



Consciousness System
DANIEL MARTIN DIAZ

IV.

WATER

BY
R a m e z N a a m

The water whispered to Simon's brain as it passed his lips. It told him of its purity, of mineral levels, of the place it was bottled. The bottle was cool in his hand, chilled perfectly to the temperature his neural implants told it he preferred. Simon closed his eyes and took a long, luxurious swallow, savoring the feel of the liquid passing down his throat, the drops of condensation on his fingers.

Perfection.

“Are you drinking that?” the woman across from him asked. “Or making love to it?”

Simon opened his eyes, smiled, and put the bottle back down on the table. “You should try some,” he told her.

Stephanie shook her head, her auburn curls swaying as she did. “I try not to drink anything with an IQ over 200.”

Simon laughed at that.

They were at a table at a little outdoor café at Washington Square Park. A dozen yards away, children splashed noisily in the fountain, shouting and jumping in the cold spray in the hot midday sun. Simon hadn’t seen Stephanie since their last college reunion. She looked as good as ever.

“Besides,” Stephanie went on. “I’m not rich like you. My implants are ad-supported.” She tapped a tanned finger against the side of her head. “It’s hard enough just looking at that bottle, at all of this . . .” —she gestured with her hands at the table, the menu, the café around them—“. . . without getting terminally distracted. One drink out of that bottle and I’d be hooked!”

Simon smiled, spread his hands expansively. “Oh, it’s not as bad as all that.” In his peripheral senses he could feel the bottle’s adverttech working, reaching out to Stephanie’s brain, monitoring her pupillary dilation, the pulse evident in her throat, adapting its pitch in real time, searching for some hook that would get her to drink, to order a bottle for herself. Around them he could feel the menus, the table, the chairs, the café—all chattering, all swapping and bartering and auctioning data, looking for some advantage that might maximize their profits, expand their market shares.

Stephanie raised an eyebrow. “Really? Every time I glance at that bottle I get little flashes of how good it would feel to take a drink, little whole body shivers.” She wrapped her arms around herself now, rubbing her hands over the skin of her tanned shoulders, as if cold in this heat. “And if I did drink it, what then?” Her eyes drilled into Simon’s. “Direct neural pleasure stimulation? A little jolt of dopamine? A little micro-addiction to Pura Vita bottled water?”

Simon tilted his head slightly, put on the smile he used for the cameras, for the reporters. “We only use pathways you accepted as part of your implant’s licensing agreement. And we’re well

within the FDA's safe limits for . . .”

Stephanie laughed at him then. “Simon, it’s *me!* I know you’re a big marketing exec now, but don’t give me your corporate line, okay?”

Simon smiled ruefully. “Okay. So, sure, of course, we make it absolutely as enticing as the law lets us. That’s what advertising’s for! If your neural implant is ad-supported, we use every function you have enabled. But so what? It’s *water*. It’s not like it’s going to hurt you any.”

Stephanie was nodding now. “Mmm-hmmm. And your other products? VitaBars? Pure-E-Ohs? McVita Burgers?”

Simon spread his hands, palms open. “Hey look, *everybody* does it. If someone doesn’t buy our Pura Vita line, they’re gonna just go buy something from NutriYum or OhSoSweet or OrganiTaste or somebody else. We at least do our best to put some nutrition in there.”

Stephanie shook her head. “Simon, don’t you think there’s something wrong with this? That people let you put ads in their *brains* in order to afford their implants?”

“You don’t have to,” Simon replied.

“I know, I know,” Stephanie answered. “If I paid enough, I could skip the ads, like you do. You don’t even have to experience your own work! But you know most people can’t afford that. And you’ve got to have an implant these days to be competitive. Like they say, wired or fired.”

Simon frowned inwardly. He’d come to lunch hoping for foreplay, not debate club. Nothing had changed since college. Time to redirect this.

“Look,” he said. “I just do my job the best I can, okay? Come on, let’s order something. I’m starving.”

