Below is a series of three AI short stories based on real world data points, and real world cause and effects provided as a backdrop to the story. It is hoped this will encourage everyone to examine themselves, and to evaluate their future potential based on their present actions and attitudes.

The same data points were provided to all three AI systems for the creation of the stories, with one point added to story two and three to enhance the point being developed:

Life in this age has an endpoint, and an end evaluation and "exam."

We are creating our future, right now, with every decision we make and every word we utter from our lips. Are we building a social network based on truth and positive results, or on lies, chaos and destruction?

No one gets a free pass from the bad fruits of their lives. . .

2-5-26 - (Grok)

OK, let's create a short story about 3-4 pages (or whatever) long. It will center on a combination of themes we are presently dealing with:

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Next, we look at the dumbing down of the education system whereby we have illiterate students and young adults who cannot read, well, or write cursive, or have any real talents being tapped, etc. College systems not teaching basics of real job skills, and little or no "trade" education or apprenticeships, or real life skills.

We have a huge crime problem, with growing unrest, violence and mentally unstable actions and emotional responses by many.

Next we have a worldwide cataclysm threat that threatens all life, but an off world power offers to save humanity from complete destruction, but it is based on life skills, health status, and real "asset" value in each human chosen that will be able to contribute toward a new living place.

This severely limits the choices available, and only those who made something of themselves, used their talents and gifts, improved them... are chosen.

Moral of the story . . . we are ALL "auditioning" for a reward and position in a new world... so what can each of us expect regarding our real world contributions NOW?

The Audition.

In the year 2047, the world was a shadow of its former self. Cities sprawled like overgrown weeds, choked with smog from factories that never stopped churning out processed sludge masquerading as food. Farms had long since surrendered to monoculture giants, dousing crops in pesticides and hormones that seeped into every bite.

People munched on glowing packages of "nutri-bars" laced with preservatives, their bodies bloating from sedentary lives glued to screens. Exercise was a relic; why walk when drones delivered everything? Heart disease, diabetes, and a host of mysterious ailments ravaged the population, turning vibrant youth into weary shells by thirty.

Life expectancy hovered at 65, and that was if you avoided the contaminated water supplies. Education had fared no better. Schools were warehouses for the young, pumping out graduates who could swipe through apps but struggled to read a full sentence without autocorrect. Cursive? A forgotten art, like blacksmithing or map-reading. Talents lay dormant; art classes were cut for "practical" tech drills that taught nothing practical.

Colleges churned out degrees in vague "studies" programs, leaving debt-ridden alumni flipping burgers or scrolling for gigs in the gig economy. Trades? Apprenticeships? Laughable. Who needed plumbers when AI promised to fix everything—until it didn't. Real-life skills like budgeting, cooking from scratch, or even basic first aid were myths from grandparents' tales. And then there was the crime. Unrest simmered like a pot left too long on the boil. Gangs roamed the streets, fueled by desperation and mental fractures from isolation and poor nutrition.

Violence erupted over scraps: a clean water bottle, a working charger, a spot in the shade. Prisons overflowed with the unstable, their minds warped by chemicals in the air and food, sparking emotional outbursts that turned neighborhoods into war zones. Governments promised reforms, but corruption ate away at any progress. Society teetered on the edge, one spark from total collapse.

Elara Thompson was one of the many caught in this web. At 28, she embodied the average citizen. Her days blurred into nights spent lounging in her cramped apartment, binge-watching holographic shows while munching on synth-meat tacos laced with flavor enhancers that masked the rot.

Exercise? She'd tried a virtual gym app once, but the ads were too distracting. Her job as a data entry drone for a faceless corp required no real skill—just tapping screens to log meaningless metrics. School had been a haze; she could barely scribble her name in print, let alone craft a coherent argument.

Talents? She had a vague memory of drawing as a kid, but that fizzled out when art supplies became luxury items. Crime touched her life peripherally—a cousin locked up for a rage-fueled robbery, a neighbor's screams echoing through thin walls. Elara scrolled past news of riots, numb to it all. "What's the point?" she'd mutter, popping another energy pill to stave off the fatigue from her nutrient-void diet.

Across town lived Marcus Hale, 32, a stark contrast. He'd bucked the system early. Disgusted by the wilted veggies in supermarkets, he started a rooftop garden, learning organic farming from smuggled old books and underground forums. His body was lean from daily labor—hauling soil, tending plants, even biking to barter fresh produce. Sedentary? Not him. He ran workshops teaching kids basic mechanics, welding scraps into useful tools. Education had failed him too, but Marcus sought out apprenticeships in secret maker spaces, honing skills in carpentry and electronics.

