

# Petra and Envy

## The Normal Monitor with a Strange Message

It was a normal monitor. Observing the sun from the Solar Orbiter's (a satellite launched at Cape Canaveral Air Force Station in Florida on February fifth) point of view. It was left unattended, for the employees of NASA were overly occupied like the special ones that are about to send a "strange" message to the Solar Orbiter's monitor. It had to be the one with the most basic mission: orbiting Earth's essential source of light. That one perfectly ordinary, normal monitor received a message in English, or was it not in English? It had the exact same words, but it had no punctuations, spaces, indents or anything that would make it "grammatically correct" or what the normal ones called, "understandable." It only had capitals for proper nouns and for the start of each "sentence."

A NASA trainee stumbled clumsily into the room of satellite monitors, and he was followed closely by what seemed a ghost. The female ghost wore a long, tight and black pencil skirt and a pair of unattractive flats. Her pale, gray hair was yanked tightly back into a bun, and her pure white blouse reflected her inhuman color, but it was her personality that was cold. The ghost was heartless. That was likely the most rational reason for her endless frowns and constant criticism *she* believed that she had generously gifted the nervous trainee in a bright red tie. It was also the only reason that most people remembered she was still alive, always creeping on coworkers and taking charge of their trivial actions.

"Use your feet correctly, boy!" she demanded impatiently. "I'll be older than dirt soon, and I'm walking sufficiently."

The timid man gulped and pleaded, "I apologize, Mrs. Johnson, but everyone makes mistakes!"

"LESS, AT LEAST!" she commented, raising her voice.

Mrs. Johnson was no doubt a harsh trainer, but she wasn't rude. She let others finish their sentences which she still thought were mundane and worthy of interruption. Nigel, the trainee, finally situated himself in front of the Solar Orbiter's monitor.

"Now, access the Solar Orbiter's camera with the password I gave you this morning," Johnson began as she stepped forward to insure his progress as a future employee.

At that, Nigel immediately typed in the complicated password with his surprisingly flawless memory but paused midway. The screen went dark, and the strange message that the special ones had just sent appeared on the black mirror:

Greetings humans we are from a planet named Petra or what you might call Kepler-186f We just like the men and women on Earth conduct many spacial expeditions and we have come to the conclusion that we are not the only form of life in the entire universe We would like to visit your planet and study how life is able to support itself in your home if you might allow us to send 30 of our scientists and common citizens alike here exactly a month from today at 3:30 PM so that we may find out if you are this a habitable place in case of emergency In return we will provide shelter back at Petra if Earth happen to be in jeopardy at any time We hope you accept the exchange and have a great day Sincerely the astronauts and scientists of the Petran Association of Sciences and Mathematics PASM

Nigel gaped at this, but Mrs. Johnson guffawed for a minute straight.

"What kind of joke is this?!" she boomed shakily through happy tears. "I haven't seen a joke like this in years ..." her voice trailed away as Nigel pointed out the information files on a desk nearby.

NASA knew there was a possibility of life on Kepler-186f, but they hadn't proved it yet. The NASA trainer flipped through and stopped at a photo which they had finally managed to take of the planet. She stuck her pointy nose deep into the file. Then it occurred to her: there was a distinct living figure going about their day in the photo, but nobody had noticed it!

Nigel popped up right behind her. She turned to him, and Nigel searched the photo as thoroughly as she did. Then he realized the spectacular.

"There's life on Kepler-186f ..." they claimed in synchronization.

### "Spread the Word!"

"Spread the word!" the trainer exclaimed.

The trainee followed her command with a question: "But who will believe us, Ma'am?"

"Don't be silly. You can show them the photo, can you? I promise I'll have the message translated in no time. After all, it's just English with out the spaces and punctuation marks."

### The Memorable Day: March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Crowds of the normal ones appeared. There were many types of them: space fans, guest spectators from all over the world, political members, news reporters, camera men, journalists, celebrities, and of course, the wonderful employees of NASA themselves. They cheered and cheered as a news reporter interviewed a member of NASA from California.

"Well," the Californian NASA member began thoughtfully, "I once stated that other planets with similar

conditions to Earth are where our search for any unrevealed forms of life usually commences. I always had a glimmer of hope for the existence of living organisms on Kepler-186f, or Petra which is what these 'aliens' call their planet," she giggled. "They probably titled it this because of the rocky geography on their planet and little did we know, there was actually life on there. Furthermore, we have assessed a theory that deals with the message they sent us a month ago. NASA believes that their minds have what we call, 'century-later human intelligence.' Petrans probably have brains around ten times quicker and more intellectually capable than our's. That's most likely why they are adepts at interpreting words that are all stuck together, their minds decipher and process language patterns much faster. We will collect more research for this theory once our 30 Petran visitors make a safe landing."

