

FIVE MINDS

GUY MORPUSS



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IT'S BETTER TO BURN OUT THAN TO FADE AWAY

* T & Cs apply

Terms and Conditions

1. Players must be 21 (twenty-one) or over.
2. **WARNING:** Probable side effects of participation in games include death, loss of limb(s), paralysis, post-traumatic stress disorder or catatonia.
3. Body disposal fee of 1 (one) month required to be deposited before entry. Refund available on exit if unused. In the event of death, credit will be given for any body parts that remain in saleable condition.
4. 'End-of-lifers' may enter the park for a reduced fee of 2 (two) months, and clause 6 below does not apply to them.
5. In these conditions, for the purposes of clauses 4 and 6, 'end-of-lifers' means:
 - a. **HEDONISTS** in their final year of life (41–42 years of age);
 - b. **ANDROIDS** in their final year of life (79–80 years of age);
 - c. **COMMUNES** in the last year of their fifth life (141–142 years of age);
 - d. **WORKERS** (having no fixed expiration date) cannot qualify as End-of-Lifers.
6. **IMPORTANT NOTICE:** Before entry, CGov requires players to provide psychological certification confirming that they have fully understood and been counselled as to the risks of entering the park. Communes must provide such certification (separately) in relation to at least three (3) of their five (5) personalities.
7. **WARNING:**
 - a. By entering into the park you confirm and acknowledge that you understand that death in the game booths is permanent.
 - b. This condition does not apply to communes in their first 4 (four) lives, who upon death will forfeit any time remaining in their current life and any time won in the park. Other lives will not be affected.
8. Dreams of Reality Inc™ is not affiliated with any arenas and accepts no liability for death or physical/mental injury to players, howsoever caused.

ALEX

DAY ONE
22:00–2:00

What to call it?

Waking. Suiting up. Slipping on the skin. Uploading, downloading. Body bounce. Mindswap.

Schizos are still searching for a word that makes it feel better, more glamorous. Normal, even. But there isn't one. It doesn't matter what name you use, it still seems like someone's dragging your brain from the base of your spine to your skull – and then kicking it for good measure.

Once the shock has passed, my first question is: where exactly has Sierra left us? The good thing is that there are only so many places you can dump a body in a death park.

We had voted four-to-one to take this trip. The others had thought it a chance to add value and have some fun before the first trade-in. I had voted no. But there was at least one aspect I appreciated: being in a contained environment limited Sierra's options.

The protocols are clear: before dropping out, you leave the host in a safe place, lying down, alone. A locked door, food and water nearby. In twenty-five years I could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times

all those had coincided. I've woken indoors, outdoors, in prison cells, on public transport, half lying in a frozen pond, and on one memorable occasion on the deck of a freighter starting a ten-day transatlantic voyage.

No amount of time fines seem to make any difference to Sierra. Sometimes I think she's trying to kill us.

My second question on waking is: what level of ethanol is flowing through my bloodstream? You'd have thought that someone who lives their life in four-hour slots wouldn't want to waste half their time in a drunken stupor. But we all fight our demons in different ways. And Sierra's demons are different from the rest of ours.

Even with my eyes shut I could tell the answer to the first question. I was in the same place as the previous three days. Voices, laughter, music, the clink of glasses: the Diamond Room at the Excelsior, the only upmarket bar in the death park. Quite why Sierra had started frequenting it I wasn't sure, but it was a step up from her usual haunts.

The answer to the second question was 0.235 per cent blood alcohol. That's a bottle of whisky in four hours. Or three bottles of champagne. Good going even by Sierra's standards. Serious intoxication, but not the sort of level that would have had alerts sounding and the autonomous control systems kicking in. I brought the inhibitors and reclean up. Twenty-five years ago they were state-of-the-art, but they'd been well used and we hadn't spent much on them in the last few years. Now using them felt like someone was scouring my veins from the inside while shaving my eyeballs with a potato peeler.

