



The Top Turtle

The Top Turtle Pt. 1
A short story by Aaron Fingtam

“Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on Earth should that mean that it is not real?”

— Dumbledore, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows

Incense filled Jaleesa's nostrils as she knelt before the altar of the Irexae. With her head bowed, she raised her hands in worship. The stone floor hurt her knees, but she had grown well accustomed to it. The temple priest approached the altar in the center of the sanctuary. He cradled a kid goat in his arms. Chanting filled the room as he raised it above his head, *All hail Ixilia, goddess of vengeance. All hail Birisha, lord of the harvest. All hail Aiden, bringer of victory. All hail Fangore, father of time.*

Jaleesa moved her mouth silently without speaking the words aloud. Her fellow priestesses chanted loud, and nobody noticed Jaleesa's silence. When the priest reached the altar, he placed the kid in a wooden crate, which he set on the lit sacrificial pyre. It let out a terrible shriek and the chanting grew louder, *All hail Ixilia, goddess of vengeance. All hail Birisha, lord of the harvest. All hail Aiden, bringer of victory. All hail Fangore, father of time.* As the chanting grew in volume, Jaleesa moved her mouth with greater fervor, but resolutely refused to speak the blasphemy out loud.

Once the kid ceased its shrill bleating, the high priest lowered his hands, releasing the priestesses from their nightly duty.

Jaleesa stood, rubbing her sore knees, and walked down the temple aisle towards her personal quarters. As high priestess of the temple, she was allotted her own private room. It was a simple living space. Just a bed, a mirror, and a small closet. When she arrived, she knelt in front of the mirror and began to pray.

"Hear my prayer, O Aiden, Lord of all." Jaleesa knew the words well. She recited the same prayer each night after completing the blasphemous liturgy in the temple sanctuary. "I hereby denounce the false gods, Ixilia, Birisha, and Fangore. I give all honor to thee, Aiden, creator of the Universe".

As the words left her mouth, Jaleesa felt the presence of the creator. From deep inside herself, she felt his will to bless her. As she opened her eyes, she noticed an object laying on the floor in front of her. An ornate golden amulet with a fiery ruby in the middle. A smile crossed her face. "Praise be to Aiden, the one true God, and giver of all good things", she said, draping the amulet around her neck and standing. She touched the amulet and felt the fire jolt through her body. Then she turned and stepped out her chamber door.

She snuck leery through the temple corridors. All the candles and lanterns had been put out for the night, and priestesses were required to remain in their quarters, but she had important business to attend to. In the darkness, she noted that her new amulet glowed with a soft red light like the embers in a furnace. She clutched it to her breast to conceal the light, and felt the warmth spread through her body. *A truly magnificent gift from the Lord Aiden.*

When she arrived in the alley behind the temple, she found a dozen priestesses, two monks, and a handful of other citizens patiently waiting for her. *Our resistance is growing in number*, she thought to herself. She was filled with excitement as she searched for the words to share with them. "My brothers and sisters", she said, climbing onto a wooden crate, "We are living in most exciting times. Our moment to rise draws near".

"It's been drawing near for over a year", one man protested. "When will it be our time to strike?"

Jaleesa ignored the complaint. "The Lord Aiden has blessed me with me with a miraculous sign this very night." She held the amulet with the fiery ruby for her spectators to admire, and then, as if on cue, a stream of fire spouted from the amulet like dragon's breath, illuminating the dark alley.

The crowd gasped, and cheered quietly at the miraculous sign. "This magical amulet is a gift to the true disciples of Aiden, and to our cause. It is now only a matter of time before we throw off the shackles of the false gods, and Aiden will lead us to victory. Brothers and sisters, you do not know the power we will wield once Aiden's true potential is made known to the world. And you will not want to be on the wrong side when that day comes. He has told me".

"Why does Aiden only speak to you?" asked one of the townspeople in the crowd. "And how do we know that the amulet really came from Him?"

