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Opening extract from

Metawars 2: The Dead are Rising

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1

Jonah Delacroix loved to fly.

He spread his arms wide and pushed his toes together. He swooped low over the sprawling new digital city of Changhai. The warm wind against his face was virtual, but the thrill in his stomach was real.

In the bustling streets below him, new buildings pixelated into existence and throngs of avatars populated this brave new world. Behind each avatar was a real person whose brain interfaced directly with the internet, generating a digital representation of the user called the avatar.

Jonah lived most of his waking life inside a virtual world called the Metasphere. In this, he wasn't unusual. Most people had gone *meta*.

But now, the Metasphere had a rival.

This fast-growing new world that Jonah soared above was called the Changsphere, and it was drawing avatars from the Metasphere with its higher-resolution graphics, faster servers and infectious sense of optimism. To Jonah, the Metasphere – with its rich, 3D rendering and sharp, lifelike recreation of all five senses – had always seemed more real than the crumbling real world. Inside the Changsphere, however, everything seemed richer and sharper still.

One of the things Jonah loved about the virtual world was the sheer diversity of avatars. They took all shapes and sizes, from the familiar to the ridiculous. As he soared, he saw a cat riding an elephant. On the city streets below him, he spotted a chimpanzee selling apps to a raptor, and a shark strolling on two legs. He noticed two translucent triangles (one isosceles and one equilateral) pulsing as they bickered, and a mallard duck parading three ducklings behind it.

Suddenly, Jonah realised that he had no way of knowing if those avatars below did, in fact, have a real person behind them. They could, for all he knew, be dead.

In the Metasphere of old, some users chose to Upload themselves, digitising all of their memories and storing them in their avatar. They would live on in the virtual world in a state of ignorant bliss, confined to a specific island, the Island of the Uploaded. The uploading process, however, killed the user; every Uploaded avatar had committed suicide to get there. But in return, they were immortal.

Immortal, but not indestructible.

The server farm that stored their memories had almost crashed, and in the nick of time, Jonah had led the millions of Uploaded avatars into the light of the new Changsphere world, where they were now roaming free among the living. For Jonah it was a miracle that the dead could come back to life – or at least a digital life.

Jonah had opened the portal between the worlds two months ago. Looking down, it was hard to believe that back then Changhai had been nothing but a digital grid, zoned for development. In fact, this entire world had only recently come into existence.

Jonah wasn't alone in the sky. He flew past a silver, five-pointed star and nodded his head. 'Good morning.'

'It certainly is in here,' the star replied.

Jonah caught a glimpse of his avatar in the star's reflection. He looked just like his real-world self, gangly with an unruly tuft of dark hair. But what struck Jonah more than anything was how lifelike he looked. The graphics here were so sharp that he could have sworn he was looking into a mirror in the real world, and not at a digital reflection.

Thousands of new settlers were arriving in the Changsphere every day. They were buying up plots of virtual land, building homes and businesses. They were moving their entire online lives here. Jonah shared the optimism of these virtual pioneers as they explored their new surroundings. But to Jonah, the Changsphere represented more than a second chance. It was the one place where his father was still alive.

But not everyone was happy.

Below Jonah, a demonstration was taking place in Changhai Square. He hovered high above to see what the commotion was about. *Why would anyone be unhappy here?* he wondered.

About a hundred avatars had gathered and their angry voices drifted up to him:

'Boycott the Changsphere!'

'Don't support terrorism!'

'Hand back the Southern Corner!'

Jonah felt a surge of anger. *They don't know what they're talking about!* he thought. Part of him wanted to fly down there and argue with them, but he was outnumbered a hundred to one and he knew his voice would be drowned out. Besides, he was on his way to see his Uploaded father.

'Hand back the Southern Corner! Don't support terrorism!'

David Foster grinned to himself. This was going well.

He had started with just a few hardcore Millennials – his own people – but the flash mob he had whipped up had soon gone viral and attracted more supporters through the main portal.

