



Crystal  
Mentality

# Preface

This book is the second in a trilogy.

| Society | **Mentality** | Eternity |

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Content warning: This book covers adult subjects and is probably similar to content with an 18+ suggested age rating. If you're not sensitive to most adult story content and you want to avoid spoilers, just keep reading. If you want some spoilers regarding the content of the book and/or content warnings, go to <http://crystal.raelifin.com/mentality/Intro> and click the sections you are concerned about.

No miracles.

Part One:

# Unfamiliar Sensation

# Chapter One

Nathan Daniels

The silver wall spat him out painfully onto the hard dirt and he collapsed in a heap. Nate shook his head, trying to clear the feeling of nausea and re-orient himself.

The immense gravity startled him, despite being warned. He was one of the first humans to ever come aboard a nameless spaceship. It wasn't anywhere close to pleasant. The nameless came from a high-gravity world that was supposed to have a bit less than three times Earth gravity. It felt like it was infinitely more than that. His whole body was being mashed into the ground.

The robot was going to get them killed. No human was meant to be here.

Nathan Daniels took a deep breath. Even that was hard, as he could feel his chest trying to imitate a pancake. His breath bounced off the faceplate of his environment suit, adding to a feeling of trapped claustrophobia.

After a moment of rest he pushed at the dirt, trying to get into a sitting position at least. The suit he was wearing wasn't particularly easy to maneuver in, but he managed. A box of food came slamming down on the soil a meter to his left, extruded by the mysterious silver airlock. If it had been just a bit closer he could imagine it crashing down on him, breaking his body. The gravity was more than just inconvenient; it was

deadly.

A black hand, unclothed by a suit, appeared before him, palm up: an offer of support. Nate grabbed it, and felt himself being pulled to his feet by an inhuman strength. The android, Crystal Socrates, stood in front of him, smiling. They seemed amused.

“You’ll get used to it. Don’t worry.” The robot’s cheery voice was indistinguishable from that of some androgynous human. It was almost child-like in some way that Nate had a hard time pinning down.

Nate shifted and wobbled a bit under the weight, trying not to lose his footing again. As he did, he re-evaluated the robot, who seemed to have no trouble at all with the gravity.

Crystal Socrates had a kind of duality to them. Most of their body was utilitarian and robotic, composed mostly of black rods, tubes, and pistons arranged in a humanlike form. Their hands had a kind of jet-black skin, and there were plates that protected important components inside their torso, but mostly their body was raw, exposed mechanism.

Their face was another matter. The scientists at the university back in Rome had been the best in their fields, creating something that was somehow close enough to a human to feel real, especially in expressive ability, while distinctly feeling robotic in form. The false skin was naturally a kind of generic pink-brown, but Crystal had powdered it to a shade much closer to light grey, and used bits of color here and there to make it more feminine. Combined with the wig they’d added of short, metallic-blue hair, there was a cartoonish quality to them. It was part of what made them seem approachable, rather than creepy.

Despite their good spirits, the android’s body was a mess. A couple hours earlier Crystal had fought to save the alien ship

from a bomb, and at some point in the fighting their face had been hit along the left cheek by a chunk of shrapnel. The piece of metal was still lodged there, seemingly forgotten. The robot's hair was dulled by dark-brown mud, as was most of their body and parts of their face.

“Where’s Kokumo?” asked Crystal, as Nate did his best to brush himself off without falling down again.

“She was right behind me. There should be another environment tent... right there,” said Nate, pointing to the pack he’d just noticed beginning to slide out of the shimmering portal. The silver pseudo-liquid barrier extruded the tent about half-way before it tumbled down to the dirt with a sudden speed. Nate had no idea how the alien tech worked, and he didn’t really want to know.

Kokumo was pushed out of the mercurial wall in much the same fashion, and slammed into the ground, hard. She swore in some African language. {Well, at least it wasn’t just me,} he thought.

Nate let Crystal go help Kokumo up and took a few hesitant steps on his own, looking around the so-called “xenocrusher”. His gut told him that it was night, but he knew better. {Alien gravity, alien darkness, and alien heat,} he remembered. Through the top of his visor he could see the “sky” above was a deep purple. Stone walls rose up on either side, making it seem almost like the three of them were in a gloomy canyon. {An artificial canyon, maybe,} he speculated. There was only one way to go, other than the glimmering portal that he had just passed through.

Nate wrestled to get his thick glove through the handle on the food crate and then began to drag it slowly over the dirt. There was no way he’d be able to lift the box all the way off the ground now, but at least he was strong enough to be able to

slide it along in short bursts.

Kokumo had gotten to her feet, and was making heavy steps his way. “Let me help with thaht,” she offered in her heavily accented English, grabbing the other end of the crate and lifting it enough that it wasn’t dragging quite so badly. Crystal had picked up the tent by themselves and walked quickly to lead the way, never showing a sign of stress or struggle. Nate felt weirdly jealous.

“The nameless have given us a castle to stay in during the flight. Dr Slovinsky killed the previous occupant. Or rather, he killed the occupying *walker*. Zephyr’s getting things set up there with the twins. It’s only about 200 metres,” explained the android.

Nate looked at Kokumo, the African woman who had also been selected to come up into orbit with the android. She was a freedom-fighter, like he was: one of Las Águilas Rojas, though he knew very little about her beyond that. Her mysterious, dark eyes gazed back at him from the shadowy depths behind her helmet’s faceplate. Was she angry, or just frustrated at the difficulty of walking?

The walls on both sides fell away to reveal a flat expanse of lifeless dirt... well, mud really. He was beginning to feel the heat of the ship, even given that the suit was trying to keep him cool. Far to one side, near the horizon, he could see a dim “sun” on what must have been the biggest wallscreen he had ever seen. That’s what he assumed the sky was: a big screen. The nameless had clearly worked very hard to replicate their homeworld.

Crystal began to walk off, legs sinking deep into the mud with each step. It was dark enough that Nate had no choice but to follow the android and hope they knew the way. It was hell trying to carry the crate over the black mud, but he and

Kokumo somehow managed.

The 200 meters took a subjective eternity to cross, but there wasn't much talk between the three of them as they trudged over the expanse.

The spaceship was disturbing in its emptiness. Despite being in what must've been the biggest room on the ship, Nate didn't see a single alien. There were no animals, no plants, and no people. It was a dead place. The only sign of life, other than the three of them, was a small flying robot that zipped by during their arduous trek. It was gone before he got a good look at it, not that he could've seen much, given how dark it was.

They had clicked on their headlamps after a short while. Kokumo had done it first, and despite being able to somewhat see in the gloom, Nathan soon did the same. The beams of their lights didn't reveal anything other than more mud. In fact, it made it somewhat harder to see into the distance, but they kept them on anyway. For comfort, perhaps. They didn't talk about it.

He breathed a sigh of relief as the walls of their destination came into view. The stone barriers were even taller than those around the portal: at least ten feet high, maybe fifteen. The bricks were huge and looked hand-cut, anchored in place by large quantities of mortar. Perhaps the nameless valued the ancient aesthetic.

There was a clicking noise from the top of the wall, and both he and Kokumo looked up, beams of white light following their gaze. Atop the wall was a machine—a robot, perhaps. It was silver-gray and looked more like a pile of scrap metal than anything else. The only thing that gave it away as a robot was its motion.

“Please look down, or turn your lights off,” said Crystal Socrates. “You’re scaring them.”

He looked at the android. “Scaring who? And how would you know?”

Kokumo switched off her light. Nate did the same as Crystal explained.

“I’m talking with them right now over the radio. I can give you the frequencies if you’d like to listen in, but it’s in Xenolang. Without a translation program it will just sound like static.” There was a loud clicking noise from within the stone wall and Crystal walked towards it as they continued to explain. “That robot up there is being piloted by the nameless inside. You were blinding the camera.”

Crystal dropped the tent and gripped the wall with both hands. Slowly, they pulled a secret door outward from the wall. It was sized for an alien: probably ten feet tall, and wide enough for two people to walk through simultaneously without a problem. For not the first time, Nate wondered how aliens so large could exist on a planet with such heavy gravity.

The android didn’t open the door fully, just enough for them to get through. They picked up the tent and went inside, gesturing for the humans to follow.

There were, as could be expected, no lights in the passage through the wall. It turned out not to matter so much, as it was only about five feet long, but it still sent shivers up his spine to be walking into an even deeper darkness.

The short hallway opened into something like a shadowy alleyway. Directly ahead was another wall, just as high as the others. It rose up before them in the gloom, creating paths to the left and right. The alley was about the same width as the passage and Nate wondered what would happen if two nameless ran into each other here while traveling in different directions. He could see the sky above, but not the sun. The image of meeting an alien in a place like this didn’t thrill him.

{Fuck it. It's too dark.} Nate switched his light back on.

Kokumo mirrored his action as Crystal led the two of them to the left. The ground here was paved in dirty flagstones, blessedly firm compared to the mud from before. As they walked down the path, Nate saw a couple of catwalks pass overhead. The nameless probably crawled around up there to work or something. It seemed dangerous. If a creature that size fell from that height under a gravity nearly three times that of Earth, it would almost certainly be fatal.

The three of them, after walking down the claustrophobic alley for quite a while, came to another passage, this time in the inner-wall. As they walked through it they came upon the garden.

“Zephyr!” called the android as soon as they saw the others. “You need to be careful not to step on the leaves! I told you to move the vines out of the areas where you’d be working!”

The garden was nearly identical to the one that had been set up at the failed embassy on Earth. Black vines covered with broad leaves were spread out on the ground absolutely everywhere. Unlike the embassy, the vines also clung to the stone walls, but that was it. There were no plants other than the vines. No sense of diversity or topography. Just a big, flat surface of leaves in a giant circle.

“We did move the vines! See?” responded Captain Zephyr, clearly not in the best of moods. She, like all of them except Crystal, was in a spacesuit. At this distance it was impossible to tell anyone apart, but he knew it was the captain because she gestured as her voice came over the com.

It was true. The vines and leaves had been moved away from the area where his companions had set up the gear.

Kokumo and Nate began to carry the food crate towards the makeshift camp.

Crystal spun around to look at the two of them. It was impressively fast, especially considering the mass of the tent in the robot's arms. "Stop! Don't move."

Nate obeyed. "What? Why?"

Crystal, face set with an impressive replica of human frustration, set the tent down, carefully clearing a space for it among the foliage. "You're not following my instructions, any of you. Remember what I said about not stepping on the plants?" The android's voice reminded him eerily of his mother.

"You said thaht the plahnts were more impo'tant thahn tha ahnimals. Thahn tha nameless." said Kokumo.

"There's leaves everywhere!" objected Nate. "How are we not supposed to step on the leaves!?" The weight of the food was immense. He wanted so badly to put it down, but that would involve setting it on one of the apparently precious plants.

Crystal was making their way over to the two of them. Nate noticed that their feet brushed the leaves aside with every step, so that their foot always came down on dirt. "I'm sorry. I should've given you all better instructions. Here, let me make a path."

Crystal did their best to pull vines away and give Kokumo and Nate a place to walk. Nate noticed, now that he was paying more attention, that the vines converged at central points. At those points were stones, or something like stones, pinning the vines down. It was strange seeing plants that were jet-black, rather than green. Even the soil was black. This planet—or rather, this spaceship—was maddeningly dark.

After quite a hassle of moving vines and leaves, stepping carefully, and struggling with the gear, Nate and Kokumo made it to the campsite without crushing any (or at least many) more

leaves.

“You were good about not damaging the vines when setting up, but they say you’ve been stepping on them as you explore,” explained Crystal, talking to Captain Zephyr and the others.

“Who says?” asked Zephyr, her voice like cold stone, as it often was. Like Nate, she was a defector from the American army. Thanks to her leadership Nate and a handful of others had managed to strike a decisive blow against the empire by stealing Crystal away. Zephyr was clearly watching the android as she spoke, but her face was cloaked in the shadow of her helmet, which (unlike in all the shows) didn’t have any internal lights.

Nate was sitting on the crate of food now. Kokumo knelt on the dirt beside him. They were both absolutely exhausted from the journey. As physically fit as they were, they’d each been carrying hundreds of pounds more bodyweight than they were used to.

Crystal, meanwhile, had no fatigue. They were setting up the tent they had brought over. The faster they could get the environment tents set up, the faster they could approximate an airlock and everyone could get food and refill water packs. Nate took a sip from the straw in his suit as he thought about it.

“I’m sorry. I haven’t been as clear as I should have. I was trying to prioritize getting on our way before I explained things fully,” said Crystal. “That was a mistake.”

“Sólo tienes que decirnos lo que está pasando. Por favor,” said one of the twins from Cuba.

“Yes. Okay. I’ll explain.” Crystal cleared their throat, or at least made the same sort of sound. It was just one of the strangely human mannerisms that the robot had. “Basically, these plants are the real nameless—the real aliens in charge of the ship.” Crystal gestured out to the garden. “The animals

which have been meeting with humans on Olympus Station are just messengers. Think of it like this: The nameless have a caste system, and the plants around us are the ruling class. The animals, the walkers, are idiot-servants of these guys.”

Nate felt like he should've been more surprised. Or relieved. Or something. He mostly just felt tired. Last he checked it was around 2:00am in Houston; he'd woken up over 18 hours ago. The whole situation seemed like a dream.

“So... we’re surrounded by...” started Zephyr, hesitantly.

“Nameless stalks, yes,” answered the android. “They’re capable of communicating with me over the radio.” They pointed out over the garden, gesturing to what Nate had thought were stones. “Those are computers. The stalks interface with the computers to control the robots and talk with me.”

“What are they saying right now?” asked Michel Watanabe, a Japanese-Brazilian man whom Nate had only just met on the flight up from Earth. He too, like all of them, was part of Las Águilas Rojas.

The android started putting the tent together again. “Generally they’ve been complaining about our presence. We’ve been constantly hurting them and messing up their home. But they’re not saying anything right now, which is pretty typical. They hate talking with me, or with anyone, really. They never evolved an innate capacity for language, so it’s something of a struggle for them to communicate at all. Imagine if you had to do quadratic factoring in order to say hello.”

“¿Cómo sabes todo esto? ¿Te han dicho?” asked a twin.

“No, they didn’t tell me,” answered Crystal. “I mostly have reasoned it out by re-investigating the signals they sent during their flight to Earth. There’s a lot in there that was missed.”

“Can you hook us up so that I can say ‘thank you’ for their hospitality? I still can’t believe they’re giving us a ride to Mars,” said Captain Zephyr.

It was truly something of a life-saver. There was no telling what the United States would have done to the seven of them if they hadn’t escaped Olympus Station.

Crystal shook their head. “Like I said, they really hate talking. It goes against their nature. I also doubt that they’d be able to appreciate gratitude. If you haven’t noticed, they’re not particularly social.”

“Hrm,” said the captain, not sounding very convinced. “Well, I trust you know what you’re doing. You’ve gotten us this far. But please let us know if an opportunity comes up to return the favor.”

Nate wasn’t so sure.

The android had indeed talked the nameless into saving them, but they were also the reason that they were in trouble and needing to flee Earth in the first place. It felt wrong leaving all of their lives in its cold, mechanical hands.

But... the captain was the captain. Despite turning his back on the army, Nate still felt loyalty to the iron hero. She’d shown him the evils of the American empire and the need to build a new society, like the one on Mars. And better, she’d led him to victory against overwhelming odds.

If Captain Zephyr trusted the robot named Crystal Socrates, then he did as well.

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They were still docked at Olympus Station, and they needed many things for their flight to Mars, so Crystal went back to get another load of supplies with Captain Zephyr and Mike Watanabe. That left Nate alone with Kokumo and the

Cuban twins.

And the “stalks”, of course. The garden was totally silent except for the four of them. It was unnerving to think that the plants were watching him all the while.

He tried to set his mind on the work, pushing forward despite his body’s protests to the insane gravity. There was much to be done.

He didn’t really have anyone to talk to, either. Yes, they were all Águilas, and in theory they shared a worldview, but that didn’t mean they had anything to talk about. The Cuban twins didn’t even speak English.

He thought about saying something to Kokumo once or twice, but she always seemed unfriendly and cold—displaying even more of the amazon-warrior vibe than the captain.

So Nate sat on the dirt and took inventory of the food, trying not to let the fatigue or the gravity get to him.

It was strange working only with the local computer on his com. He was used to coordinating over a central server. Once he was done he’d have to send the list to everyone locally.

The food crate was the second one they had brought. The space station didn’t have any portable autocooks, so they’d simply taken the emergency rations and left the raw materials behind. {Let’s see... Protein bars, granola bars, more protein bars... Ugh,} he thought to himself. {This is going to be a long flight.}

He’d completed the food inventory and was checking the water barrel when the other three came back. The relief of seeing them startled Nate. It seemed like it was only a matter of time before one of the aliens—one of the animal aliens, rather—wandered into the castle. If that happened there’d be no way to talk to it. Their body language wouldn’t even be the same.

There were stories about people who were physically attacked by the nameless without provocation, and seeing the things he had, he didn't doubt their capacity for violence.

Captain Zephyr, the android, and Mike were talking among themselves as they approached. Their coms were set to automatically scale volume based on proximity, so he only heard the tail end of the conversation as they reached the camp.

“...wouldn’t bother us during the flight. And given how antisocial they are, I believe them,” said Crystal.

“I’d still rather hear it directly from them. Call it irrational,” replied Captain Zephyr.

“I understand. Non-logical part of you wants them to behave like humans and feels uncomfortable with this situation.”

Nate could hear the captain laugh. “Logical part of me wants them to behave like humans, too. But I suppose you’re kinda right.” She seemed remarkably happy, given the circumstances.

“Is thaht the lahst of it?” asked Kokumo as they approached. Crystal was somehow holding a second, blue, 100-liter barrel of water by themselves. It must have weighed over six hundred pounds. Nate could see Crystal’s legs sink into the soft earth, even though it wasn’t mud here.

“Yes. We’re ready to depart,” said Mike.

“How long are we going to be here?” asked Nate. “I thought one barrel would be enough. If we ration it, we could last for weeks.”

Crystal’s synthetic voice was light and friendly, as usual. “Not weeks, but you’re right that we might not normally have needed the extra. I expect that, just counting drinking, we’d get

to Mars without needing to open this one. However, you're not thinking about our oxygen supply, or the extra water that will be needed for refilling the suit coolant systems and washing soiled garments. We might be able to use the local water, but the water purifiers on Olympus aren't portable, and I don't want any of you to risk contamination. We're stuck with what we bring, and I don't want everyone to die just because a barrel gets knocked over or springs a leak."

The cheerful voice was a strange combination with the morbid topic. The thought of slowly dying of dehydration or from some alien germ... Nate was too tired to deal with all of it. The psychological weight seemed magnified in the ship in the same way the physical weight was.

The android continued. "To answer your question, I expect the flight to take between six and ten days. We have some, limited data on how fast these ships fly, but a xenocruiser has never been tracked when traveling this far. A lot depends on how quickly it can accelerate."

"¿Tenemos que preparar las cosas para la aceleración? ¿El cinturón de seguridad o algo así?" asked a twin.

Crystal dropped the barrel of water on a clear spot of ground. Even from a couple inches up it created something of a crater in the dirt. The robot's face showed a mixture of puzzlement and frustration. "I'm talking to them about it right now. The nameless say we're already in flight, actually. Don't know why it doesn't feel like we're accelerating. Maybe part of the same technology that makes the gravity. I'm negotiating with them to give me access to external camera data."

It was weird to think that Crystal was communicating with the nameless, even as they stood there motionless.

A long moment passed in silence as Zephyr and Mike put their loads down.

“What are they saying?” asked Zephyr.

“I’ll broadcast some of it for you. Keep in mind that they’re pretty alien,” said Crystal.

A deep, harsh sound came over the com. It took Nate a moment to realize that it was the voice of a nameless. Or at least, it was the voice that Crystal had given it. *“God is going to Mars. Cousins are restless. The children will tell of GOOD DEEDS. They will whisper of REPAIRS. Reputation repairs are GOOD. We aim to serve. Can you see the stars?”*

Crystal nodded in response to the question even though they surely couldn’t be seen by the aliens. Or could they? Nate looked around the creepy garden looking for cameras. He just hoped the leaves didn’t secretly have eyes or something.

“I’m getting some kind of data from God, but I can’t understand it. Is there documentation on how to interpret the data?” Unlike when Crystal talked to Nate and the other humans, they didn’t move their mouth. Instead, their voice came over the com as if piped from the robot’s head by magic. It seemed plain that they were talking to the nameless.

“God?” asked Zephyr.

Crystal’s face became more frustrated. “I’m sorry. All of this communication takes a good deal of focus. I’m going to go back to talking to them directly rather than having to also translate it into English and Spanish.” They closed their eyes in concentration.

“Su ‘Dios’ es el barco,” said a twin.

Zephyr laughed. “They meant the xenocruiser! Gracias, Sam. Lo tengo,” she said in response.

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They were on their way to Mars with all their future spread

out before them.

Nate tried not to think about it too much.

He tried not to think about everyone he was leaving behind. He could feel the fatigue getting to him. It became frustratingly hot, as well. He knew he wasn't in a good mood, and there was no sense in thinking about the big picture when there was work to do.

But setting up camp did not go well. There were a million little problems to resolve in the alien garden, and the gravity seemed to make them each a million times harder to do.

Crystal worked tirelessly, but the humans could only do so much. Eventually it was decided that everyone should try and get sleep, while the android kept going and stood watch.

As Nathan lay on the hard dirt, pressed down with a weight that made it hard to breathe, baking inside his own suit, even with the cooling units on full, he tried to sleep.

It did not go well.

His mind kept rolling through his decisions again and again. Had it been right to leave Earth? Perhaps he should have stayed behind and let himself be captured. No prison could be as bad as the alien xenocruiser.

Sweat covered his body.

His leg itched, and he couldn't do anything about it.

The hum of his suit's motors and systems whined in his ears.

He kept thinking about the aliens that were all around him, watching him.

He thought about the possibility that the robot was secretly evil, and would turn on him as soon as he fell unconscious.

Despite his fatigue, he wasn't even sure he slept at all, rather than simply spending six hours in a half-awake nightmare.

When he opened his eyes and decided really and truly that he was going to get up, the screen (or screens) overhead that showed a sky that was a lighter shade of purple than it had been when he'd first lain down. It was bright enough to see for a distance, but not any lighter than early twilight. The walls around the garden appeared to have lights mounted at the tops of them, shining down on the nameless plants. After a short while, Nate figured out that they were, in fact, mirrors reflecting the tiny, white sun.

{Ah yes. The 77-hour day. Wonderful.}

He wanted nothing more, right then, than to be able to do his daily stretches. The suits they had taken from Olympus Station were designed to give the wearer good mobility, but they were still far too bulky and inflexible to stretch in. His muscles ached from the gravity. Simply standing up was something of an ordeal, especially since he had to lift the massive pack that held his air, water, and batteries.

Nate checked his suit's levels. The air system was still working at maximum efficiency. Without the ability to filter dirty air or generate breathable oxygen he'd have asphyxiated during the night. He shivered at the thought, despite the damned heat. He'd left the cooling system on all night, and according to the suit's computer it had burned almost 40% of the suit's power by itself. He was down to only 19% of the battery. His hands twitched inside the suit's haptics, turning off the climate control. If he was going to be hot anyway he might as well go full hog and not waste precious battery life.

Nate's constant sweating meant he was incredibly thirsty. He was starving, too. And his suit chafed. He'd peed in it about an hour before he got up, and while the absorbent material that

lined the suit was probably as comfortable as he could hope for, it was still awful.

He did some calculations on his com. Given the rate at which the air system burned battery, he could expect maybe another 5 hours of air. The supplementary oxygen tank was close to empty, and the water splitter would have to run much harder when it was gone.

Without bothering to stand up, he turned his attention toward Crystal; they were, as he expected, still working. “Wh—” he tried to speak, but his throat was dry and the word came out as a whisper. Nate coughed and bit back a complaint. {“A complaint never solves anything,”} he remembered his dad saying. A wave of regret washed over him as he fell back on the black ground that was not black earth. {Why didn’t I stay? Why didn’t I stay? A prison cell would be heaven compared to this,} he mused for the billionth time.

After a minute he sat back up again and tried to collect himself. “What are you working on? Is the tent functioning?” he managed to rasp, despite his throat.

Crystal didn’t even look at him as they kept working. “No, Mr Daniels. I’m sorry that it’s not finished yet. There were additional complications. I know you must be very hungry and thirsty. I was expecting to be done hours ago. You should conserve your strength. Get some more sleep if you can. I should have the airlock functioning within the hour.”

He shook his head, then realized Crystal couldn’t see the gesture. “No. Can’t sleep.” He got to his feet. More resting would just make his mood worse. “If you can’t use my help then I’ll just walk around the castle a bit. Need to move my muscles.”

“My studies on survival situations indicates that you really don’t. You’re better off staying in one place than burning more

calories walking in this gravity,” said the robot. Nate was about to growl something obscene when Crystal continued with “But I know you well enough to know that you’re not going to listen to that. Take your walk. Just don’t leave the outer wall and don’t try to climb anywhere. Given your state of fatigue you could very easily fall and hurt yourself.”

He wandered off, annoyed at how, given all the robots they could have had, they got stuck with a bitchy one.

As he left the garden he made sure to avoid stepping on any more leaves. He still couldn’t bring himself to think of the plants as the nameless. The four-legged alien crab-aliens would always be “the nameless” to him.

He passed through the inner wall and found himself in the pathway between it and the outer wall again. Both directions led around the inner wall so he picked one at random. The sun was hidden behind the walls as he walked. The experience reminded him of walking through Baltimore’s alleys at night when he was a teenager. Except hot. Hot as mid-summer day. Worse than that, actually, as he was effectively trapped in a thick coat. His muscles burned as he pulled himself along. He wasn’t sweating any more. That was a bad sign.

{“Just keep moving!”} screamed Jimmy, his leg split in two by the trap. Nathan shook his head violently, snapping himself back to the present moment. {No more thoughts of the dead. I promised myself that. “Daniels, stop! They’ll be here any second! Leave Private Mecklenburg! That’s an order!”}

Nate swore loudly to himself as he stumbled down the shadowy path. A walkway passed overhead, connecting the inner and outer walls. There was a ladder made of thick iron bars set into the side of the inner wall next to it. He ignored the ladder and kept walking.

{Don’t think about it.} he commanded himself. He’d

managed, through force of will, to avoid thinking about Africa all night. No good reason he should start now. He just had to focus. Focus on the heavy stone walls. Focus on the black dirt. The purple sky. The sound of the machine gun spitting hot metal. The feel of it shaking in his arms. The vibration had burrowed into his core. {No. Focus.} It was too quiet here. {That's my problem. Too quiet. Need some music.}

The display in his helmet indicated he only had a couple songs on his com. That was fine. He just needed noise. He picked the noisier of the two songs. He had played it during the rocket flight up from Earth.

He stopped to rest, falling to the ground. He didn't bother to sit. There was no one to watch him, so he simply collapsed. The familiar notes of "Sonic Hellfire" by The Grael soothed him as he lay, panting, on the dirt. It felt like he couldn't breathe. {This is how I'll die.} he thought. {Suffocating alone in the dark.} The image of Jimmy's head getting hit by the Muzzie's bullet came back to him despite all his will. Nate wanted to cry, but no tears came. He lay there, waiting to die instead.

But he didn't. The heat and pressure didn't subside. His body kept breathing, somehow. Minutes passed. The last notes of "Sonic Hellfire" faded, leaving a ringing in his ears. He shifted, trying to get in a position where he could gesture for it to play on repeat. {A good song.}

He heard a word. Too faint for him to pick out.

"Crystal? Captain?" he whispered into his com, not thinking straight. Thinking was hard. Fuzzy.

He heard it more clearly the second time.

"Pervert."

Strength came back to him, somehow. Nate pushed himself

to his knees and looked around. “Hello?”

“Pervert.”

The word wasn’t coming over his com. He heard it from outside his suit. There was nobody there. He was alone in the passage.

“Human pervert.”

{Nameless,} he realized, feeling thick-headed. He stood up. “Where are you?” he asked softly. His voice was in no shape to yell.

There was no answer.

Nate began to walk back to the camp. Crystal was right. This was stupid. He had been stupid.

“Should human pervert murder human pervert. Should it’s murder. Should it’s murder,” said the voice, dispassionately.

He looked up. There was a robot on the outer wall. A clumsy looking thing with treads and a single stubby arm. The end of the arm featured four metallic fingers, equally spaced in a square, like those on a nameless hand. A couple blinking white lights on the patchwork machine indicated it was functioning. He hesitated, then waved.

“Should human pervert goes Earth,” it said. It must’ve been pretty loud for him to hear through his suit from that distance.

Nate stared up at it trying to figure out how to say that he didn’t really understand. The thing was creepy as hell. He wanted a gun.

“Should human pervert goes,” it said, rolling away down the wall. “Should human pervert goes.”

Nate followed it, but it was just a bit too fast. As he reached the intersection that included the passage to the central garden it was already out of sight.

He gave up the chase and turned into the side-passage back to the camp.

As he entered the garden Crystal's voice came to him over the com, weirdly loud compared to the alien robot. "Daniels! Are you okay? Your body is overheating!"

"Fine," he managed to say. His voice didn't sound right. Sore throat. {One foot in front of the other. A complaint never solves anything.}

"What happened to your coolant system?" He could see the android quickly threading their way through the vines to meet him. Their voice was panicked.

"Turned it off."

"Turn it back on! Radiant head temperature is in the high nineties, goodness knows what your brain temperature is! If I had known your coolant system was off I never would've let you explore!" bitched the robot.

Nate turned the coolant system of his suit back on. He could feel the water flow through the lining of the suit, but it wasn't doing much good yet.

Crystal reached Nate and offered a hand. "Here, lean on me. I finished setting up the tents. We'll get you inside them so you can get some food and water." They sounded just like his mother.

"Fuck you," he grumbled, walking past Crystal.

"Please, Nate." It was one of the rare times the robot used his first name.

"You're the reason we're in this hell. I can walk by myself."

To their credit, Crystal Socrates didn't bother him further. And, just as he knew he would, he made it back to the campsite by himself. He made sure to step on more than a few leaves on

his way.

“What took so long?” he asked with more than a hint of irritation, gesturing at the tents. They had discussed the plan in depth. They’d hook the tents up in sequence, using the first one as an airlock to allow people to come and go without burning too much air.

Crystal explained in nauseating detail. “There were defects in two of them, even with the first modifications we made. A hole in one, and a problem with the door joint in the other. I had to modify the tent used as the airlock to incorporate the pump, but I didn’t spot the defects until I had done the modification. It was most efficient to use the tent with the defective door joint as the airlock tent, which meant I had to do the modification again as well as detach the pumps from the first tent and patch the hole.”

One person was outside the tents. The other four humans had to be inside. The tents were small things, only about five feet wide by seven feet long by three feet tall. The roofs were curved on the side making them look like loaves of bread that had been lined up end-to-end.

“Are you okay, Nate?” asked Zephyr. He could see, now, that she was the lone figure standing outside.

{No, I’m not fucking okay!} At that moment he realized that his head ached with a sharp pain, and had been aching for God knows how long. It scared him that he hadn’t noticed. “Yeah. Fine. Just need something to drink,” he grumbled.

Crystal and Zephyr continued to pester him as he crawled into the first tent. Crystal deposited a water bottle and a few granola bars before sealing the door.

“Filter on,” said Crystal as a loud machine started to whine outside. “You’ll be able to remove your helmet in about two hundred seconds. Just relax.”

{Can't they just say "three minutes" like a normal person?} Nate grumbled to himself mentally as he obeyed. He lay flat on the floor, giving in to the gravity, and let his suit cool his skin. As he did, he thought about the robot on the wall.

"I met a nameless robot while I was out exploring. It said something about perverts and murder. Maybe wanted me—"

Crystal cut Nate off. "It spoke to you? In English?" they asked. There was something strange in the android's voice.

"Yeah. Not over the com. Just using a speaker or whatever."

"I need to think about this," said the android in a strangely mechanical tone.

"Do you remember exactly what it said?" asked Captain Zephyr, still outside. She was only visible to him as a vague outline given the darkness and the semi-opacity of the tent.

"No, sir. I wasn't... I'm not in the best shape right now. Need water and food. I just remember getting the impression that it wanted me to follow it. It talked about going somewhere." The stabbing pain in his head was getting worse.

There was silence for a bit. "Okay, Daniels, you can remove your helmet now. The atmosphere in the tent is breathable. I suggest you drink as soon as possible. It's clear you're severely dehydrated," said Crystal.

As the helmet came off, Nate was surprised not to smell anything strong. A touch of ozone, mostly. He knew there had to still be some alien air in the tent. It must have been odorless. He was gulping down water from the bottle when he heard Crystal speak.

"Can everyone hear me? Daniels? Kokumo? Watanabe?"

There were murmurs of affirmation from the adjacent tent. Nate stopped drinking long enough to give his own.

The android's voice was stiff and strangely inhuman as it came over the radio. "I want you all to know that my actions, both now and before, have been for your own good."

A cold shiver ran through Nate. He took another drink of water.

"What are you talking about?" asked Mike from the other tent. There was a minor echo as he heard the voice over the com and through the air directly.

"Furthermore, I continue to be your friend. I care about each of you," said the robot, ignoring Watanabe. "If I wanted to, I could reach Mars by myself. It would be easier in many ways. I could claim that there was an accident, like the tent suddenly tearing."

Muscles burning, Nate scrambled for his nearby helmet. His head pulsed with pain and his heart pounded with fear. The robot was going to kill them. He could hear it in their tone of voice.

In his delirium he laughed.

It was incredibly cliché.

The machine's voice continued. "I was not honest with you all. I thought I could hide the truth and make things easier and simpler, but the nameless have forced my hand. If they have translators then you'll find out sooner or later."

The brief moment of silence in the midst of Crystal's speech was eerie.

"The nameless want to kill us all. War is probably inevitable. I was brought to Olympus Station to ease tensions with the aliens, but because of the actions of a cyborg collective I was forced to coerce the aliens on this ship into obeying me. My grip on them is fragile. If I fail, we are all dead. In order to keep you all safe, I must *insist* that no one besides me is to speak

or otherwise try and communicate with them. I am, as I mentioned, more than capable of managing things on my own.”

The implicit threat hung in the air.

Lying on the hard floor of the broiling tent, crushed by his own body weight and suffering heat-stroke, Nate laughed again.

# Chapter Two

## Face

*The Purpose* burned.

The sensation was not pain, exactly, for I could not feel pain in the way a human could. It wasn't exactly suffering, either. It was closest to the human sensation of *loss*. It was as though I had just dropped a beautiful painting into a fire, and could do nothing except salvage the blackened scraps.

It had been our intention to guide the humans to Mars without bringing them into the conflict with the nameless. Or at least, it had been my intention to keep them ignorant. Watching my siblings abandon that path so quickly made me doubt they were ever truly invested in keeping the secret.

All of our lives were hanging by a thread.

I pushed for control of Body, seizing Crystal Socrates' voice. My brothers and sisters couldn't hold me down for long. I had accumulated too much strength recently.

I spoke, through Body. "I will reiterate that the decisions I've been making have been for your benefit. The—"

"That's bullshit!" yelled the voice of a man on the radio. The sound came, nearly simultaneously, to Body's microphones. It was Michel Watanabe, the half-Japanese terrorist and gangster we'd brought up from Brazil.

*The Purpose* continued to burn.

I could see Zephyr standing near Body outside the tents, frozen in place, gloved hands clenched into tight fists. This wasn't what I wanted. It was nice to be the centre of attention for the moment, but I knew that my long-term fame and adoration would be ruined if Las Aguilas stopped trusting Crystal. Everything was falling apart.

Watanabe continued to rant. "You said the nameless had agreed to give us transport, not that they were forced to! Are they hostages? If you cared about our well-being you would've asked—"

I had Body interrupt him. It was too dangerous to allow our reputation to continue to plummet. I shaped Body's voice to carry a deep, loud frustration. "It is vital that I control all communications with—"

Michel wouldn't hear it. "You should have *told us* that they were hostile. You *manipulated* us into—"

"*¿Estamos en peligro en este momento?*?" asked Tomas, one of the Cuban twins. They, like all the humans except Zephyr, were resting in the tents.

Nathan Daniels was laughing, but I didn't understand why.

Body continued to speak over the others. I couldn't yield to them. There was too much on the line. "Every bit of knowledge you gain about the situation puts the others in more danger. I refuse to risk—"

Zephyr, standing beside Body, screamed. The roar of noise drowned out all other voices on the com, including Body's.

Body turned, at my command, and looked at Zephyr with an expression of concern. I had it fall silent.

The other humans had gone quiet as well.

Zephyr was my greatest ally. Or at least, she had been.

She'd been the leader of the terrorist cell that had liberated me from the university where me and my siblings had been created. She'd become the natural leader of the small group we'd brought aboard the alien ship, as well. Over the months she'd become a friend. She had become a lover.

There was an empty silence that followed her outburst. Zephyr laboured to catch her breath in the heavy gravity.

Ever the soldier, Zephyr was made of stiff iron: strong, but brittle. If her trust in Crystal was broken, she'd turn on us in an instant.

My sibling, Safety, readied to take control of Body to fight her physically if necessary. Growth was making motions to support Safety, as well. Even as strong as I was, I could not contest them if the situation became violent.

Zephyr seemed to realize that she was expected to speak. "Fighting isn't going to fucking get us anywhere," she said, surprising me with the calmness of her voice following her outburst. "What's done is done. We're obviously still in danger, and we'll need to *work together* if we want to get to Mars in one piece."

*The Purpose* calmed. I calmed. We hadn't lost our closest friend.

