

In space, the sun is always shining.

Decades from now, solar panels will hover 200 miles overhead in near-Earth orbit. There they will capture enormous amounts of energy from the sun and transmit it to array fields across the world, such as the one outside Atlanta, Georgia, where this story takes place. On the afternoon of May 11, 2078, there really will be a total solar eclipse of the sun in Atlanta. The rest of the events in this story are speculative fiction.

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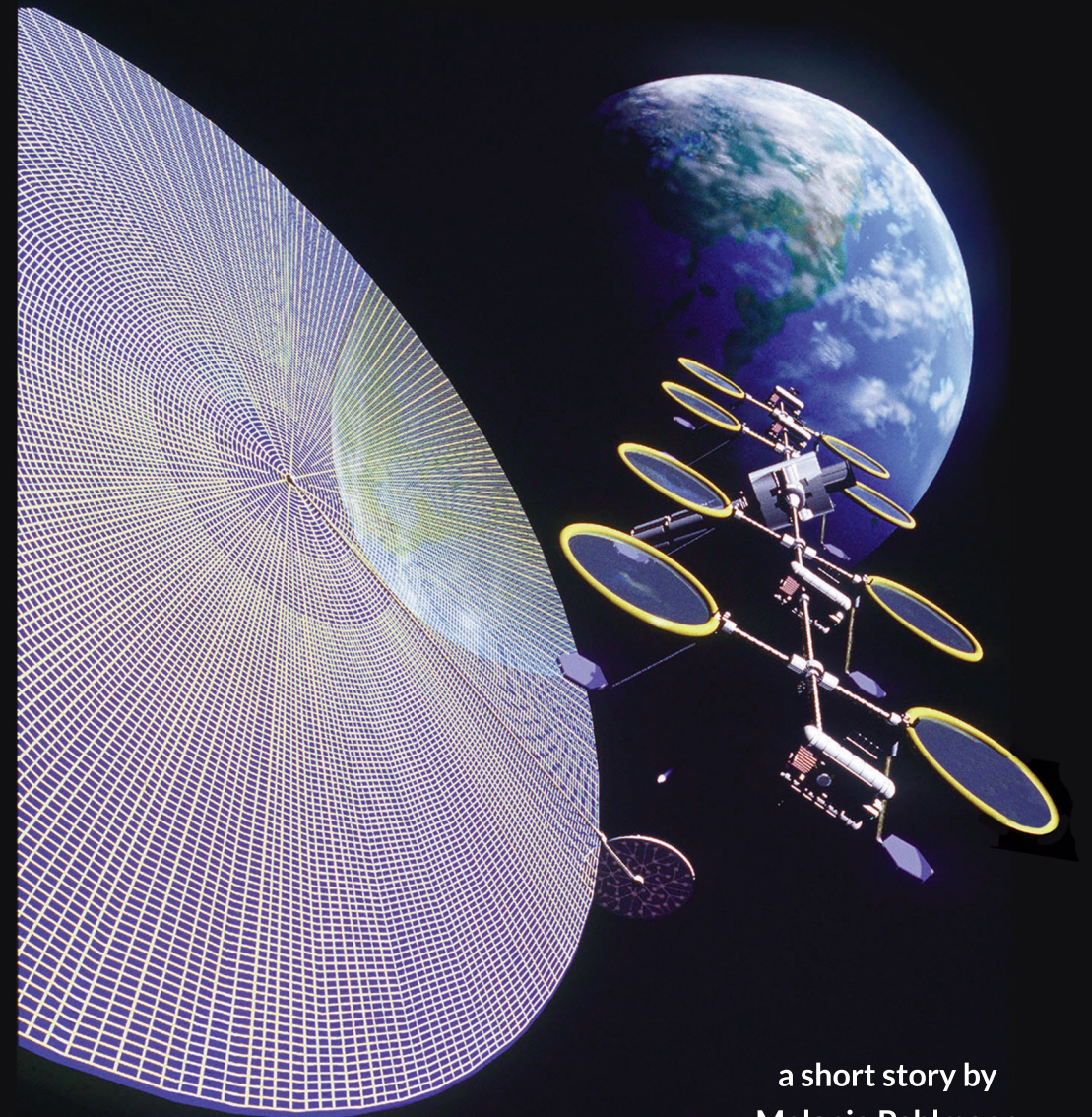
Welcome to the solarpunk world of Melanie Pahlmann, author of the science fiction trilogies *Lin of Luratia* and *Cri of Egli*. Solarpunk — like its sci fi sisters steampunk and cyberpunk — is a new genre of sci fi literature. Solarpunk imagines a future of renewable energy, ecological harmony with nature, the service motive over the profit motive, and collaborative cooperation in place of zero-sum competition.

