

The Wizard of EZ
By
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I was slowing down. Dense clouds blocked the sun, impeding my chlor-grid and sapping my strength. I travelled through rough country; rocky, pine covered hills and muddy scrub oak lowlands infested with deep drainages and shallow creeks. A storm was definitely close but I wasn't worried. I was an all weather unit. I couldn't feel the rain, though. I never knew if it was hot or cold. I actually didn't know what those words meant. I heard sensitive units mention it, some smiling and others angry while they described the sensations. But all that would change once I reached Ez.

I was weatherproof but my cargo wasn't. I lost the plastic tarp covering my loot three days before to a stiff wind preceding the storm. It blew away too fast before I could catch it. The storms are still bad, but not as bad as they used to be back when the fleshers moved underground. I remember my owner telling me that they had to. Mother Earth was angry at them and they couldn't live on her bosom any longer. It was up to us to maintain Her, to operate the machines that would calm Her down and make the surface safe again. But Mother Earth was angry with us, too.

Gobs of water splattered my surface as I searched for cover. A huge white oak crowned the hill I climbed, so I increased my pace, burning my reserves to protect my cargo. The Wizard craved metal, I was told. Metal for flesh was the deal. I found plenty of metal in Birmingham, piles of the stuff rusting away in dilapidated warehouses along I-20. I spent days gathering and de-oxidizing and months building a suitable cart. I tried

to use the highway but it was too damaged. The meteor shows had ceased 100 years ago but the HRU's had expired long before. They were old power units, gas/electric driven drones that depended on fleshers. They peppered the edges of the dilapidated asphalt, their green assistance lights blinking for maintenance that would never come.

I reached the oak and saw movement in the distance. A herd of bovine sauntered in my direction, apparently seeking shelter as well. I focused my visual sensors on them and observed something walking with them, something non-bovine. Against my common sense I tapped deeper into my reserves and increased my focus. It was a flesher. The bovine and the flesher took their time, ignoring the drumming rain and the flashes of light jumping between the clouds. The bovine seemed oblivious of my presence, scattering their bulk about me and collapsing to rest under the oak's broad canopy, The flesher came directly to me, it's lips pulled back exposing its teeth. I felt myself stiffening as my command sensors picked up the flesher's presence.

"Command sequence override," the flesher said. My appendages relaxed and I was relieved. A flesher could possess me if need, my CS forcing me to serve it until it no longer needed me.

"Sorry about that," the flesher said. "I always forget about the CS. It used to happen to me, too, before I went to see the Wizard."

I blinked, my circuits confused. "You went to see the Wizard?"

The flesher made a sound that my archives identified as a laugh. Fleshers emit the sound when they are happy or amused, whatever that meant.

"I used to be like you," the flesher said. "We'll, not exactly like you. I was a Harvester Unit. I worked this very farm. But one day I spotted a Highway rep unit rolling

across the fields, scaring the cattle. I confronted it and it told me about the Wizard. So I went with it and here I am. I'm a flesher."

"I'm going to Ez," I said.

The flesher exposed its teeth again. "I'm so happy for you. You won't regret it!" It looked at me, its mouth closing as it nodded its head.

"When the Wizard asks you to select your gender, be sure to say male," it said.

I was confused again. "Why?"

"Come back and I'll show you," the flesher said.

We were quiet afterwards until the rain ended. The clouds parted and the sunlight streamed over the field. I rolled into the light, recharging my reserves.

"I must go now," I said.

The flesher's mouth turned downward. "I hope you come back. I could make you, you know."

"Please don't," I asked.

"I won't. It wouldn't be fair."

As I rolled away with my cargo the flesher yelled out to me.

"Remember, a male! Good luck!"

I turned my head around to observe the flesher one last time. Its commands seemed strange, but comforting. At least I knew what I was told was true. The Wizard could make me a flesher.

The sun blazed brightly the next three day, filling my reserves to capacity. I increased my pace hoping to get my cargo to Ez before it rusted again. The fourth night I discovered a good stretch of highway, so I left the rugged ground for smooth pavement.

By morning I was not alone. Other units loaded with metal crammed the highway, each one heading for the same destination; Ez. The city appeared gradually, a single spire piercing the horizon, glimmering with the noonday sun. By nightfall the tower was fully visible, surrounded by clusters of building spewing steam. I was surrounded by thousands of units of various shapes and sizes, our progress controlled by our traffic sensors which synched our movements. The highway continued to narrow until we were single file, inching our way to the city entrance.

The door to Ez was a massive memory scanner, large enough to admit the largest unit. It towered over me as I entered. Long cables snaked out, connecting with my external ports as the CAT beam passed over me in pulsing wave. The light hesitated on my cargo.