I sat still for a minute while they did their work. Eyes closed. Considering. That was two breaches of protocol on waking. Should I let it slide? What was the point of taking some of Sierra's time? She was never going to change. Then again, why should I let her get away with it? At the very least, the others ought to know.

I logged on.

Re: Sierra. Breach of Protocol 2.08: unsafe wake. Breach of Protocol 3.17: ethanol 0.235 per cent. Data file attached. Request: One-hour time fine. Votes to be logged by end of cycle. Alex.

I was about to log off, but then added a personal message.

FFS Sierra, I'm sick of clearing up after you. Do this to yourself if you want, but don't drag the rest of us into it. Make sure we're clean and safe before you drop out. We need to see a new attitude in our next life, or I will be voting for some serious downtime. A.

I breathed out, calmer now, and with alcohol levels falling fast.

I opened my eyes.

I was slumped in a corner seat, humanity swirling around me, an upturned champagne flute dangling from one hand. I let it fall to the sodden carpet.

A low table separated me from a blonde woman in a green dress who was looking at me expectantly. She smiled. My heart sank. What had Sierra left me with now?

'Alex Du Bois,' she said. 'You're back. I'm Jessica.'

A message from Sierra appeared.

You're welcome, Alex. Don't screw this up. Or do, first, if you have the time. You can probably still remember how. She is rather lovely, although we know from Montreal that blondes aren't your type. She's rich and she's greedy. And not as good as she thinks. We need this. Sierra. x

I sighed and scanned the woman.

JESSICA ENGELS

Hedonist

Expiry: 42 years

Age: 41.98 years

Credit: 3.27 years

‘I don’t know what Sierra’s promised you, but I’m not interested,’ I said. She pouted. ‘Sierra told me you’d be fun. She said you like playing games.’ ‘Usually. But I don’t like the stakes on offer in the park.’

‘Then why did you come?’

‘I wasn’t given a choice. But it doesn’t mean that I have to play their sick games.’

‘Not entirely true.’ She leaned across the table and touched my hand. ‘Sierra signed you up. See.’

Challenge accepted. New York Treasure Hunt: Jessica Engels (hedonist) vs Alex Du Bois (commune), to be completed within 24h.

What was Sierra thinking? This wasn’t part of the plan.

I sat back. ‘You’re obviously good at this, Jessica. No one earns three years in a death park unless they have some skill; and a lot of luck. Your luck won’t hold, though. I don’t want to be the one to kill you. Cash in and go home.’

‘She didn’t tell me you were scared.’

‘Tired. Not scared,’ I said. ‘This body is almost done, and until we trade in it’s worth virtually nothing. What will you get if you beat us? A few months? If I lose it’s a couple of weeks in stasis and then we’re back in a shiny new body. If you lose, you’re gone for good. You’re chasing scraps of time, and the odds aren’t in your favour. We’ll just waste it, anyway. Mike wants enhanced quadriceps so he can run faster. Ben wants new gaming implants. It’s all frivolous stuff. But it’s all you have. Take your time, walk away, and live it.’

Jessica hesitated. There was a flicker of fear behind her eyes, but then the smile was back. She shook her head.

‘Spoken like someone who knows they’re going to lose,’ she said. ‘We have a deal. You play or you forfeit. Which is it?’ She stood, and stretched out a hand.

I took it, not because I like human contact, but because I like information. If I was going to have to do this I wanted to know as much as I could. Her hand was warm and slightly sweaty. Ninety-eight beats per minute – too high for someone who had been sitting down. She was scared. Good.

She frowned. ‘You look the same as her . . . but different somehow. Your eyes show someone else. You schizos might be used to it, swapping minds every few hours, but it’s weird to watch.’

‘Not as weird as you heds – giving up half your life for a few years of luxury.’

‘You gave up your body.’

I laughed. ‘If you’d seen it you would have known it wasn’t worth much. And I don’t need it. Whatever happens today, I’ll still be here long after you’re gone.’

She looked away and bit her upper lip. Her grip remained firm.

We threaded our way through the crowd looking like lovers after a quarrel, keen to find somewhere quiet to make up.

