as you know, since the pheromones surpass the frontal cortex there is little defense against it. Only a few upgrades exists that can counter that.”

“No wonder I found you irresistible this afternoon,” Cindy said. “God, I envy you so much. Now I wish I hadn’t gone for the intelligence upgrade the last time.”

There was a good view from the balcony overlooking the nearby city area. The two women slowly consumed their dinner while continuing the conversation, then sat a while in silence enjoying the view. Natalie broke the silence: “I’m going away for a while,” she said.

“And by ‘away’, you mean..?” asked Cindy.

“To the surface,” Natalie said. Cindy gasped.

“Again? Why on Earth would you subject yourself to that? And twice? It’s filthy, it’s not safe..”

“I have to do some field study for my research,” Natalie said.

“Ok, but just promise me you’ll take care,” Cindy said.

“I will.”

Natalie took another sip of her wine, and her eyes fell upon the clock on the wall above the balcony door.

“Oh my god, is it that late?” she said. “I need to pick up Amelia.” They paid the bill, and Natalie said goodbye and got into the nearest available car.

“Oh, hi mom,” Amelia said as she walked out onto the street. Her mother was there, waiting.

“Hi Amelia,” Natalie said, “so, how was violin class today?” Amelia looked at her with an empty stare.

“Well, same as usual,” she said. “I played the violin.” Natalie let it pass.

They drove home together in silence. When the car stopped in front of a 2 storey building they got out and took the elevator to the top floor that was Natalie’s apartment. It was a big apartment for 2 people, even if one of them was a child, but the robot house servant made sure that keeping all the rooms clean wasn’t a problem. There was a huge terrace with flowers and other greenery in stands all around, and inside the rooms were all very neat and clean, and didn’t reveal much about the people that lived there, except for Amelia’s room.

“Come and sit with me in the living room,” Natalie said. “I have something I want to tell you.”

Amelia sat down on the couch with her mother.

“I’ll be going away for some days,” Natalie began.

“Again?” Amelia asked.

“Yes, but it’s only for about a week, maximum. I need to do some research on my book.”

“To the surface?” Amelia asked.

“Yes,” Natalie said.

“Ok,” Amelia said. “I want Yenna as my caretaker, and a huge bowl of ice cream every day.”

Natalie wanted to say that this wasn’t a negotiation, but reconsidered.

“I’ll give you Yenna,” she said, ignoring the coldness in Amelia’s voice. Amelia thought about it, then nodded.

“Ok,” she said.

## Chapter 2: The Community

“Jerry, where do you think the tomatoes should be?” Nina asked.

“I think that if we keep all the vegetables with high water demand at this end we can have the automatic water system installed there,” Jerry said.

“Yeah, of course, that would be practical,” Nina said.

“Let me come and help you with the plant box,” Jerry said. The plant box wasn’t heavy, but it was nice working together, and an extra hand wouldn’t hurt. Or was it because he just liked being in the company of Nina? In any case he got to work, and it was fun work. It was the culmination of the huge project it had been cleaning the soil and building the large greenhouse out of reused materials. Something chimed in his pocket.

“It is time,” he said.

Nina nodded, and they and the rest of the work crew got out of the greenhouse and headed down to the beach.

The whole village had gathered down at the beach, and Jeremy stood in front of them, and said with a loud voice: “Ok, today we go to the west side.”

Jeremy started walking, and the crowd followed. When he reached his destination, he stopped.

“For those of you who are newcomers: We go on a line, then work westward for 2 hours. Plastic has highest priority, then other kind of trash, and then the seaweed. It doesn’t matter if you miss a bit of seaweed, just be sure to collect all the trash you find. And for how small a piece of plastic should be for you to pick it up: If it is visible, grab it.”

They all started picking. It wasn’t long before Toby, working next to Jerry, exclaimed: “I remember working on this part of the beach before. It wasn’t that long ago. And now it’s filled with plastic again. Where does all that plastic come from?”

“The sea,” Jerry answered. “Yes, it does seem there is an almost limitless supply of it. We can’t clean the sea, we don’t have the tools for it, but we can clean the beaches.”

