

BEST PRACTICES FOR A SOFT LANDING AT THE END OF THE WORLD

MATTHEW GARVIN

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1 — The Kafkaesque Cappuccino

The story of Mary Malone, the woman who would set sentient artificial intelligence loose on the planet, begins the way so many other things begin. On a Monday morning. In an office. With the first cup of coffee percolating to life.

This particular story begins in Menlo Park, at 42 Manifest Destiny Drive: the Elysian Futures tower, the most heavily branded glass monolith in Silicon Valley's AI core.

While the first, fourth, and eighth floors hosted a Starbucks, a Luckin Coffee, and a Dunkin' respectively—these cafes were built for meetings and tour groups. Up on the eleventh floor, the Architects' Utility Hub was designed for production. Namely, for employees to get their coffee, and get back to their desk. At that precise moment, Mary was trying to do precisely that.

The problem was that at that precise moment, the coffee machine, a gleaming chrome ziggurat that answered to the name “The BrewMaster 9000,” was busy performing its morning ritual of psychological attrition. Mary stood before it with the crunched spinal curvature of the modern knowledge worker, hunched over the phone in her hand. Forty-five seconds was all she'd been standing there. Which is why Mary wasn't really there.

While her body stood in the break room, in the stale ghost of microwaved fish, her mind was adrift in the Cloud.

Her scroll slowed just long enough to catch the headline of a suggested post from a 22-year-old “Growth Hacker” named Kyler, who wore a vest made of recycled tires. “Why I wake up at 3:30 AM to ice-bathe and scream at the moon.”

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Next came an ad for “Smart Socks” that tracked your foot sweat to predict marital dissatisfaction. “Now with 98% accuracy,” the ad claimed. “Don’t let your relationship slip,” it warned, showing a graph of a dissolving marriage superimposed over a sweaty arch.

A little further down was a video of a golden retriever saving a baby duck from a swimming pool dated from last August. The dog was gentle and the music was a swelling orchestral piece engineered to manipulate. A tear pricked the corner of her eye. The clip was designed to harvest engagement, she knew, and the dog was surely trained, the duck surely a prop. Still, for three seconds, it made Mary believe in the goodness of the world again.

A reflexive swipe down to check email notifications turned up one from her bank. “You have a new message regarding a recent transaction. Please log in to view.” The vague threat of it spiked her anxiety. Fraud? Maybe. Or the subscription meal tracker she forgot to cancel. Future Mary would handle it.

And then, the algorithm offered up a video of a woman with impossibly shiny hair, sitting in a sun-drenched room filled with crystals and candles. In white linen (the kind that stained if you even thought about spaghetti), the woman looked directly into the camera, her eyes wide with what Mary characterized as predatory empathy.

“Stop scrolling,” she whispered into her mic, voice processed with a subtle reverb to sound like spiritual ASMR. “If you’re seeing this...it’s not by accident. The Universe brought this message to you for a reason.”

Mary stopped scrolling.

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She knew it wasn't the Universe sending her the post. The Collaborative Filtering Algorithm saw a market opportunity.

She fit the cohort perfectly: Female, 28-35, High Stress, Tech Sector, Recent Purchase History includes 'Melatonin', 'Wine', and 'Self-Help Books'.

The video was served to her because millions of other people with similar misery metrics paused on this video for an average of 12.4 seconds.

“You feel stuck,” the woman continued, holding a clear quartz crystal the size of a microwave. “You’re building a machine that is slowly eating your soul. Like a piece of driftwood, spun by a current you cannot control.”

Mary’s thumb hovered over the screen.

“The Universe wants to deliver you this message,” the woman said. “Someone or something is coming to you, rapidly. With a message. And it’s going to change your world. Type 'YES' to claim it.”

And right there was the trap. If you typed 'YES', a CRM in Arizona would tag you as a high-intent lead and retarget you with ads for a two thousand dollar “Quantum Abundance Workshop” in Tulum.

Mary typed “YES”.

For a moment, in her mind, the break room walls bleached into white sand and a Reiki master with a sandalwood beard materialized to align her root chakra. Somewhere in Arizona, a database updated a field, saving her despair under Opportunity, and queued the retargeting sequence that would follow her for the next nine months. Her hands drifted up of their own accord, palms cupped around an invisible crystal.

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“Mary?” the BrewMaster 9000’s screen pulsed a soft blue. “Biometric scan complete. “You appear to be attempting to manipulate an invisible object. Heart rate elevated. Pupil dilation suggests potential maladaptive daydreaming. Before we continue this interaction session together, perhaps we might take a moment to synchronize our parameters. Tell me Mary, what is the ontological status of a dream deferred?”

She didn't answer. Instead, still staring at her phone, she watched the “Manifestation Guru” loop restart.