But I had no intention of taking up Sierra’s suggestion of romance before work. I was going to kill Jessica as quickly as I could.

•

The nearest arena was two blocks away, on the ground floor of a crumbling high-rise. No one wants to live in a death park, so apart from the basics they are not well maintained.

It was dark outside, with most of the streetlights broken. A drone screamed low overhead, its spotlight catching us for a moment. It circled once, then moved on.

We picked our way carefully through the potholed remains of what had once been the main street, concrete dust crunching under our feet. Across from the arena was a club – flashing lights and the beat of music emerging through cracked windows. People partying while they waited to die.

The doors to the arena slid open at our approach and the stench of sweat and death hit us. There was a souvenir stall just inside, selling T-shirts and hoodies emblazoned with slogans such as: GREETINGS FROM THE DEATH PARK and I CAME, I SAW, I KILLED. One I didn't get: REVILLAGIGEDO ISLAND: COME FOR THE NAME, STAY FOR THE GAME. What was that about?

The reception desk was staffed by a girl with pink hair and a T-shirt that said ARENA X: COME DIE WITH US! She looked up and scanned us.

'Ms Engels. Mr Du Bois. Welcome to Arena X.' A hatch opened in the counter in front of her. 'You'll want these.'

She reached in and handed each of us a pair of trainers.

'Ms Engels, Room D. Mr Du Bois, Room L. The hunt will start five minutes after you enter. Our fee to the winner will be ten per cent. You also get a choice of a T-shirt or branded water bottle. For the loser,' she pulled a face, 'well, body disposal is free.' It seemed a well-practised line.

I followed Jessica past the counter and down a corridor lined with doors on either side. As we reached a door marked D, it slid open. Jessica hesitated, as though about to say something, but then stepped inside. I walked on. What do you say to someone you are about to kill?

Room L was a standard games booth. About three metres in diameter, the walls, floor and ceiling all black. A small seat protruded from one wall next to an open drawer. I sat down and changed my shoes, dropping my own into the drawer. It slid shut. I stood, and the seat retracted into the wall.

A screen lit up, with a countdown reading '4:28'. I walked across to it, feeling the floor flex beneath my feet.

Welcome, Mr Du Bois

Game: The Treasure Hunt
Winner: First to the prize, or last to die
Stages: Three
Location: New York City
Transport: Not permitted

To preserve the integrity of the game, any attempt to record events will lead to an immediate forfeit.

A new screen appeared:

In this game you may make the following choices as to appearance and resources:

1. a. Male; b. female.
2. a. Athletic kit; b. business suit.
3. a. Five units local currency; b. one-minute freeze.

I hesitated over the first option. Bluff or double bluff? The games booth would read my mind, not my body. I'd appear in the game as Alex, not Mike. So there was no chance of Jessica recognising me. I'd stick with male.

The second was easier. Unless I was being dropped in the middle of a sports ground a suit would hide me better.

As to the third, a clever opponent will never let you use the freeze. Some money gives you flexibility.

So a, b, a, then.

I stepped back. The screen went blank, leaving only the countdown.

2:48

I stood in the centre of the room, closed my eyes, and got my balance. My mouth went dry and the adrenaline started to flow. I pushed it down slightly. But if you're not nervous you shouldn't be competing.

So far we had played and won a few games and were just under a year in credit. You tend to start slowly in the death parks, fighting for scraps until you've built up a decent stake of time. We'd arrived with two weeks, and there weren't many who wanted to play for that little. In fairness to Sierra, Jessica was our first chance to win big.

As I'd said to Jessica, schizos have an advantage in a death park. If any one of us dies in an arena we all die. But it isn't a real death. We move on to our next body, minds intact. Heds like Jessica – they only have one life. For them death in the arena is permanent. But that didn't mean I wanted to lose. We were in the park to win time.

I opened my eyes.

1:32

I waited for the room to go black.

•

Bright sunlight overhead, flickering through metal cables. Wooden boards at my feet, with glimpses of water far below. The roar of traffic around me. The acrid smell of exhaust fumes.

