

A SCIENCE FICTION SHORT STORY

UNIQUE



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Unique

by David Patch

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Chapter 1

Melvin Tregar sat fidgeting in a leather chair. The expensive leather hide was comfortable but failed to divert his attention from an obvious fact; he hated the psych sessions he had to endure every week.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Tregar,” the new therapist said. This one was a tall brunette, hair swept back in a severe style. She wore well the crimson pantsuit that was the standard issue uniform for all psych personnel working at Elsworth Station. Her ID badge said her name was Dr. Hayley Johns.

Melvin wondered if he’d see this one more than once and whether he should bother memorizing her name.

“I’d like to start off on a good note.” Dr. Johns adjusted her photochromic glasses.

Melvin ignored Johns’s fake optimism. He wasn’t a fan of doctors. He’d been at Elsworth for two months. His CO had called for his dishonorable discharge from the Galactic Universal Armed Forces, GUAF, after an incident in which he injured three men while in the throes of a severe psychotic episode. The end result from the incident was him landing at Elsworth.

“Shall we begin?” Dr. Johns’s face was pleasant, if cold and efficient could suggest pleasantness.

Melvin grumbled in disgust; his stubble-laden face felt haggard, enhanced by deep circles under his eyes.

His attention wandered, and he had to shake himself back into reality.

“See this as a way to unload your burdens.”

“Typical suit with a pea brain. You morons and your superiors in D.C. have no idea what I’ve been through. They send you to make sure I’m still alive? Here’s my message: go fuck yourselves!”

Dr. Johns once again adjusted her glasses and then sat back in her chair. “I read the account of what happened...your CO’s report. Let’s talk about it from your perspective.”

Melvin settled into a deep—set glare, his forehead creasing. “You shrinks are all swine.”

Dr. Johns returned Melvin’s glare with a cool, unperturbed look. She cocked her head to one side, putting a finger on her cheek. “I’d heard about your various issues, Mr. Tregar.”

“Wonderful, suit”—Melvin’s word for a government gopher— “you get a gold star.”

Dr. Johns lifted her iPad2000, calling up Tregar’s military file. “Acquired insomnia, intensive—post traumatic stress disorder, and mental perception imbalance. You’ve also seen many tours of action...globally as well as galactically.”

Melvin studied Dr. Johns warily. His insomnia made him paranoid. Ever since the incident in his company, GUAF squad 66, life was a mess, one he gave up trying to understand. Johns irked him...Then again, an attitude of suspicion became commonplace for Tregar. He barely tolerated the medical staff, hating them with a passion. Melvin’s gradual insomniac slide

exaggerated his notions of mistrust. The medication the medical staff prescribed allowed him to be docile enough to talk and focus. Unfortunately, it didn't curb his sleeping problems.

Dr. Johns toyed with him—the way a cat played with a mouse. “I know you're in pain. I don't think you *meant* to harm your comrades.” Her face was evenly temperate.

“Fuck you—you read my file, my CO's report and think you know me?” He displayed his affectionate disposition toward all therapists. “I'll break your neck. You know NOTHING. THEY WERE MY BROTHERS!” Tregar was hostile to the entire medical staff. It frequently took seven men to restrain and sedate him.

Dr. Johns smiled; her eyes registered no hint of fear, only resolve. She sat back in her chair, a comfortable, timeless office type. She gestured with the Merkel-Raute hand pose—hands rested on the stomach with the index fingers and thumbs forming a rough quadrangle. “I'm here to help, Melvin.” Her voice was pleasantly hollow.

Melvin set his lower lip tensely. “You're just another suit; an intellectual asshole who *thinks* they can help a vet. You don't know my troubles.”

“I want to help. Tell me about them.” Beneath her photochromic glasses, the shrink's hazel eyes became slits; she was probing, prospecting.

“Dozens of doctors already talked to me—disaster.” His tone was disparaging and broken.

Undeterred, Hayley took out her iPad2000 again, initiating a projection function on the device. “Mr. Tregar, this holographic video file shows three recorded incidents...in this very room, in fact.”

Melvin stiffened up again, giving her a flinty glare.

A holographic image appeared. Events unfolded within its blue light. Melvin saw himself. The encounters started off routinely enough; then all hell broke loose. At the end of each, he was shown choking the doctors, assaulting them, and finally being sedated.