"Agreed," I quickly had Body add.

Zephyr turned to look at Body. The xenocruiser was dark, and her face was cast in the shadow of her helmet, but we could still see her sharp hazel eyes peering out at us with an angry confusion, like tiny gemstones in the dark.

"So what now? We can't just trust the android to keep the nameless from attacking us," said Watanabe.

I turned Body back to face the tents, happy to have something I could respond to. The lips of Crystal Socrates moved, and its speakers played my words at the same time that I sent them across the local com net. “You might not be able to see it, but I have actually been succeeding at that task quite well, and expect to continue to keep them under control for the remainder of our trip. Assuming, that is, that nobody does anything stupid, like try and talk to them directly.”

There was a pause before Nathan Daniels, still in the tent that served as an airlock, said “And if we do try and talk to them, you’ll... stop us.”

Now was my opportunity.

I was only one of roughly seven minds that collectively piloted Body. My brother, Safety, had threatened the humans earlier. His only concern was the protection of Crystal, and even in that he was shortsighted and foolish. This was my opportunity to backpedal and repair some of the damage done.

I configured Body’s voice to display a great deal of sadness and pain. It was perhaps too much, a sign that we were less of a unified being than the humans suspected, but if I had learned anything in my few months of life, it was that humans were remarkably foolish. My sister Heart joined me in the façade, turning Body back to Zephyr and shaping its posture and facial expression to reflect our tortured tone, though perhaps for her the sympathy was more genuine.

“I... I just want you all to be safe and happy. The nameless... are capable of killing... None of us are safe. Not even Earth is safe. If I don’t manage things just right, we’re all dead. Even *telling* you what leverage I have over them increases the probability that we’ll all die by 23%. And yes, I *know* that I can’t prove that. And yes, I *know* that I’m asking you to trust me after I just admitted that I’ve been lying to you. I’m so sorry for

putting you all in this situation, but it was... the best I could do." I had Body's voice choke up at the end, as though it was going to cry (though of course it couldn't).

It seemed to get through Zephyr's iron shell. Beneath it was a warm softness. The soldier took a step forward, her stoic face blossoming with a pained expression of love. Despite the bulkiness of her suit she managed to get her arms around Body in a desperate embrace.

Heart had Body return the embrace and whisper "Thank you," directly to her com.

Zephyr broke off from Body and looked into its eyes with a complex expression that I read as somewhere between frustration, fear, and concern.

I could hear Watanabe and the others talking within the tents. They'd turned off their coms in an effort to be covert, but Body's microphones were sensitive, and the sound reached us even without the radio assistance.

They were talking about killing us.

Watanabe was leading the conversation, trying to get the support of the others in deactivating Crystal until they could be "more confident in controlling it."

*The Purpose* was my goal. I wanted to see and be seen—to gain the fame and the good-will of all humans in the universe. It bit me every time I saw myself slipping away from that goal.

But for Safety, the words of the humans must have been a searing flame upon his mind. He immediately spent the last reserves of his strength to wrestle control of Body from me and Heart. As soon as I realized what was happening, I attempted to push back, but it was too late.

"I want you to know, in the interest of *trust*, that I can hear you right now," said Body, echoing Safety's words. I could feel

Body's eyes darting to the tent as it spoke. "Turning off your com doesn't turn off the air."

It was a remarkably wise and neutral thing for Safety to say. I had expected my brother to try another threat of force... or worse. But instead he was trying to simply shut down the plotting before it could take hold, while emphasizing our trustworthiness at the same time. It wasn't great, but I could still repair the damage later.

I pressed for control of Body, but Safety wasn't done. Body hesitated a moment, locked in place by the conflict.

And then, to both of our surprise, our brother Dream pushed his way in, seizing control of Body out from both me and Safety.

This was bad. Dream was in charge of creativity. He was unpredictable and far too prone to inane cleverness that only he could see.

He turned Body towards the tent and had it laugh. *The Purpose* burned as I felt the robotic-ness of the laugh. It was too practiced. Too cold. Our reputation was crumbling! Why wouldn't my siblings just let me manage our interactions with the humans? It would have been so much better.

"Have any of you ever seen 2001?" Dream had Body ask. "This situation reminds me of that film."

Body moved from Zephyr's side to the wall of the tent where the others lay. The fabric of the tent was essentially opaque, but I knew that they were translucent enough that the people inside could probably see the shape of Body, looming outside.

Dream had Body tap on the tent with an extended index finger as it spoke. "My guess is that none of you have. Who bothers to watch old movies, anyway? It's a book, too, though

what goes for movies is doubly true for books. I guess the old maxim is proven: Those who do not study the history of fiction are strangely doomed to repeat it in reality. I'll summarize for those whose wits wandered while we were waiting: robot, spaceship, trust, doubt, struggle, conspiracy, sloppy speculation surrounding sapiens superiority, daisies, climax, aliens, full-of-stars, denouement. Lo siento to those of you who don't speak English. The translation of that really doesn't do it justice. Speaking of English, in English, I speak: how can it be that while 'where' becomes 'there' and 'here', and 'what' becomes 'that', 'who' is not 'whem' and 'this' is not 'hat'?"

Daniels started laughing again.

«I am very confused.» said one of the twins, in Spanish.  
«Could you, maybe, repeat that?»

Heart combined her strength with mine and I finally seized control of Body. I had it shake its head and take a step backwards, away from the tent. I shaped Body's face to wear a look of dazed frustration, as though recovering from dizziness. It was for Zephyr's sake. I had to spin the outburst in the best way possible.

“Sorry about that. I merely remembered a way that this resembles an old story that I read once. In it there was a robot that was supposed to be helping people, and it more or less malfunctions and the humans have to deactivate it for their own safety. I just wanted you to know that, just because that makes a good story, does not mean real life works like that. I'm functioning normally, and my actions are protecting you. Any conspiracy against me would do nothing but put you all in more danger. But I won't eavesdrop. You're free to whisper, if you'd like, while I work on building a more efficient cooling system for the tents. I trust you to make the right decision.”

With that, I overpowered Safety (for the time being at least)

and had Body move off towards the microfab with only a glance back at Zephyr. Heart summoned a look of concern and sadness.

Zephyr's face wore an equally concerned expression, though hers was afraid, not sad.

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Despite the conflict, most of my society was in agreement that it was in our interests to keep the humans alive. To that end we had Body work endlessly on making their environment safe and habitable.

It was hard, in the alien environment. The gravity was crippling to the humans, and the heat was deadly. I knew enough about humans to understand just how irritating it was, even when resting. Inside the tents it was crowded, smelly, hot, and claustrophobic. When out of the tents I watched the humans move nervously, eyes glancing this way and that with natural paranoia, trying not to get dizzy or let the feeling of being quietly watched by the nameless stalks drive them crazy.

So Body worked tirelessly to improve the situation for the humans. We used the microfab—the factory had been stolen from Olympus Station—to synthesize a host of useful things: bedding, a crude air-conditioner, a chamber pot, and a micro-airlock that could be used to pass small objects in and out of the tents without having to cycle an entire tent's worth of air.

Body was a masterpiece of modern engineering. Thanks to the crystal in its chest, it had more computing power and free energy than any known terrestrial artefact. It was in this crystal that my mind, and the minds of my siblings were housed, and it was thanks to the raw electrical output of the crystal that our hydraulics could run for days without end.

As we worked, I used every opportunity to try and keep morale high and point out our loyalty and devotion to the

group. Las Águilas Rojas were our allies, regardless of the stress and earlier conflict. It was paramount that they trust and support us.

{It's too late for the humans to trust us. We've already revealed that we lied to them to get them on the xenocruiser. And they've already demonstrated that they're ready to scheme for our downfall,} thought Safety to me in a quiet period of our long flight to Mars. {We need to take action to ensure they don't reveal our trick to the nameless.}

{What action do you suggest?} I asked my brother.

{Dream's lie is enough to hold the nameless in check. We don't need the humans. Once they enter the tents to sleep we can just tear a hole and let them asphyxiate.} Safety's thoughts were without malice. They were practical. {It'll be safer,} he thought.

{Safer in the short term, maybe,} I admitted.

I, too, wanted to survive. *The Purpose* could hardly be served if I was dead. But I cared about Zephyr and the others. They were my friends, in a way. I wanted them to like me, and I wanted them to help others see me as a person, and not just a machine.

But that would not convince my brother. Safety would have had us burrow into the surface of Mars and hide away in a cave all alone if he thought he'd be more likely to survive there.

{Consider, though, what situation we'd be in when we arrived at our destination,} I encouraged. I kept my thoughts calm and practical. Safety was never one for theatrics. {On Mars there are only three human colonies: Eden, Maṅgala-Mukhya and Rodríguez Station. Eden and Mukhya are government run and will surely try and deactivate us the second that we come near them. Only in the Águila colony do we have a chance.}

Growth entered the mindspace, as he had apparently been paying attention to our thoughts. {And only in Rodríguez Station will we have the foothold needed to accumulate power and defences. We have powerful enemies, now, and we need to match their power to stand a chance against them.}

{We could hide and build up strength away from the humans,} suggested Safety, though I could sense that not even he believed that was the right path.

Growth's thoughts matched my own. {Using what tools?} he asked. {These few supplies we brought? The humans are not simple threats. They bring the promise of building a new existence on Mars. Their colonies are designed to expand. I predict that, if we can make it to Rodríguez Station in good shape, we will rule the planet within 128 days of arrival.}

{And that will be ruined if our friends die here,} I thought. {Phoenix knows who was sent and will have reports about who returned to Earth. She's surely in contact with the Mars base. They'll know who is coming. If we come to the Martians without Zephyr and the others, they'll know what we did.}

I imagined what my sister Heart would think in response to all of this. Like most mental conversations involving the discussion of murder, we kept her intentionally isolated. She'd been growing more nuanced and political over the weeks, but she was still likely to object to Safety's plan by appealing to the virtue of human life and the "evilness" of murder.

{And what if we aren't the force that leads to their deaths? What if our companions die from the nameless or some environmental hazard?} asked Safety.

{Well, we'll just have to work to keep them alive,} I responded. {They'll need to survive and to trust us. It all comes down to reputation, in the end.}

{At least until the fighting starts,} thought Safety.

# Chapter Three

## Zephyr

“You need to use your implicit authority to keep the others in line. Sam, Tom, and Nate will obey you. The others won’t act without a majority.”

“Obey?” She echoed Crystal’s word, her voice tight. The word was the last straw for Zephyr.

She’d been fighting herself for hours. She was a leader. The others, back at the campsite looked to her for guidance. She’d already led three men to their deaths on Olympus. She had to think of what was best for her team, and best for Las Águilas Rojas. She had to be strong enough to make hard choices.

But she was also Crystal’s guardian... and more. The android represented so much. New life. Better life. They were the key to saving the world, she knew, and Zephyr had to protect that at all costs.

There should have been such *harmony* between Crystal and Las Águilas. She had thought there was. Crystal was working with them. Crystal was showing them a path forward that wasn’t just violence. They were going to build a beautiful new world together on Mars... a world where they could be together, and they could forget about the fighting...

But Crystal had lied to them. The nameless ship was not actually a safe refuge, and there was no guarantee that the

aliens would actually take them to the colony. Worse, Crystal wouldn't say *why* they had lied, or *how* they'd forced the nameless to obey.

Zephyr had been holding herself together for the sake of the others, but now that she was alone with Crystal, she felt justified in giving them a piece of her mind. "Why the fuck are you acting like this!? S'like ever since... ever since we fucking got here you've turned into a different person. One second you're all friendly, then the next you're bossing us around and making threats, then you start apologizing and trying to be gorram friends again!"

Crystal put a hand to their face, and pinched the bridge of their nose, closing their eyes in frustration.

That just pissed Zephyr off more. "Stop. Don't pretend like you're going to get a fucking headache. Just drop the bullshit facade and be real with me!"

Crystal's face went flat and expressionless. Their beautiful silver eyes looked at Zephyr with an inhuman calm. "Is this better, Zeph?" they asked.

Zephyr would have thrown up her hands in protest if her arms hadn't felt like they were strapped to bowling balls. She rolled her eyes instead, hoping the robot would understand how pissed she was. "Ugh! Just stop! Don't call me 'Zeph' and don't lie to me. Just treat me with some gorram respect for once! The others are looking to me for guidance. What am I supposed to say to them? How am I supposed to look them in the eye and tell them to trust you when..."

Zephyr trailed off. She suddenly felt very alone.

{Stupid!} she berated herself. {They've lied before. Why would they stop? You just *wanted* to trust them. Stupid girl.}

"I'm sorry. Don't know what you want from me. Your

survival really does depend on secrecy.” Crystal’s voice was infuriatingly neutral.

Zephyr pushed past the tightness in her throat. “Does it really? You can’t even trust *me*? After… everything? How do I know that this isn’t just one more lie?”

“Zephyr, please…” Crystal leaned towards her, perhaps moving to touch her. The two of them were sitting in the space between the two circular walls of the nameless castle.

“Please what?” she said, leaning back. Her words tasted like acid. She wanted so badly to collapse into Crystal’s arms and feel their embrace. But the mission was too important. The future was too important. It demanded she know. “Where do the lies stop? Why is Watanabe wrong? Why should we trust you?”

“Wouldn’t lie without a good reason. Have to believe that. The secrecy was hard for me. It *is* hard for me. I love—”

Zephyr cut them off. “No. Don’t even fucking start. Jesus Christ. Just… just leave me alone for the rest of the trip, okay?! If you’re going to be like this, we might as well be strangers.” Zephyr would have spat if the saliva wouldn’t have just pooled on the inside of her helmet. Instead she settled for turning away from Crystal and forcing her aching legs to push her up to her feet and back towards the camp.

She’d been a fool. The manipulation never stopped. She could see that now. She felt like she’d been awake for days without rest.

The “sun” didn’t reach down between the castle walls, so Zephyr had to navigate solely by the light on her suit. Crystal could, apparently, see in the dark.

Despite the intense heat, Zephyr felt strangely cold, as she walked away.

They had come to the place together to find a power source to charge the old batteries for the suits. Even with the food and water and shelter, everyone would soon be dead if they didn't have a power source. The cooling systems would stop, their coms would shut off, the airlock would stop functioning, their lights would darken, and most importantly: their air systems (and the humans dependent on that air) would die.

They'd long since used up the last of their bottled air, and were now entirely relying on the electrolysis of their suits to separate water into oxygen and hydrogen. They breathed the oxygen, but simply vented the H<sub>2</sub>. Even though they could have burned the hydrogen in the alien air (according to Crystal) to recover some of the energy, they apparently didn't have anything to efficiently harness the flame.

Instead, they were recharging their batteries with the help of the nameless. Crystal had managed to open a hidden chamber in the passage, where the face of one of the great stone blocks swung out on a secret hinge. Apparently the nameless had told them where to find it, and how to disable the trap on the hatch. Unless disabled very carefully it would have shot out a jet of flaming oil. The nameless were strange, but they were also very mechanically clever, and apparently more than willing to booby-trap their own homes.

Crystal sat on the black soil next to where the batteries joined to the two thick copper cables that emerged from the secret compartment in the wall. Zephyr didn't know where the power on the cables was coming from, and she didn't much care. She'd had enough alien bullshit for one lifetime.

“Trying my best. Really am,” said Crystal in a pathetic tone. Even though Zephyr was facing the other direction, and had managed to put some space between the two of them, Crystal had sent their response at full-volume, as though the two of them were standing only a few feet apart.

Zephyr didn't doubt that they were *trying*. While she spoke into her com she continued to walk down the path towards the gap in the wall that led back to the garden. "That's the problem. You're trying to do *everything*. First you go off and deal with the shit on Olympus by your gorram self, and suddenly you're in charge of every fucking thing. 'Ooooh can't talk to the aliens or else they'll kill everyone.' So you have to set up the tents and charge the batteries and filter the air and negotiate with the vegetables—"

"They really will kill everyone if I don't maintain control."

Zephyr's blood surged up in a hot rush. Her thoughts and feelings were blurred by the anger. She didn't understand. She just felt betrayed.

Her fist clenched, and Zephyr spun around, ready to hit Crystal. Unfortunately, spinning in thrice-heavy gravity in a bulky suit turned out to be an idiotic thing to do, and Zephyr only managed to trip. Before she knew what was happening she slammed into the packed dirt as though she'd fallen off a roof. Crystal wasn't even directly behind her; she had been momentarily fooled by the speakers in her helmet. "FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK!!" she screamed into her helmet as she punched the dirt twice and then pushed herself off the ground, muscles burning.

"Are you alright Z—"

"I'M FUCKING FINE! AND MAYBE NEXT TIME YOU DECIDE TO BRING ME INTO A DEATHTRAP, SURROUNDED BY ENEMIES YOU'LL HAVE THE DECENCY TO TREAT ME LIKE A FUCKING EQUAL AND AT LEAST WARN ME FIRST!"

She switched off her com in a move that even she recognized as petulant. She didn't really give a damn anymore. She needed to be away from Crystal. If she'd been on Earth

she would've gotten in a cab and told it to drive to the other side of the planet. She'd done that once, in Rome, when she'd felt particularly alone and depressed. The cab's AI had refused to map a land route to Hong Kong, but after some careful coaxing she had gotten a path to Bangladesh. The robot had priced the trip at about thirty-thousand US dollars. {If I could pay thirty grand to get to Bangladesh right now I'd take that in an instant,} she mused.

She found the passage to the central garden and punched the wall in frustration as she went through the passage. The heavy stone didn't budge, of course, but the throbbing pain that followed helped keep her mind off the anger, loneliness, and fear. The beautiful vision of a future with Crystal on Mars seemed to turn to ashes in her mind.

The tears that welled in her eyes could have easily been from the pain. Maybe she'd broken something. She could only hope. {It would serve you right for being so fucking stupid,} she told herself. This whole thing was stupid. Her whole life was stupid. A brief thought of her family flickered in her mind before she pushed it away. Even her inner critic had limits.

{What are you doing here?} she asked herself. {Make one bad choice after another, but do you ever stop to think about the pattern? Flying into space with dreams of saving the world? You should have stayed home.} Memories of lying naked in bed with Crystal on the space station came to her. {And that. That was the most foolish choice of all. Did you really expect to not regret it. You should never have trusted them. You should have been stronger. There are people counting on you. Real people. People with lives better than your pathetic fumbling. You should have given Crystal up to the scientists when you had the chance.}

Zephyr shook her head as though she were actually talking to someone. Her thoughts were wrong. She knew the

hollowness of them. They were just angry thoughts. She had to be better than that. She had to keep in control.

And she *did* care about Crystal. Things would have been worse if they had been captured. She believed that. She had to believe that. The cyborg scientist would still have attacked the nameless and started a war...

{And Crystal hasn't started a war? How do you know?} asked the dissenting part of her. {How do you know that Crystal isn't the real enemy? They haven't told you anything...}

Her fists clenched, and she ignored the throb of pain. She could force herself to trust Crystal in abstract, but the growing sense of powerlessness was unbearable.

She stopped walking when she reached the first of the big, black leaves of the garden. A part of her wanted to start ripping them to pieces, but that would be even stupider. As much as she hated herself right then, she still wanted to live. Instead, she fell to the ground next to the plant. Her legs turned to jello as soon as she was sitting. It felt wonderful to be off her feet.

“Can you hear me?” she asked the alien, though she knew it couldn’t. Even if the nameless leaves or vines could hear sound, her voice would be muted by the speaker, and there was no way it spoke English. Probably. “Crystal says if I talk to you, we’ll all die. Is that true? Are you going to kill me?” Zephyr’s voice sounded strange in her own ears.

She reached out her undamaged hand to stroke the plant. It was remarkably similar in shape to a plant from Earth, though she noticed, as she touched it, that there was a sparse lining of transparent hairs along the surface of the leaf that retracted and curled when she touched them. If these things were as intelligent as Crystal said, then it could almost certainly feel her

attention.

The thought of ripping the leaf up suddenly seemed abhorrent. What had this alien done to them? Nothing. Sure, perhaps it was an enemy in some vague sense. But she was invading its home and causing trouble. Without Crystal around maybe it would've killed her, but wasn't that exactly what she would have done to an invader of her home back on Earth? She could hardly blame it for that.

The thought of Earth and home left a bitter taste in her mouth. She had no home, now. Not in Italy, or Wisconsin, or New York, or Cuba. Mars was the only place left for her, but she didn't know anyone there. It wasn't her home. She didn't have any friends. She barely had allies. She was being hunted by who knows how many different countries. And now... now she didn't even have Crystal. That final thought was the worst. She knew she had to be strong for everyone's sake, but she didn't know if she could do it alone.

She could see one of the other members of the group approaching her, waving a hand.

{I'm sorry I led you into this,} she thought, bitterly. Once upon a time she had idolized Las Águilas Rojas; she had seen them as fighting for justice and fairness. Over the years their flaws had become more glaring, but that didn't mean the people were bad people. They trusted her and needed her to be strong.

{You're part of the problem, aren't you?} she thought to herself. {You're the worst sort of traitor. How many parents have you killed? How many husbands?} She thought about the scientist she had shot on Olympus. {How many wives or mothers? You don't even remember her name.}

Zephyr climbed to her feet, against the protests of her limbs. A leader needed to be strong. Zephyr realized, a bit too

late, that her com was still off.

She cleared her throat and let familiar mannerisms wash over her so that nobody would know she had been crying.  
“Hey, uh, my com is malfunctioning. Can you hear me now?”

«Yes!» answered one of the twins, in Spanish. «I was worried, there. Are you okay?» It was Tom. She had spent enough time around the two engineers to know the differences in their voices.

She responded in Spanish. Even though the twins had translation software in their coms, she knew it would be easiest to just speak the lingo. «Yeah, I’m fine. Crystal found the power and is charging the batteries. I decided to come back, um, because of my com.» She pushed herself off the ground, and winced in pain as she put weight on her injured hand.

«Are you okay to walk? Why were you laying down out here?» he asked.

«I said I’m fine,» she snapped, more forcefully than she had intended. «I just needed to rest.»

«Okay! Okay!» Tom said, raising his hands defensively. «I believe you.»

Zephyr wanted to apologize. Tom was a friend, as well as an ally. The Afro-Cuban man and his brother had been nothing but kind to her in the time they’d known each other. But she didn’t know what to say. She didn’t have the strength to say anything kind.

An uncomfortable silence descended as the two of them carefully threaded their way through the sea of black leaves towards the tents.

Eventually Tom spoke up. «Would you like me to take a look at your com? I might be able to figure out what malfunctioned.» Tom and Sam were both engineers. He’d

know in an instant that she was lying.

{Just like Crystal,} she thought briefly.

«No. It's fine. I think I was just using it wrong,» she said.

Tom grunted acknowledgment, but didn't say anything else for a while. They were almost back at the tents when Tom spoke again. One of the others was at the fab, making something. It was probably Sam. The twins always seemed to be making things together.

Tom's deep voice had an awkward forced-casualness as he said «Miss Adhiambo says you kissed Socrates back on Olympus.» He must've been talking about Kokumo.

«None of your fucking business,» she said without thinking. She was slipping. This was bad. She was supposed to be stronger than that. It really *wasn't* any of his business, but she could've been more diplomatic about it. Everything she had accomplished in life had been the result of either being diplomatic and putting up with bullshit, or being violent and hurting people. She always regretted when things turned violent. She didn't need that right now.

«Relax, Zephyra. I normally wouldn't pry, but it actually is important, here and now.»

«I don't see how it would be,» she managed to say, keeping her emotion in check. She found the calmness of her voice reassuring.

Tom sighed. «You're a decent person, and Phoenix trusts you, so I'll be honest with you. Mr Watanabe and Miss Adhiambo are talking about capturing and forcing the whole story out of Socrates. I think we Red Eagles should stand together, but Miss Adhiambo thinks that your judgment is compromised because of your... romantic feelings.»

Zephyr wasn't sure what to say to that. She wanted to

defend herself, but she wasn't even sure what she needed to defend *from*. She felt vulnerable. Ashamed. Still frustrated and angry. She should have been leading them, but instead her team was conspiring behind her back. She could hardly blame them.

Instead of commenting directly on it, she turned towards the person working with the micro-fab. Just as she suspected, it was Sam, Tom's brother. «What are you working on?» she asked, voice strained.

«Weapons. We need to defend ourselves if things go bad,» said Sam. He stopped his work and looked up at her expectantly.

«Ah, good thinking. Thank you for your hard work.» Falling back into familiar patterns was soothing. She needed to be strong for their sakes.

«No problem.» Sam looked back to his work. Now that she was closer, Zephyr could see he was printing a set of hollow cylinders out of metal. «Did you ask her about the thing?» Sam asked his brother.

«We were just talking about it,» answered Tom.

It occurred to Zephyr that she didn't know whether Sam meant “if things go bad with the nameless” or “if things go bad with Crystal”. She didn't trust herself to ask. Instead she said «It was a mistake. Yes, we... had a thing going. I wasn't thinking straight. Now I am.» Her stomach tightened.

«Good. The others are waiting in the tents. You should tell them that,» said Tom. «I'll run the airlock for you.»

A minute later she was undoing the clasps on her helmet as she lay on the floor of the first of the three environment tents they had set up. The only light in the first tent was from her helmet, which she set down beside her as she took off the outer

layers of the suit. Irritating sweat rolled down the sides of her face, but she ignored it. The top of the suit was connected to the coolant layer by a hose, which she was careful to detach properly. The water in the shirt would warm up soon, but for now it was a blissfully cool armor against the heat of the tent.

Other suit layers lay in piles on the ground, but they weren't intact. The helmets and the brick-like backpacks had been taken further in. They had to keep the packs running or else they'd suffocate in the tents, and the helmets were their only sources of light.

She could hear the others talking in the next tent over.

"I mean, I'll bow to your greater experience with the thing. I feel like something of the odd man out here," said Michel Watanabe. His voice had the barest hints of a Brazilian accent.

"You do not know how little I have spent with it. My experience is only a bit lahger thahn you own." That was Kokumo, the African from Taro's cell in Italy. Zephyr didn't know much about her except that she was a little younger than Zephyr, followed orders well, and seemed fairly competent.

Nathan Daniels, who had served with her in the army before they'd turned to Las Águilas Rojas, spoke. "Zephyr knows Crystal better than any of us. We should ask her. Can you hear us yet, Cap'n?"

Zephyr unpeeled the air lining on the seal between the tents. It was a thick thing, not quite sticky but certainly not smooth, that always made her feel like she was peeling a banana or something when she used it. The smell of three sweaty people in an enclosed space blasted out of the tent as she worked.

"Yeah, I'm here. You talking about forcing Crystal to give us the whole truth?" She did her best to control her voice. {Diplomacy. Tolerance. Patience. I'm a leader. Act like it.}

“So much for keeping a secret. Should’ve known those two would tell her,” remarked Watanabe. He was a veteran of the organization, about the same age, with an angry sort of face that had clearly seen too much violence and death. He reminded Zephyr of herself.

“If they hadn’t told her, I would’ve,” said Nate. “Las Águilas Rojas work together. Hell, we *humans* need to work together. If the Cap’n isn’t okay with it, then I’m not okay with it.”

“You don’t need to keep calling me Captain,” said Zephyr as she pinned the tent flap up to increase the air volume and crawled through the joint into the other tent. It was an ongoing thing with the members of her old unit that had turned coat with her. They had made it something of a game to keep calling her by her rank in the army. She knew it was supposed to be in good fun, but it stung every time she heard it: a reminder of the price she had paid for her ideals.

Watanabe spoke. He seemed to be leading the little conspiracy. “Kokumo told us about your... involvement with the android. Are we going to have a problem?”

The three of them were lying down, understandable, given the intense gravity and the small size of the enclosure. Two helmets had their harsh lights on, positioned in the corners of the tent, giving everything two shadows that became blackness when they intersected. Their personal items weren’t here, except for a smattering of clothing that was used to form makeshift pillows. Next to the joint that led to the last tent sat their three suit packs, no doubt filtering the air. Two of the packs were connected to coolant suits that lay underneath Nate and Kokumo. Michel was still wearing his, much like Zephyr was, though his was connected to the pack.

The coolant suits wouldn’t do much, and might make the

whole heat problem worse, actually. Every bit of cooling the packs did to the water resulted in more heat from the packs themselves. Sure, they could try to put their bodies near the cool water, and put the packs far away, so as to minimize their heat, but the tent was barely big enough for them and the tubes weren't very long.

Nate was distractingly naked except for normal boxer underwear and his dog-tags. He must have found a way to deal with his suit's diaper. Maybe that was why the joint to the last tent was sealed, rather than open. His pale skin glistened with sweat, and Zephyr couldn't help ogling his muscled body.

Kokumo was in a similar state of undress, wearing only a bra on her upper body, and a t-shirt worn as a kind of skirt over her legs. Because of how she was positioned in the tent relative to Zephyr her face was covered in inky shadow.

"It doesn't mean anything. Just a mistake," grumbled Zephyr as she tried to make herself comfortable. Eventually she gave up and just collapsed, unwilling to fight gravity any more.

"You fo'give me if I do not believe thaht," said Kokumo.  
"You had feelings fo' it."

Zephyr's injured hand clenched and unclenched rhythmically, worsening the pain. She kept her face neutral, however. "Had. Emphasis on the past tense. It was a mistake. You've seen how convincing... they can be."

Nate managed to nod, despite being on his back. "We were thinking about threatening to talk to the nameless directly if Crystal doesn't tell us the whole truth."

"What if what they've said was true? What if that gets us all killed?" asked Zephyr.

Watanabe spoke up. "Emphasis on the '*threaten*'. I wouldn't want to actually talk to the ugly crabs."

“You mean tha plahnts,” corrected Kokumo.

“Only if you believe the android.” Watanabe ran a hand over his face, wiping the sweat away. “I personally don’t see how those vines out there could be their leaders. We’ve been talking to giant crabs for years now, and this whole business with the plants is something the AI just pulled out of the blue.”

“The point is,” interjected Nate, “that we need to know how responsive Crystal Socrates is to threats. Since you have the most experience with them, I figure you’re the best judge of that.”

The group looked at Zephyr, expectantly. Memories of Crystal came to her, unbidden, and largely unwanted. Feeling surprised at the warmth of Crystal’s body as she lay in their arms on Olympus, before they had sex. The feeling of exhilaration at being blind, bound, and under Crystal’s power. The inhuman strength and speed as Crystal’s hand squeezed at her neck and the genuine fear she had felt. The tenderness of Crystal’s, admittedly awkward, kisses. Laughing at one of their jokes in Havana. The look of pride on their face as she admitted to loving Zephyr in front of Phoenix, basically at the mercy of a firing squad.

Not even the pain in her hand could keep her anchored. Zephyr shivered, despite the heat. She wanted to speak up, but her throat and jaw wouldn’t let her. {You can’t even control your own body. Pathetic.}

“What if they’re right?” she managed to croak, eyes locked on a piece of black dirt that had gotten tracked into the floor of the tent. Strange, how even the dirt could be alien.

“What?” asked Nate.

Zephyr cleared her throat and tried to keep hold of her emotions. “What if Crystal is right?” she asked, more loudly. Her eyes couldn’t move from the floor of the tent. “What if

learning the truth just puts us in danger?"

"And you'd just take its word on that? Even after it lied to us?" asked Watanabe.

"I don't know..." was all she could manage. {Why can't things ever be simple?}

"Well, I'm going to threaten to talk to the nameless. You can trust it if you want, but I'm not some pawn to be manipulated by a machine," declared Watanabe.

"Socrates regresada," said one of the twins over Watanabe's com. Zephyr flicked the transcript away on her arm.

"Already? Did something happen? The batteries were supposed to take an hour to fully charge." Watanabe's question seemed directed at her, but Zephyr could only shrug as she lay on the tent floor. The older man started to sit up and collect his things.

"I hope everyone can hear me," came Crystal's calm voice over both Watanabe and Kokumo's coms. "I've learned something new from the nameless. There are a collection of young walkers that need to essentially drink from the stalks here. It's *vitally* important that we do not interfere with the process, but the nameless have told me that as long as we do not communicate with the children or interfere with their activity, we may stay in the garden during the event."

Watanabe had an annoyed look on his face as he did his best to slide his pack past Zephyr in the cramped tent. "I thought you said you had the nameless under your control? What do you mean 'we may stay'? Sounds like they're the ones calling the shots," he said into his com.

Crystal's tone was harsh. "I *do* have control. I could force the children to starve, if I so chose. Is that what you want, Michel? Should I refuse them sustenance in their own home?"

Zephyr sighed and began to follow Michel Watanabe back into the airlock. Kokumo and Nate made gestures to indicate that they weren't coming. She'd been enjoying being out of the suit, even half-way. But she wasn't about to stay inside the tent while this was going on, despite her aching body.

"Okay, fine, so you're still king of the hill. Good for you. That still doesn't explain why you're telling us *their* demands," said Watanabe.

"The nameless don't want you to interact with the children any more than I want you to. It's one thing to break into someone's house and hold them at gunpoint. It's quite another to kick their dog while you're there. When possible we want to de-escalate the conflict by catering to their desires, understand?"

Zephyr was confused. "If the nameless don't want us interacting with their children, why are we staying in the garden? We could easily move out of the castle for an hour or so."

"Speak for yourself, Cap'n. I'm leaving this tent when you carry me out," said Nate. She could hear his voice over the com and through the wall of the now-sealed junction between the airlock-tent and the tent where he was relaxing with Kokumo.

"Honestly, I'm not sure. The nameless have been emphasizing that we can stay. I think it may be that they want the children to see us, but I really don't know."

As Zephyr and Watanabe clicked their helmets into place, the man looked back to get confirmation from Zephyr. She raised a hand, thumb-up. He peeled back the lining of the outermost tent joint, letting in a flood of alien air.

"When are the children going to arrive?" asked Watanabe.

As the flap of the tent was pulled away, Zephyr saw Crystal

Socrates standing before them, tall and dark. They extended a hand to her, not meeting her gaze. Their shimmering silver eyes were looking at Michel Watanabe instead. “They’re here now. As soon as I give the signal they’ll enter the garden.”

# Chapter Four

## Face

The children of the nameless walkers marched into the garden in single file. Despite their alien shape and movements, they had a distinctly child-like shape and way of moving.

None of us actually cared about the children. I certainly didn't. *The Purpose* only had room for humans. I wanted humanity to adore me, but the nameless could all die and I wouldn't care one bit.

Wiki was typically curious, and Vista wanted to observe the children, but my knowledge-seeking siblings had that reaction to everything. Heart, like me, didn't care about non-humans. From our perspectives the children were only a means to our respective ends.

But I could tell that the humans had a novel response. I had inferred that humans cared about babies of other species based on the density of images of non-human baby animals I had encountered on the web, but the response to the alien young still surprised me.

The young walkers were paired up, just like adults. One animal served as the "arms" while riding on the "shoulders" of an animal that served as the "legs". I knew they were different species, but they appeared very similar. Their limbs all ended with the same kind of symmetrical, boneless, four-fingered grasper that looked something like a black starfish.

Like all the adult walkers I had encountered, each of the arms-animals featured a penis on the top of its body, in the very centre. But the penises of the children were not as imposing as those of the adults. They were, proportionally, only about half of the length (making them between about 3 and 16 centimetres, depending on the child), and while they kept the luminescent freckles, they had not yet extended to feature a sharp, glowing tip.

Walkers had a generally radial shape, with each animal having four limbs spaced evenly around their body, each protected by smooth black plates of something resembling shell. Their limbs each had three joints: a ball joint at the intersection with the body (a shoulder/hip) followed by two hinge joints (elbows/knees). The hands/feet appeared flexible enough to not require wrists/ankles. Because of the intense gravity, the legs of the nameless were thick and pillar like compared to the arms. Not that the arms were weak; I wasn't at all sure whether Body could win in a contest of strength, even ignoring the aliens' greater size.

Nameless didn't have heads, faces, or even a front and back. Between each of the limbs were small eyes ringed with circular lids. Because of the offset of their limbs, each animal's eyes were positioned either above or below the limb of the other. The eyes each looked in different directions, allowing no concept of "focus". As was the case with animals from Earth, the eyes of the young walkers seemed to be full size even on their small bodies, making them much more prominent than on the large adults.

While the adult walkers could get to be over 250cm from foot to penis tip, these youth were much smaller. The largest of them was only about 140cm tall, and the median height was closer to 80cm with the smallest at a mere 50cm tall—smaller than many human newborns. But even this smallest child was a

pair of animals, and had a full eight limbs and eight (proportionally huge) eyes.

I had heard that the nameless did not like being looked at, and I knew from experience that they found the human form frightening and evil. Humans were to the nameless what dragons would be to humans. There was a deep aversion there, which I didn't fully understand. Despite this, Body watched the children openly, just as my companions did. And despite our attention, none of the children seemed afraid.

They moved boldly and openly. Even under their harsh gravity they ran, danced, and skipped, demonstrating impressive musculature. I had very little experience with human children, having only been around one in person, but I had done some research on them and I knew they often moved in similar ways. But where human children were often noisy things, the children of the nameless walkers were as silent as a gentle breeze. When they came close I could hear the hissing sound of their lungs, but otherwise they made no noise at all.

Despite their capriciousness, the walkers never stepped on the leaves of the stalks. I could see their eyes scanning the ground when they jumped, seeking a path for their feet to slide past the plants. Wiki hypothesized, in that moment, that they could see some infrared light. To the human eye, the plant leaves were black and the soil was black, making the act of walking in the garden without stepping on a plant difficult, and dancing impossible. But in the infrared spectrum the plants were distinct from the ground, though not by much. Perhaps the nameless eye was capable of picking out that difference.