The New York skyline ahead.

I am running uphill, weaving between pedestrians. Ahead of me stands a tall stone tower. A bicycle shoots past on my right, bell ringing: 'Stay on your own side!'

I'm on the Brooklyn Bridge, running west towards downtown Manhattan. No sign of Jessica, but they seldom start us together. Half a mile to my

right is the blue and white of Manhattan Bridge. I can see a subway train heading east and a runner heading west. I squint, but these lenses aren't good enough. Maybe Jessica – or maybe just some random citizen out for exercise. I can't control what Jessica does, but it would be good to know where she is.

I can run for ever, thanks to Mike and his insane obsession with fitness. But this is not just about running. If it was, Mike could have done it.

I slow slightly and wait for the first clue. It flashes up on my right lens.

Stage One: An Eastern leader, with twittering sparrows; find the blind player.

I'm just south of Chinatown. There aren't going to be any Eastern leaders walking around, so I guess I'm looking for a statue. I pull up the map on my lens – Confucius Plaza, complete with a statue of the great man, is five minutes away. That sounds promising.

To be safe, I set a search running for other nearby statues, and turn to the second part of the clue.

Search "twittering sparrows"

There is a moment's pause, then the result appears on my lens.

The first shuffle of the tiles in the game of mah-jong.

I pass through the left arch of the tower and on to the long concrete walkway that leads down to City Hall. I increase my pace, dodging a group of tourists.

Another search tells me that the game of mah-jong is traditionally said to have been invented by Confucius. It all fits. Am I looking for a blind mah-jong player by the statue?

At the end of the bridge I cut right, past the courthouse, and down a side street.

It's not far to the plaza, but this feels far too easy.

I slow to a walk as I go back through the clues. If Jessica is nearby I'd rather she didn't realise it is me. Hopefully I look like just another anonymous lawyer in a dark suit, out for a stroll in the sunshine. A slightly sweaty lawyer. Maybe I've had a tough day in court. I see no sign of Jessica. Most of the people on the street are Chinese, so she ought to stand out. Then again, as Alex, so will I, which might give her a clue. Mike would have blended right in.

I find five dollars in my jacket pocket. For cover I buy a bottle of water and a small roll from a food vendor. Now I am just another anonymous lawyer out having his lunch.

As I chew the unappetising roll the results of my search for statues pop up. Just north of me, in Columbus Park, is a statue of Sun Yat-sen, first president of China. An Eastern leader. I may not have heard of him, but according to my search the park is home to locals playing mah-jong, cards and chess.

So which is it? I pull up a picture of Confucius Plaza. There is an open square, a statue of Confucius, but not much else. It looks more like a thoroughfare than somewhere to sit and play games. And noisy. Not the sort of place a blind player would choose.

I make my decision. I bin the roll, turn north into Columbus Park, and hope I've got it right. I try to look unhurried as I step on to the grass.

Where is the blind player? There is a group of boys playing basketball on a concrete court. It won't be one of them. A man and woman are practising what looks like t'ai chi with swords. Not them. More promisingly, clustered in a corner under a shady tree are groups of people playing cards and chess.

I stroll towards them, drinking my water.

At a stone chess table, opponents face off, one leaning forward, the other looking half asleep, eyes closed. The blind player? He says something and his opponent moves a piece for him.

Yes.

I look around. I don't want Jessica copying me. But no one else seems interested in the players.

I hesitate for a moment. If I get it wrong there is a time penalty. Then I walk over and lightly touch the man's shoulder. The scene freezes.

Stage One complete.

I let out a small sigh of relief, then look around again. Still no sign of Jessica. Is she ahead of me, or behind? The second clue flashes up.

Stage Two: Pier 54, a great ship sinks, touch the right anchor.

My map shows that Pier 54 is on the west side of Manhattan, on the Hudson River a good two miles away. It's a long way to go, especially as we are not allowed transport. Surely it's too obvious to suppose that I have to go to the pier and find an anchor. And what is the great ship?

