

The Doomsday Race

Chloe shivered in the brisk March air and slipped gratefully into the waiting jacuzzi. The others were already neck deep in the bubbling water. The blond boy she'd picked up at brunch. Julie, her best friend, across from her. Dan, with one arm casually draped around Julie's shoulders.

She leaned back into the warm water. Her muscles relaxed. She looked up at the night sky. Sirius, the binary star system, was already visible over Dan's wet, curly hair. He was rambling on again, trying to impress them. Well, he'd paid for the Park City VRBO. Maybe she should at least feign interest.

"...similar to how scaffolding is used in construction," Dan said. No one said anything, which Dan apparently interpreted as encouragement. "Start with silicon. Just like carbon, silicon atoms bond easily with hydrogen and oxygen atoms. Over time, a silicon replicator emerges. Silicon-based life. Let's call that Level One. The silicon replicators mutate and evolve, until they resemble RNA. Then carbon-based molecules come along and use the silicon structures almost as a template. In other words," Dan concluded, "organic life started off by using inorganic life as scaffolding. And we're that organic life. Level Two." He looked around triumphantly.

"Hmmm, fascinating," said the blond boy. He sounded bored. "Chloe, babe, what do you think?" He scooted over until their bodies touched, then looked at her and cocked an eyebrow. His hand slid up her leg and gripped her thigh. She could feel his thumb start to trace small circles on her skin.

"I think it's an unfalsifiable theory," she said. She took the blond boy's hand in her own and pushed it down to her knee. He tried to pull her hand over to his crotch. There was a brief, silent, underwater struggle.

"That's the beauty of it," said Dan smugly. He ran a hand through his hair, pushing back the dark curls. "After a building is completed, the scaffolding disappears. The lack of silicon replicators today is irrelevant. We're the evidence. Just like the pyramids are evidence that the Egyptians used scaffolding to build them."

Chloe won the battle. The blond boy shifted in the water and sighed. She felt a surge of guilt and decided to toss him a bone. He was awfully cute, after all. And just her type. Tan. Tall. Not too bright. She wrapped both her arms around one of his and squeezed his bicep. He flexed the muscle instinctively. She leaned against him, her head on his shoulder.

"Rank speculation," she said. She met Julie's eyes and smiled at her friend, inviting her in on the joke, on how easy it was to wind Dan up. "I suppose you think we're just scaffolding for Artificial General Intelligence."

"Yes!" said Dan excitedly. "Exactly!" He smacked the surface of the water with his palm. "Isn't it obvious? We're already building the necessary structures for Level Three life. Data centers, fiber optic cables. The Internet itself!"

Julie sniffed. "Sounds like the plot of a bad movie."

"That's what the robots will be saying in fifty years," retorted Dan, "when there's no evidence of humans and one of them wonders if we ever existed."

The blond boy put his hand back on Chloe's thigh. Suddenly, she felt exhausted. Exhausted with always having to be on, always having to be put together, always having to look the right way and say the right things. Exhausted with the game, with the constant flirting and being chased and having to pretend to run away. She felt like a fisherman without worms or flies, a fisherman who'd resorted to carving chunks off his own body for bait.

The hand crept upwards, slow but confident. She started to respond despite her best intentions. She was too tired to resist, she told herself. For a moment, she wondered what the blond boy's name was. He had told her, at brunch, but she'd forgotten. Not that his name mattered.

Meanwhile, Julie was whispering something in Dan's ear. Her lips brushed his earlobe. She glanced sideways at Chloe and her dark eyes flashed with an emotion Chloe couldn't make out.

"I'm getting cold," said Julie. She stood up, her long hair spilling down her back, and reached half-heartedly for her robe. Dan jumped up and fetched it. He draped it around her shoulders, then rubbed them vigorously.

"Let's get you inside," he said. Chloe was amused to hear how embarrassed he sounded. His cheeks were red and she didn't think it was from the cold. She watched them tiptoe back to the house. The glass door slid open, then closed with a thunk. She turned back to the blond boy just in time to be kissed. She sighed inwardly and opened her mouth.

The sex was just as she'd expected. Competent. Perfunctory. Afterwards, she left him snoring into the pillow and padded into the kitchen.

Dan was already sitting at the table, staring at a lamp and rolling a half-filled glass between his palms. A bottle of Scotch stood in front of him. He didn't seem to notice her at first, not until she turned on the tap.

"Want something stronger?" he asked, indicating the bottle.

