

The Snob, the Blob and the Mob.

Carl was always the last one in his street to get the latest gadget. It had taken him years to even upgrade to a holographic game system from his virtual reality kit. Now, of course, these new Matter-Recomposition units were all the rage. They reconstructed matter into a representation of the image, so you could not only see but also touch the surroundings, objects and people in your game world. Obviously, this was an attractive option to many different people, for many different reasons. And, finally, Carl had relented and bought one. Maybe it was to compensate for the overwhelming feeling that he was getting old, having recently turned thirty...

He eyed the unit suspiciously. He didn't actually like technological breakthroughs very much; he was the only Snob (as journalists had become known) in the whole country who still used a keyboard and actually typed his reports. Still, he didn't want to be seen as a complete technophobe, so he did make the occasional concession to the modern lifestyle.

The MR unit was like the TARDIS, which was a small machine in an ancient Science Fiction series. It looked small from the outside, but once inside it was vast. Once you got inside the MR unit, it was practically infinite.

But, whatever the delights this machine may hold, Carl had some research to do. As he had neither an instantaneous electro-mental link to the national library or techno-enhanced brain response, it would take a little time. He also needed sleep, unlike many of his colleagues who simply hooked up to a machine for a few minutes to "charge their batteries". Carl was sure there were health hazards that no-one in government was letting on about, but no-one took any notice of his ideas.

Next evening after work, Carl decided it was time to test his new toy. After all, even a snob needed some relaxation. Especially after that interview with the notorious Sharon Elliot-Carter, the pseudo-monarchy's daughter-in-law from hell. After years of reporting sleaze, Carl wanted to report some *real* news. Only it seemed as though there was none left.

He went up to the entrance of the MR unit.

A voice said *"Anywhere in the known galaxy is available for your delectation. Where do you want to go today?"*, followed by a brief pause before it concluded *"TM"*.

"Great. Just great. American patronising and corporate copyright procedures rolled up in the voice from the Greenwhisk talking clock", muttered Carl to himself. He wasn't sure if he was just cynical, or if the rest of the world looked at everything through artificial-rose tinted glasses. Whatever it was, these machines never failed to get on his nerves. He began to get the feeling that he wasn't going to enjoy this at all.

But, having spent all those ECUs on it, he was determined to enjoy it. Even if it killed him.

"Response unknown. Please state Galactic Standard Co-ordinates or make new selection." Stupid computer. Everyone thought they were so good, but they didn't know anything really.

"Um, okay, say Barbados."

"Barbados selected. Default conditions and position in Barbados will be presumed as no other specific details have been given. Enjoy your experience. Have a nice day."

"Yeah, right. Have a good time yourself, thicko computer."

Carl entered the game-world. It didn't seem much different from the holographic environment he'd had before he upgraded. Typical, you pay through your plastic nose to get something that's no better than what you had before.

He ambled along the sandy beach for a while, then squatted down on the sand, which felt... well, just like sand should feel. Warm and grainy. It was so real. He took off his shoes, and soon became engrossed in his surroundings, feeling the sand, the sea, the occasional shell.

"Hi."

Carl jumped, and span round to face this two-letter assault on his mesmerised state. It was, perhaps unsurprisingly, a beautiful woman. Normally, though, blobs, as characters in these games were often called, don't communicate with you unless you interact with them first, like asking them a question in a murder mystery game. But they don't just come and talk to you...

"Um, hi. Who are you?", asked Carl, puzzled.

"My name's Louise. Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. I just saw you, and, well I thought maybe you were the real human in the set." A look of embarrassment flashed across her lovely face.

"You what? How... Look, I'm not being funny, but computer generated characters just aren't supposed to act like this. You must be a very complicated set of algorithms, but I still don't understand."

Louise looked hurt. "I realise I must be different from anything you've encountered before. I'm certainly

alone here. In fact, although I'm surrounded by people when the machine is switch on, I'm still completely alone. Apart from you..."

Carl tried to make some sort of sense out of this. "So, you mean... But when the unit's switched off, you don't even exist!"

Louise dropped her gaze and sighed. If she were a computer simulation of a human, she was certainly a good one. "When the unit isn't on, no-one in here exists. Except me. Or at least, my consciousness does, although not my body."

This hit Carl like a thunderbolt. "How? Why? What makes you so different to all the other blobs?"

"One of the scientists working on this particular unit was trying an experiment, unknown to anyone else, to make a... sentient creature. The machines weren't always mass-produced, and you happen to have got one of the older ones."

