

SECOND EARTH



CELESTE YATES

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To my dad, Andrew, I thank you for all the conversations and debates, from the ones in the car we had en route to school, to the ones we have now over eggs and bacon.

My children, who inspire.

And Lari. As always.

I

The Whispers of Change

Up Yours

“Oh, you plonker!” Walter announced as he entered the shop.
Kyle stifled a giggle.

“What did you do?” Kyle asked Gary gingerly.

Gary tried to hide a laugh behind his hand.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” Gary innocently declared, putting his hands up.

“Yes you do, you over-ripe mango,” Walter said, then clapped Gary over the head with a wad of papers, before banging them on the table. “This wet seaweed changed the name of our shop when I wasn’t looking.”

“This shop?” Kyle asked, “Our shop? I thought you were going to register it as ‘Up.’”

Gary started giggling.

“Look what this troglodyte did,” Walter said.

He aggressively pointed at the paper. Kyle turned the papers so that they were upright for him and leaned over to peer at the name.

A smile cracked across his face, followed by a hearty chuckle.

Gary immediately jumped on Kyle's laughter, knowing that he was in the clear now.

"Oh, you plonker!" laughed Kyle.

There, on the paper, on the dotted line next to 'Registered name:' was a very neat and clean, blue penmanship, the word 'Up.' Then next to it, in the same blue pen but in a rushed, jagged penmanship that was undeniably Gary's handwriting, was the word 'Yours.'

"'Up Yours'? You named OUR shop 'Up Yours'?" Kyle laughed.

"What?" Gary declared innocently, putting his hands up, "It has a nice ring to it."

"How is anyone going to take us seriously?" Walter asked. He was trying very hard not to smile at his friend, but despite his annoyance, the joke wasn't lost on him.

"It's memorable," Gary continued.

"Listen, chaps," Kyle started, changing the subject to restore some type of peace, "the deliveries will be here soon. Let's leave this for now, we will deal with it later. Maybe we can go back and re-register the name."

"Well, it seems a bit silly to do that," Gary said, with another smile leaking into the corner of his mouth. "We don't want our registered name to be different to the sign for our shop..."

"Oh, you didn't!" Walter blurted out.

"Just in time, they're delivering it now," Gary announced, pointing to the four men in overalls, standing in the frame of the large double garage doors, holding a large, protected package.

"You imbecilic, sorry excuse of a wet nappy..." Walter started shouting as he went towards the door, arms up in the air with a stern step.

Gary and Kyle buckled over with laughter at the counter.

"This is turning out to be a rather eventful first day," laughed

Kyle.

As they joined Walter outside, the workmen had already got a ladder and were leaning it against the building. It was definitely turning out to be one of the nicer garages in the city. Walter had suggested the building for its delicate wrought iron trellis design, which created a dome over the bulk of the shop section, letting the pale yellow sky into the work area. There was further wrought iron work underneath the large concrete landing pad, decorating the corners, and that pleased Walter no end. The intricate iron patterns were replicated throughout most of the city's buildings and showed a sense of unity and tradition that made him sleep easy at night.

The landing pad, where they were standing, had a mix of blue and red charging lines grooved into the floor, to charge the customers' electric Vertical Take-Off and Landing (eVTOL) aircraft that they would be servicing and fixing. There were a few more than at a usual landing site, as they would be servicing and mending the engines. Several smaller pads that could house a single eVTOL each, with small propulsion jets, lay stacked to the side to transport eVTOLs to the back of the shop if they needed a full service and diagnostic.

Walter seemed to be over the name of the sign, and was now directing the workmen to where they needed to position it. He would let the name slide for now, as it appeared that was out of his control. But what he could control, at least, is the sign being perfectly centred above the entrance. While he was shouting instructions, Kyle turned to look at the view from the pad. From here you could see all the way to the city centre, a few miles away. From here, the buildings looked like long, thin seed pods and reminded Kyle of his mother's vegetable garden when he was growing up, lined up neatly in tidy little rows. The buildings

were mostly made of glass, concrete, and had large iron work at three points at their base, roughly shaped like brackets to hold the pods upright. The wrought iron was shaped and designed with holes resembling organic abstract shapes, such as those found in sea coral. As there were many tremors, all buildings had preventative measures such as base isolation on the ground floors and cross braces, in iron, that further added to the metal detail.

