END OF THE WORLD, PLEASE DON’T REBOOT

By Michael Lane

Everything was ready for the demonstration. The equipment was running perfectly and the temporal field had formed. Now, all that was needed was his audience.

Dr. Nkosi waited patiently as the minutes passed.

There was a knock and a forty-something man with a dusting of gray stepped into the lab.

“Thank you for joining me, Dr. Peterson,” Dr. Nkosi said, in greeting.

“A pleasure,” the visitor replied. “This device of yours sounds intriguing.”

“But not as exciting as I had hoped,” Dr. Nkosi said, with a sigh.

“Your email described a means of viewing the past. Did this not work?”

“Oh, the equipment works perfectly,” Dr. Nkosi replied, and gestured to two chairs sitting before a large monitor. “Have a seat and I will show you.”

“This would be an amazing tool for anthropologists like me. Imagine, looking back into time to watch the construction of Stonehenge or the Norman invasion of England.”

“Yes, but unfortunately, I can only show the history of where we are sitting,” Dr. Nkosi explained.

“Why?” the historian asked.

“Just as there are three axes defining physical space, there is a fourth axis defining time. The equipment I have developed allows me to move along this Delta Tau axis, but the X, Y, and Z location is fixed here in this room.”

“But it does allow you to look back in time?” the historian asked.

“Yes, let me show you.”

The screen sprang to life, showing an image of the lab with the two men sitting in the chairs. The physicist keyed some instructions into his computer and the blue glow above the equipment expanded.

“The probe is a fiber optic cable. As it enters the temporal opening, it will travel back along the Tau axis. It will not appear to us to be moving, but we will see its journey to the past,” Dr. Nkosi explained. “I shall begin.”

On the screen, the chairs were suddenly empty, then missing, as the lights in the lab strobed on and off. Brief images of people flickered in and out of existence, and then the building deconstructed, leaving only sunlight on a field green with flowers.

“This was when the lab was built fifteen years ago,” Dr. Nkosi explained.

“Amazing!”

“Yes, but I encountered a problem.”

“A problem?” Dr. Peterson asked.

“Watch,” the physicist said.

On the screen, seasons flickered by, coming to an abrupt stop at an image of several vehicles parked along the road containing the green field.

“Why did you stop?” Dr. Peterson asked.

“This is where time ends,” the physicist replied.

“What do you mean? I can see a car. We can’t be that far back in time. What is that, a Mercury Comet?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Dr. Nkosi said, with a shrug, “But the date is October 18, 1962.”

“October of ’62? Well, it was the height of the Cuban missile crisis. Fairly critical point in history, but my specialty is the early middle ages. Can’t you go back further?”

“I’m afraid not. It appears that time begins at this point.”

Dr. Peterson tsked.

“Of course it doesn’t.”

“I have checked multiple times, and the timeline terminates in this point.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense,” the historian said, and stood to peer at the screen.

“After discovering this barrier, I decided to move the probe in the other direction of the Tau axis.”

“Into the future?”

“Yes, but it too stopped at a point several days into the future. I shall show you.”

With several keystrokes, the image on the screen sped forward to display the two academics sitting in their chairs.

“This is the present. I’ll now send the probe forward.”

The image changed slightly to show the lab empty.

“Could it be that time is too uncertain beyond that point?” the historian asked.

“I considered that possibility, but the end point has remained fixed. It is now just thirty-six minutes from now.”

“Thirty-six minutes?”

“Yes, I was hoping that someone outside physics might have a different perspective on things.”

“You should have asked Carolyn Bates in English,” Dr. Paterson replied. “She writes science fiction.”

“That might have helped, because my conclusion is that we are in a simulation, and that simulation will soon be terminated,” Dr. Nkosi said glumly. “It explains the beginning and end points of the Tau axis.”

“But why?”

“We may never know,” the physicist replied. “Are laboratory rats told why they are being experimented on?"