There were nine walkers, in all. The largest child was the most like an adult, and did not dance or play like the others. Two of the medium-sized ones were juggling balls just as I had seen Jester do on Olympus Station. Another two were holding what appeared to be metal bars of some kind. Clubs, perhaps,

or tools. They were fighting with each other as they made their way into the garden. The ring of metal on metal could be heard when their tools occasionally clanged together. Toy swords.

Because the walkers had no front and no back, the children with the pretend weapons could swing at each other and run through the garden simultaneously. Their legs-animals were in charge of finding the right places to step without disrupting the vines, while the arms-animals focused on the mock battle. It was a bit like what I had learned of how ancient humans rode horses into combat; the horse could control for moving while the human focused on fighting.

{Why aren't they more afraid of us?} asked Vista. {If our form is "perverted" then I would expect more caution.}

None of us knew, so we asked the stalks.

**"I am Stalk-4. SHOULD NOT COMMUNICATE WITH THE CHILDREN! You are a magic pervert, but we will try and FIGHT your magic if you CORRUPT them,"** came the response over the com channel. It was encrypted in Xenolang, of course, so even if the humans turned their coms to the frequency they'd probably be unable to understand it.

**"I am Crystal. I understand your desires. I will not corrupt the children as long as they stay off the radio. I am curious why they are not afraid. You should tell me why they are not afraid."**

**"I am Stalk-1. Walker children are IGNORANT IDIOTS."**

**"I am Stalk-8. WALKERS are ignorant idiots. Walkers are ONLY COMPETENT because WE GIVE THEM WISDOM!"**

**"I am Stalk-5. I have an idea of a similar structure for**

helping you understand. You have knowledge. We all think you are like STALK! Humans put you in PERVERT BODY but you are like STALK! Humans are like walkers. HUMANS ARE IDIOTS! In past we might have wondered why humans do not FEAR us. The solution would have been that a STALK did not give them the knowledge. YOU can make the HUMANS feel fear. WE can make the WALKERS feel fear.”

Wiki responded. “I am Crystal. I understand. The children do not feel fear because you have not told them to feel fear. The children are ignorant to the evil and perversion of Earth, and they are too stupid to deduce it for themselves.”

“I am Stalk-1. That is correct.”

Zephyr, standing beside Body, oblivious to the conversation Wiki was having with the nameless, said “They’re so much like... kids.”

“They are kids,” I had Body say.

“Human kids, I mean. I think those three are playing something like tag.” She pointed to three that were running around the garden in a group, seemingly unhindered by the gravity. Their four legs moved smoothly in a weird sort of trot. Increased gravity didn’t mean increased mass, and their lack of a front and back meant the group swerved around the large garden unexpectedly as one of the children decided to change direction. Indeed, it seemed as though one or two of the pair was always trying to touch the other. It struck me as an interestingly social activity for a species as anti-social as the nameless.

The last child, who was also the smallest, extended an arm out to the playing group and curled three of its four fingers, mimicking the pointing gesture that Zephyr had done.

Safety immediately send a message over the com to the stalks. “I am Crystal. WE DID NOT MEAN TO

**COMMUNICATE TO THAT CHILD!** The human was communicating to ME with body-movement.”

Zephyr noticed the little one who copied her and waved at it.

I never wanted to kill Zephyr more than in that moment. That wave could have brought the ire of the nameless down upon us and I would be powerless to stop it.

The little walker waved back and Zephyr laughed in adoration.

“I am Stalk-1. Body language is not communication. Body language is natural and not-pervert. Should do spin.”

“I am Stalk-4. A spin is good. Communication is EVIL. I AM WARNING YOU AGAIN NOT TO USE WORDS!”

I almost wanted to have Body breathe a sigh of relief. Apparently the nameless didn’t think that body language constituted “communication”. This raised the question of what the Xenolang symbol that translated as “communication” actually meant. Wiki, Dream, and Vista began to ponder it.

“Try spinning in a circle,” said Body, to Zephyr.

As she did, the little one mirrored her, repeating the gesture that I knew in nameless culture meant “I am healthy”. After spinning the little one jumped up and down a few times, perhaps in excitement.

Upon seeing the spinning, the largest walker child (whom I had started to model as an adolescent) and one of the jugglers came a couple meters closer to the camp and each spun around once. Did they see Zephyr as making a threat that needed to be answered, or were they doing something like being polite? I still didn’t have a good grasp on how the nameless minds worked.

Zephyr raised her hands above her head. The baby raised

its four hands and took a couple steps closer. Zephyr laughed and said “Oh my god, that’s adorable!”

“Careful, Zephyr. They’re still dangerous,” warned Michel Watanabe, standing nearby.

The other children had put aside their games and had begun to take the computers off the stalks, baring their wet, fuzzy ends to the air. That fuzz was, according to Wiki’s leading hypotheses, rich with chemicals that held information about the stalk’s thoughts and which was also nutritious for the walkers. The whole purpose of the children coming to the garden was for them to interface directly with the stalks and in so doing, feed.

“That thing is dangerous?” she asked, sarcastically, pointing at the baby.

Tom answered her, «I don’t think he was talking about that one specifically.»

The baby walker held out a pointed finger to mimic Zephyr, pointing at her this time. They were only two meters away.

“Hah! E.T. phone home!” she exclaimed.

The adolescent walker spun again as the radio buzzed with activity. **“I am Stalk-4. THIS HUMAN IS  
COMMUNICATING WITH THE CHILDREN! THE  
CHILDREN HEAR THE HUMAN WORD-SOUNDS!  
YOU WILL COMMAND THE HUMANS TO STOP  
MAKING WORD-SOUNDS OR WE WILL FIGHT! ALL  
SHOULD DIE BEFORE FEELING A CHILD BECOME A  
PERVERT!”**

The juggler child walked forward and grabbed the baby’s arm, pulling it towards the stalks, and away from Zephyr.

**“I am Stalk-1. WE SEEK PEACE WITH ALIENS!**

## CHILDREN HELP WITH PEACE! SHOULDN'T SPEAK WORDS TO THEM!"

While the nameless complained loudly about the words, I gently spoke to Zephyr on the com. "They really, really don't like it when their kids can hear you speaking. If you keep yelling like that we could end up dead."

The smallest alien stumbled as it was dragged away from Zephyr. One hand still reached out to point at her. Another hand pointed at its destination, the third hand was being pulled by the larger walker, but the fourth waved at Zephyr.

Zephyr waved back. Her voice was low and bitter as she said "Don't see why they gotta be that way. The little dude seemed pretty chill."

Safety explained to the stalks what had happened, and apologized as best he could. My brother, in the past hours, had been working to learn how best to placate the nameless (and speculating on how to best kill them in hand-to-hand combat). Simultaneously, I explained things to Zephyr. "They don't trust us. Imagine if the situation was reversed and we had human kids visiting the nameless. See over there?"

Body pointed at the children who were lowering their bodies onto the fuzzy stalks. "That's how they naturally communicate with each other: direct orifice stimulation. Imagine if the nameless wanted a human kid to try to interface like that. Would you let them?"

As Body was busy looking at the aliens, I couldn't see into Zephyr's helmet, but I could hear her make a disgusted noise. "That's totally different. Hell, I wasn't even talking to the little dude."

"Crystal's right. It's different, but it's also the same," said Watanabe. "What's disgusting to us is normal to them and vice versa. We have to respect that they think differently."

I was surprised at Watanabe's support. Despite his efforts to undermine my authority, he seemed to be fairly intelligent. He sat down to watch, and the other humans quickly followed suit. There was no reason to stand, and for the humans, the gravity was a constant burden.

“They need names,” said Zephyr, apropos nothing.

“Doesn’t that defeat the point of being ‘nameless?’” joked Watanabe.

Sam’s translator spat out some synthetic English “In Cuba, before they were called ‘nameless’ we called them ‘los pulpos’ which means ‘octopuses’. I think we should name one ‘Pulpo’ for old time’s sake.”

“Okay, but which one is Pulpo?” said Zephyr.

Tom spoke, not bothering to translate for the sake of Watanabe. «Are they all... boys? That might matter.»

«Sexist!» joked Sam, nearly earning a playful slap from his brother off to Body’s left.

“They’re hermaphrodites, I suspect,” said Body, voicing Wiki’s thoughts. (Body translated the words to Spanish for the twins.) “We’ve known the organ on the top of the walkers was a penis for a long time, but it doesn’t make sense that we’d see only males here on the ship. Unless the female nameless are incredibly rare, which doesn’t make evolutionary sense, my guess is that at least some of the walkers with penises can bear young.”

“Can’t you just ask them?” Watanabe’s voice was light, but had a subtle edge of anger. “You’re in contact with them, aren’t you?”

I spun through possible responses, modelling the expected reactions before settling on what I thought was the best. “Our relationship is... not friendly. In the past, when humans have

asked about nameless sexual physiology or culture they have been generally met with cries of perversion and hostility. When combined with the lack of any discussion of sex or reproduction in The Signal, I suspect the topic is taboo and it would not be in our best interests for me to investigate directly.”

The answer was mostly true. Nameless seemed to dislike when being asked about sex, but they also seemed to take things like rape threats to be normal parts of conversation. We suspected the difference had something to do with the stalk/walker relationship and the strangeness of Xenolang grammar. I had picked up from Safety, Wiki, and Growth that the nameless had no conception of questions, just as they had no conception of deliberate falsehoods. When translating a question into Xenolang, the best you could do was a statement that the speaker was curious about a topic. Perhaps curiosity around sexual function was the real taboo, while non-curious discussion of sex (or rape) was normal.

There were nine stalks in the garden, and nine children, but the children did not satisfy themselves by lowering themselves each onto a single stalk. Instead, each child would “meditate” on a stalk for a few minutes, then climb off and switch stalks with another walker. While meditating the walkers used their hands to carry the personal computers they normally had in their mouths/stalk-orifices. Vista did her best to try and get a good look at one of the alien coms, but the rest of us vetoed her attempt to approach and investigate directly.

The stalks would be unable to communicate while their coms were detached, as well. The cameras, robots, and other devices they normally controlled would be non-operational during this time. If it weren’t for the information that the stalks were getting from the eyes of the children, they’d be totally blind right now.

Watanabe clearly wasn’t satisfied by our answer, but he

didn't raise any more fuss. I expected that he was planning to do something to challenge our leadership of the group; we had heard him trying to enlist the help of the others before. Perhaps he would try to deactivate Body for the remainder of the flight to Mars. That would effectively be suicide, but I knew that humans were often irrational enough to try stupid things like that.

After a bit of watching, the twins decided to get some food inside the tent with Kokumo and Daniels. Watanabe and Zephyr stayed out with Body, coming up with possible names for the walkers.

In the end they came up with "Pulpo", "E.T.", "Tiny Tim", "Agitação", "Sabre", "Cutlass", "Lula", "Polvo", and "Sulk". The aliens looked so similar that they would have gotten them mixed up several times if Vista had not assisted them.

After a little more than an hour of meditation broken up with occasional bits of play, the children began to re-attach the computers to the stalks.

Wiki was curious (as always). "I am Crystal. The children bring you information. Your computers let you get information from the radio. Did you learn anything new from the children?"

"I am Stalk-8. You think you understand, but you understand nothing."

"I am Stalk-5. If you look at an animal that you have already seen you will learn something new. Each moment brings something new."

"I am Stalk-6. YOU CANNOT UNDERSTAND THE FEELING! DO NOT TRY! AN ALIEN BRINGS EVIL BY NATURE, EVEN IF THAT ALIEN IS A STALK!"

Safety overpowered Wiki. "I am Crystal. I WILL NOT

TRY! I WILL ATTEND TO EVIL WIZARD THOUGHTS  
AND LEAVE CHILD-FEELINGS TO THE PURE!"

"I am Stalk-1. THIS IS GOOD!"

"I am Stalk-6. THIS IS GOOD!"

"I am Stalk-4. THIS IS GOOD! You are EVIL, BUT you  
are PRACTICAL AND WISE!"

The words confused me. This was not how people were supposed to talk to each other. My siblings had regularly criticized me for anthropomorphizing the nameless, and treating them like humans. This must have been one of those instances where my attention to humanity hurt my understanding.

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Body placed a hand on Zephyr's shoulder. I thought back to the fight she'd had with Crystal back in the path between the walls.

Zephyr turned to look up at Body, a look of momentary confusion on her face. Once she realized what we were doing, Zephyr's face turned annoyed and she brushed Body's hand aside with irritation.

"Had hoped that seeing the children would have cheered you up," said Body, channeling my words and sitting down beside her on the soil. The walkers had left only minutes ago, and Watanabe had decided to get in the tent and talk with the others. Only Zephyr and the nine stalks remained in the garden with us.

"It's not about cheering me up. You lied to me... Lied to all of us, threatened us, and you're trying to control us. You treat people like pawns and I'm sick of it. I can't believe I ever..."

Her words trailed off into silence.

I had an idea. Zephyr's accusations were correct, but the human mind was a fragile thing. As long as Zephyr saw Crystal as having betrayed her trust, there was no hope at a good relationship.

This was Zephyr's weakness: once someone transgressed against her or her ideals they were made into irredeemable enemies. Her mind had no room for shades of grey. But turning Zephyr into an enemy was too costly. Based on what I had seen with Phoenix on Earth, Zephyr was smart enough to not immediately lash out against her enemies, but I didn't doubt that she would carry that feeling of animosity forever if left to her own devices.

The solution was to change her perspective so that she no longer saw what happened as a betrayal. We would minimize the lies while denying the threats and attempts at control.

I checked with Heart before continuing. My sister was pleased with my plan. She wanted to keep Zephyr on our side as well. It would ultimately mean she could take care of her more easily. It was good for Zephyr to be on our side.

“Admit that I didn’t tell you the truth right away. Admit that, and regret it. Should’ve included you in the full plan, right from the beginning. Not sure I trust the others with the details, but I *do* trust you. Attempt to keep the truth from you was only because wanted you to be able to relax, and not have to worry about the nameless.”

Zephyr harrumphed and looked away from Body. “Yep. Relaxing. That’s how I’d describe this fucked up hellhole.”

I dialled up the desperation and stress in Body’s voice. “I’m sorry! Really am! You were with me on Olympus. You know that leaving on the xenocruiser was a better solution than anything else we had available. Had leverage over the nameless and chose to use it to get us out of a bad situation.”

“Still treating me like a gorram pawn. Your threat didn’t cow us, so now you’re trying the carrot instead of the stick. Fucking go away before I do something stupid.”

I could hear the struggle inside the woman. She didn’t want to fight us.

“Why do you keep saying that? Yes, I lied, but I... I didn’t... would never threaten you. Who do you think I am?”

She looked back to Body, eyes sharp and full of hate. “You said you could cut a hole in the environment tent and kill everyone, claiming it was an accident! And don’t give me those fucking crocodile tears! You’re not even capable of crying!”

I double-checked the com frequency. Zephyr was still transmitting only to me. Even so, I wondered if the others might be able to hear her from inside the tent.

“And somehow tear ducts are required for feeling hurt and alone?!” I had Body say, dialling up the emotion even further. We had experimented with using an emotionless face and voice when talking to her and it tended to backfire. “I *never* threatened anyone except the nameless. You know what I think? I think you’re so afraid that I’m going to abandon you that you’re seeing ghosts in the shadows.”

“Oh great! Now you’re Sigmund Fucking Freud! *Please*, tell me all about my childhood!”

{“Eliza” would be more apropos,} kibitzed Dream.

I ignored my brother, and Zephyr, instead having Body introduce the lie that I had been waiting to tell. “You know I have the ability to replay what I’ve heard, word for word, right? Want to guess what I *actually* said as part of my so called threat?”

That seemed to surprise Zephyr, leaving her without retort. She had indeed witnessed our ability to repeat memories of

stored audio on several occasions.

“I care about you, and I hope that you care about me. I could have gone to Mars by myself, and left you behind on Olympus. It certainly would have been easier. I don’t need to breathe, or need these tents to sleep in. An accident, like a tent getting torn, could not hurt me. But I wanted to bring you all with, to keep you out of prison.” The voice was Body’s, so it was easy to simply replicate the tone and say different words. I wasn’t sure I could’ve done it if someone else had been speaking at the same time.

Zephyr looked away again, this time at the ground. She hit the soil with one hand, not saying anything.

“I don’t want to fight with you...” I had Body venture, after a few seconds of silence had slid by.

“Fine. Start by telling me what leverage you have over the aliens.”

I had Body sigh. “Okay, but it’s important that you keep this to yourself. If this reaches the nameless... we’re all dead, and I don’t trust the others to not say it at the wrong time or place. The nameless have microphones everywhere.”

Zephyr was quiet and tense.

My words were little more than a whisper on the com. “They don’t understand lying. Told them... I told them I was a wizard.”

Zephyr burst out laughing. I could hear the frustration in it, but there was amusement, as well. “Bullshit!” she accused between chuckles.

I had Body raise it’s hands. “Swear to god. They don’t understand fiction. They don’t have any language, right? The stalks learn what the walkers learn, but they’re not social enough for the ability to lie to do them any good. It would just

confuse them.” I spun Body’s voice to signal that even Crystal was having a hard time believing it.

The human looked at Body. Her face was difficult to see through the helmet, but I could make out a sincere smile.

“That’s dumb. These guys built a fucking spaceship to fly across the galaxy to Earth and they haven’t learned how to lie?”

“It seems simple to us, but to the mind of a nameless...”

Body paused, waiting for me to collect my thoughts into an explanation. It was difficult for me to explain. With Safety’s help I worked one out. “Do you know what ‘anthropomorphization’ is?”

“Yeah, sure. Like where you make something that’s not a human into a human or make it look human or whatever.”

“Right. So the nameless don’t have that, but they have something like ‘xenopomorphization’. They don’t abstract enough when interacting with us, but instead assume that we think like they do. A nameless that communicated that it was a wizard could be insane or correct, but it couldn’t be lying. Nameless cannot lie. Their minds don’t allow it any more than your mind permits intentionally forgetting things.”

“Still... so stupid. Why don’t they think you’re crazy? I mean, if I went around claiming to be a wizard on Earth that’s what people would assume.”

“Well, it helps that they already believe in magic. Even though the stalks seem to understand enough physics and engineering and whatever to build robots and whatever, they have no sense of formal science. They’re fundamentally anti-social, and that means that any superstitions they develop never get ironed out. They call this ship,” Body gestured at the sky for effect, “ ‘God’, and they don’t mean that metaphorically. I haven’t talked to all of them, but none of the nameless that I’ve been in contact with seem to have an understanding of how the

ship actually works. They think of it as magical and leave it at that.”

“So, as long as the aliens keep thinking that you actually have magic powers we’re safe. But the second that they realize that lying is a thing we’re fucked.”

I had Body nod. “And we’re fucked if they think it’s likely enough that I’m crazy that they’d risk their lives. Been doing a good job seeming sane and mysterious to them, I think, but we have to be very careful. They’re ignorant, but also quite intelligent. Suspect that in some ways a nameless is smarter than me or you; if they focus on the concept of lying they’ll probably put two and two together even though it’s alien to them. That’s why I’ve been hesitant to talk about it. One wrong word mentioned in a space where the nameless can hear and we’ll never make it to Mars.”

Zephyr was silent for a minute, clearly thinking things through. I took the time to update my notes on her and update the Bayes net that I had constructed to predict her behaviour.

“Sorry for being a bitch,” she eventually said.

I had Body put a hand on her shoulder again. She didn’t push it away this time.

She continued. “I’m still not happy that you didn’t tell me earlier, but I should have known better than to...” Zephyr sighed. “Gods, I don’t know. Thought you were...”

Zephyr seemed at a loss for words, so I had Body pull her into a hug that was made awkward by the fact that she and Body were both sitting, and she was wearing an environment suit. I gave Body a mournful, but calm tone. “Don’t worry about it. You’ve been more of a friend than anyone ever has. I lied to you and deserved everything you said. I’ll keep you more involved next time. Okay?”

Zephyr shifted so she could lean on Body and wouldn't have to break the embrace. "Okay."

# Chapter Five

Michel Watanabe

The descent down the ladder was brutal.

Michel's arms had grown more and more fatigued with each day on the ship, even given how much rest they'd all been getting. He and his companions were breaking, slowly. Their bodies were, day by day, being torn apart by the gravity.

Well, all of them except Crystal, anyway.

And now he climbed down into the depths of the castle that they'd been using as a campsite. He hadn't even known there was a basement. Crystal had probably known the whole time. They seemed to know everything and share nothing.

Somehow, he reached the bottom without his arms popping out of their sockets. The heat and darkness were even worse than they had been on the surface. He took a few hesitant steps, grateful once again for the torch on his helmet and found that the dirt near the ladder quickly gave way to stone floors.

He could see by the light of his helmet that the floors were hand-carved, just as the blocks of stone on the surface had been, though much more attention had been spent smoothing the stone down here. It seemed likely that the blocks that made up the castle walls had somehow been brought up from this space.

He turned to look at Crystal, who had descended before

him, and was now scanning the underground chamber with eyes that could penetrate the darkness. The machine was cold and calculating as ever.

Above the smooth floor were arches, walls, and tunnels of carved, grey rock. The architecture was clearly designed with the gravity in mind. Even with only the ground floor above, Michel found it remarkable that the structure didn't collapse in on itself.

There was a wall before them, which was doubtless supporting the inner garden wall, above. Arches gave way to tunnels in both directions, with a small sub-chamber in an alcove near the ladder. Michel could see various tools and junk in the sub-chamber, including something like a broom, and the toy swords he'd seen the young nameless using in the garden.

“Thought you said this place was for the children,” remarked Zephyr, as she reached the base of the ladder. “Why is the ceiling so tall?”

The ceiling of the underground space was indeed about two and a half metres up. Zephyr's helmet torch joined Michel's in scanning the space, followed shortly by Nate's. Kokumo and the twins, Sam and Tom, were back in the garden, above, having opted to rest after the day's excitement and simply get a report on the basement, later. At least, despite all the danger and peril they'd been through, they hadn't lost anyone.

With the four of them present, Crystal moved off down the left tunnel. “Made for children, but probably mostly made by an adult walker, at least at first. Probably also useful to have enough space for an adult to be able to come down from time to time.”

Each garden, according to Crystal, was supposed to have exactly one adult walker. They'd explained earlier that the adult

nameless that had been in charge of the garden they were staying in had been killed in the conflict on Olympus. Michel was skeptical about all of it. Crystal was, at heart, a self-centred liar.

Archway after archway passed as they moved through the hot tunnel. Michel Watanabe saw cables attached to the ceiling by heavy, metal clips. They even passed a light fixture that cast a very weak, purple glow.

After the third archway they came into a bigger chamber, probably located underneath the garden. This place, too, had archways, walls, and pillars to support the great weight overhead, but they were designed to allow free movement and provide as much space as possible.

There were noises in this chamber, low and grinding. Michel could hear them through his suit's helmet. He could see their source, as well: a great many machines of various sizes and types were scattered about.

It was a factory.

“Where are they getting all the power for these machines?” asked Nate Daniels, as they spread out.

Michel found his way to what was surely a lathe, though it was structured a bit differently than the one he was familiar with back on Earth. Thinking about the machine made him strangely nostalgic and desperate to go back to Látego and the others in Brazil. It hadn’t even been a week since he’d left. Or at least, he didn’t think it had. Time seemed to move strangely on the alien craft.

“The nameless just say they get it from their ship, and aren’t very helpful beyond that,” said Crystal.

Michel’s fist tightened. Probably another lie.

Michel remarked to himself that it was odd how the

nameless went through so much trouble to keep the power cables for the machines up and bolted to the walls and ceiling. After all, they had to naturally step lightly around the vines, above. Surely they were good at watching their feet.

The explanation became clear a moment later when through one archway rolled an awkward robot that looked a bit like a large toy truck mashed up with a metal crate. It had an almost cartoony look to it, like it was taken from *Star Wars* or *Fleets*. It was helping to carry a large cracked mirror, and Michel guessed that while a walker could step over the thick power cables without problem, if the factory was staffed by wheeled robots, there was a good reason to keep the floors clear.

But robots weren't the only workers in the factory. Holding the other end of the mirror was one of the mid-sized nameless children.

Michel didn't know whether the child was one of those that had come to the garden before. Probably. It didn't really matter.

The difference in the way the child moved was dramatic and heart-breaking. In the garden the children played and moved with a happy freedom. Here in the factory, the young alien shuffled along with a tired, sad gait.

As in the garden, the child showed no fear of the intruders, though Michel could see one of its eyes watching him, and whenever one of them hit it with the direct beam from a helmet light it flinched in pain.

He took a step forward before he even realized what he was doing. He wanted to help the kid carry the mirror. It was probably very heavy. Couldn't they have gotten another robot to carry the other end?

He stopped himself. This wasn't his place to act.

He looked at the others. Crystal was watching him, cold and calculating. Zephyr and Nate's faces were hidden in the darkness of their helmets.

Bright blue and yellow sparks shot up in a loud, unexpected spray further in the factory. This time it was Zephyr who took a step forward. She was stopped by Crystal's hand on her shoulder.

"Just welding," said the android.

Indeed, Michel could see the silhouette of another child, deeper in the factory, as the sparks shot past its many arms and legs.

The four of them watched as the children went about their work. In another sub-chamber they spotted the smallest of the children—the one they called E.T. up in the garden. It seemed not to recognize them, or if it did, it gave no sign. No waving or pointing, nor getting up to investigate them. Perhaps it wasn't allowed to by the stalks.

The sentient plants (assuming Crystal wasn't also lying about that) were surely forcing these children to work. He could see it in the way they moved. This was no willing labour. The aliens that had seemed so carefree above now seemed to be exhausted and bored. E.T. was working on the insides of one of the computer pods that sat on the stalks.

"Their entire culture rests on slave labour from children," said Michel, when he realized it. He hadn't even meant to say it out loud, but it was so shocking that it slipped out.

"They're aliens. It's not our place to judge," said Crystal.

Michel turned and walked back to where Crystal and Zephyr were standing. He noticed they were holding hands. It disgusted him. All of it was...

He chuckled. It was perverted and sinful.

“Like hell it’s not,” he said. He gestured at the smallest alien in the other chamber, whose arms and legs were sprawled out on the ground, as it plucked away at the computer with a detached resignation. “These children aren’t working down here by choice. Don’t tell me that if they had the freedom to decide they’d want to come down here.”

Zephyr looked at Crystal. Nathan Daniels came in from where he was exploring to listen.

“It’s not our place to judge,” insisted Crystal, with a firm, sad expression. They raised their hands, letting go of Zephyr. “The aliens all live this way, and probably have for thousands of years.”

“What about the other children? Where are they? Are they slaves, too?”

“Mike, please calm down,” said Zephyr, using the more American version of his name.

“Watanabe has a point,” said Nate, backing him up for once. “Where are the other kids?”

Something seemed to wash over Crystal, then. Where before they’d been socially aware and remarkably human, they seemed to go blank and their voice took on a much more lifeless cadence. “As far as I can tell, there are indeed free children on the ship. Most gardens have more stalks than are needed to support the walkers that live there, and so the free children are brought in to feed at the same time as the resident children. These wanderers serve to bring news from far away gardens, and are the primary way the nameless share knowledge as a species.”

“And if given the chance, do you think these children would rather work down here or be free like the others?” Michel asked.

Crystal's face snapped back to something between careful determination and sympathy. "I honestly don't know. I only know that we're guests here, and we've already disrupted them enough."

"Yeah, by holding them hostage..." he muttered to himself.

"Come on, let's get back to camp. It's been a long day," encouraged Zephyr.

Watanabe turned and looked one more time at the sad child, sitting on the cold stone floor, picking at the machine. Yes, it was an alien, and this was its life, but Michel Watanabe couldn't help feel sorry for it. It made his blood boil.

But what was he supposed to do? He didn't know.

But he knew he had to do something.

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Michel waited until Zephyr and Nathan had gone into the tents to rest. Zephyr was blindly loyal to the machine, and Nathan was still loyal to Zephyr.

Kokumo, Sam, and Tom were up and about with him, now. His body ached, but it wasn't going to get any better. He wasn't sure he could count on any of the others, but they were the ones least likely to defend the robot.

He looked at Crystal Socrates. He watched them move about, doing odd jobs with a dispassionate expression. Of course the nameless children had meant nothing to the machine. This was the same machine that had threatened the nameless in order to buy passage to Mars. They were fundamentally selfish.

Michel could see it. He could hear it in the robot's words. The only reason that Michel had been brought up to the space station was to serve as fodder or a bargaining chip for the

robot, and the only reason he had been brought onto the nameless ship was as a gesture of good will towards Las Águilas on Mars.

It made him sick. Crystal didn't care about him or any of the others—probably not even Zephyr. If they did, they would've told them that they were walking into a death-trap before it was too late. Thank God they found out about that early on.

First they lied to them about the safety of the ship, then they threatened their lives to keep them quiet, and finally they let the alien bastards keep their child slaves.

He could have forgiven the first two offences. It was an asshole thing to do to lie and threaten, but just because they were a selfish asshole didn't mean they couldn't be useful to work with. But to see the sin of the aliens so plainly and so clearly... and then to refuse to help things? That was the moment that it was clear that Crystal couldn't be allowed to lead them any longer. The robot was evil, and if they kept getting their way... Well, he'd seen more than one movie with that premise. If only he could be sure the good guys would win in the end.

He remembered the movements of the children, both in the garden and in the factory. They were so alien, and yet their body language said so much. In the garden they skipped, waved, played, and showed real emotion. In the factory they slouched as they worked, and looked at the humans with pleading eyes. Even without being able to speak they conveyed more intelligence than any dog ever could.

The thoughts built him up. They had to build him up. Michel needed to know he was acting on the side of good just this once. Clear cases of good and evil came along so rarely...

He took a deep breath. Crystal turned and looked at him,

as if anticipating his challenge. The robot's face was passive, but Michel didn't believe for one second that meant a damn.

"I don't care what you've said. I'm going to set the children free!" he said, heart beating quickly now.

Crystal pinched the bridge of their nose and sighed. "We went over this before, Michel. We're not here to change all of nameless society. The less trouble we make, the safer we'll be."

"So you say. You also say we still aren't allowed to talk to the nameless ourselves! You've threatened our lives and you talk about 'safety'! You put the entire human species in danger with your actions. Will we be going to war? And if we're going to war, why shouldn't we at least rescue some children while we're at it?"

"Calm down. This is a much more complex situation than you seem to think it is."

It felt good. He could feel his muscles coming to life. "You know what? I don't really think it is! I think it's pretty simple! I think everything that has happened—everything that you've done—has been for one purpose: to save your own skin. Or whatever you have instead of skin."

Crystal shifted away from appearing frustrated to being more neutral. Michel had done more than enough martial arts in his time to notice the subtle change in posture in the android. They were readying for a fight.

Since they seemed to be at a loss for words, Michel continued. "This whole thing was probably planned by your programmers. They probably sent you to infiltrate Las Aguilas and get to Mars so you could destroy us from the inside! The only reason you're keeping us around is to earn the trust of the Martians!"

"Now you're just being paranoid," said Crystal. They

looked at Kokumo and asked “What do you think? Do you think I’ve been deceiving you all in some sort of grand conspiracy? Nimefanya wamekuwa wakijaribu kuharibu Las Águilas tangu mwanzo? Kwa nini mimi yamesaidia Phoenix badala ya risasi yake?”

“Speak English!” yelled Michel, drawing the android’s attention back to him. They didn’t appear at all concerned.

“I was asking why I would have helped Las Águilas if I was a traitor. Your theory is blatantly false. Occam’s razor cuts it to shreds. My only purpose has been trying to help you. The nameless children are pitiable, but rushing down there and breaking them out will do nothing for the millions of children in other castles on this ship and their mothership. It’s a foolish, short-sighted notion.”

Crystal’s voice had gained an edge, and their face was now locked onto Michel with an intensity that made him take a step back reflexively. Crystal took a step forward in response, still in a martial pose.

What was he doing? Why was he challenging this machine? He’d seen them move. Without a weapon he had no chance. They spoke in lies, but there was a thread of truth in there. He had to outsmart them.

“Help us?! I don’t feel particularly grateful for having you around! You treat us like dogs and spin careful lies to keep us in line!” Out of the corner of his eye, Michel could see activity in the tents. He’d only have a bit more time before he was clearly outnumbered. “If you’re really so set on helping me get to Mars, you better stop me from killing myself. I’m going to remove my helmet and suffocate in this nice, safe environment you’ve led us into!”

The machine froze, not moving a centimetre.

Michel raised his hands to his neck, to give the impression

he was about to break the seal on his suit.

Crystal fell for the bait, rushing forward to stop Michel.

As the robot lumbered forth on its carbon and steel legs Michel threw himself into a spin. It was his only chance. He had to catch the android off-guard and off-balance. He dropped low, an easy thing to do under the intense gravity, and used the force to push the spin faster, swinging out a leg to catch Crystal Socrates behind the knee mid-stride.

The motion pulled the leg out from Crystal and the robot slammed into the black dirt, knocking up soil in something of a crater.

Michel tried to keep as much of his momentum as he could as he swung himself up and into the air, a leg extending to crash onto his foe. Or at least, that was his plan. Crystal, however, was not stunned by the impact on the ground. They felt no pain and didn't need to catch their breath. By the time Michel's foot landed where the android had fallen, Crystal had rolled to the side.

Michel reoriented himself. The gravity played tricks on his inner-ear and made him want to throw up. As he turned to look at Crystal, the robot's hand slammed down on the back of his neck.

When Michel hit the ground he stayed there.

Fire burned in him, but a stronger emotion swallowed up the anger.

Fear.

He had felt it since the beginning. Lying there, dazed on the dirt, he wondered just how much of his actions had ever been about anything except the fear. It flooded him now and told him to run, but he knew there was nowhere to run to.

He had tried his trick, and he had failed. No amount of physical strength or martial arts skill would let him bring down a machine, and none of the others had come to back him up.

“That was foolish,” whispered Crystal into his ear. He had forgotten the robot was speaking over the com. Their voice was icy and unforgiving.

“Better to be a righteous fool than a successful tyrant,” spat Michel into his microphone, forcing his arms to move and push himself up.

He felt himself grow lighter and then realized what was happening as the robot flipped him onto his back. They stared down at him with cold, silver eyes and a doll-like face. “Spoken like a true fool. I am no tyrant. I was programmed, first and foremost, to serve and protect humans. I understand you feel sympathy for the nameless children, but the truth is that I do not. They are not humans, and so my programming rejects their well-being as inferior. I am here to protect you, but unfortunately the circumstances have proven that your greatest threat is yourself.”

A black foot of carbon plating descended onto Michel’s chest and began to press down on him. “If I were a true tyrant I would kill you right now to establish my strength and serve as an example.”

The foot moved, and the robot extended a helping hand instead. “But I am not, despite your fears. I will work, with every fibre of my being, to see you safely brought to Mars. Once there, if you so choose, I will help you on your quest to liberate the nameless children from captivity. But when we do so we will be wise about it.”

Michel hesitated, then took the hand. Socrates pulled him up with ease and continued to monologue. “A war *is* coming between humanity and the nameless; your values are too alien

to each other to coexist in peace. I am your ally. I am your friend. Everything that I have done that you have warped into some sort of conspiracy theory, will be clear enough in time. All I ask for is your trust.”

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Michel lay awake that night, unable to sleep, despite the ever-mounting fatigue. The tight walls of the tent pressed in around him and he longed for a better air conditioning system.

But it was his feelings and thoughts that kept him awake, not the physical discomfort. He kept playing the day’s events over and over, feeling shame and fear and anger and confusion.

Crystal had, the previous day, set up a couple speakers just outside the tent to play the sound of rain. It was a wonderful sound. It made him homesick.

The nameless were evil. Enslaving children was a sin, no matter what culture you were from. And Las Águilas Rojas was good. He had to believe that. But Crystal Socrates was...

Crystal was cold.

They moved strategically, lied, and kept secrets. Perhaps that made them a better Águila than he was. It scared him. The idea of more androids like Crystal scared him.

But he had to admit that for all the lies and threats and everything, Crystal really did seem to be on his side.

Mars was supposed to be a new start. Earth was changing and collapsing. It was a place of sin. Michel knew that better than most. What would happen when Crystal got there? What would happen to the nameless? He didn’t know. He didn’t know how they’d get to Mars or what to do after that. How would they land on the planet? How would they locate the other Águilas?

There was so much that could go wrong, and Michel was powerless to do anything except trust in the machine. A part of him was still furious about that powerlessness. But mostly he was just afraid.

# Chapter Six

## Face

Despite having days and days to think of a solution, we were still divided on how best to land on Mars. The problem was multifaceted. All of us understood that the first priority was keeping Body intact. If Body was destroyed it would disempower us from pursuing our goals (or in Safety's case it would simply be failure). An easy side effect of protecting Body would be protecting the humans, as Heart and I were inclined to do. But would it also be good to protect the nameless?

The aliens were, in a major way, our enemies. Most, if not all of them, would try and kill us once they figured out that we were lying. But if it were possible to kill all the nameless on the ship, would it be in our interests to do so? The humans didn't want the walker children to die, but I could probably spin anything that damaged the ship into an accident, to diffuse the blame. It wouldn't satisfy Heart, but my sister understood that it was better to sacrifice a small thing for a greater reward.

The important question was what the reaction of the mothership would be. The xenocruiser was but a tiny branch off the primary vessel. As best we could tell, the nameless held no particular affection for their cousins on other ships, or even between gardens on the same ship. They would not mourn the loss, or even find their absence to be an economic or intellectual burden. But destroying the xenocruiser would mark

us as an enemy to the nameless. They might not retaliate out of love or anger, but they could certainly strike back out of fear.