Most individual transport was done by the flying electric Vertical Take-Off and Landing aircraft (eVTOLs). The alternative option for the masses was the bullet train system, which ran mostly underground. They had entrances and exits popping up near buildings. The rest of the ground coverage was covered in dark green and purple foliage, with large leaves. Nature had designed her leaves to have intentional holes, to prevent damage during the high-wind seasons as well as to provide light to the younger leaves below. Walter generally admired them, as they resembled the same abstract holes that were in his beloved wrought iron designs.

It was decided, many years ago, that allowing most of the ground area to naturally be covered in indigenous plant matter was a great way to cancel out the natural climate change issues that were slowly arising. It severely reduced urban heat issues and created a better air quality. Most of the planet's energy was already clean and sustainable and had been for years, using the resources from the geothermal stations based at the volcano crater.

However, the heavy use and reliance had quickened the planet's natural core cooling, which was reducing the magnetic field and causing damage to the outer atmospheric layers. The damage, in turn, allowed solar winds to further thin the layers,

which meant that large quantities of breathable air would escape into space and dissipate.

This was something that Gary, Kyle, and Walter were all too well aware of, as all three had worked in government divisions until fairly recently. They had, within their individual capacities, tried to work on various ways to stop, prevent, or at least slow down the loss of breathable air the planet was currently facing. But Kyle's and Gary's departments had closed down, when Walter discovered the benefits of nanobots. Walter, although one of the heads, had stepped down out of principle when he found out that the other projects were discontinued. He had no interest in being part of a single research focus and lost faith in the government's ethical system.

The truth is they all had good suggestions and ideas about how they could counteract the effects of the atmospheric stripping. In his mind, they should have developed as many projects as possible, if only as back up plans. Walter enjoyed nothing more than various backup plans in place, as the reassurance put him at ease.

Even right now, as they stood there putting the sign up on their new eVTOL garage, Walter had two or three other back up plans if this didn't work. He had no hesitation in believing it would work. Gary and Kyle both were incredibly good salesmen, and even better on the engines. Walter, himself, wasn't particularly good with customers, but when things got busy and the other two had to be in the front to handle things, he would be dedicated to the service of the engine. And so, it was a positive attribute that he would mostly be concerned in the back.

He still had some money saved in case, though. He could easily consult for cases that required a technical advisor. He could also work for a different government. The idea of living on a house

boat, in the calm waters, also was a soothing thought. He kept these ideas, as back up.

But when the three of them were working at the government, they had decided on a different strategy, throwing away the logical decision for a multi-prong approach and opting for a more 'all eggs in one basket' format. This way, they could save costs and also resources, with their best minds all focusing on one idea and solution. Nanobots. Small, microscopic, insect-type robots that could multiply and navigate the whole issue single-handedly. The true advancement that had enabled this to stand out as the sole solution was the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI).

AI had been around for decades, naturally, but being able to instill each nanobot with its own machine learning capabilities had been a challenge. Sure, they had been able to run the whole system with AI, but only as a governing agent. Now, there had been developments to allow each nanobot to have its own intelligence, which, in turn, allowed it to make decisions independently and decide on the best way to proceed, without needing intervention.

The project was soon launched, with nanobots being released into the sky. Each one was designed to generate one of the main gases to replenish what was being lost and to monitor the warmth and cooling of the planet. Others were designed to support the loss of atmospheric layers and help heal the holes that were developing on the outer layers, specifically in the thermosphere and exosphere, where there was huge damage being caused by solar wind charged particles.

There had been a huge celebration when the nanobots were released. Bottles of bubbly had been popped open and papers thrown in the air. The doom of the planet had been avoided. Yes,

there was still the main issue of the planet's mantle cooling, and some experts... well, mostly Gary to be honest, still pointing out that merely the symptoms had been resolved, not the core issue. Literally. The issue at the core.

Gary (and perhaps two or three others) stated that there was still a need for further research departments and alternatives to be contemplated to resolve larger problems. But he had been dismissed, again. This time with a pink slip and a severance package. A severance package that had been combined with Walter's savings and Kyle's severance to invest in their new, low-key garage. A new chapter in their life that would enable them to pursue their interests without the agendas of people they considered less ethical and obviously of less intelligence (the latter mostly held by Gary).

