



ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION

Queensland Branch

PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING & HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH ENGLISH

THE ESU ROLY SUSSEX SHORT STORY COMPETITION

2023

Second Prize in the Secondary Schools Division

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Promotion

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As the energy field, which was being used as a door, retracted upwards into the generator, an electronic bell chimed a high note, piercing the usual hum of fridges and computers. The flickering lights, of a neon blue and red hue, illuminated shelves filled with containers of pills and powders. Some of the cybernetic enhancements in Casian's legs had begun to rust, which significantly decreased his range of motion. They moaned as the ball bearings at his knees rotated to allow Casian to squat and reach the bottom shelf. The shelf was piled with gustation pills of any flavour that could be imagined. Although unnecessary in the modern day, Casian enjoyed savouring pills, if for no other reason than the feeling of nostalgia that flooded his mind. The cherry pills reminded him of long afternoons he spent with his mother picking bright red cherries scattered across the plethora of bushes. He thought of the cherries as being similar to the network of red streetlights seen from a bird's-eye view of Third York. The joy he gained from these memories justified his purchase. He grasped the thick box of cherry pills without considering the other flavours.

The self-register beeped a low tone as he scanned the pills. The door's usual sequence of actions was played out, including its ear-piercing beep. Casian waited as his car automatically drove towards the entrance of the supermarket. The car doors launched upwards revealing the clean, beige interior with wooden highlights. Casian lowered himself into the seat, which was warm and a pleasant contrast to the cool air. As soon as he shut the door, the dashboard exploded into a mess of colourful holograms. A feminine voice softly asked, "Where would you like me to take you?"

"Bioware Tower 3, industrial district."

The light hum of his electric car dwindled into silence as he pulled over into an employee parking bay. Buildings filled every millimetre in between roads. They were all orange with rust, on the verge of collapse. All but one. One building loomed more than three times the size of the nearest corporate tower. The building was an eye magnet due to the piercing glow emerging from the thousands of windows. Once one's gaze was caught by the building, their eyes naturally travelled to the elaborate showpiece towards

the bottom. “Bioware” beamed in bright yellow lights. He reached for one of the two bio-power cells lodged in his chest. He slowly peeled the cell out of the aluminium casing and tossed it onto the floor of the passenger seat. The glove box opened with a light hiss from the motor inside. Casian reached for the cell labelled “5h charge – Breakfast” and carefully pressed it into his chest. The muscle fibres in his legs and left arm loosened as his cybernetic enhancements disengaged and rebooted.

With a small push, the door was raised. Casian stepped towards the glowing Bioware building and heard the car doors compress back into their initial positions. As he walked towards the staircase that led up to the entrance, Casian noticed a new promotional billboard had been installed at the edge of the car park. It stated “Bioware, your key to immortality. Batteries, Enhancements, Cryopreservation insurance. All sold here.”

A man jolted down the staircase and stumbled into Casian, gripping his shoulders for support. “Casian, I’ll bring you the payments with any interest. I almost have them.” The man’s features were identical to Casian’s, except he was maybe thirty years older, and his nose was large and lightly hooked. Casian’s was perfectly straight and average. “Sir, I have no authority over any decisions, please book a meeting with my superiors to discuss any special requests,” Casian replied in a collected manner. The man fell to his knees and tears streamed down over his large nose.

“I sold everything! The tax debt has been paid off. It’s all going to Bioware now.” The man’s voice was quavering as he spoke. Casian filtered out his pleas as he walked off towards the grand entrance. The tube for the elevator was directly on his right when he walked in. Casian scanned his employee card and tapped the box labelled Floor 37 on the electronic screen next to him. Immediately, the elevator jolted upward as a voice gave the usual corporate spiel. “Bioware Cryopreservation can keep you alive so you could experience the events important to you.” Casian had subconsciously ignored the robotic voice since he had heard it every single morning. The doors opened as the voice began spouting information about batteries and how your limbs can be kept fresh. Casian exited the elevator and faced the door, which was elaborately decorated with a silver plate reading “Senior Auditor”. The door rotated smoothly on its oiled hinges and Casian entered the room.

His body was wrapped in a pleasant soft leather as he sat in front of a beautifully organised desk. He placed his box of new cherry pills in the left drawer only after he had taken two into his pocket. Books lined the walls on dusty oak shelves, a sensation of bibliosmia emanating from the walls. Casian pushed a button and a screen illuminated

out of a slit in the desk and hovered about five centimetres above it. The hologram was accompanied with a light electric buzz. Casian navigated swiftly to a document full of names and numbers. The values were separated into neat columns on Bioware's proprietary spreadsheet service. The first couple of columns contained every user's name, address and serial number. The columns titled "Subscription type", "Nutritional requirements" and "Special needs" looked like scrambled gibberish to Casian. They were of no concern to him. Finally, he found the column that mattered, "Amount owed". In the column, five colours broke the monochromatic document. Casian was well acquainted with these values. He mostly didn't worry about green or yellow as they were in the "safe" zone. The orange users were contained on floor negative three in the preservation chamber. The black values were already taken care of. Which left the red values for Casian to deal with. Scrolling through the users, one particularly caught his eye, Vanessa Neubecker. Vanessa had owed Bioware nine million dollars and had been in the preservation chamber for six months now. Casian decided that today he finally would deal with her.

