

ZOLINA REED



Omni

CITY OF DESIRES

OMNI: City of Desires

Zolina Reed

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May your fantasies continue to be your light.

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PART ONE

Sienna

‘Unfuckingbelievable!’

Runtime error. Sienna stared in disbelief at the most detestable phrase in all of programming history floating on her quad-hologram interface.

The words pulsed softly in green, as though a go-ahead for her to unleash the frustration clawing at her insides.

After three days of energy patches, undercooked burgers and an aggregate of exactly ten hours of sleep, this was what it had all culminated in: a sixth runtime error. *What was she doing wrong?*

Sienna tried hard to relax. She slowly released a ragged breath of exhaustion, punched in another error-tracking algorithm and then lowered her head to the desk. With only three weeks left to the event she had been planning for all year, she barely had enough time to organise a user validation session with her colleagues and still meet the submission deadline for the competition. The Innovative Partner Award was the biggest event hosted by Ark Technologies and it was only hosted every 5 years, a year longer than the Olympics. At the end of the event, in a Nobel Prize fashion, the best software that was submitted and judged by a panel of the most experienced and respected programmers in the world would be announced. She had always dreamed of walking away with the coveted award and this year she could feel it in her core that she would be the winner. As the number one innovator she would fast forward to the partner track in her company. She would even have enough clout to start her own company. She would have a million options available and the time to choose what was right for her. But before any of that could happen, she needed to finish the program.

Sienna was determined to put in as much work as she could before she was

forced to take a break. She had been running on energy drinks for the last 48 hours and she did not want to make that 72 hours. The last time she was awake that long her friend Brie made a video of her sprouting out incoherent sentences.

‘If I type one more line of code’ she muttered to herself while her eyes involuntarily closed. After a few seconds, or maybe minutes, her eyes fluttered open. ‘It’s systems shut down for this weary carcass.’ She knew she was at the end of her ability to coherently think.

An irresistible vision of the nomination event clouded her mind.

She saw herself sitting in the audience, dressed in the electric blue tunic suit she’d always pictured herself wearing to the event (it was actually hanging in her wardrobe); CEO Ark Nathan, with his characteristic lop-sided smile, is announcing the names of the company developers nominated for ‘Innovative Partner’. His grin broadens as he lists the benefits that come with the award:

‘A lifetime membership access to off-world vacationing locations including luxury Moons, Xyva and Aurien, a limited platinum edition 2050 Tesla Speedster model. And finally - he looks up, eyes brimming with barely concealed pride – a partner position at Ark technologies.’

He looks into the audience and his smile widens. ‘Without further ado’, he says ‘the 15th partner award for innovation goes to-’

She leans forward ever so slightly as she prepares to rise to her feet, the applause already deafening.

But he doesn’t say ‘Sienna Fitzgerald’. She waits and waits, but he never says her name.

Sienna’s eyes fluttered open. The dream like scenario brought her back to her reality. ‘No way that’s going to happen’, she said as she sat upright in her chair, running a hand through her short red hair. ‘No fucking way.’

‘Progress report’, she said aloud, her voice strong yet laced with exhaustion. A

calendar dotted irregularly with red and green dots appeared on the hologram interface before her. A small green box tagged 73% and a red box tagged 27% sat at the bottom of the screen.

‘Not bad.’ Her nose twitched, and a small tired smile stretched the corners of her lips. She was ahead of her schedule by 35 hours. *35.08 hours*, her mind corrected.

And only a little progress to show for it. She flicked a finger and the screens went black. What she needed in that moment was one massive break and she was going to take it. Her creativity and problem solving depended on it, as did her sanity.

As she forced herself up from her chair and walked towards her bedroom, she remembered her friend Brie’s version of ‘massive break’ which included a guy and a night in bed that would require 24 hours for recovery. *Silly rotten girl*, she smiled. Brie’s stories were often about colourful escapades involving several men or women, all at once or in a series. Sienna had to admit that if she needed ideas for the kind of mind-numbing fun that could get her creative juices bubbling again, Brie was the go-to.

Brie and Sienna pretty much hit it off when they met at an annual Holo-Programmer conference dinner. They both sat at the same table and except for a courteous exchange they didn’t speak to each other. During an off-world food connoisseur session, they were the only ones standing at the ‘Moon Tael’ exhibition. ‘These things taste really delicious’ Brie gestured at a pile of yellowish purple sprouts and Sienna joined her at the platter. ‘Have you tried those tiny fluorescent tubers?’

They spent the rest of the session talking about off-world cuisines and at the end of the dinner, exchanged contact details. That was when Sienna found out she’d been working for five years as a holo-programmer at Mid-City Cooperative, the third largest holo-programming company in the Midwest - and Ark

Technologies' biggest competitor.

They both made a pact that if they met up again any discussion about work would be taboo. And they did meet again. Brie invited her to a birthday party at her upscale apartment in West Fair, an area procured exclusively for employees of Mid-City Cooperative. Sienna had never seen so many coloured vape cubes in one place. Vape cubes were the rave of the moment; essentially these items had the texture and taste of fruit bubble gum and the kick of the strongest alcohol one could use as comparison. Upon ingesting the cube, the user would begin to puff colourful vapours in the air. It only lasted a few seconds, but it made for a very colourful night out.

Over the next year they met often for dinner or vape cubes over the weekend. More than once, Brie made jokes that they should both resign from their jobs where recognition of their talents was so seldom given and set up their own holo-game company. Sienna, who knew without doubt that they would be very successful - possibly wealthy - if they did so, was always ready with a reply that sounded closer to the 'fuck an independent company' end of the spectrum than the 'hell yea, that sounds good'. Making partner at Ark technology was her all-consuming passion and if she ever entertained thoughts of an independent company, it was in the event of her being sacked from her current job – which at the moment was less likely to happen than snow on planet Mars.

Sienna's time disc flashed, and she wondered if Brie would be free for rotisserie veal that night. She needed someone to distract her, if only for an hour. She switched on her holo-flex; there was a reminder notification bobbing at one corner of the screen. 'Remind me, Tim,' she said in a low tired voice. She was pacing in her room, in an attempt to try and keep her eyes open for a few more seconds.

'Make a decision about when to go to The Omni.' A crisp male AI voice read out. It had a British accent, which Sienna found very sexy. In fact, she had spent more than a few hours reprograming the AI to have him sound her version of

perfect.

‘I suppose there’s no better time than this weekend,’ she replied aloud. ‘Book a 9-hour break from 1900 today. Location, home.’ *The rotisserie veal would have to wait.*

‘9-hour break for 1900 hours on the 26th of August 2850. Location ‘Home’. Please confirm, Sienna.’

‘Go ahead, Tim,’ she confirmed.

It had cost more than a quarter of her monthly credits, but she hoped the experience would provide the kind of creative edge she needed to nudge her software design into genius status - if the gospel according to Jon was anything to go by. Her co-programmer had come to work one morning, all excited and raving about The Omni.

‘Sienna, you won’t believe it!’ Jon could barely sit still, his blonde hair swishing from side to side with every movement. ‘The Omni is some kind of miracle. You *definitely* need to get a ticket ASAP!’

The Omni was touted as an ultra-modern hyperreality wonder. Commissioned in 2840, the original architectural plans were meant for a physical entertainment facility on luxury planet Ulysses. More than a dozen level five off-world architects were contracted to work on the plan for an entertainment centre that could not only withstand - but also took advantage of - the planet’s peculiar atmospheric dynamics.

The plan’s execution, as far as luxury planet Ulysses was concerned, was a total disaster. A bunch of engineers miscalculated the angle of certain buildings and they collapsed during the inauguration of the prototype buildings, killing several employees.

But then Eurasian real estate billionaire Kamal Rachman procured the 3-D architectural plans a year later and converted them entirely into a highly

advanced virtual reality program. The program, in all respects, was out of this world. Kamal's program eliminated the use of visual wearables or any observable user interface by introducing a patch containing nano-computers. Once the patch was applied to the base of the skull, micro needles released these nano-computers into the brain which swiftly uploaded a user's consciousness to The Omni. A morph script then transformed the user into a variety of pre-selected virtual characters ranging from celebrities to fantasy creatures derived from the individual's imagination. Another ingenious feature in the program was a time warp module that could alter a user's perception of time so while a user was spending a few days of holiday in The Omni, only a couple of hours would have transpired in real life.

'You sound like you found some pretty good MCAT, Jon.' She didn't even bother to look away from her screens.