She shook her head. "I'm all right." She filled her tumbler and plopped down on the chair next to him.

Dan shrugged. "More for me," he said. He poured another inch into his glass, emptying the bottle.

She looked at him critically. "Don't tell me you're so distraught over the idea of humans as scaffolding for AI," she said. "Or did you and Julie have another fight?"

"Ha!" laughed Dan ruefully. "I wish it were another one. But no. Just the same one. Over and over and over and over..." He rolled his eyes comically and wagged his head. Chloe laughed; she couldn't help it.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"You're her best friend," said Dan, shaking his head. "Sometimes I think you're her only friend. So no."

"Thank goodness," sighed Chloe. They sat in comfortable silence for a moment. "What if you have it backwards," she said finally.

Dan tilted his head at her, his face scrunched up as though puzzled. "Whatcha mean?"

"I'm not sure," she admitted. There was another pause. Then she started talking, as much to figure out what she was thinking as anything. "Even if humans are eventually eliminated, you're still describing a natural evolutionary process. One species arises, better fitted to the environment, and displaces another. But what if, instead, human evolution itself isn't natural. What if we're being pulled along, guided into getting smarter?"

"So you don't believe in artificial intelligence as Level Three life?" asked Dan skeptically.

Chloe shook her head, still thinking it through. "AI's just a red herring. Even if we get to quantum computing, I'm betting the heat generated by a hundred trillion silicon synapses melts your Terminator."

"Wow, you are such a geek," marveled Dan. She couldn't tell if he was kidding, so she erred on the side of caution and slapped him on the arm.

"Pot, kettle," she replied archly. "Anyway, just run with me on this one."

Dan shrugged and took a swallow from his drink. "The floor is yours, your geekness."

"Thank you. Let's assume for a moment a higher intelligence has been playing mankind right from the start."

"Why?"

"What is this, a cross-examination? Maybe they want to introduce us to the rest of the galaxy. Maybe we're on one of their petri dishes. Maybe this is all just a sim. Who cares?"

"Fine, fine," grumbled Dan.

"The point I was trying to make," continued Chloe, "until I was so rudely interrupted from the peanut gallery, is that we'd need evidence. Hard evidence," she clarified quickly, "not hocus-pocus like you thinking lack of surviving scaffolding is confirming evidence."

"Ouch," said Dan amiably. He tried to pour some more whisky, then shook the bottle when nothing came out. "So what does this theoretical hard evidence look like, oh wise woman?"

"I don't know," she confessed. "Maybe some historical person who knew things they shouldn't have. Discontinuous knowledge. Like, way ahead of their time."

"Implying they were being taught by this higher intelligence that's trying to lift us up."

Chloe nodded. "Right. Someone like da Vinci, I suppose."

"Painter by day, alien conduit by night," said Dan darkly. He squinted suspiciously, his eyes darting around the dark room as though he expected the aliens in question to step out from behind the curtains at any moment.

"Har har," said Chloe. She crossed her arms defensively. "Make fun of me all you want. But he was a rational empiricist when those words didn't even exist. He invented solar power two hundreds years before the age of steam. He designed the helicopter and airplane practically ex nihilo."

"Sure," Dan argued, "and that's the problem. His ideas didn't effect change. They just got moldy in obscure notebooks. Your uplift theory requires someone who actually made a difference. Who impractically accelerated human development."

"Do you have any better ideas?" she shot back.

"Actually, I do," replied Dan. He sounded surprised with himself. "Bach. Johann Sebastian."

"A composer?" scoffed Chloe.

Dan raised a hand. "Hear me out." He finished his drink. "His music has influenced every creative genius since the Enlightenment. And the sheer volume... let me put it this way. No human could even copy out his works in a lifetime."

"He probably had ghostwriters," objected Chloe. "Like Dumas. Or his wife did the heavy lifting and he just signed stuff."

That's actually a real theory," Dan admitted. "But hey, this is your crackpot idea. Any other rabbits in your hat, or am I dismissed? I gotta go play big spoon to a grumpy girlfriend."

Chloe tapped her fingers on the table for a moment, working up her nerve. "Elon Musk." She immediately winced, waiting for the inevitable reaction.

Dan didn't laugh. "Shiitake mushrooms," he said slowly. "That actually makes sense. How many stagnant industries has he single-handedly revitalized?"

"Three, maybe four."

And each one with the same goal as da Vinci," said Dan slowly. "Flight. Space. The interstellar birth of the human species." He was excited now, talking faster. "Everything Musk does is aimed at Mars. Tesla for the R&D and mass production of batteries and solar cells. SpaceX for the actual craft."