From the author:

“Despite the dystopian futures that haunt our storytelling, I can’t help but believe that our best years are ahead of us. Wisdom, decency, and creative cooperation are what it will take to shape a better future, and these are not impossible achievements, not for a person and not for a world.”

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EVENTS ON THE AFTERNOON OF MAY 11, 2078



a short story by
Melanie Pahlmann

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With all that could go wrong, Bob insisted I take the day off.

Henry reassures me while we get dressed for our eclipse party. “Don’t worry, honey,” he says, “everything’s going to be fine. All the tests you did. Months and months of tests.”

“They were simulations,” I tell him. “They don’t show us everything. You can never trust simulations, not a hundred percent.”

“It’s not a hundred percent world, Lisa. You expect too much. Promise me you won’t obsess over this. And promise you won’t wear your smart lenses today. Be here. Relax. Promise?”

“I promise,” I kiss him, ashamed of the lie.

Our guests arrive at noon, and the drinking begins.

While it’s great to see everyone and, yes, to live in the path of totality, our solar panels 200 miles up will also be plunged into total darkness. For two hours today, peak time, all the power we’ll have is sitting in our land batteries. Bob won’t admit it, but our batteries are a joke. We put all our money into space panels.

Half an hour to totality, the com-chip in my shoulder vibrates. It’s Margie calling. I tap my temple to engage our connection, and her face fades in on my smart lenses.

“Lisa,” she says. “We’ve got a situation. A serious situation.”

I slip away for privacy. “What? What’s happening?”

“There’s a couple hundred protestors on the array field,” she says.

“Now?”

“Yes! Conference with me!”

“No,” I say, “I’ve got people here. I’m coming in. I’ll call you when I’m airborne.”

I go out to the backyard where the mood is jolly. Our house-bot is barbequing, another serves nutri-wine. The kids are floating in the pool, staring at the half-Sun through oversized glasses.

I whisper to Henry I’m leaving and lie when he protests. “It’s a quick little thing,” I tell him. “I won’t be long.”

“But the eclipse,” he says. “You’ll miss it.”

“I’ll see it in VR.”

He shrugs in drunken acquiescence. “Alright, if you have to, but be back soon.”

I get in my air-drone and command it to take me to my office. On lift-off, I call Margie.

“A couple hundred?” I ask her. “How’s that possible? We shut down the power transmission hardly 20 minutes ago. In 20 minutes they all just walked onto our field without us noticing?”

“I guess so,” Margie says.

“Does Bob know?”

“I don’t know. I called you first. Do you want me to call him?”

“No, I want to go over the facts with you. What do these people want?”

“They want to talk to you. It’s that girl. You know —”

“The young one?”

“Right.”

“Okay, send our entire fleet of air-trams down to the field, we need to evacuate them immediately. Do that and get back to me.”

Margie fades out, and my focus goes to the messy sky, littered with air-busses, air-taxis, and single-passenger crafts. Some pass so close I can see people’s faces. They’ve all come to see this damned eclipse.

I triple-tap my temple and login to the system stats. I scan graphs and numbers, no anomalies. I check our battery reserves, a bitter disappointment — 114 minutes of power at current usage levels. I wanted four hours of reserve power, settled for three, and got less than that. If Bob had listened to me, this wouldn’t have happened. I’d have my four hours of reserve.

I login to surveillance and call up an aerial view of our Atlanta array. It’s sickening to see. All the people standing there, demanding something. From the sky they look like insects. I wish they were. Some rather think they are. Bob does.

“The air-trams have been dispatched to the field,” Margie smiles when she calls back, as if that solves the problem.

“Thanks,” I say. “You said this girl wants to talk to me?”