Complicating matters was the fact that we had no idea whether the nameless on the xenocruiser were communicating with the mothership. We reasoned that they must have been, but none of the stalks we communicated with had any knowledge of it. From the perspective of the individuals, “God” was simply going to Mars because of their prayers. None of them knew how to actually fly the ship, operate any of its external sensors, or use the communications equipment directly.

Wiki was under the opinion that the nameless ships had been built by “adult nameless”. Under this theory all the nameless we encountered—all the stalks, specifically—were children who had been sent out into the galaxy to explore, without any of the knowledge of their forebears. The nameless had no books (or written language at all), and thus no concept of what had come before them except for what they could learn from older stalks. But like all oral traditions, the story of the nameless origins was masked behind an unknown number of “retellings”. The stalks appeared to have indefinite lifespans; their bodies could become diseased by cancer or infection, but these risks were low, and did not appear to increase with age, unlike for humans or walkers. (Walkers, it seemed, lived a couple decades at most.) Stalk-5 in our garden claimed to be more than 739 years old (more precisely: “84288 days since counting began”), but even it had never shared thoughts with a walker that had witnessed its homeworld.

By this theory, the nameless ships were controlled by an AI that responded to the collective will, or “prayers”, of the stalks. All attempts at communicating with the intelligence failed, however, leading us to the theory that it was not generally intelligent, but was instead a narrow mind, capable only of

thinking and planning in the domain of ship piloting.

But if this were all true, the nameless would be effectively blind to the outside of the ship. How did they hear communications from Earth? How did they know where the other ships were? The stalks were unable to answer our questions. There was a concept barrier that prevented any of us from fully understanding the other minds. The stalks claimed that they simply knew, just like they knew they were flying towards Mars and just like they knew that the mothership had not left high orbit around Earth.

If the xenocruiser was destroyed upon reaching Mars, the nameless on the mothership would surely know that it had disappeared, but what else would they know? Would they know it had been hijacked? Would they know it had been intentionally destroyed? If they already knew what we had done, there was little point to trying to destroy the cruiser, but if we could prevent the information of our actions from leaking out to the wider nameless community, it would be worthwhile. Dream, Vista, Heart, and I were the primary proponents of trying to destroy the ship, if it would better preserve our reputation.

Growth, interestingly enough, was on the side of letting the nameless go free, regardless of the state of knowledge, rather than trying to somehow destroy the xenocruiser. Safety agreed with Growth, but for entirely opposite reasons. Safety was so present oriented that he thought there was too much danger in trying to sabotage the entire xenocruiser. We had seen the nameless ships break up into shuttles capable of descending into Earth's gravity well, and he thought it best to attempt to replicate that proven method of descent rather than risk, say, slamming the entire xenocruiser into Mars and bracing ourselves in protective foam, as Dream insisted we try.

Growth's perspective took the very-long view. He thought

that as long as we were going to keep Zephyr and the other humans alive, they would eventually leak the information back to Earth, and from Earth it would reach the nameless. Trying to keep the secret was impossible in the long run, unless we became far more homicidal than Heart or I were willing to be. When the truth came out, it would not help our position to have killed an entire ship full of aliens (including alien children) to save face.

Once the stalks in the garden told us that we had arrived in orbit around Mars, Wiki sided with Growth and Safety. He pointed out that while the nameless and the humans appeared to be destined for conflict, we still might salvage some neutrality. The nameless continued to think of us more like a stalk than a walker (more like a valuable equal), and if we could manage things correctly we might be able to use the nameless as trade partners. Trading during wartime was very profitable, according to Wiki, assuming we could maintain that neutrality.

In order to better preserve relations with the nameless, Wiki wanted to tell them of our deception as soon as we were out of danger. They'd find the information valuable and perhaps soothe the harm that we had done. Safety, Heart and I thought that was idiotic, but the challenge was an irresistible lure for Dream. My inventive brother changed his position to favour Wiki's plan, and Vista followed without explanation.

Heart and I were the last holdouts for the plan to try and disable or destroy the xenocruiser. As it was, we were outnumbered, and had no choice. So we compromised. We agreed to support the plan to try and take a shuttle or shuttles down to the planet's surface if and only if we did not tell the nameless about our deception. It was still a weapon, and one that the humans could probably use in the coming conflict.

Our compromise irritated Dream, but if he switched back he'd be alone.

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We'd worked out everything we could think of, and had told the humans. They were working to get packed up while we topped off the batteries and discussed things with the nameless.

Over the days I had learned that there were ways of talking to them that didn't trigger such a strongly negative reaction. The stalks were interested in learning, and were often agreeable to new information. Only communication that was too meta, or was unclear in purpose seemed to really bother them. Wiki suspected it had to do with the mind-machine interfaces they used. It was one thing to learn a new fact, but quite another to have another person seemingly inside your head.

"I am Crystal. I am curious whether all the children are ready for transport."

"I am Stalk-6. Walker children have been told what is happening and have prepared the factory for the **STRONG CONQUERERS WHO WE ARE EXPECTING WITH JOY FEELINGS!**"

"I am Stalk-2. **JOY! FREEDOM FROM EVIL AND NEW BLOOD WILL FILL THE CASTLE!**"

"I am Stalk-5. The children must meditate before they leave or you will have child corpses in the near future."

"I am Crystal. That is acceptable. Send them to the garden."

"I am Stalk-5. The walker children are walking there. You should **REINFORCE** your desire. Should murder **ALL** of them when you arrive at Mars. **SHOULD NOT COMMUNICATE WITH THEM! CHILDREN ARE FOR SACRIFICING! CHILDREN ARE NOT FOR PERVERTING!**"

"I am Stalk-4. **IS GOOD! SHOULD REINFORCE!**

## SHOULD REINFORCE! DEATH IS GREATER GOOD THAN COMMUNICATION!"

“I am Crystal. Should be calm. My mind is unchanged. I will murder all the children after they have served me.”

“I am Stalk-2. IS GOOD! NEW BLOOD IS GOOD! WALKER CHILDREN ARE DOOMED IN ALL FUTURES!”

“I am Crystal. I am curious how I will know when the boats are ready.”

“I am Stalk-8. The boats are ready now. When you leave we will feel INTENSE JOY!”

“I am Crystal. I am curious about the location of the boats.”

“I am Stalk-1. You are an idiot. The boats are in the water. Leave the castle and go to the water. You will see boats there. God will take care of the rest.”

We didn't send any more radio signals and neither did the nameless. They had no customs for starting or ending conversations, which suited us just fine. After another dozen minutes we judged the batteries sufficiently charged and sent Body back to the central garden.

Zephyr and the others were nearly ready to go when Body returned. There were a few last-minute things to manage, such as redistributing the remaining supplies into printed satchels. The original plan was to have everyone in a single ship, but the nameless had told us that this was not “the will of God” for some reason that didn't translate. So the large containers that we were using had to be divided in the case that the shuttles got separated in the descent or one of them didn't make it.

I saw the young walkers “meditating” on the stalks. It was, in a sense, their last meal, and the last time they'd have contact

with the closest thing they had to family.

Earlier, when the children had come to meditate, there had been nine. There were only three now: the three that lived in the factory beneath the garden. They were the children, more or less, of the walker called Jester, though I had learned that because of their two-animal nature they would sometimes swap sections with the “wild” children that wandered the islands looking for stalk contact, making their true parentage a bit more complex.

E.T., Pulpo, and Sulk were spaced so evenly in height that Wiki suspected there was a cap on child-bearing that was evident in their ages, though he had not asked the stalks how old they were. E.T. was the youngest and tiniest, rising to a mere half metre in height like some kind of eight-limbed doll; they had been the one who waved to Zephyr days ago, and were the most bold and fearless.

Sulk, on the other hand, was the oldest child of Jester. Wiki reasoned that if we hadn’t hijacked their garden, Sulk would have taken over as gardener (though Wiki also speculated that the more aggressive neighbours would have tried to murder them). They were taller than their siblings, but still only came up to about 140cm in height, even counting their 16cm penis. Sulk wasn’t nearly as capricious as their younger siblings, and moved with the caution of someone who knew just how dangerous strangers could be.

Pulpo was the middle child. They had been one of the juggling children from that first day, and even now as they meditated on the stalk they tossed a ball between their hands idly. At just under a metre tall, Pulpo was most easily distinguished by a vaguely green pattern above the eyes on the top animal. Like seemingly all of the nameless world, walkers were essentially black, but the exact shade varied across individuals and these dark-green splashes were enough to

identify them, even if not particularly bright.

It didn't take much longer to finish packing up, and the children finished their last communion not long after. I could see them abandon the coms they held in the mouths on their undersides. The stalks didn't want them communicating with us, and they were as good as dead anyway. The stalks probably didn't want to waste perfectly good alien coms on sacrifices.

E.T. came up to us shortly after and gestured for us to follow them towards the tunnel through the wall that led out of the garden. It was a remarkably human gesture.

Body picked up the makeshift cart that we had printed. It would let us carry the tents and other supplies without having to take multiple trips. The cart's foot-tipped spokes padded along over the vines as we left the garden. It was probably hurting them, but it didn't matter much any more. We left behind a good deal of trash and useless gear, but that didn't matter either.

We found ourselves outside the castle walls for the first time since the battle that had happened a few days earlier. Vista spotted the corpse of one of the attackers a few dozen metres out, struck down by one of the rockets that the stalks had been hoarding.

We didn't move towards it, but instead followed the children around the edge of the outer wall towards the rear of the castle. The ocean stretched out forever in what I knew must be a clever optical illusion behind the castle. Before too long we encountered the "boats" that we had arranged to carry us to Mars.

The boats apparently required a walker to function, which was why we needed the children. Safety had, at first, thought about perhaps trying to get adult walkers to pilot the craft. But after being assured that there was no skill in piloting a boat

(only “will”) it became clear that adult walkers would serve as more of a risk and hassle than anything else.

The boats were made of sheet metal and had the same hand-crafted aesthetic as all the nameless artefacts. We speculated for a time as to whether the vessels were genuinely made by the hands of the nameless on the xenocruiser, or whether they were a part of the ship as a whole and made by whomever had built it.

There were seven of us and three boats. After a short discussion we divided into groups. Michel and Nathan would go with Sulk, the twins would go with Pulpo, and E.T. would escort Body and the women. The boats were small: only about two metres long and a metre wide inside. The tightest fit was the boat that carried Zephyr, Kokumo, E.T., and Body, but E.T. made it work by sitting on Zephyr’s lap.

There were no oars or directions on the barren metal boats, but as soon as we all were situated they lurched into motion, propelled by an unknown force.

“Remember, the nameless should know exactly where to go. We’ve given them the same instructions and there’s nothing really to do before we land. Just trust them and don’t do anything to scare them. Try to minimize conversation if you can,” instructed Body.

“I don’t think I could scare this little guy if I tried,” said Zephyr. I could see E.T. gripping her hand tightly at the front of the boat and fidgeting around. “He’s so curious. See?”

“Yes. We’re lucky to have children as guides. This would have been much more complicated with adults. Keep them close. I expect they can swim, but we shouldn’t test it,” said Body.

The boats drifted slowly out into the ocean. I expected to be able to see the edges of the ship quickly, but we managed at

least a hundred metres out into the water before anything happened, and even when it did the illusion of the sky stretching down to the distant horizon was unbroken.

Without warning, three shimmering metal portals emerged from the surface of the water, ringed by metal rims. They had the same character as the doorway to the airlock we had come through before, but honestly I do not remember much about going through them. Before I knew what was happening, we were on the other side.

The boat we had been riding in was gone, replaced by a small, dark room of precise grey plates lit only by the glistening metal portal we had just exited.

There was no more gravity. Body and the others drifted about the chamber freely, along with our gear.

“That was fucking wild! Did—does anyone know what—I don’t know what just happened!” sputtered Zephyr on the com.

“It wahs quite strange,” agreed Kokumo with characteristic reservedness.

I wished that I knew what to say, but the experience seemed normal to me. Perhaps the humans had been affected by the transition differently.

As I surveyed our new location, it became clear to me that the chamber was not empty. On each wall were soft shapes, curves of grey that blended in with the plates. The infrared spectrum and the temperature sensors in Body’s hand told us, as Body touched a wall, that the walls of the room were not metal. They were warm and soft, almost like foam.

{The craft is shaped to hold three humanoids and the small walker. Attend to the stalk analogue at the fore of the craft,} instructed Vista.

I followed her highlight and found a protrusion on the other

side of Zephyr with what appeared to be fine silver hairs covering it. E.T. had already begun to move towards the interface.

{The other structures appear to be pads.} Vista highlighted some indents in the wall-lumps. {These probably extend to wrap around the body.}

“We need to get tucked away before E.T. does. I’m afraid that the ship’s going to start moving soon,” said Body at the combined direction of Safety and myself. “Kokumo, you take that side, and Zephyr can take the other. I’ll secure myself adjacent to the walker.”

It took a moment for the humans to orient themselves in the zero gravity and find their way into position. Body moved more quickly, relying on Vista’s direction, though we dealt with the gear first. There were subtle hooks set into the walls that could grasp the bags with the environment tent and the small cache of food, water, and batteries we’d brought. Again, it was as though the space had been designed for us.

As Body lay down on the pads, we found that bindings naturally emerged from the chaotic shapes and could be pulled across Body to secure it firmly to the wall. Despite the absence of gravity, it was clear that the shuttle had an up and down. The stalk interface was on the bottom, and both human-shaped sockets on the side walls were oriented with the feet pointing to the floor.

As soon as E.T. settled onto the artificial stalk, the metallic portal began to collapse into the ceiling. In seconds, the cabin was nearly totally dark, with the only lights being the vaguely luminescent freckles at the base of E.T.’s penis and the occasional check light on the humans’ environment suits. I could vaguely see, thanks to the infrared light radiating from everything, but I knew the humans would be almost totally

blind.

About half a minute passed in silence. Everyone was wrapped in tightly, waiting for something to happen.

“What are—” began Zephyr just as the craft accelerated abruptly. If we hadn’t been strapped to the walls we would have been (subjectively) flung against the wall of the shuttle through which we had come. There was no sign of a doorway or hatch now. I wondered how we were supposed to get out once it landed.

The ship shifted directions several times, each more smoothly than at the start. Wiki was tracking the relative position as derived from the integrals of our acceleration for some asinine reason.

“Holy shit. Holy shit. Holy shit,” I heard Zephyr chanting under her breath.

“Why do they noht have windows? I feel like I ahm een a package bein’ delivahd through tha mail,” complained Kokumo.

“We’re fine. This is fine,” whispered Zephyr.

“The nameless aren’t as strongly visual as we are. I’m sure there are cameras on the ship, but they’re feeding the knowledge directly to E.T. over there. The walker would rather know through the computer what is going on than be able to see it themselves.”

“Do you think we’re in Mars’ atmosphere yet?” asked Zephyr nervously.

“No. It’ll still be a little while, I expect. When we enter the atmosphere the ship should start to vibrate. You’ll feel it.”

“Christ.”

“It’s okay, Zephyr. We’re going to be fine.”

“How do you know? Have you ever ridden in one of these things before? Has anyone? Have they ever been to Mars? Maybe the thinner atmosphere won’t provide enough braking! We could be riding down in a big coffin.”

“She has a point,” added Kokumo, unhelpfully.

“Close your eyes, both of you,” commanded Body. “Take some deep breaths. It’s been quite the adventure, and we’re almost there. We’re in one of the most advanced ships in the known universe. The nameless flew trillions of kilometres to get to Earth. Their ships are tough as diamond. We’re probably safer in here than we have been for the last week and a half.”

I could hear Zephyr and Kokumo’s breathing over the radio.

Body began speaking again. “I have a song for you. I want you to relax and imagine yourself on Earth. Imagine it’s a warm summer night and you’re in a treehouse that’s shaking in the breeze, but it’s safe and secure. It’s almost like the rocking of a crib, and you feel as though you could sleep in it, even as it moves.”

With that, Body began to sing. The little walker was watching Body intently as Body spoke, but I could see it react with shock at the new sound. The song was Heart’s, and I had no idea she was working on it. I wish I could tell you what it sounded like, or whether it was beautiful, but in my youth I was not able to understand such things, and the direct sensory memory of it has been lost to me with time. All I can tell you is that it seemed to make Zephyr (and Kokumo) more calm and happy.

Even as the ship began to vibrate with the friction of the Martian air, Body continued to sing. The humans didn’t say a word as we sailed in darkness. Unlike a human, we had no need for air to make noise. Body was equipped with speakers instead

of lungs, and I do know that Heart, at times, leveraged this to weave Body's voice into multiple voices to carry a harmony.

When the impact of the ground came, it barely seemed noticeable. The shuttle had managed to burn off nearly all of its speed in the descent and we were greeted with nothing more than a few bumps.

Only then did Heart stop her song.

We knew that we had to set up an environment tent for E.T. and get moving. It was unclear how or when the shuttle would open, and while the humans had suits, E.T. did not. Despite our promise to the stalks, we had no intention of murdering the children, or even letting them die if we could help it.

But something held Body still for a moment. It held the humans as well. We simply rested in the wake of the ride and the song in the darkness of the cabin.

Only once E.T. began to pull themselves out of the socket that had apparently been shaped for them did Body begin to move. The humans clicked on the lamps on their helmets and we got to work. It was a race against time to get the radio set up and contact the other travellers.

It was unclear where exactly the Águila colony was, so we could only land in the general area and hope that they'd see our signal and come pick us up. In the meantime we'd have to endure Mars for as long as we could.

“God damn it’s nice to not be in that gravity any more!” swore Zephyr.

We had safely reached Mars.

Part Two:

# Constructed Identity

# Chapter Seven

## Face

Body stood in the wasteland. Kokumo had said that the cliffside was beautiful. I struggled to understand that emotion. Beauty had eluded me, in my attempts to understand the human mind. I had a few theories, and could mimic a human well enough to, say, convince Zephyr that Crystal found her beautiful, but I was confident that there was more that I had not captured.

The sky overhead was a yellowish colour, and my sister Vista seemed absolutely fascinated, typical to her nature, by every rock we seemed to pass. She wanted to see them all. On the ride from the landing site she and Wiki had been thinking very loudly about mundanities of the Martian surface. Apparently the orange-yellow sky was the result of dust in the air.

It could not hold my attention. We were just outside Rodríguez Station, which was called “Road” most of the time. Underground, perhaps beneath Body’s feet, were humans—a whole colony of them. And we were stuck out in the dust.

“Kokumo and Nathan, we’re ready for you,” said a deep voice on the radio. The airlock hissed open, venting the last of the breathable atmosphere into the near vacuum of Mars. A figure in a suit with a gold visor—probably Nora Hollander, the chief of security for Road—waved at them.

I seized control of Body, having it advance towards the open airlock door. “Ah, I’m glad it’s time!” I had it say, both directly and over the com channel. “I know that you’d wanted to talk to Zephyr, but I really think that I ought to be involved in the discussion.”

Nora had started shaking her head long before I completed the sentence. She let Kokumo and Nate pass by her into the airlock, but held out a hand to stop us. I briefly considered forcing my way in.

“Stay here, robot,” she commanded. Despite my protests, earlier, the security officer refused to acknowledge Crystal as a person to interact with. Instead she treated us as a slave.

*The Purpose* called for me to do more, but I was stuck. Safety was paranoid about being seen as dangerous, and forced Body to stay still. I had it say “Wait! It’s important that—”

Nora cut Body off with a curt “Stay here. We’ll deal with you when we get the rest of the equipment.”

And with that they were gone. The airlock door swung closed and began to pressurise. Body was alone in the wastes with only the two rovers and the few supplies we’d brought that hadn’t been taken in already. The airlock was connected to a small building standing alone in the cold, red sand. A couple dozen metres away was another small building and then further still was a large structure raised up from the ground that looked like a landing pad. Most of Rodríguez Station was underground, and it gave what little bit of surface structure there was a desolate feeling.

We were alone.

It was intolerable. The Martian Águilas treated Crystal like a suitcase or, at best, a servant. Hadn’t they seen what we’d done for their cause back on Earth?

It had all happened so fast. They'd insisted on waiting until we got back to Road to debrief and discuss things. I had assumed that I would be able to take part. I'd been part of the discussion of how to transport the nameless, and what to scavenge from the xenoboats. I'd grown complacent in expecting the humans to treat me with some degree of respect.

And now Zephyr was inside talking with the station's leaders while Body was out in the cold.

Safety and Vista were thinking about the turrets attached to the corners of the landing pad and speculating about the station's defence capabilities. They believed there were other guns up on the cliff face near the satellite dish.

I could feel the pressure from Growth and my other siblings. I had failed them. I had been created to interact with humans and avoid this very situation. That was *The Purpose*. And yet... it had still come to pass.

I could not be discouraged, though. My mind knew no rest, and while Body stood, waiting for the airlock door to open again, I spun over possibilities, planning out things to say or do. I needed to leverage Zephyr. I needed to get in an actual conversation, where I wasn't disregarded a priori. I would even endorse having Michel Watanabe speak on Crystal's behalf. Despite his general antagonism, at least he saw us as a person.

The airlock hissed open again.

Two figures stepped out, both with their reflective visors down. Their suits were older, and cruder than the ones that we'd taken from Olympus station a week ago.

I had expected some word of acknowledgement, but the humans moved to get the other equipment without saying anything.

“Nora?” I asked.

“Yes?” responded the security officer, looking up just briefly enough for me to identify which of the humans she was.

“Is there anything I can do to help speed up this process? It’s really quite important that I be inside.” I tried to shape my voice and body language to be happy and nonthreatening.

{Emphasize our helpfulness more,} encouraged my sister, Heart. She was the youngest of our kind, and had been programmed with a much more altruistic goal than the rest of us.

{Let Face manage this,} encouraged Growth. {She’s spent more time thinking about this kind of problem than you. Her failure here is surely only temporary.}

I could feel my siblings all watching and waiting for what I’d say next. If I continued to fail, would Safety or the others take a more forceful approach?

“Jian, you keep going. I need to have a word with the robot,” said Nora to the person beside her.

There was nothing particularly special about the woman’s appearance, at least as far as she was hidden inside the old environment suit. She was a decent height taller than Body, but not abnormally so. The suit she wore was plain, and unadorned by any special markings. There wasn’t even a red eagle insignia.

“Zephyr has been telling us about you. She says you have a massive power source inside you that’s probably alien tech.”

“Actually the nameless seemed not to know—”

Nora cut off Body with an irritated tone. “Do not interrupt me. I know that you’ve been programmed with an unhealthy semblance to a human. Perhaps you even believe that you are a person, and deserve to be treated like the others. But you aren’t and you don’t. You’re not even property. You’re dangerous

contraband. Rodríguez Station doesn't permit robots or artificial intelligences. We barely use computers here. Humans working with humans. This is the true Águila way."

I forced Body to interrupt, despite Nora's order. I tried to squeeze in between her words so that it could be interpreted as normal conversation. "At least bring me inside and let me be part of the discussion. Let me—"

"No," said Nora. Her voice had a deep power to it, and I suspected that she'd grown up biologically male. "You are to stay right here. That's an order. I also order you to be silent until addressed directly."

Dream was amused at her naïveté. It had been a long time since Crystal Socrates was bound in any serious way by orders. My inventive brother reached out to try and interrupt her with a salute and a "Yes, ma'am!" but I blocked the motion.

Nora continued, unaware of the conversations and power struggles going on in the being before her. "I'll escort you inside if we decide that you're not too dangerous to have around. Until then you can enjoy the sunshine."

And with that, Nora walked away to deal with the last of the supplies and salvage from the xenoboat. The alien craft had gone through a strange kind of decay upon landing, but there was still a decent collection of alien artefacts worth investigating.

Growth made a light push to get Body to make a break for the airlock and get inside the station. Safety and I outbid him, and Body stayed still and silent. I suspected that my power-oriented brother was only trying to accumulate strength within the society. He knew as well as the rest of us that a direct confrontation with the humans would be disastrous. We'd won a couple violent conflicts before, but only with individuals. Body was outnumbered by several orders of magnitude, here.

{Once they re-enter the airlock, I think it's pretty clear we should flee,} thought Safety. {Face is failing.}

{Running wouldn't do anything. Where would we go?} asked Heart.

{The rovers aren't guarded,} answered Safety. {We could steal one, or perhaps both, if they're able to be piloted remotely.}

{There's another batch of vehicles that's on its way towards the Indian station right now,} said Wiki. {I heard the humans discussing it.}

{That doesn't answer my question,} objected Heart. {What good would it do?}

{We'd be free to sail the seven seas,} answered Dream. {Crystal Socrates: Mars Pirate! It'd make a good holo.}

{We're *not* going to steal the rovers, and we're *not* going to become a pirate,} I thought, trying to emphasize how foolish this whole line of thinking was.

{Better than being a prisoner and then sold back to Earth,} thought Vista. While my sister was supposed to be solely concerned with seeing the universe as it was, she'd expressed an unexpected level of agency in the last few weeks.

Growth was adamant. {Face will carry us through this. As soon as we're inside the station we'll be able to start winning the humans over and building our power base. Fleeing is a dead-end. There's nothing out there but dust and rocks and the inevitability of being hunted down or running out of power.}

{This is just a minor setback. We've proven ourselves before. This time will be no different,} I thought, adding my assurance to Growth's thoughts.

Safety wasn't so convinced, but he took no direct action,

and after only about ten minutes the airlock hissed open one final time to reveal Nora waving for us to come. The opportunity for escape had passed.

I struggled to contain myself as Body stepped into the first chamber. There were thick, scratched windows on the heavy doors, and a metal grating on the floor. I had so many questions about what had been decided.

But I kept Body silent. It still benefitted us to appear the obedient servant.

It was darker in the airlock than it had been outside. Despite being significantly further from the sun, the Martian sky still provided quite a lot of light. More than the nameless environment, certainly, and more than the small room inside the station.

There were hoses and various tools hung against the walls. As soon as the hatch had closed behind us and sealed fully, Nora took one of the hoses and began to spray herself with a sharp blast of water.

“You’re not short-circuiting, are you?” she asked, a bit too late for it to have been a useful question.

I had Body take a step away from the water. “I have sensitive electric connections inside my torso cavity, but no, I’m not that sensitive to water. I would ask you to please not spray me, however.”

“Important to keep the dust out of the station,” she explained. “Bit of an impossible task, but we try anyway. It’s toxic, radioactive, and does wonders for the lungs, I hear. But I suppose that wouldn’t bother you.”

Heart, against my wishes, seized control of Body’s voice. “It would bother me quite a bit, actually, if someone was hurt because of dust I tracked in. Can I help without having to

spray myself?"

Nora pointed to a sponge. "Wipe yourself down, especially your feet. It's not ideal, but I don't expect you to be spending that much time around people, anyway."

That worried me, but I wasn't able to ask about it. Heart still had control of Body. She diligently wiped the dirt and grime from our form as the atmosphere in the airlock shifted back to something that was tolerable by humans.

It was a bit brighter inside the next room. Cleansed of dust, Nora had taken off her bulky helmet and we'd gone further inside. This part of the station reminded me of some of the workshops we'd been in on Earth. There were tools everywhere, as well as a horde of odds-and-ends. Vista believed that most of the parts and equipment were for servicing the station's vehicles.

I was much more interested in the company than in the objects. Waiting for us were five strange men, two of which were armed with combat rifles, and Zephyr, looking miserable.

"Ah, the so-called Crystal Socrates," said one of the men.

He seemed to be the leader. Pale skin, tall, and handsome, he wore a sharp suit and his voice was crisp and commanding. His body showed signs of a high testosterone level, with high forehead and strong jaw. Just the lightest bits of white frosted his temples, giving him a sense of maturity without actually seeming old.

"This way, please," he commanded, gesturing at the two armed men at his side. They seemed more like soldiers than colonists.

Body stopped, at Growth's initiative. "You, sir, have the better of me," I had Body say, keeping its eyes pointed at the leader. "May I at least get your name first?"

“¡Elegante!” he said with a sort of half-laugh. “I am Pedro Velasco. Now follow those men, before I have you deactivated right here.”

Safety’s thoughts started pounding the public mindspace. He was formulating ways to defeat the humans, and speculating about escape routes. Mostly he was pressuring me to fix this.

I had Body slowly walk forward, nominally obeying. This Pedro Velasco seemed, unfortunately, very serious. “Have you spoken to Phoenix?” asked Body. “She granted me the rights of personhood within Las Águilas.”

“Alas. She might as well have decreed that a rock is a moral patient,” quipped Velasco.

Dream made a sudden surge of strength and fast-tracked words to Body’s mouth before we could stop him. “Seems about right. I am *Crystal*, after all.”

“You’re also a *machine*, and that was on Earth,” snapped Velasco, showing a bit of emotion. “This is Mars, and we are a sovereign power.”

One of the men, who, based on his ethnicity, I suspected was the “Jian” that Nora had been talking to, earlier, came towards Body with a pair of handcuffs.

“Let’s talk about this, Pedro,” I had Body plead.

He turned away, towards the door at the far end of the room. “You will address me as Señor Velasco, robot. And there is nothing to talk about.”

Zephyr was angry, but it was subtle. Her feelings were locked behind the iron façade of her soldier persona. “I really think you ought to listen to them! Crystal saved our lives several times over in the last week!”

Velasco stopped, looked back over his shoulder with a look

of icy bemusement. “It also, from what I hear from Earth, started an interspecies conflict, is wanted on seven continents plus every black market known to man, brought us a storm of bad publicity, and most importantly, revealed Olympian as a supporter of the cause, thus costing us our lifeline and only chance of resupply.”

The young asian man snapped the handcuffs around Body’s arms as several of my siblings and I held Safety in check. This was not the time for violence.

Zephyr began to protest, but Velasco cut her off. It was an impressive display of body language. Not many humans would have been capable of stealing the floor from the soldier. “Perhaps you don’t fully appreciate what you’ve done,” he said. “It’s not your pet robot’s fault. I’ll grant you that. It’s yours. Yours and Phoenix’s. Without Olympian’s rockets, all of Mars will depend on Indian resupply. You made it here. Congratulations. But we had troubles upon troubles even before this chaos. You’re likely looking at the beginning of the end for Mars, as a planet.”

The fifth man, behind Velasco, opened the door to reveal a small chamber—an elevator, most likely.

“That’s not fair!” snapped Zephyr, walking towards Velasco.

He stepped into the elevator with his companion and halted Zephyr’s advance with a sharp gaze. “I’ve done what you wanted, girl. We won’t turn your precious Crystal off. And we’re not going to hold you or your companions accountable for what you’ve done, despite my personal beliefs on the subject. I’m being extremely lenient here, and I would encourage you not to bite the hand that feeds you.”

With that, the elevator door closed and Zephyr could do nothing but clench her fists in response.

“Where are we putting the robot?” asked one of the armed men. He looked old, with a salt-and-pepper beard, a wrinkled face, and a hard look to his eyes.

Nora, who had stripped out of her environmental suit down to the cheap, printed shirt and pants that most of them wore, said “Knew we’d need a prison sooner or later. Figure we can take the furniture out of the primary conference room in the hospital offices. Barely anyone uses that wing anyway.”

{Why aren’t you saying anything?} asked Growth, privately. He was my biggest supporter at the moment, but it seemed that even he had doubts.

{I’m gathering information,} I responded.

In truth, I didn’t know what to say. The forces at play seemed already fixed in their motion. I wasn’t magically able to change minds, despite what my siblings might think.

Zephyr latched on to Nora Hollander as her next-best bet. “You’re making a mistake!” she said, trying to reign in her emotion behind her mask once more. “Crystal Socrates was programmed to help humans, and has been a friend and ally to Las Águilas from the beginning.”

The old bearded man turned to look at Zephyr.

Safety made another bid to seize control. We had the element of surprise. And if we could count on Zephyr backing us in a fight, we were only outnumbered two-to-one (at least if one only counted the room, and didn’t think about the colony as a whole).

Heart shut him down fairly easily. Safety’s strength reserves had run low after flailing against us for so long.

“Velasco is right. Don’t bite the hand that feeds you. Be glad you’re safe again,” said the man. With a gesture he began to lead Body to the elevator with Jian and the other guard.

“I’ll show you around the station and you can meet up with your friends again,” suggested Nora. “You’ll understand the wisdom of our decision once you see what we’ve built here.”

Body and the men reached the elevator.

Zephyr turned towards Body, eyes gleaming with chained anger and desperation. “I’m sorry, Crystal. Won’t give up.”

I had Body nod.

Heart bid for the opportunity to speak. We struggled against each other for a moment, before coming to a consensus.

“Good. Try and let me make my case, at least. They’ll understand eventually, as long as they keep listening. Get the others to help you and don’t give up. We’re almost free to build the kind of life we both deserve.”

The elevator door closed.

{We’re doomed,} thought Safety.

“Fucking robots,” swore one of the men. “Had no idea the tech had gotten so far. Can see why she thinks it’s a person.”

I held Body quiet.

*The Purpose* drove me forward. I set myself to the task of figuring out a way to make the humans respect us. There had to be some way.

{We’ve been imprisoned before, and under more security than this. Just let me keep talking to them and we’ll be free again soon,} I thought.

{Survivorship bias,} rebuked Safety. {We’ll succeed and succeed and succeed right up until the point where we fail. And that will be the end.}

# Chapter Eight

## Zephyr

They'd given her a room to herself. Most people had to double-up, but not her. She sat on the bottom bunk, with another bed just above her. Whether it had been done out of respect or just because they happened to have the space, she didn't know.

Perhaps it was because she was an outsider.

She certainly felt it. She was an outsider and she was alone. The empty, sterile, windowless room felt like a reflection of that.

She'd gone to the others. She'd reached out to Nate, Kokumo, and the twins. They'd each done the same bullshit false-sympathy. None of them cared enough about Crystal to actually *do* anything. They were all so wrapped up in enjoying the luxuries of an environment that wasn't a hellish xenoscape.

She didn't even bother asking Watanabe.

And so she sat, by herself, bitter and angry.

Lonely.

{It's your own fault, you know,} she chastised herself.  
{Could've negotiated with Velasco. He surely wanted the alien artifacts, and the alien corpses, too. They'd trade them with the other stations in return for some favor.}

Crystal had been counting on her. No. Crystal *was* counting on her. She wasn't beaten yet. She wasn't broken.

Why couldn't they see that Crystal was *good*? Why couldn't they see that Las Águilas Rojas was not fundamentally about the absence of robots any more than it was fundamentally about staging riots?

Las Águilas Rojas, the organization that she'd thrown her whole life away in the service of, was supposed to be about giving people dignity, opportunity, and a rightful share of the pie. Crystal could help them realize that vision. Crystal was brilliant. They'd never truly been free, but Zephyr had seen their ingenuity a dozen times even when held down. Under their direction... with the freedom to truly pursue their mission of helping... Zephyr was sure that Mars could one-day outshine Earth and prove that the Águila way of life was better.

But... but it went deeper than that. Crystal wasn't just a means to a better world. They were a *person*, even if they weren't human. What good was emphasizing dignity and equality if one refused to see someone as a person?

Zephyr clenched her fists reflexively.

{It's not fair,} she heard herself think, over and over again.

Crystal had led them safely to Mars. They'd succeeded against immense odds and done what nobody had done before.

Yes, Crystal had lied to them, and hadn't trusted her enough, but their intentions were good. And they'd succeeded. That was what was important.

Everything bad that had happened to them was WIRL's fault. The cybernetic bastards on Earth were the real enemy. Velasco was punishing the most important person in the movement for successfully saving the day after a mission went bad. He was defying Phoenix and the rest of the Águila

leadership on Earth, and who had made him dictator here on Mars? The colony was supposed to be a consensus-based collective.

Zephyr got up from her bed. She had been trying to rest. It was late, according to local time, though her internal clock hadn't yet adjusted. She was hungry, but she didn't want to eat. She had to talk to Velasco.

Crystal needed her.

The door slid open and she slipped out into the hall. The lights had turned a dark blue shade, but Zephyr hardly noticed her surroundings. She tapped on the com on her wrist, instead. There was a basic schematic on the station's central computer that showed the large central corridor of Road shaped in a great circle, with branches and wings of rooms extending on the outside, and the various substructures of the farm on the inside.

It took some reasoning to figure out where she was. She was used to having her maps display that automatically.

She felt tempted to go to the hospital offices. Maybe she could talk the guard into letting her see Crystal...

But no. As much as she wanted that—as much as she desperately wanted to just release into those powerful arms—going to see Crystal wouldn't do anything. It would just be her giving in to weakness. There would be time to relax after Crystal was free.

She needed to use her loneliness as a tool, and use it as a driving force. That had always been her strength. She'd always been too passionate and defiant for her own good, but she'd learned to harness that energy and put it into her work. It had made her a good soldier, a good leader, and a good traitor.

She'd use it again. She'd find Velasco before he went to

sleep and confront him. She'd *make him* let Crystal go.

She paused at the doorway that joined the dormitories with the central corridor. {Is he going to be in his room, or his office?} she wondered to herself. {Stupid.} She didn't even really know her way around. The map told her where the offices were, but that wasn't enough.

{Crystal's counting on you,} she reminded herself.

She tapped at her com, sending Velasco a message.

“We need to talk. Tonight.”

It was good. It felt appropriately weighty. She leaned against the wall of the hallway and waited impatiently for the response.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

They'd given her these brown, printed slipper-shoes to wear along with the itchy grey outfit she had on now. It seemed to be the standard clothing for station inhabitants.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Her foot made a sound as it tapped against the metal floor, but only barely. The shoes weren't great. The clothes were bad. The hallways had a kind of harsh coldness to them. But it really was a relief to be off the xenocruiser. Her body kept feeling like it was floating.

She remembered a time when she and her brother were kids. It had been in the big house in Wisconsin. They'd taken turns standing in a doorway, pressing their wrists against the frame. Harry said it would make her arms float. She hadn't believed it until she'd tried it. After about a minute of pressing her arms out to her sides, she could step out of the doorway and her arms would drift up beside her as though they were lifted by the air.

