

## Alternative Spirituality

“Wake up, we’re nearly there!” Zena opened her eyes and nodded gently at her companion. She hadn’t been asleep; she had merely been in deep contemplation about the enormity of what she was about to do in the next few hours.

Zena felt the engines of the craft scale back as they began the descent. Although the use of combustion engines on all aircraft had been scrapped many years ago, and these days aircraft could fly almost silently, designers had added noise effects that reassuringly mirrored the sound of an old-fashioned airplane motor.

Zena stretched. A voice came through the intercom, “*Ten minutes until landing, please put all seats upright and fasten safety belts. Do not be alarmed by any loud noises as we land as these are perfectly normal. You may wish to slip on the ear defenders which can be located beneath your seat. Thank you for flying with Infinity Energy, we hope you enjoyed your journey.*”

Zena raised her seat and lightly touched the arm of the person seated next to her. “Thanks, Lola, for coming with me, that was a heck of a quick ride, I hardly had the chance to think.” Lola smiled, “These new solar-powered airbuses are something else, aren’t they? Quick and clean!”

Lola’s smile turned into a frown, “Are you definitely sure that you want to go with this, I mean, it’s all still at an experimental stage, I know AI has done some remarkable stuff, but this takes it to another level.”

Their conversation was interrupted by a short screaming noise that resembled the shriek of the famous White Bellbird, known to inhabit the area of Venezuela where they were about to land.

“Shit, they weren’t joking when they said there might be some noise, that nearly burst my eardrums.” Lola laughed and tapped her ear defenders, “Now you know why I always put these on, apparently the noise is to warn the landing operators that we are coming in. Otherwise, we could drop onto the pad without them knowing. Averts any disasters.”

Zena nodded. She remembered that Lola was the lead engineer on the development of the Infinity Energy Airbus fleet. They had first met in the canteen of the Infinity Energy engineering facility. At first, they just acknowledged each other’s presence, however, when they teamed up together to work on a solar energy storage project, a personal relationship began to develop. Then when they moved on to the fledgling ‘Nuclear Negation Scheme’, their friendship deepened, and eventually, they became married lovers.

Lola repeated, “Look are you *really* sure about this?”

Zena smiled and gripped her partner’s arm tightly. “Look, it’s well, you know, it’s like a chance in a lifetime, and to turn down a lottery prize, would be a sacrilege, wouldn’t it? I mean what’s the point of entering into it, if you are to back off the moment you get a win? It was good of them to include you on the trip, all expenses paid, how could you turn that down?”

*“We have now landed at Ven Port Two. The Golems will unload your bags and have them ready to collect at Zone Two.”* The intercom crackled and clicked off.

Lola and Zena unclipped the safety belts and Lola dropped her ear defenders onto her seat. They both rose and joined the short queue to leave the craft. As the queue inched forward, Zena dipped into her trouser pocket and produced two cards, each stamped with ‘Inter Nation Travel Permit – US-Eurasian Citizens.’ She slipped one of the cards into Lola’s hand, “Here, this is yours, we probably won’t need them, but the South Americans are renowned for their botched technology, so their feature recognition machinery is likely to be on the blink.” Lola accepted the card and slid it into her breast pocket.

Safely reunited with their luggage, the pair stepped onto a white pad and held the chromed rail tightly. “These AquaBoards are a fantastic invention,” exclaimed Lola, as the swirling water stream carried them to the hotel concourse, “We should have them in our airports, not only do they provide individual transport, but the water flow provides power to ninety percent of the building. They were invented by a guy from Siberia, you know, he just managed to flee the country after the Russian Federation fell apart. A genius of a bloke, he gave us talks at the Facility.”

With the touch of four taps, the hotel door opened up, and Lola and Zena entered and threw their bags onto the double bed. “Get the beers in girl, I’m going to read through the instructions for tomorrow, I want to be prepared, I don’t want any nasty surprises.

Four cartons of beer silently dropped through a chute that was fitted in the corner of their room. Lola tapped both cartons on the top and they automatically opened. Lola passed a carton to Zena, and they both devoured the contents within seconds. Setting the now empty carton to one side, Zena unfolded her tablet and tapped an app shaped like a lotus flower which bore the title ‘Welcome to **AIternative Spirituality**’.

She settled back and began to read ...