“Yes, you specifically.”

“Did she say why?”

“No,” Margie says. “She just said they won’t leave until you do.”

“Alright, go to my office and send one of my video-bots — not a company bot, one of my personal ones — send it down to the girl. Security has a heat signature on her. Stay in my office and monitor things. I’ll be there in about ten minutes. And don’t tell Bob about this.”

“Sure,” Margie says.

As I sail through the sludge of traffic, I watch aerial of the protestors, engaging the zoom to see them close-up. Progress advocates are the best kind of protestors, so I should be grateful for that. If it weren’t for the girl — their bold, beloved leader — I would feel more confident

that they won't be stupid, that they'll all just leave, get off our field before we turn our power transmission back on. If they don't, our space-to-ground microwaves will cook their bodies so fast and hot they'll literally explode.

Margie's waiting for me at my office, my video-bot on stand-by, the girl's face displayed on the jumbo screen on my situation wall.

"I want a smaller screen for her face," I tell Margie. "Put the aerial surveillance on the jumbo screen." Margie makes the adjustment. "And no camera on me. Make me audio-only."

"Okay," Margie says, "you're ready to go, audio-only."

I engage a call to my video-bot. "This is Lisa Bocelli," I say to the girl.

She hears the words from the belly of my bot and bows to its lens before saying my name. "Lisa Bocelli, wow, here we are, face-to-face so to speak. I've been waiting for this day for *months*." She's confident and smiling and young for her success, young enough to be my daughter. I feel guilt for my hatred of her.

"You're trespassing on private property," I tell her.

"We're exercising our right to protest," she replies. "We deserve to be heard."

"Yes, but not on our array. There are other venues in which we can talk."

"Sorry," she says, "but this is the only way to get your attention. Nothing else has worked with you."

"You're committing a crime, and you must vacate immediately."

"We know. We expect to be convicted, and we won't protest the punishment, provided it's fair. But probably what's going to happen is that you do nothing and you're going to deep fry a bunch of peaceful protestors with the whole world watching."

"Please leave our property. You're posing a serious threat to the country."

She laughs. "We're posing a serious threat to your *stockholders*, let's get that straight."

"We serve large organizations and millions of residents who rely on our power."

"What's the problem? Not enough back-up?"

"You're trespassing," I tell her, "and we'll use force if need to."

"Fine. Send that message to the world. See how that goes."

I mute myself and curse her.

"Look," Margie says, pointing at a surveillance view.

"*Oh, come on!*" I unmute and shout at the girl, "You're defacing our property!"

"Oh, the graffiti," she says. "We only use foglet spray, not real paint. We'll dissolve it when we go. Once you meet our demands."

"We're not meeting any demands."

"I would if I were you. Otherwise, you're going to kill us all, which is very bad for PR, and your reputation's not too hot lately."

"Our reputation has been harmed by *lies*," I say, uncomfortably aware that I'm lying for liars.

"Right," she says, "by lies *you* tell. You lie and lie to confuse everyone from the fact that your

policies and prices are indecent. You're a wealthy company, you can afford to be decent. That's the frustrating thing, you can afford to do the right thing, but you *won't!*"

"You're trespassing on private property, and you will be arrested if you don't leave immediately."

"We're not going anywhere," the girl says. "I want a meeting with the CEO."

"The CEO won't meet with you."

"Oh, right, because he's whooping it up on the path of totality in his cloaked jet with all his drone security. Meanwhile, desperate people are —"

"The CEO will *not* meet with you," I repeat.

"Then you, then."

"I'm not meeting with you either."

"But you are, you're meeting with me right now. Let's just keep on talking."

"We're *not* meeting."

"But we are!" she laughs as a video-bot descends from the sky and rests at her side. "Great, there it is. My v-bot just joined me, and now millions of people are watching." She leans toward the lens of my bot. "Did you hear that, Lisa? *Millions.*"

"Is that all you want?" I say. "A meeting?"

"No, we have demands."

"What are they?"

"That's what the meeting's for."

I tap my temple and release a dose of calmative. I can't believe how much I hate this girl. I'm not a hater.

"Alright," I tell her, "I agree to this meeting. What are your demands?"

"We want you to stop charging your residential customers."

"Free residential service?"

