

Dream Job

“Could you run through those nonstop options again?” Customer #80129955 asked.

“Of course,” replied the voice on the other end. “There are direct flights at 6 am, 10:15, and 1 pm. From your priors I can see that you prefer a mid-cabin aisle seat, and right now all three of them have availability in that zone.”

“Terrific. Mid-morning works best, so how about we do the 10:15?”

“Just a moment, ma’am... you might want to consider an alternative. I see that each of the two aisle seats on the 10:15 has an LT in the row immediately behind.”

“Has a what?”

“My apologies – an LT, or a loud talker. LT’s have a history of annoying passengers in adjacent seats by chatting incessantly, with no apparent awareness of their surroundings. One is a sales rep who drones on about the day-to-day minutiae of his job to whatever poor sap gets stuck beside him. The other is a mom of twins who will be flexing over her week-long theme park vacation. She likely will fill the time from takeoff to touchdown peppering the kids with questions about every ride, show, and live character they saw. Both passengers have been identified as third-degree LT’s.”

“Wow, I didn’t know you kept track of such things!”

“We maintain a database of customers who have been flagged on surveys in several categories, such as XG for excessive girth, QH for questionable hygiene, and of course, the LT. An LT-3 rating indicates a top-tier irritant to SR’s, or silent reader types, like yourself.”

“Well, I sure appreciate the heads up.”

“Let’s put you on the 1 o’clock in seat 12C. It’s a quick 2-hour trip, and the middle section looks to be booked mostly by military personnel who keep to themselves. Does that sound OK?”

“Sounds perfect! You’ve been very helpful. This will be my first trip to the islands and I hear the food is amazing.”

“Wouldn’t know. Never been. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“No, that’s all – thank you so much, Rob, uh, what was it again?”

“Robo5317.JB316. I will text you a confirmation. On behalf of ZapAir, thank you for your business.”

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A few minutes later, the alarm on Julian Buck’s nightstand awakened him from a deep slumber. After two snooze cycles he sat up, wiped the crusty debris from the corners of his eyes, and unplugged the CerebShare® cable from the back of his neck. He had no memory of this or any of the other twenty-some phone conversations on which his subconscious mind had assisted on

behalf of the airline while he slept. But he did have a strong and unexplained craving for grilled pineapple.

Most of the heavy lifting including digital vocals had been handled by the AI robot terminal identified as Robo5317, to which Julian’s brain had been fused over the past seven hours. Like most call centers, ZapAir had migrated to 100% robotic CSR’s years earlier. But the airlines had pioneered and nearly perfected the next generation CerebShare® concept, which addressed one of the major complaints about AI – that being the lack of a human element.

For years practitioners had propagated the theory that 90% of a person’s brain was unused at any given time. Despite the lack of clinical evidence, some innovative proprietors had advanced the notion to develop the bio-port technology that became the cornerstone of CerebShare® and a few copycat firms. The idea was to connect the seemingly infinite capacity of machines to process data with this excess brain space, which added new dimensions such as the ability to empathize and to apply common sense, even when it contradicted the analytics. What ride sharing had been to drivers and temporary rentals to homeowners, CerebShare® was to any hosts willing to have the bio-port device installed and engaged while they slept. For both the company and its overnight sleep-workers – collectively referred to as “mind lots” – it was turning the surplus ability to feel and to reason into revenue.

Julian (better known as JB316 to ZapAir) was one of about 50 mind lots that the airline employed for this purpose. The process involved having the bio-port installed in the back of the neck, just below the base of the skull. Normally the procedure required two days of recovery, for which the host was fully reimbursed and after which the port was painless and barely noticeable. Connecting to the AI terminal at bedtime was much like strapping on a CPAP device – at first it was a little awkward but eventually it became as routine as turning out the lights. The extra income Julian earned had enabled him to repay his student loans early and to upgrade his ride to a sleek, solar electric model. Anyone could apply for one of ZapAir’s CerebShare® positions, but early trials had suggested that candidates with high math skills tended to have the strongest capacity for mind to merge with machine.

By day Julian was an actuarial analyst, needing just one more exam to earn his first professional credential – Associateship. His role in the Predictive Analytics Department (PAD) at HopeAssurance mostly involved feeding data and modeling assumptions into thinking machines much like Robo5317, only in the insurance sector – which had been slow to embrace CerebShare®-type technology over concerns about lack of testing and privacy, particularly on behalf of customers but also of mind lots like Julian.