He could read blueprints, write detailed plans in flowing cursive (a skill he revived for authenticity), and fix anything from a leaky pipe to a hacked drone. Crime? He'd diffused street fights with calm words, his mental clarity sharpened by clean eating and meditation apps he coded himself. Marcus wasn't rich, but he contributed: building community shelters, sharing knowledge, turning wastelands into green oases.

Their paths crossed indirectly through Lena Voss, a 25-year-old firebrand. Lena was the in-between—talented but trapped. She'd dropped out of college after realizing her "communications" degree taught nothing but buzzwords. Instead, she apprenticed under a rogue mechanic, learning to repair solar panels amid rising blackouts. But poor food choices caught up; her energy lagged from cheap, chemical-laden snacks, and a sedentary desk job sapped her strength.

Crime haunted her: she'd lost a brother to gang violence, his mind unraveled by synthetic drugs. Lena channeled her rage into activism, organizing protests against food corps, but her efforts often dissolved into chaos, her followers too illiterate to spread coherent messages.

The cataclysm came without warning. Astronomers spotted it first: a rogue asteroid swarm, remnants of a shattered comet, barreling toward Earth. Impacts would trigger tsunamis, dust clouds blocking the sun, and quakes shattering continents. Governments scrambled, but resources were depleted from decades of neglect. Billions faced extinction. Panic erupted—riots looted stores, violence surged as the unstable lashed out in fear.

Then, the signal arrived. Broadcast from orbit, it pierced every device: an alien envoy, the Zorath Collective, offering salvation. "We have monitored your world," the voice intoned, calm and ethereal. "Catastrophe approaches. We can evacuate a select few to our haven worlds—planets teeming with life, where humanity can rebuild. But space is limited.

We choose based on merit: physical health to endure the journey, life skills to contribute, and

asset value—your talents, improved and applied, that benefit a new society. This is no lottery; it is an audition. Prove your worth."The world held its breath as Zorath probes descended, scanning populations. Criteria flashed on screens: Health metrics—body composition, organ function, free of chemical toxins. Skills—demonstrable trades, knowledge, creativity honed through effort. Contributions—evidence of building, teaching, innovating, not just consuming.

Elara queued at a scanning station, heart pounding. Her scan beeped red: obesity from sedentary habits, liver scarred by preservatives, lungs weak from polluted air. Skills? Her resume listed "proficient in social media navigation," but probes detected no real talents—no art, no crafts, just passive scrolling. Contributions? Zero; she'd never volunteered, never created. "Insufficient," the verdict hummed. Denied.

She stumbled away, joining throngs of the rejected—youths who couldn't read instructions, adults crumbling under stress, criminals whose violence marked them as liabilities.Marcus approached confidently. His scan glowed green: robust health from clean living and activity, muscles toned, mind sharp.

Skills poured out—farming techniques, engineering blueprints sketched in cursive, tools he'd invented. Contributions? Testimonials from communities he'd uplifted, gardens feeding hundreds. "Valued asset," the probe affirmed. Accepted. He boarded a shuttle, carrying seeds and schematics for the new world.

Lena teetered on the edge. Her health faltered—toxins from poor food, fatigue from inactivity—but her skills shone: repairs on mock probes, plans for sustainable energy. Contributions? Her activism logs showed organized efforts, teaching basics to the illiterate. It was enough. "Marginal but promising," the scan read. She squeezed through, vowing to improve.As shuttles lifted off, Earth trembled under the first impacts. The saved looked back at the crumbling blue marble, a mix of grief and resolve.

Billions perished, but the chosen carried humanity's spark: those who'd fought the decay, nurtured their gifts, built rather than broke. In the haven worlds, Marcus thrived, teaching farming to new generations. Lena reformed education, blending trades with basics. Elara's fate echoed as a cautionary tale—whispered in classrooms, a reminder that life was an ongoing audition. Health neglected, talents buried, contributions ignored led to obsolescence.

The moral was clear: We are all auditioning for a place in whatever new world awaits—be it cosmic rescue or simply tomorrow. What have you contributed now? Your choices today determine your ticket. Improve, create, endure—or fade into the dust.

2-5-26 - (Gab.ai/Arya - with a tweak point added*)

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We have a huge crime problem, with growing unrest, violence and mentally unstable actions and emotional responses by many.