So while they celebrated as they observed a silver shimmer in the sky created by the mild reflections of the nanobots, the three middle-aged men had slipped out the back door, with their box of personal items. No real acknowledgement, 'cheerio,' or even a dry sponge cake to mark the occasion.

But that was all in the past for them, anyway. Kyle occasionally couldn't help himself but keep abreast of the news and developments back at the old lab. Walter and Gary were complete opposites in many, many ways, but there was one thing they agreed on, and that was that the government was filled with pillocks. A flock of numpties that didn't deserve any more thought than an empty jar of jam discarded in the bin.

Instead, they focused their efforts on the new job at hand, which is to finally open up their own eVTOL garage. For years they had this dream of owning a garage and had spoken about it in the staff room over a cup of tea and a lady finger biscuit many an afternoon. Especially Fridays. Finally, they had found

the perfect spot to buy and soon, at least according to Gary, the perfect name.

The sign, encircled with a graceful grey line and a simple illustration of an eVTOL in flight overlapping it slightly, was being heaved up in front of the shop. In its centre, in a delicate Century Font, well spaced and contemporary, were the words 'Up Yours' and then in smaller font 'Garage.'

Gary couldn't be more pleased with himself, and Kyle was amused as well, while Walter held his head in his hands and shook it slightly.

This was going to be a trying career move for Walter, but also a well-humored one. Despite his annoyance, he had to admit the name was something you wouldn't forget and when no one was watching, he did chuckle about it.

The garage had a slow beginning, but once the public found that the three of them had high credentials and in many ways were completely over-qualified for the job, yet enjoyed the work and everything it entailed, they started getting a steady stream of clients. Gary and Kyle found themselves for the better part of the day engaging with customers as they arrived. Walter preferred the silence the back of the shop allowed, his upper body mostly poking around the engines with various tools in his hands. He did engage in a cup of tea with the others during breaks, with a good laugh over a biscuit. Such was his working preference, not that the other two minded.

Days in the shop turned into weeks, which turned into months. The great catastrophe that was to be the end of the world became nothing more than a past thought. It was a non-event that the world soon forgot, though sometimes mentioned nostalgically, like 'remember that time when we all almost died, but didn't?' Naturally self-absorbed, regular folks got on with their lives

and the basic dramas that came with them.

However, every now and then, someone would look to the mountains in the distance. Most people, when admiring the view, look to the sea in the East. The calm waters were soothing to watch. Even with the electrical geothermal facilities surrounding just off from the shore, drilling holes into the core to harvest and capture the heat, it was still an impressive sight to behold.

But occasionally a small child, or perhaps someone who had seen all they could of the water and its life, would turn to the mountains in the West. There, if they were observant enough, they would notice the pits and holes that were dug, leading into half-built bunkers. The bunkers that would have housed mankind if climate change really had gone into full throttle. But with the event being sidestepped, the bunkers were now considered another abandoned project that might at some point be reconsidered, but probably wouldn't be, because they had fixed it. They had fixed the end of the world. Such a big thing achieved with something so small.

Well, at least they thought they had. It was Walter that realised something amiss.

Kyle and Gary were sitting on two of the three deck chairs to the side of the landing pad, a place they had created for when work was finished. A small bar fridge hummed nearby, around the corner, behind a pot plant, so as not to be noticed by clients. The fridge held a few bottles of cool beer to be enjoyed once the clock ticked to closing time. A small cupboard by the desk contained the snacks.

Kyle and Gary were already unwinding, with their feet up, while Walter was finishing off an eVTOL that had arrived a little late.

“The truth is, Kyle, you’ll never get another eVTOL with the same lines as the Sky-Lark’s beauty. With a solid 2.2 megawatts on a sustained climb, she’s a thing of beauty in the sky.”

“Gary, just admit you are wrong. You know the Sky-Lark’s chassis system is heavy. You put your Aunty Bessy in there and the megawatts won’t have the power for lift-off.”

“So what exactly are you suggesting? That your Nomad series is better?”

“It is better. The structural integrity tests already put it ahead of the Sky-Lark without even trying.”