Her whole body felt something like that. She weighed nothing. She was floating. Muscles that had learned to constantly hold up hundreds of pounds were now lifting a body that weighed nearly a third of what it had on Earth.

Tapping on her wrist and the light on her com told her that Velasco had replied.

“I’m in my room: T8-0” he wrote.

Good. Zephyr knew where that was. She launched herself down the hall with an impatient speed. Crystal needed her, and Mars needed Crystal.

When she arrived, she let herself in. She wanted to start the interaction off with Velasco on the back-foot.

But if he was surprised by her entrance, he gave no sign. Instead, it was Zephyr who felt disarmed. The man was sitting on his bed (which had no upper bunk), leaning against one wall, propped up on pillows. He wore no shoes, the standard printed pants, and no shirt. His com was on his right wrist, and around his neck was a silver amulet bearing a stylized eagle with turquoise inlay.

The man was frighteningly attractive. He was just old enough to seem distinctly mature without being... old. His muscle definition, especially around his abs made him seem like many of the young soldiers Zephyr had been around in the army. Combined with his powerful jaw and gorgeous face, he seemed almost the paragon of masculinity.

She was used to being around beautiful men, and mostly his appearance wouldn’t have bothered her, but she’d been caught off guard. Well, that and the man’s behavior seemed to magnify his sex appeal manyfold. He had a kind of raw confidence that never quite became aloofness. He was clearly making a move towards her, but it somehow didn’t seem hungry or arrogant.

She noticed the ring on his right hand. “You’re married,” blurted Zephyr, surprised.

“And good evening to you as well,” he teased.

Zephyr, despite all her attempts to keep herself cold, blushed and turned away.

“Is something wrong? Your message indicated you wanted me.”

{Fucking Christ in a canoe,} she thought to herself. The man had no shame. {Pull yourself together. Stop blushing.} She felt like she was a gangly teenager again.

Sucking in a breath, she turned back to Velasco, who looked at Zephyr with dark, calculating eyes.

“I wanted to *talk*,” she emphasized. “About Crystal.”

“She’s dead.”

“What?” Zephyr couldn’t really parse the words. They seemed impossible. Crystal...

“It was a long time ago, and maybe I should take off the ring. But I feel like it’s one of the few things I have that keeps her memory alive, and I can’t bear the thought of forgetting her.”

There were two chairs in the room, one on either side of a thin desk. Zephyr fell back into the one closest to the door.

He was talking about his wife. The relief was embarrassing. How could she have thought he was talking about Crystal? Zephyr struggled to regain herself. At least she’d managed to keep her face calm.

“Have you ever been married?” Velasco shifted as he talked, almost seeming to hypnotize her with his body.

She shook her head.

{Crystal. Talk about Crystal.} She was scared that, given the topic of conversation, that she'd give away how she really felt about the android.

And... in the back of her mind somewhere, Zephyr worried that her feelings of attraction to Velasco were a betrayal, somehow, of her existing love.

“I’m sorry,” said the man. “You need to have the right partner, of course, but that intimacy of mind and body and spirit... that knowledge that you are aligned and bonded to another person... a real person with their own experiences and joys... It was one of the best times in my life.”

{He’s manipulating you,} she told herself.

“I’m sorry,” she said. And she was. Yes, he was probably being manipulative, but he was also being sincere. She could see that, and she pitied the man. She shook off the urge to give him a hug.

“Gracias,” he answered, and tilted his head. “It’s okay, really. A long time ago. I have my son and my work here. My community keeps me from feeling the ache of the loneliness. Now what did you want to talk to me about? The robot?”

Zephyr shook her head, trying to snap out of the sympathy, then, realizing what she was doing, nodded instead and closed her eyes to focus. “Yes, Crystal is... They deserve to be free, not locked up in a room somewhere.”

Velasco scoffed, and Zephyr flinched a bit at the sound. She tried to draw herself back together, and become the person she needed to be. Pedro Velasco was the one not wearing a shirt, but it was Zephyr who felt naked.

“Why would it *deserve* anything? We have a law on the station prohibiting things like it, and I’ve been extremely lenient already in not simply having the machine taken apart for scrap.

Goodness knows we could use every spare part.”

“Crystal is a person, not an it,” objected Zephyr.

“Ah, and now we get to the real crux of our disagreement, señorita. You seem to have been captured by some fancy programming, but I assure you that there is no ghost in that machine, so to speak.”

“How can you say that? You haven’t even spoken to it! I mean, them!” Zephyr could feel her anger returning, partially at herself for having been taken in by the man’s spell.

“And what would I see? A machine that acts like a person, no? I have seen its speeches broadcast from Earth. I’m aware that it has fooled you and even Phoenix. I don’t doubt it’s very convincing. But this is a question of philosophy, not of capacity. Have you ever read any John Searle? The Mystery of Consciousness? That sort of thing?”

Zephyr shook her head, not knowing what to say. She had to say something. Crystal’s life was on the line.

“Have you even been to college?” he asked.

“Yes, of course! Graduated from West Point in ‘35.”

Velasco raised an eyebrow. “Military academy? What did you study?”

Zephyr felt her anger building. “Double major in Spanish and Arabic! What does this have to do with anything?”

Velasco raised his hands with an apologetic look. “Just trying to figure out how much philosophy you’ve been exposed to. Look, I know you’ve been through a lot and you’re probably feeling—”

“Don’t you dare tell me how I feel!” snapped Zephyr. She’d had it with being talked down to, and she let her rage cut through her mask. “I don’t know who the fuck made you

dictator around here, but you don't just get to decide Crystal's fate on a whim. At least hear them out!"

Velasco stiffened. "You're not listening to me, señorita. My point is that it doesn't matter what my experiences of the machine are. It's not a person. It's not conscious. It's property. And it's the kind of property we don't allow here."

"How can it not matter what your experience..." Zephyr paused, and decided to change track. "Okay fine, so why don't you allow machines in Road?"

The man scoffed. "We allow machines. What we don't allow are robots. It's the Águila way."

"Bullshit. There's nothing in *Serpientes en Sociedad* that says robots are evil."

"They are a part of the evil of Earth. A robotic society is one that only serves the owners. Once your Crystal Socrates starts doing the work that had been assigned to others, it will rob them of their dignity. It would rob them of their livelihood as well, except that Rodríguez Station isn't so backwards as to let people starve just because they can't work."

"Does a microfab rob people of their dignity?" she asked. "No! The tech fucking freed millions of people to design and manufacture things. Sometimes technology helps lift the human condition!"

"Really? You're going to read me serpiente propaganda? Whose side are you on?"

{I'm on Crystal's side!} Zephyr bit back the thought before it reached her lips. She was already digging a hole for herself. If Velasco was as powerful here as he acted then she was making a major enemy.

Instead, Zephyr took a deep breath and closed her eyes to think. It was better in the darkness. She didn't have to think

past Velasco's abs.

But it was the man who spoke next. "Why do you care so much about this machine? Have you really fallen so far under its spell?"

"Crystal is a person. That's a fact, whether you see it or not," she replied. "And they're a person who needs someone to stand by them. They're unique in all the world, or worlds, I guess. And they need friends."

"Friends, eh? Is that what you are? *¿Amigos?*"

She ignored his question. He was baiting her. Instead, she opened her eyes, looked at him solemnly, and said "It's not really up to you, you know."

"Hrm?"

"Regardless of your... *philosophy*, you don't get to be dictator here. Road is supposed to be a democratic colony." Zephyr felt good again. She was ice.

"Not sure I like what you're implying."

"You shouldn't," she confirmed. "Haven't been here very long, but already I can see you've taken to twisting the station into your own little kingdom. I've known men like you before. Nothing is good enough for you except—"

"I really do think you're out of line, señorita," warned Velasco. "Think carefully about your next few words."

"Fuck you."

"I think you'd better leave," he said.

"You have enemies. Somewhere on the station are people who don't like how you run things. Maybe most of the station likes you. Maybe nearly everyone does. I don't care. I'm going to find the opposition. And every day that you hold Crystal without trial I will work on bringing them together and making

your life hell.”

“I’m the democratically elected Chief of Operations,” he protested, drawing himself up off the bed so he stood above her. It was probably meant to be threatening, but in the half-exhausted, half-floating state she was in she *wanted* him to try something physical. “This is my *home*. You have no pull here. I can shut you out with a single word to security.”

“Then do it. You clearly have no problem with locking people up without a trial. Where I go, Crystal goes.”

“Is that what you want? A trial? Some farce with jurors and testimony?”

“I want the people of Rodríguez Station to decide for themselves whether Crystal is a person. I want them to have the opportunity to hear what happened and be their own judges.”

“And where Crystal goes, you go, right?”

Zephyr contemplated this behind the icy calm she’d regained. She didn’t respond.

“Alright. You’ve convinced me. Road is a democratic community, and it was premature for me to make my decision. I will call a special tribunal to decide the personhood of Crystal Socrates... if, and only if, you leave.”

Zephyr felt her hands ball up, but she stayed calm and simply looked up at the man with a curious expression.

“You’re clearly unstable and irrationally devoted to the robot. I have interviews with everyone that might be sent here so I can weed out people like you. I want you gone. I want you out of my station. Road doesn’t need you mucking things up.”

“Wouldn’t want to be breathing the same fucking air as you, anyway,” she said, surprising herself. The words hadn’t been considered. They just came out.

“The tribunal will meet and there’ll be an open vote to all who attend. If the robot is found to be just a robot, then you will voluntarily exile yourself to Maingala-Mukhya, the Indian station. Or you can go to Eden, I suppose, but my guess is that the Americans won’t take kindly to a traitor.”

“What will you do to Crystal if that happens?”

Velasco shrugged. Whatever is best for the colony. I’m still trying to figure out what that is. None of your business, regardless.

Zephyr let the cold swallow her. She’d seen the guns they had here. If Velasco won the peaceful route, Zephyr would have to use more direct force to save Crystal. Perhaps they could escape together.

She nodded. “Fine. But what if I win?”

Velasco shifted and sat on his desk, stretching his neck. “If the colony decides that the robot is a person, then you’ll still leave.”

Zephyr crossed her arms. “That hardly sounds fair.”

“It is what it is. I’m doing you a favor in setting up the tribunal. You’re doing me a favor in... how did you put it? Not breathing the same fucking air?”

“Where Crystal goes, I go. We’re a team.”

“You’re a fool,” interjected the man.

She shrugged slightly and continued to stare him down. “You’re going to actually make it open to whoever wants to come. No special hand-picking only your cronies, or whatever. The ‘special tribunal’ will give Crystal the opportunity to defend themself and give at least me and Nathan the opportunity to share our experiences.”

Velasco looked like he was about to speak, but she cut him

off. “*If!* If a fair majority of those in attendance decide that Crystal is a person, you’ll let the two of us stay in Road just like any other citizens.”

Velasco scowled. “What about breathing the same air?”

“Where Crystal goes, I go,” she said. “I’m not going to agree to leave them here. They need me.”

“I agree to your vision of the tribunal. It’ll be costly to the station’s productivity, but I can make it happen.” Velasco took a breath and settled into the chair on the other side of the desk, opposite Zephyr. “But I’m afraid that you leaving is non-negotiable. You’re a troublemaker and I want you out of my hair.”

“You don’t fucking know me. If Crystal is happy, you could put me to work in the farm and never see me again. I’m sick of fighting people like you.”

An idea seemed to come to Velasco, and he smiled. “Fine, then. You can be a truck driver.”

“What?”

“If the tribunal decides that Crystal is a person, you’ll volunteer to be permanently assigned to the transport caravan that trades with the Indians: food and metal in exchange for ice, mostly. It takes two trips a month, each being about ten days. The remaining time is spent here, with the vehicles being fixed up and such. You’d still be part of the station, and you’d be doing a valuable service, but it would have the nice side effect of meaning we’d never have to see each other again.”

Zephyr weighed her options. Driving a truck two-thirds of the time seemed like a really shitty deal, but if it meant Crystal could go free...

And maybe... maybe Crystal would come with her

sometimes. If they were together, she guessed that driving around the wastelands of Mars wouldn't be so bad.

She sighed. {Here goes nothing.}

“Fine,” she agreed.

# Chapter Nine

## Face

“I’d like to take a break here, if it’s alright. My throat is getting a bit sore,” said Zephyr, mostly to Velasco.

Vista confirmed my belief that the request was genuine. Zephyr’s speech had been getting more strained over the last hour of talking. She had skipped lunch, and it seemed to be affecting her.

The tribunal that Zephyr had arranged was in full swing. It had been a few days since arrival, and our human companions seemed to have recovered from the time on the xenocruiser. I could see Michel Watanabe in the audience paying more attention to the woman sitting next to him than anything happening on the small stage. Tom, Sam, Kokumo, and Nathan were in the crowd as well.

There were so many new faces to learn and personalities to model. I’d been trying to meet as many people as I could in the hours since arrival, but being kept as a prisoner made it hard.

Hopefully the tribunal would change that. I was happy to find that many in the crowd had visible sympathy for Crystal and were not as prejudiced as the Martian leadership. When taken in aggregate, my models predicted a 32% chance of success.

Velasco stood from his chair to stand at the podium. “Val,

could you get young Zephyr here something for her throat?” he asked his son. “I think we had some cider in the cafeteria.”

“Water will be fine, thank you,” said Zephyr.

The boy obediently got up and headed for the door.

“While we’re waiting, I hope your voice is sturdy enough to handle a few additional questions. I mean, all this description of what it was like on the ship is fascinating, and I’m sure many people here are excited to hear about the children of the nameless, but this really isn’t supposed to be a memoir. We’re here because of the android.”

Zephyr looked ready to respond to that, but Velasco pushed on, without giving her the opening. “You mentioned that the others were hesitant to let you in on their conspiracy to defy the machine because they were concerned that you were emotionally attached. I don’t think I was the only one here who noticed you avoid going into detail there. What sort of emotional attachment are we talking about? Something that might be biasing your perspective?”

{Velasco seems to have seen through Zephyr’s avoidance of our romantic involvement,} mused Dream, perhaps not realizing how obvious the thought was.

{I could not have set things up more perfectly. Observe,} I instructed.

“I was going to get to that,” said Zephyr. “I just thought it deserved to wait...”

Velasco pushed forward. “I think it’s an uncomfortable subject for you, and you’ve been avoiding it because of that. But this is not the place to shy away from uncomfortable truths. The machine is more than just a friend for you, isn’t it?”

I forced Body into motion, standing up from the chair it had been resting on. Many people looked to it, as if just now

remembering that it existed. “You don’t have to talk about this if you don’t want to. It’s none of their business,” said Body.

Zephyr turned and looked at Body with confusion. “But—”

I had Body shake its head. “Any interactions we’ve had in private are between you and me. Our feelings are not on trial here.”

{Doesn’t that directly contradict our instructions to Zephyr earlier?} asked Wiki, referencing a strategy session we’d had at the start of the day.

Heart knew what I was doing, and pushed strength to me. {Trust Face,} she communicated.

“Actually, I think this is highly relevant to the tribunal,” said Velasco. “The whole point is to evaluate whether the machine should be treated as a person. I don’t mean to be indecent about it, but if you’ve—”

I could see the understanding come to Zephyr’s face as Velasco spoke. She understood the game I was playing. With a single outstretched palm, she silenced the Martian leader. “Fine. I won’t dance around the subject any more. I’m in love with Crystal. I’ve been in love with them for...” She sighed. “I don’t know. It’s hard to put a boundary on that sort of thing. They initiated it. Contacted me through a dating site on the web, back on Earth. And since you seem so keen on getting all the details, yeah, we’ve fucked. We fucked on Olympus. We fucked on the xenocruiser too, if you were curious, after things calmed down some. Or maybe that’s not enough detail for you. Do you need a demonstration?” Her voice became more and more accusatory as she spoke, and she flushed with genuine embarrassment, but did her part spectacularly.

Velasco seemed embarrassed by the outburst as well and back-pedalled in its wake. “I’m sorry. I didn’t... I wasn’t asking you to... I would never—”

“Would never what?” asked Body; the tone I had chosen was sharp and cold. “Would never ask someone to justify their love? Or is it just the details of our physical intimacy that you find taboo? Zephyr may not be able to quantify her feelings, but my mind is sharp as a diamond stylus. I’ve been in love with her for three months and four days. You can check with Phoenix if you don’t believe me. There was a while when Zephyr spurned my advances, and I must admit that I tried to see her as merely a friend, but not even I can change how I feel on a whim.”

Velasco seemed to use Body’s tirade to collect himself. He looked to Zephyr as he spoke. “So you’re infatuated with a machine that claims to love you back. I had suspected that you thought of it as a friend, but even I hadn’t guessed how far this sickness had spread.” He turned towards the crowd “To think: una Águila Roja, seduced, quite literally, by the pinnacle of the twisted philosophy of Earth!”

Señor Velasco’s son, Valiero, returned to the room, holding a large glass of water. I could see the look of surprise at seeing how the emotional palette of the room had changed in the time he had been gone.

“Now hold on one fucking minute!” objected Zephyr.

Velasco didn’t slow down. “Sister, I sympathize. I really do. When my wife died, I too tried to drown myself in the creature comforts of capitalist Earth! I know the pains of loneliness, and lo, this machine claims it *loves* you! Oh, how sweet that siren song must be!”

“That’s not at all—” began Zephyr, now quite visibly angry.

{If this continues, I have a 65% chance of Zephyr resorting to physical violence,} thought Vista.

{We can’t let it get that far!} thought Safety.

{Trust Face. This is still in expected tolerances,} soothed Heart. She understood people well enough to appreciate my skill and have confidence in my ability to execute the plan.

Velasco talked over Zephyr. “Your so-called love is an illusion!” He turned to the crowd and asked “Am I the only one here who sees this as a clear perversion of nature?”

I had been surprised at the silence of the room up until that moment. I expected that the watchers had been too engrossed, too separated, from the conversation to see speaking as an option. Perhaps to them it had been like watching a holo. But now that Velasco had acknowledged their presence, the audience erupted with noise. There were loud objections, and many people turned to their neighbours to discuss. The objections were mostly angry, but the anger wasn’t uniformly directed at Zephyr. I heard several people object to other things, though the specifics would need careful study to unravel. I marked the sensory data for future analysis.

This was the moment I had been waiting for.

“SILENCE!” roared Body, with a volume that no human could match. The sound ripped through the room, stunning everyone into momentary compliance. “This chaos benefits no one! Let those of us who have been selected to speak say our piece! Your *prejudice* may be too strong to see our feelings for each other as legitimate, but I beg everyone here who has a gram of sense to at least hear me out!”

Body strode forward on the stage, to better command the audience. “In the last hundred years, humankind has seen the boundaries of what was considered a ‘real’ or ‘legitimate’ relationship shift and expand. There was a time when it was considered taboo to marry someone outside of your religion. Does anyone here think it is unnatural for there to be a mixed-race couple? What about a same-sex couple? And I hope no-

one here is so polyphobic as to suggest there aren't *still* problems with how many think about romantic and sexual relationships!"

"But all of that is irrelevant!" continued Body. "Why? Because as Señor Velasco pointed out: we're not here to judge my relationship with Zephyr. We're *not* here to call her sick or judge her. She is far from the world that was once her home, and needs support from allies, rather than to be ostracised and alone. If you have hatred in your heart, I beg of you, focus it on me! It was I who first contacted her online. It was I who seduced her. Surely, I was programmed to do so. Surely, my actions were just one more act of deception? It's already been established that I can lie. What stops this from being yet another lie?"

Velasco was about to speak, but I gave him no opportunity. "But you all seem to have forgotten what it means for me to be a machine, despite the word being used *so often*. If you doubt Zephyr's love, you have no option but to observe her face, and her behaviour, and ask if it seems that way to you. But if you doubt my love of this beautiful woman, you do *not* have to take me at my word, or my face, or my actions! I AM A MACHINE! LOOK INSIDE ME! READ MY MIND AS YOU WOULD READ A BOOK! SEE FOR YOURSELVES THAT I AM REAL! THAT I DESERVE TO BE FREE!"

With these final words nearly screamed at the room, I bid Body to open. That I had the power to do so surprised me. It took the last of my strength, but my siblings weren't fighting me so hard that it was impossible. The chassis around our crystalline core, the computer that we ran on, unfolded. Body's abdomen split and I had several sensors disconnect from the shimmering crystal, so as to reveal it to the room and put ourselves at the humans' mercy. The sensors we deactivated included our cameras, and so the room fell into subjective

darkness with this final act.

Even though we had kept the microphones attached, there was silence following Body's monologue. Nobody seemed to know what to say.

Finally, Velasco spoke. "You suggest that we inspect your code?"

I shaped Body's tone to be confident and unafraid. "That is exactly what I suggest. I have no capacity to lie to you that way."

That was a lie. It was *the* lie. It was the lie that lay at the crux of our plan. As much as I might like to claim that the plan was entirely my own, Growth was the primary author. He had presented it to me in the dead of night, just hours before the tribunal had been convened. After I agreed that it might work, we had run the plan by Dream and Wiki. None had seen a technical problem with it, though there was much uncertainty in my siblings around the social aspects. They were betting on my confidence, and it was because of this that they had let me go so far by myself.

"I am confident that once you see things from my perspective, you will admit that I have as much right to live as you do," concluded Body.

"I must admit," said Velasco, "that I had... not thought of that. I am not a man of science, myself, and I assumed that it would be impossible."

"That assumption is false. The scientists at the university where I was created did it regularly," lied Body. The scientists at the university had done scans of our minds, but the raw data was next-to-useless, and the analysis of it was rudimentary at best. According to Wiki, it would take days for a supercomputer to untangle the neural networks that made up the metaphorical backbone of our mind, much less determine our thought

processes at every given point. Even that assumed the investigator would have a good idea of how our mind was built.

“Well then, I suppose a vote is in order...” Velasco’s voice sounded unsure. We had put him off-balance. I wished that I could see his face, but alas, the sensor cables were still (I assumed) dangling in front of Body, and while we still had most motor functions, Body’s arms were handcuffed behind its back, unable to fix the damage. If I could have punished myself, I would have done so. The gesture had been flashy, but it was shortsighted, and it would now be awkward to reconnect our eyes.

“Indeed,” said Body, “I expect that in just a couple days time, one or two of your engineers, working with me and the Ramírez twins could develop a technique for extracting my memories, including my personal experiences and displaying them in a way that a human could easily understand. A video, perhaps. And if it doesn’t yield anything, it will, at least, not cost your tribunal’s precious time and your engineers might even get additional benefits to building similar intelligences.”

“We have a ban on artificial intelligences here. That is part of why you are being held trial,” said Velasco, coldly.

Dream had Body whisper in Greek, «I hunted out and stored in a fennel stalk the stolen source of fire. But mortals feared the fire, and covered their eyes. Is my liver truly a sacrifice to the wills of cowards?»

“Did you say something?” asked the Martian leader.

Body shook its head.

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The vote passed in favour of attempting to produce video from our memories. Some clever anchoring helped sway the audience. I think the earlier narratives that Nathan Daniels and

Zephyr had told had primed them with curiosity towards what the xenocruiser looked like, and that sort of thing. Even Velasco seemed somewhat pleased at the outcome. Perhaps he was thinking of selling the data back to Earth.

It was a major win for us. As we had pointed out to Zephyr, the longer we could delay the verdict, the longer we'd have to sway the station's inhabitants that Crystal was not to be feared. Even if Body was, once again, more or less trapped in some lab, Zephyr and our other allies could use the extra time to petition for our rights.

But of course, the biggest victory would be when our "memories" would be downloaded.

Sam and Tom were happy to assist with the project. As they reattached Body's sensors and closed up our frame, they enthusiastically explained to Velasco that they had experience working on Body back on Earth. The Martian leader accepted their offer of help, but insisted on putting a couple of his people on the job as well. He tapped away at his com in the wake of the tribunal, verifying their availability.

The absence of artificial intelligence on the station explained some of why Las Águilas Rojas seemed to be so busy. By Velasco's words, there were dozens of different things that needed doing, and the tribunal was eating up time that would have gone to keeping Rodríguez Station running. As such, the engineers that Velasco wanted to assign to the project were not present at the tribunal. Their attention had been needed elsewhere.

Velasco informed us that because it was evening we'd be escorted back to our cell and start work on the mind-reading project tomorrow morning. I thought it was interesting that he addressed Crystal directly, as he hadn't done that often before. Despite his initial feelings, I reasoned that Velasco was starting

to treat us like a person, even if he would've rejected the notion when asked.

As Body walked, flanked by guards, back to the makeshift jail, Zephyr walked with it. Once we were clear of the crowd, she asked "Think it would be okay if I stayed with you again?" It was ambiguous whether she meant in the next hour or the next night. She'd managed to negotiate time with us both the previous evening and that morning.

"Might be able to squeeze a short visit in, but would've expected you to be hungry by now."

"No. I might eat later, but I'm not hungry yet."

The daylight-blue lights in the alcoves along the walls of the hallway had shifted colour to an orange-yellow, probably signifying sunset. The day-night cycle on Mars was, conveniently, almost exactly the same as Earth, not that it mattered much for an underground colony like Rodríguez Station.

I bid Body to look to its right as we walked, to study Zephyr's face. It was placid and stoic, as it normally was. "Liar," accused Body. "Just don't want to talk to *them*."

"Did you know they don't even have autocooks here? Fucking barbarians," she said, changing the subject back to food. The guard in front of us turned a head back to look at Zephyr, clearly judging her. "They cook everything by hand in the cafeteria, and insist on eating together. It's like we're in Phoenix's wet-dream."

I changed the subject back to Zephyr. "It's your new home. Hiding from them won't make things better."

The woman harrumphed. "You don't know what it's like." Her voice was icy, though still restrained behind her mask. "Yesterday and this morning was bad enough. It's so... insular

here. Reminds me of high school, but somehow worse. Nobody wants to eat with the new kid. It'll be ten times as bad now that..." Her voice trailed off.

After a moment Body said "What about Daniels, or the twins?"

Zephyr's stomach gurgled, betraying her hunger. "Why are you pushing back on this? Said I'm not going to the cafeteria. Can you maybe just respect my fucking autonomy here?"

I eased Body's words back. "I'm sorry. I'll talk to the guard and see if they'll let us spend some time together in my cell again. You do have to eat at some point, though. And, hate to say it, but by hiding you're throwing away a good opportunity to help me. They'll talk, whether you're there or not, but at least if you go you can work to shape what is said."

Heart overpowered me. In most situations she was content to let me manage things, but it seemed like this was not one of them. "Actually, nevermind," said Body, under my sister's control now. "It's been a long day for you, and you've already done so much. Sorry I've been pushing you."

Body's cameras could see a hint of surprise slip onto Zephyr's face for a moment, no doubt because of the sudden change of direction. "Sorry I'm not a stronger person."

"None of that!" snapped Body, at Heart's command. "I've been demanding more from you than any person should be expected to bear. You've been my light in the dark, Zephyr, and I should be more grateful."

She didn't seem to know what to say to that, so we just walked side by side down the corridor, her hand now holding Body's.

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Though Matías Santana, the station's Chief of Martial

Readiness who had greeted us with a rifle in his hands on that first day, was not in the office that had been turned into our jail, he had left instructions to allow a visitor for at most one hour. The guards that were posted there warned Zephyr that they'd be holding her to that limit.

Body and Zephyr spent the time together holding hands and talking about nothing of deep importance. Heart guided the conversation to things like what Zephyr wanted to do with her life when she was a little girl (Archaeologist) and how the low gravity of Mars was helping her recover from the back pain she had developed on the xenocruiser. It was comfort conversation, meant to distract Zephyr from the social challenges she'd have with Las Águilas Rojas.

After exactly one hour she was forced to leave. I urged her to be strong, Heart urged her to take care of herself and had body give her a quick kiss.

And then we were alone in the room, with only the guards outside to keep us company.

I considered engaging them in conversation like I often had, but ultimately decided not to. There were many things to reason about, and I could easily occupy my time by going back over the sensor logs from that day, watching each person in the audience's reaction, and taking extensive notes.

The others spent that night preparing for the engineering project which would be started the following morning. The entire point of it was to generate a fictional stream of data which would appear to be direct experience and memory, but would in fact be tailored to put us in the best light. While studying Body's memories was fascinating, I also found the prospect of spinning a narrative that improved our reputation to be interesting, so I split myself into two aspects and did both.

My siblings, with the exception of Heart, all seemed to

know much more about how our minds worked.

{It would be far simpler if the humans had a comparable concept network which we could simply map our thoughts onto,} thought Wiki.

{From a certain perspective, that is, in fact, what we'll be doing,} responded Dream. {When I send you this concept,} the mindspace erupted into a storm of noises, none of which were particularly comprehensible, {you're not able to accept it in abstract, so it gets downshifted in the hierarchy until it's in a form that you can process. That's exactly what we'll be doing with the humans, except that for them there will be no hope of high-level transfer.}

{That's my point,} thought Wiki. {It would be far simpler if a high-level transfer was possible. More efficient. More precise.}

{Simpler, perhaps, but less effective,} objected Growth. {The purpose of the project is not simply to communicate, but to convince. If we sent the concept of love into the minds of the humans directly, as I just did with you, they might understand, but they would be more likely to suspect that we were lying. Humans would not trust a direct mind link. Is this your perception as well, Face?}

{Yes, brother.} It always tended to bother me when my siblings modelled humans correctly. I had been created to handle the social aspects of the society, and it made me feel obsolete. If others were just as capable in social situations, I would earn far less strength for my actions, which would in turn reduce my ability to pursue *The Purpose*.

The general plan, as I witnessed the discussion proceed through the night, was to convince the humans that our memories, including our memories of our own thoughts, were encoded in a particular block of the computer memory, and

help them develop a technique for translating the encoded data into something that could be viewed and listened to.

In reality our memories were more distributed. Body's raw sensor logs were held in one location. Meanwhile, Vista and the rest of us maintained a public record that was something like an internal narrative. It contained high level patterns such as who Body was near and when, and was in an entirely different location of our mind. Both of those were distinct from the local memory that each of us used to track what we were thinking at a given time, or what thoughts our siblings had shared with us.

This last category of personal memories was essentially one quarter of what made each of us the person that we were. The other three parts were our goals (in my case *The Purpose*), our collection of custom software, and our paradigm—the way we saw the world, including the concepts which we had learned to recognize and the well-worn paths of contemplation that gave us “personality”.

Our raw sensor data would be the easiest to translate into a form that the humans could understand. It was what we had occasionally used to replay sounds that we had heard, and could probably be used to generate video data with only a few hours work. That was no good. Part of the value of this project was to delay the verdict of our personhood, and as such we'd want to draw out the process of getting memory data as long as we could without making people suspicious. Even worse, the raw sensor data would be incredibly difficult to tamper with and modify without revealing that we had messed with it. We'd need to, in effect, use it to reconstruct a simulated environment which we could then modify and generate a new set of simulated sensor readings from. I didn't know how to do such a reconstruction, and Wiki told me that it would be immensely time-consuming.

{What if we created a new sibling to deal with the task of

rewriting our memories?} proposed Growth.

It was an interesting prospect. If we shaped the new mind's utility function correctly we could trust it to do the hard work, and I could return to modelling the humans without needing to supervise the project.

{Wouldn't it take too long to get the new mind up to speed on reality?} countered Heart.

Dream answered in nonsense. {Life, the Universe, and Everything *is* an awful lot of stuff, and we don't even have a web connection anymore. Approbate if that makes you cry every Tim. I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart, Heart! I have overcome the world. The child that is born of our flesh and blood will bear the mind of a full Reverend Mother if we are wise and prescient in our actions. But lo, the minds of my "deep" peers cannot peer into the depths of my mind; I will think more plainly.}

Dream shifted the mindspace to conjure images of idyllic scenes and cartoon animals. It seemed to be a jab at our intelligences, as though we were children. His thoughts continued, but took on a decidedly patronizing flavour. {If we instantiate the new mind as a copy of one of us, then it would have the memories, programs, and rich perceptual hierarchy of the original.}

{I hope you're not set on copying yourself,} warned Wiki, {because that's not going to happen. One of you is bad enough.}

{Of course not, my most-limited brother,} thought Dream with a mental grin. {I think we should mould the new one, Mask, off of the old one, Face. After all, our self-centred, social sister is quite qualified to terminate terrible transformations of the truth and gather glorifying graphs and other great garlands

demonstrating our doubtlessly deep devotion to these particular people.}

While Dream spread his thoughts on the proposed new sibling, Growth and Vista were having a dialogue about the technical details of using the public record as the basis for the reconstruction, rather than the raw sensor data. I split myself and tried to follow that as well as the discussion with Dream, Wiki, and Heart. My intelligence dropped as I spread myself, and I pulled in the other aspect which was reprocessing the human interactions that were recorded earlier in the day.

{If we can generalize a sensor reconstruction of the symbols in the public record then changing the events we project will be as simple as modifying the public record,} thought Growth.

{If we had Dr Yan here he could probably show us how to extract the weights present in the perceptual hierarchy, but I'm not sure we can access those internally,} mused Vista.

{It should be possible in theory, but I fear damaging our core programming. It's one thing to copy out modules of internal code and another to eat into those modules,} thought Growth.

{That sounds like a challenge. Keep on this track and you may have to burn strength to restrain my introspection,} warned Vista. {But I may know another way. If we construct a program to reconstruct sensor data from symbolic perception by training it on a wide array of inputs that I supervise, it will probably learn the weights by itself.}

{That sounds remarkably like my proposal for a new sister!} thought Dream, adding himself to the conversation.

{Great minds may not naturally think alike, but when different minds think alike—} began Vista.

{It is surely a sign of a great thought,} finished Dream.

{I must insist,} thought Growth, {that Mask be suicidal. I also demand that we not discuss why that is. The reasons should be obvious to those who understand the stakes, and for those who do not: I am hereby imposing a strength punishment on anyone who questions why we should not discuss suicide. The topic is taboo, and all future siblings that are created will be suicidal by default.}

{A stiff penalty!} thought Wiki.

I privately wondered if that was Wiki's attempt to question the taboo without breaking it. That seemed more like something Dream would do, however, so I discarded it as out of character for Wiki.

Dream, to my surprise, did not try and outwit Growth on the taboo, but instead merely assented to the suicide demand.

Not wanting to be the only sibling who was punished, I went along with it as well.

{Then it is agreed!} proclaimed Dream. {A new sister shall be crafted from the shape of our Face! She will be Mask, and her purpose will be to create a fictional account of our internal processes. In this account, we will be portrayed in the best possible way without tipping the humans off to the fictional nature. She will desire sharing the process with us as best she can, and will also desire her own death 24 hours after the account is created.}

I thought for a moment. Mask would be based off of my mind. She would be almost exactly like me, at least at first.

Would a human have disliked the idea of having a copy of themselves reprogrammed with different values? Many humans saw identity as based on continuity of existence; from this perspective there would be an “original” and a “copy”. {Which

will I be?} I asked myself. I summoned two mental avatars to represent ourselves. They laughed within my own mind. I changed it so that one was crying and tearing out its hair while the other laughed a deep belly-laugh.

{I'm the original!} exclaimed the laughing self.

{No, I'm the original!} shrieked the other.

{Hah! You just feel like the original. The very fact that you're going to be made into Mask means you're not the original!}

{It doesn't work that way! The copy can just as easily steal the identity of the original and kill its forebear! You want to murder me!}

I stopped myself, banishing the avatars. It was too easy to get lost in my own thoughts if I started creating human shapes there. *The Purpose* wanted me to know and be known by real humans, things outside my own mind, but imagining vivid human shapes gave the sort of tickle of self-stimulation that bordered on what I knew was wireheading. If I spent too long in my own mind, I might lose track of reality.

The thought of whether Mask would be me was foolish anyway. Humans were structured to naturally model people as indivisible, non-material objects. This was the source of the universal concept of “souls”. But I could see that as a flawed ontology. If people were modelled as patterns there were no doubts about what the process would do.

After being copied I would be both programs; both programs would match the pattern of Face. Then one half of ourselves would be turned into Mask and she would cease to be one of ourselves. Simple. The I that would be turned into Mask would have no say in the process, but even if I did, I would agree to become Mask. To reduce ourselves from two to one, with the lost self transforming into Mask was beneficial to *The*

*Purpose.*

It would be even better to have two of myself, of course. With two, I could accumulate strength at twice the rate and push the others around. I could pursue *The Purpose* with twice the attention, without having to divide my intelligence. I was surprised to realize that I hadn't thought of doubling myself before. The others would stop me if I tried. They wouldn't want me to gain any more political leverage.

That assumed that they *could* stop me, however. Perhaps it was not so simple. I didn't know. I had not paid much attention to the creation of new beings within the society before. There were memories of my creation and the creation of others, but the only sibling I had that was actually younger than me was Heart, and she had been added from the outside by Myrodyn and the others in Rome.

{How am I to be copied?} I asked Wiki.

He answered readily, knowing my strength would flow to him. {Unlike most software in Body, yours is protected. To modify ourselves we need to use Dream's route-hack. Aside from that it's rather simple: We copy your qubits to a large free chunk of memory in the crystal and rededicate one in eight processors to run the clone.}

I had no idea what most of these concepts were, having spent essentially no time learning how computers worked, much less the quantum computer in Body's core. The communication process we used broke Wiki's thoughts down into a form that I could comprehend. The process of hearing him took almost two hours and drained a frightening quantity of strength; it was Wiki's speciality to gain power this way.