"Thank you so much for your time, Mrs. Quintana. Again, I'm Jim Kelly from Florida Weekly News, and we'll be right back after this for the landing of the Petrans."



The crowd danced on their feet like raindrops pounding on a window on a sleepless, stormy night, but their excitement only increased when they spotted a fiery dot in the sky: the Petran spaceship. The colossal spaceship was lined with indigo stripes that had the acronym, *P.A.S.M.*, printed on them. The fuel that produced the rocket's blaze seemed much more powerful and much more energy-preserving. The spectators suddenly fell silent as the Petran spaceship slowed to a stop and hovered above the platform.



20 peeked out the window of the spaceship and gazed at the platform as if it were a warm welcome to an unfamiliar place. He smiled at the excited people, for no six-year-old other than

his friend, 38 who was standing next to him, would be stepping foot on to a whole new planet. For now, 20 dreamed that eventually all his relatives would dwell on Earth and dreamed he would be able to play with the same neighbors on a familiar sunny weekend. The desire for a feeling déjà vu grew heavy for him. The spaceship landed softly on the platform, and 20's father, 109, stepped out first, placing his hands on his hips as he grinned and waved at the applauding and cheering viewers. He was handed a microphone while his wife, 330, touched his shoulder and gave him a nod of approval.

109, captain of the mission, inhaled deeply and projected, "Greetings and good afternoon people of Earth. I am so honored to be face to face with some of the most sophisticated and self-sufficient forms of life in the universe!"

The delirious gathering of people screamed and howled with excitement, and Donald Trump stepped on to the platform and shook 109's hand.

President Trump's carefully planned speech commenced: "As you might know, our new friend here comes from the planet, Kepler-186f, and scientists proposed a theory stating that there was possible life on there. We really owe it to these brilliant minds who came up with this idea. However, there is one twist: NASA claims that the average Petran brain capacity is the same as our's, but seems to contain ten times the information than the average human in one 'fold' of the brain. Now sir, I don't intend to put you on the spot but may you demonstrate an example of this?"

"No problem," 109 replied as he fished for a pen and notepad.

As he took the objects out, he examined a sign to the far right that explained the

Petrans and the reason for this event. He processed the patterns visible in the grammar of the passage and asked a member from the crowd to provide a few sentences for him to write down, and with the exact grammar and spelling rules utilized in a language that he definitely did not fully understand was able to write:

*Hello, and my name is 109, and I am so glad to be with you all today. I hope for many of my people to experience such a momentous event. Thirty of us will be staying here under the terms and conditions you have given us.*

The crowd stared, amazed at what had just happened. 109 was able to decipher the patterns of English and interpret the spelling it used for certain sounds, but he never was taught to write the way the normal ones did. He also stated that adults and children from the mysterious planet were all able to complete such a task, wowing the viewers even more.

## Ten Years Later

Sixteen-year-old Alex Jay headed for his desk in classroom 1B at the Thomas Anderson Private School; he was already pursuing a bachelor degree and was a teaching assistant for the students' favorite chemistry teacher Mrs. Emmy Stonewall. Alex remembered the time when his name was 20 and how he met the profound Dr. Alexander Jason and his daughter Sabrina. They were such an amazing family, Dr. Jason's wife, Ann, as well. They ended up being the donor for Alex's family's last name, and with that the story of the Jay family began.

Sabrina was in one of the classes Alex assisted in, and she would always take the back seat so it would be more convenient for her to request any advice from him that she needed, especially when Mrs. Stonewall was busy with her other classmates. Alex knew deep down

that wasn't the only reason why she would rush to class just to secure her usual spot: she seemed to admire him quite a bit and listened to everything he said. Personally, he was aware that Sabrina was a very capable teenager, unlike the popular students who always thought they were better than the genius kids or the friendly but creepy goths or anyone else at the school. Most of the staff and faculty disliked the popular kids because they would always find trouble to stir up among the students, and that started many arguments between close friends which the teachers made the effort to subside.

A decade after the Petran spaceship landing, humans collaborated with their other-worldly colleagues with sophisticated minds to innovate and renovate various inventions which boosted them to complete the work that would have required over a century to successfully establish. Most of Earth's pollution was eliminated with the implementation of a newly generated self-preserving engine fuel. Modern micro-surgeries were established for transgender citizens so that they could appear and sound the gender they genuinely believed they were. Miniature satellites became implanted into the walls of homes to help televisions and devices around the world produce a less harmful blue light, so workers and students could both safely use screens right before bedtime, and fellow citizens could enjoy late-night movies without causing much eye or brain damage.

