



PERMAFROST

By

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Paul Frost greeted the sunrise from the windswept deck of his rustic mansion. He never grew tired of gazing at this majestic view. There was something about seeing the Rocky Mountains stretching away from him in all directions that infused him with a sense of power – the feeling that he had control over the entire universe.

The thought brought a rueful smile to his face. It was almost true.

He leaned against the cedar railing and took a sip of his black Kona coffee, savoring its almost sexual assault upon his palate. He appreciated the simple pleasures, right along with the extravagant ones.

Even before the exodus, this Denver home had been his favorite. He closed his eyes for a moment, enjoying the feel of the warm sunshine through his black silk robe, the coolness of the breeze – and the quiet solitude that surrounded him.

Paul Frost was a man who valued silence.

His late wife had offered a harsher description of his character – right before she had walked out on him five years ago. She had called him a “selfish, cold-hearted bastard,” and “a loner who deserved to be alone.” Celia had wanted to bring a child into a shrinking world ravaged by biological warfare, deadly viruses, rising water tables, and devastating droughts.

And she’d thought *he* was selfish?

Considering the state of the planet, it was no wonder Paul’s invention had made him filthy rich. The end result was something he refused to feel guilty about.

He glanced at his watch, an expensive Tag Heuer he’d picked up years ago in London. It was 8:00 a.m. – time to check the feeds.

Paul crossed back through the sliding glass doors and into the mansion, bare feet sinking into the plush, beige carpet that ran wall to wall in the auditorium-sized living room. It was so thick, so full, that he could walk over it without a sound. That was, of course, the primary reason he had bought it in the first place.

He stopped in the kitchen for a refill of his coffee, being careful to transfer it to a spill-proof travel mug before heading to the SatCom center. He chose the elevator rather than the stairs, something he found himself doing more often as middle age approached.

Even though he’d designed and built it, Frost always found his first few steps into the Satellite Room difficult to take. There was something disconcerting about the hundreds of blank television screens lining the walls; staring down at him like dead eyes, each reflecting a weak image of him on their gray surfaces. It gave him the creeps. Hitting the power-up switch was a palpable relief.

He middle-fingered the blue button directly beneath the power, and smiled as the access board hissed out of the wall and into place in front of his chair. It was a touchpad keyboard, one of the old Sholes style ones – a veritable antique in the age of electroencephalohelmets, which Frost refused to use. He didn’t care; he preferred keyboards and always had.

The irony of this did not escape him. He had, after all, built his empire on an electroencephalohelmet-based technology – although in a roundabout way. Back in the early 2000s when mind-controlled computers had been a new wave, PermaFrost had merely been another cryogenic freezing/cryostasis laboratory out in California. However, as the century slowly progressed, and electroencephalohelmets rapidly

replaced the bulky keyboard-monitor, Frost had discovered a way to turn mind-control to his advantage.

The inherent problem with cryostasis was that it caused irreparable tissue damage, and contrary to what PermaFrost and her sister companies told their customers, technology was not gaining at a pace that would provide a solution to the problem before it became irreversible. So in a bold move, PermaFrost scrapped its nanotech division, and instead used the funds to develop a cross between Virtual Reality and the mind-controlled computers, using the electroencephalohelmet as a bridge. The theory was to store the mind, rather than the body, in a permanent virtual world of its own creation.

It worked, with only one side effect. Once the neural pattern, the personality, was uploaded to the PermaFrost server, the body inevitably died. Given PermaFrost's client base, however, this was not considered a major drawback.

Frost leaned back in his leather chair and watched as, one by one, the screens flickered to life, each one showing a different city, a different view. Satellites, web cameras – everywhere there was a computerized eye still functioning it was linked here to his command center. He struck a few keys.

The Paris webcams were out; apparently the power had finally failed there without anyone left to monitor it. Sighing, he keyed in the cam monitoring Main Street in his old hometown of Holyoke, Massachusetts.