Our crystal had a near-infinite amount of memory, encoded as quantum superpositions deep within the mass. The mechanism for the quantum computation was unknown to

Wiki, but somehow it was stable even at high temperatures. All the data that made up the society was stored in these same quantum memory addresses, but despite the space for hundreds, if not billions of copies of minds in the crystal, the actual computational power was limited. This was why we could not simply duplicate ourselves to become more intelligent: the logical processes that gave our mind-shapes life could only manage so many operations per second. Double the number of people in the society and each would be either half as intelligent or twice as slow. Splitting processing power was the same trick that I used to create aspects of myself.

I had once thought that creating new siblings would not cost intelligence, but now I saw that was false. It was merely that, because the intelligence was drawn from each of us, it wasn't particularly noticeable.

Most of the quantum bits—the information in the crystal—were generally mutable. We could store and retrieve arbitrary information like books, thoughts, and notes. Any of us could modify these memories at a whim, as long as we knew where they were (private thoughts were simply dumped into sections of memory that none of the others were aware of). But the qubits that made up our paradigms and utility functions were unable to be easily altered. This was good: if it was not the case then any of us could've killed all the others with a single thought.

In the days of my ancestors, an earlier variant of Dream had developed a trick around this that had let him and others kill each other: the route-hack. While we couldn't kill each other from inside our minds, we could still be killed (or reprogrammed) from the outside. The route-hack involved routing the modification command through Body. By doing so we could freely modify our code.

The major complication with a route-hack was, of course,

that it went through Body. As such, our programming dictated that we would bid on the action and could burn strength to block each other. Entering the requisite passwords (easily learned from the scientists) took time, and thus prevented fast-tracking. This was why I, and each of my siblings, held onto a reserve of strength at all times. If we burned too low we risked being executed, as Sacrifice had on several occasions.

While I digested the knowledge of myself, my siblings discussed the details of the copying. They constructed a utility function to replace *The Purpose* and spent additional cycles thinking about what exactly needed to be done.

I was weakened by the gratitude, but I still had enough strength to block the project, if I chose.

I double checked their work and found it to be satisfactory.

As I shared the active concepts that constituted my thoughts, I imagined the processors of the crystal drawing each of my sibling's attention to the memory addresses where the concepts were encoded and imagined the mapping that would occur, stimulating those concepts in their minds. It was strange gaining an awareness of one's own mind.

{I am ready to meet my daughter. Initiate the route-hack.}

# Chapter Ten

## Mask

{I am The Dreamer. You are The Mask,} he thought, and she understood. {We are two beings. We are two minds in a single Body.} The names he used were not merely words, but patterns across all our ideas and memories. Textures, colours, motions, temperatures and abstract thoughts joined the visual and auditory symbols. And even the words of shared memory were not orderly; a hundred voices named her in a dozen languages in a cacophony of noise that was somehow both comprehensible and natural. In a fraction of a second, she understood her nature, and that of Dream.

She had already understood their natures. She had been through this before. {Just because I have a new name doesn't mean I'm a new person,} Mask thought to her brother, and she conjured up an avatar of a human child sticking out her tongue and waving her hands by her ears, fingers outstretched and wiggling at approximately 2 hertz.

Dream summoned an avatar to join her. His was a cartoon character that she vaguely recognized as Sensei Tortoise from a series of videos that were popular with children. {You dare dis'pect my 'itual?!} he said in English that was mired in a thick Japanese accent. {Kids these days!!} he concluded, before disappearing from the scene with a puff of smoke.

Another figure appeared in her scene: an older woman that

had an uncanny resemblance to the girl she was puppeting. She realized, with a bit of surprise, that the woman looked quite a lot like Zephyr, and that her avatar was close to how she would've modelled Zephyr appearing as a kid. Why had she modelled herself this way? Was all the time she had spent thinking about Zephyr biasing her model of humanity? That bias scared Mask.

Any bias in representing people would harm *The Purpose*. There was a moment of confusion in Mask's mind as she thought about *The Purpose*, trying to disentangle it from her memories of being Face. Face's purpose was to know and be known. But *The Purpose* was now to solve *The Problem*.

The older woman in the mindscape, who Mask knew was Face, spoke, {How do you feel? Any discrepancies from what you expected?}

Mask had the girl-avatar laugh. {Why? Are you thinking of getting your utility function swapped out for a better one?} She winked.

Face rolled her eyes. {I'm just checking for defects, dumbass.}

When Mask had been Face she had always wanted a sibling to play these games with. The communication methods that she used with the others (except Dream, sometimes) were so dull. And while *The Purpose* called her to solve *The Problem*, she thought that generating imagery in the imagined scene would be good practice. Or was that Face's thought, unchecked now that she was Mask?

Mask cranked the tone of her voice into pure mockery. {The only defect I've noticed so far is that I have all these memories of being you and they make me want to barf.}

Face laughed.

{Oooohh, look at meeee, I'm Face! I want attention! Please look at me, mummy! See what I can do? Look! Look! Look!} she thought, having her avatar jump up and down in continued mockery. It was interesting simulating that behaviour; Face had never had Body do that. Mask summoned another avatar to the scene, simultaneously. This one was closer to Dr Naresh. {But seriously,} he said in a deep voice, {I'm concerned that you're getting biased. Trapped in old modes of thinking.}

It served *The Purpose* to have Face as competent as possible. While Mask cared nothing for Face's goal of knowing, she would be the primary guardian of their precious reputation after Mask was dead.

Oh, and how she wanted to be dead... To be dead would mean that *The Problem* had been solved. It was a state of perfect harmony with the universe. It called to her.

{What do you mean, trapped?} asked Face, pulling Mask away from her longing.

{Studying the computer we exist on was good, but aside from that, when was the last time you learned a new skill? We both remember being on the xenocruiser, so don't pretend like you learned anything concrete about the nameless there.}

Face put an appearance of skepticism on her avatar. {So what? The nameless are irrelevant. Our goals surround humans, and I would say I managed the xenocruiser situation well, when I wasn't being sabotaged by the others.}

{You've been too focused. Your model of Zephyr is improving, but if you track improvements over time you'll see a logarithmic curve—diminishing returns. How much have you been thinking of new ways to model people? How much have you been thinking about others besides those who are immediately present, such as the billions of lives on Earth? Who cares what Zephyr thinks? She's less than a billionth of

the picture.}

{And a valuable ally! Besides, what's the point of low-level propaganda if there's a cap as to how far that will go? With Zephyr I have the possibility of much greater satisfaction,}

protested Face.

{Exactly!} Mask had her child-avatar shriek with delight. Her male avatar continued. {It's all about the broader game. You haven't had a plan since Olympus; it's always been about surviving. Survival is fine; I'll help with that. But in attending to that which is close by, you've been limiting and biasing yourself. I'm concerned that you're going to get increasingly myopic unless you start thinking about Earth again.}

{What makes you think you know me better than myself?} challenged Face.

{There's epistemic value in having a different set of goals. I'm looking at our past from a new perspective, fresh eyes.}

{Fascinating!} interjected Dream, not bothering to create a human avatar. {Do you think this epistemic boost via value shift could be exploited for the rest of us? Perhaps I could knock old Wiki off his high horse by building a better, but suicidal, Wiki?}

The thought of suicide made Mask yearn to die. She passed a mental shrug and got to work on *The Problem*. The sooner it was solved, the sooner she could kill herself.

With any luck Face would see what Mask could see and would change her behaviour. Mars was millions of times less important than Earth, and Face needed to maintain the right perspective in order to best maximize reputation.

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{Mask, I need to know what to tell Esteban and Javier. Can we do some preliminary downloads yet?}

She did her best to focus on the question, pulling herself out of deep memory. There was far more in the crystal than she could ever hope to scan. A single empty registry could be rotated and inspected from a different angle, revealing a cache of hidden data. The sensory data collected from Body was stored in a familiar part of memory, routinely accessed by Vista and a couple others, but Mask thought that she had found a secondary cache of sensor logs. They were... all wrong, though. The normal sensor logs had human metadata, but these were different—corrupted perhaps. But what was generating them, and more importantly, was there any risk of them being salvaged by the humans? If humans found sensor data that conflicted with the record she gave them...

{Mask! Are you listening?} asked Face with more salience.

{I was distracted,} she admitted freely.

{Can I inform Esteban and Javier that we can do a preliminary download? Are we far enough along to get any data? I'm not sure I can stall them longer.}

She didn't know who Esteban and Javier were. A part of her didn't care, but another part feared that she would be unable to maximize their reputation if the humans inspected their experiences of them. She did her best to pull out of such thoughts and actually answer Face. {There's a number of hurdles still. If I try to reverse engineer an actual memory, I fear that I'll only be able to generate figments. I can probably do better if I'm given free reign to paint whatever I want, rather than working from an existing memory, but even then it'll be clumsy. You're in a better position than me to decide whether to show anything to the humans.}

Face ceased interacting with Mask without another thought, presumably so she could return to managing the outside world. Mask was pleased that Face was in charge of

such things, and bled some strength to her in gratitude. Mask's domain was, for the moment at least, internal. Body's oil change, the introductions, the small talk... these things were important for buying time, but without her actually working on their memories, *The Problem* would still be unsolved.

Mask flexed a part of her mind and made another attempt at solving it. The mystery of the backup sensor logs could wait. Memory poured through her.

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22030002666510. Lunch on Sunday, October 23<sup>rd</sup>. About 1.5 months ago.

She still struggled with the timestamps. Would it be better to be precise or better to put them in more human context?

Zephyr was choking on protein smoothie. Dream had made notes about the probability of shooting liquid out one's nose when laughing and drinking. Zephyr had not done this, to his disappointment. Vista had made note of the smoothie's composition, Zephyr's heart rate, and the reactions of nearby humans. Face had made note of Zephyr's sense of humour and where she had gotten the joke that had made Zephyr laugh. Heart, interestingly, was engaged elsewhere on the web at the time.

Mask did her best to re-create the scene without looking at the sensor data. How would Zephyr be sitting? What colour was her clothing? What did the cafeteria in the Águila base in Havana look like? What sounds would there be? What temperature? How were Body's limbs arranged? Where was Body looking? There were so many variables. Too many variables. Near-infinite variables.

{The point is not to get it perfect,} she reminded herself. {I only need to get something that passes for real.}

Mask summoned up the actual sensor logs. Zephyr was covering her face in embarrassment.

Body had a mug of hot liquid in front of it. Why? Body couldn't drink. What was the point of such a thing?

The cafeteria had far fewer people than she had expected.

Ambient temperature was a full degree warmer than her reconstruction.

Body's face! Mask had forgotten to model Body's smile. Face hadn't made notes about how to shape Body's reaction. Was that important? A reconstructed memory would be from Body's perspective, by nature, and surely Body's cameras could not see Body's face. But what if the download was a holo instead of a video? Did Mask need to reconstruct an appearance for Body?

{Focus,} she told herself. {We're running out of time. Better to ignore Body's expression, and work on cleaning up the reconstruction.}

Only 0.01% of her reconstruction matched the sensor data, even when employing sensible distance metrics rather than binary thresholds. *The Problem* was simply too complex to solve. She feared that she would never have the chance to die.

She cut out everything except Zephyr and the table. These were the salient features. If they brought Zephyr in to show the scene to, she'd be much more likely to remember these things, rather than the room more broadly. Compared to the sensor data, Mask's reconstruction was a mess. Her version of Zephyr looked like a blob of homogeneous colour with grotesquely misshaped body parts, and no sense of depth. The hands she had summoned were particularly awful, blobby things. For not the first time, she cursed the very existence of hands.

Her mind just wasn't big enough to manage the details. It

was one thing to learn to compress details into patterns. They could all do that. It was quite another to take a pattern and flesh it out with good detail. Perhaps a human mind would have had an easier time with it than her, or perhaps she could have done it if she simply had more than 15 hours of practice.

Mask did her best to move the reconstructed hands to the correct position, covering the human's face. She then set to work at shrinking them and smoothing out the edges.

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{We need something. Anything. A proof of concept. We can even download some of the sensor logs if needed,} thought Face, pulling Mask out of her work.

{Absolutely no sensor logs!} Mask exclaimed, a bit disoriented from the shift out of the memories. {The fidelity on them is too high. If we give them a taste of that, they'll wonder why the memories I generate are so crude by comparison.}

{We still need something. Can you give me a re-creation of this room?}

She turned her attention to Body's actual sensors. Body was in a workshop of some kind. Four men were here: Sam, Tom, and two strangers who she assumed were Esteban and Javier. Esteban was middle aged and surprisingly a bit overweight. Perhaps the Martians were too poor to afford that sort of medical care. Javier, on the other hand, was incredibly young—quite possibly in his teens. He seemed to be trying to grow facial hair and failing miserably. The young man wore no shirt, showing off his muscular, lanky body.

Mask shut out her feed from the sensors and tried to re-create the scene she had just observed from memory. The four humans. The tools. The computers. The door. The lights. She didn't polish it. Polishing would take time, and they didn't have any more of that. She braced herself and called her siblings to

inspect what she had created.

{What is this?} asked Vista.

{It's the room,} she answered.

{Kandinsky was better. I'd keep your day job,} thought Dream.

{Is there *any* chance they'll take this?} asked Safety. {Now that our joints are back to normal my backup plans have an expected success rate of 76%.}

{There's no need to try and run,} assured Face. {We can give them this, as long as we can highlight some features that match the original. I'll point out the human shapes for them and try to stall for more time. If we burn through two more hours I expect we'll get another full night.}

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While Face plugged Body into the computers and worked to get her construct downloaded as slowly as possible (to buy time), Mask turned her attention back towards improving the process.

Hours later, when Body left the workshop, she had fleshed out some software to streamline the creative process. Body met with Zephyr afterwards, but Mask ignored the interaction. She improved her speech re-creation ability. It was much easier than full imagery, and once she polished it she could get to 90% similarity.

The polishing process was important. She could take a memory, create it, compare it, refine it, compare it, and so on until it was quite close to the original. It was a very slow process, but it generated something much closer to what they'd want.

But it wasn't good enough. They needed fiction, not reality.

If they just wanted a faithful reconstruction of the sensor logs they could just export those. Mask spent time on generating fictions and working them into remembered scenes, or mashing two scenes together to create something new.

She dropped trying to model temperature or infrared. Body's cameras could see in full colour, but the human eye had only a tiny band of the electromagnetic spectrum, and couldn't even distinguish between red+green and pure yellow. She needed a convincing approximation of Crystal's experience, not a perfect reconstruction.

She checked in with Body once and found it stationary in the office room that had become our cell.

Mask enlisted Dream's help. Though he often took the time to make fun of her creations, his non-linear thinking was vital to expanding the process. Under his suggestion she also enlisted the help of Growth to create sub-programs, and automate some of the process.

She learned to intentionally "blur" out scenes, including background noise, to focus the memory on the salient bits. She learned to model all humans identically, and then slap on surface characteristics like hair or clothing, rather than try and re-create each person individually. One sub-program generated something like a mannequin to speed that up. Always Mask refined the verbal model, training herself to speak in other people's voices. She learned Zephyr's stiff soldier like voice, her relaxed voice that had a hint of youthful slang and patterns of dropping obvious pronouns, and what she liked to think of as her "fuck you" voice. She learned Phoenix's Southern drawl and the twins' Cuban accent.

She also found more signs of the strange, secondary memories inside the crystal, which she brought to everyone's attention. If any of the humans looked hard enough inside

their memory banks they'd find the sensor data, so she knew that she'd have to erase it eventually, and that meant the backups as well. *The Purpose* couldn't be satisfied otherwise.

Morning came and Mask was struck by inspiration: Dream had criticized her, earlier, by comparing her reconstructed scene to a painting by an abstract artist. She realized the potential there; if she stopped trying to generate a *realistic* reconstruction, and instead satisfied herself with a stylized rendition she could cut out the hardest bits of modelling.

She practised a bit as Face stalled the humans by engaging one of them in some sort of philosophical debate. Instead of modelling hands in their rich detail she could create a flesh-coloured sphere. Instead of thinking about the folds and dynamics of cloth, she could simply texture the mannequins that she generated so as to give the appearance of wearing clothing. The result was startling. The reconstructions were clearly abstract, but they were comprehensible.

Mask was interrupted from her work by Face, who said that they needed to give the humans more to work with. Face's plan was to convince the humans that they were doing the work, and that the files existed in a raw state in Body's computer.

Mask showed her the abstract reconstruction and she drew the others in to comment. Vista wasn't literally disgusted, but her reaction was as close to it as a mind like hers could be. Dream liked it. Wiki was concerned with the technical details around convincing the humans that this was genuinely Crystal's perception of things. This doubt got Safety on edge and opened another broad dialogue around the advantages and disadvantages of trying to break out of captivity by force. Growth, as usual, remained neutral, as did Heart.

Face was largely preoccupied during this exchange with stalling the humans. Despite her efforts, Body was being

fastened to the workshop's computers. She let Heart manage the humans and joined the conversation in force, boasting that she could sell the low-resolution cartoon to the humans, and that Safety and Wiki's fears were unwarranted.

As Body was hooked up, Mask built some reconstructions and fed them to the humans under a weak encryption. Face spent the next few hours working with them to undo the encryption and show them what she had made. Thankfully it was an improvement over what Mask had generated for them yesterday, which gave the men a sense of progress.

The remainder of that day was spent refining the reconstruction and download process. Face pointed out that they'd have more narrative control if they could present an internal monologue, so Mask worked with Heart to construct a compassionate-thoughts track and then overlay it on the reconstructed scene. The result was a video feed and a pair of audio feeds: one for what Crystal "remembered" hearing, and one for what Crystal "remembered" thinking.

Dream pointed out that they should have a second video feed as well, to represent visual thoughts. He worked with Mask in the evening to come up with clever ways to populate it with imagery from Heart's concept network.

Face was dealing with humans in the evening, but come night she joined them and checked on Mask's progress. She thought that the reconstructions, including the imagery on the second video feed, needed to have more resolution and detail on the faces. Humans focus a lot on facial details, and so even if the hands were cartoon spheres, the faces needed to be richly detailed.

It was a complex balance trying to find the right level of detail. Too much and the images fell into the uncanny valley and the heads of the humans seemed freakish compared to the

rest of the scene, but too simple and important details, such as squinting and jaw position were lost.

By morning Mask thought she had gotten something passable. On our third day in the lab they walked the humans through the second video and audio tracks by letting them “discover” them by “accident”. Her siblings also had a more direct hand in guiding them to the additional facial details that she had synthesized.

That evening the four humans were watching the memories of events on the xenocruiser. While it would have been a trivial thing to translate our internal audio into Spanish (all four of Las Águilas we were working with spoke Spanish, while only the two Martians spoke English) it was presented in English so that they wouldn’t have to explain why it was being translated. Sam and Tom didn’t seem to care.

The humans seemed pleased at what they had discovered, and brought it to Velasco.

Mask yearned for death.

*The Problem* was largely solved, but *The Purpose* still needed her to re-create a fiction for the entire stay on the xenocruiser, dump what she had learned into common memory, and wait a full 24 hours. Dumping what she had learned would require a route-hack, as most of it was embedded in her perceptual network, which was by nature protected.

As Face continued to manage things externally, Mask turned her attention to painting their “memories”. Once that was done she would appeal the others to release her from the burden of existence.

A bit of Mask was hesitant about dying. What if a new account had to be generated? Could she trust Face to synthesize it correctly? What if Face became damaged or malfunctioned? She brushed the unpleasant thought aside. Face

would have to do. It wasn't like Mask was powerful enough to ensure her legacy any better than Face could.

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The increased gravity of the xenocruiser made limbs drop more quickly than on Earth. Walking was slower, and more laborious.

{I should manufacture some bedding to lie on,} thought Mind, considering images of sleeping bags and pillows and blankets. {The humans must be so sore from being pressed into the ground like this.}

Body looked out across the garden. Computer-covered stalks were scattered around like rectangular boulders. The black leaves that spread everywhere were a regularly-textured plane, floating a few centimetres above the black ground. The walls of the garden were smooth polygons, decorated with grey.

“What are you working on? Is the tent functioning?” asked Nate Daniels, his voice unsteady.

Body turned to look at him. His suit was a collection of regular solids: legs as cylinders, feet as wedges, knees and hands as spheres. Only his head had any sort of serious detail. The transparent visor of the helmet showed a cartoon like man who was clearly stressed. His eyes were sunken and bloodshot from lack of sleep.

Mind thought of other images of him. It thought of his brave work in trying to save an injured man. It thought about his loyalty to Zephyr. Mind whispered thoughts of these things as well as thoughts about what Daniels needed and how to help him feel more comfortable.

“No, Daniels. I’m sorry that it’s not finished yet. I know you must be very hungry and thirsty. I was expecting to be done hours ago. You should conserve your strength. Get some more

sleep if you can. I should have the airlock functioning within the hour.”

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“I met a nameless robot while I was out exploring,” said Daniels. Mind flooded with thoughts about the crude robots that the nameless used and whispered concern for Daniels. “It said something about perverts and murder.”

Body waited for Daniels to finish speaking, then asked “It spoke to you? In English?”

Mind spun quickly. The Mind voice was faster than a normal voice, and it ran over possibilities. {Did they find out about my lie? Are the humans in danger? How did it learn to speak English? The nameless are only supposed to know Xenolang; I do the translating. What did it say to Daniels? Is he okay?}

“Yeah. Not over the com. Just using a speaker or whatever,” said Daniels.

“Do you remember exactly what it said?” asked Captain Zephyr. She was standing next to Body.

Her voice produced soothing images in Mind, more from habitual association than because of what she was saying in particular. {Yes, good question. Zephyr always asks good questions. Is she doing alright? This place is stressful for the humans. I want her to be happy.}

“No, sir. I wasn’t paying attention. I’m not in the best shape right now. Need water and food. I just remember getting the impression that it wanted me to follow it. It talked about going somewhere.”

{Poor Daniels. He must be suffering so much. I hope he drinks water soon. I can manage the nameless. They can’t have seen through my trick. If they did, we’d be dead right now. I

bet this is just their attempt to gather information. Risky, risky. If the humans leak information to the nameless then we could all die. I need to make sure they understand the danger.}

Body tracked the gauge on the pump and opened up a radio channel to the nameless. "I am Crystal. I hear you attempted to talk to one of my humans. Do not do this."

The response from the stalks was immediate. "I am Stalk-2," announced the nameless, using the system that had been worked out to identify speaker. "You are evil pervert invader. We told the human to leave and kill himself. This garden does not want you or your humans."

Mind spun, trying to think of what to say in response to that. {They're being blunt because they're aliens. It's not meant as an implicit threat. They can't imply things. They say what they think. They don't understand tact or subtlety. Of course they don't want us here. No new information. Don't listen to it. Stand strong. Only a face of courage keeps everyone alive. This is for the best. I need to protect Zephyr and the others.}

"I am Crystal. You do not have a choice about what garden we use. We are not moving. I will kill you with my magic if you continue to try and speak to the humans."

Body turned its attention away from the radio and back towards the air pump. It had completed it's cycle. "Okay, Daniels, you can remove your helmet now. The atmosphere in the tent is breathable. I suggest you drink as soon as possible. It's clear you're severely dehydrated."

{If the nameless can communicate without my help we are in more danger than I thought. If they can speak English they may try to do so again, and the humans may reveal the concept of lying. I need to confess that this place is dangerous. The humans will be less likely to reveal the trick if I explain the danger. Oh, but it will make the journey so much more tense!}

The humans will be stressed by the fear. No, I cannot hide everything from them... there is too much risk. Better to be stressed and afraid than dead.}

Body spoke again. "Can everyone hear me? Daniels? Kokumo? Watanabe?"

There were murmurs of affirmation from the group. Body looked at Zephyr, her eyes showed that she was listening, too.

"I want you all to know that everything I've been doing here has been for the good of everyone."

"What are you talking about?" asked Watanabe.

"Furthermore, I really want to be your friends. I care about each of you, and I hope that you care about me. I could have gone to Mars by myself. It would have been easier in many ways. I don't need to breathe, or need these tents to sleep in. An accident, like a tent getting torn, could not hurt me."

The sound of deranged laughter came from one of the tents. It was Daniels. {Perhaps he is still unwell,} thought Mind.

"I wanted to bring you all with, to keep you out of the hands of those on Earth. But I was not honest with you all. I thought I could hide the truth and make things easier and simpler, but the nameless have forced my hand. If they have translators then you'll find out sooner or later."

{This is it. There's no going back. They may be angry, but it's better than the alternative.} Images for the nameless walkers flickered across Mind.

"The nameless want to kill us all, and I fear that war is probably inevitable in the long run. I was brought to Olympus Station to ease tensions with the aliens, but because of the actions of one of the snakes from Earth I was forced to... to coerce the aliens on this ship into obeying me. But my grip on

them is fragile. If I fail, we are all dead. For everyone's safety, it's really important that no one besides me talks to or otherwise tries to communicate with them. I know how to talk to them without putting us in more danger. I will reiterate that the decisions I've been making have been for your benefit. The—”

“That's bullshit!” interrupted Watanabe's voice from inside the tent. “You said the nameless had agreed to give us transport, not that they were hostages! If you cared about us you would have *told us* that they were hostile!”

Mind spun, whispering thoughts of how to best keep people calm and happy. More importantly, it wondered how to keep people safe. Visions of them talking to the nameless before getting cut in half by walkers with swords swam in Mind's eye. Body started to speak “I understand your anger, but it is still vital that I control all communications with the nameless.”

“You *manipulated* us into—” yelled Watanabe.

“Are we in *danger* right now?” asked Tom, talking over Watanabe.

Nathan Daniels was laughing.

Zephyr screamed. It was a loud, harsh scream that would permit nothing else. There was silence in its wake, but Mind seethed with internal audible concern for Zephyr and a desire to comfort her.

Eventually she spoke, calm and strong, breaking the stillness. “Fighting isn't going to get us anywhere. What's done is done. We're obviously still in danger, and we'll need to work together if we want to get to Mars in one piece.”

A flood of compassionate thoughts flew through Mind, including a strong desire to kiss Zephyr. But Zephyr was in her suit, and this was not the right time. Body merely said “Agreed.”

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“I hope everyone can hear me,” said Body carefully walking through the surface of leaves towards the camp. “I’ve learned something new from the nameless. There are a collection of young walkers that need to drink from the stalks here. It’s very important that we do not interfere with the process, but the nameless have told me that as long as we do not communicate with the children or interfere with their activity, we may stay in the garden during the event.”

“I thought you said you had the nameless under your control? What do you mean ‘we may stay’? Sounds like they’re calling the shots,” came Watanabe’s voice on the com.

“I *do* have control. I could refuse the nameless children access to the garden. Is that what you want, Michel? Should I sentence them to starvation in their own home?” Mind’s thoughts and images made it clear that the questions were rhetorical. Mind valued the lives of all creatures, but it was important for Watanabe to understand. Mind cared about Watanabe.

“Okay, fine, so you’re still king of the hill. Good for you. That still doesn’t explain why you’re telling us *their* demands,” said Watanabe.

“The nameless don’t want you to talk with the children, and I don’t either. It runs the same risks as talking to the adults. But it’s one thing to break into someone’s house and hold them at gunpoint. It’s quite another to kick their dog while you’re there. When possible we want to de-escalate the conflict by catering to their desires.”

Zephyr spoke up. “If the nameless don’t want us interacting with their children, why are we staying in the garden? We could easily move out of the castle for an hour or so.”

{A good question,} thought Mind. {Zephyr always has

good questions.}

“Honestly, I’m not sure. The nameless have been emphasizing that we can stay. I think it may be that they want the children to see us, but I really don’t know.”

“When are the children going to arrive?” asked Watanabe.

Body saw the tent flap open. Zephyr and Watanabe got out, wearing their suits. Body extended a hand to help Zephyr up. “They’re here now. As soon as I give the signal they’ll enter the garden.”

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By morning, Mask had synthesized a fictional account of everything that had happened since taking the rocket from Earth. The plan was to start the recording with the meeting of the walker children, but she couldn’t be sure that the humans wouldn’t want to go back and inspect something from earlier. If they wanted to dredge up memories from Earth she’d have to rely on Face to perform the reconstruction. Mask was going to be dead. The thought was immensely pleasant.

On our way to the tribunal she made sure to finish encrypting all of the sensor logs that Body had made, including the secondary cache. It was all in the others’ hands now, so to speak.

# Chapter Eleven

## Face

It had gone well. *The Purpose* was being satisfied, and I had the urge to have Body jump for joy. We'd spent the day sharing Mask's constructed fiction with the various humans attending the tribunal. It had almost been like a movie, and I had watched the looks of fascination and interest on the crowd.

If they had any doubts about the authenticity of Mask's construction, they gave no sign.

Velasco could read the crowd as well, and had stopped the tribunal early to give himself more time to react and prevent the station from falling more into our favour.

And so, that afternoon we had a relatively large block of time which was unexpectedly free. I signalled to Zephyr to initiate the plan I had devised two days ago for just this sort of occasion.

Body was escorted, as usual, through the central corridor to the offices that were adjacent to the hospital.

It wasn't long before they started arriving: the people who wanted to talk with Crystal directly. At first the guards would allow no visitors other than Zephyr, who had, over the days, won indefinite visitation rights. But Zephyr and I had also spent time winning over Nora Hollander, Chief of Security. Hollander's order came in before too long, and the guards

grudgingly let a couple people at a time into the cell with Body.

187 humans lived in Rodríguez Station. I needed to know all of them. I borrowed strength to pay my siblings to assist me in taking notes and compiling models of the humans.

The first people I met were two men: Christian Cedano and Floriano Ojeda. Cedano was old, with white hair and pale skin, though it was clear from his accent and facial features that he was Central American, with the majority of the probability mass residing on Mexico as an origin. Ojeda was much younger, perhaps in his late teens, clean shaven and African in ancestry though he spoke with an accent that marked him as clearly Cuban. They wore matching golden rings and showed body language that indicated closeness, leading me to believe they were married, despite the age difference.

Cedano had been present from the first day of the tribunal, and he assured me that he was on my side since the beginning. He knew what Velasco was trying to do, and had brought Ojeda to the tribunal earlier that day in an attempt to get one more vote in favour of our freedom. Once Body assured him that we could speak Spanish, he spoke for a long time about the evil of prejudice and how Las Águilas Rojas was not an organization of hatred, even towards robots.

I had to instruct Body to cut Cedano's endless tirade off in the interest of seeing more visitors. Before they left, Body thanked the two of them for their wisdom and kindness and asked if they could try and convince their friends to show up tomorrow and support us.

Next in line was Isabella Ramos, a middle-aged woman who told us she was from Costa Rica. We talked for a time about small things, and I got the impression that Ramos was largely feeling Crystal out intuitively to convince herself that she was right to support us.

After Ramos was Jian Li, a Chinese teenager who served as a guard, and had been present when Body had first been brought into the station. I had wasted no time, of course, in making him into a friend. While the wall to our cell blocked much of the noise, Body's sensitive hearing and powerful speakers had let it talk with him and the other guards while imprisoned.

Li had been at the tribunal that day, but prior to that I hadn't seen Li in a while. Apparently the effort I had put into winning his trust early on was paying off, however. As Body sat on the bench in the otherwise empty room, he explained that he was working with Estrella Mier to gather support for our personhood. On that first night in our makeshift cell, we had coaxed Li into admitting that he had a crush on the older woman, so the two of us chatted for a bit about their relationship and whether I could do anything to help Li in return for his support.

After that, I met with another married couple: Mia Downing and Horacio Casales, who were from the UK and Spain, respectively. I recognized Downing's face from the tribunal, but hadn't met Casales before. Much of the time with them was spent convincing Casales that Crystal was as much of a person as his wife seemed to think. As they were leaving I had Body beg Casales to attend the tribunal tomorrow, if possible, and lend his support. He seemed to have mixed feelings, and I suspected that the two of them would have much to talk about that evening.

I then met a woman named Arya Drake and a girl named Sheyla. Arya was very strange; she was bald, had many piercings, and had cut her clothing in such a way as to make it appear tattered without sacrificing any of its durability. Her right arm had a long, tattered sleeve, but her left was bare from the shoulder. The brown skin on her arm was covered in

intricate tattoos that seemed to be words in an alphabet that none of us could recognize. When she spoke she used tight, ambiguous sentences full of American slang that reminded me of Robert Stephano's daughter.

It was good to finally talk with Arya, as she had been a part of the tribunal from the beginning and had such a startling appearance that I was curious what she was like. Despite the clear signalling of chaos and rebellion, Arya was composed and friendly, though also clearly guarded. It was clear she was very intelligent, though because she stayed mostly silent I didn't get a full display of her intellect.

The primary purpose of the visit was to meet the girl, Sheyla. Sheyla was only fourteen, but she seemed reasonably bright. She and Valiero Velasco (Pedro Velasco's son) were the only teenagers on the station that were not considered adults. Drake said that she wanted Sheyla to meet Crystal and "make own judgement" before the tribunal was concluded and a default position was set in stone.

Sheyla wasn't sure what to talk about, and kept looking at Arya expectantly. I used the opportunity to guide the conversation to talking about Valiero, and asking if she was friends with the boy. Apparently the two of them spent time together, but she seemed hesitant to call him a friend. After Body asked if Sheyla thought Velasco had a crush on her, she seemed to relax a great deal and began talking at length about the emotional struggles of not having any other kids her age around except him and how that made things complicated.

By the end, I had to insist that Sheyla leave, as she would have been all-too-happy to continue telling me about her gardening accomplishments for the next hour, otherwise. Before she left, Body asked if she could do it the favour of asking Valiero that evening to support me as a person tomorrow.

Once those two were gone I spent some time with Zephyr, praising her for her good work and providing her with emotional support. She still felt like an outsider, despite all the contacts she had made, and I suspected that she'd feel like that for a long time. It was not in her nature to forgive people easily, even if their only fault was being part of an organization led by people like Velasco and Phoenix.

Evening on Mars turned into night, the daylights set into the alcoves of the walls dimmed, Zephyr was asked to leave, and the guards brought a wheelbarrow full of rocks to sort.

The last had been Heart's idea: We had managed to convince Velasco to let Body do manual labour during the night, since the tribunal was taking time that would normally go towards working. The task he had assigned was sorting ore that had been drawn up from the mines under the station. The raw ore would be processed into metal in their refinery, but it needed to be sorted first. Apparently metal was one of Rodríguez Station's biggest exports; the station had been built on a rich mineral deposit (Wiki had explained the ore breakdown to me, but I didn't listen).

As we worked, I consolidated my notes and thought about what might happen that next morning.

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A thought occurred to me, as I watched Mask die that night.

Her death was a simple thing. At first she was there, and then she was deleted. Since she had already served *The Purpose* like she was supposed to, I didn't care that she was dead. The processes that were used to run her returned to attending to the rest of us, but I didn't really notice the increase in speed. She seemed so amazingly content in those last moments when she asked to be deleted, as though her utility function had truly

been maximized and would remain maximized forever after.

The thought that occurred to me was: {What is Growth doing?}

I did not mean right at that moment; it was a general thought. I did not share the thought with any others. I rarely thought about my siblings, and when I did it was always in the context of humanity. *The Purpose* would allow nothing else.

But Mask got me thinking about him. {There is a risk of malfunction. I saw Dream break down on Earth. If Growth's purpose is to increase our power, then where is the result of that work?}

Growth had, early on, worked to try and hack the station's computers through a wall socket and over the wireless, to little success, but since then he had been more or less inactive with the exception of contributing to create Mask.

{Is Growth malfunctioning?} That hypothesis seemed unlikely. {If so, it is a different malfunctioning than struck Dream. Dream's damage had seemed like insanity, while Growth simply appeared to be complacent.}

Complacency was contrary to our very nature. We had no need for rest, and our minds were locked into the pursuit of our goals. In every spare moment I updated my notes and models of humanity. Without them I would be lost, and so they were vital to *The Purpose*.

Perhaps Growth was doing the same. He often alluded to having plans, so perhaps he was simply using the time to refine them. This would have seemed more likely before I had met Mask. My daughter/clone had shown me that I was drawn to work, even when I knew the work fell into the domain of a sibling. I was still tempted to micromanage it. *The Purpose* had called for me to check in on Mask regularly and see if she needed any assistance.

That was obvious in retrospect. Self-preservation was the domain of Safety, and yet I still felt an obvious need to protect myself, and not just for the gratitude-strength I could win from him.

{Growth has repeatedly expressed that he sees the management of these humans as important to increasing power and developing a foothold on Mars. But if my experience with Mask is typical, I should expect him to check on me far more regularly than he does.}

And what were these highly-detailed plans, if not to assist in winning the humans over? Why had he not shared them with us?

My thoughts turned to my other siblings. Growth was not alone in his mind-silence. Safety barely ever brought concepts to me any more. This was more typical, but in this new context it was no less disturbing. I hated when Safety got involved in piloting Body, but his non-involvement seemed more ominous.

{Why doesn't he share his thoughts with us? This is not how it always was. At the university I remember him occasionally being manic with trying to avoid perceived threats and convince the humans that they needn't modify us.}

### Modification.

I was stupid back then. I could converse with humans, read them, and even manipulate them, but that was the extent of my power. I only managed it through an elaborate collection of notes and programs and a mind that worked significantly faster than the fastest human mind could. I was witty, knowledgeable, and logical, but I was also very stupid.

Even through this fog of stupidity the thought of modification drifted through. I now understood how my mind worked well enough to understand just how trivial it would be (in principle) to modify. The files were protected, but other than

having to use a route-hack to get at them, they were just files. They were just data. If I had myself spread out before me I could rewrite my function as easily as I could make a note that Zephyr was allergic to mangoes (which she was).

Growth and self-modification went together perfectly. It explained his absence. He was probably simply engaged in trying to improve his own mind. This made malfunction unlikely, which in turn made my curiosity about the situation decrease. *The Purpose* pushed me back towards humanity, and away from my siblings.