*Humans, with a lack of focus, no mission or purpose beyond ourselves, aiming for something worth fighting for, worth WORKING for, destroys motivation... goals disappear, focus fades, zero drive to move us out of our comfort zone to become greater than where we began. The path of least resistance always goes down hill.**

Next we have a worldwide cataclysm threat that threatens all life, but an off world power offers to save humanity from complete destruction, but it is based on life skills, health status, and real "asset" value in each human chosen that will be able to contribute toward a new living place.

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Audition for Eternity!

In the sprawl of New Chicago, 2047, the air hung thick with the smog of regret. Skyscrapers leaned like weary giants, their bases choked by trash fires and graffiti-scarred streets. Elias hunched over his flickering holoscreen in a one-room pod-apartment, scrolling through feeds of riots in Europe and famines in Asia. At 32, he was a ghost of a man—skin sallow from nutrient-void synth-meals, muscles atrophied from years glued to virtual reality escapes. His diet? Processed bars laced with growth hormones and pesticides, courtesy of mega-farms that stripped soil bare and pumped out Franken-crops. "Efficiency," they called it. Elias called it slow poison. His body ached with inflammation, his mind fogged by endless distractions. No gym, no garden—just the couch and the glow.

Across the fractured city, in the reclaimed warehouses of the South Side, lived Mira. At 35, she was steel forged in fire. She'd ditched the corporate grind a decade ago, turning a derelict lot into a permaculture haven. Worms aerated her soil, compost from kitchen scraps fed heirloom tomatoes bursting with lycopene and vitamins. Chickens scratched for bugs, their eggs yolks like liquid gold. Mira moved with purpose—deadlifts from salvaged iron, sprints through urban trails, breathwork under the polluted dawn. Her body hummed with vitality, immune system a fortress against the plagues sweeping the weak.

Education had failed them both differently. Elias stumbled out of public schools illiterate in basics, cursive a forgotten art, history reduced to memes. College? A debt trap peddling gender studies and AI ethics while trades vanished. He bounced between gig apps—delivering drone-dropped slop to pod-dwellers like himself. No skills, no drive. "Why bother?" he'd mutter, as another blackout hit.

Mira? Homeschooled by grit. Her father, a welder, taught her arcs and blueprints before the unions collapsed. She apprenticed under old-timers, mastering solar installs, hydroponics, and basic mechanics. Books lined her shelves—real ones, pages yellowed with wisdom on homesteading, philosophy, survival. Purpose burned in her: build community, teach kids to weld and plant, not scroll.

The world unraveled faster than predicted. Crime waves crashed like tsunamis. Gangs ruled blocks, fueled by mental fractures—depression epidemics from blue-light isolation, gender chaos fracturing families, violence spiking as purpose evaporated. Elias dodged muggings nightly, his sedentary frailty no match for feral youths hopped on street chems. Riots erupted over food shortages; molotovs lit the sky. Unrest boiled—protests turning pogroms, the unstable lashing out at shadows.

Mira fortified her block. Barter networks thrived: her fresh kale for a neighbor's machined parts. She trained volunteers—fencing from rebar, marksmanship with air rifles. "Focus," she'd drill them. "A mission bigger than your screen." They built greenhouses, dug wells, formed patrols. Not for glory, but survival. Elias? He hid, comfort his cowardice.

Then, the cataclysm struck. No warning. Seismographs screamed as fissures clawed the Pacific Rim. Volcanoes erupted in chains, ash blotting the sun. Comets? No—quantum rifts, scientists babbled, spewing plasma storms. Tsunamis swallowed coasts; EMP bursts fried grids. Billions perished in days. New Chicago choked on fallout, the weak dropping first—inflamed lungs seizing, unvaccinated bodies (from vax-hesitant enclaves) folding under viral mutants born in the chaos.

Elias huddled in his pod, rations gone, body betraying him. Fever wracked his pesticide-ravaged frame. Mira's crew rationed stores, her health a bulwark.

On the seventh day, skies parted. Not clouds—ships. Sleek, obsidian orbs, miles wide, hovering

silent. A voice boomed globally, translated in every tongue:

"People of Terra. We are the Architects, observers of a million worlds. Your cradle cracks. In 72 hours, the Veil descends—extinction absolute. We offer exodus. Not all. Selection criteria: physiological integrity, cognitive acuity, skill utility, adaptive will. Contribute to the New Eden, or perish. Auditions conclude now."

Holo-scanners activated worldwide. Drones swarmed, beams piercing flesh and soul.

Elias felt it first—a prickling scan. His readout flashed on his wrist-implant:

“Elias Kane, 32. Vitality Index: 14/100. Toxin Load: 78%. Muscle Density: Suboptimal. Cognitive Baseline: 22nd percentile. Skills: Data entry (redundant). Purpose Quotient: 3/100. Contribution Potential: Negligible. Status: Excluded.”