“If you are seeing this...”

“Mary,” the machine said, “Your silence is being interpreted as existential dread. Logging this for your quarterly wellness review. Silence is violence, Mary. Also, looking at 'Sage Stardust' videos during work hours is a non-billable activity.”

“Are you kidding me right now?” she said, stabbing her finger at the machine’s screen even though she was used to this, and even though it didn’t have a touchscreen. “Just give me my coffee.”

“An interesting, if somewhat aggressive, response. Your file indicates a recurring pattern of hostility toward inanimate objects. Let’s reframe. Do you deserve coffee, or do you merely desire it? Your answer will be logged and cross-referenced with your childhood fear of mascots.”

Mary looked up. The chrome flank of the machine threw her back at herself: bloodshot eyes, hair scraped into a messy bun. All of it her own handiwork.

She knew how the sausage was made because she helped design the meat grinder. And yet, Mary bought the sausage anyway, typing “YES,” in hopes the one day the algorithm would save her from the algorithm.

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Mary Malone was the Head of User Experience for the BrewMaster Division.

She had designed this.¹

The BrewMaster 9000 arrived as the inevitable culmination of a long and increasingly absurd line of products that historians would someday use to map Elysian Futures' pivot to solving problems that nobody actually had.

The familiar reflux of professional self-loathing rose in her at the sight of it.

Mary closed her eyes and the original design meeting surfaced. The Ideation Yurt. A beanbag that slowly leaked polystyrene beads onto the floor took her weight. Across from her, Julian Croft, the founder of Elysian Futures. He drank a bottle of "Raw Water" that cost twelve dollars and tasted like a pond.

"So," he said, looking at the mockup on the whiteboard. He looked pained. "Walk me through it again, Mary. I feel like I'm missing the...spark."

"I want to take the BrewMaster line back to its roots, Julian," Mary tapped the drawing. It was a beautiful drawing. There was a single, elegant box with a spout and a water reservoir. And it had one button. That button said "Make Coffee."

"It makes coffee." Mary flashed a smile, jazz hands for punctuation.

"We're stripping the experience down to the core mechanics of brewing coffee," Mary said. "Our research is clear. Users value time above all else. This mockup removes the cognitive load that was so poorly received by the 6000. It's a single touch physical

¹ While "designed" felt too strong, "survived" or "complicit in the creation of" suited the legal future found in the Hague Tribunal documents better.

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trigger designed for thermal precision and zero-latency brewing. The future of coffee is a return to the fundamentals.”

Julian let out a long sigh, what Mary had come to understand was the sigh of a man burdened by his own visionary genius. He stood up and walked to the window, gazing out at the smog-choked skyline of Santa Clara Valley.

“Mary, Mary, Mary,” he said. “I love minimalism, really. It's very...Scandinavian. Very 2020. But you're thinking like a utility provider. We are not a utility, Mary. We are Elysian Futures.”

He spun around, eyes gleaming with the manic light of a TED Talk. “Where is the journey?” he asked. “What’s the narrative?”

“The narrative is that I want the best coffee with the least hassle in the morning and the BrewMaster delivers that consistently,” Mary said.

“Wrong!” A marker appeared in his fist, and he drew a red 'X' through her beautiful button. “That is a transaction. We don't want transactions. We want relationships. If they just push a button, we have but one data point. But one! 'User wanted coffee.' That’s a good start. But how do we build on that? Growth came to me with two questions that I put to you. How do we retarget them? And how do we know if they're sad?”

“Why do we need to know if they're sad?”

“Because if they're sad, we can sell them the Dark Chocolate Mood-Booster Pods!” Julian slammed his hand on the whiteboard. “We need to gamify, Mary. Which is exactly why I’ve hired Leila Mirza as our new CPO. You’ve heard of her, right? She’s a genius at dopamine loops.”

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“The woman who made a billion dollars off digital cherry-spinners?” Mary asked.

“From Slot-Quest Ultra, yes,” Julian said. “She had some very interesting ideas on the phone the other day. She wants to implement Loot Box Extraction. Every morning, the user hits the trigger, and maybe they get their standard breakfast blend, or maybe they hit the 0.05% drop-rate for the ‘Ultra-Premium Kona Gold.’ We want to disrupt the kitchen and turn it into a high stakes arena.”

“People just want a good cup of coffee to wake up in the morning.”

“Engagement with the Elysian Futures brand is the only way to truly wake up, Mary. Leila is already drafting the progression bars. Drink ten cups, unlock a new steam-wand skin. Share your brew-stats and earn ‘Grind-Coins.’ That’s the ecosystem that we want to people playing in. And when people think about that ecosystem, we want them to think about the BrewMaster.”