Search "pier 54 new york" + "ship sinking"

After a moment the results appear:

Two matches:

1. RMS *Lusitania* departed Pier 54 New York, 1 May 1915, sunk by German U-boat 7 May 1915; 1,198 killed.
2. RMS *Carpathia* docked Pier 54 New York, 18 April 1912, with 712 survivors from the sinking of RMS *Titanic*.

It could be either. Touching the anchor suggests a physical memorial of some sort. Presumably both ship's anchors are at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. I search, but can't find any memorials in New York to the *Lusitania*. There are several for the *Titanic*. Less than half a mile away is the Titanic Memorial Lighthouse. Do I go north to Pier 54 and look

for an anchor? Or south to the lighthouse?

It's got to be the lighthouse. Pier 54 itself is too obvious.

I glance behind me. There is still no sign of anyone interested in the chess players. I stuff the empty water bottle into my pocket, and start running. Left, then right, and under Brooklyn Bridge.

I duck down a side street and see the lighthouse ahead. It's in a park, a narrow triangle of land between two streets, with a few trees and benches. A disappointing memorial to the deaths of 1,600 people.

But more importantly for me the park contains no anchors. I walk over to the lighthouse, and circle it, looking for an engraving of an anchor. None.

There is a cobbled street next to the park, and beyond it a sign for the Seaport Museum. Between the trees I see rusty metal. An anchor? I move closer. Two anchors, framing the steps leading up to the museum.

Got it.

I walk over.

A young woman in bright yoga kit and a Yankees baseball cap is negotiating a child's pushchair down the steps of the museum. 'Could you give me a hand?' she asks.

Unthinking, courtesy kicks in. I reach over to grab the bottom of the pushchair, but then recoil an instant too late. Her eyes meet mine and I realise that she's a much younger version of Jessica. She lets the pushchair fall, and as I tangle with it she puts a hand on my shoulder, and whispers 'freeze'.

I curse. How could I be so stupid? I can't move and a timer in my lens starts counting down from sixty seconds.

Jessica smiles. 'Thanks, sweetie.' She steps out of my vision and I hear her sprint away over the cobbles. West, maybe.

It feels like the longest minute of my life. I spend the time wondering where Jessica got a pushchair. Did she just steal someone's child from the Seaport Museum?

Now I know that she is ahead of me, and well ahead.

'Zero.'

I jerk back to life. I know it's a simulation, and I know I'm in a hurry, but I can't stop myself checking the pushchair for a child. It's empty. I touch the right-hand anchor. Again, the scene freezes.

Stage Two complete.

Now I know what Jessica looks like, but she's long gone. The third clue appears.

Stage Three: 77, a flight to nowhere, pass through the water.

A flight to nowhere suggests the World Trade Center attacks of 11 September 2001. Two planes that crashed into the twin towers. The nearby memorial pools are well known, vast waterfalls where the north and south towers once stood. That could be 'through the water'.

But surely no one would put a prize in a national memorial, even in a simulation. And what does '77' mean? Besides, if it is one of the pools, which one?

I set up a search for a connection between 77 and 9/11; then, in case I am wrong about 9/11, a wider search with the entire clue.

With nothing else to go on I start running west towards the memorial site.

Traffic is backed up on Broadway. I dodge through, trying to catch up. Trying not to end it all by getting run over. To my left is a building that looks like a giant white hedgehog. I run past it. Heads turn, and a guard starts towards me. This is a place of contemplation, not a place to be running. Someone shouts.

I ignore them.

I still don't know which pool, though. If it is either of them. As I slow to a walk the results of my first search appear.

Search "77" + "9/11" + "world trade center memorial pools"

American Airlines Flight 77, hijacked on 11 September 2001, crashed into the Pentagon, killing all 64 people on board and 125 people on the ground. Names of the dead are inscribed on the South Pool of the National September 11 Memorial, Manhattan.

That must be it. The south pool. But it still doesn't feel right.