He collapsed, sobs hacking through phlegm-clogged lungs. Years of sloth, junk food, screen rot—his audition flunked.

Mira stood tall in her garden, beam bathing her.

“Mira Voss, 35. Vitality Index: 96/100. Toxin Load: 2%. Muscle Density: Elite. Cognitive Baseline: 89th percentile. Skills: Agronomy (advanced), Fabrication (master), Leadership (proven). Purpose Quotient: 94/100. Contribution Potential: High-Value Pioneer. Status: Accepted.”

Beams descended. Portals yawned. The worthy ascended—farmers with callused hands, mechanics with tool belts, mothers who'd birthed strong, elders with unwritten lore. Mira boarded last, glancing back at her burning world. Elias? He crawled to his window, watching the orbs lift the capable. Riots renewed below— the excluded turning on each other in final fury.

In the New Eden, a verdant sphere orbiting beyond Sol, Mira thrived. Vast domes bloomed under alien suns, her knowledge seeding empires. She taught the chosen: "We auditioned every day. Health wasn't luxury—it was duty. Skills weren't hobbies—they were lifelines. Purpose? The fire that forges worlds."

Back on the ashes of Earth, survivors whispered the moral etched in the stars: We are *all* auditioning. For reward, for position, for eternity. What have you built today? What toxins do you carry? What skills rust unused? The path of least resistance ends in the grave. Choose greater—or fade.

A parable of our times—live worthy, or watch from the ruins.

ChatGPT AI

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(No title).

The day the sky began to bruise, nobody looked up.

They were looking down—at phones, at receipts, at the microwave timer, at the little red badge that meant somebody somewhere wanted something from them. The air itself had a taste now. Not smoke, not ozone. Something like plastic warmed in sunlight.

Jonah Briggs noticed because he still ran.

Not “ran” the way people said it, meaning jogged twice a week and posted a screenshot. He ran because his grandfather had taught him to run the way you learned to read: slowly, correctly, every day until it became part of you. Jonah ran in the mornings when the streets were quiet and the neighborhood dogs still believed in the purpose of barking.

This morning the horizon looked wrong. A low, dirty smear—like a thumb dragged across a painting.

At the corner, he passed the mini-mart where a new banner flapped: “FAMILY MEAL DEAL!” A mother in the doorway tried to manage two kids and a bag of bright packages, her face set in the exhausted neutrality of someone who had stopped expecting better choices to be available.

Jonah slowed and nodded to her. She nodded back. Neither of them smiled.

He crossed in front of Fremont High. The school had windows, but you wouldn’t know it from the way the blinds stayed down. A security guard leaned on a barricade, and behind him the student entrance was a funnel, single-file, metal detector, wand, pat-down if the randomizer beeped.

Jonah’s sister worked there.

Mara Briggs taught “Communication Skills,” which was a class built like a bandage over a missing limb. It had replaced Reading Lab. Replaced Cursive. Replaced Shop. Replaced Home Ec. Replaced anything that involved making or fixing or building—anything that gave a kid the dangerous idea that they could do something real with their hands.

Mara had the kind of patience that didn’t show up in job descriptions. Jonah didn’t know where she got it. Some mornings, when he ran past the school, he imagined patience as a finite resource stored in a hidden tank behind her ribs, sloshing lower every semester.

Inside, the kids moved like a flock under stress. Heads down, shoulders forward, eyes jumping from threat to threat. A girl shoved a boy; the boy shoved back; a teacher called out without conviction; the moment passed, unresolved, like so many moments did now.

That was the thing. The world didn’t break all at once. It frayed.

It frayed in grocery aisles that looked like abundance but felt like surrender. The produce section was bright and waxy. The labels promised “NATURAL” and “HEART-HEALTHY” and “PROTEIN PACKED” while the ingredient lists read like a chemistry worksheet.

It frayed in bodies that didn’t move much because movement was expensive—time expensive, energy expensive, soreness expensive. It frayed in kids who couldn’t read a paragraph without their eyes skidding off the lines like tires on ice.

It frayed in the way people talked.

Not all people. But enough.

In the break room at Jonah's job—a small repair shop with fewer customers every month—his coworker Dean watched the news with the sound off. The anchor's mouth moved, and captions scrolled.

"UNREST SPREADS—"
"VIOLENCE IN THREE CITIES—"
"SCHOOL INCIDENT UNDER INVESTIGATION—"
"HEALTH AGENCY ISSUES NEW GUIDELINES—"

Dean laughed without humor. "Guidelines. Like anybody reads."