It looked the same as it had for months: Dead bodies littered the streets, thrown there by desperate people in their efforts to get to the computers during the exodus. Most were stacked neatly, but here and there a bent limb or unnatural pose suggested that more than a few people had chosen to use their last few hours of accountability to exercise some very dark fantasies.

Frost sipped his coffee and keyed in directly to the Holyoke Cyber-café. More dead people; mostly piled on the floor higgledy-piggledy but some still sitting at the tables, electroencephalohelmets clinging to their moldering skulls.

He spent another hour checking every available signal; it was the same worldwide. Los Angeles, Tokyo, Melbourne, Moscow, New York City, Seattle, Toronto – nothing but piles and piles of corpses. He hadn't seen a living thing moving except animals in over a year now.

So, he thought, powering the SatCom center down and making his way to the server room, which was the next stop on his daily tour, it was probably safe to assume that he was the only human being left alive on earth. The primitives were all but extinct.

Those who had been unable to leave during the exodus – the ill, the retarded and the ones locked away – should have all died off by now.

The world outside was gone forever.

Another quick elevator ride, this time disgorging him into the observation hallway outside the server room. Here the floor vibrated with the low hum from the underground generators, tickling his feet. The primary power source was hydroelectric, with a solar backup, so barring anything unforeseen the power would remain safely on for another few thousand years.

He pressed his face up against the Plexiglas windows like a kid at a candy store, admiring his masterwork.

It had taken humanity countless ages to crawl from the primordial muck and build civilization, and yet only a handful of days to walk away from it all. It hadn't collapsed, it hadn't fallen – it had surrendered, given up of its own free will and moved.

Here.

Row upon row of computer servers stretched beyond seeing into the temperature-controlled void below him. Monolithic black edifices, each a perfect duplicate of the others, all a monument to Frost and his genius. This was the new world; this was PermaFrost.

Within six months of his mind-storage breakthrough, Paul Frost had become the richest man in the world. Within a year of that, he had become bored and disillusioned – nearly to the point of suicide. There was nothing he couldn't own, but he had come to realize that the “wanting” usually felt better than the “having.”

Paul finally transferred all the operations to his Colorado mansion, set himself up with a lifetime of supplies, and opened up PermaFrost to the general public as a free service. Within hours the exodus had begun as people worldwide raced to upload themselves to their own virtual paradise. The trickle became a flood, bodies piling up in the streets as rampant chaos descended around the public-access helmets.

By week's end they were gone – every single person on earth who had been able to access PermaFrost was now here, living whatever virtual life they pleased inside the multitude of servers. Murderers murdered without fear of reprisal, families lived in perfect towns, despots ruled imaginary kingdoms, and the elderly became forever young again.

They were all in there – and now he was their God, their savior.

Frost took the elevator down to the lowest level, the last stop on his daily tour. Here was a simple room, eight-foot square with a single desk and chair. The desk was empty except for an electroencephalohelmet and a large red button. He sat, chin on fist, and idly stroked the helmet with his fingertips.

Someday, he knew, a choice would have to be made. There was the helmet – a direct pipeline to his own personally sculpted Nirvana. And then there was the button.

The control switch.

One little tap and all the power in his house would cut out, instantly crashing the servers and erasing every mind stored within them. Here was the true power of a deity – all of humanity dreaming away, unaware that their very existences rested beneath his fingertip.

In the blink of an eye, he could wipe them all out.

Helmet, button. Button, helmet. Eenie, meenie, miny, moe.

Maybe he'd already used the helmet and just didn't realize it. After all, how could any paradise he created be better than what he had now? He'd given himself the one thing money couldn't buy: Total control over the entire race. The whole world locked in his basement, out of sight, out of mind, and he with the power of God over it all. He had his own private heaven – a sanctuary made up of fabulous coffee, magnificent views, and blessed silence.

He held his breath, fingering the power switch once again.

Paul Frost was a man who truly valued silence.

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