

Certain Death
by
Leslie R. Lee

"Chou," Emily murmured. Her eyes stared at the ocean through the dining room window of her home. "Do you ever wonder why we are alone?"

"Considering the traffic I had to fight to get here," he grouched, tossing his jacket over a chair. "Alone is not how I would describe us."

"You know what I mean," she said, smiling.

He came to stand beside her so that he too could look over the calm water. She'd said that it reminded her of the Pacific Ocean back on Old Earth. That's why she'd chosen this place on this planet to live. It looked like California. He'd never been there so he had no idea. For him, this was just another ocean.

"We human beings are alone in the Universe," he intoned, trying to sound as portentous as he could, "because we're the only ones here."

She chuckled. "Silly me. I should have realized. All these years that I have spent researching this one question, and you answer it immediately."

Dark waves rolled up onto the beach creating a gentle surf. The beach was deserted now though the footsteps in the sand reminded them that families had played here just a few hours ago.

"If the Universe was a beach ball," he said, "the amount that we've explored so far would be a mere pin prick. And some say that we've not paid enough attention to even our own galaxy. It's hardly surprising that we haven't found any intelligent life."

"Other than us."

"Actually I was including us as well."

Her laughter suited her appearance. Twenty five years old, young and vibrant. A good looking woman, who was poised and intelligent. She poured him wine, crimson in its crystal goblet.

"I have spent centuries investigating this little conundrum, why we are alone. And you have summed it up perfectly. We are alone, because there is nobody else." She sighed.

He wanted to ask but felt he shouldn't. After all this time, controlling his impatience was still so difficult.

"You're really going through with it?" he asked finally unable to contain himself. The sun was setting turning the sky amber. It irritated him for some reason. The sunset seemed unreasonably beautiful considering why he was there.

"Absolutely."

"You're sure?"

A quick burst of laughter. "Dear, that is what absolutely means."

"Just because you can't answer your question?"

"Of course not. I'm just finished. That's all."

"Real Death. It's not natural."

Again, a serene laugh that still caused his speech to stumble. "Real Death used to happen to everyone all the time. Probably will happen to everyone eventually, regardless of Mister Computer."

He winced. Mister Computer. Slang for the Hyperspace Computer that allowed this version of immortality. The Hyperspace Technologies Company wanted everyone to call it the Hyperspace Humanity Information Database. It existed in the special realm where time and space had no meaning. Storage was infinite, access was instantaneous and ubiquitous. Power beyond imagining. Everyone called it Mister Computer. He hated that. Sounded like a kitchen appliance. People should have more respect.

"I am tired, Chou," she continued on, sipping at her wine. "Do you know how long I have lived?"

Such a personal question caused him to stammer. "I hadn't thought about it."

"Liar. I don't know how long I have lived. That's the truth. I have lost track of the number of the incarnations. I have lost track of the years between the incarnations. And how long do incarnations last now? A hundred years? A hundred and fifty?"

"The average has been 200 years."

"Dear Lord. I cannot imagine living two hundred years."

"I think your previous incarnation lasted somewhere around three hundred years."

"Really? Time flies when you are having fun."

"Why not just take a break between incarnations."

"You have read my file at Mister Computer Company." She touched his arm gently. Old friends. Good friends. "You know me too well."

He liked everyone to know that he worked at Hyperspace Technologies. Mister Computer Company didn't sound very prestigious.

"Your last incarnation ended more than five hundred years before this birth."

"Asleep for five centuries?" she marveled. "Yet here I am. I look twenty five but feel... old."

"Some people wait much longer. The record is eleven hundred years."

Despite medical advances, every body wore out eventually. Then that person would simply be restored in a new clone, their preserved memories re-injected by Mr. Computer. An accident no longer meant the end of life. Old age held no fear. The implant in the base of the neck sent everything to Mr. Computer. No one was ever out of touch, no thought unrecorded. As far as the scientists could tell, death held no longer held dominion over the human race.

She refilled her wine glass and led him to the kitchen. They were silent as together they laid out their meal. Simple fare that he recognized as her favorite.

"It is scheduled for tomorrow," she said as they sat down.

He almost choked. "What? Why so soon?"

"There is no point in waiting further."

"This isn't something to rush into." He'd come here with the plan to start dissuading her from this course of action. How was he going to do that now?

She laughed. "I've been thinking on this for centuries. You don't have to be my witness."

"Of course," he said stiffly. "I'd be honored to be there."

"Oh do not be upset." She smiled and placed a hand over his and he squeezed her warm flesh.

"Don't be upset? How can I be not upset? I'm losing a friend." He took a breath. "More than a friend."

She pulled her hand free. "Been there, done that."

"Doesn't mean that we can't go there and do it again."

They ate in silence for a while.

"It was a good time wasn't it?" he said, forcing himself to not sound plaintive.

"Do not do this," she warned.

"Emily, I'm not through loving you. I need more time."

"It is time. My time."