After 2 hours they were done, and they all went to Jeremy with their bags and threw them into the big cart of his. They all walked back to the village.

Cleaning the beach was an important job. It had been a tough negotiation, making the local administration accept it as an activation task, and especially having the village council administering the task. The arrangement allowed the villagers to do something meaningful while still having time for building up their community and getting self-sustained with certain food and other basic things. Everybody would then receive the unemployment income from the government that all unemployed citizens were entitled to, provided they lived up to certain obligations put forth by the government. In short, what it meant, was, that as long as the villages did the beach cleaning 2 hours every day, the government would leave them alone. The small income they got could then be used to buy advanced tools and luxury goods, and the food they couldn’t grow in their greenhouses.

But there was more to it than that. Years ago some dedicated environmentalists from the village had called for village meetings, proposing that the village should become a sustainable community, grow its own food sustainably, have its electricity produced by local renewable energy installations, and to do something about the global pollution at the local level. Many, like Jerry, agreed at once, but some, especially the more mature and the elderly, thought that it was a silly idea. But as they started to get to work on the project, the advantages, both economically and environmentally, quickly became clear, and more and more joined. The community project also brought the villagers together in a new and positive way, and provided them with a purpose. It wasn’t long before every single villager was part of the project.

Jerry walked into the dining hall, got a plate and put some food on it, and then sat down with his friends.

“Who’s next for a solar roof?” Bill asked.

“I think it’s Enya,” Jerry answered. Saving up for a full set of solar panels would take years if not decades for a single person, so instead of each household buying their own, the community would save up in unity, buying a full set for a single household, which then would pay back most of their energy savings to the community, contributing further to the next solar roof.

At another table, Nina was engaged in another conversation.

“You and Jerry seem to get along nicely,” said Enya, smiling.

“Yeah, he’s a nice guy,” Nina said, trying to sound indifferent. But she knew she couldn’t hide her feelings for him.

“It seems to me he thinks you are a nice girl too,” Enya continued, clearly teasing.

“So, how long until you get your solar roof?” Nina asked. It worked. The topic shifted, and Nina was off the hook.

## Chapter 3: The Spa

“Nicole, I want you to keep an eye on the lab while I am gone, and be sure to note the mouse’s behaviour and everything else you observe. I made a list of the ongoing experiments and how to go about them, just in case. Not that I don’t trust you, you are very competent, but these experiments are important. So, until next week then.” Natalie left the lab.

She was in a bit of a hurry not to miss her appointment, so she went to the parking lot of the floor she was on and got into a car there. The car took off, and flew towards its destination. There were no skyscrapers in the city, the highest buildings only had 5 floors, so she had a good view and spotted her destination long before she got there. The car landed on the roof of the building.

The roof entrance was just as welcoming as that on the ground floor. Lines of soft light in various shades of green and blue framed the double doors that were themselves a blend of carved wood and frosted glass. They slid open as Natalie approached them.

Inside there was a great variety of mixed soft lighting. The main area was brightly lit, while the edges of the room had less bright bluish or greenish lighting, with spots of brighter lit areas where light was required for the activity going on. The walls were wooden, decorated with settings of framed moss and little flowers, and the floor was wooden too, had patterns of light and dark wood, and there were soft, carpet walkways leading everywhere. Natalie went straight for the welcoming counter.

“Welcome to the Blue Heavens, miss Angelheart,” a pleasant female voice spoke out of nowhere. “How can we help you today?”

“I’d like the full treatment, manicure, pedicure, baths, skin treatment,” she said.

“And you deserve it,” the voice said. “I recommend starting with your foot treatment. Would that please you, miss Angelheart?”

“That would please me very well,” Natalie said, smiling.

“Please follow the light to your destination,” the voice said. A line of blue lights lit up along one of the walkways.

Nothing about payment was mentioned, although Natalie knew that payment would be automatically drawn from her account. She didn’t think about it though, as paying for the spa treatment would be like extracting a drop of water from the oceans. There was no reason for the AI to bother her about such trivialities.