*‘Welcome to the wonderful spiritually energised world of **AIternative Spirituality**. Over the years, AI has completed many exciting tasks. From writing fiction, manuals, plays, and developing works of art. AI has transformed health, science, psychology, and the way that these are taught. AI is now the go-to system when previously unsurmountable processes need to be addressed. AI had ceased wars, changed minds, and developed an entirely new way of governance.*

*However, **AIternative Spirituality** has taken AI to the next level, and into the previously unrealised world of spirituality.*

*If you are reading this app, then you are one of the very few people that have been selected to immerse themselves into the mysterious, enlightening sphere of an AI-generated, ‘Medium.’ Our creation will delve deeply into your psyche and then attempt to summon those who have passed into the spirit world. **AIternative Spirituality**’s Medium can communicate with a chosen relative, work colleague, or friend and then relay any messages you may have to your past loved ones. This is all completed in a safe and sterile room. The Medium’s earth representative will simply attach a crown, which is connected to the Medium, via wireless technology, to the top of your head. You will feel no pain, although there may be a small*

*tingle just above the ears as the Medium begins the process of entering the Spirit World. You are welcome to bring a partner or friend to accompany you into the room.*

*You may ask the Medium to summon individuals from your past, however, as some spirits are reluctant to re-enter the earthly world, The Medium cannot guarantee that you find the person you are seeking to 'speak' with.*

*Everyone at **Alternative Spirituality** looking forward to having your company very soon. We know that you will have an enlightening, and safe experience. See you soon!*

Zena tapped the app off, unaware that Lola had been looking over her shoulder and reading alongside her.

“Well?” enquired Lola, “who are you intending to summon? Mum, Dad, that boyfriend of yours that died in an ‘unexplained’ manner? What about that girl, you know, her name was ... Enid ... she walked into a lake and drowned, nobody knew why, she had everything to look forward to, she was a top scientist at the Facility. I’d love to know why she *apparently* topped herself.”

Zena folded up her tablet, took another mouthful of beer, and scratched her nose. Turning to Lola she spoke slowly. “Not sure about Mum, I mean she was one of the last people to die with dementia, you know just before that AI programme, ‘Psychosis-AI-Cure’ developed a serum that halted the illness. She may still have it and then it would be a waste of time talking to her.”

“What about your dad? You could ask him why he pissed off when you were six, and left you and your mother to fend for yourselves. Just think ... you could call him a bastard to his ‘spiritual’ face,” laughed Lola.

“Nah,” whispered Zena, “Not him, I don’t care that he left, in fact, he did us a favour, Mum got me into the New Cooper Union, and we never looked back. I can’t even remember what he looks like, Mum just deleted all the images she had of him.”

“But,” continued Zena, “Cohen, my old boyfriend could be interesting. He was found dead in his apartment. There were no signs of a struggle, no marks on his body, and nothing toxic in his blood. Very mysterious. Might be worth a shout.”

“Mind you, he did work for the EurasianIPF, you know, the force us mortals used to call the ‘Thought Police’, there would be a few on the other side that would like to bump him off.”

Lola raised her eyebrows, “Well how about that Enid girl? She had no reason to do herself in, I know she was working on some AI-powered brain transplants, and her team was apparently on the cusp of a major breakthrough when she took that ill-fated dip into Lake Altaussee.”

Zena let out a big yawn, “I’ll put them both on my list, anyway all this *Alternative Spirituality* could actually be a load of bollocks, but I’m knackered, let’s turn in and see what tomorrow might bring.”

\*\*\*

NEWSFLASH\*\*\*NEWSFLASH\*\*\*NEWSFLASH\*\*\*NEWSFLASH\*\*\*NEWSFLASH

Two top US-Eurasian scientists, Zena and Lola Fischer, have both been found dead in a hotel room. The married couple was in the US-controlled South American province of Venezuela, where one of the scientists had taken up a lottery-funded trip to the premises of *Alternative Spirituality*. This little-known organisation claims to have gained access to the spiritual world using advanced AI techniques. In a written submission posted on the social media site InstaPost, representatives of *Alternative Spirituality* stated that their methods are entirely safe and that both women left their facility in good health. They went on to claim that Zena Fischer had been successfully contacted by two spirits, Cohen Fournier, and Enid Boucher, but because of a confidentiality clause in the contract between the client and *Alternative Spirituality*, the company cannot disclose any discourse between the spirit(s) and their client.

It is believed that Ms. Zena and Zola Fischer were jointly working on a scheme that could eventually neutralise all nuclear and atomic weaponry, rendering these deadly munitions harmless. More information will be disclosed about these tragic deaths when the results of an autopsy are released. Their bodies will be flown back to the US-Eurasian capital, Dublin when the tests are completed.

Detectives say that although their investigations are at an early stage, they are not currently looking for anyone else in connection with these deaths.

The end