Jonah held a carburetor in his hands, turning it like it was a puzzle. "Some people read."

Dean snorted. "Sure. You. Your sister. Like five librarians and a monk."

Jonah didn't answer. He didn't like arguing with Dean because Dean argued the way a person flails when they're drowning: not to win, but to keep from feeling the water.

At lunch, Jonah ate what he always ate—simple, boring, food you could recognize. He'd grown up poor enough to learn that "cheap" and "real" weren't always enemies if you knew how to cook. Beans. Rice. Eggs. Whatever vegetables looked like they'd been grown in dirt instead of assembled.

Dean unwrapped a neon snack cake and a drink that glowed faintly blue.

"Man," Dean said, chewing. "They say these chemicals are everywhere anyway. Might as well enjoy it."

Jonah watched him swallow. Watched the way Dean's hand trembled when he reached for the drink. It wasn't old age. Dean was thirty-one.

"You ever think," Jonah said carefully, "that 'might as well' is the sentence that's killing us?"

Dean's eyes narrowed. "You ever think you're annoying?"

Jonah returned to his carburetor and let the silence do its work.

That evening, Mara called him.

Her voice was quiet in the way it got when she was trying not to sound worried. “Can you come by?”

Jonah drove to her apartment. The building smelled like stale fryer oil and detergent. In Mara’s living room, there were stacks of papers on the table—student work, mostly. Jonah saw a worksheet with a paragraph printed in large font and simple words.

Mara sat on the floor, back against the couch, shoes still on. She looked like she’d been holding her breath all day and only now remembered she was allowed to exhale.

“Bad day?” Jonah asked.

“Normal day,” she said. Then: “Worse.”

She held up a piece of paper. It was a handwritten note from a student. The letters were shaky, inconsistent, like a child learning to write. But the kid was seventeen. Jonah knew because Mara’s roster was open on the table.

The note said:

“Ms. B i dont no how 2 read good. i feel dum. u r nice.”

Mara’s eyes were wet. “He wrote that like it was a confession,” she said. “Like he was admitting a crime.”

Jonah sat down across from her, cross-legged. “You’re helping.”

Mara laughed, sharp. “Am I? Or am I—” She gestured at the piles. “—putting gauze on a flood?”

Jonah didn’t have an answer that didn’t insult her intelligence.

Mara wiped her face and stared past him at the muted TV. “They cut the trade program. Again. They said it’s ‘not aligned with outcomes.’”

“Outcomes,” Jonah repeated, tasting the word like something rotten.

“Jonah… we’re raising people who can’t do anything.” Mara’s voice rose. “They can’t fix a leak. They can’t cook. They can’t write a letter. They can’t read the instructions on a medicine bottle. And then we act surprised when they’re angry. When they break things. When they break each other.”

Jonah thought of the bruised horizon.

“Mara,” he said, “look at the sky.”

She did. The window showed a strange dimness, a color like old dishwater.

“Is that smoke?” she asked.

“I don’t think so.”

Three days later, the message came.

It did not come through governments. Governments were busy. They were always busy. It came through every screen and speaker at once, overriding whatever was playing. It came in clean, calm English first, then translated into other languages with eerie precision.

A symbol appeared—three intersecting arcs around a point—like a simple compass rose drawn by someone with steady hands.

Then a voice.

Not male, not female. Not warm, not cold. Just… clear.

““Attention: This planet is approaching an extinction-level event. We can offer relocation.””

The streets filled. People stood on balconies. Cars stopped in intersections. For a few minutes, even the angry city seemed to hold its breath.

““Selection will be limited.””

The breath released into shouting.

““Selection will be based on measurable contribution potential.””

More shouting. Confusion. Laughter. Denial.

““Criteria include: physical adaptability; demonstrated skill; cognitive resilience; cooperative capacity; creative and technical aptitude.””

Jonah felt Mara’s hand clamp around his forearm like a vise.

They were watching from her couch now. The TV showed the symbol and closed captions that stuttered as networks tried to keep up.

Mara whispered, “They’re… auditioning us.”

The voice continued.

“‘“You will be given ninety days to present yourselves at evaluation sites.”“‘

A map appeared.

“‘“Those selected will relocate. Those not selected will remain.”“‘

The message ended.

For one heartbeat, there was silence.

Then the world erupted—sirens, screams, laughter, prayers, angry arguments on sidewalks, phones shoved into faces, fists raised at strangers as if strangers were responsible for the rules of the universe.