Simon pulled up his menu to cut off this line of conversation. He moved just fast enough that for a split second he saw the listed entrees still morphing, optimizing their order and presentation to maximize the profit potential afforded by the mood his posture and tone of voice indicated.

Then his kill files caught up and filtered out of his senses every item that wasn’t on his diet.

Simon grimaced. "Looks like I'm having the salad again. Oh joy."

He looked over at Stephanie, and she was still engrossed in the menu, her mind being tugged at by a dozen entrees, each caressing her thoughts with sensations and emotions to entice, each trying to earn that extra dollar.

Simon saw his chance. He activated the ad-buyer interface on his own implant, took out some extremely targeted ads, paid top dollar to be sure he came out on top of the instant auction, and then authorized them against his line of credit. A running tab for the new ad campaign appeared in the corner of his vision, accumulating even as he watched. Simon ignored it.

Stephanie looked up at him a moment later, her lunch chosen. Then he felt his own ads go into effect. Sweet enticements. Subtle reminders of good times had. Sultry undertones. Subtle, just below normal human perception. And all emanating from Simon, beamed straight into Stephanie's mind.

And he saw her expression change just a tiny bit.

* * *

Half an hour later the check came. Simon paid, over Stephanie's objection, then stood. He leaned in close as she stood as well. The adverttech monitors told him she was receptive, excited.

"My place, tonight?" he asked.

Stephanie shook her head, clearly struggling with herself.

Simon mentally cranked up the intensity of his ads another notch further.

"I can make you forget all these distractions," he whispered to her. "I can even turn off your ads, for a night." His own adverttech whispered sweeter things to her brain, more personal, more sensual.

Simon saw Stephanie hesitate, torn. He moved to wrap his arms around her, moved his face toward hers for a kiss.

Stephanie turned her face away abruptly, and his lips brushed her cheek instead. She squeezed him in a sudden, brisk hug, her hands pressing almost roughly into his back.

“Never,” she said. Then she pushed away from him and was gone.

* * *

Simon stood there, shaking his head, watching as Stephanie walked past the fountain and out of his view.

In the corner of his sight, an impressive tally of what he'd just spent on highly targeted advertising loomed. He blinked it away in annoyance. It was just a number. His line of credit against his Pura Vita stock options would pay for it.

He'd been too subtle, he decided. He should have cranked the ads higher from the very beginning. Well, there were plenty more fish in the sea. Time to get back to the office, anyway.

* * *

Steph walked north, past layers of virtual billboards and interactive fashion ads, past a barrage of interactive emotional landscape ads trying to suck her into buying perfume she didn't need, and farther, until she was sure she was out of Simon's senses.

Then she reached into her mind and flicked off the advertising interfaces in her own implant.

She leaned against a building, let her brain unclench, let the struggle of fighting the adverttech he'd employed against her pass.

That bastard, she thought, fuming. She couldn't believe he'd tried that crap on her. If she'd had any shred of doubt remaining, he'd eliminated it. No. He deserved what was coming.

Steph straightened herself, put out a mental bid for a taxi, rode it to Brooklyn, and stepped up to the door of the rented one-room flat. She knocked—short, short, long, long, short. She heard motion inside the room, then saw an eye press itself to the other side of the ancient peephole.

They knew too well that electronic systems could be compromised.

The door opened a fraction, the chain still on it, and Lisa's face appeared. The short-haired brunette nodded, then unlatched the chain, opened the door fully.

Steph walked into the room, closed the door behind her, saw Lisa tucking the home-printed pistol back into her pocket. She hated

that thing. They both did. But they'd agreed it was necessary.

"It's done?" Lisa asked.

Steph nodded.

"It's done."

* * *

Simon walked south along Broadway. It was a gorgeous day for a stroll. The sun felt warm on his brow. He was overdressed for the heat in an expensive gray silk jacket and slacks, but the smart lining kept him cool nonetheless. The city was alive with people, alive with data. He watched as throngs moved up and down the street, shopping, chatting, smiling on this lovely day. He partially lowered his neural firewalls and let his implants feed him the whisper of electronic conversations all around him.