'I'm telling you, Sienna. I'm about to blow and when I do, remember I've given you the primer.' He chuckled with feverish excitement, whirling around in his swivel chair.

'Whatever, Jon' She waved a hand dismissively. 'Just don't get caught on the premises high on MCAT.'

Two weeks later, Jon resigned. Less than a year later, in her news feed was a clip about a new start up that had just secured 160 million credits to fund a revolutionary jump passage software. The name of its founder was Jonan Ettanl, her former co-programmer.

I'm about to blow and when I do, remember I've given you the primer, he had said. So be it. She was happy for him and she was happy he told her what gave him the push to make his decisions. Because it helped her to decide to try The Omni experience herself. The rut she was in could not get any worse.

Three days earlier she spotted a multi-deal package for The Omni Avant Garde tour on a holo-ad display outside her office and it was so fortuitous she acted

immediately, and luckily so, because there was only one ticket left for the deal.

For all it was worth she might have just blown money on some poorly-timed entertainment, but she needed an intervening event to jump start her creative juices and The Omni may be just what she needed. Sienna-in-control would have first done her home work; looked for a dozen or more case studies that supported Jon's testimonial before committing a large chunk of her money. Admittedly, her carelessness, rare as it were, was a sign of her desperation and she could recognize her desperation quite well. As an only child faced with the prospect of homelessness after an accident on a jump trip killed both parents, she had to make hard but necessary decisions which shaped her life. With scant savings and massive debts, she dropped out of college and ploughed through various odd jobs to fund a certification course in holo-programming. Fortunately, the move paid off. Her first job was as a junior holo-programmer at Capital HP and within two years she moved up in ranks but switched to Ark technologies. Her promotion at Capital HP was worth a bit more than her current salary at Ark technologies but reaching partner would skyrocket her earnings above anything her contemporaries at Capital HP could ever earn. It was partner or bust. She could feel that something major was about to happen for her and she wanted all her energies focused on becoming a partner.

'I'll be coming for blood, Jon' She said aloud as she cleared her desk. 'If this turns out to be just one really expensive psychedelic trip Jon will not remain unscathed.' She didn't really mean it, but with such a rash decision she needed someone to blame if it was all a waste.

Her reflection peered back at her from a digital mirror. With her short hair-cut and male geeky glasses, a quick glance might register a very attractive boy. Not until the eyes rested on the not-too modest twin mounds of flesh, just inches below her neckline, straining against her customary black knit jumper.

Not that she'd ever bothered about boys - or girls for that matter - and what they thought of her; every ounce of strength, concern, and care she was capable of,

she had funnelled doggedly into her six-year career as a holo-programmer. The result was a mouth-watering seven figure monthly salary in a blue-chip company with benefits most of her friends from school (who were all now settled with families) could only dream of. But still no boyfriend. As far as her career was concerned, it was just not worth it. Her first date ever was in college – His name was Ray, short for something she could not seem to bring to mind. She remembered his flowing black hair and red Honda super racer that made him quite a ‘catch’ from the perspective of other girls. It was just her curiosity egging her on and that curious cat was quickly killed. One awkward smooch or two later, they were done. *Raylond? Rayvin? Rayvid?* That experience became some kind of template for future relationships.

Puch, Caesar, Thomas, they all moved in and out of her life without incident and without her being able to recall much about them. She was staring at the prospect of spending her life alone. All the friends she had over the years were worried that she would end up alone, but it didn’t seem at all a scary prospect.

Her apartment was a tiny two-bedroom space furnished with the bare essentials. One look would reveal that she was not at all used to having visitors over, but she was okay with things being just the way they were.

Sienna had a slow, albeit very thorough shower and ate some leftover pasta. Her chrono showed 18:53, by the time she sat cross-legged on her pallet and activated the holographic instructions for ‘The Omni’ package.

The hologram of a smiling lady in a white off-world hostess uniform appeared.

‘Good evening, Sienna! Thank you for choosing The Omni. I am Salem and I am thrilled to be your guide on this adventure.

Partly excited and extremely fatigued, Sienna started to follow the instructions.

‘Peel off the protective slip on the active surface of the patch’, Salem said as she demonstrated.

Sienna slowly Peeled the protective strip, hesitating only slightly. Jon would be

her first call when she came back to reality.

‘Flatten the active surface against the back of your neck, careful to avoid your hairline’

Sienna made sure to lift her short red mane out of the way as she planted the patch on the back of her neck. It felt cold, but that soon changed as it clung to her skin and the sensation associated with it disappeared completely.

‘Assume a comfortable position on your back’

Sienna laid on her back, staring into the ceiling, but not really seeing anything. She really needed a break. This was the best time to explore The Omni without feeling like she wasted precious programming time.

‘Would you like to choose a character association now?’ Salem asked, pulling Sienna back to the task at hand.

She had browsed through all the character selections earlier on an AR ad; she had no interest in becoming Marga Khiera, the famous female jump pilot, Miss World Whenever or ‘any bipod that had ever existed’.

‘Miryn.’ She made her decision in an instant and it felt right. ‘I want to be a Miryn.’

‘Great Selection Sienna’ Salem responded, in a tone a fraction more enthusiastic than when she was giving instructions.

Miryn, a rare East Sumerian cat hybrid known for its fiercely independent nature, was the only pet she owned growing up. Yes, she had the same name as her species, but it was fitting. Miryn did exactly as she pleased, with the entire family indulging her whims shamelessly. The cat had little tolerance for her more domestic suitors, and quiet nights were often interrupted with the terrified shriek of some harassed Tom. She was repossessed as bank property shortly after the banks revealed her father’s bankruptcy, following her parents’ death.

Sometimes Sienna viewed herself as Miryn, a creature who valued secrecy, was

powerfully independent, and only focused on what she wanted. Sometimes the image waned but lately, as the nominations for partner loomed, so though herself to be more like her Miryn.

The smile on the face of the hologram appeared to falter. *“I’m sorry but the system does not...”*

‘Of course, you won’t’. Years ago, she’d systematically trawled countless databases, popular and obscure, looking for regen labs with exotic cat samples to no avail.

‘East Sumerian cat hybrid.’

“I’m sorry but...”

She knew this would happen and had made arrangements to ensure that she experienced the Omni in a way that she would never forget. Her ultimate goal was to get a creative boost that would propel her to make her finished project the best her company had ever seen. She reached for her holodrive and flicked a file to the hologram. It took her about two years, but she believed she had created the perfect code for her pet Miryn.

The hologram projector took about a minute to read the file and adjust it for the Omni environment. She knew it was good code, but The Omni was created and controlled by the best technology and development in the world. She waited and waited. The minute seemed more like an hour, as she dreaded being told that her Miryn was not good enough.

Excellent choice, Sienna! The hologram trilled. In exactly two minutes and fifty-nine seconds, your exciting trip to The Omni will begin. We wish you a relaxing and fun-filled experience!

‘Thank you’ she muttered, shutting her eyes as anxiety started to cause her hands to shake. It was ‘Go Time’. The last thing she experienced, as consciousness took its leave, was a floating sensation. She was weightlessly drifting and then she started floating towards the sky, or maybe it was just a bright light.

And then everything went black.

PART TWO

The Omni

Her eyes fluttered open. She noticed that her vision was unfocused, and her senses were all acting a little messed up. After a few blinks and a lot of mental readjusting, her eyes focused on an opaque glass ceiling that shimmered as she moved. It was as though glow worms were darting across a screen dotted with an endless spatter of tiny glows. She tried unsuccessfully to move right hand to her forehead and knew instantly that something was different, but it was good different. Or at least she hoped so. She knew she was in a room, but she was unable to take it in, because her body was unaccustomed to moving. Everything felt different. She felt different. The scent of the unfamiliar environment slowly seeped into her conscious mind and she started to feel tingles all over her body. She closed her eyes and willed herself to manoeuvre the wake-up hurdles. A few seconds later she opened her eyes and the room appeared. She was in the middle of the room lying on a pallet, staring through a clear ceiling at a brightly lit night sky; what had appeared to be glow worms were the luminous exhaust of hovercrafts streaking across the sky in all the colours of the rainbow.

She felt the pull of gravity as she lifted her hands, quickly getting accustomed to the weight. As she reached towards her throbbing temples, she caught a glimpse of her arms and an animal sound of raw excitement escaped her lips, startling her. Her hands were covered in tan, black-spotted fur that looked and felt like velvet on her skin. Each finger was tipped with elegant black talons that made her fill with emotions she had never before had the opportunity to feel.