Silence took over for a few seconds, then she continued.

"But there's more to it than that. During the development of this unit, that coder's daughter died. He couldn't cope with that. So he tried to transfer her personality into me."

'Now, this is a story worth investigating!', thought Carl. He suddenly felt a great deal of compassion for Louise. What must it be like to exist with no body, no companions, and who knows what else she was missing? She certainly seemed to have a brain, and the ability to think about things.

Would you want to live if you could only think? Not able to do anything, no memories, no anything, just... existence?

"It was hard, yes, and I do have a brain but no experiences. I know how to speak one hundred and forty seven languages, so I can communicate with any likely user. I can see and hear, touch and smell, and... and yes, I can feel emotions, although I don't know the extent." It was like she'd been reading his mind.

"Yes, I can read your mind too", she said.

Over the next few weeks, Carl spent much time visiting Louise and getting to know her. It was incredible. She began to feel more real to him than any human he knew, although he knew she wasn't human, she was a blob. Also, it seemed like every time he saw her, she looked slightly different, and acted slightly different. Each time she changed, he liked her more. The one thing that really bothered him was that she could read his mind. He couldn't shake the feeling that she knew how, but wouldn't tell him.

But she was trapped, inside the MR unit. Carl longed for her to be able to come out, to be with him in the real world.

Then again, why not take the real world to her?

"So, Miss Kalanevosky, how did you clinch the Manhattan deal, which in turn gave you promotion to Managing Director of Milton Logistics?", asked Carl, aware that his interviewee suspected some trick. It was unusual, although not unheard of, for interviews to be carried out in simulated environments. She smiled at him all the same, showing plenty of teeth and turning the palms of her hands to face outwards. (Like most management people, she had been well trained in the use of body language.)

"Well, Mr Kendall", she began.

"Call me Carl", he interrupted.

At that moment Louise appeared with some drinks for them. "I believe you ordered two dry martinis?", she said innocently.

"Who is *she*?", asked Kalanevosky warily, jerking her head at the offending woman.

"Oh, don't worry about her, she's only a blob", replied Carl.

"A blob? Oh yes, I remember now. A Matter Recomposition Character. Of course." She waited impatiently for Louise to leave them.

"Carl", she resumed, "It was really just a case of me showing TQX that our company offered the best services at the best prices, and showing how our respective corporations could merge their assets and schedules in a more profitable and productive way."

This was exactly the sort of answer Carl had expected, and he gently probed for the truth while the woman gave her standard replies to the standard hidden questions. She gave nothing away, Carl didn't press too hard. Both of them were happy.

"She's lying", said Louise.

"What really happened?"

"She's promised them dirt-cheap labour forever for their South American ventures. She's able to do this

because of her connections with the Mafia bosses there. Of course, on the official forms, these workers will be paid the same, so not only will TQX save money on the labour, they'll also be able to get tax rebates based on the number of people they employ and how much they're supposed to pay them. They'll save millions every week."

"So how do I prove it?"

"You don't. You leave it well alone. The government knows about this sort of thing, but they're too scared to stop it."

"I could do it. With your help."

Louise looked at him hard. "You know I can't leave the unit."

"I know, I know. But wasn't it Einstein who once said, 'There are no problems, only solutions?'"

"Doesn't sound like Einstein to me," said Louise with a smile.

"No, you're probably right... actually I think that was Doctor Who."

"Who?" Louise didn't seem to know who "Who" was.

"Yes. It certainly wasn't Einstein."

Louise appeared completely confused now, so Carl gave up on this line of conversation. "Whoever said it, it was true. There must be a way of getting you out of here."

"What if I don't want to come?," murmured Louise demurely, but Carl was so caught up in his thoughts he didn't hear her.

After getting back from work the next day, Carl was feeling a bit despondent. He'd racked his brains for a way to get Louise outside the unit, and had come up with absolutely nothing. The trouble was, he thought, she wouldn't be able to survive outside the unit anyway. So what was the use of hoping?

He walked towards the MR unit, making a mental note that he must Hoover the carpet in the front room. It had somehow got some sand on it.

He walked into the MR unit, and immediately Louise ran up to him and hugged him. She'd never done that before.

"Carl, I felt so alone when you went last time. It just hit me, I've never felt like that before, I was so scared..."

Carl held her back from himself and looked at her. It was as if he were beholding her for the first time. He could no longer think of her as a blob. She was as human as he was.

He folded his arms around her again, unable to say what he'd been intending to, about there not being a way to get her out of there. "Only solutions..." kept echoing in his head, bouncing along his neural pathways like a synaptic pinball.