"Wait a minute," he said, suddenly understanding what she was saying. "Are you saying that you're not just going to delete your life, you're ending it as well? Tomorrow?"

"It is all arranged."

"What?" He found he'd risen from the table. He looked down at the wine he'd spilled upon the white tablecloth. He swore and started to dab it up.

"Do not worry about it."

"How can I not worry about it?"

"The tablecloth, dear."

"I don't give a crap about the tablecloth."

She raised an eyebrow. "Excuse me, but this happens to be one of my favorites."

"Emily." He couldn't help himself. He grabbed her by the arms. "Emily..." She touched his cheek. "It is just a table cloth. Speak no more of it."

Though they went to bed, they didn't sleep. After becoming breathless from their love making, she evoked in him their best memories. More than three hundred thousand years of time together, time apart. Other partners. Friendships that remained.

"What about our children?" he asked suddenly.

"I have not been in touch with any of the children. Not even ours. Not for quite some time. Have you?"

"Heard from Sally the other day. She's off on one of those galaxy explorations."

"Really? Which one?"

"Don't know. I think we're into twenty or so last I heard but that's been a while. Kids these days, huh?"

"She was always so adventurous. Is Mister Computer getting filled up with new births yet?"

He snorted. "Not possible. Millions of new births are enrolled an hour."

"And Real Deaths?"

"Last I looked, maybe one every ten years."

"We are virtually immortal, but there is nobody else around. Does that not seem strange to you?"

The way she changed subject puzzled him. It always had. "Doesn't seem like there's any kind of a connection."

"I have spent thousands of years working with thousands of people trying to answer that question."

"Sounds like you're just starting out. Maybe you need to work longer."

"Do not start." She stretched. How many times had she stretched like this? How many times had he'd seen her stretch like this? Why hadn't he really watched her do this?

"Life has been rare," he said. "Intelligent life may just be a fluke. Wait a minute, what about those primates?"

"They were from Earth and they killed themselves off despite our best efforts. It does not count."

"Hmm. Okay, maybe everyone else has killed themselves off as well."

"And left no trace?"

"Okay then. We're really special."

"Are we? So special? So divine?"

"You are."

She sighed. "You sweet talker you. I chose this young age so that your last memories of me would be as a young thing. All these lifetimes and I am still so vain."

"You think Real Death is going to give you the answers?"

"No. I am just finished searching."

"You're thinking that God's going to let you in on his little secret?"

"He is not going to be pleased when he finds out that I have not believed in him for quite some time."

"So that's it? We're alone because we're alone and there's no reason to continue on. There's other questions you know. There's some thought that everyone who's not a new birth don't have souls. We are mere constructs of Mr. Computer."

She snorted. "I can only handle one metaphysical question at a time. And frankly, I have done a fairly miserable job on this one. Look, the sun is rising." Her bedroom looked out over the mountains. She put her finger on his lips. "I know what you are trying to do. Let us go shower."

Choosing Chou to be with her at the end wasn't difficult. He hadn't been the best relationship she'd ever had. But he was a comfort. And he happened to live on the same

planet as she did. She liked the fact that he had hardly changed at all since she'd known him. Everyone liked to think that time made them better, changed them, honed them towards perfection. She doubted it. He was essentially the same person that she'd married and left thousands of years ago.

He probably wouldn't understand, but she was having trouble picking the right clothes to wear. All these years, centuries leading to this one act, and she couldn't decide between the red dress and the blue dress.

Watching her, the urge to jump up and snatch her away was unbearable. He couldn't believe that she would go through with it. No one close to him had ever... died. No matter what happened to the people he loved, he knew that he would see them again. She held up the red dress. Then the blue. Then the red. Then both. This was intolerable. But she seemed to sense that he was going to protest again and retreated into the bathroom to change. Miserable, he dressed.

Together they went to his transport. She never looked back at the house. Just locked it and left. They said nothing on the way to the Hyperspace Terminal. It was where he worked, tending the massive invisible computer. Mister Computer. He absentmindedly fingered the small implant in the back of his neck that was continually recording his every action and every memory. All the parts necessary for his next incarnation except for the DNA used for a clone. Those samples were stored in multiple Terminals throughout the galaxy. The samples weren't strictly necessary. DNA could always be recreated via the records. But most liked to believe that they were still somehow connected to their original selves.

She stood above the console where on her command she could destroy all of her DNA wherever it was stored. The last stage of screening had been perfunctory. The counselors had been unable to dissuade her and they'd simply left. She hesitated for only an instant then keyed in the control code. And everywhere, small samples of Emily disappeared. No one else could control such a drastic action. Nor the next one. The erasing of herself from Mister Computer. This required three codes. The first was from the most senior member of the Mister Computer complex on this planet. A dull talkative man who Chou didn't like. But he was mercifully quiet as he keyed in his code. Chou's code was next. He turned to her one more time but she gifted him a dazzling smile and he punched in his code, savagely. Then she entered her code. Nothing appeared to happen. The senior administrator had explained that there was nothing to see.