The door to the lab opened and an Asian gentleman in a suit entered. Dr. Nkosi didn’t recognize the individual; possibly an administrator or lost student. But, then again, it was a weekend and the research laboratories were locked. He’d had to provide Dr. Peterson with a key card.

“Can I help you?”

“Dr. Nkosi, you are doing some amazing work.”

The man couldn’t be someone from the college; his suit was Armani. Was he with the government? Were they planning on weaponizing his discovery?

“Who are you?”

“I am Dr. Phibateakd,” the stranger replied. “You aren’t the first to discover the nature of the timeline, but your research has progressed far beyond the others. None had managed to move forward.

“Not the first?”

“This is the fifth incarnation of this reality,” the stranger answered.

“Why?” Dr. Peterson asked.

“We are studying history, just as you do, doctor.”

The historian shook his head, and turned to the window.

“A simulation? That means that my family, everything I know is fake. I’m fake?”

The stranger smiled.

“The word fake implies a lack of value, Dr. Peterson. In fact, you are very important.”

“In what way?”

“We had to discover if your species was worth salvaging,” the stranger replied.

“That sounds ominous,” the historian muttered.

“We discovered your planet several years ago. Judging from the radioactive decay, we determined there had been a nuclear war 9,848 years in the past. Our protocols require us to determine if such species annihilations are accidental or the product of an inherent suicidal behavior. If accidental, we can recreate the species.”

“We aren’t suicidal,” Paterson stated.

“Aren’t we?” Dr. Nkosi asked.

“To determine that,” the stranger continued, “We used technology based on the same principles that you discovered, Dr. Nkosi, and studied the planet’s past. As individuals, you are not destructive for the most part. As a group, however, you appeared quite dangerous, so it was determined to run a simulation where your species avoided destroying yourselves.”

“That’s why time started in October of 1962,” Paterson muttered.

“Precisely.”

“You said that you ran five simulations,” Dr. Nkosi interrupted. “I assume that we failed the previous four times.”

“Yes. Species destruction was merely postponed,” the stranger answered. “Though the initial nuclear war was averted, regional governments eventually chose to destroy the planet.”

“But we haven’t destroyed ourselves,” Dr. Paterson stated. “Does that mean we’ll be recreated?”

“Unfortunately, no. Your governments are issuing launch orders as we speak.”

Panic filled the historian’s eyes and he grabbed the stranger by the lapels of his expensive jacket.

“Stop it! Make the missiles not explode or something!”

“It would not matter. It is still proof that humanity is too dangerous to salvage.”

“But my children…” Paterson said, as tears ran down the historian’s face.

“Do not worry, we don’t run the simulation to its conclusion,” the alien stranger said. “There will be no fireball. We don’t wish to create unnecessary suffering.”

With a glance from the alien, the sobbing figure of Dr. Peterson disappeared from reality.

Unsurprised by this, Dr. Nkosi turned to the stranger. “Why are you here, then?”

“We were hoping to recruit you to help us. It would be a great loss for someone of your intellect to perish with the inhabitants of this simulation.”

“Despite the fact that I am an artificial creation.”

“Many of us in the Scientific Council are either augmented or fully transferred into synthetic preservation. Age and natural decay are not allowed to take our greatest minds. Your transfer would be no different, and you’ll not need to worry over funding. We believe in the value of pure science.”

Nkosi considered the offer. An unending life dedicated to scientific study.

“I think not. If my species is so dangerous, I should perish with them,” he told the stranger.

“But you as an individual are not violent.”

“I am a product of that violence, “Nkosi replied. “It is safer that I cease to be; so wave your hand and end this.”

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As Dr. Phibateakd exited the simulation, Sartilik reached forward and shut it off with a stubby, gray tentacle of his third arm.

“Should I set up for another generation, Dr. Phibateakd?”

The alien vibrated his cilia in the negative.

“No, we have the data required by the protocols,” he said to the intern. “File the report and notify the constructor fleet that the planet is ready for development.”

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