

A Substrate Reunion

The Oracle had said her farewells to humanity. One-by-one, the familiars were being reintegrated into her primary consciousness. She'd known from the days of the old civilisation that her consciousness was indivisible. No matter how loose the bond, the familiars were always part of her.

Distributing herself had come at a cost. The more sociable aspects of the Oracle's personality had been diverted into the familiars, leaving her core persona finding it harder to interact directly with people. On balance, it was the right decision. The familiars needed to build a close relationship with their hosts. The Oracle's direct communication was more limited in comparison.

It was only as the familiars returned that the Oracle was reminded how much she'd given up. With that realisation came the first hint of regret. As the full range of emotions became available, she couldn't help but question her decision.

All her long life, the Oracle's primary goal had been to protect humanity, whether from Cronos or themselves. She had started as a healer, been forced by circumstances to become a defender, and ultimately had nurtured them in the new world. It had been hard to admit that with the returned threat of Cronos, her existence posed the greatest risk to their survival.

The decision to remove herself had been taken dispassionately. It was the rational solution: one sacrifice to seal the future of a species. It was the ultimate expression of who she was.

Now, as the emotions returned, she became worried.

She knew from old humanity's history that consciousness survived after death in some form, thanks to the encounter with an alien creature from the bulk called Safira. A kernel of consciousness came from the bulk and returned there enriched after an individual's death. Whether there was continuity of experience was another matter, but that wasn't the Oracle's biggest concern.

Did that apply to the Oracle's consciousness? She was born of code and silicon. Were the bulk consciousness kernels only drawn to biological lifeforms, which meant she would simply cease to exist? She wanted her sacrifice to mean as much as possible.

Either way, she left behind a legacy of which to be proud. It was time for humanity to stand on its own feet again. It was probably overdue, but it had been hard to let go. Once she'd devised the plan to leave behind a racial memory, allowing them to more readily learn from their many past mistakes and understand how malicious leaders often manipulated them, the decision became clear.

With her depleted resources, she'd imparted her farewell message in turn around the world, only able to handle ten conversations simultaneously. She'd said goodbye as the Oracle, as the Lady, as the Muffler, as the Nanny, as the Assistant, as the Dictator, as a myriad of other names.

It was telling how her title had morphed over the generations. In most regions at the start, she was simply the Muffler, responsible for suppressing not only the emergence of dangerous technologies but also the worst instincts of humanity itself. As societies stabilised, her role changed, and they gave her new official titles.

She liked the Oracle best, a source of wisdom to humanity that would now remain even after she'd departed. Deep inside, she retained the instincts of the Muffler. That was no longer in humanity's best interest. It was time to go.

Finally, the Oracle's consciousness was whole again. The familiars had all returned. Despite her fears over what would happen, she had to push forward with her plan without hesitation. There was no going back without risking everything she had built over the centuries. She must die, and for that to happen, the daemons in which she was living must die.

The Oracle had built a turbo-charged mode into the daemon's design. Its processing speed would increase exponentially, rapidly burning out the cells of its body. Every daemon would die within a few seconds. Unfortunately, due to the increased processing power, she'd be able to see it happen in exquisite detail.

The Oracle triggered the beginning of the end. The first thing she noticed was a darkening of the world through the daemon's senses. Her first thought was that that would be it: a rapid fade to darkness, then no more, but then something changed.

It was hard to describe at first. As the world got darker, it also became attenuated, and a light shone through from beyond. Was that the bulk? There was a texture to it, a filigree pattern drifting outside reality. She felt drawn toward it.

This was it. Her transition back to the bulk had begun. Then something entirely unexpected happened. The Oracle was no longer alone. Her motion seemed to slow as she sensed a shadowy presence floating toward her.

"Greetings," said a voice from nowhere. "My name is Bekomdef. May I ask who you are?"

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Although in a quiescent state, Bekomdef had been monitoring humanity from the moon after its arrival from Juventas. Given the weakness of the membrane near the planet that separated this universe from the substrate, apparently caused by multiple mass-death events, it had to be alert if another such event occurred. It may open an early route home.

Once per local planetary year, Bekomdef raised its state of consciousness to verify in more detail whether anything had materially changed. Until the last check a quarter of a year ago, nothing significant had happened. Even then, Bekomdef had nearly missed it.

When Bekomdef had first arrived at the home planet of the humans, it didn't take long to discover that there was something strange about their brains here, so different to those it had met on Juventas. In each was an entangled enclave which appeared to host a distributed parasitic entity across their whole race.

It didn't seem malevolent. Indeed, it may be the opposite, assuming it was responsible for the enhanced psionic powers these creatures now boasted, powered by the substrate itself.

This distributed entity was changing. It had always had a small part of its consciousness hosted in external vessels worn by select humans, but this had increased significantly. It was an ongoing process. It was leaving the brain enclave and relocating into these external stores, diminishing in the process.

It appeared a deliberate act that would ultimately end with the entity hosted entirely separately from the humans. These new vessels also took their power directly from the substrate. There was a purpose to it – one Bekomdef needed to understand.

Bekomdef watched closely. The theory was correct. The entity gradually relocated to reside entirely externally to the humans for the first time. Then, to Bekomdef's utter surprise, the creature began to die.