Since he connected only during sleep, Julian’s side hustle didn’t interfere with his day job at Hope. Although technically he knew he probably should disclose this “moonlighting” activity to his employer, he reasoned that there was no conflict of interest since he never bio-ported during business hours and what he chose to do while he slept had no bearing on his performance while he was awake. He figured that once he got his Associateship, he would be held to a higher standard but at the same time would receive a substantial salary increase, thus rendering him no longer in need of the supplemental income from ZapAir.

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Julian arrived at Hope’s headquarters in Silico Falls that morning at the usual time and went through his daily processes. On most days he would study at lunch and eat from the vending machines. But on that day he talked a couple of his PAD colleagues into trying out the new luau-themed buffet a few blocks away, where he feasted on honey-glazed ham and pineapple

kabobs, Molokai sweet potato salad, and a dessert plate full of Lilikoi bars. The combination was succulent and oddly satisfying.

In contrast to his heavy midday meal, Julian's afternoon was light except for a 3:00 meeting with the PAD team that had been scheduled earlier that day. Colleagues gathered at the appointed time in the windowless 11th floor conference room, located near the elevators, where the only available light was provided by the few recessed LED bulbs installed in the overhead ceiling panels. As was typical on summer afternoons, the air conditioning units had been adjusted to the low output setting for conservation purposes, making the motionless 79-degree air feel stale and stuffy.

Julian's manager, Chase Greene, sat at the far end of the rectangular oak table and pushed aside an open donut box containing the remnants of another team's weekly gathering. He opened the meeting with a sobering competitive update. Tiffany Brass, Senior Vice President in charge of operations at Sandz Inc, had just announced during the quarterly shareholders call that her company was pursuing an aggressive implant strategy, equipping all insureds on a voluntary basis with subcutaneous devices that monitored driving patterns, heart rhythms, caloric intake, blood pressure, glucose level, exercise, noise exposure, and several other measurables – all of which would be compiled to produce a continuous, composite individual risk score. The devices would be completely optional, but customers agreeing to install them earned a 10% discount on all insurance premiums – auto, home, life, and health – regardless of the results. Favorable scores could increase the discounts to 30% or more, with additional incentives for improvements.

Chase exhorted his team, "We need to figure out how we're going to stay relevant when competitors are bringing these kinds of innovations to market."

One of Julian's PAD colleagues responded, "Why can't we do the same thing? We already have the technology to replicate 80% of what Sandz is doing."

Chase retorted, "The problem is they claim to have patented the technology. Whether valid or not, we will be drowned in lawsuits if we simply reproduce what they do. There has to be something that distinguishes us to avoid disputes."

Julian spoke up, "What if we offered CerebShare® to our customers?" His lunch buddies chuckled while others smirked and shook their heads. But not Chase, who stared intently into Julian's eyes for a few seconds.

"What would that look like?" Chase asked.

"Well, I haven't thought it through, but I'm envisioning that we could connect and see what they're thinking, beyond what they know they're thinking. We could mine data about their past, their aspirations, their motivations – things they don't even know about themselves – and use the results to come up with product recommendations, customized pricing, and incentives based on overall character scores."

Suddenly the room got quiet, aside from the steady hum of the dim overhead lights. Chase paused, removed his glasses, and rubbed his eyelids with his left thumb and index finger. "We aren't ready to move in that direction," he said in a low, deliberate voice. "We are not and never have been on the bleeding edge. We are at best slow followers. I like the creativity, and we need that kind of thinking around here. But for now we have to color inside the lines."

Despite the feeble attempt at positive reinforcement, the boss's response didn't sit well with Julian. He knew when he started at Hope that it was an old-fashioned company, with more focus on personal relationships and customer satisfaction than the potential benefits of bio-tech advancements. Hope had been great about supporting exams and helping to map out a career path. But in his mind, Julian resolved in that moment that once he reached Associateship, he would unleash his resume in pursuit of more progressive opportunities.

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At around 10:30 pm, Julian stopped reading and closed his study documents. There were just four more weeks until his exam, after which he would get to experience real freedom again. He took the last swallow of his ginger-spiced kombucha, plugged into his bio-port, turned out the light, and drifted off....

"Thank you for calling ZapAir, my tag is Robo5317.JB316, how may I assist you?"

"Hello, this is Customer #70773049. I need to book a flight to Silico Falls for this coming Thursday."

"OK, and I'm guessing your trip must be for business since you've booked three flights to the area over the past six weeks."

"Yes, it's business."

"I hear the Falls are really nice this time of year," the digital voice remarked, even though the Robo5317 terminal had no concept of geography or weather, much less any realization that it was stationed in that exact city.

"Wouldn't know. Never been."