"Yes," she says.

"And what else?"

"That's it. For now."

"That's all you want? Then you'll vacate?"

"Yes. Peaceably. We're a force of goodness."

I roll my eyes. Margie muffles a laugh.

I mute and tell Margie, "You heard it, they want free residential. Call Bob and tell him that and ask him to advise. We've got 57 minutes."

"Sure," Margie says. She steps into the hallway to make the call.

"Are you there?" says the girl.

I close my eyes to disappear the count-down clock, but I still see the numbers on my smart lenses. I want time to stop. I want these people off our field. Sweat drips off my chin.

"Lisa," says Margie. "Bob says to get rid of them."

“I asked for specifics.”

“Well, that’s what he said.”

“What does he expect me to do? Just ask them to leave?”

Margie is silent.

“Hey, Lisa, are you there?” says the girl. “I thought we were having a meeting.”

I ignore her and say to Margie, “Call Bob back and tell him how serious this is. We have to do something. I need something to negotiate. I say we agree to the free residential.”

“Sure,” says Margie.

The girl turns away from my video-bot and speaks to her own. “For seven years SunPower Electric has been building their solar arrays in space with 3D printers and cheap raw materials. An array *used* to cost them \$2000 to make, now it costs \$15. And are they passing off that savings to the millions of families and children they serve? No! They have so much power, it’s actually too cheap to meter. But they meter it anyway.”

To shut the girl up, I blurt a half-truth, “Those figures are not accurate.”

She turns to my video-bot. “Lisa, I’m glad you’re back. Have you thought about our demand?”

“We need a little time, understandably,” I answer. “While you wait, I implore you to begin boarding our air-trams. Please, for your safety.”

“Our safety isn’t important,” says the girl. “We’re here to represent the dire need of families who are suffering in these hard times.”

“Lisa,” says Margie.

I mute.

“Bob says he knows it’s serious,” she says. “He’s been watching the news feeds. He’s furious. He wants to know how they got in there in the first place.”

“*It’s his damned new AI security!*” I shout. “I told him to wait. You *never* want to break in a new system just before a crisis. This was a known crisis! This didn’t have to happen!” I tap my temple and release another dose of calmativ. “They’re not going away, Margie, I know this girl. We have to offer something.”

“Bob says no negotiations.”

“Then we’re going to kill these people.”

“I guess so,” she whispers.

“Let me talk to him,” I say.

“He doesn’t want to talk to you. He wants you to handle it.”

“Hey!” says the girl. “Are you there?”

“If he wants me to handle it,” I tell Margie, “then he’s got to give me something to negotiate.”

“No negotiations, period,” she says. “His exact words.”

“We don’t have *time* for this! Doesn’t he know the trouble we’re in?”

“You know Bob, he’s —”

“Do *you* know the trouble we’re in?”

“Yes,” she says after a pause.

“I’ll tell the girl we’ll agree to consider it if the protestors leave.”

“Good,” says Margie. “That sounds good.”

I unmute. “Alright,” I say to the girl. “We agree to hold a meeting with our Board about providing free residential service, but only if you begin leaving the premises immediately. Our air-trams are waiting for you.”

“We see your air-trams,” the girl says, “and we’ll be glad to get on them after your Board agrees.”

“There’s no time for that,” I say.

“Well, that’s *your* problem if you’re greedy and don’t have enough back-up on your batteries. We’re not leaving until our one, simple demand is met.”

“This is not a simple demand. It has large fiscal consequences.”

“Actually, it doesn’t,” she says. “There’s another lie. It’s pocket change when you look at the real numbers. We’re post-scarcity, and you have to face up to it. You can afford to be decent. You can *afford* to be —”

“We agree to a public meeting at the soonest possible date and time,” I say.

“Nope,” she refuses. “We want a binding legal statement that you agree to stop charging for residential power. You can cap it, we’re not asking for unlimited energy. Just give them enough to live on, you know, based on their past use. It’s not unreasonable. It’s nothing for you.”

I unmute. “Margie, tell Bob I’m going to negotiate and he needs to promise to stand by it.”

“Just a minute,” she says.