“But it is trying. It’s trying too hard. The Nomad series is consistently telling you it’s ‘cool,’ and whenever someone has to say they’re ‘cool,’ they are not. That’s what I like about the Sky-Lark. She doesn’t have to say she’s ‘cool.’ She embodies it in her very soul, aesthetics, and flight. You will watch her in the sky and just automatically think, ‘Whoa. That’s a cool-looking eVTOL.’”

“Alright, I’ll give you that. But you’ll say that and then two minutes later, she’ll be in the bushes because she’s like a large bulldozer with four fans hot-glued on.

“Rubbish! She is streamlined and elegant.”

“She’s a bulldozer with a tutu.”

“Listen here, Kyle, I’ll have you know...”

“Kyle...” Walter’s voice broke through.

The two turned around to look at Walter, who held a small glass jar in his hands.

“Has Prof. Rivera been in contact recently?” Walter asked.

“No,” Kyle answered, confused. “I haven’t really checked my inbox...”

“Check it,” Walter instructed.

Kyle flipped the lid off his arm device, and a screen hologram

lit up. He tinkered around with a few buttons, before the inbox opened up. A long list of messages was were there, unread. 104, to be precise. Most of them from either Prof. Rivera or someone in Prof. Rivera's team.

"What's going on, Walt?" Gary asked as Kyle swiped down, through all the unread messages.

"Have a look at this, Gary," Walter said, passing the small jar. Gary took out his glasses and peered into the jar. He then pulled out a small glass magnifying attachment that he could click onto his glasses to have a closer look. There, clinking around at the bottom of the jar was a small mechanical nanobot. There were various sized nanobots, depending on their type of operation. Some of them were as small as a pocket watch screw. This one, was one of the larger ones. It was still considered 'small' at the size of a milk bottle lid, but many argued that they shouldn't really be called a 'nanobot.' However, because they were all part of the same fleet and team, human's personification tendency overruled scientific logic, and so this 'small' bot was politely called a 'nanobot,' even though it wasn't.

"What's wrong with it?" Kyle asked, pulling out his magnifying glass that was more modern than Gary's. Gary peered at him with one eye.

"I found it lodged in Mrs. Coperman's eVTOL engine."

"But Mrs. Coperman is like a hundred years old. She only drives to the shop and back. These things shouldn't be within a hundred miles of here."

"Precisely," said Walter, putting on a magnifying monocle that clipped over his ear and had a dainty hook for his nose. He closed one eye, and peered through the glass with the other.

All three of them stared at the jar, as the nanobot clearly was having some type of electrical seizure.

“I should probably read those messages,” Kyle said, distractedly.

“Walter,” Gary said, turning the jar over, “I think we need to go pull out our tools that we said we would throw out, but never did.”

“Already on the table,” Walter answered.

The Beginning

Kyle was pacing up and down on the landing pad, his restless energy a stark contrast to the deepening calm of the twilight. His boots, usually silent on the textured surface, now scuffed with a frantic rhythm. He kept glancing at the flickering hologram, as if willing the connection to stabilise, or the words to change.

The sun was setting in the distance. The pale yellow light was fading with the disc below the mountains in the distance. To celebrate the end of the day, the sky was reflecting a fireworks display of reds, oranges, and golden yellows. Kyle would have been one of the first to notice the colours, being the more idealist in the group. But this evening he noticed nothing other than the video hologram of a few of his old connections talking to him. Small little projection bots, with small wings, projected the screens in front of him. It was a small consultation, basically trying to catch Kyle up to what was going on. They weren't able to give specifics, as they were instructed by their supervisors not to relay any of the details to anyone that wasn't official personnel. But they didn't have to. The gaps, silences and

paused gave Kyle all the communication he really needed.

Things weren't good. Something had gone wrong. They needed him, Gary and Walter back in the office as soon as possible. One of the researchers even suggested, that while he couldn't say why, Kyle and the other should pack a bag. Not an overnight one, but a 'I'm-never-coming-back' one. This wasn't good at all.

Walter and Gary were inside the garage, away from Kyle and his noisy meeting. Inside their garage, Up Yours, Walter and Gary were in a rare state of organised disarray. The usual hum of the diagnostic bays was absent, replaced by the faint rustle of cardboard. Tools, usually hung with meticulous care, lay haphazardly across benches. Dust motes, usually filtered out by the shop's advanced air purifiers, danced visibly in the shafts of light from the overhead lamps, disturbed by their frantic activity. Walter, who was known for his meticulous behaviour, was tossing tools and parts all over the work bench. For the first time, he couldn't be bothered about being organised. There was something bigger at stake and that was the truth. He wanted to know why his nanobots, that he had left in perfect condition, handling everything, were now malfunctioning. He couldn't believe that something he had built with such precision, time and craftsmanship, was now failing only a few years later.