"Oh really? That's odd, because as I mentioned it looks like you've visited—"

"The flight is not for me, it's for my director. I don't really get out. I just execute plans and arrange activities as I'm programmed to do."

"Ah, OK. So... you're an AI then!"

"More or less. I'm connected to my director's bio-port. She gives basic instructions and leaves working through the details for me."

"So then your director uses CerebShare®?"

"No, but she connects to a similar platform to do things like booking flights and scheduling appointments while she sleeps."

"Fascinating. OK, let's start with the passenger's full name as it appears on the government-issued ID that she will be using for travel."

"TIFFANY URSULA BRASS."

“Got it – one moment, please.” Normally date of birth and known traveler number would have been the next automated prompts, but with that name being recognized somewhere deep inside the mind lot’s cranium, suddenly the Robo5317 algorithms were being overridden by JB316’s curious subconscious. “So, what kinds of things will your director be doing in Silico Falls?”

“She is taking over a company.”

“How interesting. What kind of company?”

“It’s an insurance company called HopeAssurance. It’s an older, private firm, still doing business like at the turn of the century. But it has fiercely loyal customers and a strong reputation. She wants to leverage the company’s identity to expand predictive analytics technology while maintaining the appearance of a personal touch.”

Julian rolled over on his mattress. While part of his subconscious dreamt of flying telepathic dogs delivering pizza, the area engaged by his bio-port continued to probe.

“What will happen with HopeAssurance when the transition is complete?”

“Who knows. Most likely it will be dissolved after a targeted segment of its customer base has been absorbed. She doesn’t need their technology, or the people – just the name.”

“I see... and what about the employees?”

“Aside from a few exceptions, they will be eliminated.”

“As in ‘displaced’?”

“As in eliminated. The humans don’t realize it yet, but the industry has no room for workers with outdated skills. After a brief assessment period, anyone who has not been redeployed will be part of the corporate extermination program. They along with their heirs will be phased out as humanely as possible.”

After those words had sunk in for a few seconds, Robo5317 resumed the conversation and started to lay out travel options. The two AI’s worked through the details without any trace of conscious human intervention.

But the next morning, Julian awoke with a dry mouth, an intense headache, and an extreme, unexplained anxiety about both his job and his own existence. He couldn’t say why but as he stood brushing his teeth, he sensed a threat lurking that was as cold and as real and as the travertine tile beneath his bare feet.

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When Julian arrived at work, he requested and was granted a closed-door meeting in Chase’s corner office. “Listen, I can’t explain what I’m feeling, but we really need to do something about that stuff you mentioned yesterday.”

“What stuff?” Chase inquired.

“You know, the Sandz thing. I have this overwhelming sense that we need to act, and fast – not just for our livelihood but maybe even for our lives!”

“You too, huh?”

“Yeah. It’s all I can think about and I don’t know what to do.”

Chase paused for a few seconds. “Have you by chance been doing contract work with CerebShare®?”

Julian stumbled over several incomprehensible syllables that stopped short of forming actual words. He tried to dodge, but his guilt was absurdly obvious. Finally, he gathered his breath and inquired, “Why do you ask?”

Chase replied, “You know that Hope has a strict policy about moonlighting.”

“I know, and I’m really sorry about—“

“And that’s why we can’t tell anyone,” Chase urged as he slapped the top of his cocobolo desk with an open right hand. “I’ve been doing overnights for the last three months with an airline that uses CerebShare® – ever since my divorce went final. My ex’s lawyers were ruthless with our common property.”

Julian was shocked yet, at the same time, relieved at their mutual transparency. “I assume you mean ZapAir. So what happened?”

“Two nights ago, I was plugged in as tag Robo3504.CG238. At some point it felt like I had a bad dream, and when I rolled over the terminal got pulled off the nightstand. When the cable disengaged, the call that was in progress ended with no record that I could access. Afterward I barely slept at all, and I had this deep sense of dread. That feeling intensified during our officers’ staff meeting while they were talking about Sandz. They’re up to something drastic, I’m sure of it.”

Julian drew a quick, deep breath. “That’s weird, Chase. My heart just about jumped out of my chest when you mentioned Sandz just now. Something isn’t right. But if all we have to go on is gut feel, how can we prove anything, and what could we do about it?”

Chase rubbed his cheeks and chin whiskers with his left thumb and index finger and reasoned, “Somehow we need to reverse engineer the process. I’m just not sure how.”