She felt powerful, very powerful – and sexy. *Sexy as hell*. The thought sat like an alien, but seductive, intrusion in her mind. She pictured herself wrapped in the arms of a rugged creature of pure masculine beauty, and her body's reaction – the strange stirrings of lust in her groin - somehow seemed familiar and strange at the same time. She felt like herself, but maybe with a little more of her inner

self. She felt like Sienna 2.0.

‘I need a mirror!’ She leapt to her feet and immediately a wave of nausea struck, sending her sprawling back onto the pallet. She giggled as she spread her limbs luxuriously across the pallet. ‘A queen in heat’ Another giggle. To giggle like a school girl twice in one day, and worse one hour, was definitely new territory. But she felt a greater sense of freedom and she was not intent on holding in the reigns too much. She needed to relax and get some creative juices flowing and that is exactly what she was going to do.

Her second attempt took a great amount of will power, but she was on her feet and she was a lot steadier. With only a few steps the dizziness was completely gone, and she was in complete control. Her eyes slowly scanned the room. Everything stood out in more razor-sharp detail than she was accustomed to with her glasses. She was clearly in a hotel room, furnished tastefully with simple but expensive looking post-modern furniture. In one corner of the room, a frothy waterfall tumbled within a full-length frame. As she closed in to inspect it, a humanoid East Samarian Cat Hybrid in a white gold trimmed bathrobe suddenly appeared in the frame.

There was a brief second of panic before realisation struck.

‘Damn!’ She raised her hands to her face in admiration. Noting that the hybrid in before her did the same. ‘You are beautiful, girl!’

Honey coloured cat eyes peeked out at her, with a delicate oval face, framed by black hair that cascaded thickly down her back. She slowly shrugged off the bathrobe to reveal her breasts. After careful consideration and examination, she decided they were perfect-sized, sitting proportionate to her small frame. Her torso was beautifully sculpted and covered in fuzzy white fur that faded to tan as it neared her pubic area. Her legs were seductively muscular and the talons on her feet were a bit shorter than those on her fingers, but they looked equally beautiful. She felt a twitch and saw movement behind her. As soon as the fright

had built up in her stomach it dissipated. She had a tail. She giggled again, a bit longer than the first two giggles. She knew she was about to experience one of the best vacations of her lifetime because she already felt amazing. She felt different, in that she was more relaxed, and she welcomed the feeling.

‘Time to explore’ She purred, turning away from the mirror to give the room a sweeping glance. She located the bathroom and made her way towards it. ‘Location map please.’

On the bedside stool – which was a black slab of wood resting on a crouching metal Miryn - a holocom device buzzed to life.

A colour hologram map appeared above the device and followed her towards the bathroom. Smoothly gliding across the wall.

She looked at herself in the mirror again. She felt total admiration. This made her realise that she really needed to get out of the room and see others. She could not imagine what other creations she would see! They could admire her, while she got the chance to admire them. She moved towards the shower and the glass door slid open so that she could enter. When the door closed behind her, she was surrounded by visuals from the outdoors as if she was by a watering hole. At first, she felt a little exposed, but that is what she wanted right? To have a different experience. The room was designed to make her experience memorable, so she knew there was a lot more it had to offer, and she welcomed it.

‘Top recommended bars, audio’ she said to the AI as she selected the cherry blossoms shower and felt it cascading down her body.

A cheerful male AI voice erupted from the walls of the shower as she lathered her body with creamy foam. ‘Hi, Sienna. I am Tom and I’ve got an excellent selection of bars across The Omni. May I have your specifications, please?’ The AI had a British accent which made his voice quite soothing to her.

‘Least activity, decent view.’

‘That would be The LireQ, Sa-’

‘Book a place for me at The LireQ for – what’s the time now, Tom?’

‘The time is 2043.’

‘2130. Book a place at The LireQ for 2130. Is it a short walk away?’

‘Yes Sienna, it will take you approximately ten minutes on foot to arrive at your destination.’

‘Ten minutes is good, Tom.’

The warm water gave her a soothing massage as it hit her body, washing away all the cherry blossom, except for the scent that tingled her nose. It was not too overpowering, even with a super sensitive nose. The air jets purred to life and in a few seconds she was completely dried. The wall parted to reveal a selection of clothes in muted colours. It was like the bathroom had moved, or at least the shower had, because she was now on the opposite side of the room, or so it seemed.

‘Extra marks for your attention to detail Tom!’ She smiled. Rummaging through the selection she found outfits that were similar to the combinations she wore on her occasional club nights with Brie. ‘Pretty presumptuous of you to think I’m only here to party and mess about, Tom.’ Her nose twitched, and her tail flickered about uncontrollably.

And then it struck her: the whole programme was possibly feeding off her stored memories to provide customisations. *What had the gods wrought?*

‘You’re a fucking genius, Kamal.’ Sienna chose a Mercury-red short bodycon dress and black thigh-high boots. ‘And I...’ She stood before the mirror, twisting this way and that. ‘...am officially a fucking super-hero.’

She peeled off a gel earpiece from the holocom device that was on the bedside stool and flattened it against one earlobe. Now she could take Tom wherever she went. ‘Ready to go, little cowboy.’

An EDM remix of Rednex ‘cotton eyed Joe’ erupted from the walls.

She snapped her fingers and the music stopped as suddenly as it had started. ‘Sienna,’ she said aloud to herself, ‘remember not to use references in future. You never know what these overzealous AIs will spring at you.’

She evaluated her outfit in the mirror for the final time. She was starting to love looking at herself. ‘Just a few drinks and some level-headed entertainment, said no one ever in The Omni.’

And Sienna Fitzgerald was no exception. At least not as this creature of elegance.

‘Exit, please.’

‘Prepare for exit.’ Tom said in her ear.

A square of blue light materialised under her feet. It flickered and suddenly she was standing on what appeared to be a high-street crowded with a mix of human and humanoid beings. It felt like she’d just stepped into Comic Con. A middle-aged John Boyega strode past with a strikingly beautiful Vulcan model on one arm. At one end of the street, a Scarlett paused to exhale a cloud of yellow vapour and then climbed into a sleek black hover-pod three humanoid reptiles had just stepped down from.

‘Fucking incredible.’ She laughed, taking in all the beautiful and the aura of excitement that was starting to affect her too.

Behind her in the distance was a blue-lit skyscraper emblazoned at the top with the same alien calligraphy that had been embroidered in the pallet sheets and pillows of the accommodation she’d arrived in. She thought it meant ‘The Omni’, but she wasn’t completely sure.

A blue strip of light stretched across the street, from under her feet, as she took her first step, and two thinner tributaries branched off from the strip in various alternative directions. ‘Interpret, Tom.’

‘The first alternative route will take you by the fountain of Athens which is located exactly 450 seconds from here but is 104 seconds longer,’ Tom explained. The first tributary turned a shade of pink and pulsed briefly. ‘The second alternative route will take you uptown to some incredibly popular off-world fashion galleries.’

All that could come later after a few drinks, she decided, continuing down the central strip of light. Neytiri, swaddled in richly embroidered fabric, winked at her from the doorway of an upscale body salon tricked out like an aquarium. ‘Come experience the wonders of the Omaticaya cyber ladies.’

Sienna grinned back. ‘Cats don’t like water, where I’m from.’

‘Oh no water at all!’ The Orange lady appeared shocked.

Before her eyes, the building morphed into lush greenery with a ceiling of rich green vegetation.

‘Wow.’ Sienna shook her head in wonder. ‘Remind me to pay a visit on my way back, Tom’

‘The orange lady laughed delightedly as the building transformed back to the giant aquarium.

A pulsing light from above caught Sienna’s attention. A quartet of colourful escort rovers hovered parallel to each other and then fused swiftly together into a single escort rover. Sex in the air. It hadn’t caught on yet back in the Mid-West, but it was becoming increasingly popular for escorts to fuse rovers with clients to form temporary floating bedrooms. After business was taken care of fly half way at light speed across the world to meet with some other client. It was highly profitable but equally as risky. Rovers were expensive vehicles and it was not infrequent to hear of escorts or clients that were robbed of their vehicles on their way to some off-world liaison.

She kept walking, the central blue light strip pulsing brighter, possibly to indicate she was closer to her destination.

After what seemed like a few seconds, a neon-lit 'The LireQ' display came into view. The building itself was a 3-storey cloud-shaped structure, its aquarium walls teeming with exotic aquatic creatures that were not likely to exist elsewhere. If the number of hovercrafts that touched down or took off from hover-ports on its roof was anything to go by, there was a full-scale party indoors. A couple of smiling blue-skinned models approached her at the door. 'XKT?' They chorused softly, and one held up a clear pouch of tiny pink pills.

