

Prologue

By the year 2328, the human race had firmly entered into what many experts considered a golden age.

The world had shifted significantly over the span of three centuries, with many of humanity's worst problems solved with cooperation and science. Most experts agreed that the shift started with a small Swedish laboratory in 2046, where the secret to stable and safe fusion energy generation was discovered. Almost overnight world's energy crisis was solved, with hundreds of reactors planned and constructed over the next ten years.

Global Warming, a catastrophe that was reported to be responsible for nearly a hundred thousand deaths and trillions of credits in damage, was next. The world struggled for decades before eventually developing a solution, using a combination of weather-controlling technology and the nearly limitless energy provided by the thousands of fusion reactors that now dotted the globe.

By 2158 cancer, along with hundreds of other illnesses that used to threaten human lives, were a thing of the past. There were now dozens of different treatment methods, thousands of cures, and comprehensive vaccines to treat, prevent and cure almost every ailment known to man. Even the threat of genetic disorders faded from humanity's concern as treatments were developed to repair their symptoms. These disorders were then completely eradicated when preventative treatments for people who were carriers of these conditions prevented them from passing them on to their children.

Even old age, humanity's greatest enemy, suffered a grievous blow when pharmaceutical companies began selling age treatment supplements, drugs that slowed the decay of telomeres during cell division, resulting in the life expectancy of humans skyrocketing to three to four hundred years in its first few iterations.

With the discovery of a realistically functioning ion thruster, travel between Earth and other planets in our solar system became a reality. By the year 2226 humanity's first underground Martian city, Prosperity, reached a population of twenty thousand. As interplanetary travel became a reality, humanity reached a point where material scarcity was no longer a concern. Many believed we could finally begin to transition into a post-scarcity society, especially with the advent of robotic helpers and VI factories.

Humanity continued to push the boundaries of science, even as many of our immediate problems were solved. Research turned to more exotic fields, and the study of more fantastic concepts became more and more popular, funded by the wealth created by tapping into the resources of space.

In 2241 the graviton particle was observed for the first time. Based on that discovery, the first antigravity technology was developed fifteen years later. This allowed the creation of one of humanity's oldest dreams, the flying car. Soon exotic creations and even more exotic effects were on the tip of everyone's tongues, in the minds of every researcher. Science became akin to a race, with researchers and businesses competing against each other to discover and create, feeding humanity's hunger for new and amazing things.

Energy shields, biological regenerators, personal independent flight, technopathy, human enhancement through cybernetics and genetic manipulation, mind linking, and genetic body modification. The true time of the rockstar scientist had come, as the scientific community enjoyed an explosion of private funding to develop and cater to humanity's fantasies.

Decades passed, but the drive to push boundaries in fantastic ways endured. In the year 2292, privately funded scientists discovered a method to travel between dimensions, to Earth's that ran parallel with our own, though often at a different time scale. Originally an attempt to find a method of teleportation, the project was further funded in an attempt to find a more efficient resource-gathering method. Ultimately it was declared a failure when the limitation on how much energy it took to transport any significant amount of material between dimensions proved impossible to overcome.

Several years later, however, scientists funded by private entertainment companies refined the technique, and while the trip was still exorbitantly expensive, costing almost a million credits for a single person, eventually they began selling inter-reality trips to wealthy individuals looking to explore unknown worlds or go on grand adventures.

None of them, however, were ever at any risk. Each of these travelers arrived at their destinations armed and armored with the latest technology they could afford, often meaning the latest and greatest that humanity had to offer. Gene treatments to increase their strength, durability, stamina, and healing, armor that could survive everything from the depths of space to weapons fire from some of humanity's deadliest weapons. One traveler even witnessed the detonation of a nuclear device and survived the blast unharmed for a full five seconds before the emergency return feature that all travelers carried pulled them home.

It was no wonder that an enterprising business attempted to market recordings and live streams of these adventures. Despite the initial spike, however, viewership quickly fell. Beyond the excitement of new worlds to explore there was no risk, no sense of challenge involved. There was still a small audience who was interested in exploration, but it was not nearly enough for the company to consider the idea a success. The concept was considered a failure and alternate reality travel became nothing but a fanciful vacation option for the high class.

Between the spike in scientific discovery and the implementation of those discoveries into real-world luxuries, it was easy to see why so many experts considered this to be humanity's golden age.

Of course, anyone not being paid off would know that was a load of shit.

While many of the old issues of the world were solved, many more developed in their place. Cancer may have been a thing of the past, but it was replaced by hundreds of different variations of exotic energy sickness. The early versions of antigrav caused horrible mutations in people who were around them for long periods of time, causing thousands of repairmen and chauffeurs to suffer, and that was only one example among hundreds.

The first attempt to fix global warming was more of a patch than a fix and caused drought and famine to affect several countries. It also encouraged superstorms to develop in areas not under the control of the weather satellites, which just so happened to be in poorer parts of the world.

While science took leaps and bounds into the future at the cost of ethics, the gap between the rich, and everyone else continued to grow. By 2175 around one-tenth of the population was incredibly rich, while the remaining population was locked in somewhere around the lower middle class. People crossing from one class to the other became less and less frequent. Cities, sometimes called utopians or golden cities, began to develop where the prices and living space was strictly controlled to prevent anyone under a certain level of wealth or influence from moving in. These cities were largely automated and filled with cutting-edge technology and obscene luxuries.

In 2198 a cabal of the wealthiest people on the planet formed. Scared that a post-scarcity society would strip them of their power and influence, they began orchestrating markets, influencing politics, and controlling the media to cement the separation between the poor and the rich. What had once been an unintended side effect of greed was now being focused and directed to ensure that the rich stay rich and the poor stay poor. By 2250 this cabal of wealth gripped the world so tightly that they no longer bothered to hide. The rich became like royalty, and while they held no inherent political or legal power, their words were quite frequently taken as law.

By 2298 the world had grown used to the division, the forcible separation between the wealthy and the poor. The majority of the population was focused on doing what they had to do in order to support themselves and their loved ones, occasionally affording luxuries that were out of date by decades, if not centuries. Even the ability to slow down aging was restricted, with pharmaceutical companies insisting that only a small portion of the population could safely consume the treatment.

The chance to move up, to cross between poor to wealthy, from one of the masses to a member of high society became a thing of fantasy, something someone would daydream about. The idea of self-made wealth or making it big through investments or even just gambling disappeared as the people in charge manipulated laws to prevent people from gaining wealth without their permission.

While normally people are stuck at the level of wealth in which they are born, occasionally the fantasy does come true. Once in a blue moon, when it suits those in control, an opportunity presents itself. It may be a dream come true to some, but any reasonably intelligent person knows that such an offer does not come cheap and that while the reward may be honest, you are nothing but a number to them.