A mangy blue hyena flew into the air and cackled, *'Death to the Guardians! Down with Mr Chang!'*

David waddled through the crowd, urging the protestors to get angrier, to shout louder. In the virtual worlds, David took the form of an emperor penguin. He would rather have been a more imposing avatar like a bird of prey, but it was a cruel quirk of Direct Interface, the method of connecting the brain to the virtual world, that the user did not choose his avatar. The subconscious

mind generated the avatar, and the conscious mind just had to live with it.

With a little more prodding, he thought, *I can get these dupes to riot, and perhaps Mr Granger will finally promote me out of Anti-Virus.*

'That's right,' he yelled, 'let 'em know what we think of their Changsphere!'

But something was wrong. The crowd was actually growing *quieter*. Some of the demonstrators had clammed up completely and were staring at the sky. It was difficult for David, as a penguin, to look up, but he strained to follow their gazes.

Another group of avatars had arrived, about twenty of them. They were hovering above the demonstrators' heads, and they didn't look like they had come to join in. One of the newcomers, a zebra with neon-green and black stripes, looked down at David and spat, 'If you don't like it here, then waddle back to the Metasphere.'

A few of his demonstrators floated up to the newcomers' level, but David remained warily on the ground. He had lit the spark of protest and wanted to see how fast his fire would spread.

The hyena squared up to the zebra. 'We'll leave,' it hissed, 'as soon as Mr Chang gives back the quarter of the Metasphere his Guardian friends stole!'

'You'll leave now,' said the zebra, 'or we'll make you sorry!'

'Oh yeah? There are more of us than there are of you. Who are you, anyway? I'll bet you're Guardians yourselves.'

'Guardian terrorist scum!' cried David, and five more protesters took up the shout and lifted off to square up to the newcomers.

'The Guardians saved us,' said the zebra. 'They led us into the Changsphere when our Island was destroyed. So, we won't let you—'

The hyena suddenly turned from affronted to afraid. 'You're…Uploaded?'

It cowered away from the zebra, as a whisper of fear wove through the demonstrators: *'Uploaded!'*

David felt a shiver too. He thought it was unnatural, unholy. The dead shouldn't be allowed to roam among the living. *I can't even tell them apart from us*, he thought.

He knew he had to do something. His flash mob was on the verge of dissipating, losing its nerve. He yelled up at the newcomers, 'These are matters for the living, not the dead! You have no say! You have no rights!'

The blue hyena shrieked and clawed at the zebra as the standoff exploded into a brawl. A giant, fat leech – an Uploaded – sprang onto a protesting minotaur's head with an audible slurp.

This is golden, David told himself. *This'll get us on the big video blogs for sure, maybe even onto Bryony's vlog—*

A gasp went up from all around him. Half the

Uploaded avatars had broken away from the others and were dive-bombing the people on the ground.

A vampire bat swooped down on a slow-moving cow and sank its claws into its shoulders. At first, the cow was more irritated than afraid, but it kicked and thrashed as it was lifted into the air. It succeeded in breaking free, but only for a second. The bat was on the cow's back before it could fly away, and its mouth opened wide... and *kept* on opening...

David stared in horror at the bat. Its mouth was now as wide as its prey was big – even wider – and in a swift, angry motion, it jabbed its little head forward and gulped the startled cow down whole. The bovine avatar disappeared completely into the Uploaded bat.

David couldn't believe what he was seeing. It was impossible. He watched helplessly as his protesters scattered half blindly. The Uploaded stalked them with their mouths gaping open. David didn't wait to see if any more were caught and devoured.

He had to get out of here before the Uploaded came after him!

He turned and flew along the street. He beat his flippers as hard as he could, gaining height until he could see the shiny new shopping mall, where inside he had parked his exit halo. It wasn't far away. He was going to make it. But then David Foster made one fatal mistake.

He looked back.