The Rebirth

SCIENCE FICTION—Fourth Best Entry

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DAVID knew it was the best and the worst moment of his long life. For someone who had just completed his life’s work, instead of being overwhelmed by the majesty of his moment of creation; he felt sad. He felt deceived, cheated.

His work had cost him too much, a pyrrhic victory. He had started with so many: tasked by their starfaring civilization to build this mammoth machine, as an edifice to their collective wisdom and to their eternal search for the ultimate truth. Each of them was chosen with great care, bodies and minds engineered incorruptible by time, and imbued with an unshakable faith in their final goal. And they proved equal to the task. On this day, after 400 years, they all have. Even if only he remained.

His beloved, Celia, was amongst the chosen. Smartest woman he knew, she was one of the toughest too. She survived till there were only a handful left. But the loss of their home world proved too much for her to bear in the end. It gnawed at her being: having nowhere to return to, and eventually it took its toll. Her last gift to him was one of those curious little dolls whose rounded torso when removed will reveal another smaller version of it hidden inside, and removing that presents another one, still smaller, tucked within & so on. She had told a puzzled David that it meant good luck. It had also meant goodbye.

All three of his eyes filled with tears. He reminded himself not to stare too long into the remaining light that escaped the protostar and tried to focus on the work at hand. He didn’t have much time left. The Oracle’s structure enveloped almost two-thirds of the protostar, obscuring it, feeding hungrily on its nuclear radiance as if to drink it dry. Not much starlight escaped its monstrous bulk, the behemoth’s shadowy wake engulfing countless worlds into the immutable blackness of space. It would need every drop of that energy to serve the purpose it was built for.

His accomplished race had designed the Oracle to perform a singular task: to reveal the mind of the Maker. The ancients had believed based on their calculations, that the multiverse in essence was a computer simulation, a program, a self-consistent numerical automaton weaved out of raw Code: one running on some cosmic apparatus put in place by the Maker. It lent substance to the physical Laws that governed space & time, underlying & animating the very fabric of Reality.

The Oracle was to punch a hole in this fabric, dispel the facade, peel apart the construct and force a peek at the hidden sequences. The brute assault came from raw computing power, a series of de-resolution attack algorithms, a counter-simulation executed at astronomical scales of size and energy to pick out the dangling fibres to the Maker’s illusion. If this pondering giant, this gargantuan computer, succeeded, the ancients had said, their race could finally meet their Maker. The Creator. And he knew he would never live to see Him.

When they received news that their planet was wiped away in a sudden and unknown cataclysmic event, the builders who were already a century into the work of building the Oracle around this distant protostar, kept true to their faith. They reasoned, including David himself, that the Maker will be merciful and reward their quest by restoring their home world. They resumed their work with religious zeal, but his wife Celia remained inconsolable. Every day as they returned to their orbiting habitats, Celia reaffirmed her fears that they were not built rugged enough to outlast the construction of the Oracle. David, even now as he stood, could feel his body and mind, eroded through ages of tireless effort, failing him.

The idea came to him suddenly, out of nowhere. He could integrate himself, his consciousness with the Oracle’s mainframe before he died! The technology though rarely reliable, already existed: as a means to preserve the Ancients’ wisdom. If unsuccessful, his doom would be all the swifter. If successful, he could survive even to the end of eternity. He would be alive, waiting within, as a part of the Oracle’s psyche, existing for the sole purpose to be ready when the moment came. To meet the Maker. He would then appeal His benevolence to reinstate his home world. He would persuade Him
Wasting not a moment further, he hailed the interface on his orbiter’s control module. Ensuring a strong uplink with the Oracle, he positioned himself under the myriad scanners, overrode all the warning.

The liquid glow seemed to pulse; he was vaguely aware of a voice addressing him. He thought at first that it was the artifact of his own mind, especially when the voice was of his wife, Celia. His being was scattered, with only a tenuous residue of identity left, united through the Oracle’s own. Gathering himself took great effort, but the voice was insistent and within him came a desire to be whole again. He searched for his voice, discarded, disused for what seemed like millennia. “Celia?” David found himself drawn to the voice, “is it you, Celia?”

The voice turned graver and more masculine as David’s attention converged on it; it was not her. “David, isn’t that your name?” The glow about him took wispy shapes and faded as the voice echoed.