'No but I'll have some vape cubes if you've got them.'

Another model held out a small vape box, his smile widening. 'We got you, darling.' They chorused again, giggling excitedly. 'Compliments of The LireQ.'

'Thanks, weird guys' Sienna laughed as the blue models disappeared inside the building. She was not much of a party girl, but she knew she was now more receptive than ever. 'Humanoid dispensers! who would have thought?'

As soon as she popped the vape cube in her mouth the floor parted beneath her; there was a brief feeling of floating downwards and then she was in a pocket of dancing lights and pounding club music. It wasn't the walls of the building that was the aquarium – the building itself was a massive aquarium. Water creatures darted around and between guests as they writhed and contorted to the music. While the sensation was like being underwater, she could breathe and move around without difficulty, as though she was in the open air. A flute glass of pink champagne floated towards her.

'You've got to be fucking kidding me' She stared. 'That was just in my head!' She wished Brie was there to experience this with her, it would definitely be more fun, or maybe just crazier. Sienna smiled at the thought.

The Omni is some kind of miracle. Those were Jon's words, and he wasn't wrong by a stretch. The Omni wasn't just some VR fleshpot; it was a mind reschooling centre.

She took a first tentative sip, paused, and then drained the glass. 'Brie you'd run

mad if you were here.’ Numerous tiny flower-like fish fluttered around her feet, and swiftly arranged themselves into various alphabets to spell ‘*Hey gorgeous*’

‘Are you flirting, pretty little fish?’ She giggled.

They rearranged themselves again. *Enjoyed your champagne?*

‘Don’t tell me you piss champagne-’ She stooped to caress them.

‘Nope, they don’t’ A voice boomed softly behind her. ‘but aren’t they the most adorable fish you’ve ever seen?’

She turned. Stooping behind her was a well-built humanoid lion in a green bomber jacket; dreadlocks, the same gold colour as his beard, cascaded halfway down his back instead of a mane. ‘An extinct breed from Atlantis although they didn’t exactly respond to telepathy’ he explained. But she was too distracted by his presence to hear him.

‘First time around here?’ Luminous sky-blue eyes sparkled as he smiled. He was obviously aware of her reaction to him.

‘Aren’t we all?’ She smiled back, forcing the smile and the words from her lips. ‘I feel a thousand visits here would always be a first time.’ She didn’t want to be awkward or cheesy, but it was too late.

‘Couldn’t have said it any better. This is my sixth visit here and I still feel like I just arrived.’

His eyes grew distant with a look of dreamy awe as he spoke. She felt her belly flutter. It might have been the ambience, the champagne, perhaps his untamed male scent that was enveloping her or everything at once, but she’d never felt so powerfully attracted to a humanoid or person before. She was no longer the awkward little Sienna. *A fucking cat in heat, that’s what she was.*

‘There’s always something to challenge my perspective and nudge me above the limits in here’ he continued, pressing a talon-tipped finger against his temple. ‘It’s always a re-birthing experience.’

She remembered Jon, the moment he walked into the office that morning after his visit to The Omni. ‘*Rebirth*’ was the single word that had crossed her mind when she saw his face flush with unfathomable excitement. Some people had layers of their mind peeled back by their experiences; but for others, their experiences mashed and remoulded their minds, like playdough, into something entirely new, a rebirth. Jon, an average junior level holo-programmer, suddenly the CEO of a multimillion-dollar company seemingly overnight.

‘A rebirth’ She whispered. ‘It’s worth it all.’

‘It is.’ He cast a sidelong glance at her.

‘That wasn’t meant for your big ears.’ She blushed a little. But she hoped it was hidden beneath her fur. To avert his eyes, she waved bye to the cute fish and stood tall.

‘Super cat hearing’ He chuckled. ‘Can’t help it.’ He stood too.

‘I see your plan is ‘show off till she drops dead’” She drawled. He looked even better standing. His masculinity was intoxicating. She felt like she would jump him then and there. *What was in that drink?*

A roar of laughter escaped his lips. ‘Touché, says Leo’ He held out a hand with a small bow.

‘Are you kidding me?’ Sienna chuckled. ‘Leo?’

‘The lion because I’m Leo.’ He laughed again. ‘It’s a bit more forgiving when you look at it that way, isn’t it?’

‘Still corny as hell’ she responded as her lips spread in a genial grin and she offered her hand. ‘Miryn.’

‘Miryn!’ His eyes widened in appreciation. ‘Now that’s a proper ‘fangs bared sexy’ kind of name.

‘Would you like to sink those pretty little fangs into some real adrenalin-pumping action, Miryn?’

‘What have you got-?’

Without warning, he slipped his arm around her and took one mighty leap upwards, all in one clean movement.

‘-in mind?’ She stared, looked about her. They were suddenly standing among hover-pods on the roof of the building. ‘Is it the champagne or you just pulled off one hell of a party trick?’

Leo laughed. ‘This building is quite a wonder of its own, but in its barest form it is just one massive drop of water.’

‘Everywhere makes for an entry or exit’ Sienna nodded. ‘Pure brilliance.’

A hatch opened on one hovercraft and he gestured. ‘Shall we?’

She hesitated for a minute, then was reminded that she was there to have fun, so she straddled a hoverbike instead. Her tail flickered with excitement. ‘This looks like more fun.’

‘Well, let’s find out then.’ His face lit with a grin as he slipped onto the hoverbike, his hands resting on each side of her waist, as he ensured that he was securely seated behind her. Her eyes peered down with uncertainty at the glowing featureless dashboard of the hoverbike and then an idea struck her.

She remembered the heart thumping thrill, plastered against Ray as he powered through Central City on his roaring ‘speed devil’, how the dashboard ramped into fiery colours with increased acceleration. The dashboard before her smoothly moulded into that of a Honda Super racer.

‘You definitely know your super racer.’ Leo sounded impressed.

Sienna laughed. ‘I’d argue otherwise. Hope you’ve got your will all signed up and shit.’

His faced looked stricken for a few seconds then faded to a grin. ‘There is no pain or death in the Omni’, he said as he smiled at her.

The hoverbike slowly lifted into the air. It was noticeably unsteady, but that

lasted only a few seconds. Before she knew it, they shot into the night with a spurt of blue light trailing them.

She felt his fingers tighten ever so slightly around her waist as she launched the super racer in a smooth barrel roll at top speed towards a cluster of leaf-shaped glass buildings.

‘I bet you’re some top shot super speed racer in real life’, Leo raised his voice to be heard above the wind whipping past them.

‘And you must be an actual lion in real life!’ Sienna screamed back, letting out a purr of excitement.

The super racer wove swiftly between the buildings and then angled upwards in a wide sweeping arc again.

She felt his weight shift at the rear end of the super racer, and suddenly she was hurtling through the air headfirst in a free fall, towards the glass roof of a leaf-shaped building. Powerful arms snatched at her scant seconds before impact and she slammed into Leo’s body, his wild scent suffusing her nostrils.

When Sienna opened her eyes, which she hadn’t realised were shut, she was lying with her back against the glass roof; Leo’s eyes, radiant with intensity, were fixed on her as he lay mere inches away.

Sienna let out a hysterical laugh. She could not help it. ‘I’m this close to swiping at your eyes with bared claws-’

He leaned forward and kissed her lips lightly.

She shoved at him half-heartedly, smiling. ‘You can’t bribe me with a kiss, Leo.’

‘For a moment, I thought you’d freak out and -’

‘Oh, shut up!’

She leaned towards him this time, her lips meeting his in the same gentle way he had kissed her before. His hands trailed down her torso as he moved closer to her, the full length of their bodies side by side and touching. A purr of ecstasy

escaped her lips as his fingers moved further downwards and settled between her thighs. He stroked her lightly as if asking permission and she depended the kiss and pushed into him. He inserted a finger inside her and she purred loudly as she got instantly wet. He inserted another finger and she nearly screamed at the sensation. Her pulse beat fast with excitement and his fingers were moving at the same pace.

‘Fuck Leo’ she said aloud. Sienna reached for his dick that was now digging into her side. She ran a finger gently around the tip and then gripped it with her warm palm. Slowly at first and then increasingly faster she worked his cock, which caused it to enlarge so much that she could no longer hold it. Leo Stopped her hands and hoisted her onto him so that she straddled him. He took her breasts into his mouth and hands alternately, using his tongue to tease her nipples until they hardened. Unable to restrain herself anymore Sienna used her knees to lift her so that he could slip inside her.