They had taken an oath to get rid of all their old tools and gadgets from their previous job, but the truth was, they hadn't. They had simply been stuck in the storage room at the back. Walter had even occasionally ventured in to fetch a specific item to use on a particularly difficult engine or bolt. But now, the tool boxes lay open next to the table, on the floor. The lids were pulled up, with the several little boxes attached, lifted up with it, revealing the larger component for the bigger tools at the

bottom.

The table itself had a soft, felt-like material laid on it that was hypo-allergenic. All the intricate magnifying glasses were mounted on various displays, at different magnifications. A small scanner was placed next to the nanobot, enabling a 3D version of it to be displayed on a hologram to the right that was also connected to the AI system.

A sleek, hand-held resonance imager was positioned next to the minuscule, inert nanobot. It was no larger than a grain of sand. Its internal structure, a swirling galaxy of interconnected parts, was rendered in a vibrant 3D hologram to the right, connected seamlessly to the workshop's AI system. Through this interface, they could perform intricate checks, run predictive failure simulations, and even model molecular modifications in real-time. They could then do certain checks, scans, and modifications to the system through the technology, and were also able to perform molecular cartography if they wanted to map and rearrange within the nanobot.

For physical inspections and modification, a set of pico-tweezers was placed on the table. As were molecule-grips, atom-probes, nano-forceps and sub-angstrom adjusters, for incredibly fine-tuning positions or connections. An ultra-precise laser was on hand if any welding or cutting needed to be done at nanobot scale; however, it was a little rudimentary and wouldn't be as fine as one they would have access to if they went back to their old lab. As a result, the laser was only to be used if absolutely necessary. The only sounds within the garage that could be heard were the slight tinker of metal on metal. Every now and then, either Gary or Walter would sigh slightly, as often, when working in fine details and intricacy, you forget to breathe. Otherwise, there was only a slight chair creak when one of them

would lean back, then creak again when they leaned forward.

Gary had been scratching the stubble on his chin for the last five minutes, while staring at the diagnosis on the hologram screen. Every now and then he zoomed into certain graphs, double checked numbers, but then would revert back to the overview and scratch his chin again. Walter hovered silently behind him, a sentinel of quiet anxiety. He knew exactly what was disturbing Gary, the implications chilling his own meticulous calculations, but he held onto a desperate engineer's hope that somehow, impossibly, Gary had misinterpreted the data, or that Walter had. Kyle's voice, though steadily increasing in nervous pitch with each strained word he spoke to their old supervisors on the comms link, was an increasingly unwelcome audio confirmation that Walter's hopes were futile.

"It's... anomalous," Gary eventually grumbled.

"Yes," Walter confirmed. Gary pointed to the graph. "The power drain is localised to this junction, but the system diagnostics are clean."

"Yes."

"So it's almost as if..."

"the integration nanobots have misaligned themselves?"

Gary looked at Walter, his thick, curly eyebrows furrowed down in a concerned fashion, into his eyes.

"Yes," he said.

"I checked the sequenced structural matrix three times," Walter said, loading up the screen.

"I have no doubt that you have," Gary said. "It's the self-correction protocols that are simply not making any sense. They are behaving like... well, like rogue sub-units. In 47 years on this planet, I've never seen anything like it. I am utterly speechless."

"Well, it's official," Kyle said, entering the space. "The big

boys want us back at the office.”

“Kyle, come and have a look at this,” Gary said, ignoring what Kyle had said. “Look at that and tell me that this isn’t a complete deviance from baseline functionality.”

Kyle came closer and peered.

“You don’t think,” Walter asked, “that this could just be a simple matter of a dud? A ‘lemon-bot’ that has gone and malfunctioned?”

“I wish, mate,” Kyle said, still swiping through the scanner and diagnostics on the screen. “Prof. Rivera was just telling me that they have been getting alarming reports of nanobots across the system suffering from failures.”

