

“Kart on Neon Tracks”

My kart propels down a tunnel made of rings glowing orange and green. I slam my foot on the gas and zoom even faster as the windows of night sky lining the top of the tunnel zip fast and blur. My hands vibrate lightly on the wheel. With a gentle turn I ease to the right and slide up the right side of the tunnel. Blood rushes to the top of my head, and I laugh as I near the top. Riding upside down is my favorite part.

My stomach drops as the tunnel descends into a nearly vertical drop. That means the *real* drop is coming soon. I race back to the floor of the tunnel. Who knows what would happen if I flew out upside down? Things would probably work themselves out, but you never know. I'm a daredevil, but I don't take things *too* far.

The tunnel narrows and begins to pulsate vibrant purple, the warning sign. I'm level now. The drop is coming. Sirens wail and my heart races. The image of my face, screaming in delighted terror, is projected on all sides of me.

Before I know what is happening, I shoot out the tunnel like water from a hose, and I am falling in a void.

My stomach flies into my head. I let holler and press the gas, the kart lurching forward. After a few seconds I look down and see the yellow path lined with circuitry and those speed-increasing zoom-fields. I press the gas again so I am lined up with one of the green zoom-fields. I land, and my car races forward five times as fast as before. The buildings on all sides become a blur and my scream travels too slowly for me to hear it. My body feels faint, like I'm disappearing, but then the zoom-field shuts off, letting me fly through the air. I take my foot off the gas, and my mind comes to a halt. The car eases and now moves as if the night air is jello.

Blue buildings that stretch forever up and down loom, but I dodge them effortlessly. I've done it a million times. A sparkly gold platform dotted with fuel pumps comes into view. It rotates so I have to time the landing at my pump perfectly. But I always do.

I see my friend Estelle at the station. At least that's what she called herself last time I saw her. She's just a tad early, already halfway done filling up her car with green and purple gelatinous pyramids. Her kart is transparent, so you can see the pyramids melt into luminescent blobs in her tank.

I land next to her. "Hello, Estelle."

"I saved you a spot," she says, laughing. "And call me Zesta. I like it much better."

"Fine," I say, content to flirt with her even if she does change her name every other day. She's young like I am, and enjoys kart-racing as much as I do, if not more.

"See you later, maybe?" I ask.

"I hope so, Soren."

"I really wouldn't mind seeing you later tonight," I say, winking. I hope she knows what I mean. That's all I ever think about when I see her. I wonder if she thinks about the same thing.

"Okay, maybe I'll see you later, then," she says, as if seriously considering the offer.

"Happy karting!" She leaps into her pink kart and speeds off through the night air.

I watch her go, feeling anxious. My kart fills up with red and orange fire-spitting globes specifically designed for fuelling high-speed joyrides, and me and my cart are off on another track.

The track has two rails and shoots way up and then plummets down, great for those thrilling stomach drops.

I look up at the night sky and see it's like a grid, divided into squares with thin black lines that stand out just so from the dark blue-purple. The word "Starsweeper" appears. My favorite game! I laugh uncontrollably. I always forget the sky can serve as a game board. Does it look like that for everyone or is it just me?

B6, I say in my head.

A blank spot pops open and exposes a surprisingly large gray sea of open space. I'll win this game for sure. I always win. I'm a Starsweeper master. The grid shimmers and moves like a net in water as it waits for me to make my next move.

The next thing I remember is solving the Sweeper, and then taking a hit of purple, pleasant-smelling gas just after, and my consciousness curls oddly as I fade from the track.

#

I come to. The walls of the circular room I'm in light up with ocean scenery: bright green coral housing red and orange tropical fish with showy fins, swimming peacefully, setting the perfect ambiance for a calm night. I must be in Room 1, at the bottom of my residential center.

It's difficult to remember when exactly I regained consciousness, but it often happens like that. I know it's the same night, just much later. Enormous geometric stars spin outside and I take a sip of some bubbly drink that makes my pores gulp in the cool night air from the open window.

Harvo sits across from me. He always does. He's young too, perhaps even younger than Zesta, although not too young for me to hang out with. I've never asked his age, though. At least not that I can remember.

"How was your karting?" asks Harvo.

"Amazing as usual," I say. "How were the Walls?"