Dean called Jonah an hour later, voice frantic. “Dude. Dude. This is a scam, right? This is—this is like a hack.”

Jonah glanced at Mara, who was staring at the map like it was a verdict.

“I don’t know,” Jonah said.

Dean swallowed audibly. “They said ‘skill.’ Like—what do they mean? Like, my job? My… I mean I can game. I can—”

Jonah pictured Dean’s hands, trembling. Pictured the neon snack cakes. The blue drink.

“Dean,” Jonah said, “what can you *do*?”

There was a pause that stretched into something ugly.

“I—” Dean started. Then: “That’s not fair.”

“It’s just a question,” Jonah said softly.

Dean’s voice cracked. “Nobody told us we were being tested!”

Jonah closed his eyes.

Because that was the most honest thing Dean had said in years.

The first evaluation site opened at the fairgrounds outside town.

People camped for days. Families arrived with binders—certificates, diplomas, resumes. Others arrived with nothing but rage. Some showed up carrying rifles, as if the universe could be intimidated.

At the entrance, drones hovered silently, scanning faces. There were no alien soldiers. No gates of glowing light. Just a series of tents and lines organized with unsettling efficiency.

A sign over the main tent read:

“EVALUATION”
“PHYSICAL”
“COGNITIVE”
“SKILL”
“COOPERATION”

Mara and Jonah stood in line at dawn.

Mara wore practical shoes. Jonah wore his running clothes.

Ahead of them, a young man argued with an attendant. “I’m a content creator,” he insisted. “I’ve got two million followers.”

The attendant’s tablet blinked. The attendant didn’t look up. “Please proceed to the skills station.”

The young man scoffed and stormed away.

Behind Jonah, a woman held a toddler on her hip and cried quietly. “He’s only four,” she said to nobody. “How do you evaluate a four-year-old?”

Nobody answered because nobody could.

When Jonah and Mara reached the physical station, they were led into a long tent with simple equipment—weights, balance beams, stationary bikes, flexibility mats. A screen displayed instructions.

A human technician supervised, but the scoring came from the drones. Mara’s jaw tightened as she watched a middle-aged man wheeze on a treadmill, sweat pouring down his face as he cursed the screen.

“This is ableist,” he spat. “This is—this is discrimination!”

The drone made a soft chime and displayed a number.

Low.

The man screamed and slapped the treadmill console.

Security removed him gently. Not because they cared about the treadmill. Because violence in a line of desperate people was a spark in dry grass.

Mara's turn came.

She was not an athlete. She'd spent years sitting in meetings and leaning over desks and standing in hallways, breaking up fights.

But she had always walked. Always taken stairs. Always cooked.

She moved awkwardly but steadily through the tests.

When Jonah's turn came, it felt unfair.

His lungs were strong. His balance was trained. His hands knew precision.

The drone chimed.

His number was high.

He didn't feel proud. He felt grief.

At the cognitive station, the room was quiet enough to hear heartbeats.

Screens displayed reading passages. Logic puzzles. Memory tests. Language tasks.

Mara's hands trembled when she saw the first prompt: a paragraph with subtle meaning, not just information. The kind of reading that asked you to "think", not just decode.

She swallowed and began.

Jonah finished early, then sat with his hands folded, watching other people struggle—eyes darting, brows furrowed, lips moving silently as if words were unfamiliar tools.

A teenager two stations down stared at the screen for a long time. Then he raised his hand.

"I can't," he said quietly.

The technician approached. "What's the problem?"

The boy's voice barely carried. "I can't read it."

The technician's face softened in a way that made Jonah's stomach ache. "Try your best," the technician said.

The boy stared at the screen like it was an accusation.

Mara passed Jonah afterward and whispered, "That could've been my student."

Jonah nodded. "It is."

The skills station was the strangest.

It wasn't about titles. It wasn't "Do you have a degree?" It was "Can you do something that keeps humans alive?"

People were asked to repair a simple machine. To build a stable structure with limited materials. To identify edible plants. To cook a meal from basic ingredients. To stitch a torn fabric. To set a broken bone on a dummy. To de-escalate a heated argument with two actors trained to provoke.

Mara watched a man in an expensive suit stare helplessly at a toolbox. His hands hovered over wrenches like they were poisonous.

"I manage a team of fifty," he protested.

"Please begin," the technician said.

He picked up a screwdriver by the metal shaft and tried to turn a bolt with it.

The drone chimed.

Low.

Mara's station involved communication. She was paired with two strangers and given a scenario: limited supplies, limited time, a shelter to build. One stranger was a young woman with nervous eyes; the other was an older man who began by barking orders.

