

# Unshared Lives

Although it was all over Karl was glad of the beer in his hand. He hated flying at the best of times. Having to stuff his huge frame into a tiny creaking economy seat for a couple of hours was unpleasant enough but the final approach into Denver had been a little lumpy. Maybe the autopilot had had a bad day or worse maybe a real pilot who hadn't taken his happy pills was at the helm. Even this insipid stuff helped relax him. Why were the Americans incapable of making good beer? It seemed to him their idea of crafting excellence was to chuck more hops at it. He could really do with a good thick black *doppelbock* like the stuff back home.

The rising bubbles in his glass reminded him of the unstoppable stream of events that had carried him here. He had helped get his friend away from the grasping tentacles of *Majestic*, a covert organisation hiding within the folds of the US government; pulling strings, coercing authorities, acquiring exotic technologies, and quietly making inquisitive people disappear. Although he was sure *Majestic* had failed to identify him he couldn't take the chance. Here in Denver he would be able to lay low until things blew over. He would then be reassigned elsewhere. He figured it would probably be Australia or the UK or maybe even further afield. Somewhere where *Majestic* had little presence.

He was not due to enter the base secreted under the airport for another couple of hours so he was happy to relax and de-stress. He tugged his laptop out of his backpack spilling cables, chargers, and other electronic devices in a tangled heap around his feet. How did they do that? He had carefully packed them all tidily when he had put them in there. He examined one cord. Did they breed in there or something? He was sure he had never seen this one before. With the swiftness brought about by great experience, he untangled the mass and extracted his laptop's charger.

With the charger plugged into the wall socket at the end of his booth's table he opened the computer. Quickly and quietly *LuminOS* started. The news feeds were quiet; the president was still making a fool of himself. His latest being a particularly weird praising of the air force for their pivotal role in the 1775 American Revolutionary war. Karl marvelled that no one had figured out the president was a robot and one running a rather patchy and increasingly corrupted set of programs. He shook his head and continued to browse.

Amber felt like she was about to burst. The early trials from her research had been far more successful than anyone could have predicted. She had received a summons from North American Central a week ago asking her to move to full scale implementation trials. So here she was at the main *Illuminati* base to finalise details and get it all underway. She was excited, electrified. She held in her hands something that was going to be huge. It would change the world. "Worlds", she corrected herself with a smile. But keeping it all tightly under wraps was paramount. She longed to run around the airport shouting at the top of her voice; "I'm going to the stars!" but decided that a quiet celebration with the company of a wine (or two) would have to do. That was the down-side of belonging to an ultra-secret organisation.

It was still early, and her entry time into the underground base was not for several hours. She glanced at the flight information board. Southwest Airlines flight SW4112 to Tulsa was due to board at 8:25. It gave Amber a warm feeling knowing she wasn't going to be catching the flight to Tulsa. Tulsa did not feature on her list of top destinations at all.

Selecting a table for herself, Amber ordered an *Educated Guess Merlot* and pulled out her laptop. She had just booted into *LuminOS* when a small notice popped up in the corner of her screen.

Amber huffed to herself, "Damn. Five minutes of charge left."

"Your Merlot?" the waiter said to Amber's back as she scrabbled around in her pack looking for her charger.

"Oh. Thanks." said Amber. "You wouldn't happen to have a charger would you?"

"Sorry." replied the Waiter. "We get that question quite regularly but we only have phone chargers."

"Ah well, thanks." said Amber and shut down her computer.

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She had been rather looking forward to having a bit of a browse and catching up on some news. Merlot in hand, she relaxed into her seat, her gaze sweeping around the other *Elway's* patrons. It wasn't full, most of the other customers appeared to be early-evening travellers just whiling away a bit of time before their next flight. A scattering were absorbed in their smart phones and one or two working on tablets. Her gaze settled on a large blond man sitting alone in one of the booths. He too appeared to be filling time idly browsing the web. She noticed with a start that he was using a very similar laptop to her own.

Karl looked up to see a dark featured woman standing at the end of his booth trying to catch his attention.

"I'm sorry. I was completely in my own world." he looked sheepish.

"Hi. I was wondering...would you happen to have a spare charger?" Amber smiled, embarrassed at having to ask a favour of a stranger. "I saw you had a similar laptop to my own. Mine is just about out, and I must have packed my charger into my main baggage."

"Ja. I've done that too many times myself." Karl glanced at his screen. "I don't have a spare, but my battery is about full anyway."

Karl went to pull the socket from the wall.

"If you don't mind I'll just bring my stuff over and perch here."

"Sure." Karl corralled some of his gear which was making a move to take over the entire table.