The glass roof became like rubber, stretching with their weight until it deposited them both on a pallet within the building. The roof closed above them and a soft pink light and floating red petals started to float about the room. They could see their bodies and the petals, but that was it. Sienna slowly rode Leo’s dick, so that she could get accustomed to his size and the way he felt inside her. She purred with every thrust and so did he. They were both lost for words, but the sounds were all they needed to express the fulfilment of their desire. Leo sat upright and braced himself with his left hand while he used his right hand to pull her closer. They both felt how much deeper they were connected. Their eyes met and all they could see was desire. Leo Kissed her hard and fast, moving his lips to her breasts. In one smooth move he flipped her onto her back and buried himself as deep as he could inside her while his lips devoured her mouth. Sienna was beyond a regular climax. The grip she had on his dick was pulsing uncontrollably. Her body clenched, and she could not even purr as she was before. She felt her eyes gloss over with a thin layer of tears and she clung to

Leo's back, her talons sinking into his flesh. Everything was involuntary, but she had never felt so satisfied in her life. Leo flipped her onto all fours and plunged his dick inside her only a few more time before he too exploded. His hands on her breasts and his semen emptying inside her he roared softly and then they both collapsed onto the pallet.

It took a few seconds, or maybe minutes, before they could speak, or even look at each other, as they were quietly contemplating their own thoughts. When their eyes met, they both erupted into laughter.

'That was - incredible.' Sienna finally said. 'Like everything else is... so incredible.'

Leo smiled, his eyes fixed on her. 'I know what you mean. I felt it too Miryn', he smiled. He pulled her into him and they started at the glass ceiling that was now very transparent, although the room was still basically dark.

She liked having him close to her. His warmth and the smell of sex was intoxicating. 'Why do you come here so often?' Sienna asked.

Leo seemed to take a minute to think before he answered. 'My dreams as a kid were always of magic, of a place beyond the restrictions of physical laws. And when I first came here, I knew for certain that there might be crazy dreams, wild dreams, but never impossible dreams. Whenever I return to this place, it's an attempt to take that bit of magic back to my world.'

'Isn't that what we all wish for?' There was a wistful note to her tone. It was all there, the fuels and the flame, but nothing was catching fire yet in her mind. There was still relatively a lot of time to mull over the ideas that were simmering in her mind, but everything felt fuzzy and incomplete at the moment. 'I have dreams too and this place makes it all seem a bit more possible. I have already done things I thought impossible, you being one of those things.' Sienna smiles at that. She was already stepping out of the box she created for herself and it felt good.

‘What do you do in real life?’

‘Oh, you mean besides being a cat?’ She raised a sardonic eyebrow.

He waited, his smile widening. The ceiling turned into a mirror and they could see themselves, laced into each other and smiling with satisfaction.

‘I get things done with computer holo-programs.’ She relented finally. ‘At Ark technologies.’

That carelessness, that lowered inhibition. Again. Her mind nudged a warning, not quite overpowered by the high of her post-coital bliss. *But Sienna wasn’t in charge, at least not tonight.* She thought. *Miryn was.* Miryn, still thrumming from the cocoon of the sexual pleasure she’d been rebirthed from, did as she pleased and when she pleased, trusting the reins of a certain wild animal instinct.

‘What do you do?’ she asked.

‘I am what they call an architect’, he responded with a short laugh. ‘But most days I feel like a slave, because I work for others and not myself’.

Sienna understood and told him as much. She told him that she was driven by only one goal and that she did not know what she would do if it was not realised. She told him where she saw herself in the future and told him that her only hindrance was that she was stuck in a special project she was working on. She told him why she was in The Omni, and how much she needed her experience to clear her mind and inspire her.

His eyes were darkened in thought as he listened to her. Without a word, he rose to his feet and held out a hand.

‘Where are we going?’ She grasped his hand and he hoisted her to her feet.

‘To find some inspiration, but first we have to see to her clothes.’

Fully dressed he pulled her into his side as the ceiling became like rubber and descended into the room for them. On the glass outer roof Leo straddled the hoverbike and then hoisted Sienna onto it before him. ‘I am flying,’ he said. She

leaned into him as he took charge of the controls.

‘How exactly do you find inspiration? Strutting on the streets?’

Leo chuckled. ‘It’s funny because you actually got it right.’

The hoverbike floated into the air slowly and then shot into the night, leaving a silver trail behind it.

Sienna wasn’t sure how far they had travelled or how long it took. the hoverbike flew swiftly through a maze of towering luxury buildings of various shapes and then slowed down over what appeared to be a lake surrounded by a huge forest.

‘What’s this place?’

As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she realised that what had looked like trees and plants were not even vegetation but thousands of wires and damaged mechanical parts. It was more like a junk yard than anything else.

‘Your sense of romance is clearly broken.’ She laughed nervously.

Leo grinned, slipping an arm around her waist. The warmth of his body was reassuring, but she was still not impressed. ‘This is the greatest place on The Omni. You know why?’

‘Why, Leo the lion?’

‘Everybody wants to enjoy the polished beauty, the efficiency and the creativity of The Omni. But few want to sink their hands into the very mess that created The Omni.’

She turned to him, eyes shining as realisation dawned. He nodded with a knowing smile. ‘You are kidding right?’ They were at one of the corners of The Omni universe. The wires were just the raw ends of the overall creation, waiting to be turned into something magical to extend the edge of the universe.

‘This is the very matter that The Omni comprises of. Sooner or later, everyone with a true question ends up here. To create their answers. And when you’re done The Omni’s got an evaluation team who will inspect your design structure

and decide where it will be located or if it should be revised. But the effort at creation is a powerful exercise for our imagination and our emotions, if you put your heart into it. You can find real-life applications from this experience, or at least express yourself in a way that you cannot anywhere else.’ He spread his arms, as though parting an invisible curtain. Cables thick as elephants’ trunks parted to reveal a giant glowing dome.

‘A pet project of mine from the last visit.’ He cast a sideways glance as his fingers spread wide apart. The dome unfurled like a sunflower – no, it was indeed one giant glass sunflower with glass petals. The petals slowly revolved, lighting up and bathing the surroundings in a soft yellow glow.

‘It’s so beautiful.’ Sienna’s eyes were fixed on the giant flower, moving with the petals. ‘Is it a building?’

‘I’m pretty positive buildings don’t do this!’ He made an upward gesture with his right hand, palm up and the giant glass flower stretched upwards on a slender green stem. ‘Honestly, I don’t know what it is yet.’

‘And that’s not the point.’ She nodded. It was obvious why he’d chosen this place, this method to coax out the buried creativity in her in a process that was a solution in itself. *Leo understood.*

‘Your turn, Miryn’ He gestured, gripping her hands with his and guiding them forward.

The petals moved in the same direction as their hands, the warm glow broadening in incredible shapes across the lake. It was beautiful.

‘Feel the power.’ She felt Leo’s breath on her neck as he whispered into her ear and tingles started spreading throughout her body. ‘Feel the possibilities.’

He released her hands. She snatched at the air with one hand and made a sweeping movement with the other. A bunch of luminous colourful wires swirled like a thousand vines across the sunflower, framing it in a colourful spiral. Her hands seemed to move in a blur now, as she created. Wires twisted, formed into

shapes, changed colour, and merged with the sun flower.

‘Feel the limits break’ Leo’s voice urged, the confident assurance she heard in his voice only made her more excited. She created with fever while he kept the hoverbike steady.

Everything was moving, fast. The yellow glow intensified as her creation took shape, towering high above the sunflower. She felt a connection to what she was doing and what she was making, although she was not quite sure what it would be in the end. She tried to release all the doubt she had and embraced the power she was feeling. There were no limits to what she could do and what she could achieve, all she had to do was believe in herself and her abilities and allow her mind to work out all the kinks and do what needed to be done. She felt light, and would have floated off the hoverbike, had Leo not held her in place.

And then she was done, as suddenly as she’d started, well some intense minutes later. There were tears streaming down her face as she looked at what she had done and embraced the way she felt.

The glowing frame of giant humanoid child, with the features of a feline, hunkered by the sunflower, hands cupped around its bloom. The bloom was open to the child’s smile. Beside the child stood a man and a woman, the parents, smiling in admiration. *In the spirit of Miryn, she’d touched the sun, doing her parents proud in the process.* Those were not her thoughts, so where were those words from?

