

A Scenario

# Playing Dead

By Abigail Sidebotham

Hadbud waits in the afternoon sun for the arrival of a mystery man known only to him as Makemake. As he waits he comprehends that what he understands of life is plenty. Why he is sat here this afternoon, he has no idea.

For Hadbud's convenience Makemake suggested they meet outside the Institute of Technology and Astronomy at 4 p.m. Hadbud's been waiting fifteen minutes already. He waits on a bench in the sun. He's tall, sits still and upright, his shoulders rolled back. A faint breeze blows around him.

Far off in the skyline he watches a crane mounted on top of a skyscraper gradually lowering a girder. The steel of the crane is silhouetted black against the pale blue sky. As the crane finds its new position the girder twists and rotates, slowly narrowing, giving the impression its getting shorter, until it's a simple black dot on the horizon, and then twisting more, drawing itself out again, longer.

Hadbud doesn't concern himself too much with perceptions of this sort. He's a scientist; he understands the world exists in perfect symbiosis, with all real and concrete things linked by a web of connections to all other real things. He sees it as his job to explain and verify these connections.

In his last e-mail to Hadbud, Makemake wrote a simple yet enigmatic list.

Things to consider upon meeting: Divine element (reflected in the external behaviour of other minds), Empirical fact (process to obtain immediate knowledge), Gestation (period of a butterfly, for example), Human synergies (ends / beginnings), Parallax, Shiny (it's hard not to like shiny), Technical transformation, Transmission (data enhancing), .

Hadbud had only been able to make vague, occasionally mystic and abstract associations within the list (apart from the obvious alphabetisation he'd found little coherence). He was slightly amused and sufficiently intrigued. This, plus the good mood he's been in since hooking up with Matea, are the only reasons he agreed to the meeting.

Hadbud looks down at his watch. The display reads 16:26. Looking up again he notices a man rushing around the corner and into the courtyard. He's carrying a take-away coffee in his right hand; the matt-black carton stands out against his white t-shirt and pale beige slacks. Catching sight of Hadbud the man throws his free hand in the air and starts towards him. Hadbud observes him for a moment. He's short, of medium build; he has a beard and mid-length wavy black hair that bounces behind him as he walks. From his appearance Hadbud assumes he possesses some of those Tom Cruise genes so popular thirty years ago.

'Hadbud? Hi, I'm Makemake—a pleasure meet-

ing you.' He says, swapping his coffee to his left hand so he can extend his right to Hadbud. 'Let's walk.' Spinning on his heels Makemake begins walking away. Hadbud jumps up and—grabbing the A4 document from the bench—joins him at his side.

'Where are we going?'

'You'll see', he says, smiling.

Walking briskly down Chrysler Street they remain silent. Hadbud gets the impression there's little to discuss until they arrive at their destination. Besides, the street's busy this time of day. Three lanes of traffic edge slowly towards ever-changing lights and horns blare over the deep hum of electric motors. People spill out from shops laden with bags and clutter the chairs and tables on the street outside a row of bistros. From a distance Makemake throws his empty coffee cup; it lands neatly in a bin.

They turn a corner onto Fisher Street and head towards the Central Train Depot, which Hadbud knows marks the beginning of the Red Zone, the area that Brandon Knight, mayor of the city, designated permanently derelict after its bankruptcy fifty years ago. The move was considered conservation on the back of the financial minister's declaration that 'destruction tourism' was the cities biggest asset.

Turning another corner onto Rosa Parks Boulevard they meet total ruin and a huge sign stating that THIS CITY TAKES NO RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE WELFARE OF CITIZENS IN THIS AREA. ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK.

The derelict buildings lining the street were reinforced a long time ago and remain near to collapse, suspended in a permanent state of disrepair. Everywhere smashed windows, twisted steel, and piles of rubble and junk are meticulously maintained; on the walls graffiti tells its coded and fragmented tale.

Walking down the middle of the road they approach a brick wall that's collapsed onto a Ford Capri. Its roof, piled high with bricks, has caved to a sharp 'V', the white paintwork's cracked, spots of rust bleed orange-brown down the dirty white. Makemake slows to look at it.

'What is it that you do, Makemake?'

'Art.'

'You're an artist?'

'Yes.'

Hadbud wants to ask more but senses Makemake's reluctance.

Amongst all this mess, it's quiet, peaceful even. Birds perching in the cavities of buildings sing over the distant whine of car horns, a butterfly swoops and dips in front of Hadbud, landing gently on a weed poking up through a gap in the concrete. A few tourists armed with cameras wander around dodging debris, with broken glass crunching beneath their trainers. They point out things that catch their eye and speak in hushed voices as if in some catacomb.