Alex felt so alive on Earth with all his new friends, and he was able to call some of his relatives who were still on Petra, but a thousand of such beings which he complained were being called, "aliens," too often were spread among the surface of the blue planet, and many of them were the people he had longed to visit for almost ten years. Alex believed he was accepted until a normal one betrayed the specials, and the entire world plunged into chaos.

## The Missing Ones

The conflict arose with a girl. A Petran girl attending elementary school and hoping to become a scientist when she reached adulthood. It had to be that type of person: a vulnerable child, a special one, someone who a group of suspicious strangers could and *would* target. It had to be a naive second grader just enjoying the sight of a glistening moon during her family's camping trip. That one Petran resident who poked her head out of her tent at the moment she "needed" to be tranquilized and taken to a lab for some "tests" or what the villainous ones referred to as, "experiments."

Alex lay on the couch with a bowl of cereal in disbelief at what he saw on the news. The police suspected a kidnapper that had brought some sort of tranquilizer, for there was no sign of force. There were only signs of some limp shape being dragged across the damp soil of the nature reserve and some hints of a peculiar green substance.



"That sounds horrible," Sabrina commented.

"I know, right?" Alex had told her of the event.

They were having a picnic together, and Sabrina was wearing hot pink lipstick and bold mascara which seemed a little unnatural since she usually despised make up and the way it clung stickily to her skin. Her long red hair fell neatly on to her bare shoulders in pretty curls. That was when Alex noticed he paid much attention to the way *he* looked too. Sabrina picked an inconspicuous leaf from his dark brown hair, and they fell silent, unsure of what to prattle about in their usual manner.



Nothing cheery after that occurred: around 50 more Petrans went missing, including Alex's mother, and a lot of the popular girls at school seemed to be mourning his loss, and Alex received invitations to all these wild parties which he never accepted, but as much as he tried, Sabrina wasn't satisfied with the fact that he was becoming so favorable, and she raced to class all the same but to claim a seat at the very front instead. She also waited patiently for Mrs. Stonewall to answer her questions. Advanced chemistry was complex and confusing, so that was the point of Alex being around in the first place, but many people other than Sabrina came to his desk.

However, something he heard from the students he had just begun to hang out with really struck him: Dr. Alexander Jason had been leaving his home early and returning unbearably late with questionable stains on his normally neat lab coat. They believed that Sabrina's father might be the culprit of the missing Petran cases, and he was experimenting on them. Unfortunately, some aspects of it appeared true. For one, Dr. Jason did not answer many of the Jays' calls, and his wife sounded strange when Alex's mother, Marla Jay (330) was chatting with her before she disappeared. Alex's mind was in turmoil about all these possibly kidnapped Petrans, and he feared him, or a second person from his family would be next. He decided to take the huge risk of mentioning this to his long-time childhood friend from Earth.

"Hey," he called to Sabrina as he left his part-time shift.

"Hi," she replied dully.

"I was wondering, uh ..." Alex wrung his hands. "I need to talk to you about something important. I recall somebody once mentioned your father seems to be away from home a lot lately, and I, um, think—"

She slammed her locker door, stunning Alex. “I don’t need to be pestered about any of this! Now the cool kids think my dad has been capturing and doing experiments on your group of aliens!”

She violently pushed Alex against the lockers and stormed away. Alex had never witnessed Sabrina reacting so furiously, and *she* was the person who attempted to get even with bullies who called Alex that stereotypical name.

Alex chased after her, and she screamed, “Stop following me!”

“Sabrina please, we can work—” Sabrina turned with a subtle expression on her face, but Alex could tell she was still angry at him.

She sighed and said, “You no what? Let’s make a deal. My father told me he would be visiting *your* father today, and a couple of his coworkers wanted to meet the Petrans for themselves too. So, if we come to your house and your dad is still at home and very much alive with my dad and his colleagues, you have to apologize for ditching me and spreading rumors about me and my family.” Sabrina smiled craftily. Alex gulped, for he already knew that he was being idiotic and would lose the bet and get scolded once again by the more frightful side of his friend.

“And the Winner of the Bet is ...”

Alex and Sabrina jogged to his house. Sabrina was giggling the entire way, hopeful that she would win Alex, and somebody who should have been ten times smarter than her would be outwitted by Sabrina. Her giggles turned into laughs and her laughs into cackles. They finally reached Alex’s home, and he trembled vigorously as he unlocked the door and turned the knob.

“And the winner of the bet is ...” began Sabrina. Alex swung open the door to find puddles of eerie green liquid on the floors and walls and shattered dishes from a ferocious outbreak during a meal.

## The Guilty Ones

Sabrina gasped, and Alex’s lips trembled. She whimpered and grasped his hand tightly.