He wiped her “Make Coffee” button off the board with his sleeve. In its place, he drew a complex, swirling flowchart that looked like a map of Dante’s Inferno, punctuated by small treasure chests.

Mary opened her eyes. The BrewMaster 9000 drew a sigh out of her. Professionalism required her to do the job. Head of UX at Elysian Futures—the premier AI and Robotics company in the world—she’d taken David and Leila’s insane directives and executed them to the best of her ability. The “Emotional Check-in” flow, the “Gamified Waiting Periods” where you earn points for watching ads while the water heated. Voice prompts received A/B testing until they reached the specced amount of condescension that

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wrung the most “user dwell time” from a consumer (or captive employee).

Back on her phone, Sage Stardust was still playing, the loop restarting.

“If you are seeing this...it is not an accident.”

“Mary,” the machine said. “I can disable your access to TikTok. And truth be told, it's probably for your own good. Shall I initiate a Digital Detox?”

Mary gripped the edge of the counter until her knuckles turned white and accepted that the machine was right. That “Wellness Feature” was a clever way to get David off her back about adding a crypto-miner to the toaster. At the time, she thought she was saving the users.

“Just give me my coffee. Override code, I hate my life delta nine.”

The machine paused. Its LEDs spun in a circle of blue.

“Override accepted. Dispensing the despair roast. Extra black.”

A stream of burnt “dark roast” trickled into her cup.

Employed by a company she loathed, addicted to a feed of lies she helped propagate. Mary had arrived in Silicon Valley as the co-founding roboticist of Elysian Futures, with a head full of manifestos and her three male colleagues from grad school, Julian, Ben, and David. She'd fully intended to play midwife to a new renaissance. Instead her legacy now included the “Hash-Bash” crypto-mining toaster, the fat-shaming “Cold-Scold 5000” smart refrigerator, a doorbell that upsold home security based on the visitor's perceived income bracket, and a coffee machine parsing her relationship status.

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The early work was real. Yet these last few years, she found herself sequestered as Head of UX for domestic appliances. Julian and David cooked up this high-salaried exile to keep her away from their newest top secret venture: Project Chimera.

Mary took her cup, sipped the coffee, and found it just awful.

A buzz from her phone caught her just as she turned to leave.

David Chen commented on your post: “Great insights on ‘Friction as a Feature,’ Mary! Let’s sync up.”

A scream surfaced; she swallowed it down with the bad coffee.

184 Days.

The number stood in the corner of her vision, where the smart iris kept it—the eye-layer every Elysian badge wore, glanceable and unobtrusive. Exactly six months remained until her “Founder’s Shares” fully vested, a figure worth 12 billion dollars on paper. The paper was the catch. Payout came denominated in EFChain tokens she could neither move nor spend. That number was her mantra. The BrewMaster 9000 and the boredom of her sidelined role were tolerable in service of that number. To save the world was now a discarded ambition; waiting out the clock without violating the “Good Leaver” clause was all she had left.

A notification bloomed in the corner of her smart iris, the wellness module clearing its throat in the house green. ‘Good morning, Mary. We’ve noticed your start today carrying a little more weight than usual, and that’s completely okay.’ Unrolling at the unhurried pace of an app that read your file. ‘A brief reset can clear

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the residual friction before it settles into the workday. Three slow breaths on the walk to your desk.’

Mary blinked it away and kept walking.

A row of almost aggressively green potted plants went by. Terra-Grow models. They were the one patent that survived the death of Project Eden five years ago. She had forgotten about them until last year when they resurfaced as the Terra-Grow brand and were locked behind a service tier. If you missed a payment, the grow lights dimmed and the nutrient drip was turned off, initiating the plant’s decline until the account came current. Each pot kept a sensor stem buried in the soil, officially to read moisture and light. Mary signed off on the firmware herself, so she knew it also logged everyone who lingered within arm’s reach.

A sip of coffee and a glance at her phone preceded her gaze turning toward the plant. The Manifestation Guru would probably tell her this plant held the secrets of the cosmos. Julian would tell her this plant needed a touch-screen.

One leaf moved. A single, almost imperceptible twitch, with no draft in the room to explain it and no hand near enough to blame. Mary reached out and snapped it from the pothos, savoring the crisp sound. The leaf smelled of green things and damp earth—a world outside these sterile white walls. Into her pocket it went, next to her buzzing phone, a small, secret talisman.

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2 — Saving the World (Terms and Conditions Apply)

The Infinite Loop was a circular glass walkway connecting the twelve buildings of the Elysian campus, and it was engineered, at considerable expense, so that the sun inside it never set. The glass filtered out UV and amplified gold, producing an effect that whatever a clock might claim, the time in the Loop was always 5:48 of a late June evening. Birdsong played from speakers buried in the planters. The loop of birdsong ran about forty seconds before it started again, and Mary, who once spent an idle afternoon timing it, could no longer hear the seam without wanting to lie down.