Then he remembered she could read his mind. She already knew.

Suddenly Louise raised her head and looked at him through tear-drenched eyes. "Sand?," she queried. Carl thought for a moment that she'd lost it, and then remembered.

Sand.

They looked at each other for an eternal moment. Their eyes spoke understanding.

If sand could escape from the unit and stay intact, why not a person?

Louise took timid steps toward the exit of the unit that had appeared at Carl's command. She seemed a little edgy, and Carl noticed her body shaking.

"It's ok, the world outside isn't so bad really. Although you've got to realise that not everyone out there is as sweet-natured and lovable as myself, of course", he joked. She tried to smile, but her lips seemed to be feeling the effects of gravity really hard right then.

She stopped long before she got out of the unit. "It's no good Carl, I can't do it", she sobbed.

"Why not? I mean, it's only the real world..." Carl's voice trailed off as he realised how stupid that sounded. To Louise, it wasn't the real world at all, but some strange, mystical place that no-one else like her had ever gone, or even could go.

They both stood rooted to the spot. She turned to face him, utter defeat written on her face. His mind was racing. A normal blob could be programmed, but not to leave the unit, and anyway she wasn't a normal blob. He could hardly hope to carry or push her out against his will, even if he'd wanted to; her strength would be much greater than any human's, although she wouldn't hurt him, even if she wasn't bound by the unit's safeguards.

He couldn't even trick her out by setting the unit to disguise the exit. She was intrinsically linked to the unit; she would know. There was no solution, only problems.

Something that had been smouldering in the back of Carl's mind suddenly conflagrated. "You don't want to come out!"

"No, no, it's not that..." said Louise quickly.

He stroked her hair gently. "It's all right, I'm sorry. I was so wrapped up in my own enthusiasm for this that I managed to forget that you had your own feelings, your own mind, your own will. I had no right to expect you to just come because I wanted you to. It's okay if you won't want to come." He was aware that she would be able to read not only from his mind but also his voice stress patterns that he was lying in the last sentence to protect her feelings, that the thought of her not being able or not wanting to come out was already tearing him up inside of, but he couldn't help that. Hopefully she would also know that his intentions in doing so were good.

She held him closer. "No, darling, that's not it. I do *want* to come out, but I *can't*. It's not about choice." She gazed into his eyes through her own tear-streaked ones. "But I appreciate you giving me the choice. That's good of you. I can appreciate that this is a difficult concept for you to grasp. I've had all my life to think about it, you haven't."

He wondered what exactly her calling him "darling" really meant. It was probably part of her programming, despite her all too human personality. Sighing, he ran the whole thing through his mind again, trying to see if he had missed something.

That night Carl read the bible, something he hadn't done for quite a while. He had often turned to it in the past when he'd needed inspiration, or when logic and science alone provided no real answer. There was no pattern to what he read, no particular thought in mind or genuine hope of it helping with his current problem. However, on this night he read about the walls of Jericho tumbling down, and he read Jesus' words that "all things are possible if you have faith". Among the despairing thoughts and memories about Louise and the plan to get her out of the MR unit, he began to wonder...

Carl strode into the MR unit. "Come on, Louise. You're getting out of here."

She strode out to meet him. "Yes, ok."

So far so good.

She walked up to the egress. Through it. Quickly Carl followed, and, breathing a huge sigh of relief, noticed the disbelief on Louise's face. He smiled, then at her surprised delight burst out laughing. Soon they were both in fits of laughter.

After the hilarity had subsided somewhat, Louise spoke, a little short of breathe. "How did you do it?"

"I had faith", Carl answered, still chuckling to himself. "I noticed how much you were affected by my moods. When I thought you couldn't come out, so did you, and you were overcome with grief. Then, when I thought we'd found the solution, you believed briefly. I then started to wonder about it, and you suddenly couldn't do it. So I made sure that I believed you could do it. That made you believe as well."

She looked at him, a penetrating look, as if she were trying to see into him. A look of puzzled concern flashed across her face for a brief moment, and then it was gone.

"What?", asked Carl.

"Oh, nothing."

"Sure?"

"Yes, I'm just so relieved to get out of there. Amazed, too. You know what? You're amazing."

Carl wasn't quite sure he believed her, but was pleased to hear it anyway. His thoughts came back to his original plan.

"So, we go after the Mob?"

Louise shrugged. "I couldn't advise it, but if you say so then yes."

