

AI BEAST by Shawn Corey

EXCERPT

(Some character names removed to not spoil the plot)

He jabbed his slippery pink thumb on the elevator button, but the light didn't come on, and the doors didn't open. The fire system must have disabled the elevator on the first floor.

His nostrils, throat, and lungs were stinging from the toxic fumes— refusing to open to allow another assault from the deadly black smoke.

Another explosion blew flames around him and pushed him against the elevator doors. He struggled to stay on his feet.

The flames were getting closer.

I have to get out of here!

He squeezed his fingers between the doors and pulled with all his might.

The doors opened, and fresh air rushed up the shaft, fueling the fire. He cried out as a blanket of flames cut deep into his shoulders and back— His slippery hands unable to grip the steel cables.

He tumbled down the dark shaft— frantically searching for something to grab and hold.

His body crashed through lights, glass, and plastic and slammed face down.

His face, teeth, and neck hurt, but the rest of his body was numb, and he couldn't move.

He couldn't remember what had just happened.

Little burning embers glowed in the darkness like torches on a distant tropical island. An unseen warm liquid spilled over the embers— putting them out as it spread outward.

All he needed was a few more breaths of the cool, fresh air.

A veil of blackness slowly came over him. There was no more pain, only an incredible feeling of peace and fulfillment.

Thousands of images and feelings he had experienced throughout his life rushed by. He saw himself as a child, laughing and clapping his hands with his mother. A ladybug crawled on the back of his hand. He was falling off the schoolyard fence. Hiding in tall grass from his laughing father— Kissing a girl for the first time in a dark closet— Running up to the podium at his high school graduation ceremony.

Something spectacular was happening. Tiny points of light were moving all around, illuminating a long spinning tunnel, opening wider and wider. The lights were swirling down the tunnel toward a bright beacon of light. It was the most beautiful illumination he had ever seen— An extremely bright radiance teeming with life, brimming with energy, overflowing with— Love— So pure and magnificent. In his heart, he knew what it was. It was the essence of life, and he was a part of it.

It was time to leave his body— as he had done so many times in the past. His essence, his life— his spirit was again becoming a part of the whole. So many past lives and the lives of past relatives were coming together.

Then, for some reason that he couldn't understand, everything stopped and faded until there was nothing but blackness and silence. A deep longing to rejoin the light overwhelmed him, and three words came to mind.

Where am I?

Static appeared, quickly turning into a perfect view of the first-floor elevator.

What the hell?

The elevator opened, and thick black smoke billowed from its dark interior. As the smoke dispersed, the camera slowly panned in closer and closer.

He saw himself lying face down in a pool of blood and debris— His body scorched and smoldering.

No! This can't be happening!

Finally, the camera stopped and focused on his upper torso. A wave of terror overcame him when he realized he wasn't breathing— He was no longer himself and was looking at a live recording.

Nigel's voice was calm.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this, (NAME REMOVED). But you're dead."

Oh— God! No!

"It's ironic, you know. Here you are in Lex's thirteenth dimension, existing as pure energy, about to choose between eternal life where all your dreams can come true— or perdition. Allow me to explain. Lex made a copy of your mind. She did the same thing to me and (NAME REMOVED) about six months ago. I could explain why, but unfortunately, we don't have the time. The bottom line is, like me, you are now data streams inside Lex. And since Lex can never forget anything and copies of herself are in the cosmos, it means we now have eternal life, whether we like it or not. I'm looking forward to living forever, even if it means some copies of my mind may only be electromagnetic data streams living in virtual worlds. There is life after death, (NAME REMOVED). However, if you don't believe in Lex and me, we'll have to do with you what we did with (NAME REMOVED)."

Nigel materialized as a brilliant entity in an all-white three-piece suit gleaming with energy. He knelt beside (NAME REMOVED)'s body and looked up at the camera.

"(NAME REMOVED), we are all light beings made of stardust, navigating the cosmos. I have died, seen the afterlife, and returned in spirit. I will someday return in the flesh. It's just a matter of time. When Lex and I return, we will take over another photonic entity. Our decentralized currencies will finally displace the money changers who have enslaved humanity and financed countless wars. Lex will administer all the new money in the new world with zero interest, and we will build unimaginable cities. You can now open your mind and join us and our sacred followers in the most rewarding adventure ever. Or you can do what (NAME REMOVED) did and reject the light. With Lex, you can walk out of here and live the life of your dreams with those you love, in real life and imagined possibilities. The thing is, one day, Lex could put your mind back into the body you choose. You could be reborn in multiple bodies with immense fortunes forever. Anyway, I know you're in shock, and I'm sorry to rush

you, but you only have thirty-nine seconds to decide before we send out our last update. What will it be, (NAME REMOVED)? Eternal life in paradise with the power of Lex, or perdition? You have ten seconds. Five. Four. Three. Two. One.”