



This rock from outer space had forever been gliding through the still vastness of space. It had orbited around supernovas and black holes, got catapulted by gravity from one galaxy to the next in some of the most desolate corners of the universe. For billions of years, it had followed an uninterrupted path, unseen by any life form, not even a thought, present but non-existent.

Then one day its intergalactic adventures came to an end.

As it drifted peacefully through a solar system, the rock got caught in a gravitational field which deviated its path, and came crashing towards a blue planet. Soaring through the exosphere, the rock burst into a giant fireball that illuminated the night sky. Following eons of dormancy, it flashed into existence, as a family of four witnessed with amazement its final descent.

The end of spring wind swept through the photosynthetic panels, disguised as leaves, hanging from tree sculpted solar batteries. The sound of chirping birds coming out of microscopic nanospeakers echoed throughout the yard, reverberating their songs of love. Across the horizon, the one true sun was setting, spreading an array of orange hues across the distant arcologies and colossal habitable towers sustaining humanity.

A perfect beginning to a perfect summer.

Outside on the patio, the family of four was enjoying a delicious BBQ. The meat had been procured from a farm raised cow, a live one. This was indeed a rare occasion for an exceptional celebration.

The ten-year-old Sister, pressed on the hololense attached to her right temple, and zoomed her vision towards the food, studying the texture of the cow's meat with great consideration.

"One way to differentiate real animal cells from the lab grown ones is the level of fat stratification present in it, the marbling. Here, I'll show you." She winked at the right icon in her vision as the bioprojector illuminated the whole table, revealing the intricacies of the food they were eating. She pointed at the white lines on the red meat. "Real animals move continuously. As they mature, this perpetual movement creates layers of fat that give the tastiness to high quality meat. From what I'm looking at right now Father, you must have paid a small fortune for all of this." The Father didn't say

anything and smiled at her. He loved listening to his daughter's teachings as she always opened up his mind to ideas he had never imagined. She made him proud.

Ignoring the Sister's explanations, the seven-year-old Brother was focused on the shapes of the food on his plate. He piled up the mashed potatoes on top of the steak, like a mountain, then began to drill various holes using a carrot. With both hands, he lifted his new sculpture up in the air and showed it to his family.

"Look my tunnels!" Not getting the congratulations he was looking for, he stuffed a handful of vegetables in his mouth, and forced them down in one gulp. Having a hard time breathing, he choked and sneezed out a white, red and green purée from his nostrils. His face was a mess, a monster escaping from a swamp, but he giggled anyway. The Mother didn't say a word, frowning, but then smiled a motherly smile. She could not stay mad at him for too long, especially not on a special day like this. He was just a kid acting his age and she loved him for it.

"Brother!" Exclaimed the Sister. "You never take anything seriously! Dad do something!"

"You can't tell me what to do!" The Brother replied before sticking out his tongue.

Ignoring the squabble, the Father drummed his fingers nervously on the table. He looked at the Mother for her approbation and she nodded. Now was the time. He put his fork down, raised his ethylaid and stood up in front of the whole family to make an important announcement. The Sister and the Brother's bickering came to a halt.

"As you're well aware, this year has been tough for the whole family. I've been working a lot less thanks to the Ultron robots stealing everyone's jobs at the factory and Mother just lost her job to a computer program at the store. And on top of that, it's still hard for me to cope with your Grandfather passing away last week. I mean, it's been a rough ride and we feel like we haven't been there for you guys as much as we should of have. Isn't that right Mother?"

The Mother acknowledged and raised her glass in an attempt to hide the fact that she was about to weep with joy. The Father pressed on.

"Throughout these ordeals, you guys have always been there to support us. You've kept up with your good grades, you've helped us with the house and you've been there when we needed you most. You make us proud and we could not have asked for better kids." The Father's voice quivered with emotion.

"Oh Father." The Sister got up to embrace him but he raised his palm to stop her in her

tracks.

“Let me finish. As I was saying, your Mother and I have been discussing what to do with the leftover money from the inheritance, and we have decided to use it to thank you both. Once classes are over, we’re going on a trip of a lifetime!”

After the announcement, the family was ecstatic and they savoured every bite of their celebratory steak. The next day was a Sunday, so they spent their afternoon planning out the promised vacation. An adventure they would cherish for years to come. Together, they all agreed on a road trip along the East Coast, all the way down to the southern tip of Florida, so they could swim in the ocean. The Father rented a magnetic hovercamp van while the others read every article about the East Coast they could get their hands on. They read about the majestic parks and the many cities along the Atlantic coast they would encounter. The readings fueled their imagination and added to the anticipation of their long-awaited trip.