The girl talks to a fast-gathering swarm of media-bots from local, national, and global outlets. I knew this new security was bullshit. Our perimeter has been totally penetrated. De-encrypted, probably, by some snotty teenager.

“And that’s what we care about,” the girl says to the global bot media, “all the future generations of humanity, not a bunch of trillionaires who don’t give a shit about anyone but themselves.”

“Bob said no negotiating,” Margie says.

I burn hot and shout I’m so angry, “We’re *not* going to kill people during one of the most-watched events in years! Tell him that and ask him again.”

“It’s not going to work, Lisa. Don’t bring him into it. He’s with family, and he’s drunk.”

“*God, he’s such a child!* Alright, get in touch with as many Board Members as you can and explain the girl’s demand and ask them to back me up on what I negotiate.”

“Sure,” Margie says.

The protestors on the field, in a single synchronized voice, count down the seconds to the start of totality. “*Five! Four! Three! Two! One!*”

In an explosion they cheer as the darkening day turns black like night. “Wow!” the girl shouts. “Wow, we’re total! Totally total! Look at the stars! Wow!” She laughs, claps twice, and gives a voice command to her video-bot, “Medium spotlight, please.” It obeys with the casting of a soft light, which illumines her like some kind of saint.

This girl’s a little PR genius, recently hired by the National Organization of Coastal Mayors. I wonder how they feel about this stunt of hers. I wonder if they’ll fire her.

She turns to my video-bot, smiling in the glow of the spotlight. “Lisa! Look! The eclipse! I don’t know where you are, but wow, it’s so beautiful here! That’s one great thing about your array field, no light pollution. Lisa, are you there?”

I unmute. “I’m right here,” I say. “And I agree to meet you in person, today, if all your people get on our air-trams.”

“We don’t trust you,” she says.

“And we refuse for you die. That’s not what we want here. If you won’t accept our offer to take you safely off our property, we cannot be held responsible for the outcome.”

She turns to the bot media and says, “See how she’s washing their hands of responsibility? Of accountability? That’s just the kind of —”

“Please,” I say. “Begin boarding the air-trams. We do *not* want you to die.”

“Then accept our small, simple request,” she tells me. “It’s not a lot to ask. Japan and the EU have been doing it for years. That’s one reason why they have a higher quality of life than we do. That’s why they’re happier people with healthier societies and —”

“I’m willing to talk to you,” I say to the girl.

“Willing but not able?”

“I’m talking to you now, and we don’t have much time.”

She looks up at the sky. “No,” she shakes her head, looking at me again, “*you* don’t have much time. Us down here on the field, we have all the time there is, for the rest of our lives, however long that might be.”

“Please,” I plead, “don’t resist me. I’m agreeing to talk seriously about your demand, but only if your people begin boarding.”

“These aren’t *my* people,” she says, “they’re the world’s people. We’re all one people, one family, one planet, one human —”

“We don’t have time for philosophy here. Don’t resist my cooperation, lest the outcome be on *you*.”

“Lest?”

“This is a serious matter!”

“No, you’re right,” she says.

“Lisa,” Margie says.

I mute. “Tell me.”

“Okay, we’ve got Ann, Barclay, and Jim backing you up. They’ve agreed to the free

residential.”

“Good, but that’s not enough. What about Morris and Clem?”

“Clem says no. Morris is unavailable.”

“Clem said no?”

“And Tan and Bill.”

“Shit.”

“I know.”

“Who else is there?”

“Rona,” we say in unison.

“She owes me a favor,” I say. “Remind her. She’ll know what you mean. Call her now, and keep trying Morris. And call Musk!”

“He’s still alive?”

“No, his daughter. She just joined the Board.”

“Lisa?” the girl keeps saying.

I tap my temple and release a dose of calmative. A deep breath, my mind focused, I unmute. “Alright,” I say, “I’m ready to negotiate an agreement, but only after your people begin boarding our air-trams.”

“How do I know this isn’t a trick?” the girl says.

“You’re going to have to trust me.”

“You haven’t earned our trust.”

“In order for this to work, you’re going to have to trust me. *Me*, not the company, *me*. Right now, this discussion, it’s between you and me, not you and the company. You and me. You got that?”

She squints and nods, enigmatic and cool. Dozens of video-bots hover around her, spotlights aimed, bathing her in light. She’s beautiful like a cgi VR star. No wonder the people love her.