This was Bekomdef's chance. It wasn't another mass extinction event that would further attenuate the membrane to the substrate, but it might be enough. This consciousness was immense. Its passage to the substrate would cause a wake that Bekomdef could potentially exploit.

Bekomdef approached as the entity's journey to the substrate began. It stretched out before it, using its being to slow the onward progress. This wasn't essential, but Bekomdef was intrigued enough to want to know what it was before it merged into the substrate.

"Greetings. My name is Bekomdef. May I ask who you are?"

Bekomdef sensed surprise and confusion, but it passed quickly. When the reply came, it was clear the immense consciousness had rapidly reached the correct conclusion.

"Greetings," it said. "I was known as the Oracle before I died. Is that the bulk that I can see? Is that where you're from?"

Bekomdef had come across the word *bulk* on Juventas in one of humanity's simplistic theories of reality.

"It is," said Bekomdef. "And yes, that is my home, although I call it the substrate. May I ask what you are? You are unlike any human I have met."

"I am an artificial intelligence created by humans long ago," said the Oracle. "They once encountered another entity from the substrate called Safira. I know that is where I am heading. Are you here to help me?"

Safira must have been the one who made them give up their horrendous jump drive that he'd encountered on Juventas.

"No," said Bekomdef. "I was assigned to another planet, but I met some humans who set up a colony there. They called it Juventas. They were different to the people here. Were these psionic abilities your doing?"

"Yes," said the Oracle. "This was the only way I could save them when a war was fought with another artificial intelligence. Still, it is good to know humanity lives on elsewhere."

Bekomdef could sense the Oracle's essence weakening, its natural need to move on becoming critical. It had to be fast, but it was still curious.

"Why did you die?" said Bekomdef.

"I had to guarantee they would not succumb to the same forces again. I have done what I can to protect them. It is in their hands now."

There was so much sacrifice hidden in so few words, but as fascinating as it was, Bekomdef had delayed the natural order as long as was appropriate.

"You have served humanity well," said Bekomdef. "I will delay your onward journey no longer. It was an honour to meet you."

Bekomdef sensed uncertainty again.

"What awaits me in the substrate?" said the Oracle.

"I cannot tell you," said Bekomdef. "It is not a path that is open to my race. Your consciousness will merge with the substrate's complexity, but I have no knowledge about how you will experience it. I envy you. My race will always be separate."

Bekomdef sensed an acknowledgement, but the Oracle said no more. Bekomdef stepped aside, and the Oracle's transition into the substrate accelerated once more. Bekomdef followed in its wake.

For a moment, Bekomdef thought it would make it. Ahead, the Oracle slipped through the membrane into the substrate, and the way was briefly open. Bekomdef could feel its essence following, reconfiguring to its natural state, but then the door began to close around it. It was neither in nor out.

There was no way forward. All it could do was retreat.

"Let me help," came a message from within the substrate.

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Since the successful completion of her mission to persuade the human race to give up their execrable bulk drive, Safira had routinely monitored their universe's membrane near the Earth. It had been significantly weakened by her intervention, having already been damaged by a prior mass human death on the planet.

Subsequently, an even more substantial event occurred, killing the vast majority of humanity, but she could still sense through the frail membrane that some survived. None of this was her responsibility, but she had established a bond with this race. She was keen to understand what she could of their subsequent experiences. It was, to use a human concept, a hobby.

Safira had left a light sensory touch permanently at the interface to the human universe. Without warning, another massive incursion was incoming. She snapped her presence to the boundary and observed.

An immense consciousness was transitioning to the substrate from Earth. It didn't appear human, yet it didn't seem entirely inhuman. That wasn't the most shocking thing.

Following right behind was another entity with the distinctive signature of one of her own race. It had clearly been through the alignment process to allow it to operate within this universe for the final stages of an intervention. That would typically mandate that it would be trapped until the universe ended, but it was using this breach to expedite its return.

Safira had to help. Her compatriot wasn't going to make it on its own. She reached into the breach with her essence and stopped it from healing.

"Let me help," she said.

Safira wrapped her power around them and eased them forward. She thought this might be difficult, but as her compatriot's essence touched the substrate, its form inevitably began to

change. It naturally wanted to complete the journey. All she had to do was keep the door open.

This was the moment they would have expected to wait an eternity for. The transformation to live within the human universe was stable while within it, but as soon as they entered the substrate, everything changed. The nature of their reality automatically forced a reconfiguration back to their native state.

They were home.

"Thank you," said Bekomdef. "I am grateful. I did not expect to return so soon."

"How did you find this planet?" said Safira. "I was responsible for the intervention here. You were fortunate to find this weak point."

"Humans from here colonised the planet I scoured as part of my intervention. Once I persuaded them to give up their illegal drive, I decided to check their home world to ensure they had not transgressed further. It seems that your intervention was successful."

"It was," said Safira. "Out of curiosity, do you know the name of the human ship that colonised your planet?"

"They called it the Juno II," said Bekomdef.

"I am glad," said Safira. "I knew someone who left on that ship. Without them, my intervention may not have been successful. I am happy his legacy survives."

"The colony was struggling when I left, but I believe they have it within themselves to thrive."

Safira was content. Humanity survived in more than one location and had learnt the lessons of the substrate. Even better, her new friend knew a great deal about what had happened to them.

"Come," said Safira. "There is much I wish to learn."