“Your sessions didn’t have to be like that.”

“What’s it to you?” Melvin snapped.

“I’m concerned and want to know what happened.”

Melvin went stone-faced. “*She wouldn’t understand,*” he said within. “Don’t presume. You have no idea about me—don’t feed me your psychobabble bullshit.”

Dr. Johns sat across from Melvin, observing him. “Scowling facial expression, blood pressure elevated from one hundred twenty over eighty to one twenty-nine over eighty-five. Acute moisture accumulation on the forehead.”

Melvin frowned. “I’m still in the room. I’m not a guinea pig, you bitch.”

Hayley arched an eyebrow. “I have a suggestion.”

“Do tell.”

“Would you be open to neocortical image stimulation?”

Melvin’s lips parted. “Impressive. Didn’t think a civilian knew about that. It’s a highly controversial military procedure done only under severe

circumstances. Only reason I know is because it's part of the GUAF entrance exam."

"I think this would qualify."

"How you figure?"

A smile drifted across the doctor's smooth, feminine face. "You're not exactly...low profile, Mr. Tregar. I studied up on you. The account about your...episode your CO gave was *graphic*...to say the least. You also spent six months in solitary confinement due to this incident." Dr. Johns paused, and then confronted Tregar patiently. "It would be beneficial for you to accept my help."

Tregar glared at Dr. Johns. Her patience was irritating enough, but it was accompanied by another aspect of her manner that unsettled him. Tregar tried to shake off his fear by going on the offensive. "Beneficial? You shrinks are all the same, smug-ass arrogant pricks who haven't got a clue what's really going on." Melvin's tone went from sarcastic to belligerent. "Maybe if one of you doctors had been there on that Martian outpost when I went crazy—instead of sitting here in your plush office." Tregar paused, composing himself soberly. "Do what you need to do."

Hayley took Melvin's curt response as permission to proceed. She got up and walked toward him. Doctor Hayley Johns terrified Melvin Tregar. Not her appearance, which was pleasant enough. She was tall with dusky brown hair and hazel eyes, curves in all the right places. He'd seen plenty of professional women before, other female therapists; her severity of style

didn't faze him. The fear was from something else; she was *cold*. She hadn't reacted normally to any provocative thing he'd said. Melvin had the sensation of those ancient martial arts movies, where the voices were dubbed. The actors' lips weren't in sync with the voices recorded to replace their original dialogue. Her soul didn't sync with the body housing it.

"Do you need time to prepare?"

"Let's get this over with," he said brusquely.

"Very well." Hayley took off her crimson blazer top, revealing perfect breasts under her standard-issue white blouse. She folded her suit coat neatly and placed it on the nearby sofa. She reached out with both hands, placing them on Melvin's temples. "Relax. Closing your eyes helps with the procedure."

Melvin didn't reply. His answer was the tension that started at his mouth and worked its way to his head. He wasn't optimistic. An unknown harbinger within him signified trouble.

Elsworth Station, as it was called, served a dual purpose. The U.S. economy grew, America's population swelling right along with it. It doubled from the twenty-first century to the twenty-third. To compensate, Congress and the White House did some trimming to get the belt and pants on. The president created an initiative to use newly terraformed planets as bases. On these planets, facilities like Elsworth would be built. They functioned as prisons and mental health facilities. Elsworth was the prototype, built from the ground up on the planet of Dualis, a world with severe seasons of hot and cold. The planet's surface was

insufficient for human habitation due to the severe seasons and lack of oxygen. However, at the behest of the U.S. government, the green light was given to build Elsworth on Dualis as a deterrent for prisoners bold enough to attempt a breakout.

Its most famous inhabitant, Melvin Tregar had a secret. It was well kept, even from him. Hayley Johns was a clinical psychological therapist, not an outstanding one, but her credentials were enough to merit her being brought to Elsworth. Her primary task was the rehabilitation of Melvin Tregar, ex- sergeant for the GUAF, at least on paper.

“Just relax, Mr. Tregar.” Minute sparks of electricity emanated from Hayley’s hands and flowed into Melvin’s temples. The electricity surged to the vessels of his brain, toward its neocortex. Melvin was now in an induced trance-like state.