By mid-June, they left.

The family spent the trip driving down the coast, taking in the amazing scenic views, singing along to their favorite songs, laughing, playing riddles, enjoying every new experience with genuine joie de vivre. They rode through Acadia National Park in Maine and spotted a very rare wild black bear. The Sister considered it an extraordinary encounter and retold the story long after to whoever wanted to hear of how she had approached it without breaking a sweat and almost patted it on the nose before it ran away.

They went through the miles deep underground tunnel to bypass the polluted megalopolis that had become New York City with its neurotoxic pollution and radioactive sewers. They visited the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum and were able to see real Martian soil brought back by Zephyr IV, the first unmanned returning interplanetary mission. No one in the family, with the exception of the Sister, had been impressed by the pile of red dirt. Filled with awe, she made a promise to herself that she would one day touch the red planet’s soil.

In Virginia Beach they camped on the coast. The Brother filled his ear with ocean water and suffered a nasty ear infection. It became so painful that they had gone to the Healing Center for medical assistance. For the next two days, they stayed with him, next to his bed, telling him stories, playing cards and cheering him up as he healed.

It is never a pleasant experience to be sick when you’re far away from home but the family managed to make the best of it. The Brother soon got better and they were able to

continue their adventure.

Near Savannah Georgia, they admired massive groups of long lightning bolts ripping through the sky, ramming into the ocean. They had watched documentaries on such meteorological events through their hololense but were amazed by nature's display of brute force.

They then journeyed inland and went to the Eptoc Theme Park where they had a chance to interact and become friends with all the recent robot prototypes being developed. After failing to find a hotel room, they ended up camping in Kissimmee Florida where the Sister exchanged her first kiss with a boy from the campsite who then ran away in disgust.

By mid-July they had reached their goal, Key West, and found a lonely parcel of beach to stay on. They set up their camp and enjoyed listening to the rhythm of the waves. For a rare moment in an overpopulated world, they were alone, all by themselves, just the four of them. The Brother learned to swim while the Sister collected rare rocks and shells to study once she got back home. On a calm night, the Father made a campfire using the thermoplastic logs he had brought with him. The Mother took out her MeloPad and played some of the family's favorite singalongs. They sang and laughed and roasted golden marshmallows. At around 11 pm that night, once Mars dashed through the Gemini constellation, everyone began to feel exhausted. They were on the verge of calling it a night when they heard a sizzling sound in the sky.

They all looked up and witnessed a sublime shooting star falling through the sky. With a cracking echo, it descended from space to end its journey on Earth. Brighter than a lightning bolt, it was followed by a colorful vivid tail tracing its movement in the night. A once in four lifetime's event of extreme beauty. It fell with a thud, far ahead behind the dunes, in a patch of grass, glowing in the night, like a small pile of very hot embers in a large fire pit. They all looked at each other with surprise.

"Let's go take a look at it." Suggested the Sister.

"Wouldn't it be dangerous to get close to it?" Asked the Mother with worried eyes.

"No, it's fine Mother, we'll poke it with a stick to make sure it doesn't explode." The Father raised his shoulders with resignation, the Sister knew more about science than he did, and he trusted her judgement on these matters. She insisted with excitement. "What are we waiting for? Come on Brother! Come on Mother! Let's go before someone else finds it." They all rushed towards the warming glow, the children running in the front, parents jogging behind. Words could not describe the amazement they

experienced once they got to the shooting star's resting place. A golden aura, like shining honey, radiated through the smoke emanating from the crash site. The Father, protector of the family, grabbed a wooden stick and approached it with caution.

"Stay back. I'll make sure it's safe." He felt dizzy from inhaling the hazy emanations walked forward and poked the mysterious mass from space with the end of his stick. It rolled in the sand as the heat completely dissipated in a hiss. Coming out of the mist, they saw a rock unlike any other they had ever seen. It was the size of a deformed golf ball and had the consistency of silver bone marrow, filled with thousands of small amber and yellow glassy holes. The diamond lights of the stars in the night sky shined on the reflective surface of the meteor, like sparks on water. It was an extremely rare gem, and the most beautiful object they had ever seen. Without touching it with their bare hands, in case it was still too hot, they rolled it back to the camp, hid it in a shoe box and went to bed happy.