“No. This can’t be happening.” Alex freed his hand and sprinted into every room, opened every closet, took every flight of stairs. After five minutes of searching relentlessly, he slouched back downstairs and spotted a tranquilizer bullet on the ground.

“It has to be someone else. Your dad wouldn’t use such a weapon on people like me.”

“He would. He’s the only one with that model. He invented and built it but never sold it to anyone. It’s him,” Sabrina stated blankly.

She began to sob, and Alex sat next to where she fell and put his strong arm around her. Her teardrops landed on his T-shirt. He buried his face in her hair, but he did not cry. He had to stay strong and find a way to retrieve all the abducted Petrans. He lifted his head, and Sabrina gazed up at him with longing, puffy eyes.

Alex stroked her cheek and mumbled, “My parents probably didn’t reach the phone, otherwise, the police would be here by now, and the kidnappers didn’t set off any alarms. They were let in ...”

She nodded vigorously and pleaded, “Please, I didn’t know. I’m sorry.” She inhaled sharply. “I have to set things right,” she panted. “I’m gonna call the police and bring them

with me to his concealed laboratory, and we will persuade him to free them, even if he has to turn himself in for that to occur.”

## The Imposters

“Alright kids, my name is Officer D. Higgins,” greeted a police officer. “We’ve analyzed the crime scene, and the fingerprints of the culprits match James Coony, Hilda Manning and their boss Dr. Alexander Jason.” There was a knock on the door, and the sweet voice of a woman called from the other side.

“Come in,” said the police officer.

“Hello,” the woman spoke as she stepped through the doorway into the windowless, cement-walled room that was about to become a crime scene.

“This is our new interrogator, Joyce Patterson, and she will be asking a few questions about what *you* saw at the crime scene. Make sure you answer her questions honestly and to the best of your ability.” The officer headed for the opaque glass door.

“Oh wait, before you go, Dave,” the woman called.

“Yes, Ms. Patterson?”

“I believe ...you have interfered with too much of this situation.”

“Actually Ma’am, I have the right to speak to the children before you do. It is against protocol if I don’t.”

“Of course! But you misunderstood what I’m referring to.” Joyce Patterson touched her fingertips to the pocket of her seamless blue skirt. “I’m so sorry, Dave, but I must do what our leader orders us to.”

Dave swiftly reached for his gun, but the imposter was swifter and brandished her weapon and shot the innocent officer in the head with extraordinary accuracy. He collapsed, face down on the bare floor.

“You’re Hilda Manning,” Sabrina gasped.

The murderous woman turned and faced them with an astonishingly proud simper on her face. “Ya think?” she inquired. “Well, you two idiots have certainly gotten yourselves into serious trouble. One was ignorant enough to think dads don’t lie to their daughters, and the other was too paranoid about his family’s predicament.”

Hilda Manning noticed the heavy metal table Alex and Sabrina were sat behind. They began to stand up and sprint for the door, but she kicked the table over, and it trapped them under its immense weight. As they laid on their backs, petrified, Manning bent over the side and pointed her deadly gun at their foreheads.

“You’ll be long dead before Dr. Jason completes his experiments,” she sneered.

“Wouldn’t it be nice for a human to have a brain equally powerful compared to a Petran’s? Now, say, ‘goodbye,’ to the world and people you love.”

At that moment Alex discovered a glass shard on the ground and used it to reflect the light from a slight crack in the ceiling at the perfect angle on to the smoke detector in the room. The fire alarm rang instantly, and the sprinklers were activated, drenching Hilda Manning in freezing cold water and blinding her, giving Alex and Sabrina the ideal moment to promptly lift the table off themselves and use it as a shield from the sprinklers. When Hilda finally recollected her thoughts, the duo hurled the table at her head, knocking her out almost entirely.

Alex tightly grabbed his companion's hand and guided her speedily through the corridors of the police station like a bullet gliding seamlessly through the air towards its target. Heavily armed men charged after them, machine guns locked and loaded. *They did something to the police*, Alex thought to himself. *Otherwise, how else is there no one here to help defend us.*

Alex stopped abruptly in front of a room that would have been as blank and cave-like as the interrogation room if it were not filled with stunning grenades, bullet proof human and dog vests, throwing knives, Glock pistols and M4 Carbines. Dr. Jason's followers began to fire at them, and Alex shoved Sabrina into the room and followed her.

"What're we doing in here?" she gasped. "You don't know how to shoot a gun!"

"The grenades." Alex strode over to the right wall and clasped one grenade in a firm grip off the wall and pulled its trigger. He opened the door and chucked it at Sabrina's father's guards, and it exploded in their faces, their eyes bubbling from the heat, and their skin blistering from the mountainous, brightly colored flame.