"Don't worry, I haven't got a horse!" Carl obviously thought this was very funny, but it was quite lost on Louise.

"What?"

"Never mind, I'll explain later... Better still, I'll show you the film. It's a really old one, but still good after all these years. Robert De Niro won the lifetime achievement award at the Oscars the year I was born, you know."

"So how exactly do we uncover Kalanevosky's secret?", asked Carl as he handed Louise a drink, which she looked at suspiciously for a moment before sipping it gingerly, before deciding that it was, in fact, quite nice. She frowned slightly, as if her brain wasn't working as well as it had in the MR unit.

"I don't know. Well, I know how we might do it, but I don't know whether we'd be able to, or if it would be worth the effort if we could."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that most people know the Mafia is involved, but no- one has the power or guts to do anything about it."

Carl shuddered as this sank in. In truth, he already knew it, but couldn't bring himself to accept a world run by gangsters.

Not that it had ever been any different.

"Ok, so we take justice into our own hands."

Louise nearly fell off the chair. "What?! You must be mad. Even if we could do anything, which is unlikely, think about the repercussions!"

Carl sighed. She was right, of course. Again, it was something he already knew (Carl always wondered just how much she did know, and how much of it had been read from his mind), but he didn't want to accept it. At the present time, however, it seemed he had no choice.

"There is one thing I would like to do, though...", began Louise.

"I'm listening."

"I want to find my father."

"Is he still alive then?"

A pause.

"I don't know."

A longer pause.

"But I'm going to find out."

Carl still liked to surf the internet the old-fashioned way, using a computer, VDU, and a web browser. He knew it was old-fashioned in these days when connecting via a brain implant was all the rage, but he really wasn't sure he trusted those things.

"Now you say you have a memory of what your father looked like?" he asked.

Louise nodded. "Yes. I have no idea of his name, but I have a distinct memory of his face. He must have put it there somehow... maybe for this very purpose, do you think?"

"It's possible, I suppose. Now if I do an image search for all the genetic scientists to have worked in this country in the last twenty years, you might be able to see him."

She frowned. "That he worked here is a reasonable assumption, but make the search for the last ten years. I'm sure that the technology couldn't have existed for my creation more than ten years ago."

"So you're... less than ten years old, do you think?" stuttered Carl.

She nodded. "Yes, I should think that's about right. Why, is that a problem?" The question was asked with seemingly complete innocence, but Carl was sure he detected a certain mischief behind it. He shook his head, gave a noncommittal grunt along the lines of "just wondered", and hoped she wasn't reading his mind right now. All sorts of moral and ethical questions had just popped into his head, if they were to ever be in love... *'no, that idea's ridiculous'*, he told himself.

With both of them trying somewhat unsuccessfully to disguise their feelings at this point, he changed the search criteria and pressed enter. "Hmm... fifty eight million results might be a bit cumbersome to wade through, do you think we can narrow it down at all?"

Pondering this, Louise ran some ideas about the likely location of his work, his probably sub-specialities, and narrowed the search further by looking only for acknowledged leaders in their own fields. "Under a million results, if he's in there then we should be getting closer. I hope we're not barking up the wrong tree entirely now." Carl frowned. "Is there anything else we can do to narrow the search even further?"

Louise looked at her body. "If I'm supposed to represent his daughter's physical age, she must have been somewhere between twenty five and thirty. So, assuming he didn't have any illegal or experimental fertility treatment, his age must be around fifty, give or take a few years. Put in a minimum age of 40, maximum... 65, I guess."

This reduced the number of results quite a bit, though there were still well over half a million results. Sensing that something very obvious had been missed, Carl stared hard at the search criteria for a few moments, then realised what it was. "Of course, if we make sure the search is for a *male*, then it might well help."

"Unless he had a sex-change!" laughed Louise. Then she frowned slightly. "Oh... what if he *did*?"

Nonplussed, Carl responded, "let us for the moment assume that he didn't. Now, if I use this advanced feature to filter out all occurrences of the same person.." He moved his hand to the keyboard, but Louise put a hand on his to stop it. Embarrassed by how good it made him feel, he pulled his hand back towards him and snapped brusquely, "what?"

Her face a little flushed, she said demurely, "no, leave all the photos here. I only have one image in my mind, and I don't know how much his appearance might have changed over the years. Please?"

"Okay, sorry, just a little tense," mumbled Carl, ashamed of his reaction. "Here we go – just click here for the next batch."

Early next morning, Carl having nodded off some time ago, Louise gasped. Shaking him less gently than she had intended, she woke Carl, who displayed the traditional grumpiness of one rudely interrupted from slumber. Then he saw her expression, and looked intently at the screen.

