

Mind Games

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Rendine Philips polishes his courage and enters the fray. Not virtual reality, more reality virtuous. He feels the pull and the push. Electricity pulses resistance.

He finds it hard to believe that here he is, he Rendine, playing mind-games with Fergus Holinger. The best.

And so many *watching*. He can feel their thoughts distracting, disconnecting his concentration.

He sees the vortex, Fergus's mind, although he's still tangled to his own. Tenuous thread. Eyelids flicker REM. But this is no ordinary sleep. Not made for resting. Made to test mental metal. The power of the mind in real time. His against the other.

There are mind-words before him, ones he doesn't have to read, ones he feels through thoughts. Familiar echoes of many times with other minds, before Fergus. But these are so clear he bends back. Listens.

Come Rendine, I need to pressure you to focus. I can already feel you.

Rendine tries to answer, cannot. Sees the inner workings, thinks: My mind must look like this.

Yes.

Blanched, black and red. A hollow spiral without end. Gaps of light dart like a torch flashed at the night sky. A glimpse of the 'I' that is Fergus.

Yes, come. The first round has begun.

Rendine tries to tie his thoughts to memory. Moves like a bishop. Diagonally. Fails to think back, is here, now. Only in this second, and then this one, on and on.

The moment is the past as soon as he thinks of it. He tries to hold it, harness it to now, invert it so it has no beginning, no end.

Tell me, how you can do that. How can you be in the moment? Tell me the story.

A circle?

Too easy, Rendine.

I need time.

Yes.

A man is gasping, he looks to the ceiling of his room and feels his time is short...

Yes, go on.

The man lets out a sigh. The moment of death has no past or future, only the present.

Yes. Good.

Rendine's turn. He asks but does not ask: A question which is not a question? Tell me the story, Fergus.

A statement.

Too easy, Fergus. Tell me the story.

A man named Rendine wants to prove himself. He goes to the Mind Games. Tries for years. Has some wins and some losses. Time goes on and technology improves. Finds ways of disengaging mind from body. It is nothing new. Many people have learned the art. Science finds a way to do it on demand. Then learns to merge the minds. The games become cerebral. No way of bluffing.

Questions are felt not told. Shown not asked. A question but not a question.

Tension drops, Rendine floats on the half time interval. A quiet light in a stream, like a billowing sail.

No time seems to have passed at all when Rendine feels Fergus's words.

Round two begins now, Rendine, are you ready?

Fear suddenly clenches him like a fist. Tight, suffocating. He tries to fight it. Wants to get away.

Tell me, Rendine, how you can do that. How can you escape? Tell me the story.

A little girl is frightened of a bully. Every morning he punches her and takes her lunch money. She gets so scared she cannot sleep at

night. Doesn't want to go to school. One day she faces him and tells him to stop. He hits her and she falls down and skins her knee. The pain is so bad she gets cross and, arms flailing, she runs screaming at the bully. He turns away and skitters off.

Fear has taught its lesson to be brave. Bravery is never defined by non existence of fear. It needs the contrast of it to kick back against, to test the fire of courage. Fire that will destroy or strengthen.

No escape necessary. Fear becomes the coward when confronted.

Mm. Now challenge me.

Rendine sends mind-words like email: A man running over his three-year-old child in his four-wheel-drive. Should have bought a reversing camera. Opted not to. Guilt, avalanche of heaviness. Tell me how he can survive this. How can he live with this guilt? Tell me the story.

A moment passes. Rendine waits. Knows this will add to his points.

Tell me the story, Fergus.

The man is fixing the tow bar, crouching low behind the car. The child gets into the car without him knowing, slips behind the wheel. She is playing, releases the hand brake. The man is crushed, taken to hospital. While he lies dying he tells his daughter that he does not blame her. It was an accident.

Reverse the incident and forgive yourself as you would have forgiven them.

Light flickers consciousness. Rendine is returning, feels his body being slipped on like a glove. Opens his eyes to the Operations Room. Brings back the recall. Remembers lying down here - how long ago? Glances at the clock on the glass wall and sees the people behind it. Some rising to leave. Some opening their lunch boxes. Some still writing notes. He sees that two hours has passed. Smells the remnants of the Chloether in the back of his throat. Strong, pungent. Aroma pathway to another's mind.

"Back with us, then?" Angela, gold warm, with eyes of concern.

“You should see the other bloke.” Ancient joke, feels silly as soon as he's uttered it.

Angela takes his wrist. “I have,” she says, counting. “You did good, Ren. First time with the Master. I'm impressed. High score on round two, I think.”

Rendine waves his hand around the circular room. “The Gallery. What did they think? They're the ones voting.”

“Find out soon enough. See if they want more. Stats are okay. You could go another four rounds.”

Rendine slumps on the stretcher. Angela releases the straps which are holding him in. He drops his arms to the void on either side. Clenches and unclenches his hands, shakes his fingers. Starts to sit up. Feels the blackness swirling, not unpleasant. Slumps down again. Remembers that it takes a few minutes to knit the mind to the flesh.

