

The Underground World©

Original draft by Neil McNichol

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TEMPLATE PAGE 1

The reporter stabbed at the lift controls, cursing as two floors lit up at once. Fortunately the elevator would stop on his floor, before continuing. Jack Rush didn't really want the assignment – the media had thoroughly covered all the stories relating to people living underground in a networked world of refurbished nuclear shelters. This, for him, was ancient history. But when the editor adamantly wants a follow-up piece - *then that's exactly what he gets!*

Dr Watts was seen in full view as the elevator doors slid apart, standing upright with clipboard in hand, full white coat and pen in top pocket.

'Ah, Jack Rush, I presume' he stated cheerfully. 'I have been expecting you.'

Jack walked out towards him, surprised by the doctor's heartfelt delight. The two men cordially shook hands, after which Dr Watts commenced with the tour of the facility, which predictably ended at the cryogenic chambers.

'So this is where you store all the bodies?' commented Jack, hoping to get a peek inside the pullout cabinets. Fortunately for this ace reporter, one of the facilities bells went off, indicating that a user had ended his cryogenic cycle and was about to be ejected. The cabinet slowly rolled out, as if to show a chilled body lying in the morgue. The difference, though, was that this man was warm, alive and well, having already completed the procedural thawing out cycle.

The professor leant over and helped to remove all of the appropriate cable attachments connected to the occupant who was already sitting upright. Additional staff arrived to aid the doctor and the satisfied client was soon bungled off for his medical check.

'How was it?' Jack asked hurriedly, his journalistic instinct coming into play before the client disappeared into the back room.

'Terrific... you have to give it a shot' the man answered back, his voice fading as he was being whisked away down the passage.

'I don't think so' said Jack softly, his drowning comment audible only to Dr Watts, who at present was the only listener left within earshot.

"Maybe you should give it a go," he suggested.

'Me, no....' responded Jack, 'I don't have time for this virtual insanity stuff.'

'No, my friend' corrected the doctor, disregarding Jack's sentiments, 'this experience is now way beyond virtual. Once you are plugged in and linked to the minds and worlds of the other individuals lying in stasis, everything is as real as you and I standing here! In cabinets like these there exists a worldwide community of real people with whom you

can interact – and you decide, using only your mental ability, how these interactions take place.’

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‘As fascinating as all of this sounds, I really don’t have the time to waste living in a cryogenic fantasy realm. I could put that time to much better use...’

‘Well’, continued Dr Watts, ‘this is one of the major advantages of *our* modern cryogenic systems. While in stasis for six months within this system your metabolism slows down, along with all of your bodily functions and you will age only six hours in real time. We serve many terminally ill and old aged customers who are making full use of this feature, while enjoying the same benefits, mentally, that they would living on the surface.’

‘Well hey, since you put it that way, it would be nice to take a little vacation, even if it’s just a mental one. I could use a break from the boss.’

‘Couldn’t we all’ joked Dr Watts, sensing a new customer already swayed to signing up.

‘That would just leave Anne for me to notify’ he mumbled...

‘No, my dear boy. We can make all of those arrangements from here. Also, as your news article will reach a wide audience, I’m sure that we can arrange a substantial discount.’

Within half an hour all of the arrangements had being finalized. Jack Rush successfully completed the routine medical check, passing all of the required tests that would allow him to be plugged into the network.

‘Now you don’t have to worry about a thing’ reassured Dr Watts. ‘This procedure has been performed thousands of times. Remember, our minimal trial period is six months but if you want to leave earlier, you will be able to instantly sever the mental connection and eject yourself. We will, of course, be right here when that happens. We do find that most of our customers start off wanting to try for a month or two but invariably they all wind up doing the full six, at which point the program kicks them out anyway...’ he jabbered on.

At long last the glass covering was sealed and Jack Rush’s chamber rolled into the wall, internal robotic arms administering all the necessary chemicals before the cryogenic freezing process commenced. Cables attached to the host body controlled all input and output signals and, combined with the VRC’s computerized instructions, helped the occupant create any scenario he wished.

It didn’t take Jack long to master this aspect of the system, always having been an energetic, hands-on kind of person. Every thought, transformed into a mental image, could take shape in this reality and it was *real*. Jack tried visiting a few of the other clients on the network, as Dr Watts had recommended, but the ones he chose had picked an existence he felt to be too mundane. It was up to him to create the lifestyle he had always dreamed of sharing with Anne.

A simple intentioned thought and the program would pull out every memory it could find from within the subjects subconscious, putting all of these together to create a living duplicate of the Anne that existed on the surface. So lifelike and true to form and character, Jack was truly impressed. That old Dr Watts wasn't kidding in the least!

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He strolled down the street with Anne by his side and headed in the direction of the sports car dealership that he's mind, under instruction, instantly conjured up. Stopping for ice cream, Anne recalled his favorite flavor. All of the other characters round about them - the ice-cream vendor, the guy walking his dog, the girl in the red mini-skirt – all acted on their own, without Jack's mental assistance. Jack knew that if he hadn't had this experience himself, he would have remained yet another virtual-world skeptic.

Typical of his nature, Jack couldn't decide which car to buy; so he bought the lot. The sales assistant cordially arranged for immediate delivery – all except for the red Mustang. Jack would drive it home himself, with Anne by his side, of course.

'How are you going to pay for all of these?' asked Anne, remembering that just last week Jack was trying to scrape together odds and ends to buy dinner.

'I've come into some money,' Jack thought quickly, 'an inheritance.'

'I can't wait to show all of this to Richard,' thought Jack smugly. Cousin Richard had always been one-ups on Jack for as long as he could remember. Yep! But not anymore! A quick mental thought and Cousin Rick was active in the program, formed exactly as Jack remembered him, along with *his* smug attitude.

Jack, grabbing at his cellular phone, called him up at home to immediately invite him over.

'Wherever have you been, dude?' the voice on the receiver wanted to know.

'Oh, here and there' responded Jack, nonchalant. 'Anyway, I wanted to invite you over to see my new place. I'll give you the address.'

Rick scrambled for pen and paper and took down all the necessary details. With quick good-byes being exchanged, Jack ended the call.

'Where are you planning to park all of these' questioned Anne, fretting over the prospect of a logistical nightmare.

'Not to worry' responded Jack, driving into his new fully furnished mansion a few blocks down the road. Once there, he gleefully awaited the arrival of Cousin Rick, while the house servants prepared drinks for him and Anne.

'Damn, you really hit the jackpot with that inheritance, didn't you Jack?' exclaimed Anne, enthralled by all of the pompous attention. 'Damn!'

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