"And he retired after Paypal," Chloe pointed out. She tried not to sound smug. "The whole second act of his career kinda just emerged, like Athena from the head of Zeus."

"Like da Vinci's sketches," said Dan. He stood up hastily, almost knocking over his chair, and started rummaging through the cabinets. His search came up empty.

"I need another drink," he said. His eyes were shining. "Let's go into town."

"It's two in the morning!" Chloe protested.

"C'mon," pleaded Dan. He waggled his eyebrows at her. "Best bar in town just opened."

They rode bicycles the winding mile into Park City. The bicycles had come with the rental and were basic models, beat up and impossible to adjust. There were no helmets. Chloe loved them.

Her breath was so thick in the cold, still air that she could have been vaping. The moon was new. There were no street lamps, no house lights. Only darkness and starlight. Above her, the

wide dome of the sky slowly turned. She glided through the silence and imagined she was in the infinite abyss of space, flying between the stars.

The bar was closed for a private event, but the bouncer took one look at Chloe and unclipped the velvet rope. Stairs led down to a cavernous space lit by absurdly Gothic candles, as though the owner had seen Phantom of the Opera once too often as an impressionable teenager.

The space was relatively uncrowded. Civilized. There was something subtly off about it. The average person would have taken all night to figure it out. Chloe understood instantly. She could feel the attention of the attendees as a physical force, like magnetism or gravity. It was centered around two tables in the corner that had been pushed together. One of the more famous couples in Hollywood was sitting there, surrounded by friends and associates. When the couple laughed, everyone laughed. When the couple got serious, everyone got serious.

Dan came back from the bar, drinks in hand. Chloe accepted her spring water gratefully. She was about to thank him when someone touched her gently on the shoulder. It was a young woman: skinny, pale, and wearing an outfit that cost more than the average home.

"I thought I recognized you!" the woman said. "I just had to come over. You don't mind, do you?" Her hand was already clutching her iPhone, the lens perfectly positioned, slightly above them and to one side. Chloe didn't say anything, just handed her glass back to Dan and smiled up at the camera.

The iPhone clicked. Chloe turned to the woman, prepared with pleasantries, but she was already heading back to her table, her fingers flying over the screen of her phone. Chloe wondered how long it would take for the photo to hit Instagram. Ten seconds, she guessed. She reached for her glass.

Another hand caught her wrist. This time it was an older man in a tuxedo. He handed Dan his phone, looking apologetic. "It's for my kids," he explained, "they'll kill me if I don't get a picture with you."

Dan snapped off a couple shots. The man thanked Chloe and left. Dan said, sotto voce, "maybe coming here wasn't my best idea."

Chloe shrugged. "I'm used to it."

Dan pulled her into a dark corner. Another woman approached them. Dan scowled ferociously. The woman got the message and sheared off. "Have you noticed who's sitting over there? My four o'clock?"

Chloe grinned with amusement. "Of course."

"Yet no one's approached them for a photo. Chloe, exactly how many Instagram followers do you have?"

She told him. His mouth dropped open. Then he grinned wickedly. "That gives me a wonderful idea."

Chloe narrowed her eyes. "That doesn't exactly inspire confidence. Do you have any idea how many people try to use me?"

"All of them, I'm sure," he said airily. "But not like this." He leaned over conspiratorially. "What if you're right? What if Musk really is channeling alien knowledge to artificially accelerate human progress and jumpstart our exploration of space?"

"You mean, other than it's the best possible news?" asked Chloe innocently.

Dan laughed. "You said it yourself. He's being too obvious about it. Doing too much, too quickly. Why?" His eyes were tight in a way that made Chloe suddenly nervous.

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe we're just really clever to have noticed."

"Hardly," replied Dan. "You were right. It's blatant. If your theory is correct, the other nudges have been subtler, more careful. They - whoever *they* are - have taken their time. Been deliberate. Until now. Why the rush?" He looked at her the way a strict teacher might look at a promising student.

"Because," said Chloe slowly, putting the pieces together, "time's running out."

"Bingo," said Dan. "Something's accelerated their timeline. Maybe we're due a rogue asteroid. Maybe we've been noticed by an intelligence just as superior but less charitably inclined." Chloe opened her mouth to interject, but Dan kept going. "The specifics don't matter. What matters is that the clock is ticking down to doomsday. Metaphorically speaking. It's a race to get humans off this planet before whatever happens, happens."