Mara didn't fight him. She didn't submit, either.

She did what she did in classrooms: she found the one sentence that opened a door.

"Okay," she said, voice calm. "We have ten minutes. If we don't work together, none of us score well. What are you good at?"

The older man blinked, thrown off. “I… worked construction,” he muttered.

The young woman whispered, “I can tie knots. I camped a lot with my dad.”

Mara nodded. “Great. You—framework. You—bindings. I’ll do layout and keep time. We talk like we’re on the same team.”

Something changed. Not dramatic. Just… alignment.

The drone watched.

It chimed.

Higher.

Afterward, Mara sat outside on the grass, staring at her hands like she’d just met them.

“I didn’t realize,” she said softly, “how much of what I do is… a skill.”

Jonah sat beside her. “That’s the tragedy,” he said. “We’ve been told skills don’t matter. That they’re optional. That convenience is the same as capability.”

Mara looked at the crowd. At the anger. At the despair. At the few faces that looked quietly focused—people with calluses, people with calm eyes, people who moved like they belonged inside their own bodies.

Then Dean appeared.

Jonah recognized him from twenty yards away because panic has a posture.

Dean stumbled toward them, hair unwashed, eyes wide. He held a folder in his hand like a shield.

“Jonah,” he said, breathless. “I came. I—look.” He flipped the folder open to reveal printed screenshots: his streaming stats, his followers, his “brand partnerships.”

Jonah didn’t say anything. He didn’t want to be cruel.

Dean thrust the folder closer. “This counts, right? I mean, I influence people. That’s… that’s contribution. People need entertainment.”

Mara rose slowly. “Dean,” she said gently, “can you cook?”

Dean scoffed, defensive. “That’s not—”

“Can you fix something?” Mara pressed. “Can you teach? Can you build? Can you calm someone down when they’re about to hurt someone? Can you grow food? Can you run a mile without collapsing? Can you read instructions and follow them?”

Dean’s jaw worked. His eyes flicked away.

Then, very quietly, he said, “Nobody made us learn that.”

Jonah felt something in his chest—anger, yes, but also a sorrow so deep it was almost quiet.

Mara crouched, bringing her face level with Dean’s. “Nobody made you,” she said. “But you still could’ve.”

Dean’s eyes filled with tears. “I didn’t know it mattered.”

Jonah leaned forward. “Dean,” he said, “you have ninety days.”

Dean’s shoulders shook. “What am I supposed to do in ninety days?”

Jonah looked toward the evaluation tents, then to the crowd beyond them, the city beyond that, the world beyond that—a world that had spent decades making it easy to be weak and hard to be strong, easy to be distracted and hard to be disciplined, easy to consume and hard to create.

“You start,” Jonah said. “That’s it. You start. You learn one real thing at a time. You sweat. You read. You practice. You fail. You practice again.”

Dean laughed through his tears. “You make it sound simple.”

“It is simple,” Mara said. “It’s not easy.”

Over the next weeks, the entire town changed—or didn’t.

Some people raged and rioted, convinced they could bully the universe into a different rubric. Others begged and bribed and tried to cheat. Markets exploded with “skills bootcamps,” some legitimate, most predatory.

But something else happened in quiet corners.

Mara opened her classroom after hours. Not as a school program—those would’ve required approvals and committees and budget meetings that moved like glaciers—but as a human being with a key.

She taped a sign to the door:

“READING & REAL LIFE”
“FREE”
“NO SHAME”
“COME IN”

Jonah stayed after work to teach basic repairs. How to change a tire. How to use a wrench. How to patch a leak. He found himself saying things his grandfather used to say:

“Slow is smooth.”
“Measure twice.”
“Don’t panic. Think.”

Dean showed up the first night, eyes red, hands empty.

Mara handed him a paperback like it weighed the world. “We start here,” she said.

Dean stared at the cover. “I’m gonna look stupid.”

“Everyone looks stupid at the start,” Jonah said. “That’s how you know it’s real.”

Dean swallowed. Then nodded.

Across town, someone started a community garden in a vacant lot. An old mechanic taught teens how engines worked. A nurse taught first aid in a church basement. A retired carpenter offered apprenticeships for free in exchange for help repairing a roof.

And still, the streets were dangerous. Still, people snapped. Still, violence flared like fever. Still, the sky darkened—now a permanent bruise at the edge of every day.

Because the audition wasn’t fair, and the world had not prepared most people to pass.

But that didn’t change the rules. It only revealed them.

On the final week, Jonah and Mara returned to the fairgrounds for re-evaluation.

The lines were different now. Not smaller. Just… different.