The elevator sang a soft note for each floor it descended. The electronic screen now read floor one, *ding*, ground floor, *ding*, negative one, *ding, ding*, the doors released Casian into the small room. A black heavy-duty door was the only thing to contrast the grey that covered the walls, floor and ceiling. Cold air choked him as he approached the control pad. It was smooth and metallic in feel, with each of the digits jolting out of the frame. He punched in the numbers six, five, eight, two. Casian slightly bent his knees to fit through the metal frame. A grand hall of corridors revealed itself. The room could best be compared to a library from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Except, instead of books, the walls were lined with capsules that contained skinny bodies frozen in a sort of stasis. Cryopreservation. Each capsule came with a screen that, by default, stated the body's name and the amount of money they owed Bioware. Casian walked over to the women's capsules. The capsules were sorted alphabetically by surname. Scanning each of the names, he walked through a hallway until a screen read "Neubecker". Casian fiddled with the screen until a large red warning appeared before him. "Begin reanimation procedure?" Casian tapped yes.

The machine violently vibrated as it began the procedure. Casian took a step back out of caution. In this time all sorts of sounds were heard. Creaks and cracks of ice pierced the typical whirring of the machine. Later in its cycle, the moans and squeals of a sleeping human could be faintly made out. After the initial deathly silence returned to the room, the machine unlatched the sides of the capsule. Casian opened the hatch on

top. A woman lay there, clearly starved, but breathing. Her mouth was thin and she was tall as her legs almost reached the end of the capsule. Her nose was beautifully straight and proportional to her face. The woman, Vanessa Neubecker, began to flicker her eyes open. Her pupils dilated quickly adjusting to the dim atmosphere of the room. Vanessa's stomach tensed briefly before she groaned in pain. "Please don't try to sit up yet. You are recovering from six months in cryopreservation," Casian explained to her.

"Did he finally find the money to pay my battery debt off ... will I be able to leave?"

"Not quite," Casian shut down her train of thought. "You have an outstanding debt of nine million dollars. This money was spent on sustaining you with the use of our product, Bio-power Cells. You are no longer worth Bioware's money as your husband has proved to be inconsistent and unreliable in his payments. As the senior auditor, I am authorised to make this decision on behalf of the company."

Vanessa stammered and searched for words to say. "Casian, end it with the formalities. Please don't do this to me."

"Contractually I have to," Casian cut her off. "It has been six months and he has not repaid any of what is owed." Under his jacket, Casian felt a cool smooth lump of metal. "I am sorry. I hope your one hundred and fifty years subscribed as a member of Bioware was satisfactory." In one practised motion, Casian swung the pistol from out of his jacket and fired a laser bolt straight through the woman's forehead.

Casian wheeled the capsule, with the woman still inside, to a fenced area near the entrance. A label read "Do not enter while incinerator is running." After pressing a button, the floor opened, allowing the capsule to drop ten metres. The smell of molten metal and flesh was enough information for Casian to be satisfied with the process. He returned to the elevator and was greeted by an elegantly dressed man on the ground floor. "Good morning Casian. If you're not busy, I'd like to talk to you in my office later today. As you may know, a new position has opened up on the Board of Directors, which you may be interested in," the man rambled.

"I'd be delighted sir!" responded Casian. "I just closed off the member who owed us nine million."

"I'm glad you finally dealt with her Mr Neubecker. I see the Board of Directors may gain a valuable member soon." Casian continued towards the lobby. His hand slipped into his pocket and grasped the cherry-flavoured pills. He placed one in his mouth. Instantly it began dissolving and his taste buds were slapped with the flavour of cherries. As usual, his mind made a connection to his mother. Some of his childhood memories of

time spent with his mother flooded his consciousness. This time, however, the memories felt melancholic rather than the usual hopeful joy that came with the pills.

In the lobby stood the same man that Casian had spoken to an hour before. “Sir, I’m afraid your wife has been removed from our storage due to unpaid debt.”

“Casian, are you mad!” The man seemed delirious. “Don’t call me sir. I am your father. Stop acting like a stranger. You just murdered your mother! And for what?” The man broke down on the floor sobbing like a young child.

“I apologise, but I’m about to get a big promotion. Neither of us will have to worry about power cell debt anymore.” Casian’s voice was uplifted and excited. “I am just as sad as you about your wife’s passing, but her sacrifice had to be made. The removal of customers is part of my contract.”

Casian’s father stared at the floor and attempted to speak a few more words through his intense weeping but Casian didn’t understand them.