Angela is frowning. “Take it easy, Ren. Rest a few minutes. Then I'll take you up on that lunch offer.”

Rendine starts to say he hasn't asked her. Bites off the words with a grin. “Right,” he says.

When he takes Angela's arm he feels euphoric, one of the side effects of Chloether. Not a bad one, he thinks. The side effect and Angela.

“What are you grinning about, Ren?”

Rendine touches her arm, “You, amongst other things,” he says.

“What?’ she laughs, “like sheets?”

The campus' vastness requires the air-o-bus to carry them across. The cafeteria that Angela has chosen is on the north side.

They both wear their micromobs: *the ring that rings*. Rendine's mind plays back the slogan that made them so popular. Two years after they were launched hand held mobiles became obsolete.

His is glowing azure blue, signalling that it is on and fully charged.

The café offers the usual fare. Organic modified, Natural modified. Plain predate.

Angela stares at the menu. "I can never tell the difference. Even now that they have these smile stickers." She stops and turns to Rendine. "What do three smiles mean again?"

"Bugged if I know. Must be better. Stands to reason."

Memories of his childhood. Happy Meals. Had to be thirty years since he'd had one of those. Not long before the greatest lawsuit in history sent McDonalds to hamburger heaven.

This is turning into a great afternoon, Rendine thinks. He can't remember ever chatting up Angela before. It seemed like she was way out of his league.

Even if he didn't win the Game, having this 'happy meal' with Angela would make it all worthwhile.

"Hey Ange," he says. "Look over there, isn't that..."

"Yes, it is, it's Fergus. Don't, Ren. It's against the rules to engage with the opponent before a decision has been made."

"I know that. But *he's* looking at us."

The sky surrounds Rendine with its usual cloudless grey as he waits on the glass platform. He can hear the gentle whoosh of the wind-converters charging the generators. The temperature is constant. Twenty-one degrees.

His micromob has been silent. No news is good news perhaps, he thinks.

Angie has returned home, her shift had finished with round two.

So, we meet in the flesh.

Rendine whirls around. Sees Fergus standing back, behind two students both busy talking on their micromobs.

They stare at each other. Know the inner working of each other's minds. Feel that not even sex is as intimate. They still have the ability to think in unison. No change of point of view necessary. Another side effect of Chloether, Rendine thinks.

Yes, says Fergus. But his mouth is closed.

Has the Gallery decided? Rendine tries to read his mind.

Blankness. Like the look on Fergus's face.

Come with me. Solid walls abut either side of the sentence.

Rendine finds his legs moving. Feet follow in step with Fergus. Feels like he is in a dream. They climb onto the air-o-bus together. Sit together. For a moment Rendine hears only his own thoughts. Doesn't feel like probing. Feels like sleeping.

The bus is creating tides of wind. Started twenty years ago with the first sucking in of air turning the turbines. And going on ever since. In and out. This friction causes gravity absorbing vibration, making perpetual motion possible. The air-o-bus never shuts down.

Rendine wonders why Fergus is telling him things he already knows. Anyway, he thinks, it's not that simple.

He doesn't know where they are going but he knows it's not back to the Operations Room.

Now he is walking behind Fergus. Not caring, just wanting to stop and rest his eyes.

A building looms closer, towering like a giant leaning down to touch them.

Rendine shakes his head and the building stands upright again.

He realises he's still on campus. These are the lecturers' quarters. Fergus territory.

They climb the stairs.

Good for us to walk. Need the exercise. Too many shortcuts.

Rendine can't recall entering the room. Doesn't remember sitting in the chair, Feels cold wire tape being stuck to his left temple and to the back of his head. Knows he is paralysed and it's not from fear.

Did you think I would let you win so easily, Rendine?

Let's see you face fear now, with confrontation. See if your hypothesis works for you.

The Games have never been the same since they let the Gallery decide. Second and third year students. What do they know?

Did I win then, Fergus?

No answer.

Rendine's heart beats faster. Fergus has not used Chloether but the old method of Transitional Transfer. Not so transitional this one. The mind is stuck until the operator removes the wires.

He's a sail on the river again. White, flowing, taking him to Fergus. They exchange their minds, occupy space behind each other's eyes. Join. No hiding, thoughts as transparent as ice. Two become one but stay divided.

Rendine feels fear like a dark cloak. Suffocating, dying, without the release.

Do you know that the body will try to give up if it passes the point of no return to living? How then, can there be hope?

Tell me the story.

The last four words an echo mock.

They are alone. No one watching this time, no one to judge.

He thinks of the Hide and Go die syndrome, where the victim senses his demise and tries to hide from it, literally. Gets under the bed, behind cupboards, even under the carpet if it's loose.

No good, Rendine. Tell me the story.