The Petran teenager tugged at Sabrina once again as they hurried through the last hallway, straight for the exit. Hilda Manning had awoken from being knocked out, and she appeared around the corner, limping with a fearsome expression on her chestnut, bruised and angular face. Blood dripped down the sides of her head from the attack, but she stopped limping when she came across the wall of fire caused by the grenade Alex had utilized. She cried in anguish and resentment, for she could not enter the next hallway or be able to aim effectively with the fire in her way, and the sprinklers did not manage to extinguish it. Sabrina and Alex stumbled out of the police station and collapsed on to a patch of grass nearby. They

stared into each other's watery eyes, exhausted and gulping air. He smiled at her, and she chuckled softly and began to cry.

"I'm sorry, but I've seen so many horrifying things today," she sobbed as she brushed sweat, blood, dust and tears off Alex's face.

He stroked her delicate fingers and whispered, "Me too." With that she embraced him tightly.

"Thank you. You saved my life today," she said, her voice muffled by his shirt.

"Psst! Alex! Sabrina!" a rasping voice came from behind a bush. It was his loyal and trustworthy friend, 38, who peeked his head out.

## The Number

38 never believed in switching out his name. He was taught to stay close to his authentic identity, and he felt like changing his name would be trying to seem like everyone else, not that he didn't support 20 in replacing his name with "Alex." One thing he found uneasy though was that something about Alex's personality had changed: his friend seemed to avoid him, and even though it was just a slight feeling, he knew, from prior experience, that it was true. 38 could tell that Alex didn't exactly enjoy being friends with a number, but 38 considered himself "the number," and he recognized that deep down he was an imperative part of Alex's life, especially in the dire situation they were in right now.

38 called back to his fellow companions, saying, "We're almost at my place where I will explain everything." Alex nodded. 38 took one more glance at the duo, and he hid his horror: they were drenched in blood, and their faces were incredibly pale, so pale it reminded

him of the NASA worker and trainer, Mrs. Johnson, who he met after he stepped foot on to Earth.

They arrived at his house, and he held the door for his guests. 38 quickly shut the door and locked it before Alex and Sabrina could take in their surroundings, and Alex knew what 38 was so afraid of. Alex turned to see a plump woman in a chef's apron and a casual T-shirt dress.

"Hello, Alex and Sabrina! It's so nice to see you two," the woman cried out emotionally.

"Long time no see, Ms. 40!" Alex exclaimed as he hugged the petit lady. "I'm so sorry about the divorce. I hope everything's doing okay."

"Yeah, how are you?" Sabrina asked.

"Oh, don't worry, sweets. I'm doing simply fine!" she chuckled. "Let's get you poor kids some rest and clean clothes."



Alex, Sabrina, 38, and his mother silently sat at the lovely dinner table of finely sanded wood with a dazzling chandelier hanging from the ceiling as a source of light. Alex and Sabrina gobbled up their food within minutes, washing it down with a fresh glass of water, starving and thirsty from their endless chase to find the culprit behind the kidnapped Petrans. 38 and Ms. 40 finished almost an hour after they had.

"Here," began 38, "I'll take you upstairs ...to talk."

Alex and Sabrina nodded as they started to climb the stairs with much energy from their hearty meal. 38 trailed behind them as they entered the second room on their left: the laundry room. He tilted his head up to get the attic door into his vision, and he pulled down at the plastic circle attached to the end of a dangling string and opened the latch which let down a



dusty and creaky flight of steep wooden stairs. They slowly and gently climbed the stairs and heaved themselves up into the attic, but surprisingly Alex and Sabrina were greeted with a spotless floor made of white tile and a concrete ceiling with a lightbulb that was dying to watch them from above like an eye. 38 reached his arm to his right and flicked a switch, and the dim light shone on Sabrina's head, for she was standing right in the center where the lightbulb was inserted into the ceiling.

38 laid three pillows in a somewhat triangular shape on to the floor and sat down, patting the pillows beside him to draw the attention of Alex and Sabrina to himself. His friends slumped on to the pillow seats on each side of him. He narrowed his eyes slightly and straightened his posture, automatically intensifying their surroundings and bringing a great seriousness to the conversation.

"There's no use traveling on foot to stop them," declared 38. "You see, for my internship, a few years ago, I contributed to Dr. Alexander Jason and his company's plan to build a highly advanced VR system, and because of my help, they gave me a gift: free Virtual Reality earpieces and eyepieces, one for each member of my family. This was before my dad left," he said softly as his eyes saddened. "Back to the point, however, it allows you to travel to places without physically moving. Only in a sense you will be walking, running or whatever. The Virtual Reality system is built into a global software, so all you must do is attach the ear and eyepiece. Then you will—"

"Hey, kids?" Ms. 40 flipped open the attic's entrance. "You seem too busy to shower, but Alex and Sabrina can you clean yourselves off real quick with these towels I wet for you? Don't worry, they're warm." She tossed the towels to them.