Natalie’s first stop was at a chair by a glass basin. The basin was oval, with beautiful ornamentations, like a bird bath, but larger than the typical bird bath, and there was a constant flow through it, with water coming in from one glass pipe and exiting through another. Little coloured lights sparkled at the bottom. A soft female voice instructed her about what to do, but she had been here so many times before, so she knew the routine. She removed her shoes and socks, sat down on the chair and put her feet in the basin. The water was warm and comfortable around her skin.

Little bubbles started to form in the basin, and swept across her feet. Then soap bubbles started to form on the surface. It was a nice sensation, but it was even nicer when she started feeling tiny prickling all over her feet. She knew it was the nanobots cleaning off every tiny dirt particle she might have on them. Soft, calming music was in the air around her, along with a nice flowery scent, her favourite of course. After a few minutes she pulled her feet from the water, the chair turned her around, and she was facing a little stand for her feet. She put her feet down, and cool air dried them quickly.

A young woman approached her, only it wasn’t a young woman. It was a humanoid robot, almost perfectly resembling a human, but Natalie could tell the difference.

“I’m going to massage your feet,” the robot said. Natalie extended a foot and allowed for the robot to massage it. The robot was skilled, and the massage did not only loosen up the muscles in her foot, it also gave her a sense of wellbeing throughout her entire body.

Next was the jacuzzi. Natalie took off her clothes and let her body sink down into the warm water. Again nanobots cleaned her skin, bubbles and water jets massaged her body while she was also enveloped in soft therapeutic music from all sides. She let go of all thoughts and all tension and let herself just drift in heavenly bliss for about 20 minutes. Then she got up and into the dryer, where streams of air from all sides dried her skin quickly. She put on her clothes and went to the hair saloon where her hair was washed, trimmed, and set up by a robot. And after that it was time for her body massage.

The robot at the massage table was not only skilled in simple massage of the muscles, it also had detailed knowledge of the nervous system, and of ancient Chinese techniques for influencing her inner organs through points on her body.

“I found tiny signs of stress and tension, but nothing to be worried about,” the robot said. “You are otherwise the lucky owner of a body in perfect health.” Natalie already knew, but she didn’t mind being reminded.

Next was the manicure and the pedicure, also done by robots. They were very skilled, and soon he had the most pretty hands and the most pretty little feet you could imagine. She was satisfied. She left the spa vitalized, calm, and in a good mood, and headed for the airport. It was time.

## Chapter 4: A mysterious Woman

It was morning, and Jerry was on his way to the new greenhouse. They still had to finish some installations, and then they had to plant seeds which required a bit of planning. A small group was gathered in front of the greenhouse when he arrived.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“There’s a stranger in town,” Alice said.

“So..?” said Jerry, unable to understand why that would cause so much fuss. Strangers were a rare side in the village, but it did happen from time to time that someone from the outside world came by. Usually it was homeless people looking for a place to live, but they also had a visit from an anthropologist once, who wanted to learn about their community and the way they lived and worked.

“It’s a skywoman,” Allan said.

“Oh,” said Jerry, surprised. “Why is she here?”

“That’s the question we’ve been asking ourselves,” Alice said. “Whatever she is here for, it’s probably nothing good.”

“Why not just ask her?” Jerry asked.

“We don’t want to provoke her. Skypeople have so much political power, you can’t even begin to imagine. Better leave her alone unless she approaches us.”

“I’m going to ask her,” Jerry said. “And don’t worry, I’ll be very polite and diplomatic. Where is she now?”

“At the pub,” Alice said, “but Jerry, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“It will give us an answer to our question, so we don’t have to go and speculate,” Jerry said, and before anyone else could protest he was heading for the pub.

Jerry stepped into the pub and looked in the direction of the bar. There was no one there except from the bartender. Then he saw her, sitting at a table enjoying a sparkling water, with her focus on the computer in front of her. She was typing on a small keyboard while looking at a thin screen, all wireless it seemed. He walked up to her and put on a friendly face, while in his mind he was putting together a good opening remark. The woman looked up as he approached. She was beautiful, more beautiful than anyone he had seen before. She had a friendly smile and a questioning look on her face, probably wondering what he wanted. How could anyone think that this woman could be dangerous to anyone, or be a threat to the village?

“Hello?” she said.