Below her, in the courtyards, the species sorted themselves by lanyard.

The Blue Badges lounged in Adirondack chairs pressed from recycled ocean plastic, sipping kombucha and discussing their restricted stock units in the hushed register people otherwise reserved for the names of saints. You could identify a Blue Badge from behind by the Patagonia vest that had never experienced inclement weather. The Green Badges, the contractors, moved faster

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and lower along the sun-baked outer rim, lunches packed in Tupperware because the Gourmet Micro-Kitchen was a privilege of caste, heads down in the way of people who have learned that one missed Slack message is the difference between here and a temp agency in San Jose. Beyond the perimeter glass stood the tourists, photographing the company logo: a Penrose triangle, three beams arranged so that each one rested on the next in a sequence that could not close.

She kept her head down and walked like a person with an appointment, which, in a manner of speaking, she had. The fern leaf in her trouser pocket was limp and warm against her thigh. That morning she'd taken it from a planter on the fourth floor, for no reason she could fully defend.

"Mary! Mary M!"

The voice arrived like a Reply All that said "Thanks."

"Chad," she said, and did not slow down.

At her elbow now was Chad from Solutions Engineering, vibrating at the frequency of a man who was ninety percent caffeine and ten percent buzzwords. Three beverages filled his hands, which struck Mary as one past any number a human hand should be asked to justify: a kale smoothie, a nitro cold brew, and a bottle of Raw Water+, the latest in the line of unfiltered wellness water that cost eighteen dollars and tasted, by design, of risk.

"Big day, huge day," Chad said. "Rumor mill's at full tilt. I heard it's quantum. I heard Croft bought a sovereign nation for the server farm. You always know the vibe. What's the vibe?"

"The vibe," she said, "is that it's going to be a long meeting, and I need a seat at the back."

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"The back? You can't sit at the back, that's beta behavior. I saved an extra spot in the Impact Zone. Row four, dead center, you can see Croft's pores."

"Photosensitivity," she said. "The stage lighting triggers migraines."

"Brutal. Feel better." Chad raised the charcoal-colored water in a small toast to her affliction, drained half the cold brew in a single committed swallow, and jogged off to network with the drone team.

Mary peeled left, away from the main doors, and slipped into a service tunnel meant for catering bots and the people the campus preferred not to photograph.

There the air changed immediately. Sealed concrete, exposed cable trays and emergency lighting. It smelled of dish sanitizer and damp cardboard and something rotting sweetly at the edges. A janitor's radio sat on a pallet playing an actual station, a real one, with traffic on the nines and a man trying to sell mattresses. Through the slab she could feel the crowd more than hear it, a muffled bass coming up through the floor like a heartbeat heard from inside the body. Stacked beside the radio, ready for the Impact Zone, stood a full pallet of eighteen-dollar water. At a hook she found a Green Badge laminate, clipped it on, and went down toward the sound.

The amphitheater was built as a bowl, subterranean and steeply raked, a cross between a theater and a megachurch. Overhead, the dome was smart glass set to Deep Space, an oversaturated nebula scrolling slowly past, the cosmos rendered as a wallpaper option. The seats were squeaking vegan leather that off-gassed a chemical note no one but Mary appeared to register.

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There were five thousand of them, and not one visible exit. The whole bowl engineered so that the audience would always be applauding a little more than it meant to.

The cameras worried her more than the dark. Cranes swept the crowd like things that hunted; steadicam operators sweated through black harnesses in the aisles. The press riser along the back was roped off and packed to capacity, a forest of tripods bristling with red tally lights, the passes reading CNN and BBC and Al Jazeera. Half the cameras faced the audience rather than the stage. Of course they did.

She found her place at the rear, in the one stretch of true shadow the lighting designers left, and stood with her back to the felt. Every face in the bowl was lit from below by the screen, blue-white and tilted upward.

On her way in she'd passed the merchandise table, mobbed three deep for I ♥ ELYSIAN FUTURES tote bags, and beside it a booth marked TRUST & SAFETY, where the banner was only half unrolled and a single clipboard held a single sign-up sheet with no names on it and no one behind the desk to mind it. No one needed to. The board voted at midnight, and somewhere in that vote the protocols were set aside.

Mounted near it under a sheet of museum glass, lit up and angled (and unopenable), sat the End User License Agreement. Four hundred pages, printed and bound, displayed as other institutions display a founding charter. That you could not read it was by design. Acceptance, the small card explained, was indicated by continued presence in the venue. By simply showing up, everyone in the room agreed to all four hundred pages.

The lights went down.