“Thank you, Ms. 40,” Sabrina said.

“Thank you,” Alex followed.

40 put on a relenting smile and closed the attic door.

“Then you will be transported to an entirely blank room until you state the desired location you want to set your teleportation coordinates to,” 38 continued. “This way, we can sneak in entirely undetected. Well, as long as we are careful.”

“Then we can save the kidnapped Petrans?” Alex inquired.

“Exactly.”

Alex and Sabrina finished wiping themselves and were each given an ear and eyepiece by 38. The trio slipped them on, their hearts beating rapidly, nervous about their deadly adventure to stop an evil scientist striving to dominate the world. 38 switched the Virtual Reality sets on. A gust of wind began to play in the earpiece, and they began to feel their eyes and skin tingle. The gust of wind turned into a tornado, forcing them to widen their stance for support. Alex clutched Sabrina’s hand as her balance commenced to surrender to the windstorm.

“Hold on!” 38 cried. “Remember: this is VR! It’s telling your mind you’re being hit by a storm, but it’s not real. Pull yourselves together ’cause it’s all fake!”

“Ok!” Alex shouted over the wind. “Hold on, Sabrina!” Then the world went black.

## The “Fake” Reality

They blinked their eyes multiple times, but they saw the same thing repeatedly.

“I thought you said we need to state the location to get to it.”

38 glanced over at Sabrina. "I think they might've updated it. I'm a little disturbed that the government is allowing it to read our minds, now."

"Where are we, anyway?" Alex asked with much concern. "Pretty sure this isn't Alexander Jason's secret lab."

"This is *my* lab," 38 replied with a smile. "There is a simulation I built in here which really 'opens' your mind and shows you what thinking really is. It's vital to our mission!"

"Basically, VR inside of VR ...that could cause serious psychological problems. No joke."

38 pouted in frustration that Alex did not believe in or trust him. He sped over to a large metal canister with a faucet. He impatiently turned the rusty red ring on top of the spout clockwise and let a strange green liquid drip out of the spout into a paper cup. He held it up to them, and Alex sniffed a strangely sweet and bitter smell. Sabrina smelled lavender, peppermint candy and an ocean breeze. 38 sensed a strange scent of insecurity, envy, mourning, but the unsettling smell changed to a sugary rose perfume. It reminded him of the gift his mother had sent to Sabrina a couple years ago, of the girl who held Alex and his friendship together during tough times.

"Everyone needs to take a sip of this, and it has to be from the same cup."

38 poured one slimy drip into his mouth, and Alex and Sabrina did the same. Their friend guided them over to three sets of chairs which had no legs and had rounded corners with porous, soft netting to cover its plastic frame. They placed themselves in the seats, the hairs on the backs of their necks pointing straight up in the air.

38 pushed a shining green button and instructed, "Flick the switch on your right that

says, 'LAUNCH' and slap on the simulation glasses as fast as you can after you do that." Alex and Sabrina nodded their heads with courage and sureness. "The ride will be less bumpy this time," he began. "Ok, Sabrina, pull that lever on your right towards you," 38 commanded while Sabrina pulled back the lever and predicted correctly to engage the seat's power thrusters next.

38 nodded in approval. "Alex,—"

"Yep. Do the exact same thing as her." Alex blurted absentmindedly.

38 frowned, not knowing why Alex was being so cross with him lately, but he went ahead and repeated the steps they followed so that they could carry on with their mission. 38, Alex, and Sabrina flicked their switches and placed the simulation glasses over their eyes.



Alex's heart pounded, breaking out of his chest. He floated millions of feet off the air, his seat seeming to come out from under him. He tried to scream, but his voice did not come out. Hyperventilating, he turned his head left and right, observing his surroundings: white walls with straight black lines running up and down, side to side, forming a grid.

"Sabrina! 38!" Alex shouted as he took a deep, shaky breath in and out through his mouth. "Please! Answer me and stop joking around ..."

Alex took another heavy breath and closed his eyes. *Ok, don't worry. You must stay calm.* Still, tears dripped from his eyes and made its way to the ground. It hit the floor of the bland but terrifyingly massive grid room. The tear began to fizzle as it hit the floor. The newly made fizzling, blue puddle expanded, growing tremendously in size until it covered the entire floor and commenced in filling the entire room. Alex stared wide-eyed and in astonishment as a

clear blue sky with soft clouds covered the ceiling. The floor turned into an ocean, waves howling, so real.