Makemake stops walking. They're outside The

Guardian Building, a decayed example of Mayan revival art deco that raises a modest thirty-seven floors. During the twentieth century it was a centre for finance and business but now the whole building seems to be deflated, hanging its shoulders depressed. A huge gaping hole expanding across three flights reveals the building's cross-section, spewing out pipes, wires and debris. The curved atrium above the main entrance houses a mosaic depicting a pixelated saint wearing blue robes and surrounded by gold. Part of the saint's head has fallen away and what remains of him—one eye, his nose, mouth, chin, and body—is superimposed on a backdrop of blue sky. He appears transcendental, rising upwards as if starting some kind of ascension.

'We've arrived,' says Makemake, 'wait here a moment.' Running up the steps towards the entrance he ducks under a beam that's fallen from the gaping hole and remains propped up, wedged between the building and a column of dirt and loose bricks.

Hadbud stands in the sun and waits. It's still hot. His shirt's sticking to the sweat on his back. He fans himself with the A4 document he's been holding half rolled up in his hand, cylindrical at the base and flaring out at the top. The text on the cover reads *Karma Barot Paper, TITLE: The Effects of Solar Flares on Data Transmission.*

Makemake is shouting his name and waving at him from the entrance of the Guardian Building. Un-

derstanding that he's ready for Hadbud to come in, he begins carefully and slowly to climb the stairs. Hooking his arm over the beam, he swings his body under it and joins Makemake at the entrance, beneath the ascending saint.

Moving inside they enter a purpose-built room painted black. It's dark and cool. Hadbud's eyes strain as they adjust to the dim. The room is roughly six-metres square. On the left an interactive display mounted to the wall exhibits photographs, text and 3D simulations that tell of the Guardian Building's brief history. To the right a ticket office announces with a sign that it's closed.

A woman with long brown hair wearing a tailored black dress and neon yellow trainers is waiting for them.

'Hi,' she says, extending her hand to Hadbud, 'I'm Karen.'

'Hello, I'm Hadbud,' she turns her attention to Makemake.

'Most of the public have left now. Please be careful, Makemake, I'm not taking any responsibility...'

'Fine, it's fine,' he says, 'thank you.'

Leaving the black exhibition cube they enter the atrium. It reminds Hadbud of a church in Berlin he once read about. There was a photograph, too. It'd been bombed badly during the Second World War and a third of it was missing, as though some great hand had scooped a big chunk from it.

With Makemake leading the way they weave around rubble and find the stairs and start climbing. Huge segments are missing. Gaps appear between two, sometimes three steps. As they climb they kick loose debris that falls between the gaps, clattering as it drops and breaks beneath them. Hadbud knows the stairs are secure, reinforced with invisible supports. Smart engineering, he thinks, and isn't worried.

They've been climbing for what feels like forever. Hot and out of breath Hadbud is perplexed, questioning the necessity of all this, his patience beginning to wear.

They're approaching the thirty-sixth floor.

'Just one more flight!' Makemake shouts back, breathing in and out heavily, 'then we've arrived'

At the top they turn left down a corridor leading off to ten or so identical offices. Walking past them they flash into Hadbud's vision like photographs, records of a scheme, or is it a system that fell to pieces?

At the end of the corridor they enter a large and perfectly square room. It's completely empty apart from a single office desk standing isolated in the middle. Floor-to-ceiling windows run the length of three walls. Most of them are broken and the early evening light pours in, reflecting and bouncing off shards of glass that litter the floor. The far-right corner of this room is in a particularly bad state, with the windows, frame, and part of the floor having fallen away completely.

Walking into the centre of the room Makemake

stops and with his hands in the air turns a hundred and eighty degrees, to face Hadbud.

‘You must be wondering what we’re doing here?’

‘I think it’s safe to say I’m intrigued. I’m assuming that’s been your intention?’

‘Intrigued, well, yes, that’s quite good I suppose. Now we are intrigued by each other,’ he says shyly. ‘I think my actual intention was to keep things interesting and to reflect upon this place. I like it here...’, he says gazing through the open hole. ‘I like to look down on the city; you can see things more clearly from here.’

Hadbud looks out in the same direction. He realizes that this must be the highest accessible point this side of the city. The newer, once taller skyscrapers that surround them have crumbled from the top down and litter the horizon like amputated stumps.

‘Yes, I’ve never been in this building before, and the view—I can understand its appeal.’

‘I must thank you for coming, Hadbud. I know your work and have wanted the opportunity to meet you for a while.’

‘Sure, but I wonder what this is all about?’

‘Oh, well, it’s a question or a proposition... I’m not sure.’

‘A question?’