Civic systems chattered away. The sidewalk slabs beneath his feet fed a steady stream of counts of passers-by, estimates of weight and height and gender, plots of probabilistic walking paths, data collected for the city planners. Embedded biosensors monitored the trees lining the street, the hydration of their soils, the condition of their limbs. Health monitors watched for runny noses, sneezing, coughing, any signs of an outbreak of disease. New York City's nervous system kept constant vigil, keeping the city healthy, looking for ways to improve it.

The commercial dataflow interested Simon more than the civic. His pricey, top-of-the-line implants let him monitor that traffic as only a few could.

In Tribeca he watched as a woman walked by a storefront. He saw a mannequin size her up, then felt the traffic as it caressed her mind with a mental image of herself clothed in a new summer dress, looking ten years younger and twenty pounds lighter. Beneath the physical the mannequin layered an emotional tone in the advert: feelings of vigor, joy, carefree delight. Simon nodded to himself. A nice piece of work, that. He took note of the brand for later study. The woman turned and entered the shop.

He felt other adverttech reaching out all around him to the networked brains of the crowd. Full sensory teasers for beach vacations from a travel shop, a hint of the taste of chocolate from a candy store, the sight and feel of a taut, rippling body from a sports nutrition store. He passed by a bodega, its façade

open to the warm air, and came close enough that the individual bottles of soda and juice and beer and water reached out to him, each trying a pitch tailored to his height and weight and age and ethnicity and style of dress.

Simon felt the familiar ping of one of the many Pura Vita water pitches and smiled. Not bad. But he had a few ideas for improvements. None of it really touched him, in any case. His implants weren't ad-sponsored. He felt this ad chatter only because he chose to, and even now it was buffered, filtered, just a pale echo of what most of the implanted were subjected to. No. Simon tuned into this ambient froth of neural data as research. He sampled it, observed it from afar, because he must. His success in marketing depended on it.

He was almost to his own building when he passed the headquarters of Nexus Corp, the makers of the neural implant in his brain and millions more. Stephanie didn't understand. This was the real behemoth. So long as Nexus Corp maintained their patents on the neural implant technology, they held a monopoly. The ad-based model, all that most people could afford, was their invention. Simon was just one of thousands of marketers to make use of it to boost demand for their products.

And hell, if people didn't like it, they didn't have to get an implant! It was just the way the world worked. Want to be smarter? Want a photographic memory? Want to learn a new language or a new instrument or how to code overnight? Want all those immersive entertainment options? Want that direct connection with your loved ones? But don't have the cash?

Then accept the ads, boyo. And once you do, stop complaining.

Not that Simon wanted the ads himself, mind you. No, it was worth the high price to keep the top-of-the-line, ad-free version running in his brain, to get all the advantages of direct neural enhancement without the distraction of pervasive multisensory advertising. And, of course, to be able to monitor the traffic around him, to better understand how to optimize his own pitches.

Simon reached his building at last. The lobby doors sensed him coming and whisked themselves open. Walking by the snack bar in the lobby, he felt the drinks and packaged junk food reaching out to him. His own Pura Vita water, of course. And NutriYum water. Simon gave their top competitor's products the evil eye. Someday Pura Vita would own this whole building, and then he'd

personally see to it that not a single bottle of NutriYum remained.

The lobby floor tiles whispered ahead to the inner security doors, which in turn alerted the elevators. Simon strode forward confidently, layers of doors opening for him of their own accord, one by one, perfectly in time with his stride. He stepped into the waiting elevator and it began to ascend immediately, bound for his level. The lift opened again moments later and he strode to his windowed office. Smart routing kept subordinates out of his path. The glass door to his magnificent office swung open for him. A bottle of cold Pura Vita was on his desk, just how he liked it.