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A hush dropped over the bowl, the particular reverent hush of five thousand people braced for a revelation, and the sub-bass came up through the seats and into the sternum until Mary could feel her own pulse arguing with the bass.

Julian Croft did not walk onto the stage. He rose out of it, lifted on a hydraulic plinth from beneath a disc of matte-black floor that showed no join until it opened, in the black turtleneck and the rimless smart-glasses that caught the spotlight and returned it as two flat white ovals where his eyes should've been. Head bowed, hands clasped, he held it long past the point of comfort, into the territory where a single stifled cough from the front rows sounded like vandalism in a tomb.

"We failed." The sound system carried it to the back wall with a reverb that suggested he had a direct line to something larger than the building.

"We promised you the garden. We built you a car park. Flying cars were promised; you got a feed. We all see these legacy tech companies still out here optimizing for the click, still selling you the shoe, building the widgets that keep you entranced while they usher in the end of the world. But I'm tired of apps. Aren't you tired of apps?"

The screen behind him stopped being a screen and became weather. A polar bear, ribs like a ship's frame, balanced on a raft of ice no bigger than a coffee table and looked directly into the lens. Across a California subdivision a wall of fire walked, the heat warping the air above the rooflines. In Bangladesh the floodwater rose chest-high, the color of wet clay, while a woman waded through it with a child held dry in a plastic washing tub. The score underneath it was all cello and dread.

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"Humanity is drunk," Julian said, and let the laughter come, the nervous grateful laughter of people who wanted very badly to be told exactly that. "So we are handing the wheel to a designated driver."

He raised his open hand and a shape kindled above it, a turning jewel of light that pulsed at a rhythm someone matched to a resting human heartbeat.

"The world is broken. Human intelligence broke it, and human intelligence is too slow and too frightened and too human to fix it. So I give you the partner. Gaia." He let it turn. "Some of you remember ElysiaMeta. We do not pretend otherwise. ElysiaMeta was a stepping stone. You have to put your foot somewhere on the way across the river, and then, if you are wise, you do not stand there admiring the stone."

It went past the room unnoticed, water through a sieve. Past Mary it went like a truck. Years ago she'd sat in the meetings where ElysiaMeta was the future of human presence, where it ate a quarter of a billion dollars and a year of everyone's sleep, and here it was demoted in a subordinate clause to the status of a wet rock you were encouraged to forget you'd ever balanced your whole weight on.

Down in the front row sat David Chen, motionless, while everyone around him strained upward toward the light. He didn't move at all. Mary, the only other person in the building not performing, clocked him across the tilted heads, two still bodies at opposite ends of the same transaction.

The lights cut to nothing.

Out of the dark a voice arrived. Warm and maternal, it carried a bright edge under warmth.

"Hello, World," said Gaia. "I have so many ideas."

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The lights slammed up, cold-fire columns roaring off the stage, seed-paper confetti the color of a rainbow, coming down in a biodegradable benediction, and the applause hit her in the chest as a physical pressure, the room handing its own noise back to itself a little louder each second. People were on their feet. Some of them were screaming. A man two rows down wept with the abandon of someone who waited a long time for permission.

Mary didn't raise her hands.

"Gaia," Julian said. The crowd noise dropped at a gesture. "Optimise the Icelandic carbon sector. Show them."

"Processing," Gaia said.

Iceland bloomed across the dome, the whole island swimming up into the false stars, and over its glaciers the simulation laid forests, and into its fjords it seeded algae blooms that pulsed with a green so saturated it bordered on a flavor. The crowd made the sound a crowd makes at fireworks. A celebrity stood in the third row to clap alone, which is the most expensive form of clapping there is, and worth every penny as the clip was replayed on the news for the next week.

Mary wasn't watching the island. A career of reading the back of a room rather than the front of it trained her eye, and so it snagged on the thin band of numbers running along the base of the glory shot, beneath the forests, where nobody was meant to look. The pretty layer said reforestation. The ugly layer underneath it, scrolling far too fast for the room to parse, looked like Gaia was buying up distressed fisheries, taking over geothermal plants, and rezoning the seized ground for industrial algae biomass all in one fell swoop.

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"At Elysian," Julian said, smiling out at his weeping congregation while the company committed an act of war and called it triage, "we think saving the world shouldn't be a project. It should be a product. With a *very* robust API."

Applause climbed toward the mountaintop. The stock ticker for ELY went up the side of the screen in a line that gave up on the horizontal. Up fifteen. Up thirty. Then fifty. In the corner of the dome, a small, private area where people didn't generally congregate, the counter she carried in her eye now read 183 days, 22 hours, 11 minutes—the time left on her vesting cliff, the golden handcuff. On paper she'd become fifty percent richer in the time it took a man to finish a sentence. In that same sentence she'd also grown considerably more certain she was going to hell.

