

ALTERNATIVE TRANSPORT

By Angela Melick

Claire's fingers ached as she clambered up the rocky hill. She winced, and wondered whether her nails would ever be clean again. Running water was difficult to come by, and her meager supplies – stuffed into the pack that strained at her shoulders – didn't include a good scrub brush. Hard to believe that it was only a few weeks ago that she was lavishing in manicures and exotic skin treatments.

Has it really only been two months? Since the meteors started falling, and every community collapsed into chaos? It still doesn't seem real, but in a matter of days, the world would be over.

Franklin handed her a scuffed up Nalgene bottle when she finally reached the crest of the hill. He had been standing there awhile, staring out over the ruined cityscape. Claire gulped at the warm, gritty water.

"Think we can make it to the terminal before sundown?" Franklin suggested optimistically. Claire sighed, exhausted.

"I can't handle another night sleeping on gravel." Claire smiled weakly at Franklin, and he pulled her to her feet.

They had to duck as the deafening roar of a sudden blast of air swept past them. But the starship was only a faint shape on the horizon by the time they could open their eyes to see it. They watched the glimmering white ship disappear in silence. For weeks they had been pleading to be allowed onto one of those ships. Screaming at the ones who could afford to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on a voyage they wouldn't even survive. It would take three generations to reach and colonize Tau Ceti e. Even so, it was the closest alternative to this doomed rock and only the rich could afford the way out. They had protested the injustice until their throats were raw.

There just wasn't anything left to say about it.

All they could do was keep walking to the next terminal for as long as they could survive. The gravel scraped and shifted under their feet as they continued down the hill.

It was already dark when they arrived in Terminal Square. Claire had been here once before for a folk music festival. Then, it was packed full of people, swaying to

smooth rhythms and basking in the warmth of July. It looked very different now. Empty, ruined, and dark.

Although... there was *one* light...

Franklin furrowed his brow and tried uselessly to clean his filthy glasses with his filthy T-shirt. He squinted at the soft, white light across the plaza. Claire could see the kiosk more clearly: a white tent glowing in the darkness. Tall green banners on either side were illuminated so even from that distance, you could see the 'K' logo traced onto the icon of a Phoenix. Claire had seen this logo before, but it was one of those giant corporations that seemed to be everywhere but never did anything you cared about. Like industrial chemical distribution or thermoplastic automation... systems. Or something. Who cares. A nearby generator whirred. She could make out a short queue of people snaking out of the tent.

"I don't like the look of that," Franklin growled, stiffening. In a disaster scenario, there is always someone trying to profit from desperation.

"Come on," Claire sighed, pulling Franklin's arm, "maybe they have protein bars or something. We don't know."

Cautiously, they strolled across the open courtyard to approach the innocuous glowing white tent. Dark financial towers loomed above. It seemed strange how empty it all was. Well, empty except for the queue. Two women beamed at them from behind a table as they approached. They both had long, shiny black hair. They wore a bright green shirt with the "K" logo embroidered on the left sleeve, and spotless white pants. They looked so impossibly clean.

"Hi there!" one chirped. "Welcome to the Kleintek relocation centre."

Neither Claire nor Franklin replied. They kept a meter between themselves and the table as if they could be burned by the gleaming light. A range of glossy brochures were spread over the table in neat, fanned out piles.

Alternative Transport: How Consciousness Transfer Can Be Your Gateway to the Stars

Your Questions Answered: How Are Memories Stored and Transmitted?

A New Adventure Awaits on Tau Ceti e: The Same You in a New Body!

"What's all this, then?" Franklin muttered defensively with a vague gesture, only daring to glance at the gleaming attendants.

"Have you heard of Kleintek's patented consciousness transfer technology?" the right-hand kiosk drone beamed. Claire and Franklin shook their heads, sheepishly.

"Consciousness transfer is Kleintek's alternative to analog interstellar transport," she thrust a brochure into Claire's hands, then continued. "One of its many advantages over analog migration is that *you*, yourself will be able to live out your life on Tau Ceti e, rather than your great grandchildren."