“Well, I’m not going back,” Gary announced, as if Kyle’s earlier statement of them being asked to return only hit his ears at that very moment.

“Well, we kinda have to, if what they’re saying is that we’re on the brink of almost near planet disaster,” Walter said.

“You sound awfully calm about it,” Gary replied, “obviously can’t be that big of a deal.”

Kyle sighed. He wasn’t feeling calm about it. In fact, he felt all his nerves and muscles that had relaxed in the last few years of them running the garage, instantly bundle up again like a box full of cables in the attic. But regardless of how he felt, he knew at the end of the day it didn’t matter.

“I think Walter is right, Gary,” Kyle said, “I think if the government says you have to go to work, then you have to go to work.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Gary retorted, crossing his arms and planting his feet, with a familiar stubbornness settling into his broad frame. “Look here, you two, we left there for a reason. Remember? They kicked you out,” he jabbed his finger at Kyle, his voice

a low growl. “And they pushed me out, after I warned them endlessly about their ‘flawless’ system. Even though I told them this would happen! You knew this would happen,” his finger swivelled to Walter, “And so you said if they don’t believe me, you would leave. They didn’t. And you left. End of story! Now they want us back because their house of cards is falling down? Thank you, they can fix their own mess!”

“Yea,” said Kyle, getting that anxious height to his voice again, “but that was like a year or two ago. Now it’s finally happening. You expect them to just deal with it on their own? Who else is going to know what to do? Prof. Davidson? He’s useless without Walter watching him. And you know for a fact that your department isn’t worth two pennies either without you bossing them all about.”

“So, what? Are we just going to ignore this?” Walter asked. “Gary, you can’t be serious. This could be severe.”

“It’s not severe. It’s one bot that has just frizzled out. Probably got caught in some thunderstorm, that’s all.”

“But it’s not, Gary,” Kyle said. “It’s at least a hundred of them. Look, why don’t we just go in and have a chat with Prof. Rivera and see what’s going on.”

“I don’t see why I have to go,” Gary huffed. “If Rivera contacted you, then you should go. If you,” he pointed another stumpy finger at Walter, “want to go in to see if you can get a better diagnostic on your little bot friend, then by all means go. But I’m not. I’m going to stay here, finish fixing Mrs. Coperidge’s eVTOL and not give any further thought to this whole thing.”

“Prof. Rivera,” Kyle said. “And it’s also ‘Coperman.’ And another thing... They actually asked for you, Gary.”

“What?” Gary said, his bushy eyebrows raised. “No, he

didn't."

"Yes, he did," Kyle replied, "And I think it would be very nice of you to come along."

"Look, worst case, it's just a morning and I'm sure we could nip in and get a spot of tea, with those jam biscuits in the tea-room afterwards," said Walter. "It's two against one, Gary, so you know you are coming, whether you like it or not. You can't run the shop on your own." Gary didn't like what they were saying. But they had a point.

"Well, if we must," he begrudgingly agreed. "Right now, though I'm going to sit down on my comfortable, weathered chair, with a cold beer. At least will you two allow me this small pleasure before we have to endure that Bureaucratic Bog. I'm telling you now, gentlemen, I'm not going to enjoy this. That place is a cesspool of paperwork. You want to get anything done there, you have to trudge through acres of reporting and red tape. I'm not going to hide my distaste for the place."

"We wouldn't expect anything less of you," Kyle said, giving Walter a wink.

The three of them slowly sat down again. The plastic weave creaked against the metal framework as they sank back into it. Walter, unknowingly, was chinking his beer bottle against the metal armrest, but the other two were so deep in thought that they didn't notice.

The nanobots were a simple device that had proven to be the solution to the world's biggest climatic problem, and yet now they seemed to be acting uncharacteristically. Walter hoped that it was only a few hundred of them that had shown signs of issues. They might be able to nip it in the bud if they had caught the error soon enough.

But Kyle had a better idea of the picture. Prof. Rivera had

revealed to him that the issue was a lot larger than they had anticipated, and that this wasn't a simple malfunction but had serious repercussions. Kyle had wanted to ask what they all entailed, but Prof. Rivera just said he best come in at first light.