Jaleesa smiled and felt a rush of confidence. "Just watch", she said, closing her eyes. She raised her hands above her head. Electricity seemed to flow through her veins with excitement. "O Aiden, Lord of all. Show us a sign, that your disciples may be blessed, and increase their faith in thee." She waited a moment with her hands still stretched towards the sky and then said, "O most high Aiden, send lightning from the heavens and strike the ground before us, that thy disciples may doubt thy power no more". Jaleesa took a deep breath in preparation for the miracle, but none came. She opened her eyes and looked at the faces of her audience. They were not amused.

"Wait here", Jaleesa said, humiliated. She leapt down from the wooden box and ran into the temple, hoping nobody had noticed her red face. She raced to her private quarters and knelt down once again in front of her mirror. Of all the places she had ever felt Aiden's presence, it was here that she felt it the strongest. She had made a fool of herself in front of her disciples, and grew desperate to show them a real miracle. "O Aiden, Lord of all, speak to thy daughter", she said. After just a moment of silence which seemed like an eternity, she heard it. The voice of Aiden.

"I'm here, Jaleesa."

Electric energy filled Jaleesa's body once again. She had only heard the audible voice of Aiden twice over the course of the previous year. "O Aiden, I come to thee with a petition..."

"Open your eyes, Jaleesa."

Jaleesa opened her eyes, and her jaw dropped. She saw a face in the mirror in front of her. But it wasn't her own face. The mirror seemed to be a portal into another world, and there, looking back at her, was the face of Aiden himself. For a moment she was speechless. The Lord she had worshiped her whole life had the beardless face of a youth. Perhaps 16 years of age. She bowed down before the mirror and said, "My Lord. What an honor to gaze upon thy beautiful face."

"I never showed my face to anyone else in your world before, Jaleesa. You're the only one that ever saw me."

"What an honor", she said, still bowing. Then, raising herself up to look at him once again, she said, "But you must show yourself to your other disciples. They doubt you, and await a miraculous sign."

"No... I don't think so", said Aiden.

“But without a sign, they will abandon your ways”, Jaleesa responded. Aiden didn’t say anything, so she continued. “If my Lord will show a sign to his disciples, I will come before you and pray for one additional hour every night.”

Aiden seemed to think about it for a moment. “What kind of sign?”

“Anything, my Lord. A lightning strike. Another amulet. Anything that may cause them to believe.”

“So... If I make lightning strike in front of those people, you’ll spend more time talking to me every night?”

“I swear it on my life, my Lord”, Jaleesa replied, trembling.

“Okay. Deal”, said Aiden. And then, in an instant, Aiden was gone, and Jaleesa was left looking at her own reflection in what was once again just an ordinary mirror.

She wasted no time in leaping to her feet, and sprinting out the door. Out of breathe, she arrived in the alley where most of her disciples were still waiting. No sooner had she stepped back onto her box than eight lightning bolts struck the ground in front of her, one after another. The crowd burst into cheers, and then one disciple shouted ecstatically, staring at the ground by his feet.

“Look!” the disciple exclaimed. He picked up another fiery amulet, about half the size of Jaleesa’s, and held it for everyone else to see. Chatter filled the air as each of the disciples found his or her own amulet on the ground. Each had a fiery ruby in the center, but none of them were as large, or as beautiful as the one around Jaleesa’s neck.

“All hail Aiden, The one true God!” Jaleesa exclaimed from on top of her box. “He will bring us victory against our enemies!”

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Aiden sat back in his chair, turned off his webcam, and slammed his laptop shut, taking a few deep breaths. His bedroom was dark and calming. Exactly what he needed to collect his thoughts. He had never shown himself to Jaleesa before, and he had always worried that she would not like him if she saw him. She was supposed to represent a twenty six year old woman, after all. About ten years older than him. A smile crossed his face as he sat in the dark, thinking about what she had said when she saw his face. Although he suffered from mild acne, she had called him *beautiful*.

Of course, Aiden was well aware that Jaleesa was nothing more than a bit of artificial intelligence inside his computer, but to him, she was a person too, and her words had filled him with an unmistakable sense of satisfaction from somewhere deep inside himself. It was something he had never felt before. Rejuvenated, Aiden popped open his laptop, and double clicked on the icon that said *TEMCO World Simulator*. He pulled up the data interface window, and did a quick search for Jaleesa’s character profile. A 3D image of Jaleesa popped up along with some stats about her on the side.