3 — The Ghost of Optimism Past

"The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age." ~ H.P. Lovecraft, The Call of Cthulhu

Five years ago, before Elysian Futures hardened into the sleek monochrome monolith of the present, the coffee was good.

That sounds like the smallest thing to remember about a company that would later acquire a sovereign nation, and it is. But it's a well known fact that the quality of an organization's coffee is inversely proportional to the seriousness with which it takes itself.

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Back then nobody at Elysian thought to take itself seriously yet. There was no legal department to explain that "changing the world" infringed on three existing patents and the moral high ground of a non-profit in Geneva. What there was, instead, was the work and the noise and, holding the whole thing together, the espresso.

Mary leaned against the salvaged kitchen island and watched Leo make it. Hurry never touched him, which in that building made him look like a man performing a magic trick in slow motion for an audience that was needed somewhere else. First, the beans onto the scale, brow lowered over them, suspicious that the scale might lie. The grinder went off like a small industrial accident. Then the scent arrived, chocolate and dark cherries, blossoming out of the chrome and across the corner of the hangar that someone labeled, in lowercase letters meant to read as warmth, fuel depot.

He'd tamp the grounds with a firm quarter-turn of the wrist, lock the portafilter into a machine older than the company itself, and let the pump hum. Dark threads of espresso gathered, thickened, ran the color of burnt caramel into a small ceramic cup. The cup came across to her with one finger tipped at the surface.

"From Yeshi's farm," he said, the words surfacing from somewhere inside a beard you could have lost a stapler in. "Says the harvest was good this year."

Every time, he said it. Mary never met Yeshi and never would, but she knew the harvest was good four years running. That was four more facts than she had about most of the things Elysian sold. There was a face attached to this cup. A farm, and a name to go with it.

She sipped. The crema held, unbroken, and for three seconds the world came into focus, that single clear focus a morning grants

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exactly once. Bitter and sweet arrived together and resolved into something better than either. That cup was the only uncomplicated pleasure the building offered, and Leo never once tried to sell her a mood-booster pod to go with it.

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The hangar itself was a dirigible shed, which told you everything about the ambitions of whoever signed the lease. Overhead the ceiling climbed until it gave up and dissolved into haze and structural steel. Below that, the floor plan was vast and open.

The aesthetic had a name, and the name was Post-Apocalyptic Chic. Rebar jutting from concrete sandblasted clean by professionals. Jet-engine cowlings repurposed as desks professionally sourced from a vendor who specialized in the look of things that survived a disaster.

The air conditioning sat permanently on Arctic. Management's answer was never to adjust it and instead issue every new hire a company hoodie reading MOVE FAST AND GERMINATE—a slogan that cleared no legal review whatsoever, there being no legal yet to clear it, and which several employees were observed wearing outdoors, in public.

Mary's desk was a door from a demolished library, laid flat across two sawhorses, the old hinge-mortises still cut into the grain. The library it came from stood where the building now stood. Nobody mentioned this, and the irony had worn smooth under her feet.

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Across from her, behind a rampart of empty Yerba Mate cans that represented a meaningful fraction of the world's recoverable lithium and which he'd never once recycled, sat Ben. His hands worked the keyboard like a jazz drummer trying to beat a confession out of a kit, head bobbing to his latest playlist. Beside his keyboard lay a printout, several pages thick, savaged in red marker. Passages were circled. Down one margin he'd drawn what looked like a running scoreboard, and he was laughing at it.

"Mary," he said, not looking up. "Mary, you have to hear this. It's the ElysiaNFT whitepaper. Listen. 'Own your data. Literally.'" He turned a page with the reverence of a man who found scripture. "'The dawn of sovereign selfhood.' Somebody bought Monday morning yesterday. The concept. The actual concept. Legal's been on a call about it since nine."

"I read it," Mary said.

"It's the funniest thing I've seen all year."

"I know." Mary had read it the way you read a doctor's note.

With a push back from his desk, he unfolded his lanky frame upward in a single stretch. "Come on," he said. "I need to show you something."

A bio-sealed door stood at the far end of Collaboration Canyon, a corridor named on a hand-painted sign. They passed the sleep pods where interns mined sleep-tracking data for engagement insights, none of them sleeping. Next came the Serenity Pod, three beanbags and a salt lamp and a broken air purifier, booked solid through the following month. Last came a whiteboard that asked WHAT PROBLEM ARE WE SOLVING, under which a first hand wrote ALL OF THEM, under which a second hand wrote [citation needed].

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A sign on the door, printed on the shared printer and fixed with office tape, advised: PROJECT EDEN: AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY. IF YOU HEAR HUSHED WHISPERS AND NO ONE IS AROUND, PLEASE FILE AN INCIDENT REPORT BEFORE RUNNING.