“Eh, hello,” Jerry answered, completely forgetting the opening phrase he had prepared. Her smile broadened. Jerry knew he had to say something.

“I’m sorry for interrupting your work,” he said. “I’m sorry for intruding, but, well, we don’t see many strangers in the village, and..there’s been some talk about, eh..”

“You are curious about why I am here?” the woman said in a friendly tone, saving Jerry from further embarrassment. He was relieved.

“Yes,” he said. “I know it is none of my business, and if the question is too indiscrete I’ll just leave you alone..”

“Oh, I don’t mind,” she said. “I am travelling the country, and your village seemed to be the natural next step on my journey, so I decided to pay it a visit. I’m from one of the sky cities, and there’s not many up there knowing what goes on at the ground, so if you want to know, you’ll have to do what I do and go travelling. And I am documenting everything on my way so I can tell my friends about it when I get back.”

“That sounds lovely,” Jerry said, wondering how it would be to be able to travel around like that, not worrying about how to make a living or paying your bills. It was curiosity he was feeling now though, not envy. He wanted to know more about this woman.

“I hope you have a pleasant stay in our village, and I’ll be happy to answer any questions you might have. If you want to I can give you a tour.” He didn’t know why he said that, he had work to do, he didn’t have time to show her around. Ah, work could wait, he was on a diplomatic mission, he told himself.

“That’s very kind of you,” she said. She had a nice voice, Jerry thought. “Unfortunately I have to finish writing this while everything is fresh in my mind, and then I need to go somewhere, but perhaps tomorrow? I’ll be back at around noon tomorrow. My camper is parked just outside town, by the crossroads. If you want to you could stop by.”

“I’d be happy to,” Jerry said.

“Ok, it’s a deal then,” she said, still smiling. Jerry realized it was time for him to leave her to her writing, so he told her “until tomorrow,” and walked out of the pub. As he was heading for the greenhouse he felt a strange sensation in his chest, like something he had never felt before, not even when he was with Nina. He only then realized he never got the woman’s name. What was that nice scent he had noticed around her? An exotic flower perhaps? He didn’t know.

## Chapter 5: At the Zoo

When the doorbell rang, Yenna started walking towards the door, but Amelia rushed past her, shouting: “I’ll open!”

She didn’t reach the door though before it opened.

“Mom!” she said, with an expression of surprised.

“Hi,” Natalie said. “I’m only home for a day, then I have to leave again.”

“Oh.” Amelia’s face displayed indifference.

“Don’t give me that sour look,” Natalie said. “I thought we could do something together. What do you want to do?” Amelia lightened up a bit.

“I want to go to the zoo,” she said.

“Ok, let me get inside for a minute, then we can go.”

The zoo was not located in the city where they lived, but in another city not so far away, so they took an intercity car to fly them to the other city. It was not their first visit to the zoo, so Amelia knew her way around, and she pointed out her favourite animals one by one that she wanted to see, and Natalie just needed to follow along.

The zoo had a mix of real animals and exhibition halls with AI driven video of animal parks displayed on the walls. Due to a limited amount of space, only a relatively small amount of live animals were on display. The animals had plenty of space and good living conditions, meeting the standards for treatment of live animals. Amelia was especially fond of the lions and the wolves.

“Can we have a lion cub mom?” Amelia asked.

“I don’t think we are allowed,” Natalie answered. “Besides, they are cute as cubs, but they tend to grow up. I think a full-grown lion would be too much for us to handle.”

“The ancient Egyptians had them,” Amelia said, remembering something she had seen on a video on the internet.

“True,” Natalie answered. “But the answer is still no.”

Naturally they also had to see the dinosaurs. It was not real dinosaurs of course, but AI generated dinosaurs on the walls of an exhibition hall. Historically accurate dinosaurs were moving around in their historically accurate habitat on pre-historic Earth.

Next was the reptilians and the insects. Amelia thought they were a bit scary, but also very interesting. Natalie just followed Amelia, answering questions when she asked. Amelia stopped in front of a terrarium with a giant spider in one corner and a little naked baby mouse in the other. The spider didn’t move.

“Look, mom, the spider is about to eat that mouse,” Amelia said. She stood with her gaze fixed on the terrarium, but the spider didn’t move, and it was obvious that Amelia grew more and more impatient.