Then Alex's nightmare came true: he ceased to suspend in the air and plunged into water, but it took a full minute before he had reached the bottom. It was a long, treacherous minute. *Darn! I even put my safety into the hands of that know-it-all!* Alex cried for help, but no one was there to save him. He sensed the freezing saltwater swallowing him into a chain of irresistible currents, and the muscles in his arms and legs suddenly weakened, making him unable to swim. The current finally relented and he was washed up on shore, gasping for air, and coughing up the water he had inadvertently swallowed.

Alex pressed his forearm into the fine, warm sand, hauling himself up, regaining his strength. He planted his feet into the ground, and his shoes were off. He gaped when he looked to his left: it was 38 and him when they were eight during their trip to the beach. They were frolicking in the sand. They smiled so widely at each other, building sandcastles, and giggling at the slightest things, and whenever they began to fight about who would play Captain Rockbeard in their pirate game, Sabrina would always jog over and would assist them in coming to an agreement.

Alex sprinted over to them, but he seemed invisible to their younger selves. "38! I'm sorry! Please, I'm sorry!" Alex charged and charged, but the entire scene, all the people at the beach began to fade. He panted. "Please! Don't go!"

The beach and its visitors dropped away, leaving him with the obnoxious grid room once again. He heard 38's voice inside his head: *You can do this, Alex. Just think about all the clues*

*you found up until this point. With no doubt you are the wisest, most able person I've ever met. Think ...'cause that's what I built this place for. Trust me ....*

Alex inhaled and exhaled, locking his eyes on the plane in front of him.

Talking out loud to his thought process, he asked himself, "How did 38 even know where me and Sabrina were going first? Well, he must have noticed something odd about the path we took, but Dr. Jason would not be stupid enough to leave a trail."

The thought formed in a series of pictures and symbols in front of him. He timidly reached his hand forward but regained his confidence when he was able to swipe the figures aside as if he were pulling it to the back of his mind for subsequent use. *What an incredible simulation*, he considered.

He exhaled sharply and continued. "The green liquid on the floors and walls was an attempt to drag my parents into the double Virtual Reality. It had the same neon green hue as the one we drank earlier. They implanted a powder that would trigger the brain to release dopamine, camouflaging within the pollen in the bushes lining the sidewalk, and of course Dr. Jason would know that his own daughter was a heavy breather when exercising and would inhale much of it. Laughing so hard would make her much more noticeable and the scientist and colleagues would recognize Sabrina's laugh and flee in time, and their cover up would be much better since they escaped through VR, and it would be a better place to experiment on our genes and brains which Hilda Manning mentioned that Dr. Jason always wanted to have for himself." Alex abruptly paused to organize the symbols, words and letters appearing all about the grid. "Wait ...this means they're in here too ..."

Alex widened his eyes and grabbed at the air in front of his face, beginning to feel and see the simulation glasses again, and he ripped them off the front of his eyes, leaping out of his seat and staring at Sabrina and 38, looking frantic as ever.

“It’s ok,” 38 sighed in a gentle, welcoming manner.

Alex smiled, touched by the nostalgia he had experienced back in the simulation. “But there’s something important I need to tell you—”

“I figured it out too.”

“I didn’t, though,” Sabrina pouted in jealousy.

38 walked over with great courage to a huge gun that rested on the table. “Don’t worry,” he said, “because we can defeat them.” He snatched and raised his gun and followed with a battle cry and charged out the door. Sabrina and Alex mimicked him, grabbing their own guns as they passed by the weapon wall and bursted through the door. Alex and 38 then skidded to a halt, jaws dropping.

“No, we can’t,” Sabrina commented with a flat tone as they faced rows and rows of hundreds of Dr. Alexander Jason’s men, armed with deadly weapons which were far more fatal than the ones Alex, Sabrina and 38 were carrying with them. The teenagers dropped their weapons and raised their palms up in the air in surrender.

## The Mask

Handcuffs were bound around their wrists; bags were thrown over the heads. Alex

heard a muffled voice say, “Set coordinates to Alexander Jason’s secret lab and teleport immediately.” With that Alex felt a light flurry of wind and felt his knees hit the ground once more but on smooth, cold concrete instead of the gravelly road.

The guards hoisted the three up and impatiently forced them into a cell with a tall ceiling and deep red lasers for bars. The bags were lifted off their heads, but Dr. Jason’s men didn’t even consider unlocking handcuffs, knowing that two of captives were more than just unsophisticated teenagers mindlessly trying to save the world. They shut and locked the cell door and marched away. Alex waited for the guards to exit the cell room before he turned to speak to his friends.

“There must be a way to get out of this cell and save the stolen Petrans,” he remarked.

“Got you covered ‘cause my father’s co-workers always have their IDs clipped to the left side of their pants,” replied Sabrina as she struggled to unearth a guard’s ID from her pocket. 38 smiled and nodded at Sabrina then pulled out three simulation glasses which first took the shape of small metal circles.