"And this has to do with my Instagram account how?"

"How many journalists do you know? How many that owe you a favor, or would do you one?"

She put a hand on her hip and lowered her voice, doing her best Dan impression: "all of them, I'm sure."

Dan snorted. Then he drained his drink and put it on a passing waiter's tray. "Let's see if we can't flush our bird into the open. Gentleman's bet says you're wrong and this entire theory is

just the result of too much booze and not enough sleep.” He extended his hand and looked at her challengingly. “It’s your decision, Chloe.”

She shook his hand. “It’s a bet. One condition, though.”

Dan grinned and pumped his fist. “Name it.”

“Whatever we do, it has to accelerate the uplift timeline. We can’t reveal Musk. If we spook him, if we spook his handlers, whatever you want to call them...” she trailed off, shaking her head vehemently. She didn’t trust herself to continue.

“I don’t understand,” Dan confessed. “These alien uplifters, they’ve already accelerated their pace. Space technology is advancing faster today than it did even during the Apollo program.”

“Slightly faster!” hissed Chloe angrily. “Extrapolate from the current rate of progress, though, and we’re still talking decades to get a sustainable number of people off this planet. Maybe a century! Who knows how far off this so-called doomsday really is? Why should it arbitrarily dictate how quickly they’ll release technology to us?”

Dan looked serious, almost sober. “Chloe, is there something you want to tell me?”

She laughed, but there was a tinge of hysteria to it. “I’m not sick or dying if that’s what you mean. But,” she growled. “I refuse to die on this planet! I won’t! Not if there’s any chance at all of getting into space! Real space, not this low Earth orbit crap! If the technology already exists, and we’re just wasting time with our petty tribal squabbles until some self-righteous alien species decides to finally open up their kimono...”

Chloe took a deep breath to calm herself. Her heart rate slowed. She stared up at Dan. “I’ll do anything to stick a Taser up their ass and make them move up their schedule. Anything. So what’s your plan?”

New media moves faster than old media.

It was a frantic morning of calls, interrupted only for hot coffee and Wikipedia searches. By early afternoon, the first articles, breathlessly disclosing how a rogue asteroid was expected to impact Earth in 2027, hit the Internet. The online rumor spread as quickly as unsubstantiated fear-mongering rumors do.

In other words, the truth never stood a chance.

By early evening, despite official denials, undisclosed sources at NASA confirmed the rumor, based on data recently analyzed by NEOWISE, the Near-Earth Orbit Wide-Field Infrared Survey Explorer. The anonymous sources noted they were continuing to process and interpret the relevant data. They stressed that their conclusions were not final and that everyone should remain calm.

Global panic erupted immediately.

Tens of thousands died as a result of arson and rioting.

The following morning, Elon Musk called an impromptu press conference, where he disclosed technical blueprints for both a Space Elevator and a radically more efficient flexible solar panel. He also expressed strong suspicion in NASA's still-not-officially-confirmed prediction of an impending apocalyptic impact event.

Jeff Bezos immediately pledged his entire Amazon.com stake, worth more than one hundred billion dollars, towards an accelerated project for space colonization, and merged Blue Origin into SpaceX.

By the time the truth finally got its pants on, and the world learned that the rumor was a hoax dreamt up by a social media celebrity, it was too late. The genie was out of the bottle. The technology could not be hidden. Man's technological development had been accelerated by twenty years. Maybe fifty.

"You know," said Dan thoughtfully, after the hullabaloo had died down, "this all kind of begs the question what the real doomsday danger to Earth is."

Two years had passed. They were back in Park City, on their annual trip. Dan was still with Julie. Chloe was still occasionally single. The hoax had made her even more famous, if that was possible.

"And how soon," added Chloe. She paused to think for a moment. They were sitting on a hill outside the city, looking up at the night sky. The light pollution was relatively low here, and the stars seemed to burn more fiercely than usual. "We didn't stop doomsday. We didn't stall it by a single minute."

Dan shrugged. "That's above my pay grade. All I know is, SpaceX is already making deliveries to Mars. Drones and autonomous robots are assembling the first Martian habitats. Rumor is they'll be ready by 2024 and that the first colonists are scheduled to land shortly thereafter." He grinned wryly. "Of course, we both know what a rumor is worth."

"It's not a rumor this time," Chloe said. "I'm one of them. I'm going directly from here to Hawthorne for training and instruction."

"Ah," said Dan slowly. "Good luck, then."

THE END