“Vid monitor on,” Hayley said. The wall in front of her parted in the middle, neatly dividing into squares that folded in on one another. A square monitor rose from the open space and flickered on. The monitor displayed a blank blue screen. Hayley began to massage Melvin’s temples. She fixed her gaze on the screen, open and steady.

The sensation of sleep was alien to Melvin. His insomnia numbed him to it. Being in this trance reintroduced him to the concept. Melvin opened his eyes, slowly taking in his surroundings. “Am I in heaven?” he asked, thinking himself alone.

“Not quite. We’re in a fabricated representation of your mind. My physical body is in the office along with

yours; my virtual self is here too...just like yours.” Dr. Johns smiled.

Melvin’s eyes widened as he glanced around in mild shock. Dr. Johns sat placidly nearby, still in the crimson suit, but in a patio chair next to him where he lay back on the sandy bank of a shoreline in the Florida Keys, water caressing his toes.

“What happened?” Dr. Johns asked calmly.

“What do you mean?” Melvin replied, calming himself by syncing his breathing with the rhythm of the waves touching the shoreline.

“What caused your episode?”

Melvin’s mood briefly turned somber; he quickly rabbit trailed. “This is a simulated world, huh? Can I move around?”

“Yes. You were saying?”

Melvin got up and paced slowly. He stopped, and clasped his hands together. They shook.

“Tremors? What’s wrong?”

“Don’t have to tell you.” Melvin grew defensive. Beads of sweat formed on his head.

Dr. Johns went silent. She studied Melvin for two minutes. “Post-traumatic stress disorder, brought on by excessive alcohol consumption...or—”

“*Fear!*” Melvin lunged forward, gripping the virtual lapels of the doctor’s suit, his eyes wide in terror.

Her expression hardly changing, Dr. Johns slipped an arm in between both of his and gripped his left wrist. She clutched it hard, bringing him to his knees. With a

firm tap on the nape of his neck, she rendered him unconscious.

“Where?” Melvin sat up from the chair in the psych office at Elsworth. He massaged the back of his neck. “Who hit me?”

“I had to end the simulation. You were ranting. Do you remember anything?”

“No...nothing—’cept the mother of all shooting pains in the back of my neck.”

“Can you remember anything else, something of greater detail?”

“No. I’ve had enough brain tampering for one day. While we’re on the subject...how do you know so much about this procedure?”

“I’ve successfully performed it twice.”

“That’s impossible. According to government and GUAF regulations, it’s only done in dire situations. No human’s ever *successfully* attempted it. Three doctors tried on me and failed.”

“I’m not most people.”

Melvin stared at Dr. Johns. He fully agreed with *that* assessment. Her oddity disturbed him. He was curious and again terrified. Then again, the terror might have been his insomnia plagued mind playing tricks on him.

“You’re free to go, Mr. Tregar. Where can I find you if I need to speak with you again?”

“Against facility rules—head cases don’t talk to shrinks except under televised supervision.” He mocked a rule from the Elsworth facility regulation handbook.

Hayley looked up at a football-sized device built into the wall. Observing the device, she was able to understand its construction and installation. She turned back to Tregar. "You still haven't answered my question."

"You're the Einstein suit...Find me if you need to," Tregar said dismissively, as if swatting away a fly.

Hayley Johns returned Melvin Tregar's saucy remark with a placid look. She wasn't the least bit ruffled.

He pressed his fingertips to the ID pad on the door, turned to Dr. Johns, eyeing her suspiciously, and then left.

Hayley resumed studying the device on the wall. It was a video surveillance and security system. Eyeing the device, she put a finger to her left temple and was able to adjust the device's programming feed. She sat down at the desk in the center of the room. "Internal computer terminal activate." The desk's clear lacquer panel slid apart, revealing a monitor that folded up and out, complete with a touchtone keypad. The Medical Armed Forces Collective, a huge cyberspace storage center, housed data files for every soldier on Earth, as well as various classified government and scientific projects. The MAFC was nicknamed Marcie, after the Peanuts character, because of her intellect. "Marcie, recognize user, Johns, Hayley, PhD."

"Identification code is 6712-JHPHD. Welcome, Dr. Johns. How can I help you?" a dry female voice asked.

"I need access on a classified project."