‘Yes. I don’t know. I’m not sure. You see, I’m interested in your research on sunspots. I must admit that I don’t understand the intricacies of science but I find

your hypothesis ... well, terrifying.’

‘Really?’ Hadbud is genuinely surprised.

‘Yes, well, you seem to suggest that the activities of the universe affect all aspects of our existence. You make distinctions between diverse things. I read one article that you wrote, where you talk about the activity of sunspots and how this relates to the success or failure of businesses.’

‘Well, yes, it’s very complex but close correlations can be found between many things. You find that frightening?’

‘It makes it seem as though we have no free will. It makes me feel disempowered, out of control.’

‘Well, like I said, it’s complex.’

‘What about independence of thought? What about autonomy?’

‘I believe those things are separate to the idea of free will. Besides, my research does not imply that they can’t coexist. I’m astounded that you’ve made that connection.’

‘It’s just something that I’ve been thinking about.’

‘If anything, I think my studies allude to the ideas of connectivity, which I must say I find quite appealing.’

‘A loop? How can we be independent if that’s the case. Appealing?’ Makemake is waving a finger in the air, his voice slightly rising, ‘How can anyone connect with the unseen inscription of magic ink that is the con-

sciousness? How can we let it to beam out?’

‘I think you’re talking about something else, Makemake. This isn’t my speciality.’

‘But you see, it’s like this. Since the prohibition against migration was passed and we are unable to leave this city, which is in perpetual ruin, we are not free. We don’t even have the freedom to transform anything.’

‘That is true,’ says Hadbud, nodding.

‘And then you speak of how we are inextricably linked to everything else in the universe? What’s left?’

Makemake has started gesticulating furiously. Hadbud is starting to wonder how he can leave.

‘I’m sorry, Makemake, but I’m really not sure I can help you.’

‘Don’t you understand? I’ve heard that you yourself were developed from the imitation clone genes of some old sage ... You’re an avatar! Don’t you care?’

‘OK. I’m leaving,’ Hadbud turns and starts to leave.

‘Wait! I’m sorry. That was rude of me, please just let me try and explain to you, Hadbud.’

Hadbud stops and turns around; he sighs gently, his shoulders are relaxed, his mouth’s slightly open.

‘OK, fine.’ Realising that he might lose his audience, Makemake changes his tone.

‘You see this table, Hadbud?’ He points to the table in the middle of the room; Hadbud nods in affirmation. ‘If I sit on this table, it doesn’t become a chair, and if I have sex on it it doesn’t become a bed, and if I stand

on it it doesn’t become a ladder. It’s still always just a table that lends itself to those functions. It imitates them without ever becoming them...’

‘Yes,’ agrees Hadbud

‘... And, if I was to turn the table upside down so that its legs were sticking up in the air, it would become a table imitating nothing but itself—a table pretending to be a table.’

‘It would be playing dead,’ replies Hadbud.

‘Yes, maybe,’ Makemake says gently, smiling. To illustrate the point he walks over to the table and tips it onto its side, and taking hold of the legs, lifts it so that it’s lying flat on its back. Makemake stands back to look at it. ‘Or, maybe you would look at it and finding it adorable stroke its belly. Maybe for a moment you would consider it a dog?’ Makemake laughs at his own joke.

‘I understand about the table. What’s your point?’

‘Art has the ability to dissolve power. It melts it away. It’s very real, Hadbud. It can cause people to live or die.’

‘OK.’

‘When possible futures are given and not acted on, like they are here, the imagination recedes. And without imagination all we can do is spin a future out of the logic of the present. We will never be led to a new life because all we can work from is the known.’

‘OK.’

‘I want to activate my art, to give it power and

meaning, instead of just imitating like the table does. I want to escape the loop.’

‘How do you expect me to help you with this?’

‘I’m not sure. I think I just thought that you, out of everyone, would understand? The way that you write about things made me think that you too know that we are stuck in a self-perpetuating machine that dulls thoughts.’

‘Makemake, I live my life in a state of quiet, tentative, dispassionate curiosity. I think we see things quite differently...’

‘Aren’t you angry with our fathers? Do you not see that they became spirits that lived inside merchandise itself?’

‘Makemake, I really am sorry but I can’t help you with this. Now please excuse me. I have someone else I need to see.’ Turning his back to Makemake, Hadbud starts towards the door.

‘Mounting weight of internal logic—computerised!’ shouts Makemake behind him. Ignoring him Hadbud continues walking towards the door. He’s annoyed; he’s going to see Matea. He wants to tell Makemake that he’s got it all wrong, that things really don’t need to be this way. When he reaches the door he stops, he wants to say something, anything. He turns around but Makemake isn’t there. The room is empty apart from a table upside down on the floor.