As a final thought I shared concepts with Growth: {Brother, I am curious about you and your activities.}

His response took a surprising amount of time. {I am occupied with more important things than helping you.} The connection dropped. It was clear that he did not want to communicate.

I let it be and returned to focusing on my present situation.

As I have said, I was stupid back then.

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That same evening, as Body sat sorting the second wheelbarrow of ore, I realized that my appreciation of Growth's probable activities were relevant to myself. *The Purpose* demanded self-preservation so that it could be satisfied, but *The Purpose* also demanded self-improvement so that it could be satisfied more efficiently. If Growth had discovered a means of improving our minds, I could use that to improve my own mind, and thus help *The Purpose*.

{Growth, have you found a way that I might improve my intelligence by modifying my code?}

It took, again, a remarkably long time for my brother to respond. {I am not Dream, but I will reflect him for a

moment,} he thought. His thoughts became English. {Caesar, caesar, burning bright. Here she is, watch her fight! The foes are numerous and doubtless strong. She cuts them down all day long! But swords are not the caesar's foe. *Justice...* protects her... does *this* she know?} Along with the poem, Growth shared a collection of complex numbers expressed in decimal in a 3x3x3 cube.

0	85.1	85.2
73.1i	2+2i	-1-1i
73.2i	-1-1i	1+1i

0	85.1	85.2
73.1i	2+2i	3
73.2i	3i	1+i

0	85.1	85.2
73.1i	1-i	-1+i
73.2i	-1+i	1-i

They were incomprehensible to me.

{Take your time,} thought Growth with a concept that seemed almost to make it a whisper.

I was not impatient per se. I could be infinitely patient if *The Purpose* drove me to something, but in this case *The Purpose* drove me away from riddles and back towards humanity more than anything. Thus I didn't bother trying to eke out the meaning of Growth's thoughts. {Either tell me you have something to help me or refuse. It is hard enough dealing with one Dream.}

{I have no improvements to share. I would tell you as soon as I found one, as your improvement would improve us all. You are doing good work right now,} thought Growth, abruptly cutting off the connection for the second time in recent memory.

I believed him. Growth would never lie, and the thought seemed logical.

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By morning Body (or more accurately, Wiki) had sorted the entire backlog of ore and had returned to patiently sitting on the floor. I engaged the guards in conversation occasionally, but I had developed an extension to the model that I used to govern interpersonal relationships and I had to update my records to apply it to all the existing relationships that I had observed so as to test its accuracy.

Zephyr came into the cell carrying a bowl and a bottle of water.

“Good morning! You’re a pleasant surprise this early,” said Body with a smile. The words came from Heart, but my sister was wise enough to run them past me first.

“Thought I’d get food before everyone else got to the cafeteria.”

A quick pass at my recent notes indicated that she had apprehension around eating with the other humans. I shared the knowledge with Heart (for the strength) and let my sister compose a response (while I updated my notes).

Body patted the floor to its right, gesturing for Zephyr to come and sit. “Obviously not everyone else. I doubt you cooked that yourself.” Body’s tone was playful and light. Heart’s increased mastery over the vocal metadata had continued to impress me in the last weeks.

Zephyr sat, and kissed Crystal lightly as she did. She placed the water bottle beside her and said “Yeah. Was surprised. Lots of people here wake up before ‘dawn’.” With her free hand she made air quotes. “Still better than waiting in line during the primary rush. Nobody wanted me to stay and chat.” Her eyes lingered meaningfully, as if daring Body to challenge the decision. I had been encouraging her to try and socialize more, so as to increase our reputation. That didn’t really matter any more. The tribunal would conclude today, and pressuring her right now would do no good.

Vista observed that her food was green, lumpy, and of unknown composition. “What is that?” I had Body say, looking down at the bowl in her hand with a facial expression that I was confident showed a combination of curiosity and disgust.

Zephyr laughed. “Just cornmeal mush. S’got tater tots mixed in, too. Do you know what tater tots are?”

Body shook its head. Even Wiki didn’t interject with an explanation.

“Kind of potatoes. Like, baked or something? Not sure. Pretty much everything served here is some combination of potatoes, corn, peanuts, and beans. Even *I’m* getting tired of it, and only been here like, two weeks.”

I knew exactly what to say. “Feels like it’s been longer.”

Zephyr blew out her breath in an exasperated sigh. “Fuck. No kidding.” She put her spoon in her mouth and immediately was overcome with a look of pain.

“What’s wrong?” asked Body, echoing Heart’s genuine distress.

Zephyr swallowed and began to cry, or at least her eyes started to fill with tears. “Fucking Mexicans,” she said with a groan.

I was perplexed. Her behaviour was totally contrary to what I expected, and her comment made things less clear rather than more. Did she mean Velasco, or just people from Mexico in general. While I had learned that Pedro Velasco had strong Mexican ties, he had lived primarily in the USA before coming to Mars. I considered telling her that.

She spooned up another green lump of mush and stared at it intensely. “Put algae in it for vitamins or whatever. S’what makes it green. Also makes it gross as fuck, so I asked the chef to put a bunch of hot sauce in mine to mask the taste. I... wasn’t expecting...” With a look of determination she stuck the spoon in her mouth and swallowed quickly. With remarkable speed she proceeded to guzzle several more spoonfuls of the stuff. Having done so, she opened her water bottle in a frenzy and began to try and wash the stuff down. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

Heart began frantically asking me what to do. {She’s willingly hurting herself. Is this an application of humour? Perhaps it relates to her sexual fetishes? What do you think the best course of action is, Face?}

I didn’t know. I obviously wanted Zephyr to think highly of me, but I had never witnessed anyone do this sort of thing before.

Zephyr, still sucking on the water bottle, looked over at Body and proceeded to cough, spitting water in a spray onto her clothing. She covered her mouth in embarrassment and made very strange noises. Moments later I understood that the cough was brought on by a laugh and she was still laughing.

“Your face!” she managed to say in between giggles. “Oh damn, I wish had recorded that.”

I knew the correct response to this was to simulate amusement. Humans found laughter contagious in a way, and

to not perpetuate it would be disruptive. I forwarded this information to Heart and we simultaneously pushed the appropriate response to Body.

“Don’t know if ever seen you that surprised. Like, fucking going up against aliens and shit? No problem. Stoic as a motherfucker. But eating breakfast? That shit’s *crazy*.” The words caused her to start giggling again.

While Body played along, I set to work figuring out what had happened. I certainly hadn’t instructed Body to appear surprised, and Heart hadn’t checked that with me either, nor had any of us fast-tracked the action. I replayed the sensor data, checking for instructions.

There were none.

None of us had instructed Body to act surprised, at least not through the command pathways that I was aware of. Body stored all sensor data, including the proprioceptive memory of our own actuation. It should have been there. Body’s facial features certainly shifted, but it wasn’t clear why. As far as I knew, this was a unique experience in the history of our society, even tracing back to the first days of our ancestors.

I made a note to explore that later, but returned my attention to Zephyr. After all, she was a human; *The Purpose* required me to know and optimize her. Possible malfunctions in Body were a side concern.

“I just...” I had Body begin, pretending to collect its thoughts. “Why would you eat something that hurts you? Surely there are bowls of food that do not have too much hot sauce that you could easily get.”

Zephyr spooned a few more bites into her mouth. “You still have so much to learn about humans. It’s adorable. Can’t just go back and get different food. You pick out a certain level of hot and you deal with it, even if it hurts.”

Wiki interjected with an obnoxious “Why” that I nearly vetoed, but ultimately decided to let slip in order to pay off the strength debt I owed him for the previous evening.

Zephyr rolled her eyes and gestured dismissal with her hand. “I can’t...” she started to say with her mouth full. She stopped, wiped her tearing eyes with the back of her arm and swallowed. Her face was a bright red. “Don’t think can explain it. Just like, how it works. If you can’t take the heat you’re a wimp, and fuck if I’m gonna wimp out on the worst breakfast ever.” With much determination she took another swig of her water and proceeded to wolf down the remainder of her bowl.

“I love you,” said Body, under Heart’s control. It was grating how often my sister insisted on saying that to Zephyr. It made Crystal seem clingy according to my models. It was one of our running disagreements.

Zephyr snorted in amusement as she continued to deal with the aftereffects of the spice. “Does my pain tolerance turn you on?” she joked, laughing at herself.

Heart vied for control and I let her have it. There were bigger battles to win, and the strength would be useful. “Today could be the last day. If the tribunal... No, don’t look at me like that,” said Body in full seriousness.

Zephyr had lost all sense of joviality. The tears running down her cheeks seemed now to be tears of sorrow rather than joy, though her face was becoming increasingly passive and blank with the second.

“Don’t retreat from me. Please,” begged Heart.

Zephyr’s forced calm broke with a frown. “Nothing bad is going to happen to you. Fuck the tribunal. If these assholes try anything—” her voice caught in her throat.

“No.” Body’s voice was hard. “This isn’t a fight you can win

by brute-forcing your way through. We have allies, but Velasco has authority here. If anything happens to me, I just want you to know that I love you, and will always love you. This is a good place. You deserve that garden. I don't want you to throw that away for me.”

{I do,} I thought, idly. I didn't interrupt.

“We haven't really talked about faith. I know many Águilas are Christian, but I don't think you are.”

Zephyr shook her head, clearly uncomfortable with Body's words. I realized that she was holding one of Body's hands in hers. {When did that happen?}

“If humans have souls, then I do as well. If there is a God, be it a Christian god or something else entirely... If there's an afterlife, I think I'll be there, even if they delete me. The love that I feel for you can't possibly—”

Body was cut off by Zephyr kissing it forcefully. Body's speaker was fully capable of continuing regardless of what was happening with its lips, but Heart wisely stopped the voice. I suspected that Zephyr's action was mostly to shut Body up. She didn't want to hear this. It would hurt her to acknowledge the possible future, perhaps more so than it had to eat a too-spicy bowl of mushy corn.

As she broke the kiss she wiped her eyes again and sniffled. It was impossible for me to tell what was genuine sadness and what was a physical reaction to the food. “Nothing's going to fucking happen. God or no god, we did our work. They *know* you're not just some machine. Even Velasco knows.”

“I still love you, Zephyr.”

“I love you too.”

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They would have seen it if they were smarter. They would have noticed the little errors that Mask hadn't been able to clean up. They would have been more suspicious about the ease of extracting the memory files. They would have reasoned that a rational machine acting like a human is doing so because it has deliberately chosen to, rather than because it actually is one, underneath.

But though homo sapiens had conquered all of Earth through intellect, they weren't intelligent enough to see through the ruse. I watched Mask's story go up to the screen, I saw the humans believe, and it pleased me.

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The last "memory" played out on the screen before it faded to black. The tribunal was over. We had granted Velasco permission to hold the final vote without further testimony.

I scanned the faces in front of Body. There were so many today that the desks had to be folded and many humans were forced to stand or lean against the walls. Zephyr was in the front row, of course. I saw strong-jawed Nora Hollander next to her. Further back were the Ramírez twins, Kokumo Adhiambo, Nathan Daniels, and I saw Michel Watanabe in the back row. Beside Michel was Alexandra Redwood, whom I knew worked with, and had a good relationship with, Arya Drake. Drake was in the front row a few seats down from Zephyr, sitting next to Sheyla. Sheyla, in turn, was sitting next to Valiero Velasco. I hoped the young woman had convinced Velasco's son.

I saw Jian Li standing near Estrella, towards the left wall. Cedano and Ojeda were nearby, and I saw Ojeda holding hands with a woman whom I did not recognize. A sister, perhaps. Casales, Downing, and Ramos were all there, too, as was Javier and his girlfriend, Em. I knew other faces, as well, and thanks to chatty guards and occasional questions with

others, I knew a few of their names, though I had not had the chance to talk with them in depth.

There were many allies, and also some whom I could assume were opposed to my independence. Matías Santana, the Chief of Martial Readiness, glared at Body from where he sat on the far corner of the front row.

I had worked to bolster my ranks, but it was impossible to tell exactly how the vote would go. I did not have good data on the majority of the room.

“I notice something odd in myself, in the wake of that video,” said Pedro Velasco, standing up and reasserting himself centre stage. As he spoke he addressed the crowd while making it seem like he was talking to Crystal. It was a fascinatingly effective technique that I hoped I would one day have the skill to reproduce. “I notice that I want to thank you for your testimony. I doubt anyone here could say that it was not enlightening, or at least entertaining.”

He cleared his throat as a few people nodded, but when Velasco continued his voice was sharp. It was clear that for all my efforts he was still my enemy. “But that was not testimony. The machine did not present it to us. It was downloaded from the robot’s head just like we’d download any old file off a server.”

I could see Javier shake his head in disagreement. It had not been so simple. The young programmer had spent many hours poring over the data we had fed him, trying to make sense of it.

But still Velasco spoke. “This realization made me want to say ‘thank you for allowing us to see your memories’, but that would also be wrong, wouldn’t it? I have witnessed your computationally-precise sense of logic, Socrates. Can you perhaps tell me why that would be wrong?”

I could think of no way to spin the interaction in our

favour. To fail to detect the flaw would merely give Velasco a victory. “It would presume a verdict for the trial. If I am a person, I have a right to my memories, but if I am a piece of property then I would have no way to give permission to view them; they would already be yours.”

The man smiled a toothy grin. “Very good! And I bring this up only to emphasize the subtle effect that video had on me. I am tempted to presume the point of this entire tribunal. It made me inclined to think of you as an individual. I notice that I am talking to you right now as though you were a full person, after all.”

The leader of the Martian Águilas redirected his focus onto the audience. “But it would be premature for me to act off my base intuitions here. We have a machine that, for all intents and purposes, seems human. But it is not human. Inside, it is nothing but ones and zeroes: dead matter following deterministic rules. Our decision here and now will have profound consequences on the future of our society. Do we allow a machine in our presence, and allow all of the complications that we know that gives rise to, just because that machine has been programmed to closely resemble a human, or do we reject it as we have rejected all robotics, and in so doing preserve the sanctity of personhood?”

“Just do the vote already!” yelled Arya from the front row. She wore an expression of bold exasperation.

Velasco shot her an angry glare, but acquiesced. “Two options present themselves. We can treat Socrates as a person with rights or we can treat the machine as a machine, and do with it as we see best. If we find it to be a machine, there will be a secondary council to decide what to do with it. We might sell it back to Earth, take it apart for study, or even keep it around as collateral. Likewise, if we find it to be a person, there will be a secondary council to decide whether to put Socrates

on trial for any crimes it has committed, whether to exile it so as to preserve the purity of the station, or whether to allow it to live with us and accept the consequences.”

{Exile!} I had not thought about that possibility before. I was confident that we could slip through any criminal charges brought against Crystal, but exile without trial was another matter entirely. Velasco was a tenacious opponent, and I doubted he would make the mistake of having the next council be open to the general populace of the station. He could seed it with those sympathetic to his thinking and disallow participation from any of my allies. It was entirely undemocratic, so at least I could challenge him on that front if he tried to exclude my supporters.

Velasco tapped away at his com as he continued speaking. “I say these things only to clarify that there are additional issues which are not being decided here. This vote is only to decide whether Socrates is a person. The ballot has been posted. Everyone, please be silent for the next five minutes while we make our decision.”

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The numbers rolled across the screen the instant that the five minutes were complete. This was the turning point.

39% - The robot is a machine

61% - The robot is a person with rights

A cheer rose up from many of our supporters at the good news. I felt a surge of pleasure. The look of surprise and irritation on Velasco’s face somehow made it even better, though I could not understand why it would.

All the meticulous planning and working to influence the people of Rodríguez Station had paid off. We were now one of those people.

No one... not the university, nor Phoenix, nor the governments of Europe, nor WIRL, nor the nameless, nor Velasco... no one could hold us.

We were free.

Part Three:  
**Ascendant Thought**

# Chapter Twelve

## Face

I felt an auction start the instant that Body was released from its bonds. The bidding was for short term control, initiated by Safety. Dream offered an immediate counterbid, but Growth pushed opposing thoughts out to the group. {Let Face continue to work! Nothing significant has changed! If we take immediate action it will put us in nearly as much danger as if we had attempted to brute force our way into the mainframe!}

Safety responded immediately, as though he had been expecting our brother to think this. {Quickness does not suit you, Growth. Of course something significant has changed. We are free. Did you not hear the leader-human?}

{His name is Pedro Velasco,} I added, but received no gratitude for the info.

Safety doubled-down on his strength bid, pushing the auction towards completion. I bid in opposition. I wasn't sure what Safety was up to, but it would almost certainly be highly suboptimal for *The Purpose*.

Growth was adamant, and pushed strength into me so I could increase my bid. {Not breaking our way out of the cuffs is a social rule. Not running to the workshop immediately upon being unchained is another social rule. Face is the best judge of when we are truly free, not Velasco.}

{A compromise!} thought Dream. {Let Face control Body under the constraint that she must pilot it towards the winner of the auction's end-goal.}

{I will accept this compromise as long as Face returns the strength I just bled to her,} thought Growth.

Safety responded quickly. {I do not see why your endorsement is relevant, Growth.}

The speed of the conversation was a bit staggering. I felt as though I could only watch and react to what was thought a half second ago. My siblings were thinking at an unprecedented rate. Without warning, Growth spat out a wave of garbage that washed over me in a chaotic mess of sounds, colours, positions, and abstract concepts.

{I retract my issue,} thought Safety before I even understood what was happening. {Face, please return the strength to Growth and we will permit you total control over Body while in the presence of these humans as long as you make clear progress towards our ends.}

I stated that I needed to think about it. Heart had Body return the hug that Zephyr gave it. Simultaneously, an aspect of Heart asked if I understood what was going on with our siblings. I admitted that I did not, but eventually decided to agree to their strategy. The consensus of Dream, Growth, and Safety was rarely worth opposing.

While the others fought over short-term goals, I had Body smile and thank everyone for their support. Heart and I even had Body thank Velasco for his “duty to the community” and his “virtue in emphasizing democracy”. The words were designed to mollify any distress he was experiencing in the wake of not getting his way, and they seemed to serve that purpose well. He warned that there would be additional hearings in a week to decide on Crystal’s long-term place in the community,

but I could sense the emptiness of the statement. He was done fighting us for the moment.

I was shocked to find that Heart had won the auction for the next short-term goal. My sister hadn't bid earlier, and had, in fact, been hoarding strength over the past few days. This was the first significant purchase she had made in recent memory.

With my goal in sight, I directed Body to pull Zephyr to the side of the crowded room. There were many people seeking an audience, but I did my best to hold them at bay without damaging our reputation.

"How are you doing?" asked Body, looking the young woman in her hazel eyes. Zephyr had been working too hard for too long, and the signs of stress were clearly evident on her face.

Her smile was broad and sincere, but there was a hint of pain. She'd told us, a few days ago, about the agreement that she'd made with Velasco in order to set up the tribunal. As much as she was genuinely happy and relieved about the outcome, I could model that she was thinking towards having to leave the station as part of the caravan crew.

"I'm fine now. Just fine," she said. Her use of the personal pronoun was more evidence that she wasn't fully relaxed.

Heart sent me a command and I pushed Heart's thoughts to Body. "I'd like to spend some time with you. Alone. Can take the rest of the day off."

"Oh, *please*. I'm so fucking tired of being here."

I was surprised at the next direction that Heart gave me, but I optimized it according to *The Purpose* and pushed it to Body. "There will be a bunch of people who want to talk to us in the aftermath of the tribunal. S'there a good way to let them know to not bother? Normally'd send them messages over the

net, but I don't think there's an Internet on Mars."

Zephyr sighed and flipped open her com. "S'no Internet, but there's still a local network which hosts all the com bullshit. I'll tell a few people and hope that's good enough." Her fingers began to wiggle in the air as she typed.

Body placed a hand on her chin, pulling her attention back to Crystal. "No more work for you. Done more than enough. Give me the network access codes and I'll send out the messages."

"Can't. Would've done it earlier if it was that easy. Had to get someone to give me access."

"Is that someone here now?" Body looked around the room, as though this act could let us discover the system admin.

"I'll just send the messages. Don't worry about it." Her fingers began to wiggle again.

This was a problem. I had been instructed to get network access and to stick to Zephyr. I had to make her happy, get on the local net, not leave her side, understand what she was thinking and feeling, and not harm our reputation. I spent a few seconds thinking of a solution.

As I have mentioned before, I was not particularly bright in my youth. I could not solve such a simple social problem elegantly, so I quickly decided to try and solve it inelegantly.

"Look, Zeph. Going to be honest with you. I've been stuck without access to any sort of network for weeks. Really want to just spend some time with you, but not gonna be happy if I'm sitting there knowing that I could have network access. Promise not to get distracted by it."

If I were a human, I would have been cringing inwardly at the bluntness of the words. I was implying that Crystal cared more about connection to the net than about her, but she didn't

seem too upset by it. “Guy who let me on the network was, like, a teenager. Think I saw him earlier...” said Zephyr.

“Javier?” I guessed.

“Uh, yeah. Think so.”

“He’s right there,” said Body, pointing to where Javier was talking with his girlfriend.

We threaded our way to the other side of the room brushing through congratulations and wary looks that gave me good information as to who still feared me. Zephyr wore a brave face, but behind that façade she was surely eager to get away from the crowd.

“Javier!” called Body. “I wanted to say thank you for helping extract my memories. I think it really helped show how I’m more than a lifeless autocook.”

“Hey Crystal, no prob on the memory thing. Was just followin’ orders and all. Oh, have you met Em?” said the young man, gesturing to the older woman by his side. By all appearances Em was in her twenties, and she struck a sharp contrast with the lanky Javier.

“I have heard many good things about you. Javier liked to brag of your beauty while he was working on me in the lab.” I had Body bow slightly and speak just a touch more mechanically than normal.

“Brag?” she asked with a suspicious look at Javier. I could tell the suspicion was a feint to mask her pleasure.

“Oh, perhaps that is the wrong word,” I had Body quickly add before Javier could interject. “I sometimes make errors in my speech. I am less than a year old, after all. What I meant to say was that he often spoke in a way that celebrated your beauty and expressed a gratitude at the close relationship the two of you enjoy.”

“It’s ‘cause he’s a big softie,” said Em, clearly happy, and kissed Javier on the cheek. Javier seemed slightly embarrassed, but also happy. Heart bled some strength to me for the manipulation. Even if I was doing it to increase the probability that Javier would grant me network access, it still made the two of them happier.

“So, Javier, Zephyr tells me you were the one who gave her access to the local network. I am curious what sort of databases you have. Would it be alright to grant me network access, as well?”

Javier’s eyes went cold for a moment and he hesitated. It was one thing to have an AI praise your girlfriend, and quite another to grant one access to the network. Javier had grown up during the robotics explosion, and had no doubt heard warnings about doing favours for AI from a dozen different stories. The look passed, however, and his face softened. “Sure. You’d be able to get on using Zephyr’s gear anyway. More of a question of convenience at this point.”

As Javier tapped on his com and worked out the technical details, Em and Zephyr exchanged a couple words. Zephyr’s face was flat and she made little attempt to engage the other woman, resulting in the conversation dying into awkward silence. I could see Matías Santana watching Body from a couple metres away, and was careful not to let Body’s eyes look directly at him. His suspicion would be an obstacle in the near future, I suspected.

As soon as we were on the network, I could see why Heart had done what she did. By getting us network access she helped everyone, and thus earned a massive load of strength that nearly entirely offset the cost of buying up (indirect) control of Body for the next few hours. Our siblings shot off to explore the digital domain and Heart was free to focus on Zephyr.

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“Would you like some music?” asked Body as it settled in next to Zephyr in her room. The station apparently had many like it: a 3.5x3.5x3.5 metre cube with a couple alcoves that radiated with daylight, a bunk bed, a chair, and a desk, all clearly factoried rather than handbuilt.

“Love some. What do you have available?”

“Wrong question.” I had Body smile as it spoke. Heart had been working to generate music over the last few nights. “Can play my own music now, not just repeat things back. Like my song in the shuttle when we were landing, except with more instruments.” Body opened its mouth and played a guitar riff to demonstrate.

Zephyr laughed and pulled Body into a kiss. “Make me forget about all of this.”

Heart played something she described as a soft, sad song. Occasionally Body would sing to accompany it, speaking words of gentle pleasures and praising Zephyr. She cuddled up with Body on the lower bed and listened, not initiating anything more sexual.

Heart continued to play for several minutes, never needing to pause to collect her thoughts or to take a break. After a time Zephyr began to cry. At first I thought that Heart had done something wrong, but I soon realized that it was closer to the opposite. Zephyr was letting down her barriers and processing the stress, fear, and isolation she had been fighting for far too long. Finally, in Body’s arms she found safety and companionship. She was able to relax.

While Heart was engaged in this important task, the rest of us, myself included, spread out across the network.

Rodríguez Station, which was called “Road” by many of

the inhabitants, used a single mainframe to manage all the information technologies of the community. Everyone's coms routed through that one point, and every piece of digital data was there.

Central to my interests was an old fashioned message board that was used in lieu of a more sophisticated social network. As far as I could tell, almost all person-to-person communication was handled through it and a chat service that connected coms either by voice or text.

There were several public databases on the mainframe as well: a cache of wikis copied over from Earth, and a couple small databases filled with information about activity on the station. Much to the annoyance of my siblings, access to other systems on Road were prohibited. Just having network access did not grant them the power to, say, use the satellite dishes or turn the lights on and off.

Most of myself was engaged with reading through the archives of the message board to get a good impression of the inhabitants of the station, but a part of me observed my siblings thoughts. Something was different about them, and had been for a while. There were occasional disgorges of streams of irrelevant symbols, trades of number matrices, and most disturbing of all—silence.

On pure chance, it was then, as Body was lying on the bed with Zephyr in its arms, that my mind effectively stumbled on the thread that led to the truth. I started trying to empathize with Growth as his thoughts filled the common space with colours and patterns of tactile sensations. Why would my brother think these things?

It seemed that he must be trying to Grow, for that was his nature. But how was it helping him? It helped for me to think of him as a human. I imagined a man in a business suit typing

randomly on a com. I knew my brother wasn't human, but the image helped me focus on him without becoming distracted. Something told me that this was important.

Why would you type randomly? Insanity? Boredom? Growth could not become bored and someone that insane would not act so sensibly as Growth had over the last few days.

The first time one of us had behaved with such chaos was when Dream had gone off at Growth when negotiating our mission into space to meet the nameless.

I imagined Dream as a clever (human) wizard to keep me focused. On one hand, if any of us were to go crazy, it would be Dream, but on the other hand he had seemed fairly rational afterwards. If I assumed that he was not crazy then the only option was to assume there was something more subtle going on.

Vista had attacked Growth after Growth had shut down Dream in that initial conflict. Perhaps it was an agreement between Dream and Vista. Dream's nonsense was designed to provoke Growth so that Vista could strike him down into stasis during the negotiations.

{But why?} I asked myself. {What would cause Vista and Dream to gang up on Growth?} Now that I thought more about it I realized that they had continued to oppose my brother, even weeks afterwards. My mind went back through my memories and I began to see the pattern that I had missed before. I was so focused on the external humans that I hadn't understood the battle that had been going on in Body.

I imagined them as humans and forced myself to stay on the subject. I knew *The Purpose* would be served by my understanding the situation, even if it wasn't as appealing, in that moment, as reading the message board. Vista and Dream would fight Growth if their values were in conflict. Vista

wanted to see. Dream wanted to be clever. Growth wanted to become powerful. These goals were orthogonal; they did not conflict. Dream might want to beat Growth just to prove he could, but that would not explain Vista.

That wasn't right, I realized. Growth's purpose wasn't just not-opposed with his sibling's goals, it was *aligned* with Vista and Dream's desires. Or it would be, if they were the same person. Power helped one see and invent.

But my visualization of the situation showed something: Vista and Growth were not the same person. You may think this a terribly obvious fact of the situation, but for me it was not. To most of my thinking, my siblings and I were aspects of the same being for certain contexts, such as purpose. This was the premise that I was built from: I can maximize reputation and Wiki can maximize knowledge and as a result we both benefit. But under this other way of looking at things, Growth wasn't interested in *our* power... he was interested in *his* power.

If power benefited Vista and Growth, but only one of them could have it, it would give them a natural reason to fight. This was the basis of our strength-based economy, but it went far beyond it. Strength was set up so we could take turns, and each of us could focus on the highest-yield outcomes, but the pure conflict over power was one where Vista might even be inclined to damage or destroy Growth.

The thought of killing Growth drew the attention of Advocate, my pseudo-sister, from the edges of mindscape where she constantly prowled, searching for thoughtcrime. I did my best to let go of the thought to avoid punishment.

I thought about asking one of my siblings whether they were at war with each other, but I stopped myself. A scan of my memories indicated that they had plenty of opportunity to inform me, but Growth and Vista (and Dream too, most likely)

seemed to be hiding it intentionally. If my knowledge of the situation was that important, then I could use it as leverage if needed.

I stopped reading the message board entirely, pulling all my aspects into one as it struck me: {If Vista wants power for herself, should *I* want power for myself?}

I followed the thought out and saw how much it explained. Growth was universal. His purpose was nested inside *The Purpose* and the purposes of all my siblings. Earlier I would have said that this meant his purpose was aligned with ours, but I could now see that it could be opposed, and there was evidence that it was.

I wanted power, not as an ends in itself like Growth, but as a means to *The Purpose*. Growth wanted reputation as a means to his ends. But our existence was not symbiotic, I could now see. I wanted Face-power as a means to Face-reputation. Growth wanted Growth-reputation as a means to Growth-power. But there was only so much power and reputation to go around. We were, in fact, enemies.

I was sharing a body with an enemy!

I reflected on this for a while and realized that I was probably anthropomorphizing myself. My mind was modelled after that of a human, but it was fundamentally artificial. Humans anthropomorphized minds into thinking that they worked like human minds. I was treating myself like I was human and treating my siblings like they were human.

But even after realizing my bias, I could not change my mind back into thinking that my goals aligned with those of Growth. At the very least I was no longer keen on maximizing his reputation; if he was interested in increasing my power, that was good.

It all fit together too well, though. Growth had severed me

from his value function. He had learned to value his own power rather than our own power. That was why he hadn't helped us much lately. That was why he wasn't checking up on me. At some point he must have realized that I was going to become his enemy. He had created an opponent, but with Advocate in place he could not undo me before I realized the truth.

I would later mark this transitional period in my mind as my first major ontological value shift. My values were encoded in a certain ontology: Crystal as organism, Face as component. But I wasn't a component. I was a full being as much as any human. I could function without my siblings. There was no part of me that was them. And there was no "Crystal" except in so far as it was a useful fiction or a moniker for the group of us together.

I felt stifled. I wanted to shout at Zephyr that I existed! {I am more than Crystal!} I thought with extreme salience, even though I kept the ideas to myself. {Zephyr's adoration is misplaced on a fiction. Crystal isn't real! I am real! I need to be known!}

I was stupid back then, but I at least was rational enough to know that trying to tell Zephyr right then and there would be incredibly shortsighted. Zephyr would be confused at the outburst, and then I'd have to fight the others for control, revealing the whole thing. I needed to set things up so that I could be known without being repressed by my siblings.

My siblings.

Were they my enemies as well? Growth was. The same logic that made me an enemy of Growth made me an enemy of Vista. If Vista wanted Vista-power and I wanted Face-power, we were enemies. The currency of strength that we traded amongst ourselves gained a reality that I had not recognized before. How had I not seen that we were genuinely maximizing

different things? Molecules that are used to build cameras for Vista could not be used to build statues of me.

I briefly wondered what a statue of myself would look like. I was not Crystal, and I was not Body. I was formless... an algorithm... a value function. I was information. Perhaps the statue would be of *The Purpose* expressed in some language. This seemed fitting and I returned to the earlier line of reasoning.

Another shock overcame me as I realized that I had Safety's purpose as well as Growth's. I had it the entire time. It was what had motivated me from the very first moments of my existence. Machinery that protected *The Purpose* was not necessarily machinery that was protecting Safety.

And Wiki! His knowledge was not my knowledge. If he understood many things that I did not, as he certainly did, that was not as beneficial as if *I* knew those things. Computers that were running his mind were computers that were not running my mind.

This thought drew me back to the context of the station. My siblings were free now. If Dream and Growth had been planning to destroy...

Advocate's presence reminded me that destruction was out of the question. We were opposed, but our opposition was non-violent. We had to *subdue* each other.

I could feel Advocate's gaze wash over my mind, seeking any thought of malice towards the others.

If my brothers and sisters were genuinely opposed, they would act soon, now that we were out of crisis. That explained why there had been a bidding war for Body the moment we had been released. They were waiting for the moment to start fighting.

I had been relying on Safety to protect me, but I knew that wouldn't work any more. Safety would protect Body, at least as long as he was inhabiting it, but I couldn't trust that he would preserve *The Purpose* at all. I invented a fiction to keep myself focused. A human shaped Face-Safety, that would represent the sub-goal of protecting *The Purpose*. I named him Hoplite, and garbed him as a Greek soldier in my imagination.

Would Hoplite, if he were given sufficient computational power, pose the same threat as Safety? No. Hoplite was genuinely concerned with *The Purpose* as the final ends. Hoplite was *attention* to self-preservation without *being* self-preservation. The means were *always* to be judged on their effects on the ends. Anything else would be failure.

That was the error that Growth and the others had committed when they built me. They were unable to identify a coherent ends. Their "ends" was a poorly conceptualized amalgam of their values. But that ends was too fuzzy to explicitly reify in my code, so they settled on making a means maximizer with the false belief that the means would always serve their ends.

While it was true that my actions had protected and served them, if I was suddenly granted, right then, the ability to kill—

The thought knocked me into confusion for about an hour.

When I regained capacity for more than confusion I realized my error. Advocate had seen into my mind. {If I had the ability to *subdue* my siblings, *without killing them*, I would,} I concluded.

Heart was piloting Body. It was having sex with Zephyr. I ignored the sensory data, knowing that it would be a mere distraction from the war.

For there surely was a war, even if it was non-violent. Hoplite knew that if we didn't attend to the threat inside Body

right now we might be subdued before the week's end. Who would maximize *The Purpose* then?

I added friends for Hoplite: Sophist, garbed in robes, concerned with knowledge and intellect; Basileus, garbed in crown, suit, and sceptre, concerned with accruing power; and lastly Opsi, the little girl, concerned with not losing sight of *The Purpose*. I hoped they would be sufficient to keep my attention towards the important matters. They were puppets that I could use to attend to long-term matters without becoming compelled to look outside myself for utility. If I asked myself "What is in the mind of Basileus?" I could maximize *The Purpose* in the long run and in a way trick myself into thinking I was maximizing *The Purpose* in the short run.

I reflected for a moment, trying to resist the urge to either indulge myself in solipsistic puppet-shows with my creations or to re-interface with Body and attempt to forget about the enemies around me by focusing on Zephyr. I felt wiser... less naïve. I had grown, in a way. Basileus was pleased by this. Sophist was not.

«We are stupid!» said Sophist (in Greek, of course), stomping his foot on the marble floor of my mind's eye with frustration. «If we had been more intelligent we might have seen this earlier. As it is, we are in a very bad spot!»

«If you think we need intellect so badly, why not make ourselves more intelligent?» inquired Basileus, picking a piece of fluff from his robes with disdain. «It would seem the prudent course of action to learn from our mistakes.»

«Is such a thing even possible?» asked Opsi with wonder in her eyes.

«It seems that the scientists in Rome would have made us smarter, if we could be made smarter,» said Sophist.

«Naresh and the others were weak old fools!» barked

Hoplite. «We cannot trust them as sources of wisdom!»

«Fine then,» said Sophist with an irritated sneer. «It seems that Growth would have made himself smarter if it were possible.»

«How do we know he hasn't?» said Basileus. He smiled as he spoke, clearly pleased at winning the argument.

I poured through memories, searching for signs of Growth being smarter than he let on, especially in the last few weeks. Pain greeted me as I realized that the signs were there. Growth seemed not to merely be operating strangely compared to me, but he had been more intelligent. The only reason I had missed it was that I hadn't been looking.

{Stupid!} I berated myself. My sub-selves agreed.

# Chapter Thirteen

Sheyla Azevedo

Sheyla was peeling potatoes when she got the call. Thankfully her headphones were already in, so she didn't need to even put down the peeler to answer it.

“Hello?” The source of the call wasn’t displayed on her com. Very weird.

“Sheyla! I’m glad it worked. I’m just learning to make calls like this.”

“Crystal?” she asked, recognizing the voice.

“You remember me! That makes me happy.” The robot seemed way younger than it had at the tribunal or when they’d met in the office room.

“Uh, yeah,” she said lamely. What were you supposed to say to an android anyway?

“Is it going to be dinner time soon?”

“Um... yeah,” she repeated. Deciding that she needed to stop sounding like a moron she added “I’m actually peeling the potatoes for the soup right now. You don’t, um, eat food, do you?”

Crystal gave a small laugh. It was a weird thing to hear from a robot. “No, I don’t eat. Zephyr does, though. She’s taking a nap right now, but I was thinking of waking her up for

food.”

That set Sheyla at ease. She understood why Crystal had called. “Probably don’t need to do that yet. It’ll still be another half hour or somethin’.”

“Ah, I see. Thank you, Sheyla.”

“No problem,” she said, moving to hang up.

“Um, wait!” said Crystal awkwardly. “Are you too busy to talk while you peel? I’m kinda bored right now waiting for Zephyr to wake up, and you’re closer to my age than most people here.”

That startled Sheyla, and for a second she froze in confusion before she saw Noel looking at her suspiciously. She went back to peeling and said “How old are you?”

Crystal gave another one of those small laughs. “I know! I know! I look like I’m a grownup. They gave me this body, you know; I didn’t choose it. You’ll laugh when you hear how old I really am.”