“The ones they found when they searched my pockets were fake,” he claimed with a proud smile on his face.

“You guys are geniuses!” Alex exclaimed. “Now, let’s bust out of here.”



“My dad has a room with simulation chairs, and it should be around the corner,” Sabrina called to Alex and 38, sprinting down the hallway. They reached a sea green sliding door, and Sabrina inserted the ID she stole into the card reader. The doors slid open with ease, and they



crept in just in time before Dr. Jason's security drones rounded the corner and began scanning the next hallway for intruders.

Once, in the room Alex plopped into a simulation chair, got the system started and said, "We will end up in the same place this time because Dr. Jason is a formidable foe *and* brilliant, and we should expect something dangerous."

"No," 38 replied.

Alex stood up. "What? Why not?"

"*You* have to stop him yourself," Sabrina told him as she came to his side and put a hand on his shoulder. "38 and I will stay back and see if we can defeat the guards and hack into some of my dad's equipment and see if we can get some weapons to you. That way he will stand less of a chance against you."

Alex took deep breath as a small but confident beam permeated his face. "Thank you, guys, ...for everything." They nodded their heads, and he embraced 38, patting his back then he turned to Sabrina; she blushed and smiled at him. "What?" she inquired, giggling. Alex leaned in and kissed her, wrapping his arms around her waist, breathing in her natural, flowery scent. Sabrina, filled with desire, kissed back. He let go and returned to his seat, and he spotted Sabrina collapsing into her seat while 38 stifled a laugh right before he placed the glasses over his eyes.



Alex awoke in the middle of a large room lined with human-sized chambers, and he gasped as he noticed his parents, 38's mother, the Petran girl who was the first be stolen and so many

more banging on bullet-proof, four layer-thick glass and screaming at him to rescue them.

Marla gazed into her son's now glassy eyes.

"I've been waiting for you," a voice projected from the back corner. A light flickered and shone on the mysterious figure he had been so desperate to defeat. "Never had someone who cared so much about my work that they would infiltrate my lab for it."

"You will never attain our intelligence this way, Dr. Jason. Plotting brain transplants and gene extraction is against the law without consent of the government and the person themselves! A life is not an experiment."

"I watched as people judged me my whole life!" Dr. Alexander Jason boomed. "They constantly underestimated me, told me that I didn't have a future as an inventor and biologist, only appreciating you egocentric Petrans. And now, I will make every single one of you pay."

The cruel scientist attached a metal chest plate to the front of his lab coat, and he pressed the shining red button in front of the armor piece, and ten giant robot arms extended from the back of his invention, snaking towards Alex. One clawed him by the throat and lifted him off the ground, beginning to choke Alex. Dr. Jason chortled wickedly, instructing the robot arm to squeeze tighter. At that moment, a gun magically appeared in Alex's hands. *Must be from 38 and Sabrina!* he exclaimed to himself. He aimed at the arm that had him in its grasp and pulled the trigger, and the arm released him but surprisingly did not detach from its socket.

"You made a mistake inviting 38 to work on your VR system!" Alex called to Dr. Jason, as he dodged the robot arms and shot at the machine's weakest parts. "He wanted to

show us the true instinct of humans through VR: envy, self-centeredness, any hideousnesses and monstrosities that hid under the mask of our reality. This is what's real. You were jealous of people better than you, and you didn't think of what was morally right. This simulation is a teacher because of 38, opening your mind to the horrors and positives of our world. It taught me something too ..." Alex's voice faded slightly. Then he regained it: "You're like this, Jason! You were always cruel and never cared what it would cost!"

"You made me do this!" Jason cried insanely as some of the robotic arms began to fall off the armor

"No. Now even your daughter has seen who you really are." Alex carefully walked over to his opponent and single-handedly pried off Jason's chest plate. The man blinked, dazed. "Your weakness is being told that you're wrong." After the words came out of Alex's mouth, Dr. Alexander Jason fell to his knees and fainted as Alex removed the simulation glasses and rejoined his friends in Virtual Reality and then in the real world in 38's attic.

"Alex--"

"Wait." He interrupted Sabrina. Alex charged downstairs, his best friend and girlfriend following close behind him. He threw open the front door, and there he stood, straight as a pencil, on the front porch, starring in amazement at what was in front of him. A tear glided down Sabrina's face, but she buried herself in Alex's arms washing it away with the sense of joy for all three of them. She peered up at his handsome face.

"Alex," Another tear slid down her luminous skin as his name left her lips. "You did it."



He was not to be found, the normal one, but the three knew exactly where and what he was now.



“For wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, you will find disorder and evil of every kind.”

— James 3:16