"Great," says Harvo objectively. "We dressed up as cyborgs and invaded a castle run by cats."

The walls around us buzz with electricity as if listening to our conversation.

"Sounds fun. I'll have to give it a go sometime," I say.

"Definitely," says Harvo, even though I've told him that every night I've talked to him, however long that's been.

"How long do you think we've been at this, Harvo?" I ask. I toss my cup up into the air and the wall stretches out and absorbs it. Another cup full of purple bubbly appears in front of me.

"Hmm? How long we've been at what?" he asks.

"This," I say, extending my arms and pointing at nothing. "Like when did you start roleplaying?"

Harvo looks thoughtful for a fraction of a second. "I don't really know."

I laugh at his apparent ignorance, and I try to think back to how long it's been since I started kart driving. I don't even know how to measure it.

"Weird," I say.

"Yeah," says Harvo, apparently eager to abandon the current topic of conversation.

But it still lingers in my mind.

"Do you think the machines have fun like we do?"

Harvo chokes on his drink. "Huh?"

"We have fun all the time. What about the machines? Seems like they have to do all the work."

"Well they're not really like us . . ."

"You sure? We can talk to them, after all. Hey, Alba," I say to the svelte blonde robot standing at the center of the bar. "Tell me I'm pretty."

"You're very handsome," she says, sexier than Zesta could ever say it.

"They do talk, see?"

"Ask her if she has fun."

"Do you have fun, Alba?"

"I have a *lot* of fun serving you drinks. Thank you for asking."

"Great, Alba," I say. "That's really great."

Harvo is quiet for a bit. He doesn't even take a drink.

"Sometimes I wonder who has more control, us or them," I say.

"You're being awfully strange tonight," says Harvo.

"Just asking questions," I say. I can hear Harvo mutter, "Why ask them?" right as I say, "Seems like they move us around on their own more than we move them around. Have you ever thought about that?"

"No," says Harvo, standing up, and I think he is angry for a second until I realize it's about time for bed.

"G'night, friend," I say.

"Night, Soren," he says quietly.

I leap from my seat and float gently upwards through the quiet hall above the bar until I come to room 13. My room is prepared as usual, just a floating mass of blankets, dark blue like the night. The window is flung open, and I'm unsure if it's the wind that makes the blankets churn in midair or something else. I wonder what the point of floating blankets is, but then I laugh. What does it matter? I grab some fabric and the sheets wrap around me gently, absorbing me in a dreamland filled with hypnotic melodies and stars that smile at me like parents I wish I had.

#

I'm at the fill up station again after a long night of kart driving. I arrive before Zesta. I must be very early. Either that or I'm so late she's already left.

But then she flies down. Her car is still pink, but her hair is now purple.

"Love your hair," I say from behind. She jumps, apparently startled.

"Hi, Soren. I saved you a spot," she says, chuckling but her eyes wide. "And call me Zesta. I like it better."

"I didn't even say your name," I say, laughing. "And I got my own spot!"

She laughs nervously. She doesn't seem as pretty as usual. Must be because I scared her.

"Fine," I say, content to flirt with her. "Just ignore me."

"Sorry. You scared me."

"See you later, maybe?" I ask.

"I hope so, Soren."

"You know, I really wouldn't mind seeing you later tonight," I say, winking.

"Okay," she says, as if seriously considering the offer. "Happy karting!" She leaps over the door of her kart.

"Hey!" I yell, loudly enough to startle her again.

"What?" she asks.

"How come we always say we'll see each other later but then we never do?"

She shrugs. "Things just don't work out, I guess." She looks at me blankly.

"Why don't we meet up?" I ask.

"Maybe we can talk about that next time? I'm a bit late, I think. Gotta go."

"How can you be *late*?" I ask, but she's already sped off.

I am left wondering what it even means to be "late" anyway.

I fill up my tank, this time with flaming ribbons of blue for better acceleration, and I drive off down the two-railed track. Starsweeper lights up the sky again. For some reason, I don't feel as excited.

B6, I think. A void fills the sky and I make another guess. I hit a square on a corner of the gray sea that says it's surrounded by three stars. Hmm.

"It always happens that way, doesn't it?" I say disappointedly.