"I figure this will mean I can return it as soon as you need it back." Amber turned to go.

Karl watched her as she walked back to her table, gathered her gear, and wrestled a bunch of cables back into her pack. She was quite cute with her short bobbed black hair, and her fine, almost Asian features, maybe a little bit middle-eastern. He couldn't place her nationality.

Amber settled herself into the booth.

"I'm Amber." she held out her hand.

"Karl," Karl's hand engulfed hers.

"German?"

"Originally from Germany." said Karl. "I've been in the US for the past five years."

"What part of Germany?" Amber opened her laptop and plugged in the charger. "Ah there we go."

"*Rosenheim*. Near the Austrian border."

"So you're a mountain man. Can you yodel?" Amber grinned impishly.

"You definitely wouldn't want to hear that." Derailing any further questioning on that front Karl quickly asked, "And you? You're not an American. I can tell that much."

"Tajikistan. *Dushanbe* to be exact."

"I can't say I've met anyone from there before. What's it like?"

"I can barely remember it. Big mountains all around and dry. Very dry. I left there when I was small. My parents fled the violence when Tajikistan became independent. We settled in *Klagenfurt*."

"Austria. So you should be able to yodel too." Karl accused her.

"*Vielleicht*." Amber sipped her wine and booted up her laptop.

"So what brings you to Denver International?" Karl got to the inevitable and most dangerous question first.

"I've been doing some research on sustainable ecologies and was heading for Tulsa to do some collaboration work with a colleague there." Amber pulled out well-used fabrication number one.

"Tulsa. Nice....." said Karl pulling a face.

"I know. The place is such a dump at least we can concentrate on doing work rather than exploring the outdoors. Hopefully we'll be able to do some useful trials."

"From a mountainous country and likes the outdoors and thinks flat places like Tulsa are a dump. Yeah I can relate to that. So what is a 'sustainable ecology' project?"

"Well it's looking for balances of organisms, and environments that are self sustaining."

"A bit like those *Biosphere II* projects or whatever they were called where they had people trying to live in a fully enclosed system for several years?"

"A little like that." Amber's eyes were starting to shine. "Unfortunately those projects were designed by committees and had all sorts of features that were just a bad idea. My work is firmly based on good science and the best monitoring and measurement we can manage."

"Can you give me an idea what your systems are like?"

"Have you heard of *Aquaponics*?"

"No."

"It's a closed system where you have fish and vegetables growing together. The fish provide nutrients to the plants and the plants clean the water and provide oxygen which can get back into the water. It's a bit

like that but has many more organisms all playing their little part. We've had some recent breakthroughs which have meant we can now fully enclose the system without having to rely on extra oxygen from the atmosphere. Any additional energy required can be achieved with solar or other renewable sources like tidal, wind, or geothermal. We had some fun with cereals and grasses. It seems the conditions really work well for them – too well. They seemed to grow like crazy and completely forget about the producing seed bit. We had to do a bit of tweaking on that front.”

“Wow! I can see so many applications for that.” said Karl.

“So can I....”

“Underwater colonies. Space.” enthused Karl and thought to himself, *and our Mars base could do with that sort of thing.*

“You read way too much science fiction.” said Amber. “And what about you?”

“Nothing quite so exciting. I'm in IT. I look after security of systems and surveillance networks. I can appreciate the technology you would need for monitoring your experiments. With the biology side, I'm lost.” Karl was pleased to be able to deflect the question and not have to outright lie.

“The biology's not so bad. For one thing it's more adaptable than you'd think and besides we have plenty of good examples of ecological systems relying on each other. So who are your client's? The military?”

*That was quick*, thought Karl. With such a slammed return, he was suddenly cautious. Maybe she wasn't quite what she seemed. “No I'm not a military contractor. One of my major clients is this place. As you can understand an airport has a great deal of security needs, and I'm sure you've met your share of airport security people and know what muppets they are. So it keeps me busy. I have just finished a bit of work here and will be heading out tonight.”

“Where to next?”

“Er. Boise.” said Karl. “Just a small project to do there.”

“A bit nicer than Tulsa. Maybe I'll come with you.” Amber could feel the tension in the conversation suddenly release.

“I saw you having to fight with a nest of connectors.” grinned Karl. “I have that problem too.”

“And I had packed them so carefully too. I have a theory about that; A little bit of the information and power that runs through them soaks into their substance. This gives them a sort of pseudo life. They love nothing more than to thread themselves through each other when nobody is looking. The environment they like best is the bottom of packs.”

“OK, that's a reasonable theory. Have you put it to the test?”

“No. Shall we devise a test then seeing as we both have packs full of cables. All in the name of advancing science of course.”