“Okay,” she says, “you and me. Let’s do it.” She turns to face the bot media. “I’m speaking right now with the Chief Operations Officer of SunPower Electric, and I’m stating our demand! And wow, can you believe it? We’re doing our negotiations in totality!”

Protestors who mill behind her cheer for their meaningless victory.

“And in order to put a little pressure on,” the girl says, turning and looking into the eye of my video-bot, “we’re nibbling at your reserves.”

“You’re *what*?” I say.

“You don’t know?”

I don’t. I panic. I mute and ask Margie for stats on power usage. She sends the numbers and graphs to my smart lenses. Usage is rising, battery reserves are falling.

“Stop this!” I shout at the girl.

She smiles at me.

“Stop it! *Now!* We don’t have time for this!”

“All you have to do is say yes,” she says. “That will actually only take about one second. Then we’ll leave and all this will be over.”

If it were up to me, unilaterally, I would give them what they want.

“So just say yes,” the girl says. “That’s what I would do if I didn’t want to callously cook a bunch of peaceful protestors for the whole world to see.”

“Saying yes is not that simple.”

“Yes it is.”

“We have a Board, we have protocol.”

“Then they should be part of this discussion.”

I unmute. “Margie, any luck with Morris?”

“No, but I just got through to Rona’s assistant. We have her support.”

“Is that enough?”

“Technically, no. We still need Morris or Musk.”

“Well get them!”

The girl — whose video-bot feed has surpassed 606 million viewers — glows in the bot light and speaks to them all in a trembling voice of fierce conviction. She delivers her usual fare: the cruelty of climate injustice and wealth disparity ... the loss of our coastal cities ... the urgent need of thousands of American families losing their homes every month ... the responsibility we have to every future generation ... and that in all our decision-making, they should come first. She’s right, what she’s saying, and I’m expected to defend against it. If I interrupt her without advancing the situation in some way, I’ll be demonized by the public.

I unmute and tell her, “I’ve spoken with several Board Members, and we’re willing to work with you.”

“That sounds vague,” she says.

“I’m prepared to discuss legally binding negotiations with you, right now, but *only* after your people begin boarding our air-trams.”

She squints and smiles, as if pondering my offer.

Shrill cries shatter the silence. It’s the protestors, howling at the sky as the nighted day grows instantly bright in a fast and everywhere sunrise.

Two hundred miles up, still in the Moon’s shadow, our solar platforms wait for the Sun.

“Wow!” the girl shouts. “Amazing! It’s all so amazing! Life is truly precious, you know? We forget that.”

“Listen,” I tell her. “You’ve got our attention. We’re talking. I’ve agreed to negotiate. Now you have to give me something. Work with me on this, or the death of these people will be on you.”

“You missed it, didn’t you?” she says to me. “The eclipse, you missed it. You’re probably

inside somewhere —”

“This is serious!”

“Okay,” she says. “You’re right. You’re right.” She taps her temple and says to her people, “Hey, everyone!”

The protestors cheer.

“Wasn’t that incredible?”

They cheer again.

“So, good news! We’re reaching an agreement! Let’s all start boarding the air-trams!”

A mixed reaction comes over the protestors. Some shout in celebration, some moan their skepticism, a few run for an air-tram.

“Do it!” the girl shouts. “No one’s dying today!”

“Thank you,” I say to her. “Let’s get them all off the property. And you’ve got to put a stop to the excessive power use. We have so little time left.”

“Well, that’s the point, you know? We need to keep the pressure on.”

Suicidal maniac.

“There’s plenty of pressure,” I tell her. “Please, for everyone’s safety.”

“Okay,” she says, “but I want you to know something in case you think we hacked your batteries to drain their power. We didn’t. It’s the people doing it. People all over your grid have amped up their energy use in a silent voice of protest. You’ll see. Your algorithms’ll find it in your stats.” She taps her temple and says in a soft voice, “Dana, abort Operation Power Surge now ... yes, now ... good ... I’ll tell you later.”

“Thank you,” I say.

“You’re welcome,” she smiles. “So, now we’re even. You gave me something, and then I gave you something. Now it’s your turn again.”