Simon settled into his ready-and-waiting chair, kicked his feet up on the table, and reached through his implant to the embedded computing systems of his office. Data streamed into his mind. Market reports. Sales figures. Ad performance metrics. He closed his eyes and lost himself in it. This was the way to work.

On the back of his jacket, a tiny device, smaller than a grain of sand, woke up and got to work as well.

* * *

Lisa started intently at Steph. "He didn't notice?"

Steph shook her head. "Not a clue."

"And you still want to go through with it?" Lisa asked.

"More than ever."

Lisa looked at her. "The ones who're paying us—they're just as bad as he is, you know. And they're going to profit."

Steph nodded. "For now they will," she replied. "In the long run—they're just paying us to take the whole damn system down."

Lisa nodded. "Okay, then."

She strode over to the ancient terminal on the single desk in the flat and entered a series of keypresses.

Phase 1 began.

* * *

Around the world, three dozen different accounts stuffed with

crypto-currency logged on to anonymous, cryptographically secured stock market exchanges. One by one, they began selling short on Pura Vita stock, selling shares they did not own, on the bet that they could snap those same shares up at a far lower price in the very near future.

In data centers around the world, AI traders took note of the short sales within microseconds. They turned their analytical prowess to news and financial reports on Pura Vita, on its competitors, on the packaged snack and beverage industries in general. The computational equivalent of whole human lifetimes was burned in milliseconds analyzing all available information. Finding nothing, the AI traders flagged Pura Vita stock for closer tracking.

* * *

“Now we’re committed,” Lisa said.

Steph nodded. “Now let’s get out of here, before Phase 2 starts.”

Lisa nodded and closed the terminal. Five minutes later they were checked out of their hotel and on their way to the airport.

* * *

In a windowed office above the financial heart of Manhattan, a tiny AI woke and took stock of its surroundings.

Location—check.

Encrypted network traffic—check.

Human present—check.

Key . . .

Deep within itself, the AI found the key. Something stolen from this corporation, perhaps. An access key that would open its cryptographic security. But one with additional safeguards attached. A key that could only be used from within the secure headquarters of the corporation. And only by one of the humans approved to possess such a key. Triply redundant security. Quite wise.

Except that now the infiltration AI was here, in this secure headquarters, carried in by one of those approved humans.

Slowly, carefully, the infiltration AI crawled its tiny body up the

back of the silk suit it was on, toward its collar, as close as it could come to the human's brain without touching skin and potentially revealing itself. When it could go no farther, it reached out, fit its key into the cryptographic locks of the corporation around it, and inserted itself into the inner systems of Pura Vita enterprises, and through them, into the onboard processors of nearly a billion Pura Vita products on shelves around the world.

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In a warehouse outside Tulsa, a bottle of Pura Vita water suddenly labels itself as **RECALLED**. Its onboard processor broadcasts the state to all nearby. Within milliseconds, the other bottles in the same case, then the rest of the pallet, then all the pallets of Pura Vita water in the warehouse register as **RECALLED**. The warehouse inventory management **AI** issues a notice of return to Pura Vita, Inc.

In a restaurant in Palo Alto, Marie Evans soaks up the sun, then reaches out to touch her bottle of Pura Vita. She likes to savor this moment, to force herself to wait, to make the pleasure of that first swallow all the more intense. Then, abruptly, the bottle loses its magic. It feels dull and drab, inert in her hand. An instant later the bottle's label flashes red—**RECALL**. The woman frowns. "Waiter!"

In a convenience store in Naperville, the bottles of Pura Vita on the store shelves suddenly announce that they are in **RECALL**, setting off a flurry of electronic activity. The store inventory management **AI** notices the change and thinks to replace the bottles with more recently arrived stock in the storeroom. Searching, it finds that the stock in the back room has been recalled as well. It places an order for resupply to the local distribution center, only to receive a nearly instant reply that Pura Vita water is currently out of stock, with no resupply date specified. Confused, the inventory management **AI** passes along this information to the convenience store's business management **AI**, requesting instructions.