“Yes, it is I... Dav..David. Are... you... the Maker?”

The reply came at once, “You have exceeded all our expectations, David. Your race has proved to be a glorious experiment. If it were up to me, I would not have allowed it to end so abruptly.”

As if sensing the growing confusion in its sole listener, the voice grew softer, “We are not so different from you, David. We did seek what you seek now, an audience with our Creator. Only that we did not look Up, we took to looking Down.”

David had imagined this encounter countless times during his long wait. It wasn’t going anything like he had imagined. The Voice, meanwhile, continued, “Our guardians believed that if our programs coalesced into stable, self-organising systems, eventually a few of them would go on to sprout and sustain sentient life forms. Some of them would survive long enough to try and reach out to the stars, thence to their Maker, to Us. Fewer still would succeed. If our creations, having their thermodynamic Time accelerated to multiple orders of magnitude above our own, managed to do so in a finite number of processing cycles, it would then be worthwhile, and worth the expense, according to the guardians, for Us to mount the search Ourselves. To reach out to our own Maker, the True One.”

David’s mind was a swirling fog. “Dolls within dolls, within dolls, within dolls.....” He found himself repeating. Just like the gift Celia had given him as a charm. The more layers you removed, the more of the same you found, an unending loop.

“You are the first to make contact,” the voice was excited now. “Despite my explicit orders, a goof up on the part of an analyst resulted in depreciation of planet’s module; a de-elevated state in which your world, with its wise, old and peace loving race, could be found and obliterated by other malevolent civilizations. Which is exactly what happened.” He paused. David could feel his emotions: He, the Maker, was sad.

David himself felt a burning sensation. There were so many things to ask now that he had met the Supreme One. So much to learn. He had planned so many things, composed encomiums to offer to the Maker. Yet his will failed him. All he now wanted to know was one thing. “Could you bring her back? My wife. My friends. My planet. You can bring them all back, r-right?”

Only after what seemed an eternity to David, the Voice answered, “The simulations are bound by their own rules. So are We. We cannot violate them at will, not without dire consequences to the entire framework. Ad-hoc changes to the local structure, even fine ones, can destabilize the delicate internal equilibrium of your universe, causing it to collapse. I cannot hazard what you ask.”

Having regained some of his old poise, David reflected on his response. “What about our sacrifices? Of my people, of my own? You told me that we are unique, that we are the first. Is this the fate you choose for us, O Great One?”

Another long pause. The Voice was tense when it rumbled again. “There is a way, for you and you alone. So, pay heed. Since you have already abstracted away from your sentience, your veritable essence, into the Oracle; you have passed onto our plane as the Oracle, tearing away from your own reality, embedded itself into this one. You are now one of Us.”

David tried to interrupt, but the Voice ignored him and went on, “I am overseeing at present the development of a new world in another universe. It was commissioned as soon as your planet was destroyed, allowing Us to continue a promising lead. As such, it is almost a splitting image of your home world, with differences arising out of adjustments for this universe. In order to make things foolproof this time, arrangements have been made so that this juvenile planet resides in a secluded system, orbiting an average and insignificant star. A splendid isolation has been afforded by its setting in a deliberately unpopulated neighbourhood for billions of light-years around, far away and protected from prying eyes that could mean it harm. If and when the dominant species of this world becomes radio-capable, we have already put in measures to ensure they are not heard; and remain deaf until the time they have grown enough to go looking for trouble.”

“What does all this mean for me?” David asked. He couldn’t even venture a guess.

“In order that the New People fulfill their ultimate purpose, We trust that their development needs to be guided. You, of the Old people, will ensure that. You will be sent down to them, from time to time, as our herald, as our prophet, as our messenger. You will learn to love them, as this race has been designed to be your twin. They will love you back, respect you, enshrine you as their God. And amongst them, each time, you will find your Celia.”

Joy coursed through him at the mention of her name in the Voice of the Supreme One. The endless wait was over: he shall see her once again. And he shall be whole again. The promise of a second chance, of rejoining, of a rebirth, filled him with divine peace.

“Well, what are we calling this one?” he quipped. “Earth.” the Creator sounded happy himself, “they are going to know it simply as the Earth”.

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