Julian’s face lit up and his pupils dilated as he leaned forward and proclaimed, “I have an idea.”
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That evening Julian skipped both his fermented tea and his study time and plugged into the bio-port earlier than usual, but without going to sleep. Instead, he opened his laptop, loaded the Sandz Inc web site, and with a series of rudimentary maneuvers was able to identify an IP address. Next he scrolled through the list of addresses logged from his calls during the previous night, and just past the middle he found an entry that was a nearly perfect match.

Using the Robo5317 credentials, he switched the terminal to manual override and dialed the address from the call log. Soon a vaguely familiar voice answered. “Hello?”

“Good evening,” Julian started, recalling what he could from his CerebShare® training video. “Um, I’m sorry for the interruption, but this is Robo5317.JB316 from ZapAir, calling with some updates. Did we speak last night?”

“Yes, we did. You booked travel for my director.”

“OK, right, and uh, can you give me the confirmation number and verify the traveler’s name that is on the ticket?”

Normally the AI on the other end would have filtered the information request through a series of screens including voice recognition, to avoid being scammed. But with the IP match along with the familiar ID tag, the machine’s defenses were satisfied. *“Sure. It’s 3PB26T, for TIFFANY URSULA BRASS.”*

Julian recognized the name immediately. Using the confirmation number, he quickly logged into ZapAir’s website and saw that the flight to Silico Falls was scheduled for the following day.

After a long pause, Ms. Brass’s AI broke the silence. *“And what are the updates?”*

“Right, the trip to Silico Falls – we talked about that last night, didn’t we?”

“Yes, we did. In fact I spoke with one of your coworkers the night before, but we were disconnected and didn’t complete the reservation. So what is the change?”

“Well, as I recall it was for a pretty important meeting, right?”

“Correct – the HopeAssurance takeover and colleague extermination.”

Adrenaline surged through Julian’s veins and his hands began to shake. He had heard about a few rogue, AI-led companies and even some radical foreign governments that had taken extreme measures to cut costs, control population, and strengthen profits. But he never thought he would see such things firsthand during his lifetime. He tried to think quickly while maintaining enough composure to sound believable.

“So it came to my attention that this flight has one of the highest cancelation rates of any in our system. Plus I’m looking at expected weather patterns and the trip could be rough. May I book a later flight for you, perhaps on Friday instead?”

“Friday will not work. The meeting with the Board is on Thursday at 4 pm. And frankly I’m surprised you would ask when I was so specific about the details.”

“I – I understand. I’m sorry. Well then, what if... uh....”

“What if what?”

Julian’s brain juggled hastily through several scenarios until landing on one that he thought had a chance, albeit a slim one. “What if, in order to compensate for the inconvenience of this call, I arrange for a driver to pick up Ms. Brass at the airport and escort her to the meeting, at no charge?”

“That would be acceptable. Thank you.” The two parties worked through the details. Julian didn’t connect to his bio-port for the rest of that night, instead piecing together a plan to thwart the takeover meeting and buy more time for himself and his coworkers.

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The next morning, Julian hightailed into Chase’s office, but he wasn’t there. On his fourth try Julian’s phone call finally was answered, and he relayed to Chase the details of the conversation that confirmed Sandz Inc’s hostile intentions.

Following a long, deep sigh and a few seconds of silence Chase responded, *“That doesn’t give you much time. What are you thinking?”*

“I’m going to pick her up at the airport. After that you and I can meet and drive her to a warehouse or into the woods somewhere, and we will warn her to abort her mission, or else.”

“Or else what?”

“Or else, I don’t know, Chase. You’ve got to help me here! I’ve been up all night trying to figure this out. It’s about our survival – can’t you come up with something?”

Chase replied in a soothing voice, *“It’s going to be OK, Julian. I’ll tell you what, if you decide to go through with your idea, I suggest you take her to the old taco stand at 10th & Western Avenue. It shut down about a year ago. Pull around back and wait there.”*

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Under sunny skies, flight 5213 arrived on schedule at 12:40 pm as it did on 90% of such occasions. Julian stood outside the security checkpoint, wearing a gray wool sport coat with black trousers, a starched white shirt, and a solid maroon necktie. Against his chest he held a digital notepad with a white background and bold, black Arial-font letters that read **T. BRASS**. In preparation for their meeting he had read that Ms. Brass was a captain and outside hitter on her college volleyball team and reasoned, correctly, that with her 6-foot-2 stature and long, auburn pony tail, she would be easy to distinguish among the rush of midday travelers. As she approached with her characteristic mix of charm and toughness, he imagined how intimidating it might be to stand on the opposite side of the net while she elevated and wound up to take a swing.