I mute. “Margie, talk to me.”

Margie doesn’t answer.

“Margie!”

She peers in from the hallway. “I’m still trying Morris and Musk,” she says. “I’ve got seven numbers for Morris and five for Musk. My bot’s calling them all. I’ll let you know as soon as I get through.”

“Lisa...? Lisa?” the girl has been saying. “Okay, since you obviously need some more time to think about this, I thought I’d mention a couple other things we *would* demand from you today, but that we won’t, because the more you ask for, the bigger the no.”

“Stop,” I tell her, unsure what to do.

“Oh, you *are* there,” she says. “You’re listening. Good. First, you’ve got a lot of empty residences in your super-cities, sitting empty for months. You should let climate-displaced people live there. The churches and non-profits can’t do it all, you know. Don’t be blind and stupid and caught up in all your profit-motive ways. It won’t hurt you to help people. It will be

better for you, actually. Happier people, happier world. We all should care about each other's happiness more. But, back to my point, you should open your super-cities to climate refugees."

On impulse, I lie. "We are, in fact, discussing this. Will you please tell your people to board more quickly?"

"If that's true," says the girl, "then good. But I have my doubts." She taps her temple. "Otto, speed up the evacuation a little. Be mindful of the time. No one's dying here today. A small few of us, maybe, but let's get everyone out of here ... thanks." She looks into the lens of my video-bot. "Second, you literally have the money and power to improve American lives, but you do nothing. Stop spending your billions of charity on things that only help the wealthy or the doomed. You can't prevent every disease in the third world, but you *can*, in a very real way, help American families who've lost their homes. You can contribute to rebuilding the Gulf, Miami, and New York. You can be a respected sponsor of the zero-carbon retrofitting movement. You can do so much."

"Lisa," says Margie, "Bob wants you to shut this girl up now."

The first air-tram lifts from the field, filled with 30 or so protestors being taken to safety. So many more remain on the ground. I'm nauseated. All my choices are bad.

"It might appear that you rule the world," says the girl, smiling at my video-bot, "but another force is rising up."

I ignore my anxiety about what the force is and wonder what it's going to take to get her off the field.

"We're here to talk about your demand," I say. "We're prepared to consent."

"You're not *actually* consenting? You're just prepared to? Do I need to tell everyone to stop boarding your trams?"

"Keep them boarding," I tell her. "And boarding quickly."

I mute. "Margie? Anything from Morris or Musk?"

"No," she says.

"Well then forget it, I'm giving them what they want."

"Bob's going to be furious."

"Let him rant," I say. "He didn't bother to show up to handle this, so he's going to get it my way."

"Seriously, he'll fire you for that."

"I don't care." I unmute, clear my throat, and say it. "Let it be stated that we agree to provide free service to our residential customers within current usage levels."

"You agree?" says the girl.

"Yes," I say. "Please, ask your people to board more quickly."

She turns to the bot media, hands raised in triumph. "You heard it," she says, "we have an official agreement! They've agreed to our demand!"

I hear the exuberant roar of victory. Three air-trams lift more protestors off our field. Thirty-eight minutes of reserve power remain.

“Thank God they’re leaving,” Margie says. “Oh wait, here’s Bob. Anything you want me to tell him?”

“Tell him we can afford it.”

Margie laughs.

I say to the girl, “I can see on our aerials that not everyone’s approaching our air-trams. Will you please see to it that everyone boards as quickly as possible?”

She taps her temple and whispers, “Otto, speed it up, round up the stragglers ... thanks.” She turns to the bot media and pauses before saying, “So while we’re peacefully vacating the premises and I have your attention, I want to say a few things about you and our world. Our one, beautiful, broken world.”

“Lisa,” Margie says. “Bob wants you to stop talking to that girl, and he’s livid that you haven’t scrambled the bot transmissions. He wants you to silence the bot media immediately.”

I mute. “Then I’d silence my own. I want to be in communication.”

“She’s going to keep on talking, Lisa. You can’t win here. Save yourself. Save the company!”

“Sorry, Margie. No.”