"The process is simple," Kiosk Drone #2 didn't miss her cue, "All of your neural pathways are scanned and digitized using our state-of-the-art recording system. All of the synapses and structures that form your personality are preserved... even all of your memory! Everything that makes you *you*. The data is then transferred via our existing communication architecture and you are re-assembled on Tau Ceti e."

"Re-assembled?" Claire glanced up from the glossy photos of stiffly-posed people in alien landscapes.

"The technology to 3-D print living tissue has existed for some time," Kiosk Drone #1 picked up the thread, swishing back her shiny black hair confidently. "We have been producing custom bio-replacements for every organ and structure for decades— it's just a matter of putting it all together."

"It's *painless*," Drone #2 stressed, "and because nothing physical is transferred, you arrive much quicker than analog means of transport."

"Is that really possible?" Franklin challenged the drone. "Can a person's memories really be preserved by just scanning and printing neural pathways?"

"*Oh yes*," Drone #2 looked over at the other one and they shook their heads simultaneously in a firm nod. "The technology is sound, it has just been restricted because of... *ethical* considerations."

Claire frowned in concentration. She studied the brochure's photos, juxtaposed against bulleted lists that extolled all of Tau Ceti e's virtues. She noticed that every single person had their backs turned so you couldn't see their faces. You couldn't see any of these 3-D printed people close up...

"What's the catch?" Claire straightened, passive-aggressively sliding the folded brochure back onto the table. Its glossy surface was smeared with her fingerprints, and she deliberately left it askew to the neat piles like some kind of crumpled contaminant.

"Well..." Drone #1 straightened in kind, sharing a look with the other one. She looked down her nose at Claire, and enunciated, "There is a *cost* associated with

the procedure. Although, given our extenuating circumstances, our employer is offering a substantial discount in exchange for a term of employment.”

“So, like slavery.” Franklin crossed his arm and tried to act surprised.

“No!” Drone #2 refuted in horror. “A *compensated* ten year term of employment. Compensation is commensurate with your role and experience, but you must work for Kleintek or one of its many subsidiaries. There is much work to be done on Tau Ceti e.”

Claire exhaled sharply and looked over at her husband. He met her solemn gaze and they communicated silently by intimate familiarity. Franklin had been strong for her, but she could see that he was exhausted too. Five weeks ago their apartment complex was destroyed in a hail of meteors that they had barely escaped. It had been six days since they’d had a bath, and three days since they’d had a proper meal. They still didn’t know where they were going to sleep tonight.

There was no future here.

The queue trailing out of the tent was full of haggard, exhausted souls who had reached the same conclusion.

Between them, they carried \$30,000 in cash. Money they had scraped together in the hopes of getting a ticket off-world, but so far the cheapest ticket they’d found for ‘analog transport’ had been over \$200k.

“How much.” Franklin ventured.

The black-haired woman handed him a crisp, printed sheet of loose-leaf, just failing to restrain a victorious smirk. “\$11,560. All taxes and fees included. Once transferred, all your needs will be provided for.”

Claire stared into Franklin’s eyes, beyond the glowing reflection of the white tent in his glasses. He took her hand and squeezed it firmly.

Another adventure.

Dust and brochures scattered as he heaved his travel pack onto the table. He pulled out two crumpled but neatly packaged \$10k stacks and set them on the table. Claire pulled a wad of \$100 bills from her jacket pocket and counted 31 bills out on top of the stack. It certainly felt strange doling out this much cash at once, but she had lost all sentiment for the bills. The remains of the earth economy had devolved to bartering soap and batteries, cash only mattered in space. Franklin pulled the final \$20 from his pants pocket.

One Kiosk drone smiled widely and transferred the cash payment to a heavy canvas bag, shut quickly with a rugged zipper. The other whirled around to the table to usher them quickly into the queue.

"Please fill these forms out completely," the drone spoke quickly, thrusting a pair of clipboards into their hands. "It waives us of liability in case of transfer error and states that you understand the risks and side effects associated with the procedure."