Jaleesa

NPC id: 345.22.348i
Human, Female
Occupation: Priestess
Age: 26
Height: 5'9"
Weight: 135 lbs
Hair: Red

Of all the NPCs that populated Aiden's virtual world, Jaleesa was by far his favorite. Most of the people that populated his sim world were auto-generated NPCs, but Jaleesa was one of the few characters that Aiden had personally customized. She quickly gripped his attention with her passion, her sarcastic personality, and above all else, her physical beauty. He had originally designed her as a child, but time in the simulated world passes thousands of times faster than in the real world, and over the course of several weeks of gameplay, she aged into a beautiful young woman. Since then, she had become his favorite part of the whole game, and he spent most of his play time observing her and her interactions with the other AI characters.

Aiden had always marveled at the emotional depth and realness that new technology was able to bring to artificial intelligence. It was as if they were real people with real lives and emotions living inside his computer. So much so that to him, they were not just non-player-characters. They were people in every sense of the word. And he had fallen madly in love with one of them.

Aiden closed Jaleesa's NPC profile page, pulled up the item generator in the world editor, and began browsing mindlessly through the female apparel menu. He had spent countless hours over the last few days just thinking of ways to make Jaleesa happy, and gifts he could leave for her. *Tonight was the first time Jaleesa ever saw my face*, Aiden thought. *It's our anniversary in a sense. I should get her something nice.* As he browsed through the virtual dresses and robes, he kept an eye out for anything that exposed a lot of skin. Aiden liked it when Jaleesa showed some cleavage. After nearly an hour of searching for the most revealing outfits in the game, he settled on a metal bikini in the armor section. He laughed at the irony that the most revealing garments always offered the highest armor rating. As he copied the code into the world editor, he lamented the fact that, in an effort to keep the program child-friendly, the game creators had not included an option for full nudity within the simulated world.

But this game is really complex, Aiden thought. *NPCs are able to live full lives, and do everything that people can do in real life. I wonder if there is any way around the game parameters.*

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Jaleesa entered her chamber and knelt to pray before her mirror, as usual. It had been several days since Aiden had shown himself to her through the mirror, and she had not heard

from him since. But the moment her knees touched the floor, Aiden appeared to her in the mirror again. She was filled with the same sense of excitement she had felt the first time.

"My Lord!" she exclaimed. "You could not have come at a better time. Your disciples are in great need of divine intervention at this very moment."

"What do you need?" Aiden asked.

"The high priests of the city are planning a month long festival in honor of the false goddess Ixilia. Your faithful sons and daughters are planning a sabotage to ruin their blasphemous festivities, and to bring dishonour upon our pagan queen who allows such heresy. Our numbers have grown exponentially since your last miracle.

"Okay, well, I'm not too worried about that right now. Actually, I got something for you." Aiden said.

"Another gift for your humble daughter? Why thank you, my Lord!" she responded. Aiden pasted the code into the simulator engine, and the metal bikini spontaneously appeared in her bedroom, right in front of her. She picked it up, and examined it, trying not to show her confusion. "What a precious gift, my Lord. I shall cherish it." She knew her tone of voice was not convincing.

"I know it doesn't look like it would do any good in battle, but I got it from the elite armor menu. That little thing will give you a defense bonus of 95, which is higher than a full suit of heavy armor", Aiden said. "I know it doesn't make any sense."

Jaleesa gave up any attempt to hide her confusion, saying, "I'm afraid I don't understand, my Lord".

"Basically, it just means you will be really hard to kill in battle."

A sense of exuberance fell over Jaleesa. *So he is listening to my prayers after all*, she thought. "O my sweet Lord. Thank you. This will be most useful in the turbulent times that are before us."

"Put it on now", Aiden said.

"Of course, my Lord. Right away."