There were fewer shouted arguments. More quiet concentration. More worn hands. More notebooks tucked into back pockets. More bodies that looked like they’d been asked to move and had answered the request.

Dean stood with Jonah and Mara, jaw set, a new kind of tired on his face—the honest tiredness of effort.

He carried no folder of followers.

He carried a small toolkit and a dog-eared book full of penciled notes.

At the cognitive station, Dean sat down and stared at the screen. His lips moved. Slowly. He sounded out words under his breath, then reread the sentence until it made sense.

He looked up once, as if expecting someone to laugh.

No one did.

At the skills station, Dean tightened a bolt correctly. He didn't do it fast. He did it right. He checked his work twice.

When the drone chimed, the number wasn't high.

But it wasn't low, either.

Afterward, they sat on the grass again.

Dean exhaled shakily. "I'm still scared," he admitted.

"Good," Mara said. "Fear means you understand reality."

Dean laughed weakly. "You're brutal."

"I'm honest," Mara replied.

Jonah stared at the bruised horizon, now darker than ever. "We spent so long pretending choices didn't have consequences," he said. "Food. Movement. Learning. Discipline. Community. We treated them like lifestyle accessories."

Mara nodded, eyes reflecting the dim light. "And now the universe is treating them like survival requirements."

Dean looked between them. "So what's the moral?" he asked, half-joking, half-pleading. "That we should all live like… like we're on trial?"

Mara shook her head. "Not on trial."

Jonah considered the symbol that had appeared on every screen. Three arcs around a point.

"More like we're all building a résumé," Jonah said. "Not for a job. For a life."

Dean frowned. “That’s the same thing.”

“No,” Mara said gently. “A job can be taken from you. A life is what you become.”

The loudspeakers crackled.

“Results will be delivered within forty-eight hours.”

Dean’s throat bobbed. “What if I don’t make it?”

Jonah looked at him, really looked—at the man who had been drifting, who had been numbing himself with bright packages and endless noise, who had believed the world would never ask anything hard of him.

Then Jonah said the thing that felt like a verdict and a mercy at once.

“Then you’ll still be better than you were,” Jonah said. “And you won’t be helpless.”

Mara added, “And if you *do* make it, you won’t be a burden. You’ll be an asset.”

Dean swallowed again, eyes shimmering. “That word,” he whispered. “Asset.”

Jonah nodded. “Not money. Not status. Not followers.”

Mara’s voice softened. “Ability. Health. Skill. Character. The willingness to work. The courage to learn.”

The wind shifted. It carried the faint taste of plastic again.

Jonah stood. “Whether they pick us or not,” he said, “this is the point.”

Mara rose beside him. Dean stood too, shoulders squared like he’d borrowed some of Jonah’s spine.

Jonah looked at the endless lines of people—some furious, some broken, some quietly rebuilding themselves one hard habit at a time.

And he realized the truth that made his chest ache:

The off-world message didn’t create the audition.

It only revealed it.

Because every day before the sky bruised, every meal and every mile and every page read, every skill practiced and every comfort resisted, every moment someone chose discipline over drift—

Every one of those was already a vote cast for the kind of person you would be when the world finally demanded proof.

They walked toward the exit together, not knowing what answer the universe would give them.

But knowing, at last, what question they had been asked all along.

This series of "short stories" is NOT meant to address every side of life, or every issues people personally face. People with various disabling conditions that either have a record prior to their disability, or are too young or are completely unable to express or exercise their life due to outside factors are not discarded in the greater scheme of things.

The entire point of these stories is to get people WITH potential and ability to focus on creating and/or maintaining a goal, a mission that is not destructive, not irrational and NOT narcissistic, but is OUT bound, looking on and seeking greater and better things based on truth and human potential.

Humanity has lost its way and most are drifting down the river of life, and this will ONLY end up badly for them. It doesn't have to be that way.

Human potential is far greater than we are considering at this stage of our existence, and it is being deliberately sabotaged by multiple venues. It all boils down to a "reset" of "intent" in each of our lives.

It really IS simple, but it also is not EASY. However, all who actually examine their lives, look for the natural talent and gifts that are hiding in the recesses of ignorance and apathy, and search out those who can help develop those gifts and talents, CAN rise to a level they never imagined.

Discard the "siren song" of lies meant to sabotage your full potential, and step up to the plate of cooperation and drive, and resist the lies that are merely a facade of life designed to turn you into a slave and puppet... that will be discarded as soon as you are done being useful to destructive forces.

You CAN do better!

Jeffrey T. Maehr
2-5-26