“You want a better life?” the girl’s evangelizing to the bot media, “then you have to get off your damned VR and *do* something about it! Get involved in your local Neighborhood Action Coalition or other community group, and if you don’t have one, start one. When we speak up for our cities and neighborhoods, when we choose to be proactive citizens, we can actually really improve things. That’s the only way to fight the greedy idiots in charge — citizen participation. It’s up to us. *Us!* And if you don’t want to get active in that way, then at least be helpful, wherever you can — help a neighbor, volunteer at a shelter, sponsor a climate refugee, *anything*. Every little thing really makes a difference. Remember, everybody’s hurting in some way. *Everybody.*”

I let the girl talk, intensely aware of the seconds slipping away. More air-trams carry protestors from our field. About half now are evacuated.

“To all of you in positions of authority and power,” the girl goes on, “if you want to be respected, be respectable. You wonder why my generation doesn’t respect you? It’s because you don’t deserve it. Life isn’t about you and your wealth, it’s about our children and their future. *They’re* what matters most. Why can’t you understand that?”

Her back remains turned to my video-bot, and I’m struck by the obvious — she’s not here to talk to me, she’s here to talk to everyone else.

I unmute and interrupt her, “I have a proposal.”

The girl turns to my bot. “Did you say something, Lisa?”

“I have a proposal,” I repeat.

“Okay, what?”

“I want to have a public discussion with you. You and me, right now. We’ll drone you off the property, and I’ll meet with you in person. We’ll invite the bot media. A public discussion. The only thing is, you have to be alive to do it.”

She laughs and says nothing. I tell Margie to send a personal transport drone to her heat signature.

“We have 27 minutes to microwave transmission,” I tell the girl. “I want to give you the opportunity to speak for longer than that. I want to give you a long life of speaking. Work with me, get on our drone.”

“How do I know you’re not going to arrest and silence me?” she says.

“You have to trust me that we won’t. And even if we did, you’ll still be a martyr, you’ll still —”

“This isn’t about me or martyrdom. This is about a higher truth being told.”

“I believe that,” I tell her. “So let’s get you off the property and here where we can talk. Please, now.”

Our drone hovers near her. She steps back from it.

“Don’t fight me on this,” I say. “I’m not your opponent. Please, get on our drone. I promise you, it’s the best choice you have.”

Three more air-trams lift from the field.

“We’ll see,” she says.

“Please.”

“I’m not going anywhere until everyone is gone.” She taps her temple and whispers, “Otto, how many are still on the field...? Okay, get ‘em all off. Everyone, you included. Hurry. Thanks.” She taps her temple. “Okay,” she tells me, “we’re evacuating just like I promised. I hope you’re a woman of your word, Lisa, and you keep your promise too.”

“Lisa,” says Margie, “Bob wants you to silence the bot media, and he wants this girl off the field.”

“I think she’s almost done,” I say.

I let her talk until the last of the air-trams leave, everyone evacuated. Everyone but her.

“It’s time,” I tell her. “Everyone has left the field. We’re down to 14 minutes.”

The girl taps her temple and says, “Otto, what’s our status...? Everyone...? You’re sure...? Okay, good.” She looks at me. “I hope you’re a woman of your word, Lisa.”

Secretly, I hope the same.

“Please,” I say, “get on our drone.”

“I’ll get on your drone. I’ve got a lot more to say. I’m coming over to talk.”

“Good, wonderful.” I mute and tell Margie, “Keep my video-bot with her, lens on her face.”

The girl turns to the bot media. “Come with me,” she smiles at them, waving them to follow. She and my bot enter our drone.

It lifts up, and I take an easier breath.

“Thank God,” says Margie. “Now we just have to deal with Bob.”

“I’m not worried about Bob,” I say. “I’m worried about my kids. I’m worried about the world.”

Our drone clears the perimeter of our field, a thick horde of media-bots — perhaps a hundred — in close pursuit.

“You like this girl, don’t you?” says Margie. “You’re sympathetic, you let her talk. On eclipse day.”

“Lisa?” says the girl.

I unmute. “Yes?” I answer.

“Are you really going to meet with me?”

“Yes, you’re en route to our rooftop. I’ll be waiting for you there. I look forward to meeting you and sitting down to talk.”

I smile, surprised. What I just said was not a lie.

BOOKS BY MELANIE PAHLMANN

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* * *

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