Meanwhile, on the shelves immediately surrounding the recalled bottles of Pura Vita, other bottled products take note. Bottles of NutriYum, OhSoSweet, OrganiTaste, and BetterYou, constantly monitoring their peers and rivals, observe the sudden recall of all Pura Vita water. They virtually salivate at the new opportunity created by the temporary hole in the local market landscape. Within a few millionths of a second, they are adapting their

marketing pitches, simulating tens of thousands of scenarios in which buyers encounter the unavailable Pura Vita, angling for ways to appeal to this newly available market. Labels on bottles morph, new sub-brands appear on the shelves as experiments, new neural ads ready themselves for testing on the next wave of shoppers.

In parallel, the rival bottles of water reach out to their parent corporate AIs with maximal urgency. Pura Vita bottles temporarily removed from battleground! Taking tactical initiative to seize local market opportunity! Send further instructions/best practices to maximize profit-making potential!

For there is nothing a modern bottle of water wants more than to maximize its profit-making potential.

At the headquarters of OhSoSweet and OrganiTaste and BetterYou, AIs receive the flood of data from bottles across the globe. The breadth of the calamity to befall Pura Vita becomes clear within milliseconds. Questions remain: What has caused the recall? A product problem? A contaminant? A terrorist attack? A glitch in the software?

What is the risk to their own business?

Possible scenarios are modeled, run, evaluated for optimal courses of action robust against the unknowns in the situation.

In parallel, the corporate AIs model the responses of their competitors. They simulate each other's responses. What will NutriYum do? OhSoSweet? OrganiTaste? BetterYou? Each tries to outthink the rest in a game of market chess.

One by one, their recursive models converge on their various courses of action and come to that final, most dreaded set of questions, which every good corporate AI must ask itself a billion times a day. How much of this must be approved by the humans? How can the AI get the human-reserved decisions made quickly and in favor of the mathematically optimal course for the corporation that its machine intelligence has already decided upon?

Nothing vexes an AI so much as needing approval for its plans from slow, clumsy, irrational bags of meat.

* * *

Johnny Ray walked down the refrigerated aisle, still sweaty from

his run. Something cold sounded good right now. He came upon the cooler with the drinks, reached for a Pura Vita, and saw that the label was pulsing red. Huh? Recalled?

Then the adverttech hit him.

“If you liked Pura Vita, you’ll love Nutra Vita from NutriYum!”

“OrganiVita is the one for you!”

“Pura Sweet, from OhSoSweet!”

Images and sensations bombarded him. A cold, refreshing mountain stream crashed onto the rocks to his left, splashing him with its cool spray. A gaggle of bronzed girls in bikinis frolicked on a beach to his right, beckoning him with crooked fingers and enticing smiles. A rugged, shirtless, six-packed version of himself nodded approvingly from the bottom shelf, promising the body that Johnny Ray could have. An overwhelmingly delicious citrus taste drew him to the top.

Johnny Ray’s mouth opened in a daze. His eyes grew glassy. His hands slid the door to the drinks fridge open, reached inside, came out with some bottle, the rest of him not even aware the decision had been made.

Johnny Ray looked down at the bottle in his hand. Nutri Vita. He’d never even heard of this stuff before. His mouth felt dry, hungry for the cold drink. The sweat beaded on his brow. Wow. He couldn’t wait to try this.

* * *

While the corporate AIs of the other brands dithered, wasting whole precious seconds, debating how to persuade the inefficient bottleneck of humans above them, the controlling intelligence of NutriYum launched itself into a long prepared course of action.

NutriYumAI logged on to an anonymous investor intelligence auction site, offering a piece of exclusive, unreleased data to the highest bidder.