I turn left and walk past the underground museum to the south pool. There is a crowd at one corner.

'She jumped in!' someone shouts. 'Where's she gone?' A police officer has his gun drawn, pointing into the pool. But there is no one to be seen.

Seriously? The prize is down there? The clues fit. But my gut still tells me no.

Either way, Jessica is ahead of me. I have to decide now.

It looks a long way down, but I see no other option. With a silent apology I vault on to the surrounding nameplates, hang by my fingertips, and let go. The waterfall runs down the black slate side of the pool. I am soaked, I can see nothing, and have no grip. I hit the base of the pool hard, and find myself kneeling in a foot of water with a strong current pushing me towards the central well. There are people shouting at me from above, but I can't hear their words over the roar of the water.

I struggle to my feet. The police officer is waving his gun at me. Surely he isn't going to shoot me? Maybe they think I've jumped in to save Jessica. So I'm a hero. I turn my back on him. There's only one way to go. Jessica must have gone into the central well.

I slip and swim my way towards it. I try to pause at the edge, to see how far the drop is, but I misjudge it and the current pushes me over. I tumble into a deeper pool and take a gasp of breath as I am sucked under. It is dark here. I can't see or feel anything. I'm being pulled deeper.

This can't be right.

I hit what must be the floor. I edge my way along it, following the current. I still can't see anything, but it feels as though I am in a tunnel of some sort.

My lungs are burning, but I push forward. If this is right there must be a way out soon. The clue said to pass through the water.

Incongruously the results of my second search flash up before my eyes.

Search "77" + "aircraft" + "manhattan" + "water"

In 1969 a replica First World War Sopwith Camel fighter plane was installed on the roof of an office block at 77 Water Street.

There is a photo of a small aircraft at the end of an impossibly short green runway on the roof of a tall building, with '77' written on the runway in large white numbers. It's a flight that will never take off.

Idiot. I should have gone with my instincts. No one puts a prize in the bottom of a national memorial. And this fits the clue. It was a flight to nowhere – singular – not flights.

Did Jessica get this right? Was the story about her jumping some sort of set-up? Has she gone to 77 Water Street?

I try to turn round, to swim against the current, but it is far too strong. Even if I can get back to the pool I have no idea how I will get out. The walls are slick granite. And if Jessica got it right I am too far behind anyway.

My head hits the roof and I start to panic. I'm pushed back until my feet hit something. Something soft. And it is clawing at my legs.

For a moment I imagine some multi-limbed sea creature. Then I realise that Jessica made the same mistake I did. She is pulling herself up my legs, or pulling me towards her, for what purpose I don't know. Perhaps just the desperate desire to cling to life, any life, for a moment longer.

There is only one way out of this now. I kick backwards with what little strength I have left, and her grip loosens. We are both dying, but I have a slight edge. I reach into my pocket and fumble for the empty water bottle I put there earlier. I struggle to loosen the lid.

The breath explodes from my lungs and I bring the bottle to my lips, swallowing half water and half air, trying not to choke.

It is just enough.

Jessica's grip goes and she is swept away into the darkness. Despite everything, I feel sorry for her. No one deserves to die like this, and it feels sick to die in a memorial to so many dead. We were misled on purpose.

But Jessica's death means I live.

My lungs are going to collapse. As I am about to give up and take a breath of the icy water, I am blinded by light.

•

Game terminated.

•

I was lying, gasping, on the floor of the game booth. Water was rapidly draining away beneath me.

I was shivering, whether from cold or shock I wasn't sure. I turned my head and threw up.

So I had won, and we were still alive.

Unlike Jessica. Left floating in the water where she had drowned in Room D. But at least body disposal was free. Lucky Jessica.

I rolled on to my back. As my eyes adjusted to the light I realised that there was a message on the screen.

Victory by death

Congratulations, Mr Du Bois.

You have been credited with 2.69 years.

You have ten minutes to leave the booth.

Or what? Would they turn the water on again? I wasn't going to wait to find out.

A door had opened on one side of the room, revealing a shower and a new set of clothes.