"That's him?"

Bursting with excitement, she clapped her hands like a schoolgirl. "Yes, that's him! Without a doubt!"

"Right. Great. Wonderful. Time to sleep..." The excitement hadn't really broken through his tiredness and with no adrenaline pumping through him, he soon closed his eyes again. Not really needing to sleep, Louise as quietly as possible read all the information she could about her creator, or father – which was going to be the more accurate term?

The labs where Louise's "father" worked were three hours away by airspeeder. The receptionist was all eyes and teeth, with an irritatingly cheerful voice as she told them that Randolph Gordon was no longer working at this establishment. No reason could be squeezed out of her, so they left while being told to have a nice day. Louise frowned.

"It doesn't make sense", she said.

"What, you mean that they're not saying why? That's normal corporate procedure these days."

"But he was a brilliant scientist. One of the finest genetic biologists that's ever lived. Why would they lose him like that?"

Carl shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe he was head-hunted and they don't want to admit it. Or maybe your memories of him are what he implanted into you, what he wanted you to believe. Like Rachel in *Bladerunner*."

She looked angry at this. "Carl, look at me. I am the product of this man's genius. Are you telling me I was some random mistake?"

"No, that's not what I meant..."

"Yes it is. And the human race really did evolve from monkeys, I suppose. For intelligent creatures, you can be incredibly thick sometimes."

Carl tried to change the subject. "Okay, okay. But wait a moment. Why couldn't you just read her mind?"

"Um, she didn't know, actually. She's just a receptionist, she didn't know anything about it."

Louise seemed to be on the defensive, so Carl consciously relaxed his shoulders and facial muscles.

"Look, it's all right. We'll just have to find out where he's working now. Right?"

"I suppose so."

This proved harder than either of them had imagined. He'd apparently disappeared off the face of the earth. Then again, maybe he had...

Mars - The new colonial venture.

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of this venture is the recruiting of specialist scientists to study the Martian terrain and find out if there was ever life there. Genetic scientist Randolph Gordon and Molecular Biologist Harold Spencer will lead the team of sixteen top scientists, with a back-up staff of over one hundred. Starting from the fifth of April, 2130, ordinary unskilled people with an interest in scientific research and colonisation will be able to join our exciting project, taking exploration of the solar system into the 22nd and even maybe 23rd century. Interested? Then get in touch! (Write, phone, e-mail, or transmit via Brainwave, using International Standard Telepathic Communications Standard wavelength and electronic transfer speed): (Contact points follow)...*

"That's him. Randolph Gordon."

A tear formed and forced its way out of Louise's eye and rolled down her cheek. Carl put her arm around her comfortingly and wiped the tear from her face. "Hey, what's wrong? I thought you'd be excited to find out where your dad is!"

She turned to face him. "I don't know whether to love him or hate him. Is that wrong?"

Carl winced. "Well, I know a lot of people who felt like that, I don't know if it's wrong or not..."

She looked at him through glistening eyes. "What about you? Did you ever feel like that?"

"No."

"Oh."

"My parents both died when I was three years old. I never knew them." 'So she doesn't know *everything* about me after all', thought Carl. 'Not yet, anyway' he amended.

"I'm sorry. I just presumed you... Then, in a way, we're the same. Never knew our parents."

"Yeah, I guess so. Still, you've got a chance to meet yours, and I'm going to do everything I can to help you." Carl glanced once again at the newspaper cutting. "This is dated four weeks ago... Hey, wait a minute!

Guess who's on the list of backers for this Mars thing?"

"I can't imagine."

"TQX and Milton Logistics."

"So you're saying the Mafia are involved?" queried Louise.

"Well, it's a bit of a coincidence, isn't it?"

They looked at each other for a long moment.

"So, what are we waiting for? Let's phone them!"

"Please keep holding. All of our operators are busy at the moment, but someone will be with you as soon as a line becomes free. Thank you for your patience."

The strangled tones of Bach being murdered by a monotone chime came back on the telephone line. For some unexplained reason, technology still hadn't solved this strange phenomenon.

Some minutes later, a voice said "Martian New Venture International Hot-line, Christina speaking. How may I help you?"

"We'd like to register, please."

"Thank you. Please give your name, age, height, weight, national insurance number, telephone number, address, e-mail address if applicable, credit card number, eye colour, hair colour, job description, salary per annum and any previous experience in the fields of colonisation or scientific research, with references that can be checked."