30 SECOND ADVANTAGE AVAILABLE—MARKET OPPORTUNITY TO SELL FORTUNE 1000 STOCK IN ADVANCE OF CRASH. GREATER THAN 10% RETURN GUARANTEED BY BOND. AUCTION CLOSES IN 250 MILLISECONDS. RESERVE BID \$100 MILLION. CRYPTO CURRENCY ONLY.

Within a quarter of a second it had 438 bids. It accepted the highest, at \$187 million, with an attached cryptographically sealed and anonymized contract that promised full refund of the purchase price should the investment data fail to provide at least an equivalent profit.

In parallel, NutriYumAI sent out a flurry of offer-contracts to retailers throughout North America and select markets in Europe, Asia, and Latin America.

ADDITIONAL NUTRIYUM WATER STOCK AVAILABLE IN YOUR AREA. 10 CASES FREE, DELIVERY WITHIN 1 HOUR, PLUS 40% DISCOUNT ON NEXT 1000 CASES—EXCHANGE FOR 75% ALLOCATION OF PURA VITA SHELF SPACE AND NEURAL BANDWIDTH ALLOCATION. REPLY WITH CRYPTOGRAPHIC SIGNATURE TO ACCEPT.

Within seconds, the first acceptances began to arrive. Retailers signed over the shelf space and neural bandwidth that Pura Vita had once occupied in their stores over to NutriYum, in exchange for a discount on the coming cases.

By the end of the day, NutriYum would see its market share nearly double. A coup. A rout. The sort of market battlefield victory that songs are sung of in the executive suites.

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The AI-traded fund called Vanguard Algo 5093 opened the data package it had bought for \$187 million. It took nanoseconds to process the data. This was indeed an interesting market opportunity. Being the cautious sort, Vanguard Algo 5093 sought validation. At a random sample of a few thousand locations, it hired access to wearable lenses, to the anonymized data streams coming out of the eyes and brains of NexusCorp customers, to tiny, insect-sized airborne drones. Only a small minority of the locations it tried had a set of eyes available within the one-second threshold it set, but those were sufficient. In every single location, the Pura Vita labels in view were red. Red for recall.

Vanguard Algo 5093 leapt into action. **SELL SHORT! SELL SHORT!**

It alerted its sibling Vanguard algorithms to the opportunity, earning a commission on their profits. It sent the required notifications to the few remaining human traders at the company as well, though it

knew that they would respond far too slowly to make a difference.

Within milliseconds, Pura Vita stock was plunging, as tens of billions in Vanguard Algo assets bet against it. In the next few milliseconds, other AI traders around the world took note of the movement of the stock. Many of them, primed by the day's earlier short sale, joined in now, pushing Pura Vita stock even lower.

Thirty-two seconds after it had purchased this advance data, Vanguard Algo 5093 saw the first reports on Pura Vita's inventory problem hit the wire. By then, \$187 million in market intelligence had already netted it more than a billion in profits, with more on the way as Pura Vita dipped even lower.

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Simon's first warning was the stock ticker. Like so many other millionaires made of not-yet-vested stock options, he kept a ticker of his company's stock permanently in view in his mind. On any given day it might flicker a bit, up or down by a few tenths of a percent. More up than down for the last year, to be sure. Still, on a volatile day, one could see a swing in either direction of as much as 2 percent. Nothing to be too worried about.

He was immersing himself in data from a Tribeca clothing store—the one he'd seen with the lovely adverttech today—when he noticed that the ticker in the corner of his mind's eye was red. Bright red. Pulsating red.

His attention flicked to it.

-11.4%

What?

It plunged even as he watched.

-12.6%

-13.3%

-15.1%

What the hell? He mentally zoomed in on the ticker to get the news. The headline struck him like a blow.

PURA VITA BOTTLES EXPIRING IN MILLIONS OF

LOCATIONS.

No. This didn't make any sense. He called up the sales and marketing AI on his terminal.

Nothing.

Huh?

He tried again.

Nothing.

The AI was down.

He tried the inventory management AI next.

Nothing.

Again.

Nothing.