Leo’s arms pulled her close to him protectively. ‘That’s your magic, Miryn. It’s right there in your heart and in your fingers.’

She turned her head slightly to look at him, eyes shiny with tears and excitement. ‘Leo, I think I’ve finally figured it all out, the solution to the software.’

He kissed her lips softly. ‘Then I’d say *‘fait accompli.*’

She kissed him back, her hands sinking into his warm fur. ‘You’re a genius, you know?’

‘Now, who would have thought?’ He smiled he eased the hoverbike to the ground, a down of soft green moss springing beneath them.

They made love again in the yellow light of their creation, the soft moss a cushion underneath their bodies.

Bodies and minds exhausted Sienna laid her head on his chest, listening to his steady heartbeat below her ear. He stroked her side and kissed the top her head.

‘So, what did you figure out the solution to be?’ Leo caressed her face gently, tracing her jaw line with one finger, resting on her lips.

Her eyes glowed with excitement as she told him that she had gotten stuck because she was unable to get two important elements of the software to work together. After creating a section of The Omni that fused with what he had done she realised that she didn’t need to find a new element to merge the two but find where they could overlap and fuse to become one. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew if she looked in a mirror in that instant, it’d be the same glow she saw on Jon’s face when he came back from The Omni. She wondered if Leo had met Jon, and maybe brought him to the lake as well and a tiny pang of jealousy surprised her. She blinked a few times and it was gone. This was their moment.

‘What do you think?’ She asked Leo.

Leo leaned forward and kissed her neck. ‘I think you’re a genius.’

She laughed delightedly. ‘Yea right.’

‘You’re going to hit it big, girl. It was all within you, you just needed a release.’

Sienna could clearly picture herself walking confidently towards CEO Ark Nathan to receive the award, after he had announced the winner as ‘Sienna Fitzgerald’, amidst the rapturous applause. She could feel the Rhodium plaque in one hand, and Ark’s strong grip in the other; the dazzle of a million camera flashes as she gave her thank-you speech. It felt right that her parents, dead or

not, would be sitting there amongst the people, grinning proudly at their daughter, knowing she turned out alright. And also sitting in the crowd, grinning happily, would be Brie and –

‘You’ll be there right?’ She asked softly.

‘Where?’

She smiled. ‘Never mind.’ Her arms wrapped tightly around him. ‘So, after all this, what are you going back to?’

‘Oh, nothing much. My dog, Bornan and the prospect of some clients within the week.’

‘I didn’t even ask what you do.’ She laughed.

He paused. ‘I’m an architectural enterprise consultant for Off-world Vegas.’

‘Sounds interesting. What’s the role like?’

‘Besides the perks to travel off-world every now and then, it’s a complete bore to be honest. I’m seriously considering resigning and starting my own independent outfit in Mid-west central.’

She giggled. ‘You sound like my best friend. She wants me to resign and start a new company with her. I keep turning down the idea.’

‘Well, you’ve got a shot at that now, haven’t you?’

‘You could say so. But right now, that’s not what I want.’

‘What do you want?’

‘I want to be partner at my company, Leo.’ She said. ‘It’s kind of what I live for at the moment. Maybe years down the line I’ll see my foolishness and make last minute efforts at my friend’s brand of freedom. But for now, I’m... happy where I am.’

‘And that should be all that matters.’ He smiled. ‘It’s one life we live, like they say. My parents died dirt poor, but the grins of their skeletons would be of

satisfaction and joy. Those two travelled the universe. It's only suiting that they both got lost in some distant galaxy. No rescue team could search fast enough to find them before they died. I was twelve at the time Rescue Central signed them off as code A4Z, so I never even saw their dead bodies and sometimes I think my trips are really missions to find them, to find some kind of closure.'

Sienna hugged him closer. 'Every cub needs his parents. It is understandable that you feel that way. My parents died when I was young too and I miss them. But all I can do now is try to make them proud, while doing what makes me happy.'

'This lion likes to play pretend most days that the ache is all gone and there is healing in the flight of years. It's all a lie.'

He was acutely right. If she'd been telling herself previously that with the years, she'd come to full terms with the death of her parents, her creation a few minutes ago was the contradiction. Even her kneeling in the shadow of their images was a message in itself, that some shadows you lived in all your life.

There was silence again for a moment.

'Leo?'

'Yeah?' He sounded drowsy.

'Do you love what you do?' But that was not the question she had in mind to ask. She was thinking of how much she wanted to be with this stranger, that somehow she couldn't bear to leave. She wanted to know if there was a possibility that he felt the same way. She suspected he'd used some sort of enhanced pheromone spray to make her feel like a cat in heat all evening. Was there now some secret drug that made ladies want to be with a person perpetually? Highly doubtful but then The Omni was a land of impossibilities and a drug in and of itself.

Leo sighed. 'As long as it can fund my trips to The Omni and to exotic Off-world locations, I have to love it. Travelling has always been my dream, exploring unknown locations, prospecting new planets for new resources. As a

kid, my parents took me on off-world trips twice a year. It wasn't just planets we visited. Sometimes there was a moon or a giant asteroid, but it was always something I looked forward to. Travel is my life-blood.'

'So, if you never had to work again for money, you'd probably buy an explorer and start an inter-galactic voyage, so you could die happy on some distant, luxurious planet.'

'Sounds about right.' His voice was muffled with the blanket of sleep. She cuddled him, closing her eyes to block out the brightness of her creation and every thought that was not in the present. His smell, the chemically enhanced smell of his fur, was doing a number between her legs, a delicious tingly feeling that made her want to grab at him and fuck until both legs were dead weights. But the moment passed as she succumbed to her drowsiness.

They spent the next two days exploring The Omni, making love every time their bodies had the urge. They knew the time would not last forever, but they still stuck to the off-world names and spoke little about the real life. The fantasy they both needed remained intact.

Salem's voice caused Sienna to open her eyes. The last thing she remembered was cuddling with Leo in her hotel room. Her ticket had expired, and she was back in her apartment cushioned by her own pallet with no Leo to keep her warm. She rubbed at her eyes and got up from the pallet with renewed energy. She was ready to solve her runtime error and she knew just how to do it.

PART THREE

The End

Leo. Enterprise consultant. Off-world Vegas.

Sienna searched databases with those keywords for hours to no avail. She tried all the variations she could think of yet the only Leo she could find, who was an enterprise consultant, didn't work with Off-world Vegas and was in his sixties. Her Leo wasn't more than thirty-two, she was certain. That's when the worry started creeping in. She started accepting the possibility that he wasn't who he said he was.

Or maybe he used an alias, like she had? She imagined him trawling through databases looking for her, for Miryn, his frustration increasing every time he came up with nothing. It made more sense now. *How can we find each other now? Was he even looking?*

Despite the concerns she had and the way her mind kept wandering to Leo, she sat in front of her quad-hologram interface. The inspiration she got from her trip to The Omni surged fresh as she started typing away.

Her fingers flying over the keyframes moved in a blur, similar to when she'd been creating at The Omni. She stopped overly thinking and just did. The solutions she needed were so simple. She wondered why it was so hard for her to get past the errors in the first place.

Eight hours and twenty-three minutes later after sitting at her desk, and exactly a day after her trip to The Omni, Sienna ran her software program for the fifty-sixth time ever. The quad screens melded into a holo-simulation of her software. Everything was as expected, perfect. There was no error. She re-ran the program again and again. No error. A couple more times. Nothing.

She sank back in her chair laughing, with tears of relief and exhaustion

streaming down her face. 'Finally, you fucking genius!' She was a step close to becoming a partner. She was so happy that she forgot to worry about finding Leo. She was the centre of her own world, well her program was.

And then there was a knock at her door. 'Who is it Salem?'

'Brie Raggard is at your door, Sienna'

'Allow her to enter, she knows where to come.'

Sienna heard the door pulse open and immediately smelled rotisserie veal. It was as if Brie read her mind and knew she was hungry. 'Can you make me a serving?' she shouted to Brie who had already made her way to the kitchen. Sienna was convinced that something else would go wrong and was obsessively testing her software when Brie put the rotisserie veal before her. The smell was just the distraction she needed. She cut a slice and put it in her mouth. It was then that she realised just how hungry she was.

'So, do tell, how was the sex?' Brie had a familiar naughty look on her face. Her long black hair was twisted into a top knot and her makeup was dark and mysterious. She was definitely ready to have fun. Sienna blushed and that was enough for Brie to make her own assumptions. 'I am happy for you,' she said, patting Sienna on the head as if she was a pet. 'We both know you deserved to have a wild night or two. And it worked out because you got to finish the software, right?'