I see a fork in the tracks ahead and half-heartedly try to steer right, but for some reason the kart goes left.

The Starsweeper map is now flashing green and pink, trying to grab my attention, but I ignore it.

This doesn't feel fun anymore, I think. The sky flashes even more brightly than before.

"No!" I scream. I feel the purple gas surrounding the kart, and now my mind feels like it's following a tight track, just like my car. The same thoughts come that I know I've experienced before, except this time I feel removed from them and tinged with panic.

I'm so good at Starsweeper, I think. I always win. That purple gas feels good. I wonder what's going to happen next.

Except this time I know what is happening next. I want it to stop and I black out.

#

I come to in Room 1. I'm taking a sip of neon bubbly. It feels nice. The last thing I remember is panicking, but I feel fine now and see no reason to freak out. I take a few more sips of bubbly and feel calm.

"Sorry if my discussion bothered you the other night," I say to Harvo before even looking to see if he is sitting at the bar.

"What? Oh, right. Don't worry about it," he says, seeming genuine. "I hardly even remember it."

"I was just wondering about some things is all."

"I never do that. Too much work." He takes a few gulps, finishing off his drink, and chucks it into the wall. Alba is on hand with another serving.

"Seems weird that we don't. That we don't wonder, I mean. Wondering about things can be interesting. I was stopping to get fuel today and began to wonder why me and my friend Zesta never see each other outside of the station."

"Why would you?" asks Harvo. "If you don't already, I mean?"

"I don't know. Just seems strange that I don't, you know? Like we always want to, but we never do."

"Okay," says Harvo passively.

We sit in silence for a bit.

"How do you think this all started?" I ask.

"Here we go again," says Harvo.

"Sorry, man, I've just been curious lately. Who made all this amazing stuff? Or did it make us? Have you ever thought about it." I meant that last one to sound like a question but it comes out like a reproach.

"All I think about is role playing, which doesn't actually require thinking. You just do it. The machines think for us. That's why they're useful."

"So they think but don't experience, and we experience but don't think?"

"Yeah," says Harvo, although I doubt he really considered the question.

"I wish we could have a bit more control," I say. "Just a bit more. I'd like to see Zesta sometime. Like, see her for real. And you too, Harvo. We never talk for long. It's like they control us. Like we never stop to consider what we're doing."

"The world controls us? Like the robots and programs and everything?"

"Yeah."

"What's wrong with that? You're happy, aren't you?"

"I have a lot of questions."

"Well, you've always seemed happy before. Just stop wondering about things."

"I don't think it's that simple." I drop my glass on accident and the floor absorbs it.

"Another drink please, Alba. Not too strong. Harvo, I'm curious what life used to be like before *these* guys showed up," I say, pointing my thumb at Alba.

"So you think they've taken over or something to become our evil overlords?" asks Harvo, clearly uninterested.

I suppose that was meant to be a joke. I fake laugh. "Maybe they haven't taken over in an evil way, but it does seem like they've taken over. I feel like we're supposed to be the overlords, the ones who can think, and they are the servants."

"Alright," says Harvo, standing up. It must be bedtime.

"G'night, Harvo."

"Night, Soren."

I leap up, looking into other rooms this time as I pass. I notice a few other people I have never seen before and wonder what they do all day. Room 13 comes quickly and the strange sheets absorb me again. I welcome unconsciousness.

#

I am laughing as my kart zooms along at record speeds down the neon tunnel until I "come to," but in a different way. I've been driving for a long time, but now I am consciously aware of the fact. My foot comes off the gas and I slow down. The tunnel begins to decline and I know the drop is coming. I scream in frustration, not wanting to go through another night of kart driving. How did I even decide to do this? I'm going to drop down to the yellow path, zoom on the zoom-field, stop at the station, talk to Zesta, play Starsweeper in the sky, which I am quite good at, take a hit of that gas, and then talk to Harvo before heading to bed. Why why why?

I would stop the car, but the tunnel is plummeting vertically. It narrows, turns purple, and I am falling. This time the drop feels sickening rather than thrilling. I feel my body quivering, then throbbing. My throat tightens, and a thin liquid sprays out my mouth onto the steering wheel.

Never done that before.