“I don’t think it will happen anytime soon,” Natalie said. “Maybe we should just move on.”

“No, I want to see it,” Amelia said stubbornly. She kept her gaze fixed on the spider and didn’t move. Neither did the spider. After 5 minutes Amelia lost her patience.

“Why won’t that fucking spider eat that fucking mouse!” she shouted.

“Amelia!” Natalie’s voice was hard and firm. “You know I don’t want you to use that word.” Amelia calmed down immediately.

“But mom, adults use it all the time..” Amelia tried.

“That’s no excuse. Now let’s go and see something else.”

“Yeah, ok, I don’t care about that stupid spider anyways,” Amelia said and turned from the terrarium.

## Chapter 6: The Tour

The sun was shining brightly from a clear, blue sky as Jerry was walking out of the village. He was in high spirit as he was strolling along, aiming for the crossroads straight ahead. And as he approached he saw that it was as the woman had said, a vehicle was parked at the side of the road. But this was not a camper as Jerry had imagined it. First of all, it was big, maybe even too

big to fit on the roads, and second its features were so strange it looked like something out of a science fiction movie. At ground level the sides were plain, shiny and in discrete colours, but then there was a second floor reaching out of the sides of the edges, and looking closer Jerry could see that there were 5 connected rooms, 4 of them at the corners, and one, the biggest one, in the center, all with glass roofs with windows open towards the sky. The woman from yesterday was seated in a lounge chair in the corner room turning in the direction from which he came, with a glass of some pinkish drink on the table in front of her. She looked at him as he approached, but remained seated, observing. Only when he was almost standing next to the camper she got up and called out to him: "Come on in. I'll be with you in a minute."

The contours of a door became visible in front of him, two panels slid open to leave a doorway, and a two-step staircase shot out underneath the door. Jerry carefully stepped inside, and found himself in a round room with two doors to the sides and a round couch against the wall opposing the entrance.

"Please be seated," a soft voice told him. He looked around but saw no speakers. Was that a computer speaking? He sat down in the couch and waited. Exactly a minute later the skywoman stepped through one of the doors, smiling. She was wearing a knee-long dress in light colours and with delicate patterns and flower motives, and she looked beautiful.

"We didn't get each others names yesterday," the woman said, saying what Jerry was thinking. "I'm Natalie. And your name is?"

"My name is Jerry," he said, but otherwise at a loss for words.

"Well, thank you Jerry," she said, "for wanting to give me a tour of your village. Maybe we should get going?" She stepped out of the camper without looking back, obviously expecting Jerry to follow. He did.

They walked next to each other to the village, mostly in awkward silence, and when they did speak it was Natalie who initiated the conversation, saying something about the local forest or some landmarks she discovered in the area. But once they reached the village, Jerry took the lead.

He began telling her about the history of the village, how it had once been only a tiny village consisting of a few houses along the road, and how it had grown larger as people moved in from over-populated cities to eventually include several shops and even a small school, up until the techno revolution when jobs were being taken over by robots and artificial intelligence. For a long time the inhabitants had lived on social benefits from the government, with the exception of those who owned land, and a few shop owners and school teachers. People gradually lost their dignity, and the mood in the village became gloomy and dark, until some of the younger inhabitants suggested they started up the community, started growing their own food and taking control of their lives again.

As Jerry showed Natalie the village and the greenhouses while entertaining her with the history, he was well aware that suspicious eyes were upon them everywhere, which was not a surprise to him but made him uncomfortable nonetheless. Natalie didn't seem to notice, or maybe she didn't mind.

Eventually Jerry ran out of things to show her, and exclaimed that it was the end of the tour. He felt regret of having to say goodbye to her again, and at the thought that he would likely never see the woman again. Well, no, it was not regret he felt, but something closer to despair. He was therefore very relieved when Natalie said: "Thank you for the tour, Jerry. Maybe you would like to walk me home, and in return I could give you a small tour of my camper?"

They walked back to Natalie's camper. Natalie asked him questions about the community, how it worked in detail, and how was the relationship between inhabitants in the community. When they reached the camper, Natalie invited him in.