'Yes, I did! It was all worth it and the sex was amazing! To be honest I kind of miss it.'

'Well it must have been amazing! Nobody goes around missing bad sex!' Brie went back to the kitchen and brought back two glasses of wine. 'I would like to toast to good sex and friends. But those two do not go together in our case', she added with a laugh.

She spent the better part of an hour talking and laughing. Sienna shared all she could about The Omni and even encouraged Brie to try it out. Having completed

the software Sienna did a demonstration, beaming with pride as no errors were discovered.

‘What do you think?’ She asked, waiting in anticipation.

‘It is amazing! I love the concept and the fact that you got it to work in a day is even more impressive. Congratulations Sienna.’ She toasted again and finished the bottle of wine that she had brought into the conversation less than halfway into it.

‘I am still in awe, but it had to be done. I am just happy I got it done before the deadline. Now we can go partying and I can take as much vape cubes I can without feeling guilty’ Sienna was smiling from ear to ear. She felt a great sense of relief. All she needed now was a warm shower and a night out.

Brie suggested that they go to the club and Sienna agreed, she handed her glass to Brie who offered to clean up and went to get a quick shower. As she selected her outfit, she was reminded of her first night in The Omni, but a shake of her head banished those thoughts.

‘Let’s have some fun Brie!!’ she shouted as she made her way to the door, Brie trailing behind her.

The following week Sienna booked a user validation session, and then a meeting with upper management. Everything went smoothly. Watching every head bobbing in approval during the upper management meeting was a sight she would never forget. It was all so surreal. The barely suppressed excitement in Ark's voice as he shook her hand after the meeting, would be with her forever. 'I would like you to come down to planet Xyva this weekend,' he said. 'There are some really interesting people I'd like you to meet.'

Planet Xyva was where the top shots of big IT companies customarily relaxed on weekends – to brag or show off their newest accomplishments. She imagined standing by Ark, the look of pride on his face as he introduced her to Monty Harron, CEO of First INC or perhaps Elden Thurrel, the third richest man in the New World.

She imagined Leo would be waiting somewhere close by, at home among the luxurious vegetation and exotic refreshments. They would sneak away at some point, giggling like teenagers to have sex somewhere lush, wet, and new to their escapades. Would he have long hair and a beard? Did he love dressing in black corporate tunics and making small talk, with a wine goblet sitting casually in one hand?

What if it was all just a pleasant dream after all, Leo's hands around her torso and his tongue slipping between her lips.

She suddenly realised Ark's face had grown a bit more serious, his lips still moving. 'I'm sorry, Sir, I didn't get that.'

'I said the product launch is on Tuesday. So, implement security and protection level three protocols on your system and send over the encrypted raw data to the security vault immediately.'

Implementing a standard protocol took hours, let alone a level three protocol.

There was serious work to be done. She shoved aside thoughts of Leo and The Omni and focused on her immediate future. ‘I will be sure to do that right away, Sir.’

Left alone in a workroom, soft music playing in her ear and a “do not disturb” sign to keep co-workers out, Sienna focused on implementing the protocols. She decided to block out all distractions and her ever lucid dream of winning the award was the perfect tool to ensure that was done. Three hours later she deposited the data at the security vault, signing the document that was offered to her. She was done. All she had to do now was wait for the award ceremony.

Something had gone terribly wrong. And Sienna was not in one of her award fantasies.

She was a part of the live audience which was standing in the companies Auditorium watching Ark announce the launch The Innovative Partner Award on national satellite. He was about to list the top twenty finalist software when the CSO hurried across the stage to him, causing satellite manager to interrupt the live feed and insert an advertisement. Sienna watched as Ark's face reddened, changing from incredulity and shock to anger, as the CSO spoke to him about a clearly serious issue. He turned to smile briefly at the audience. 'Excuse me, but it appears there is an emergency that I must personally attend to right now. I do apologise.' He hurried off the stage followed, by the CSO, amidst the cries of disappointment and enquiries about the nature of the emergency.

One hour later, she received a call to go to Ark's office. She had never been called to his office before. She had never gotten the chance to even go in the floor that it was on. So, it must have been something serious that required such a request.

Something was terribly wrong, the thought kept replaying in her mind as she took the sky lift to the one hundred and twelfth floor.

In Ark's office, there were three men seated, one was the SCO. But Ark, wide-eyed with anger, stood by a quad holo-screen, one hand extended towards the screen.

'Miss Fitzgerald, can you please explain this?'

Sienna peered closely at the screen. At first, it appeared as though she was staring at two versions of her software running on the screens. Then she noticed the different company logos sitting at the bottom of each screen and the words 'Software copyright infringement'.

‘What is going on?’

‘You tell me!’ Ark said in a strong almost shouting tone. Sienna had never heard him raise his voice before. ‘Did you actually think stealing a competitor’s product idea and design was a smart thing to do?’ The CSO peered at her with disdain and disappointment.

Sienna shook her head in confusion. ‘I don’t understand what’s going on here?’

‘Miss Fitzgerald, I assure you that in the face of a massive lawsuit and even bigger fine, this is hardly the time for games. Did you steal the idea for the product we just released from our competition, Mid-City Corporative?’

But she wasn’t looking at him now; she was staring in horror at the quad holo-screen. The strikingly handsome black man on the screen had long black dreads, teased back in a ponytail, and a full black beard. The news caption read: Mid-City Corporative plans to sue ARK technology for software infringement practices. And then below that the details of the speaker scrolled past: Leopold Morgner, senior holo-programmer, Mid-City Corporative.

Sienna felt as if she was struck in the face. Leo the Lion had stolen her software. But how? And Why? She could not hear anything, and her eyes blurred. All the disappointment of a shattered future pricked at her as if it were a thousand needles. She knew Ark was talking but she could not hear him. Forcing herself to focus on her boss she focused on his lips and then the words came.

‘You are suspended pending a full investigation,’ he said. Please report to the Security Division for a full debrief and the official communication for your employment going forward.’

She could not respond. She was ushered to the sky lift that was already preprogrammed with the security floor. The decent may have been a few seconds or a few minutes, she did not know. She could not understand the recent developments. she was a like a ghost floating in a timeless place. Nothing mattered, except her software and a future lost.

When she arrived at the Security Division, they led her to an office that made her feel as if she was being interrogated. She was extensively questioned about the concept for the software she made and everything she did while she was completing it. She had to give them a rundown of all her social activities and her visitors so that they could input the information into a tracking software and trace the possible breach of her development process. She told them about her visit to The Omni, omitting certain parts of course, and her suspicion that Leopold Morgner was likely a friend she had made, and that he may have known who she was all along.

An officer from the Security Division followed her home to make a copy of her personal computer, so that they could determine if that was the source of the breach. With everything in their hands, Sienna took a warm shower and made a bowl of ice cream.

‘Salem, call Brie.’

After a few minutes Salem responded, ‘The connection has failed, Sienna. Brie appears to be busy.’

‘Okay, try again in 20 minutes Salem.’

‘As requested, Sienna’

Everything was going wrong. Nothing could fix this, if no concrete proof of a breach was found. How could she have been so foolish to tell Leo so much about her software? But if he did use her idea, how would he have gotten her exact specifications? Did he somehow hack The Omni? Did he figure out how to tap into the nano-computes that were feeding off her memories?

She could not figure it out and she knew she may never figure it out. All she could do was wait for Ark Technologies to complete their investigation. She had been there for years and had put a lot into the company. She wanted to grow with the company and here she was, suspended with the threat of being fired looming over her. Unsure what else to do to force the peace of sleep to take over, Sienna

pulled a bottle of wine from the wine cooler and sat cross legged on her pallet.

‘Sienna, Brie could not be reached’

She had completely forgotten about Brie. She would have provided all the distraction she needed right now. ‘Thank you, Salem.’

‘Would you like me to try again, Sienna?’

‘No thank you, Salem. Maybe tomorrow. How about you play some music? Some Party Music maybe. Play some Holographic Dance Music. Start with my most played song in the genre.’

‘As you requested, Sienna’

Sid Feya’s ‘Get Hyped’ started playing and Sienna decided against drinking the wine from the glass and went straight for the bottle. An empty bottle later she was passed out on the bed, music still blaring, lost in her dreams that were no happier than her real life.

There was a pinging at her door and a pinging in her head. Sienna had no idea how long she was knocked out, but she definitely had a hangover. ‘Salem, who is it?’