Jaleesa stood up and walked into her closet. Exactly one second later, she came out again, wearing the armor. When she looked back at the mirror, she saw Aiden with his mouth open. He was staring directly at her body, and made no attempt to conceal it. A sense of bewilderment fell over her and she smiled at the realisation. *I guess all men are the same*, she thought. *Even gods*. She had used her body to manipulate men before, but she never would have expected to have the same effect on Aiden, who had created her. She silently asked herself if she could use this to her advantage.

"My Lord", she said, "I ask you for another amulet. One which holds power over the stone walls of the royal palace, one that your disciples may use to invade the castle and overthrow our wicked queen."

"Sure", Aiden said. "I'll go get you one right away. But I want you to do something for me first."

"Anything, my Lord."

"Take all your clothes off."

This time, Jaleesa made no attempt to hide her confusion. *Take my clothes off?* She had never considered such a thing. She hadn't even given thought to it as being a possibility

before. In her life she had never taken all her clothes off, and she wasn't even quite sure how it could be done.

"My Lord, Is... Is that even possible?"

"I don't know", Aiden said. "This is supposed to be a kid-friendly game, but there might be some way around it."

Jaleesa didn't understand, but she nodded and said, "What do I have to do?"

"Try reaching around to the back of your armor. Feel for a clasp or something back there."

Jaleesa obeyed, but found nothing. "It's a solid piece of metal, my Lord. I don't think it can come off."

"Isn't there a latch or a hinge or anything?"

Jaleesa felt again, but in vain. She shook her head.

"Well you got it on somehow", Aiden said.

"Yes my Lord, but in the closet. I'm not entirely sure how it works."

"Well, why don't you try going in the closet again. Take your armor off in there and then come out without it."

Jaleesa hesitated. "As you wish, my Lord." She felt foolish. She had used the closet a thousand times to change her clothes, but she had never stopped to question how it worked. She always just walked into the closet wearing one outfit, and one second later she would walk out wearing another. "I'll give it a try", she said, walking into the closet. Exactly one second later she walked out again, wearing the exact same armor as before. She looked down and then sighed in disappointment. "It didn't work."

Aiden grew visibly angry. "If you don't take off all your clothes, I'm not giving you the amulet to break down the stupid castle or whatever."

Jaleesa paused. She felt a lump in her throat, and her voice quivered. "I don't think I can, my Lord."

Without a word, Aiden's image disappeared from the mirror and Jaleesa was left alone in her chamber once more. She knelt to the floor, unsure of how to feel. *How can he be mad at me for something that I don't have any control over?* she wondered helplessly.

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Aiden closed out the world simulator and pulled up his internet browser. The game creators had done a seamless job of keeping nudity out of their program, but they had also opened the game to modding. Aiden typed in the address to his favorite gaming site and pulled up the window to the open source modding community. There, he was able to browse through countless add-ons that other computer savvy gamers had come up with to modify the base game engine. But while he browsed through the possible mods, something else caught his eye.

<u>NPC free will control</u>
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Are you tired of NPCs in TEMCO Simworld making decisions you don't like? With this mod you will be able to override the free will of the artificial intelligence characters. This mod creates a control panel that will allow you to control the actions, behaviors, and even the emotions of any AI character in your virtual world.

Aiden was filled with a rush of adrenaline as he read the mod description. *The ability to control character's emotions?* He thought. *I can make Jaleesa love me.* He copied the code for the mod, and then opened the game engine editor.

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"Sons and daughters of Aiden!" Jaleesa shouted from on top of her box. "Our time has come!" The city square was full of a thousand townspeople, anxious to hear her announcement. "The one true God, Aiden the Victor, has spoken to me. The time has come for us to throw off the shackles of the dogmatic Irexian Temple!" She was answered by the enthusiastic cheers of her closest disciples, but the rest of the townspeople seemed to be leery of her radical ideas. Some of the city guards seemed alerted by this proclamation and began paying more attention to her speech. "Our Lord Aiden has promised me victory in battle against our oppressive queen!" At that, frantic murmuring erupted in the crowd. The city guards jumped into full gear and began shoving their way through the crowd to silence the radical priestess.