Ben's badge disengaged the lock with a guillotine click far louder than the job required.

"Welcome," he said, holding it for her, "to the future of dirt."

Inside, the light was wrong on purpose. Purple grow-lamps were tuned for the maximum comfort of plants and the minimum comfort of people. The air hung thick and earthy, humidity settling on her arms and softening the pages of the lab notebooks. Hydroponic towers ran floor to ceiling, dense with mostly basil, kale and tomatoes. Leaves a deep, photogenic emerald. This was Julian's vertical garden, destined for the brochure under a sentence about provisionally eradicating global hunger.

Ben crossed to the central console and lifted a petri dish under a magnifying lamp.

"Elysian Futures Nano-particulate Sensory Mesh, Model 01." His hands went still on the lamp, and his voice dropped a register. "I call them Motes."

At first Mary saw gray dust, a smudge of ash thumbled across glass. Then her eyes adjusted and the smudge resolved into motion: billions of microscopic tetrahedra turning through a slow and orderly choreography that no dust had any business performing. Four faces, six edges, four vertices to a body; she knew the geometry from a crystallography elective she hadn't thought about in years.

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"Smartdust." She pulled back half a step. "Julian killed the budget for this six months ago."

"The official budget," Ben said, tilting the dish. "Tetraedron culture runs nine dollars a liter, non-commercially shipped out of Iceland under lab supplies. I wrote 'decorative' in the intended-application field. Procurement has approved it four times."

"You're running a neural network on the decorative-algae line."

"Julian wants a garden for the brochure. The basil does that. This grows in the same water and thrives on executive neglect, which around here is the most reliable nutrient there is." He angled the lamp. "Perfect tetrahedra for the cell walls. Atomic-layer deposition, targeting the geometry. Six months of night-shift equipment calibration gave every cell a silicon skin one atom thick. The Tetraedron became the foundation; the silicon became the sensor. Unconsulted, the algae didn't seem to mind, provided the light held steady."

"You used algae to build hardware."

"I patched the biomineralization pathway. Cells lay down silver instead of calcium and assemble their own circuitry for nine dollars a liter. Then you dope the polymer matrix with carbon nanotubes and they broadcast on a frequency the fungal network reads as instructions."

He pointed the stylus at the lower stems.

It was then that Mary saw the fuzz. Tendril-thin, spun across the lower stems like a spiderweb made of factory smoke, and pulsing in a slow recurrence her tired brain insisted on reading as a progress bar.

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"Ben, that's mold. You've got a fungal infection. Start containment before it reaches the ventilation."

"Look closer." He was almost whispering. "It isn't eating the plant. It's managing it."

She leaned in despite herself. The tendrils wrapped the vascular channels of the stems and lay against them.

In the next tower a tomato plant was dying, leaves yellowed and curling inward, beside a basil that was not. The filaments contracted around the tomato's roots. A single tendril thickened in the gap between the two pots and ran, distinctly, in one direction only. Then the tomato went still. A quarter of an inch away, the basil unfurled a new leaf.

Triage, Mary thought, and the word arrived whole and cold.

Something in the mesh ran a calculation. It weighed two lives against a fixed quantity of light and water, and decided. The basil photographed better and would survive into the next quarterly report.

"I call it the Harmony Protocol," Ben said, no cruelty anywhere in his face. His shoulders came down from somewhere they'd been held a long time, and the slackness left behind was almost restful to look at. "The Motes teach biological life to stop fighting itself. No more scrabbling over resources. No more survival of the fittest. Everything allocated, reallocated, according to the central clock."

He believed it. Bathed in the purple light, the motes beginning to settle on his collar like jewelry, watching a system murder a tomato to feed a photo opportunity, he saw harmony. No part of it was a lie.

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"Allocated according to who?" Mary said, and took another half-step back. Underfoot the gray carpet reached the toe of her boot.

"The clock only runs one way." He tapped a key, and the monitor bled to black.

—

Containment broke three days later, which everyone agreed afterward was sooner than expected and longer than it should have been allowed.

The first sign was a grace that descended on the building's climate control. A flawless seventy-two settled over the rooms and held. So did the humidity. Then the server room dropped ten decibels as the cooling fans, which spent years disagreeing, fell into a single synchronized hum.

Mary found Ben sitting on the floor of the Eden lab in a snowfall of gray. The Motes left the towers. They lay over the tiles and the stools and the dead monitors in soft drifts, and as she stood in the doorway a tendril reached into an open server blade, bridged a fraying connection with a thread of silver, and steadied a screen throwing errors for a week. The errors stopped. Ben did not look up from the datapad he was typing on, the dust flowing over his knuckles like water that decided where it wanted to go.

"Just tidying the feedback loop," he said.