Their week of relaxation on the beach came to an end. They packed up all of their belongings and made their way back north. In Myrtle Beach, they stopped to visit a bazaar and met an old jeweler that was interested in their meteor story. The Mother revealed the contents of the shoe box to him as he gasped in amazement. He explained to them that such a marvel should not be kept in the dark, that they should display it with pride. Using his most convincing arguments, he talked his way into crafting them a silver chain each with a quarter of the space stone as a pendant. They very much liked the idea but were still hesitant.

"Can we really afford such luxury?" Asked the Mother. "Once this vacation is over, we are back to reality with no money and not much work."

"Honey, you know we can't say no to the kids. Look at them. They'd be so happy to have a souvenir. It would be a reminder of all the good times we've just shared. Tell you what, when we get back home, you'll find another job and I'll get a second one, even if I don't like it. I mean, it's only virtuacoins, I'm sure we'll figure it out."

They went ahead with the space stone pendants. After enjoying an extra day in Myrtle Beach, while the chains were being crafted, they left with their family's treasure hanging around their necks. On their way back home, they drove through Baltimore and saw a publiboard announcing a puppy convention, a show where all the new caninoid models, built with the latest anatomical and behavioral technologies, were sold. The kids had insisted on going in to "take a look". The Mother, aware of the fact that they would never come out of there empty handed, insisted on visiting the zoo instead. The Brother had cried and cried and cried and they agreed to go in for a quick peek.

In a corner of the hall, they noticed a stand with some of the cutest special edition puppies they had ever seen. One of them in particular, with his puffy face and cotton candy tail, had melted their hearts. As if he had chosen the family, he ran enthusiastically towards the kids with his pink tongue drooping in front of his mouth and his fluffy beige white coat.

As he raised his pleading eyes at them, it was love at first sight.

Once again, the parents had debated about whether they should buy the caninoid puppy or not while the kids were playing with him.

“Do you think we will be able to afford a decent living once we get back home?” Asked the Mother. The Father raised a brow, feeling the stress of debts gnawing away at his stomach. He could not afford such an expensive pet. He watched as the puppy wiggled and wagged his tail, as he tipped and tapped his front paws, as he bounced and pounced on the Brother, rolling hysterically on the floor. The Sister jumped in and they both laughed while the puppy barked with them. The Father knew what he had to do.

“It’s just virtuocoins my love, is there a price to having a happy family?” Without a second thought, they bought it on the spot; the kids were ecstatic. For some reason, the Mother thought he would look even more charming if he were wearing a bowtie, and so, they named him Bowie. He was a K9D0G third generation caninoid with twenty years guaranteed batteries and a special chip inside his unique positronic brain, which made it behave like a real maturing dog, from puppy to adult.

The five of them left and made it safely back home in a state of elation.

Summer came to an end as the harsh struggles of life came to a beginning. They had played hard, now they needed to work hard. The Father kept his part time job at the factory and took another full time one in the drone search and rescue team, down in the deepest sewers of the city, amongst the giant rats and the human goo. It was physically demanding and a strain on his morale, yet throughout the years, he kept his spirits up by reminding himself that it was the price to pay to sustain such a great family. He was lucky to be a part of this unique treasure and would have done anything to keep it going. In times of fright, when he was all alone, scouting through the ghastly labyrinths of dark tunnels in the city’s underbelly, he rubbed his special space stone to gather strength from his family. He would rewind time in his mind and remember the pink sunsets and the grainy friction of beach sand on his feet. He would imagine the Mother sleeping next to him on a late Sunday morning. He would smile to himself, recalling his children playing with Bowie at the park. The idea that all four pendants gleamed simultaneously when he invoked its inspiring powers soothed his mind because he

was never really alone in this universe.

With regained confidence, his fear would pass and he continued his solitary search for lost drones in the city's underbelly.

Although he despised every second of it, he never missed a day of work and never complained to anyone.

"It is what it is." He would answer when people learned about the hardships of his work. Nonetheless his family never had to resort to eating protein paste and never had to wear textile clothes.

The Father was not the only one to use the special space stone as a comforting pillar in times of adversity, they all did. The Brother kept his chain around his neck everywhere he went, even during his year at the Detention Facilities, surrounded by hardened criminals. The Mother looked up to it when money was short and she had to figure out original ways of coming up with virtuacoins. The Sister rolled the pendant between her two fingers during her years of research and exams. Bowie, the mascot of the family, was the only one that did not gather up strength from anywhere because he was nothing but a caninoid, a robot with a unique positronic brain, dressed in a cotton ball of joy.

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