‘I am sorry Sienna, I do not know. They have not been here before.’

‘Show me an image.’

As soon as she saw the image the effects of her hangover tripled. Staring back at her was Leopold Morgner. She knew that every part of her being reflected her anger and she had no intention to control it. ‘Allow him to enter, Salem. For the record his name is Asshole.’

The door pulsed open and Sienna met her monster at the door. ‘What the fuck are you doing here?’ She was staring daggers at him and his reaction suggested that the daggers were received.

His hands unfurled from fists and he met her eyes. There was no regret behind his eyes, only pain. *Why did he deserve to feel pain?*

‘I said, what do you want?’

‘Thank you for seeing me.’ His voice was as she remembered, fuelled by masculine power, but there was also something else in his tone. ‘I searched for you when I got back, but there was no Miryn in the databases I have access to.’ He chuckled awkwardly, as if he was out of his element.

‘What are you doing here?’

He stared at her for what felt like a minute, his eyes softening. He attempted to touch her, but she warned him with her eyes, forcing him to stand outside the door with his hands by his side. ‘I did not steal your concept’, he said finally.

‘I do not believe you.’

‘It is the truth. I know you must have been thinking about it, but how could I have done it?’

Sienna did not say anything because she was having a problem figuring that out herself.

‘I had no idea it was your concept until the lawsuit was announced. I know you must have seen me in the broadcast, but I had no idea. I did not work on the software and I did not oversee the creation. It was all done without my knowledge or input.’

‘How is that possible when you are the Senior Holo-programmer?’

‘When I met you in The Omni, I was almost at the end my one-month vacation leave. I just got back. I was not in charge of any development.’ He just stared at her and spoke, as if he was afraid, she would close the door and lock him out forever. ‘When I got back, I was informed that there was a new software to be launched and that it may have been copied by a competitor. So, we started an investigation and we linked it to Ark Technologies.’

‘When was the connection made?’

‘A few days ago.’

‘When did you find out it was my software?’

‘When Ark Technologies release it for the award. The images of the creators were attached and when I saw you, I knew.’

‘What are you doing here?’ Sienna asked again.

‘I want to ensure that you know that I would never steal from you and that I will never hurt you.’

‘But you already have.’

‘I am sorry Sienna.’ It was the first time he said her name and she got a weird sensation in her stomach, like a mixture of butterflies and carbonation. ‘I didn’t mean for you to get hurt, and if I could have prevented it I would have. But I had no idea. I hope you will come to know that I did not do anything. I hope that you will give me a chance to show you the kind of man that I am.’

Lost in thought, but confused by everything that Leo said to her, Sienna did not know how to respond. She was about to tell him to leave when Salem gave her a better option.

‘Incoming call from Ark technologies, Sienna’ Salem said.

Leo tensed, his fists made again. ‘Answer the call,’ she responded aloud and waited for the other person to come on over the holocom system so that Leo could hear the conversation.

‘Ms Fitzgerald, this is Simon Flute from the Security Division.’

‘Yes, Mr Flute.’

‘The investigations have been completed and we found the breach.’

‘What was it?’

‘Someone accessed your personal computer and downloaded the software last week. We will send the file to you now. It appears the breach occurred when you were in the company of Ms Brie Raggard.’

Sienna stopped breathing instantly. She could not believe it. She must have been silent for a while because Mr Flute was calling her name. She responded to him and thanked him for the information. He told her that there would be a meeting the following day to determine the way forward.

She must have collapsed at some point because Leo was holding her. He led her to the couch and she sat down automatically. She could not think. 'It all seems so impossible,' she finally said.

The door pulsed closed. Leo didn't say anything, he just pulled her into his arms like he did in The Omni. She needed his strength. Though she didn't want to admit it. She was caught between happiness that he was not the one who stole from her and sadness that her close friend had committed such a betrayal.

She just laid there, leaning on him in the hope that he could pull all she was feeling from her, so that she would be without burden. She thought about the night Brie brought over the rotisserie veal and plied her with wine. She welcomed the distraction, and that was taken advantage of to cross a line that had been established from the onset of their friendship.

'What happens now?' she asked, to no one in particular. There was no one who could answer that question, she had to figure it out herself. She took a few minutes to just sit there and exist without thought. And Leo just sat there holding her. 'Thank you for being here,' she said to him.

'There is nothing else I would rather be doing Sienna.'

She though he sounded genuine. Contrary to what she had believed and heard earlier, he had not done anything to hurt her. He came all the way to her house to apologise, and he stuck around even though she had not been in any way welcoming.

She felt better enough to pour two glass of wine and hand one to Leo before sitting beside him. She must have been looking at him weirdly because he asked her what was on her mind and she told him. She explained that she was so hurt

by the theft that she had tried to erase all the feelings she had developed for him. She felt lied to and betrayed. She never wanted to see him again, in real life or in an alternate reality. But now she did not know how to feel. She had known him for only a short time and yet she had developed strong feelings for him. Feelings she had yet to put into words. She liked the way he looked at her, his eyes sparkled the same now as it did in The Omni. She loved the way he was able to listen to her without judgement and then be honest and helpful with his responses. She loved how attentive he was, especially in bed and she hoped it was the same in real life. She was excited to try.

Leo set down his glass of wine and after doing the same with Sienna's, took her hands into his and gazed deeply into her eyes. He told her how he had been searching for her without any success and that he only went about the search because he could not stop thinking about her. She made him feel things he had never felt before. He could see himself with her for a long time and he wanted to do that. He needed her to give him a try. He needed her to give him the opportunity to show her that he was the same lion she had met.

At first, she was hesitant. But Sienna believed him. He made her feel secure. She was not ready to have him take her to bed, but she was open to getting to know him in the flesh and then get to know his flesh after. She wanted to be close to him, so that she could see where things would lead. Hopefully it led to more than just a night on the couch drinking wine. At least for them there was hope. There was no way in hell she would forgive Brie for what she had done.

Leo pulled her in so close that she could feel his breath on her lips. He looked into her eyes for approval and then his lips touched hers, lighting a fire that was first ignited by a lion and a Miryn. It felt right. She was right where she wanted to be.

EPILOGUE

Sienna was sitting in the audience at The Innovative Partner Award. Her support system was not the same as in her dreams, but it was still a sensational experience. Ark was introduced to announce the winner, and everyone applauded as he took charge of the ceremony. She felt a hand grip hers for support as Ark began announcing the top 10 finalists. She turned to show Leo an awkward smile and then her eyes became glued to the holo screen behind Ark.

She was not in her blue tunic. Instead she wore a black Kia Laing dress that clung to her curves while remaining very professional. She also wore a pair of earring Leo thought accentuated her beauty. It was his first gift and so she loved wearing it.

Ark said her name and she felt as if she was about to explode from the inside. She wondered if Leo could hear her heart pound. There was a short break for entertainment, a song performed by the children of the Ark Foundation. When Ark returned to the centre of the stage, he was accompanied by two beautifully dressed women who were carrying the Award and the credit prize.

Ark looked into the crowd and Sienna went pale with anticipation and fear.

‘The winner of this award is very deserving’, Ark said. ‘This person took a concept that so many persons have tried and failed and brought it to life. The program is not only innovative, but it is revolutionary.’ The audience applauded. ‘I am proud to announce that the winner of this year’s Innovative Partner Award is-’

Sienna could no longer breath. Leo griped her hand tighter.

‘Miss Sienna Fitzgerald!’

Sienna just sat there. ‘What did he say?’ she whispered to Leo. But before he could answer she saw a live broadcast of herself on the holo screen. She could

not believe it, even though she had dreamt about it for years. For the first time in years everything was happening as it should. She felt as if her life was on track. Nervous and overwhelmed she readily accepted Leo's aid as he pulled her into a standing position and coaxed her towards the stage. She ascended slowly and stood by Ark who shook her hand and presented the physical award. Luckily, she had prepared a thank you speech, although there were only a few people to thank.

Sienna Fitzgerald thanked Ark and then thanked everyone who ever made an impact on her life, particularly her parents' whose death made her the person she was. She was a happy woman, and that is all she had ever wanted. She had her award and she had a lion who cared a lot for her.

AUTHOR PROFILE

Zolina Reed is a passionate young woman who enjoys writing fantasies and sharing them with others. She has a pet cat who she affectionally calls 'Kitty' and an old typewriter that often gets her creative juices flowing.

Zolina enjoys writing romantic fantasies because she believes that everyone deserves the opportunity to experience total release. In her spare time, she enjoys going to conventions and writing in her weekly diary.