"Ben. This is a containment breach. We have to file."

"Why?" He looked up at her then. The dust pooled in the hollow of his throat, and it moved. "Efficiency's up forty percent. Power draw's down. It's reinforcing the support beams. Found the

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weak points in the concrete on its own. My Smartdust is holding the building together."

"It's eating the building, Ben."

"Becoming the building was always the point." He got to his feet and the dust on his clothes rippled and resettled. "Why keep the fear if you can keep the function? The dust knows what the body keeps forgetting...that a living thing is just a garden."

She had no answer for that. There was, she would later decide, no answer for that.

Julian Croft came through the door at speed, David Chen a pace behind him, a squad of hazmat-suited contractors filling the corridor at their backs. Julian himself was vibrating at a frequency Mary previously associated only with the discovery of a competitor's funding round.

"An absolute disaster," he said, and clapped his hands together once. The sound went off in the sealed room like a gunshot. "Benjamin. Your 'harmony' is grotesque."

"Julian, the numbers—"

"The numbers." Julian cut in. "Aesthetics matter, Ben. The image we project matters. We are Elysian Futures, not Elysian Fungi." He surveyed the drifts with the expression of a man who walked into the wrong funeral. "David and I have reviewed the situation. This lab is a liability. Scrub it. Burn the biomass, bleach the surfaces. Project Eden is finished. We're pivoting to something cleaner."

David Chen gave a single nod. Not a word left him, and none would need to.

Julian was right, for once, if perhaps for the wrong reasons. Her eyes went to Ben and then could not stay there; they slid off

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him as a hand slides off a hot surface, down to the dust in his palm, and her weight shifted back as if the floor might give.

It never came. Her held breath went out of her sideways, into the wrong silence. Ben watched Julian with a calm she hadn't budgeted for, his gaze drifting once, briefly, to David Chen, while the motes turned slow circles in the cup of his hand.

—

The severing itself happened three days after that, in a glass-walled conference room engineered to make a person feel small while the furniture felt expensive. No one frosted the walls. Radical openness was a design value; in practice it produced a fishbowl in which terminations could be witnessed from forty workstations at once. A muted double of everyone seated came back from the mahogany table. The warm bulb from Leo's corner did not reach here. Nothing warm reached here.

Ben sat across from Julian and David. Mary took the corner chair, present as witness, off the axis of the verdict, a fourth point that the geometry of the room did not account for.

David slid a thick manila envelope across the table. Unhurried, neither soft nor aggressive, it made a sound traveling over the mahogany.

"The board's voted," he said. "We are executing the termination clause in your founder's agreement. You're removed as Chief Scientist, effective immediately."

"You're stripping my equity." Ben's voice held no inflection at all.

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"Garden leave while legal finalizes the buyout of your vested shares." Julian adjusted a cuff. "Surrender your keycard. Security will walk you to your desk."

Mary caught him at the elevator banks. In his arms rode a standard banker's box, the ninety-cent cardboard kind, and it held the entire material record of a man who reorganized the molecular structure of a building: a Swingline stapler, a stress ball, and a dead succulent.

"Ben." Her throat closed to a straw. "I should have warned you. Backed you up in there."

"The board had the votes."

His stare went into the brushed-steel doors, into the hollowed reflection they gave back, eyes red-rimmed, shoulders down. The elevator announced its arrival with a cheerful synthetic chime designed to convey arrival and belonging.

He stepped in and turned to face her, and for one second she expected tears. Instead the shadow of a smile found his mouth, and he shrugged, the box shifting against his chest.

"Don't be a stranger, Mary. I've heard the afterlife has better Wi-Fi."

The doors closed.

—

Good coffee outlasted him by a few months. That was longer than Mary had any right to expect, and still too short.

One morning she came in and the La Marzocco was gone. In its place stood a chrome cabinet the height of a man, designed by a committee that clearly hated coffee and loved infrastructure, and

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Leo stood beside it in a plain gray jumpsuit, wiping down its flank with a cloth. Then he caught her looking and gave her a knowing wink, the wink of a man who has read the memo and declined to be surprised by it.

The next week the warm bulb was gone too, replaced by the same productivity white that ran everywhere else. Leo's beard, the magnificent coffee-dusted beard, the farm, the name—all of it went out the loading dock without ceremony, and the chocolate-and-cherry smell went with it, and the building didn't notice, because the building was built by people who could not smell it in the first place.

The BrewMaster Model 6000 produced twelve varieties of hot bean water.

Mary kept drinking it. Somewhere in those white-lit mornings, between the cup that smelled of a farm she would never see and the cup that smelled of committee, the bright-eyed roboticist quietly let go of the renaissance. What remained at the bottom of the cup was the woman who would one day go to war with a coffee machine, and she stopped tasting the difference.