The queue shuffled forward.

"Wait –transfer errors?" Claire interrupted.

"A small percentage of those who undergo consciousness transfer experience complications due to errors in either the scanning or printing process."

The queue shuffled forward again.

"What *kind* of 'complications'?" Franklin leafed through the lengthy document.

"And what are all of these side effects?"

"Only a *small* percentage are affected," the Kiosk Drone insisted impatiently. "There have been some documented issues with digestive and reproductive systems, but the most common issue is difficulty adjusting to the tint of sunlight from Tau Ceti, for which basic anti-depressants are prescribed."

The queue shuffled forward, bringing them fully inside the tent. Inner walls formed a cramped passage, and it was unexpectedly dark inside. Claire's shoes squished on damp pavement as she shuffled forward again, and more had filed in behind her. She hadn't noticed how *quickly* the queue was moving when she was talking outside...

"Deformation of earlobes – 6%. Reduction in lung capacity – 2%. Femoral perforation – 12%," Franklin read anxiously from a long list on the seventh page.

"Please – you must sign it if we are to proceed." The Kiosk Drone shot an annoyed glare at Franklin as she collected completed forms from the tired-looking patrons now behind them. Defeated, Franklin and Claire signed their waivers and handed their clipboards back to the black-haired woman. She added them to her pile, spun, then disappeared down the dark narrow passage without another word.

Claire clung to Franklin as the queue shuffled forward again. They rounded a corner in the process, but all they could see was a continuation of the cramped passage.

"It'll be fine," Claire reassured him gently. "Even if there are problems, we're getting out of this hell hole."

Franklin smiled and stiffened his resolve as the queue shuffled forward once more. Where were all of these people even *going*? The tent wasn't *that* big...

A large, gruff-looking man in rain boots and green rubber overalls appeared in the corridor.

"Here," he handed Claire and Franklin each a heavy pair of rubber coveralls. "Change into these, leave your clothes in the bin."

"What, change right here?" Claire called after the man, but he didn't linger to offer clarification. Claire sighed and started stripping off her clothes. No use for modesty at a time like this...

The coveralls were soaking wet and she shivered as she pulled them over her bare skin. It reminded her of teenage field trips to the *Maid of the Mist* at Niagara Falls. Why were these so *wet*? Claire wondered as the queue shuffled forward, and she tossed her clothes into the indicated bin.

As the queue spiraled closer to the main chamber of the tent, her thoughts were drowned out by the din of activity. Dozens of people working, shouted commands and grinding machinery were concealed only by the thick canvas walls of the tent. Claire was starting to feel claustrophobic. The air was humid with the panting breath of many weary travelers-to-be. The queue shuffled forward and the corridor was becoming very dark.

The gruff man appeared from behind a flap, arms full of sopping wet coveralls for the patrons behind them. As the flap swung closed, Claire caught a glimpse of the room. Another large man was rinsing coveralls with a pressurized hose. The water swirled down a drain in the centre of the floor, and it was streaked with red...

Something hardened in the pit of Claire's stomach. They transmit you to Tau Ceti e where you are re-assembled, but *what* happens to the *original* you...?

The queue shuffled forward.

"Franklin!" Claire hissed, tugging at his rubber sleeve, "I don't like this, we have to get out of here—"

"It's alright," Franklin spoke softly, resigned. "It's like you said, there's no hope for us here. This is our only chance, so it doesn't really matter what happens to us now."

The queue shuffled forward and Claire was next. The noise of machines on the other side of the canvas now filled her ears completely.

A nurse of some sort emerged suddenly and brushed past them in the narrow corridor. As the flap swung closed, Claire caught a glimpse of the final chamber. It was so bright inside, Claire had to squint, but she could see.

A patron sat upright in a chair, his arms restrained by metal cuffs. Blood cascaded down into his coveralls, down from his neck, down from his face—

The lower half of his face.

The top half was simply gone. She could see every detail of his brain as the laser traced back and forth.

Scanning him. Destructively.

Layer

by

layer.