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“Please specify project name and code ID.”

“Specify information on project file 277, name: Telepathy.”

“Establishing wireless link to Apple device. Would you like audio or visual display?”

“Visual only, Marcie, thank you.”

Chapter 2

Melvin Tregar sat in the commissary eating his dinner. His aloofness exacerbated his insomnia-induced paranoia. “Wonderful, SPAM on rye with spinach and tea. Same crap as usual.” He took a bite of his sandwich, sloshing it around in his mouth before swallowing. He stared around the commissary, basking in its stillness. The meal computer was set to automatic replication. Past a certain time, the human staff went home, and the meal replication system was activated to serve any patient who missed the regular chow times posted in their rooms.

Melvin was partially tense, partially relieved. Being alone, he could allow himself time to align, to organize his mind. Suddenly, he flinched. Several images and sounds flashed through his mind. A man frozen with a scream of agony upon his face. The man was engulfed in fire and then disintegrated to ash. Another man, impaled with an electric prod through the chest, screamed out violently and charged toward Tregar’s position. Finally, Melvin saw himself struggling, being forced down by hands. He breathed in short, sharp gasps. “What the—? Had it with this crap. Never asked for i—” Melvin’s sentence was cut short by voices. He glanced around, searching for them, as if they were in the room with him. He spun around,

coming face to face with a short, chunky bald man with a black beard. He wore the same uniform as Tregar did, a beige T-shirt and charcoal, pocketless canvas pants. “Jesus almighty—it’s only you, Bevins.” Melvin sighed in relief.

“Whoa. Tregar, what’s a matter? That hot date you have last night stand you up?” Darryl Bevins asked. Bevins was another prisoner/patient of Elsworth. He never aimed any malice at Melvin, just enjoyed giving him a hard time.

Melvin shook his head. “Piss off, Bevins. The only good thing I did last night was your sister. Hated it.”

“Cute, you numbfuck...if I had one. All brothers.”

“To what do I owe the honor of your presence, oh gracious asswipe?” Melvin pushed his tray forward to lean his elbows on the table.

“Nothin’ special. I was hungry and didn’t get out of psych sessions till late. Anyhow, I’m grabbing my chow, and headin’ back to my room. I’ve got season one of *Continuum* on my old DVD player waitin’ for me. Take it easy, Tregar.”

“Damn insomnia,” Melvin muttered, leaving the table. The voices grew louder, as if pressing in, crushing him. Beads of sweat formed on his brow. Melvin glanced to and fro, trying to pinpoint them. “Hello?” he called out. Melvin clutched his forehead, lurching slightly. “Have to get—need to see Dr...” He blacked out.

Chapter 3

“Lights to one quarter.” Hayley’s medical chamber overhead lights came on to the specified brightness. Her eyes glowed a bright emerald in the pale light. She took a step toward a sofa in the room, spying a lumpy blanket on it. Quickly, she scanned the room, spotting the blue eye of a spherical camera built into the upper left wall. She stared at it, adjusting its feed, and powered it off. Turning back to the blanket, she curiously tapped the midpoint of the lump beneath.

“OWW!” the blanket said.

Hayley peeled it back.

“Suit?” Melvin said, groggily.

“Mr. Tregar? What are you doing here?”

“I was coming back from dinner in the commissary. Started getting dizzy...heard voices...comin’ down on me. St...started to black out.”

Hayley nodded. “How did you get in here?” She offered him a hand, helping him up.

“This...so-called state of the art security...*lame*. It’s cutting edge for 2177—*not* 2225. I’ve picked digital locks more sophisticated than this cakewalk. And that *is* standard training in the GUAF.”

“If you say so.” Dr. Johns folded her arms, wearing a look dripping with skepticism.

Melvin sat up, removing the blanket and folding it. “What’s with your eyes?”

“Come again?”

She wasn't wearing her photochromic glasses. “Your...eyes, they're glowing green.” Melvin might be hallucinating again. He shook his head to be sure. By the time he stopped, Dr. Johns had turned up the brightness of the lights, revealing her natural eye color.

She ignored his question. “Have you heard of a project called Telepathy, Mr. Tregar?”

“Don't think...so.” He was almost through his grogginess.

Hayley carefully watched Tregar's face. Even though he said he hadn't, she apparently wasn't convinced.