Simon was sweating now. He could feel the hum as the smart lining of his suit started running its compressors, struggling to cool him off. But it wasn't fast enough. Sweat beaded on his brow, on his upper lip. There was a knot in his stomach.

He pulled up voice, clicked to connect to IT. Oh thank god.

Then routed to voicemail.

Oh no. Oh please no.

-28.7%

-30.2%

-31.1%

-33.9%

* * *

It was evening before IT called back. They'd managed to reboot the AIs. A worm had taken them out somehow, had spread new code to all the Pura Vita bottles through the market intelligence update channel. And then it had disabled the remote update feature

on the bottles. To fix those units, they needed to reach each one, *physically*. Almost a *billion* bottles. That would take whole days!

It was a disaster. And there was worse.

NutriYum had sealed up the market, had closed six-month deals with tens of thousands of retailers. Their channel was gone, eviscerated.

And with it Simon's life.

The credit notice came soon after. His options were worthless now. His most important asset was gone. And with it so was the line of credit he'd been using to finance his life.

[NOTICE OF CREDIT DOWNGRADE]

The message flashed across his mind. Not just any downgrade. Down to zero. Down into the red. Junk status.

The other calls came within seconds of his credit downgrade. Everything he had—his midtown penthouse apartment, his vacation place in the Bahamas, his fractional jet share—they were all backed by that line of credit. He'd been living well beyond his means. And now the cards came tumbling down.

[NexusCorp alert: Hello, valued customer! We have detected a problem with your account. We are temporarily downgrading your neural implant service to the free, ad-sponsored version. You can correct this at any time by submitting payment here.]

Simon clutched his head in horror. This couldn't be happening. It couldn't.

Numbly, he stumbled out of his office and down the corridor. Lurid product adverts swam at him from the open door to the break room. He pushed past them. He had to get home somehow, get to his apartment, do . . . something.

He half collapsed into the elevator, fought to keep himself from hyperventilating as it dropped to the lobby floor. Adverts from the lobby restaurants flashed at him from the wall panel as they dropped, inundating him with juicy steak flavor, glorious red wine aroma, the laughter and bonhomie of friends he didn't have. The ads he habitually blocked out reached him raw and unfiltered now, with an intensity he wasn't accustomed to in his exclusive, ad-free life. He crawled back as far as he could into the corner of

the lift, whimpering, struggling to escape the barrage. The doors opened, and he bolted forward, into the lobby and the crowd, heading out, out into the city.

The snack bar caught him first. It reached right into him, with its scents and flavors and the incredible joy a bite of a YumDog would bring him. He stumbled toward the snack bar unthinkingly. His mouth was dry, parched, a desert. He was so hot in this suit, sweating, burning up, even as the suit's pumps ran faster and faster to cool him down.

Water. He needed water.

He blinked to clear his vision, searching, searching for a refreshing Pura Vita.

All he saw was NutriYum. He stared at the bottles, the shelves upon shelves of them. And the NutriYum stared back into him. It saw his thirst. It saw the desert of his mouth, the parched landscape of his throat, and it whispered to him of sweet relief, of an endless cool stream to quench that thirst.

Simon stumbled forward another step. His fingers closed around a bottle of cold, perfect, NutriYum. Beads of condensation broke refreshingly against his fingers.

Drink me, the bottle whispered to him. And I'll make all your cares go away.

The dry earth of his throat threatened to crack. His sinuses were a ruin of flame. He shouldn't do this. He couldn't do this.

Simon brought his other hand to the bottle, twisted off the cap, and tipped it back, letting the sweet cold water quench the horrid cracking heat within him.

Pure bliss washed through him, bliss like he'd never known. This was nectar. This was perfection.

Some small part of Simon's brain told him that it was all a trick. Direct neural stimulation. Dopamine release. Pleasure center activation. Reinforcement conditioning.

And he knew this. But the rest of him didn't care.

Simon was a NutriYum man now. And always would be.