"Your camper looks so..fascinating from the outside. I can't wait to see how it looks from the inside," Jerry said.

"I can show you," Natalie said. "Or you could just come closer and give me a kiss. You want to, don't you, Jerry?" She was right, he wanted to. And once she said it, that seemed to be all he wanted, maybe all he had ever wanted, actually. And when he leaned in and kissed her, dopamine flooded his brain and obsession took over.

"Take off your clothes Jerry," Natalie commanded. Jerry did as he was told, while Natalie studied him closely. Then she started to slowly remove her own clothes.

"Oh my god!" The words just bursted out of him. Natalie laughed.

"No Jerry, I am only human."

## Chapter 7: Skyfall

"So, you live in a skycity?" Jerry asked when they were sitting in the lounge chairs in the center room on the upper floor of the camper, with a clear view to the sky.

"Yes, Jerry, I do. The closest one that is visible from here, if you must know," Natalie said. Jerry looked up at the huge construction in the sky that had always been there so long as he lived. The actual city was not visible from the ground.

"So, how is life up there in the sky?" Jerry asked. "Is the technology as advanced as they say?"

"I don't know what they say, but yes, we live quite comfortably if that is what you are asking."

Jerry paused, then said: "You originally moved to the sky because of all the pollution, right?"

"That is correct," Natalie said. She seemed to be studying him closely.

"But I don't understand," Jerry said, carefully weighing every word. "I go to the beach every day to clean up the beach from all the plastic that is washing up on the shore. But with your technology, couldn't you make machines that could clean up, not just the plastic, but all of the pollution on Earth?" Jerry was nervous about how Natalie would react to the question, but she seemed calm as ever.

"I guess we could," she said. "Some of the pollution cannot be cleaned up in an instance, like the radioactivity and some of the soil pollution, and there is chemistry in the environment that removing it will take decades, if not centuries. But yes, I suppose it could be done."

"Then why don't you?" He asked.

"I am not really into the governments policy on that topic," Natalie said. She was starting to sound bored, and Jerry thought it might be wise to stop asking questions. There was one final question he had to ask though.

"Do you have a family? Up there?"

"You ask a lot of questions Jerry," Natalie said, smiling. "Maybe it is my turn to take you on a tour." Natalie picked up a remote control from the table and pushed a button. Vertical metal blades shot up from the top of the camper on all sides, and then the blades unfolded and started to rotate, silently. The camper lifted itself from the ground and moved upwards. Once it was clear of the trees, Natalie steered it sideways along the coast. Jerry looked around in all directions. He had never been so high up in the air, and was astounded by the view.

It didn't take long for them to reach their destination. In front of them was a large building, like a factory or something like that.

"This is the facility that handles all of your plastic," Natalie said. "My vehicle is cleared for flying anywhere on the planet, otherwise we would never be allowed to fly over this area."

Natalie steered the camper down to land on a parking lot next to the facility. A man came out of the facility and approached them.

“Stay here,” Natalie said, went down and out of the camper and walked up to the man. They had a little conversation, and then she returned to the camper and seated herself in her chair once more.

“They have a daily schedule for things, but they will make a change in their schedule for our sake so we don’t have to wait. There is something I’d like to show you.”

They waited maybe 10 minutes, then a very large drone rolled out of the building. It took off from the ground and headed out towards the sea. Natalie manipulated the remote control, and the camper followed the drone.

After a few minutes they were out at high sea, far from the shore. Then the whole bottom of the camper opened, and material started drizzling out, falling into the sea.

“Is that...?” Jerry said in disbelief.

“Plastic.” Natalie said. Once again she seemed to be studying his face closely.

They didn’t speak on their way back. The camper returned to its original spot.

“Why?” Jerry finally spoke.

“Cleaning up the beach provides meaning to your lives, right?” Natalie said. “It gives you purpose. It is hard work, sure, but it makes you feel like you are doing something, and not just passively accepting.”

“But...,” Jerry said, and he almost could not get the words out, “but it’s all a lie!”

“But you didn’t know that.”

“Well now I do,” he said, feeling the anger start to grow inside him. “I don’t understand. Why show me at all?”