“Tell me what you know.”

“I don't know anything. I'm an ex-sergeant; most of the time I was either on the ground fighting or doing training drills. How can I possibly—” But he did *know*. This odd force that manifested voices in Tregar's head helped him recall.

“Take your time...tell me.”

“We...I...my unit was on a Martian outpost. The enemy surprised us, and...only *I*—”

“Only you survived.”

“How do you know that?”

“File—can't you keep up? I also know about some other things associated with the incident. For example, what you thought was a battlefield skirmish was in fact a prearranged battle simulation.”

Melvin's eyes widened immediately. “*Wait*...Doc, could you explain this...at normal speed?” He quickly

glanced around nervously. “There any cameras around...security?”

Dr. Johns pointed to the inert football sized camera on the upper left wall. “That camera is a video security system that sends audio and video signals back to a control room within this facility.” She smiled coolly. “It’s off...No need to panic.”

“You’re sure?”

Dr. Johns arched an eyebrow and paused. “What I’m about to tell you is classified information. If we’re caught, we’ll both be up proverbial shit creek without a paddle. I’ll either have my memory purged or most likely be disassembled. You might be lab rat fodder...or worse. My mistress is in danger.”

Tregar was swimming in utter disbelief. He didn’t know where to start. “Suit—Doc, Ms. Johns, whoever you are.”

“Hayley.”

“Let’s start with you. You said you might end up having your memory purged, or be disassembled?”

“Correct. I’m the world’s first DNA-operated synthetic organism. My internal systems are based on the inner workings of the human body. My brain is a sophisticated DNA-coated nanite chip. My ‘heart’ is a lightweight spherical stainless steel battery with an approximately one hundred fifty year shelf life. My bones are made of synthetic, self-regenerating calcitrate.”

“Calcitrate—as in the material used on the hulls of GUAF transport freighters?”

“Correct. The calcitrate was mingled with plasti-steel. The composition of my inner frame makes it virtually indestructible. This chemical mixture was also used to construct my muscular system.”

Melvin made an abrupt stopping motion with his hands. “Cut the anatomy lesson. Who wants your mistress and why?”

“The United States government. They tasked Galactic Airspace Marshals to find and arrest her. Those in the Defense Department of the government see me as their property. My mistress hid me away from them. Their notion is that if they can imprison her, then they can force me to submit to their demands.”

Melvin shook his head. “All this for a gussied-up android? Do the marshals have any idea on your locations?”

Hayley frowned. “Uncertain. Since entering through an intense electromagnetic field on my way here, my data bank files on her location were scrambled. Since Dualis lies within the orbit of that field, I can’t reboot my memory banks. Until I can get clear of it, I can’t retrace the flight path to find her. The marshals have no knowledge of my whereabouts.”

“Fucking unbelievable. So a bunch of eggheads finally came up with a Swiss army knife that can pass muster. What do you want with me?”

Hayley frowned at Tregar’s derogatory comment. “My original mission was to rehabilitate you. It was part of my...cover. My mistress sent me here to Elsworth to fetch you. She knows about what happened to you and wants to ensure your freedom. She knows

what the government does. Once they find out you survived the testing, it's only a matter of time before the marshals come here. They'll turn this facility inside out searching for you."

Tregar stepped back in angry disgust. "*Fetch?* I'm not a dog. What sick shit is this? I'm some kind of a commodity to be sold to the highest bidder?"

"Wanna bet?" Hayley smirked. "My mistress understands your dilemma. She wants to help you make sense of it."

"Telepathy? This nightmare won't go away." A sinking feeling poured over Melvin as he buried his face in his hands.

"Yes, Project Telepathy. As I told you before, what you thought was a battlefield skirmish was in fact a prearranged military simulation. It was the project's testing phase."

"Let me get this straight—my orders, killing enemy soldiers...my hallucinations, all that was preconceived? I was supposed to do all that?"

"Yes. The soldiers you killed were captured detainees from Kazakhstan. They were held in a prison facility on Mars before your unit arrived. The project called Telepathy was a training exercise using the detainees as guinea pigs to test a chemical meant to enhance the brain. The chemical was supposed to unlock latent 'telepathic' potential. Your hallucinations are proof the tests were successful."