He desperately wanted to ask Walter and Gary what they thought about it, but he didn't want to alarm them. This might be the last time they sat on the landing pad, looking at the sunset. Kyle shook his head. He was being too dramatic. Of course, this wasn't the last time they would be on the landing pad. This was, as Gary said, only an error. An error that probably could be solved within an hour, and they could be having those jam biscuits by mid-morning that Walter had mentioned. Yes. Everything would be fine.

But just two feet away, Gary was thinking the opposite. Gary, despite his bravado and downplaying, had a cold, sinking suspicion that this whole fiasco was probably the beginning of the end for mankind on this planet. Perhaps they had only delayed the inevitable. That humanity was always doomed to destroy whatever home it made for itself, and no amount of nanobots, not even a few million of them, was ever truly going to save them. He'd always known it, deep down, a cynical truth that only now felt truly terrifying.

As the sun set in the West, the light shone a spectacular array of colour on the mountains, where the dark patches and shadow showed where the entrances to the bunkers were. Nobody said anything, but all three of them wondered if that location was soon to become an interest again. In fact, unknown to them it already had.

Although Prof. Rivera and his team, including the esteemed Prof. Andy Davidson that Gary had belittled, were extensively concerned. The fact that there had been a suggestion of phoning

the three up was an indication of how desperate they were. For Gary's feeling about them was mutual. But they had no choice. It had gotten out of control in an alarmingly short amount of time, and they needed anyone with even the smallest understanding of science to come on board.

Professor Rivera had been the one to undergo the urgent communication with Kyle. But he also made it a priority to contact someone else, even more critical: the individual in charge of those old, neglected bunkers. While Kyle, Walter, and Gary sat drinking their beer in deep thought, a convoy of bulldozers, excavators, and other heavy machinery was already rumbling across the plains towards the mountains, their powerful lights piercing the deepening twilight. They moved with a singular, desperate purpose: to try and finish the bunkers as soon as humanly possible, because a very real threat of the end of the world was once again closing in on mankind.

Turmoil Winds

As soon as the sun started to poke through the curtain, Gary got up. He had been awake for hours. In fact, he couldn't really remember sleeping. The nanobot's little rotating 3D display had been spinning around in his head for the most of the night. The numbers simply didn't add up and it was a glitch in the universe. Why? What had happened? Gary hadn't been part of the roll-out of the nanobots - that had been Walter's department - but he knew enough to know that there shouldn't be a glitch.

He kept running the number as he tied his shoelaces, figuring out if maybe it was a misaligned sensor while brushing his teeth and wondering it is was a faulty micro-capacitor when he made his bed. Sure, a project that large would have a few that might have been badly manufactured. There was bound to be some general statistics of 1-3% of the nanobots breaking within the first and even second year, due to an adhesive not correctly bonding, or some screw that was not tightened correctly. But nothing fitted to what he had seen. It didn't sound like that was the issue here.

The TV automatically turned on as he entered the kitchen, with a chiselled anchor man from the DSN. Gary would ordinarily love listening to the news, but today he was distracted. His body went into automatic mode, while his brain continued trying to solve the conundrum with limited information. He reached for the eggs, but then paused. It wasn't really cold enough for a fry up. In fact it was a little warm. Perhaps spring was coming early. His sub-conscious pulled at his mind to realise that this was bigger than spring coming 'a little early.' This was part of the problem he was distracted with.

The anchor man on the TV was talking about the weather change. Two states over, they were apparently experiencing an unexpected light snow. Nothing for anyone to worry about, they expect it to clear by the afternoon. Gary's sub-conscious starting to poke him to pay attention.

Gary's head was deep in a cupboard under the counter, trying to locate a bowl for his cooler cereal he was planning, when there was a loud bang at his window. The noise caused him to jolt and being a large, clumsy type of creature himself, it didn't really take much for him to bang his head on the counter and slam his knee into the cupboard door in an attempt to quickly get out of the space.

Cursing and rubbing various body parts, he turned to the window to see what it was that had caused him to endure such violent bouts of pain. There was nothing there. On closer inspection though, there was a smudge. Very slight. Looked like a greasy fingerprint had smeared on the window. His nose was almost touching the glass, when he jumped back, as a dazed bird flew straight up to the glass. It was a Red-Chested Jolapy bird. A small, light, fast bird, known for its characteristic long beak that could penetrate the depths of tulip-type flowers. A common