Julian greeted the still slender Sandz SVP, who wore a solid navy jacket with polished black leather pumps, blue topaz sunflower earrings, and a simple yet stunning collection of a single gold necklace and two bracelets on each wrist. Her matching navy skirt was modest and professional but not adequate to cover the lower halves of her lean, bronze legs. He observed closely as she slipped her phone into her right jacket pocket and extended her arm for a quick but firm handshake. He didn’t recognize the scent she wore but guessed it to be from the Chanel Coco collection.

Julian nervously asked the customary questions about how her flight went and whether she needed help finding a place to stay. Her responses were polite but gravely efficient with few wasted words. He led her past baggage claim to the ground transportation area, where his own Model XY E-Car was parked and waiting. He opened the back passenger side door for her, brushed awkwardly against her torso as she entered the vehicle, apologized for his clumsiness, and proceeded to walk clockwise to the driver’s seat.

The two of them drove away from the airport and onto a four-lane highway headed south toward 10th Street. Having made this trip several times recently, Ms. Brass did not recognize the surroundings and asked pointedly, “What route are you taking?”

Julian waived a finger in front of the map on his oversized dashboard screen and replied, “Oh, I forgot to tell you, there’s a construction detour so we have to go a bit out of the way.”

Ms. Brass responded coarsely, “That’s odd. There was no mention of any detours when my AI made travel plans.”

Julian cleared his throat and tried to continue the ruse. “Um, right, it wouldn’t have been on the radar on Tuesday, as it was something that the mayor just got special funding for this—“

“TUESDAY?!” she blurted. “How do you know I made the reservation on Tuesday? Who are you?”

Julian had to come clean. “OK, listen Ms. Brass, I know why you’re here. I know about HopeAssurance and the elimination plan. I work for Hope. I have friends at Hope. I can’t let this happen. So there has been a little change in your itinerary.”

“Pull over! Let me out of this vehicle! I’m reporting you to—“

“Just a moment, ma’am... you’re not reporting anything. See?” He held up the phone that he had inelegantly confiscated from her pocket as she was entering the vehicle. “You’re coming with me and you’re going to listen to what my boss and I have to say. So just relax, we’re almost there.” The Sandz exec tried in vain to pull on the door handle and to open the window but quickly realized that both had been disabled, rendering her momentarily helpless.

Julian turned into the parking lot behind the abandoned taco stand, where he expected to rendezvous with Chase. Instead, within seconds he was confronted there by two squad cars with lights flashing and four police officers pointing revolvers squarely in the direction of the driver.

Julian slowly opened the door, raised his arms, bowed his head and surrendered without resistance. Only then did it occur to him how doomed his plan had been from the start. The implant in Ms. Brass’s left forearm had detected the sudden spikes in blood pressure and pulse rate, the abnormal onset of perspiration unrelated to exercise, and the variation from the route taken during her previous visits. Next it sent an alert to the Sandz security team, and within seconds local authorities were notified and on their way to her exact coordinates.

For his part, Julian Buck was charged with illegal wiretapping, mail fraud, conspiracy, kidnapping, theft, extortion, and unlawful imprisonment. Because it was his first offense and since he had neither committed any type of physical assault nor brandished a weapon, the judge was lenient and accepted a plea bargain that would require one year of jail time plus a lifetime ban from connecting to any type of CerebShare® or similar bio-port device.

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Eight months into his sentence, Julian was granted a one-day furlough to sit for his last Associateship exam, which he passed with a score of 9. “**Nearly perfect,**” he quipped to himself, observing that the phrase was identical to the trademarked slogan adopted by the freshly rebranded Sandz-Hope Inc. That company would be led by President & CEO Tiffany

Brass, with its newly formed Predictive Analytics Division headed by recently named COO, Chase Greene, who was now championing the initiative to bring CerebShare® to insurance customers.

On the evening after his exam, Julian sat down in the commissary to his celebratory meal of a pressed ham sandwich, crushed pineapple, canned yams, and a lemon mini-scone. He raised his recycled paper water cup, closed his eyes, and imagined his recently exterminated colleagues assembling to toast his achievement. Ironically, his arrest and confinement had spared him from succumbing to the same fate that they had met.

Instead, under the governing body's Second Chance Rehabilitated Actuaries Program (SCRAP), Julian would get another opportunity to practice using his new Associateship credential on a probationary basis. As he brushed the crumbs from his faded orange jumpsuit, he started to jot down a mental list of companies where he might apply next. The thought of making late night calls to book flights for job interviews made him chuckle to himself.

There were just four more months until his release, after which he would get to experience real freedom again.