"That's treason!" shouted one guard.

"I warn you, do not draw closer!" Jaleesa cautioned him, "Do not underestimate the power of Aiden!" But the guards kept moving closer, with their swords drawn, and yelling for her to stop speaking. Jaleesa felt a fire coaxed to life from deep within her chest. "I tried to be merciful", she yelled. With that, she held her amulet, outstretched in her hands and a blast of flame engulfed each guard that approached, leaving the surrounding townspeople unharmed. An amazed collective gasp came from the crowd, and Jaleesa raised her amulet above her head.

"A miracle from the Lord!" One of the townspeople yelled.

"Yes!" Jaleesa replied. "The Lord has protected us. And he says that our time has come to overthrow our wicked queen!" A cheer erupted in the crowd, and the entire city square was filled with chanting, *All hail Aiden, bringer of victory! All hail Aiden, bringer of victory! All hail Aiden, bringer of victory!* "Now, we march to the castle!" An ardor bubbled up from deep within Jaleesa's soul. She couldn't put into words the passion that she felt in that moment. Everything she had dreamed of for the last two years was finally coming to be.

Then, as quickly as the enthusiasm in her heart had arrived, it was gone.

She felt nothing.

She looked around at all the townspeople and her fellow clergy, all shouting with passion at what she had just said, and she wondered why. She remembered saying the words, but they

suddenly seemed empty. For a moment she tried to recall the enthusiasm that she had felt just moments earlier, but could not. *Oh well*, she thought, shrugging her shoulders.

"Actually... I guess I changed my mind. You can all go home now", Jaleesa said softly. But her words were drowned out by the impassioned chanting of the crowd. She casually stepped down from her box, and slowly made her way through the crowd back towards the temple. Most members of the crowd were too rowdy to notice their leader walk away.

When Jaleesa arrived in her chamber, Aiden was already in the mirror waiting for her. He didn't say hello, but she saw him tap a button on the device in front of him. "I love you Aiden", she said.

Aiden stared at her blankly for a moment, and softly said, "It works", to himself. Then he pressed a different button. She reached her hand up her back and felt a clasp that had not previously been on her bikini armor. Any other day, she would have been baffled by the seemingly magical alteration in her armor, but she felt no curiosity. She simply turned the clasp and the armor fell off her body, landing on the floor with a clank. She then unlatched the bottom part of the armor, which also fell to the floor.

Jaleesa stood in the middle of her room, motionless and naked. Not a word was spoken by either of them. Aiden pressed the button again.

"I love you Aiden", she repeated. Aiden leaned further toward the computer screen, staring mindlessly without blinking. His breathing became choppy, and he began to repeatedly press the same button over and over with his left hand.

"I love you Aiden."

"I love you Aiden."

"I love you Aiden."

"I love you Aiden."

"I love you Aiden."

"I love you Aiden."

Finally, Aiden stopped pushing the button. His breathing returned to normal and he leaned back in his chair. Without a word, he looked away from her for the first time and then he was gone.

Jaleesa stood still in the middle of her room. At first she thought she would do something, but she didn't know what to do, so she did nothing instead. She just stood motionless, staring at the mirror. She felt no emotion and saw no reason to move from where she was standing in the room.

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Aiden wiped his hand off and stared at his computer screen blankly, deep in thought, disappointed. Jaleesa's body had not provided him with the rush he had expected. And why would it? It was just a virtual representation of human skin on a computer screen. He also felt nothing when he heard say she loved him, no matter how many times he tapped the "I love you, Aiden" button. He had never heard a girl say that to him before, and now he realized it was empty. No matter how many times he made her say it, it was a meaningless sentence. She was a zombie now. For all intents and purposes, Aiden had killed the Jaleesa he once loved.

He emptily stared at the naked body standing in the virtual bedroom for another few minutes before mousing over the menu button on the top left of his screen. He opened the *load/save game* window and clicked the button that said *Erase Game*.

Are you sure you want to erase all the memory from this game?

Aiden clicked yes. Then he pulled up his pants, laid on the floor, and cried.