"I can still access those memories," Emily said, touching her implant.

"You will for a little while," said Chou. "The recording though has stopped. As soon as this current incarnation terminates, your files will be permanently deleted. I promise."

She smiled. "Last stage."

The room they were led to was not uncomfortable. She didn't want to end it all in the house that she had lived in and come back to life in so many times. The last few incarnations, she'd always returned to that comfortable little house overlooking the ocean and the mountains that reminded her so much of her very first existence in California. Her parents had died before Mister Computer had come into being. That was something unique to a small percentage of the humanity. The experience of loss.

The chair was comfortable. Beside it was a small control with a single button. She cradled it in her hand, familiar. It was impossible to accidentally push it. Last stage.

"How many times have I done this before?" she said, amazed. "Yet, I am... scared."

"Then for God's sake," Chou said kneeling beside her. "It's not too late."

She thought of the last time she had pushed the button. There was always a small thrill of fear. Yet, every time, she had awakened, renewed. Shedding the old, continuing life. It was always a mere blink. No pain, no dreams, no time. Just a closing of the eyes, then new eyes. So many times, she'd held this button. Then pushed it. She was not so naïve to believe that this was the same. Nor that it was so different. Fear was familiar. This time, it felt too familiar. She shuddered with the remembrance of the first time. Then sighed knowing that this fear was the last time.

"Being scared of death is not a good reason for living."

"Pretty good reason for me."

She stroked his head. "I have always loved you best."

"Liar."

She giggled and pecked him on the forehead. "Alright then. I have always loved you. And that is not true for many others."

"I love you." He wracked his brain for something else to say. "I love you."

With a smile that trembled a little, she pushed the button. Her eyes closed and her breathing ceased. He held her hand until he felt the warmth diminish. Where were his feelings? Was it because he'd done this with so many others for so many times? He couldn't dredge any kind of emotion up. Until he identified one. Irritation, that's what he felt. How could she leave him forever?

The senior administrator, Hermann, waited for him outside.

"A great loss for all of humanity," he said. "Will there be a memorial?"

Chou shook his head. "She didn't want it known. People will find out on their own."

"There is an increase in the number of Real Deaths. Almost all amongst the Ancients."

"Sort of makes sense doesn't it? They were born before the HHID came online."

"Perhaps. We're investigating to see whether it's because a portion of their life was not recorded."

"Isn't the forty-seven kabillionth anniversary of the HHID coming up?"

"A slight exaggeration," he said painfully.

"Maybe it's just long enough for anybody to live."

Hermann looked down the hall spotting his next appointment "Is there anything else you need?"

Chou grimaced in response. He nodded to the collectors who pushed a floater into the office. They emerged a few moments later with Emily. No, he thought suddenly, her body. Not Emily, just her body. He followed them down to the disposal department. He'd never been there before. The bodies sent down here were just shells. Old age had finally taken its toll, or the person had grown tired of their bodies or some accident had occurred. The people would simply be reborn into a new clone at some later time. Body disposal was just a clean up job. Usually.

The handlers as they casually flopped her from the floater on to a tray like device on a conveyor belt.

"Careful!" he snapped.

They stared at him, then shrugged. They had no idea that this was a Real Death.

"Wait!" he cried as they started the tray towards the cremator. "Don't you remove the clothing?"

The men looked at each other. "Why?"

"I guess." It sounded so lame. "I just want her ashes. That's all. Nothing else."

They shrugged and started to unbutton the dress.

"Wait!" One of the men rolled his eyes. "Let me do it."

He'd never touched a corpse before. Undressing her was difficult and he struggled. One of the men handed him a pair of shears and he reluctantly used it to cut the clothes off her. The blue dress. He wanted to cover her nakedness but he had the feeling that the patience of these men was at an end.

The body slid out of view. The men fidgeted. He realized that they probably joked with each other or ran off to do other things during this procedure. Having someone watching, especially some one who worked for Hyper Tech, made them a little nervous. The cycle completed at last and a small container was ejected.

Emily.

At his home, he placed the container on the dining room table. Then thought that was

a bit macabre so he placed it on the mantle piece instead.

"Okay, Emily," he said to it. "Now what? Are you going to tell me whether there's life after death? Am I alive? Do I have a soul? And why the hell are we the only one's here?"

He touched the metal box. "How can I be missing you already?"

His clothes still smelled of her perfume. The touch was still there. The first time they met. A memory so sharp it was as if he was standing next to her listening to her gentle laughter even now. How could he share this with her any more now that she was gone? People would never know her, and people's memories would be pushed to the backs of their minds. She'd disappear. Something inside of him broke.

Tears.

He sat down in front of his computer. He started to record.

I met Emily in the halls of the college in New Connecticut. She was sitting at a table sipping coffee. Her hair shone from the light streaming in from a window.

Real Death. Maybe. One day, when he was gone. But not now.