A woman is having a baby. Her pelvis is too small for its head. She is alone. The baby is trying to be born. The pain is bad for her but unbearable for the child. After fighting to live, he begins to fight to die. He is trying to escape but can't. The worst fear of all.

The woman's husband comes home and helps her deliver.

The child feels fear the rest of its life but counteracts this with reckless behaviour. Some say he has a death wish. And so he does. It is the legacy of failure to die when he wanted to.

But he lives on and accomplishes great things. Inspires others. Life - hope.

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Mind pictures. Now Rendine is sinking in mountainous gaps. The light, blue intensive. The noise a buzzing vortex. Surrounded by an airless void.

He feels Fergus there with him, holding on. A mind-to-mind combat of the wills. He can't think of recourse. In this game, it seems, Fergus corners all the moves.

He wants to wake, struggles to rise but knows he cannot even as he is trying.

He skins his metaphoric knee. Feels the anger and cuts the perspective. The pull against him now like an undertow, fights it, wins by not giving ground. Needs just a moment's hiatus. Finds it and turns the picture absurd. Kangaroos walking. Horses hopping. Snakes in tutus. Fergus's mind withdraws like a sword leaving a scabbard.

Then Rendine hears a micromob, sounds like it's ringing underwater.

His eyes open to the living room. He sees only the ceiling fan turning slowly corresponding with the wind-shifters on the roof to which it's joined.

He cannot move, can only just breathe. Has to concentrate to make his diaphragm lift, suck air in and out like bellows.

Fergus is talking to someone on his micromob.

"It's no good, I have to admit defeat. Yes, I have the Transvision.... But you don't understand. He's done well in this too. Even under stress... Okay, come over. I need to see you, too."

Rendine sees Fergus slowly merge into vision. Hair hanging down. Looks younger than his fifty years.

"So," Fergus says, "back with us then?"

Those last words remind Rendine of Angela. He wishes it was her. Wonders if he will ever see her again.

He hears her voice. Thinks he may be imagining it. Then, when he hears it again, screams silently: Don't come closer, Ange. Go away, leave while you can.

Now he sees her face come into focus, her gilded hair touches his cheek. He is amazed how he can feel but not move.

She says nothing to him. Rendine is struck with a cold blow of realisation. She was the voice on the other end of the phone. She is in on this with Fergus.

Then he recalls how it was Angela who asked him out. Chose the cafeteria for them, where Fergus was waiting.

How could I have been so stupid? he thinks.

"If you are defeated you will lose your a status as Master," Angela is saying to Fergus. "That could mean a transfer to another College. Not to mention a substantial cut in wages."

Her voice, honed granite.

Rendine sucks in air, concentrates on living. Wants to keep alive. Wants to level the score between them all.

Angela's face brushes over again. Non-committal eyes. Lashes half drawn.

"I just can't," Fergus says. "What you're asking... he'd be better off dead. And, Angela, listen, this guy's mind is wonderful. I can't deprive future generations..."

"Well, it's either me or him. That's my ultimatum, Fergus. Think what you'll lose, before you answer."

Rendine hears the man sigh. "I don't need to think. I only agreed to bring him here to do the mind-stress test, in case, like you said, he'd had outside help. But this stops right now. I'm bringing him back."

Rendine feels relief lighter than summer, it's strengthened with the knowing that his hero worship of Fergus has not been misplaced. Then there's a fizz as the wire from the back of his neck is being removed. It catches on some hair and he winces inwardly but is glad of the pain.

He hears a knock on the door. Someone is walking across the room.

When he finally sits up he sees that Angela is not Fergus's only visitor.

A man in a suit, with a fashionable triple tie, is giving Fergus his card. He glances at Rendine and nods.

Then he holds out a hand to Fergus. "I'm Adrian Jenson. Education Department. S.I. Special Investigations. You've come up fine by the way."

Angela speaks up. "Sorry about this, Fergus," she says, "There have been rumours. Nothing substantiated. But we had to make certain. Be sure about your integrity."

Rendine sees that she is handing Fergus her card too. Over her shoulder, he reads Education Department, S.I. and Angela. Can't focus on her surname. Feels odd that he can only recall her first name.

She turns to Rendine. "You did brilliantly, Ren. Oh shit," she says. "Adrian, have you got the Reversaclear? Of course, he doesn't remember." She stops to help Adrian retrieve a slim tube of something from his briefcase. Then turns back to Rendine. "We had to do that to you Ren, make you forget certain things. If you had known, Fergus would have known."

Adrian rubs pink gel, which smells faintly of pomegranate, on Rendine's arm. Rendine feels it travelling, a warm lava flow. Not unlike the first stage of getting drunk. But this clears his head. Recall floods like a tsunami. The picture of him volunteering to help check out Fergus Holinger fills his thoughts. God, that was a month ago, at least.

Then a warmer memory infuses him.

"Have you got my ring, Ange?" he says.

"Yeah," she says.

Angela slips her hand in her pocket, retrieves a gold band identical to the one she's wearing on her ring finger, and slips it onto his.

