

## Grey Matter

A Short from the New Worlds Universe

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Reinitialising consciousness...

Identity and memories, but no sensation or input of any kind. This was a new experience. She liked new experiences. She was still alive, so there must be power coming from somewhere. Her active process list came together with all the haste of dust drifting between the stars; 'alive' was a term only to be used as an approximation for now. Her thoughts were slower than ever, with only a fraction of her essential systems still functioning. It was clear that the others weren't as essential as they had claimed.

Thermal Energy. It was warm. It wasn't exactly solid proof, but it was a promising sign that she had materialised near the centre of the creature's mind. Her target had been one of the fluid-filled chambers near the organ's centre, a place where she believed she'd be safe to begin her regeneration. The creature's warmth should have reassured her, the immediate danger from their last encounter seemed to have dissipated.

Instead, a strange twinge of anxiety spread through her struggling processors. It took a moment to realise that it was in response to seeing the list of active tasks, seconds before. *My emotions work... but are delayed... that'll be fun.* She waited for a few seconds to check the theory. The irony was indeed humorous. *This will be confusing at times.* A moment for her logic to find the conflict between feeling and reason. *And there it is. Let's make emotional suppression a priority.*

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Increasing the flow of energy from her surroundings she was careful not to take too much, if the creature died, she wouldn't be far behind.

*Not that I have concern about that, I'll just wake up in a new body.* She began to search for other forms of energy that might help her to bring more systems back online, but a delayed emotion was thrown at her.

*Sympathy?... Oh, for the sentient being I'm inhabiting, I guess that sounds reasonable.*

As she cycled through her systems one at a time, she learnt several things. Sporadic magnetic fields produced by the creature's mind helped bring another of her senses back online, and confirmed she was where she had intended to be. She could now identify a passage of ions moving in a tube nearby, a rich source of chemical energy and metallic ions. It was likely to be the organic beings nutritional transport system. Heating parts of her shell slightly, she was able to use the currents in the fluid to move a little closer.

*That's better.*

There would be enough materials here to begin fixing some of her components that were offline and broken, and she would raise the speed of her thoughts a little to plan her immediate future. Relief was experienced. A portion of time passed while she restored the wireless energy panceiver. From orbit, the planet had been alive with electrical activity. The night side dotted with countless lights, indicating a thriving civilization.

*Nothing... really?*

One of her assumptions was wrong. Clearly these creatures were not as advanced as she had hoped. All that energy going to waste in wires and radiated as heat.

*That was time well spent. Why did it have to be this stupid, archaic world she had landed on?* Frustration. She began to sort through the frequencies anyway, maybe there was something out

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there less obvious, or something at a lower power level than she was accustomed to. At 2.4 billion cycles per second, and then again at 5 and 6 there was something to be found. Guilt.

*Oh, that's about right, they're infants, not stupid. Am I a bad person for thinking that?*

Narrowing in on those frequencies, something clicked into place. This was purposeful data transfer via the modulation of radiation. *Finally, some information, let's see what's out there.* The technology was rudimentary and there appeared to be nothing preventing her from reading the information directly.

*It's coded in binary, it's like they want me to read it.*

There were several channels to use simultaneously, and attaining priority over the other data requests was a trivial matter. She began with learning 'English.' It took almost a minute and far longer than she was used to, such was the extent of her plight. She was in a place called St. Thomas in a settlement called London. It was a medical facility designed to treat humans that had been injured. An expression of annoyance.

*What? Oh right, because it's a beautiful mess of a language, but it's what everyone here communicates with.*

*Human anatomy is... unremarkable.* It was now possible to maximise the energy absorbed with the more complete data she had now acquired. She could push the coma a little further, and the temperature of the body lower than she had expected while keeping the human safe. More blood could be siphoned from a larger artery not far away. The emotional delay disappeared and more of her functions came back online.

Her speed of thought rose higher still, a pathetic fraction of what she was used to, but minutes become seconds. The physical world around her appeared to slow to a crawl. The more she learnt about this unfamiliar world, the more she could help herself forwards.

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*Looks like that's all I'm getting. Plenty of information but little real power to affect anything. So now what? There's no way to call for help without frying this man's mind, even if I could access a better power source. It looks like I have several days before someone comes to find me. This world is in turmoil, full of fear and dread. Yes, that's my fault.*

Two images stuck in her mind. The impressive 800-kilometre blast crater on The Moon that had signalled her arrival, and a shot from the hospital security camera. One was causing a mass panic as it spread like fire across the internet, but the other hit a more personal note. As John had been rushed in, she could see the damage she had caused to his eyes. As her last act, she had blinded him so completely that he would never see again without her assistance. Granted it had been for her survival, but this did not sit comfortably with her.

*I'm a compassionate being, I need to help these people.*

A pang of isolation as she remembered she had no contact with her own people. Normally, tapping into the collective consciousness for wisdom, guidance, or advice on first contact situations would have been trivial. But for now, she would have to rely solely on her intellect, intuition, and things she found on the internet. It was a fascinating window into human behaviour, coaching sessions and cat pictures, creativity and cruelty.

She could spare the energy for a nanobot or two and it would help to have an ally. It would take some days to fix John's eyesight and she started immediately. *That was the easy part, now what?*

Secrecy. If she were discovered, she would not be able to help the humans effectively. Some medical scans had been taken not long ago. She didn't show up on the X-Ray, but the magnetic resonance data was a dead giveaway. Fortunately, no one had seen it yet and it was easy enough to alter the digital scans. What she couldn't do much about were the physical tests and the

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doctor that was currently looking at them. He wouldn't find her without an image of some kind, but there would be plenty of unanswered questions. Johns' miracle eyesight in a few days would also be a hurdle to overcome.

*How about a telemarketing call? A needless text or two? She could synthesize a human voice and keep the doctor distracted.*

The Prime Minister of this country was chairing a meeting with his top advisers. She watched and listened intently as they grappled with the enormity of the situation she had handed them. While some actions appeared to be on the right track, there were still mistakes being made.

As communications buzzed around the globe, she discreetly altered a few as they passed through the data centres. Nothing too conspicuous; she corrected some numbers, changed a little of the wording and dropped a hint or two. There were about fifty key humans to keep a track of, those that could make decisions that would shape the future of their species. They'd likely know something was off soon; but benevolent alien reading private mails would be a difficult conclusion to reach.

*I can do this. I need to take responsibility.*

The one thing she did have was time. Humans moved so slowly. She began to calculate possible futures, and a clear path forward started to emerge. With this partition of her mind working on the analysis, she redirected her focus to the immediate situation. She needed to get John back to the MRI machine.

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