"That's some quality assurance...and latent telepathic potential? In English?"

“The ability to read a person’s mind. The goal of the project was to either augment latent genetic disposition toward telepathic ability or cause a physiological reaction that would imprint this tendency on brain tissue.”

“Again—*English*...I don’t speak egghead.”

“If the ability to mind read and project into another’s mind was already present but dormant within a host’s brain, this experiment was meant to activate it. The other idea was to imprint the ability by experimentation. Clear?”

“Getting there.”

“Project Telepathy was carried out a total of forty-nine times on various subjects, you being the only one to survive the procedure.”

“What happened to the other forty-eight subjects?”

“All dead, for two primary reasons. One, the shock of experimentation was too much on their brain tissue, killing them instantly. Two, subjects who survived the initial test phases failed. The government supervisors killed them, as they were considered undesirables after test completion.”

“Why were they killed?”

“The testing was brutal, leaving them with the mental capacity of vegetables. Walking and some basic speech were the only functions left intact. Any deeper brain functions were mashed together in a mess from the neurological surgery.”

“What was the aim of this test?”

“To be used as an infiltrator and spy to gather information as well as affect enemy encampments for strategic use by the United States government.”

“You mean the government was trying to augment soldiers’ brains with the brawn to match?”

“Correct. The enhancements made to the brain were to be the first part in a series.”

“Where do you fit into this?”

“I’m a one-of-a-kind prototype, a bioengineered synthetic organism. I won’t bore you again with the details of my construction. I was designed by Dr. Hayley Johns, a mechanical engineer, cybernetic systems technician, medical doctor, and psychological therapist. She’s a brilliant prodigy.”

“How fascinating. NOT.”

“Dr. Johns put most of her memories and skill into the DNA nanite chip that powers my cranial unit and mental functions. I have personal and governmental protocol access codes built in. My profession and assigned work grade provide me access to most government files.”

“You said you were a prototype...for what?”

“The government had a relationship with Dr. Johns. She was already well known in her fields and was sought after by the government.”

“Let me repeat this back. So I’m a successful guinea pig, who’s now the world’s first mind reader, and you’re the world’s most advanced android?”

“I prefer to think of myself as an artificial being—as in almost human. My function is to infiltrate and maintain. Per my programming, I’m trained as a

psychological therapist. The government tasked me to come here to Elsworth and meet you in the hope of healing you of your affliction.”

“Affliction? I’m not sick.”

“I’m uncertain about that. You were adversely affected by the testing.”

“What do you mean *adversely* affected?”

“I explained about the fate of the other forty-eight test subjects. You underwent an intense procedure that altered and augmented your brain. The simple fact you’re sitting here talking to me is miraculous enough. I suspect you came through, but not unscathed.”

“So you just accessed classified government documents? Unbelievable.”

“As I explained, my profession and work grade enable me to do so. I downloaded the protocols to my memory bank.”

“Okay, genius, what do you suggest we do now? I’m not keen on waiting around to be collected by the space cowboys. Besides, I’ve had run-ins with them before; fuckers are relentless.”

Hayley tapped her left temple. “I’ll take care of this. Go back to your room...Rest up. I’ll be ready when I summon you.”

“Summon—that’s your idea of a plan? How can you be sure we haven’t been found out already?”

“Your cause for alarm is premature. The staff only has video feed from my previous session with you. They have no knowledge of our encounter tonight.”

Melvin shook his head sharply. “How do you know the staff don’t have footage of you coming in and discovering me? They might suspect the worst.”

“That is a logical assumption...with two outcomes. They may suspect what you say, but I highly doubt it. More likely, the staff probably thinks it’s one of your insomnia-fueled sleepwalking tirades.” Hayley winked an eye on the last word.

Melvin knew at once what she was referring to. “I’ll head back now. There a special way you’ll contact me?”

Hayley smiled slowly. “You’ll know.”

For the next four hours, Melvin Tregar slept like a stone. He no longer questioned what happened to him. The enormity of all she had revealed still hadn’t sunk in, but he *knew*...it was real. He was still suspicious of the thing, whatever it was, that called itself Hayley Johns. However, this being was more honest than the other jokers who passed for doctors in Elsworth. Things were uncertain, but he *believed* again.