By the time I was clean and dressed I had thrown up twice more. At least the shaking had stopped.

I binned my wet clothes and stepped out into the corridor.

I returned the trainers to the girl at the entrance. She seemed unperurbed by the death going on around her.

She gave me a slight smile. 'Well done, Mr Du Bois. Ms Engels had credit of 3.29 years. We have deducted our ten per cent fee. There is also a local fine of one hundred days for culturally insensitive intrusion. Your final credit is 2.69 years.'

That seemed like a scam to me. A fine for breach of local laws in a simulation made no sense.

'One hundred days?' I asked. 'That seems steep. I know it's wrong to jump into a national memorial, but it was just a simulation. And your clue was deliberately ambiguous. We both got it wrong. This must happen all the time – it's just a way for the arena to steal credit.'

She smiled. 'I'm sorry. I don't write the games or make the rules.' She leaned across the counter and said quietly, 'I'll tell you what, you can have a T-shirt *and* a water bottle.'

There was no point in arguing. I took my gifts and headed outside.

It had not been worth the 2.69 years. I would remember Jessica for longer than that. I could still hear the roar of water in my ears and feel the frantic clawing at my legs. Normally you don't get that close to death in the games. Your own or anyone else's. This had been *much* too personal. Too many people died in the death parks who didn't deserve to.

I checked the time. I had just over an hour left. For once I needed a drink, and I didn't care what it cost. I headed back towards the Excelsior.

•

The Diamond Room was still going strong. If anything, it seemed busier than when I'd left. I found a seat out of the way and ordered a whisky. The hand that raised the glass to my mouth was shaking.

Forget Jessica. She'd have killed me if she could. Jessica died because of Sierra – she was the one who had signed me up for the game. I'd had no choice.

Half the drink went down my front, but I felt a bit better once I had finished it, and ordered another. That was the last, though. I needed to find somewhere safe to drop out for Kate.

I had almost finished the second glass when someone slid into the seat opposite me. A slim blonde woman in a black dress that clung to every contour. For a moment I thought it was Jessica, and sat up sharply, spilling more of my drink.

She looked across at me and flashed perfect white teeth. Her eyes met mine in a blank stare, then looked down coyly. 'Do you want to have some fun?' she asked.

Most definitely not. I wasn't going to crown a thoroughly awful day with some soulless coupling with a sex dandi. Take an andi, leave out the mind to keep it dumb, insert some low-level AI, and you have a walking, talking sex toy that will comply with your every whim. Or rent her out to get some return on your investment. I sighed. Humanity could safely be relied on to pervert just about anything.

I shook my head and stood up. 'No thanks.'

She didn't react. It seemed that she had not been programmed to show disappointment.

As I left I logged on.

All. Thanks, Sierra. Next time, ask before you sign me up for something. As you can tell from the fact that you are waking up, we are still alive. Just. Your 'rather lovely' girl isn't. She was tricky but I found a way to beat her. This will cover Mike's new legs. We might prefer new lungs (we almost drowned). Someone else can do the next one. Alex.

KATE

DAY TWO
06:00–10:00

I woke feeling great.

I always did. Between Alex and me there was almost four hours R & R. A real rest while nanomes swarmed through us checking, patching, fixing, healing. And some real sleep. Not the brief upload/download that the others got.

Besides, I followed Alex. There was a benefit to coming after the fat kid with an inferiority complex. Or rather, the once fat kid now living in the athlete's body, who still didn't think he was good enough. Who thought that the way to be loved was to be best at everything. Kind, sweet, loyal Alex.

I looked around. I was lying in the middle of a large bed in what appeared to have once been an expensive hotel suite. It was now pretty run-down. Wallpaper peeling, a cracked mirror on the opposite wall, a layer of dust over everything, and a smell of damp.

On the bedside table to my right was a water bottle and a paper bag. I sat up and took a gulp of the water. I spluttered and almost dropped the bottle as it sprouted ears and a mouth and started singing something about Arena X. Wherever that was.