“You just kept asking questions. You couldn’t leave things alone, could you?” Natalie said. Her voice was cold.

“I’ll tell everyone. They will find out and they will rise against you.” Natalie smiled.

“Who would believe you Jerry? You will be basically telling them that their whole life is a lie, and with your emotions all worked up by being in the company of a beautiful woman you just met.” Jerry went silent.

“I don’t understand,” he finally said. “You don’t need us. Why keep us around at all? Why not just kill us off and be done with it?”

“You ask too many questions Jerry,” Natalie said. “Now take off your clothes and lie on your back. We will have sex.”

When Jerry had been dismissed from the camper, he returned to the village, determined to tell them everything, not caring whether they would believe him or not. Outside of the new greenhouse a group gathered as he approached it. Nina was among them. He started to speak, but Nina interrupted him.

“You have neglected your beach cleaning duty, so we have had to report you. You will have to go to the office for the unemployed to be assigned to another activity. I’m sorry Jerry, but we just cannot allow neglectance.” Nina’s voice was cold. “We have also decided to exclude you from the community, as you don’t seem to be reliable.” Jerry left and headed home, his emotions shifting rapidly between anger and despair.

The next day he went to the crossroads, determined to confront Natalie. But where the camper had once stood there was just an empty space. He stood there for a while, looking up into the clear blue sky towards the sky city. Was it starting to rain? But how could it be raining from a clear sky he wondered, until he realized that it was not rain he felt, but only the tears running down his cheeks.

## Chapter 8: The Symposium

The big hall was filled with anticipation, while all the people gathered for the symposium was sitting at round tables, with their drinks and little snack foods in front of them. The stage at the end of the hall was still empty, and there was a loud buzzing of human conversation in the room. Natalie and Cindy were seated at a table very close to the stage.

"How is your new book coming along?" Cindy asked.

"I'm almost done with it," Natalie said and took another sip of her drink.

"What was the title again?" Cindy asked.

"The Art of Love and how it relates to Intelligence," Natalie said.

"I'm looking forward to reading it," Cindy said and was about to say something more, when Natalie interrupted.

"Something is happening on the stage," she said.

A man in a fine and formal dress walked onto the stage and up to the podium in the center. He placed himself in front of the microphone and waited for the audience to go silent before he began to speak:

*I am happy to see you all. I know that you have all been working hard these last few months, and it is with great joy that I announce that we are now ready to release our newest set of upgrades. Our competitors have been fast on our heels for a long time, but with this newest release we again take the lead, and by more than just a margin.*

*And this is not just a victory for our company, but for all of humanity. Or well, all of those who can afford our products. We, and our customers will show the way forward. The human being will again rise to new levels of greatness as we continue to progress. It is as I have said before and will say again: The sky is the limit! Nothing is holding us back, and as long as we continue to progress, we will stay afloat and continue to thrive.*

*And to what do we owe this success? We owe it to the technology you are building and continuously improving. That technology is our friend, our tool, and our enabler, but we are its masters. So once again a praise to humanity, to what we have become, and what we are becoming.*

The man on the podium said a lot more, and when he was done there was a big applause and then conversation started again around the tables. Cindy and Natalie exchanged opinions about the speech, and then went on to other topics.

"You haven't told me much recently about your love life," Cindy said. "Are you seeing someone, or are you still just enjoying the single life?"

"The latter," Natalie said.

"Maybe it was time for you to find someone," Cindy said. "It might be nice for Amelia too to have an extra parent around."

"Maybe," Natalie said, smiling. "Do you have someone particular in mind?"

"Well, I hear Tom from the nanotech department is looking," Cindy said.

"From what I have heard, he likes his women to be submissive," Natalie said.

"Oh, yeah, well, I guess," Cindy said.

"Yeah, I don't think he is the one for me then. You see, I am more...the dominant type."

So what are we learning?  
As we begin to age  
With the time we need to borrow  
And the truth that turns to lies

The wheels they are turning  
And you turn another page  
In the book of tomorrow  
But you know you have to nick it

For while the coals are burning  
Someone approach your cage  
It's like he almost feel sorrow  
As he looks into your eyes  
Asking 'Do you have a ticket?'