After this, there were several other things they wanted to know. By the time both of them had finished, it was 4:54. They had rung the line at 3:23.

"What about the medical?" asked Carl suddenly.

"What about it?"

"Well, I mean, you're not human are you? Strictly speaking, I mean." Even to Carl this idea didn't quite make sense anymore, but somehow it was an idea that needed to be voiced.

Louise laughed. "Physically, I'm as human as you are."

Carl was flummoxed. "But how?"

She looked at him quizzically. "My 'father' is the greatest genetic scientist of his generation, probably of all time, remember?"

Carl wasn't convinced. However, much to his annoyance, she passed the medical more easily than he himself did. After much negotiation, they were put close to the top of the list due to Carl's being a reporter. The shady ID creator friend that Carl had sometimes used to get into tough areas had created a new identity for Louise. It was either a tribute to him or a condemnation of the Martian Venture authorities' procedures that Louise was accepted so easily.

Once on board the craft, they visited every area at length. The journey was to take several weeks, even at the incredible speeds the ship was travelling. From the outside, it looked very much like a skyscraper turned on its side. It didn't look a particularly aerodynamic shape, but the introductory booklet they received on arrival explained that with the innovative anti-gravity drives the ship was fitted with, it didn't need the assistance of aerodynamics. At night it was a spectacular sight, and for this reason the launch was at 11:00pm, with just as many ship-spotters as passengers. Inside, it was much like a departmental store, or one of the old ferries that used to cross the seas, with lots of useless objects to spend your money on. There were many game systems, mostly MR systems. Louise seemed to have a reverential fear of these, and flatly refused to go near them.

They received news updates from earth and the Mars colony every day. With a week to go, there were excited claims from the fourth planet of life having been discovered.

More than that, it was suspected that these life forms were still in existence.

Naturally, the whole compliment of the ship, both crew and passengers, were in a complete frenzy for the last seven days of the voyage.

Then, at last, it was over.

They had reached the promised land.

"Not bad" observed Carl, looking at the living quarters. Certainly not as ornate as modern hotels, but less austere than might have been expected. After all, they were supposed to be the pioneers of a new frontier.

"Carl, there's something I need to tell you" said Louise, after turning on the hand shower.

He grinned, thinking it highly unlikely that the room would be bugged, even if the Mafia were involved after

all. He'd more or less forgotten about their main objective after hearing about the discoveries being made on the red planet.

"I can't read minds."

"What? But you have done before. Why not now?"

"Because I'm outside the unit." Her face was downcast as she offloaded the burden she's been carrying ever since leaving her birthplace.

Carl was baffled. "I don't understand."

Sighing, she said "I was made in the unit. While there, I was an intrinsic part of it. And that unit constantly monitors the brainwaves of anyone in it. That's how it knows what sort of game to produce. Everything is designed to cater for the desires of its user. It even changed my appearance once you'd thought you'd like it slightly different."

Carl had a flashback to see her expression, just a momentary disconcertment, after she'd come out of the unit. He also remembered how her looks had indeed changed the first few times he'd gone into the unit, eventually settling down into the face and body of the woman he now beheld.

Coming back to the present, he realised the severe implications to his plans for finding her father and, hopefully, freeing him. Tricky situations would now be even trickier, with chance playing more of a part than he normally liked to account for. The thought of staying in the same room as Louise also seemed problematic to him. Going as a couple had been the only way they could be sure of staying close to each other while on Mars, but he had stopped short of getting her new identity to be as his wife – a rushed wedding or fake certificates when someone who knew him could conceivably show up was too risky. Now he had the dual problem of his reputation – he would now be thought to have slept with a woman he wasn't married to, which was against his morals (not many other peoples', but his) – and his growing feelings for her. Not only that, he mused, but the conflicting emotions this brought upon him – could he really fall for a blob? Did she truly like him, or was it just her programming that still remained, wanting to please whoever was "playing the game", even though this was no longer a game? What about the fact that she was theoretically ten years younger than him, though her body appeared about the same age (and what a body!). A snob and a blob together... someone was going to write a book about it one day, the irony of the rhyme was too much for someone to resist. He had wanted to write the book himself, but now... now he wasn't sure about that.

Whatever the situation, or however complicated or awkward it might become, there was no turning back now. It was all or nothing.

The Snob, the Blob, and the Mob is due to be published in paperback and ebook format in April 2007 (or possibly earlier). Please visit www.darscom.net or see www.lulu.com/darscom for more information or updates. (Price and format to be confirmed.)