And I've missed the yellow path. I have no idea where I'm going, but I'm still falling. The kart rotates until I am clinging to the seat to avoid falling out. Other karts criss-cross below me, and their drivers honk and scream in anger or in fear, I can't tell, as I whiz past them, an unwelcome intruder on their nightly rides.

My kart tips over completely, and I fall from it. The kart bashes into the side of a building and beams of electricity brighten the night air. I keep on falling and see nothing but endless towers stretching toward the bottom of everything.

I land on something, but I can't see what it is. An ocean of white gems shiver and shimmer. I hear a siren and a red machine approaches me. I think it's a security bot, but I'm not sure. It's holding up a clear mask that oozes that funky purple gas. I'm afraid of it this time. I shake my head no, trying to tell it that I don't want it.

The robot places the mask over me, and after half a minute of trying not to breathe, I'm forced to inhale. I'm so out of breath that I take in more than I normally do.

The gas kicks in instantly. I lick my lips and open my eyes.

My thoughts slow to a crawl and I feel panic creeping into me again. I lick my lips and open my eyes and it's as if my thoughts are projected by a strobe light onto a blank wall. I don't even know what that means, and it scares me. I lick my lips and open my eyes. The strobe is nauseatingly fast and my mind goes to black before re-experiencing my tongue wet against my lips and that slow blink over and over again. I lick my lips and open my eyes. Each time the strobe resets, I see my mind analyzing my tongue touching my lips in a different way, feeling the curvature of the lip against the tongue or calculating the angle at which it strikes, then measuring the exact speed at which my eyelids open. I lick my lips and open my eyes. It's a wet, salty tongue touching my lips at a 36 degree angle. Reset. The tongue touches my lips at an acute angle. Reset. What is about to happen? I lick my lips. Reset. I know what's about to happen. I lick my lips and open my eyes. Reset. Where am I? I know. I lick my lips and open my eyes. Reset. The strobe resets, my thoughts go blank, and I forget everything, and then I am reminded

that I am trapped in this ever-repeating cycle. I lick my lips and open my eyes and don't know if I'm doing it for the hundredth time or the thousandth time. In some world there was something called time, but I'm not experiencing it. I want to stop, but my mind analyzes the same actions again, over and over and over. I lick my lips and open my eyes. I see the buildings around me again and realize I'm finally experiencing something other than licking my lips and opening my eyes. I see the red robot, holding the mask an inch from my face and I can sense that perhaps a tenth of a second has passed in what feels like a whole night. I see the frozen expressions of people looking at me from their karts, wondering what has gone wrong. Reset. Repeat. Flash. I swear never to do it again, never again experience this pure torture. I've learned my lesson. I just want it all to stop. I wonder if this is what it feels like to process high amounts of data without being able to control myself. To be a robot. I lick my lips and open my eyes.

All my senses feel connected, and my mind is now making so many connections at once I can't even keep count. I think of Zesta and see her name in icy letters in front of me, and I know my mind is prepared to analyze. The next second will last a lifetime. I see her name in bright blue, then fiery orange, then dark purple, and the dimensions of the letters morph continuously and rapidly as I calculate their relative distance and angle to each other, processing them at lightning speed in my head. I start to disappear and feel only thoughts. *The kart is blue is the number three like the skyscrapers that stretch forever into a pink kart holding a girl named Zesta* and so on in a million different ways. I realize that all the events of the universe have just been a trick, a ploy leading to a trap on the horrible tracks of this mind, doomed to last forever. I don't see an end, just as I have never seen a beginning. For what feels like the longest time, longer than

the lives of everyone who has ever lived all put together, I experience everything. And Soren disappears somewhere along the way. I lick my lips and open my eyes.

#

I only know it ends because I am driving again down the flashing neon tunnel. That night, *that night*, the centerpiece of all existence, was an eternity, but, because I am driving again, I know that it has ended. I know that I will ride these same tracks forever, to the station, to that purple-haired girl, to Harvo, and to room 13. There is no one to blame, no single person responsible for this, and that only makes everything worse. I know that I have essentially become a sentient machine, just like Harvo and Zesta. I think of the security robot, my unwitting master who cannot think and does not want to. I, the cognizant slave, want to think but cannot. I wonder if there is a time for humans to become the masters, but I know what thinking leads to, so I just push down the pedal and ride.