“OK. So here's what I have.” Karl started pulling a tangle of cords from his pack. He muttered, “Did I or did I not just untangle these?”

“You have one of these!” Amber held up the mystery cable Karl had encountered earlier. “Do you know how hard it is to find these ones now?”

“You're welcome to it.” said Karl. “I have no idea where it came from or even what it connects to. Giving it to you prevents it from tangling up my gear.”

“You're wonderful. Thanks.” said Amber carefully rolling it up and dropping it into her pack. “I have some very old equipment that has those connectors.”

Amber sipped her wine and looked up from her screen. “You know finding good connector compatibility is hard when you're in my line of research. You think you've found the right type but it's a female and every male you come across is the wrong type.”

Karl looked up from his screen and blushed. “Er, We are picking up on our earlier conversation about cables right?”

“What did you think I was talking about.” Amber's look was innocent except for the glow to her cheeks.

“Well, yes, cables, of course.” said Karl. “I think I'll have another beer, would you like anything?”

“Another *Educated Guess Merlot* would suit me well.” said Amber.

“*Educated Guess?*”

“You'll know.”

Karl went to the bar and looked at the wine list. To his surprise *Educated Guess* was a brand. He shrugged and ordered Amber's Merlot and his own beer. He returned to their booth with both glasses in hand.

“I'd like to propose a toast.” said Amber raising her glass. “To successful sustainable ecologies and the future possibilities.”

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"May they help us reach the stars."

"*Prost!*" they both laughed and clinked glasses.

"It's nice to be able to celebrate with someone," said Amber. "I haven't had a chance to celebrate the success of my research and it's wonderful to have someone who understands to share it with."

"I'm pleased to be able to help you celebrate," said Karl. "As you say, when you're out working on your own, you have successes that would be great to share with others, but there is nobody... or at least nobody who would understand."

"Thanks, Karl," Amber flushed. "I can see you know what I mean." To herself; *If only you knew how much it would mean to me to have someone like you with me sharing the adventure.*

"You're welcome," said Karl. To himself *If only I wasn't leading another life I'd gladly team up with you.*

"What time is it?" asked Amber.

"Er. 7:56" said Karl. "What time's your flight?"

"Too soon. 8:25."

"Let's head out to the observation deck," suggested Karl. "We've been in here for hours. I'm feeling in need of a change of scenery."

It was going to be a clear night. The stars managed to make themselves known through the light of the city.

Amber gazed at the stars. "It's a sight I've always loved. As a child I remember looking up at the clear skies and seeing the stars. I wondered then if there was life out there. Have you ever wondered what life might be like out there?" *I wish I could share with you the richness of what we know lives out there.*

"Sometimes. But then I think, we'll never get there in my lifetime. And then I think, will we ever get there at all?" *I wish I could tell you about the existence of life out there and how we are taking our own brave steps into that greatness.*

"I know what you mean," said Amber. "Maybe one day ....."

"Yeah. Maybe...."

They stood a while in thought. Finally Amber said "I should go. My flight leaves soon."

"It's been great meeting you Amber," said Karl. "Good luck with the project. I look forward to reading about it in the *New Scientist*."

"I've enjoyed your company," said Amber. "I wish.... I wish circumstances were otherwise."

With that, she took his hand in hers and shook it. "So long Karl. And thanks."

He watched her go taking a part of him with her. How had she affected him so strongly? He didn't know. She was obviously covering something but then so too was he. Maybe that was it. They were kindred spirits but in the thrall of something bigger. He glanced up at the departure board. Still an hour before he was due to enter the base.

Two days later, Karl was in a meeting with the director of North American operations.

"Karl. We have a proposal for you," the director came around his desk. "I hope you accept it. We think you are the ideal person for the job. It will also be good for your recently rescued friend to have a familiar face about the place."

"Sure," said Karl.

"We want to send you to Mars."

Karl reeled in his chair. At best, being sent to Mars had always been an outside hope. "Mars?"

"Are you OK with that?"

"Yes. But. What can I contribute?"

"Your skills in security and monitoring will be invaluable for the next step in a project of ours. *Project BioSphere Mars*. We're moving to full implementation, and we'd like you there. Before you make a decision I'd like you to meet the project leader, Amber Negmat-Zadeh."

"Sorry I'm late ...." Amber entered the room. "Karl!"

"You've met before?"

"Yes, in concourse B a couple of days ago," said Amber. "Karl, you can close your mouth now."



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Writing Challenge for June 2019:

The outline was the same selection as for May but this time I chose the "**A chance meeting at the airport might just turn out to be the start of something new. - Romance**" option seeing as I could see a linked story there together with the May Story Challenge.