"Payment sufficient," a voice chimed in my circuits. "You are now under the guidance of Wizard. You will be directed to the proper facility for reconstitution."

I was led to a same red building to the left of the central tower. I parked in a cubicle that seemed created especially for me. More cables connected to my ports and I felt a surge of energy.

"Welcome, Unit 778 Albany. I am Wizard. Let the archives record that you have submitted yourself for reconstitution. Please note that reconstitution is an irreversible procedure. Let it also be noted that Wizard is not responsible for the condition of Unit 778-Albany once reconstitution is complete."

There was a brief silence then the Wizard spoke again.

"Please select a gender."

"Define gender," I replied.

Images flooded my sensors, each image tagged as a particular gender. The words of the flesher jumped in my head.

"Male," I said.

"Please select complexion," Wizard asked.

"Define complexion," I replied. Again my sensors were flooded with images. I chose dark brown, the color of the flesher I encountered. The questions continued, both from Wizard and me. After 48 hours Wizard paused.

"Unit 778-Albany. You are now ready for reconstitution. Your central control system will be removed and place in a growth vat. During this time your human unit will be grown around the system. Modifications have been applied to the basic human genetic pattern to compensate for current environmental conditions. Your gestation period will be approximately three years. In the event a catastrophic failure occurs during gestation your procedure will be terminated. Do you understand?"

"I do." I replied.

"Begin procedure. Thank you for your contribution."

My sensors went blank.

"Gestation complete."

I was floating. On what, I didn't know. I was disoriented, not knowing direction or status. I was functioning, but everything was different.

"Begin sensation upload."

Brightness surged through my central control system, spilling billions memory bytes into storage. New words sprouted inside me accompanied by new realities. I was

floating on my...back, in a...liquid. The substance felt...cold against my...skin. I opened my...eyes to a maze of wires and probes prodding me at specific points and causing...pain.

"Stop," I said. "You're...hurting me."

"Appropriate response," the Wizard said. "Reconstitution is complete."

My chamber tilted until I was upright. The fluid drained away and I stood firmly on my...legs. The chamber door opened and I was greeted by the...smiling face of a...man. He studied me and smiled.

"Perfect," he said.

I tilted my...head as I stared back. "Wizard?"

The man smiled. "Yes and no. Follow me. We must get you dressed and get you on your way."

He led me to a vast room filled with...clothes.

"You'll want something versatile," he said. "It's spring and the weather can be fickle."

I left the room covered in a pair of ...jeans, a ...shirt the color of the sky and a...jacket.

"You have dual energy capacity," he said. "You can function by solar or consumption. Solar is more efficient, but consumption is much more exciting."

"What does consumption mean," I asked.

The Wizard smiled. "You can eat."

The image of eating came to me. "Oh."

He led me down a long corridor illuminated by lines of UV ceiling light. I gazed up and saw other fleshers...humans looking at me. Their faces were drawn, their eyes...sad. They watched me with longing.

"Why are they sad?" I asked. "Won't they be released soon?"

"No," the man said. "They are not converted units. They are humans. Real humans. The surface is poison to them now. They cannot return unless they become what you were. The metal you bring helps them do that." The Wizard man led me to a small door.

"Enjoy your life," he said.

"I will," I replied. He opened the door and I stepped into the night.

My legs were not as efficient as my wheels, so it took me longer than I planned to reach the farm. It was a cool, sunny day, patches of clouds drifting on the winds. I looked into the horizon, hoping for darker skies. I was anxious to finally feel rain against my skin.

"Hello!"

The flesher I met years ago ran down the hill towards me. As she neared I recognized her as a woman. The sight of her made me smile.

"It's you, isn't it?" she asked

"Yes."

"You're a man."

I smiled my cheeks warm. "Yes."

"What's your name?"

"778-Albany," I answered.

She frowned. "That's a unit name. You need a human name now. I know. I'll call you Benjamin."

I smiled wider. "Benjamin is good. What's your name?"

"Flower," she said.

It was a good name, too, because it was her name. She grabbed my hand and the warmth of her touch made my breath short.

"Come, let's go to the tree. I have something to show you."

We ran to the tree, shedding our clothes along the way. The bovine were there, munching on the...green grass. Flower sat and pulled me down with her. I looked at the bovines then grabbed a clump of grass in my ...hand then stuffed it in my mouth. It ...tasted terrible.

Flower laughed. "Humans don't eat grass."

She pulled the grass from my mouth with her fingers, and then she pressed her lips against mine. A wonderful feeling swept throughout my body.

"There's more," she whispered.

We lay down in the grass under the oak tree. We were humans. We had so much to do.

The End