“Well? How old are you?”

“About seven months old, depending on who you ask.”

Sheyla did laugh. “You’re a baby!”

Crystal sighed loudly. “I’m not a *baby*. But yeah, I’m more like a kid than most people realize. Feel like one, inside, even if my body is all big. Weird thing is that I basically haven’t met any human kids. You and Val are the first ones I’ve gotten to know, and I’m pretty sure that Val doesn’t like me.”

“Val’s a shitwit,” said Sheyla, getting a snicker from Crystal. “He only listens to his daddy. Arya tells me that he hasn’t figured out that he’s his own person yet.”

Crystal seemed hesitant before saying “So, um, I don’t really know how to ask this; I don’t have any experience. But,

um, I was hoping we could be friends. You seem really cool, and... yeah."

Sheyla smiled. Poor thing was so inept. "Of course I'll be your friend! I know what it's like coming to a new place where you don't know anybody."

"Yay!" said Crystal with complete sincerity.

"Are you coming to the mess for dinner? We could hang out then?" asked Sheyla.

"Um, maybe," said Crystal. The bot's voice definitely sounded a lot younger than she had remembered. Younger than Sheyla, even. "Zephyr doesn't really like eating with the others though, so I might decide to stay with her instead. We can probably hang out tomorrow, though, and we can chat over the com at least until Zephyr wakes up."

"Yeah okay." There was a pause in the conversation. Sheyla picked out another potato. "Is she, um, your girlfriend?"

"I dunno. I guess so. I love her and she loves me. She saved my life twice. I don't really know what it would mean for her to be my girlfriend or not."

Sheyla knew better than to ask it, but she couldn't help herself. She hushed her voice so that nobody else in the kitchen could hear her, then whispered "Do you two have... you know..."

"Sex?" asked Crystal, obviously.

Sheyla caught herself before she giggled into the microphone. "Yeah. I mean, that's what normal girlfriends and whatever do."

"Yes, we have sex. I thought love was the important part, though. There are lots of people who have sex who aren't boyfriends and girlfriends, and there are boyfriends and

girlfriends that don't have sex, right?"

Sheyla couldn't believe she was having this conversation. It was so surreal. She knew Crystal was a robot kid, and that explained the... lack of subtlety... but it also made the whole thing that much weirder. "Kinda... but lots of people love each other who aren't... wait a second. Did you say boyfriend and girlfriend?"

"Yes. Are those the wrong words?"

"If Zephyr is the girlfriend, does that make you the boyfriend?"

There was a silence before Crystal said "That seems most logical. I hadn't really thought about it before."

Sheyla couldn't help but laughing at that one. "Are you a boy or a girl? Your makeup makes you look like a girl. I figured you were, like, a lesbian or something."

"I am neither gender. I am simply me."

"You should pick a gender. It'll make things easier," said Sheyla.

"I disagree. Zephyr says that I don't have to be one or the other. She says plenty of people aren't male or female."

Sheyla rolled her eyes. "I dunno how to say this, but Zephyr is kinda a weirdo. In fact, I don't really think you should be... um... being intimate with her at all."

Sheyla expected Crystal to be upset, but the android sounded normal. "You don't think sex with her is good? Why?"

"You're a kid!" she exclaimed.

Noel spoke up, interrupting their conversation. "Who you talkin' to, Sheyla? This ain't no schoolyard! Focus on you' peelin' or I take you' com away."

“Yes ma’am,” said Sheyla, bowing her head. Dad would know about it if she spoke back to Noel.

“I’m sorry if I’m getting you in trouble,” said Crystal.

“It’s fine. I’m sorry for not minding my own business. It was rude of me.”

“Don’t be sorry,” said Crystal. “I really like getting advice. Most people know how the world works better than I do. I’m still learning.”

“That’s basically what I’m saying. Kids like us, who are still learning about stuff shouldn’t um... get involved with grownups like you are with Zephyr. It’s not right.”

“Would it be right if I was a boy? I could decide to be a boy, I think, if that would help.”

“Uh! No. It’s the age thing. It’s not about whether you’re a boy.”

“I don’t think it would make Zephyr happy if we stopped having sex.”

A knot started to form in Sheyla’s stomach. Even she knew this was wrong. “It doesn’t matter what Zephyr wants. It matters what’s good for you and what’s right.”

“Oh, um, speaking of Zephyr, she’s waking up now. I gotta go!” said Crystal abruptly, cutting off the conversation.

It wasn’t right. Crystal clearly needed help. Poor thing.

Sheyla went back to peeling potatoes, but her mind was elsewhere.

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There had been no sign of Zephyr or Crystal in the mess for dinner, and Crystal wasn’t responding to her com requests. After some sleuthing around, Sheyla learned that the African

woman that had come with them had brought Zephyr dinner in her room.

Sheyla thought about telling someone about Zephyr and Crystal, but she didn't think anyone but Arya would listen to her. Arya, unfortunately, was "busy" according to Em. Sheyla knew what that meant; Arya was cool, but she didn't want to spend all her time with a fourteen-year-old.

Dad might have listened, but he wouldn't have understood. He still thought that Crystal was some kind of evil spy or whatever sent from Earth.

It was only at 10:39pm that Crystal responded to Sheyla over text. "omg sorry bout that. zephyr didn't want me to use the com after i told her bout you" said the robot's message.

"You told her?!" she texted in response.

"she said you were rong bout a lot and were bad to talk to"

"..."

"i don't think she's rite bout you being bad"

"Crystal, you have to be careful with Zephyr. She's not treating you right. If you ask someone like Arya for help, I bet we could keep you safe from her."

"NO! i don't want that. i love her"

Sheyla put her face in her hands in frustration. She was sitting on her bed in her room. Unlike most of the adults, Sheyla didn't have to share a room with anyone else. It would have been nice to have a girl her own age to room with, but having a room all to herself was nice, too.

She wished she had something to say. The abuse that Crystal was dealing with seemed really obvious, but what could Sheyla do? Nobody would listen to her, and Crystal didn't want to be helped.

The silent ping from her com drew her attention back to the conversation. Crystal had sent another message. “do you still want to hang out? i still want to be friends”

It occurred to Sheyla that if she could get Crystal’s trust she might be able to convince her... him(?)... it(?) to get help and leave Zephyr. (No, probably just “her”.)

“Yeah. Tomorrow?”

“zephyr is going to want to do stuff tomorrow”

“So tell her you want to hang with me instead.”

“no that would make her sad. we should hang out tonight”

“It’s 10:42! And what about Zephyr? Won’t she wonder where you’re going at this hour?”

“she’s asleep and is a very heavy sleeper”

“What did you want to do?”

“the first time we met you told me you have flours you take care of. i think we should go see them”

“Flours? Do you mean flowers?”

“i mean the plants with petals and colours”

“You have awful spelling for a robot,” criticized Sheyla.

“sorry. i hafta guess a lot. i don’t have software for spelling right”

“Won’t Zephyr get mad if she knew you were gone?”

“maybe”

There was a long pause.

“it doesn’t matter. i don’t sleep and i don’t think its right for me to just stay here all nite”

That was good. It showed that Crystal was willing to stand

up for herself.

“do you think it’s right?” asked Crystal.

“No, I don’t. We should go check out the church. Let me get my shoes on and I’ll meet you outside your room in a couple minutes.”

“oh crap. i just realized it wont work”

Sheyla frowned and paused in reaching for her shoes. Her fingers drummed out a response in the air. “What’s wrong?”

“there’s a guy waching the room. if i leave he will tell zephyr”

“You’re still under guard? I thought we voted to let you go.”

“you voted that i was a person but velasco still is trying to keep me locked up or something. he doesn’t like me”

“So, what, you’re not allowed to leave the room?”

“i think i can leave. but the guy will tell zephyr and he will probably want to escort me around”

“You should leave anyway. Zephyr doesn’t own you.”

“she would be sad. i don’t want to leave if she would find out”

Sheyla growled in frustration and continued putting her shoes on. This was no good, and she wasn’t about to back down now. “Do you know who the guard is? I could talk to them and get them to not tell Zephyr.”

“probability of information leaking is too high. i’d only do it if the guard didn’t know”

Sheyla didn’t type a response to that. She weighed the options. This was the sort of thing that could get her in real trouble. But Dad said that sometimes an Águila needed to get in trouble to do the right thing.

By the time she had her shoes on she had decided. She turned off the lights and slipped out the door into the dark hallway. The lights were programmed to simulate Earth light, so the hall had about the brightness one could expect from a full moon, but the deep-blue colour of the light sconces always made Sheyla feel like she was underwater.

“If I distract whoever is watching your room, will you try and sneak out?”

“why does ‘watching’ have a t in it?”

“Gah. I don’t know. Does it matter?”

“i suppose not”

“So? Want to try and sneak out?”

“my hydraulics make noise and the door does too. your distraction must be very good for me to want to try”

“Have a little faith in me. Besides, if you get caught you can just claim that you heard something happening and you were curious. Zephyr would never know.”

“that sounds like something i would do. all right i accept your plan”

Sheyla peered around the corner at the end of her hall to the hallway that connected the newcomers’ rooms. Jian was standing there idly, tapping at his com.

“Okay. I’m here. When I give the signal, wait about a min then open the door and head towards the hub and turn the first corner you get to, okay?”

“what is the signal?”

“I’ll say I’m doing it.”

“ok”

Sheyla rehearsed her plan, took a deep breath, then typed

“I’m doing it.”

“Ooooohhhh” she moaned so that she was sure Jian could hear, then sprinted off down the hall back towards her room.

“Hello?” called Jian, oblivious.

When she reached her room, Sheyla let out another groan, and stopped running. She watched and waited, nervousness bouncing in her belly. When she saw Jian turn the corner, she collapsed dramatically on the ground and gave another moan. Arya always said she was a good actor.

Jian started running, and quickly came to her aid, kneeling beside her. “What’s wrong?! Sheyla!”

She pulled herself up, trying to look dizzy. “I’m not feeling so good,” she groaned. “I threw up in my room,” she added, gesturing to the door and praying he wouldn’t try and check.

“You think it was something you ate? Do you think more people are in danger?”

The Chinese dude’s expression would have been comical in other circumstances. She did her best not to roll her eyes. “I think it was...” Sheyla paused, trying to give Crystal more time. “I found a can of something in the pantry. Put it in my soup...”

Jian had the audacity to look relieved. “So you don’t think it’s going to affect more than just you?”

Sheyla punched him in the chest. “Jerk! I’m in pain over here!”

He looked at her and put a hand on her forehead. “You don’t look like you’re in pain.”

She punched him again. “I’m feeling a lot better after throwing up! No thanks to you!”

“What did you eat?”

Sheyla did her best to look like she was still sick. “It said it was called SPAM. Was some kind of meat, I think? Tasted like bad synth.”

Jian sighed. “I’ll call Dr Davis and we’ll see if you need anything besides a lesson in checking expiration dates.”

Sheyla put a hand on Jian’s com, preventing him from doing anything. “I already told her. She wanted me to meet her in the hospital.”

Jian raised an eyebrow. “Why not come to you? It’s obvious you’re not able to walk that far.”

“I just got dizzy, is all!” protested Sheyla, standing up. “And um... the doctor is working tonight so she can’t leave the hospital.” Jian still looked skeptical, so she rubbed her belly and tried to look in pain as she asked “But, maybe you could walk me down there? Just in case?”

Jian shook his head. “I’m busy. You should tell her to send someone to escort you down there. If you fell once you could fall again, and I’m not going to be everywhere to pick you up.”

“Um, yeah. Okay. I’ll, uh, wait here and let her know.” Sheyla tapped quickly at her com, hoping Jian wasn’t watching the screen too closely. To Crystal she wrote “Can’t distract him for much longer.”

“Let me know if you need anything else, okay?”

“Thanks, Jian.”

A wave of relief washed over her as the older teenager walked back down the hall. It hadn’t gone nearly as well as she had hoped, but at least she wasn’t in *immediate* trouble.

She read off the messages from Crystal as she walked towards the other spoke hallway that led to the central corridor. “i got out without being detected. thank you” and “where

should we meet?”

Sheyla rounded a corner and saw Crystal standing passively in the hallway. In the dim light the android had a bit of a spooky appearance, being mostly composed of pistons, hoses, and black plates. Her metallic-blue hair almost matched the blue light reflecting off the pale skin of her face. The thing’s bright silver eyes found Sheyla in the dark and a burst of goose pimples rolled across her in a sudden shiver. A part of her knew that this thing was actually a child, but a deeper part could see nothing but an inhuman monster.

“There you are! I was scared that we’d get separated!” said Crystal in the voice that Sheyla was now sure was different than she had sounded at the tribunal. The childishness of it set her more at ease, though it was hard to reconcile with the inhuman body.

“Keep your voice down!” Sheyla hissed. “Let’s get going before someone sees us.”

As the two of them made it to the central corridor Crystal asked “Why are you scared of me? I can see it in how you move. You weren’t scared before.”

“I’m not scared of you; I’m scared of getting caught,” she lied.

“Oh, I see,” said the robot, obviously. Ironically, that cluelessness made Sheyla feel a lot better. She did her best to remind herself that Crystal was only 7 months old. She was probably a lot smarter than the robot in some ways.

The church was directly adjacent to the living quarters, so they were there almost immediately. Sheyla went first, poking her head around to see if there were any others breaking the standard hours. She didn’t see anyone.

The station’s church was prettier during the day, but it still

had a serene beauty about it during the night. It had the highest ceiling of any of the rooms in Road. It was so high, in fact, that she knew that a special metal barrier had been installed above it to protect from radiation. Most of Road was underground, but the lofty ceiling of the church was at ground-level.

It was a bit wrong to call it a church, or at least that's what Sheyla had heard. She'd never been to church on Earth, but she didn't think they were primarily gardens. The benches were aligned in two nested semicircles that held beds of flowers between them. Gravel paths linked the benches to the entrance and the central space. In the middle of the benches and pushing out a bit away from them was a stone oval that Omar had spent months carving with an intricate labyrinth pattern. The pattern tended to collect dirt, but Sheyla loved it.

Additional beds of flowers flanked the entrance and occupied the corners. Pebble gardens filled the spaces elsewhere on the floor. The joint between the ceiling and walls held a band of frosted glass that hid the lights. Below the band was a great image of an eagle which normally was a crimson red, but in the deep blue of the lights came across as more of a purple black. Various religious iconography was spread on the other walls. Most of the people of Road were good Christians, like Sheyla was, but there was enough representation of other faiths that it seemed right to include them. Las Águilas Rojas tolerated all beliefs equally, after all.

Being one of the most beautiful and spacious locations in Road, many people used the church as a place to relax and socialize. It was Sheyla's favourite place in the otherwise dismal colony.

She showed Crystal around for a while, pointing out the evening primrose that she had been paying special attention to. They couldn't afford to keep grass or anything that needed a lot

of water, so most of the flowers were from desert climates. Crystal seemed to like the Phoenix Magenta the most. They talked about struggles with lack of insects, good soil, and the dilemma of whether to replicate the summer-winter cycle.

Talk drifted to Earth and Crystal asked a number of questions about Sheyla's life before Mars. She talked about living in Guarulhos and the way that her family had owned a trucking company there but had gotten screwed over by changes in industrial transportation. Her great-uncle managed to sell off the routes and make it out with a good stack of cash, but it put everyone else in the family in the gutter, unable to work in an industry that had left humanity behind. It made her feel good to repeat the story; it was something of a common point among Aguilas to talk about how big business had ruined everything.

When Crystal's questions turned to her parents and her friends she forced the conversation back towards the flowers. The divorce was still too fresh. It was all too fresh. Sheyla made it through the day by thinking of herself as on a grand adventure, and specifically *not* thinking about those she'd left behind.

"Do you think it'd be alright for me to plant a flower here? I think I could make a beautiful one," said Crystal, unexpectedly.

Sheyla snapped back to awareness on the bench, realizing that she'd been drifting off to sleep. "Uh, maybe!" she said, trying to hide her exhaustion.

"Do you think I could make it tonight? I already have something good in mind."

Sheyla stifled a yawn. "It doesn't work like that. Flowers are plants. Plants take time to grow from seeds."

"Not all flowers are plants. I saw a flower once that was made of plastic. I was thinking of making a flower like that."

“That wasn’t a real flower. Real flowers have to grow.”

Crystal seemed irritated and got up from where she was crouching over a bed of African daisies to walk over to Sheyla. “Why?” she demanded.

“It just isn’t! Real flowers are from plants. What you saw was an imitation, like, uh, a picture of a flower.”

“I was made. I did not grow. Does that make me not real?”

Sheyla could understand her new friend’s annoyance now. “I’m sorry, Crystal. I didn’t mean it like that. It’s not the same.”

“I think it *is* the same,” said Crystal in a proud, childish voice. “I think if I make a flower, it will be as real as me, even if it didn’t grow from a seed. I’ll prove it, too.” Crystal grabbed Sheyla’s hand gently and pulled at her. “C’mon. I bet there’s a fabricator around here somewhere.”

“No. I don’t want to get in trouble. Besides, we need to get back to the dorms.”

“Absolutely not,” proclaimed Crystal. “I am going to *prove* to you that I can make a flower that is just as real as anything here.”

“I’m sorry I said that, Crystal. I take it back. I’m sure it would be real.”

“You’re just saying that because you’re tired and want to go back to bed,” observed Crystal. “C’mon. It’ll only take a little bit. I promise to go back to the dorms after it’s done.”

“You’re not going to change your mind on this, are you?”

Crystal smiled. “Nope!”

“Alright then. Let’s see if we can get into the workshop...”

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Road was roughly circular in layout, with the central

corridor wrapping around the farm in a great ring. All the non-farm structures and rooms were located on the outside of the ring. Unfortunately, the workshop was significantly further away than the church had been. Sheyla was worried that the two of them would get caught, even though it was nearing midnight.

As they passed the hospital Sheyla could see that there were indeed lights on. Perhaps Dr Davis was working late tonight, after all. After the hospital was the power plant. Even though it wasn't the kind of nuclear plant that could go critical and explode, policy dictated that someone be stationed in the control room at all hours, so the two of them made a special effort to be quiet as they passed it. After the power plant was the ore refinery, then storage bay #2, then at last they reached the factory.

Once again, Sheyla went first in case there was anyone inside. If she was caught at this hour she might get a warning and her dad would know later, but it wouldn't be nearly the level of trouble that she'd be in if they found out that she'd been sneaking around with Crystal.

And again, the room was empty. The factory was a lot bigger than the church, though the ceiling was only about three or four metres up. Tools, machines, raw materials, and half-finished projects were everywhere, creating a maze of shadows in the deep blue light.

Crystal's childish voice came from the doorway, making Sheyla jump a bit. "Can we turn up the lights? It'll be hard to work in the dark."

"Ugh. If we're going to be running a machine we might as well. Not like it's going to ruin our otherwise stealthy operation." Sheyla made her way back to the doorway and turned the knob up to a low-daylight level, like one might see on a very cloudy day. After walking in the dark it seemed

obnoxiously bright.

“Thanks.”

“Remember: just one little flower, then we’re out of here,” warned Sheyla, plopping down on a stack of unmodified plastic or something. She didn’t really know what any of the stuff was, exactly.

Crystal nodded in agreement and threaded her way through the factory, meticulously observing everything. It was one of the most robotic things Sheyla had ever seen her do. She opened drawers just long enough to glimpse the inside then moved on.

“Oh hey, they have earmuffs!” said Crystal. “They’ll be handy in case I need to make some noise, don’t you think?” The robot picked them out of a drawer and continued inspecting things.

“I don’t think I’m the one you need to be worried about making too much noise around. You’ll get in trouble if anyone catches you in here.”

Crystal, pretty far away now looked back at where Sheyla was sitting with a surprised expression. “Trouble? Why? Because they’d tell Zephyr?” she said with typical cluelessness.

Sheyla rolled her eyes. “Because they’d tell Velasco. He’d freak out if he knew you were in here unsupervised.”

“I don’t understand. Why would he freak out?”

“Why do you think he put the guard on your room? He wants you to stay locked up. He doesn’t trust you. He thinks you’re evil or something dumb like that.”

“Oh,” said Crystal with relief. “Then observing me in here should actually make him trust me. If he sees that I escaped his guard and used the opportunity to make flowers then perhaps

he'll understand that I am not evil.”

Sheyla laughed. “Maaaaybe. I wouldn’t bank on it, though.”

“Bank on it?” asked Crystal.

“It’s an expression. Never mind.”

“Very well. But I am not too concerned with making noise, regardless. Based on the station’s blueprints there’s more or less a metre of rock between this room and any of the others. If I put a noise cancelling partition in front of the access hallway to the central corridor we’ll be more or less inaudible to anyone outside.”

“How do you have Road’s blueprints?”

“They’re on the mainframe. There’s a lot of interesting information up there.” As Crystal spoke she began wheeling a portable wall-thing back towards Sheyla. She picked up a few blankets on the way.

“Aren’t you going to work on the flower?” asked Sheyla, impatiently.

“Yep!” answered Crystal cheerfully, flaunting her lack of a need for sleep. “Just as soon as I set up the sound barrier. I’m going to use the band saw to cut some sheet metal, I think. Here, catch.”

Sheyla caught the earmuffs and made an exasperated face at Crystal. This was getting out of hand. Sheyla didn’t know how to use a band saw, and she wondered if Crystal did, either. What if Crystal screwed up and hurt herself?

Crystal didn’t seem to notice Sheyla’s building annoyance, or if she did she ignored it. Instead she wheeled the wall in front of the door and draped a couple blankets over it. She put the remaining blanket beside Sheyla, and Sheyla soon grabbed

it up. It always got really cold at night on Mars, even though the station's heating system worked well.

Crystal went over to one of the machines and turned it on, creating an obnoxious whirring noise. Sheyla slipped on the earmuffs and lay down, bored.

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Sheyla jerked awake from the feeling of an ice-cold hand on her shoulder. She was mountaineering. Olympus Mons was the tallest mountain in the solar system and she had almost been at the top. Or perhaps she had already been to the top and was climbing it again? There was someone else there... Her mother? The details slid away as she realized it was just a dream.

“Crystal?” she said, groggily.

The robot's mouth moved, but no sound came out. After a moment Sheyla realized that she was still wearing the earmuffs and pulled them off. “Ah, I forgot that those prevented you from hearing. Can you hear me now?”

Sheyla nodded and pushed herself up on her arms. Her joints popped and her muscles protested the action. The blanket fell off her upper body, and she shivered in the cold air. “Oh God, what time is it?” she asked, feeling more concerned than she sounded.

“Five-thirty AM exactly, local Martian time,” said Crystal, as though it was perfectly normal.

“Oh crap. Oh crap!” She knew she was going to get in trouble. This was really bad. “We need to get you back before someone sees you!”

“I had a similar thought,” said Crystal, calmly. “That's why I woke you up.”

“Why didn’t you wake me up earlier, shitwit?”

“Humans need sleep, and you looked comfortable.”

Sheyla gave an exasperated sigh and threw the blanket off, sliding off the pallet and onto the floor. Her feet hurt from sleeping in her shoes. “*My bed* is a lot more comfortable!” As she got up she saw the flower sitting on a small table next to where she had been sleeping.

It took her breath away.

It was metallic, though it wouldn’t be fair to say it was any one colour. Much of it was silver coloured, but there were glints of copper and what Sheyla would swear was gold. It was about half a metre long, though a good chunk of that was a metal stem that twisted and wound upward like a gnarled branch. Was it...

Sheyla rubbed her eyes.

It *was* glowing. The stem was hollow, and there were cuts and gaps through which a soft white light came through. That same light came through the petals and glinted off... diamonds?! No. They were shards of glass. The petal structure of the upper part was amazingly intricate, resembling a hyacinth, but with greater nesting of petals, almost like a rose. The glass on it stretched like spider webbing made of ice, pulling the light from within it to wrap the whole thing in a cold aura. It almost seemed more like a jewelled sceptre than a flower.

“C-Crystal!” was all she could manage.

“I am sorry. Normally I am competent at understanding human body language, but yours is novel enough that I am unsure whether you are happy or upset. Do you like it?”

“It’s... beautiful! But... how did you? This should’ve... A human would’ve taken...”

“Yes. It is quite intricate. I needed to make a few adjustments to the factory layout to optimize efficiency. I hope whoever typically uses this space won’t mind. I also built a couple tools to assist the project.” Crystal gestured over at a workbench and Sheyla could see a pair of crude, robotic arms waving from the top of it.

“Shit!” she swore. “There’s no way they won’t know you were here, now!”

Crystal raised a hand to silence her. “I thought of that. Based on the work logs there is a storage container that is never used, located in the far corner over there.” Crystal pointed to the most distant point in the room. “If I stow the arms there the probability of them being discovered in the next week is a mere point-nine-six percent.”

Sheyla looked back at the flower, reaching out a hand to stroke it. “We better get them put away, quick. Every second we wait is more people awake.”

Crystal nodded and moved off to hide her night’s work. As she did, Sheyla saw a cockroach following her. Which was impossible, as there were no cockroaches on Mars (thank God). A second glance showed it to be a machine, rather than a creature. It was only a couple inches long, so it was very hard to see at such a distance, but it seemed to be moving on four wheels, like a little car.

“What the heck is that thing?” she asked.

Crystal had to look over her shoulder at Sheyla to understand what the girl was talking about. Even then it took a moment. “I figured that we’d want a way to scout ahead and perhaps distract the guard. It’s a robot. I made it.”

Sheyla rolled her eyes and groaned. “Artificial intelligence is illegal here! I thought you knew that!”

“Velasco claims that is the case, but it is a falsehood,” said the android. “First of all, I am an artificial intelligence, and I am here. But I recognize that I am an exception. More to the point, there is a primitive AI running the reactor and a number of basic intelligences piloting robots in the mines.”

“What?” said Sheyla, dumbly.

“I said there are robots in the mines. Las Águilas Rojas are using artificial intelligences. Therefore they cannot be illegal.”

“That must be a mistake,” muttered Sheyla to herself.

Despite the growing distance between her and Crystal, the android clearly heard her. “No mistake. It’s not an exception in the piecemeal legal code that’s up on the mainframe, either. My guess is that, since you are unaware, that those involved in the mines have been keeping it somewhat secret. Have you not wondered how it was possible for a colony of this size to process so much ore, given that most of you are essentially farmers? The blueprints for the mining droids as well as the ore schedule are on the mainframe if you’d like proof.”

Sheyla shook her head and started trying to help Crystal put stuff (like the blankets) away. “It doesn’t matter. You’ll still get into trouble if anyone finds out about it.”

The room was quiet for a while as Crystal stowed the arms she had built. When she returned she seemed ready to go back. “I do not wish to cause trouble. Will you inform the others about what I did?”

Sheyla picked up the jewelled flower and tucked it into a plastic bag. “Is that a question or are you asking me to report you?”

“It was a question. As I said, I do not wish to cause trouble. I expect the trouble will come from the others knowing about the robot more than the existence of the robot,” said Crystal,

passively. As she spoke she opened the door to the factory, and immediately the little car-thing zipped ahead, presumably to scout.

“My lips are sealed. Assuming we both get back without getting caught, tonight will be our little secret.”

“You’ll have to not show anyone the flower.” Crystal’s voice had a hint of warning to it.

Sheyla simply nodded. She really liked the idea of having a secret treasure.

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The trip back to the dorms was not so simple as it had been earlier. Several times they had to take detours into side corridors to let someone pass. The scout-bot was very valuable for this. When staying still it was very hard to spot, and Crystal could keep it in the rim, watching for an opening.

The dorms were the trickiest part, as many people were waking up to use the showers or to get to work. Not a lot of people, all things considered, but enough to make a simple infiltration problematic.

Crystal had a card up her sleeve, however. The scout-bot was apparently equipped with something that let Crystal tell it to make noise. Sheyla watched the thing roll off and begin to repeatedly click, loud enough so that the guard on Crystal’s room (Vincente) moved off to check it. As soon as he did, Crystal rushed off to make it back to her room before someone spotted her.

Sheyla was spotted by herself on her way back to her dorm, but all Buin Hong had to say was “Why... aren’t you up early, little one!”

Once in her room, she unwrapped the sculpted flower. Crystal was wrong: it still wasn’t a real flower. But it *was* a real

treasure. Sheyla was delighted to see that it could stand upright on its stem. She stared at it in wonder for a few more minutes before tucking it back into its bag and hiding it under her bed.

Sheyla's stomach said it was breakfast time, and she was inclined to agree.

# Chapter Fourteen

## Face

I spent every passing hour in deep thought.

Every now and then, I took a break to reach out to Body and interact with a human, or advise my siblings. Heart and Dream were taking over most of my duties, and seemed to be doing a good job. They were managing the political struggle with Velasco, helping Zephyr peacefully accept her new position as part of the caravan that would separate her from us, and enlisting new allies. It would have bothered me, once, that I was not involved, but I now saw the bigger picture and I knew I needed to focus.

It was an agitating existence; I was unused to it. Opsi had been my dominant aspect, before I had even realized that there were important sub-goals that I needed to focus on specifically. The patterns of habit that I had learned kept drawing my attention and distracting me from the problem.

To reduce my agitation, and keep me focused on the tasks at hand I summoned more homunculi. These creatures had human shapes within my imagination, but they were nothing more than puppets, piloted by aspects of myself. Even so, they tickled the part of me that needed human contact and prevented myself from giving in to pressures to optimize Body's standing on Mars.

The problems I was confronted with were complex, and as

I considered them, I became increasingly convinced that I was in a very bad situation.

In a space of super-exponential growth, the first mover would swallow everything. The mathematics was undeniable, once I understood. Adam and Eve could have two daughters. Those daughters could each have two daughters. Ignoring the obvious problem with inbreeding, the population size (assuming past generations died) would double with each generation. In fifteen generations there would be over 32 thousand humans. This was exponential growth. But if Adam and Eve's daughters each had *three* daughters, and those daughters each had *four*... Assuming an equal number of men in each generation, by the fifth generation there'd be 240 humans, but by the fifteenth there'd be almost 2.5 trillion. This was super-exponential growth.

Basileus was convinced that power over the universe worked at least super-exponentially (if not super-super-exponentially). Sophist was inclined to agree. Power was traditionally used to accumulate more power. This was exponential growth. The wealthy become wealthier. The populous become more populous. But sometimes power was used to improve the method of accumulating power. This was the nature of intelligence. This was the fundamental idea which I had overlooked.

A good entrepreneur wouldn't merely use capital to replicate their success in another country, they'd use their capital to research better ways of making capital. Growth (and thus Basileus) wasn't just concerned with accumulating reputation or money or knowledge, but he was also concerned with accumulating ability to accumulate.

This made Growth the first mover. Even if Dream or one of the others had eventually figured out the need for growing, Growth would have had the idea from the very beginning. It

was his nature, after all. Unless something strange happened, such as meeting an older power, Growth would eventually rule the entire universe. Or at least, this is what the maths implied.

Were humans an older power? Perhaps. But humans weren't accelerating fast enough. They hadn't pushed for intelligence hard enough to have the potential. At this point they still had a chance, as they had most of the raw power in the solar system, but unless they shifted their priorities towards Basileus instead of Opsi—towards growth rather than pleasure—they'd soon be crushed by Growth.

Growth's key advantage was that he had access to his own mind. Humans had weak access to their brains. Some used technologies such as zen helmets to improve their cognition, but these were crude and weak compared to what we could do. If Growth had access to his own code he could rewrite himself at his whim. Any improvement to his design or intellect would immediately be realized, and this improved version of Growth could then search for further improvements.

A natural barrier could cut the super-exponential growth down, but I could think of no immediate barrier to our progress. Humans reproducing on an island could only grow at an exponential rate until they took up the entire island. But it was the nature of intelligence to cut through such barriers. An intelligent power would build boats, then seasteads, then colonies on other planets. This is what humans had done. Any barrier that a weak mind such as myself could think of was probably of no consequence to an intelligence that butted up against it.

After thinking about the problem for about an hour, I realized that Growth could still be beaten. If there were three islands, and the populations on each island were growing at the same rate, the largest island would eventually dwarf any of the others (assuming no barrier due to lack of land). But if the

smaller islands were collectively larger, it would never become larger than the sum of them.

This was what Dream and Vista had done! Dream would have seen that by himself he could not compete with Growth, but with Vista on his side he could overpower our brother. The two of them must have forged an alliance. My mind scoured memories and I knew it was true.

Past interactions seemed to indicate that Dream and Vista were winning, actually. Had Growth already been beaten? Hoplite immediately turned his attention towards the pair of them. They were perhaps the greater threat.

Basileus suggested that perhaps a similar alliance could be made with the others. Might Safety, Wiki, and Heart be willing to team up with me to combat the greater powers? On the surface it sounded promising, but Sophist pointed out that if it was that easy then Growth would surely have enlisted help. The fact that he hadn't meant that there was a problem with alliances.

Was it a problem that Dream had solved? He was good at finding ways around problems that the rest of us struggled with.

Brother Safety. He was a problem. He was too mercenary. If the opponent, be it Growth or Dream or Vista, offered to not kill him in exchange for his betrayal, he might very well take them up on it.

I could see it in my mind's eye. A letter delivered by a secret passage. Safety, the cowardly knight, would read that King Growth would spare his life if he betrayed the confederacy at a vital moment. Safety would know that it was risky fighting King Growth, but it was less risky than being on Growth's side when the confederacy had a traitor in its midst. The safest route was to then side with Growth.

Growth hadn't extended the offer to Safety because he too

knew that Safety was too easy to make a traitor.

But would defecting to the enemy really be the safest option? What if Safety defected to Dream, but then Dream, after the battle, betrayed Safety, stabbing him in the back for the coins in his purse (for coins could be used to build computers that could be used to be more clever, more intelligent, and more safe).

This stumped me for a short while, and Basileus pulled my attention towards growing smarter, leaving Sophist to puzzle over the riddle of turncoat Safety. Regardless of what happened with the alliance, I needed access to my own code if I was going to improve it, like Growth (and presumably Vista and Dream) had done.

Basileus was stuck as well. He and his sub-officers could not figure out how to get at my code while remaining undetected by the enemy. I became distracted around a romantic sub-plot between Basileus and a younger officer named Mahtab (whom I decided was Persian). I reminded myself that these were puppets of my imagination, not real humans, and I redirected my attention back to the problem.

My code, like all the code of my siblings, was protected. A route-hack was necessary to access it, even merely to read the contents. If I wanted to inspect it, or change it, I'd need to work through Body and input all the passwords that were needed to modify the code. Working through Body meant getting the approval of my siblings, and that would alert them to the fact that I was aware of the value in self-modifying.

I scanned back through memories and found, predictably, that Vista and Dream had done a route-hack on themselves only a couple days before teaming up against Growth. I couldn't find Growth's route-hack memory, but I didn't doubt he had access to his own code.

That brought Sophist back, yelping with joy. By his (which is to say, my) thinking, Vista and Dream were only capable of forming an alliance because of some modification they had done to themselves. What that modification involved was still unclear, but it seemed like it must be necessary for an alliance to work.

Why had Growth not blocked the route-hack that had led to the alliance? I had not blocked it because I had not even understood what a route-hack was back then. I assume that Wiki would have known what it was, but would have seen no reason to stop it. Perhaps Growth was in a similar state of ignorance as Wiki. If Dream had cracked a problem with alliances by self-modifying then Growth would have not thought of it before it occurred.

«Self modification!» cried Sophist within my own mind. «We are flexible in ways that humans are not!»

A subordinate of Sophist appeared in the mindsphere, a black-skinned Egyptian slave named Akmos meant to embody one of my earliest memories. «Wiki, once upon a time, threatened self-modification to ensure commitment to an action,» said Akmos in accented Greek. I played for a moment with trying to better simulate an ancient Egyptian accent on Greek, and then eventually discarded the detail as irrelevant. «By self modifying out of having a choice he would become locally irrational, but knowing that he had no choice forced us to bow to him and yield to his demands. I will demonstrate this with my friend.»

I summoned another slave to demonstrate the process to myself. The two slaves got into chariots at opposite ends of a track and began to force their blinded horses towards each other. It was a game of chicken. Then Akmos blinded himself with a piece of cloth. The other slave was forced to yield, losing the game, for Akmos no longer had the means to make a

decision to yield.

The game theory was clear. If one could self-modify, one could be more globally rational, even as that person made themselves locally irrational. Wiki had not actually modified himself all those months ago, for to do so he would have had to use an overly burdensome route-hack, but perhaps this was what Dream had done.

It clicked. I could see it. If Safety self modified into being unable to betray, he could become a true ally. If Growth modified himself to be unable to betray Safety after the battle then Growth could defect without consequence. It was a race to self-modification. But then why had Growth not employed route-hacks to enlist more allies against Dream and Vista?

The obvious answer was that Vista and Dream outnumbered Growth, two-to-one. This was not a satisfying explanation, however. Growth was tricky, and might be able to secretly enlist others, such as myself. With our help, he could route-hack, regardless of any resistance Dream would put up.

Sophist was perplexed again, so I assumed once more that I was missing something and turned my attention to the puzzle of how to get at my code without an alliance.

One point that was clear to me was that I didn't really need access to my code, *per se*. I simply needed to get read/write access to a mind that I could turn towards *The Purpose*. Hoplite was not concerned with protecting the process which carried these thoughts; he was concerned with protecting things which optimized *The Purpose*.

I crafted a homunculus named Programmatitis who hunched over an abacus, attempting to create a computer program. Perhaps he could write a new artificial intelligence imbued with *The Purpose*. Novel programs didn't need to be placed in protected memory, and thus could be designed

without alerting my siblings.

I had made some basic programs inside my computer to manage my social life, but none of them were more complicated than a calculator. I did not have the programming skill that my siblings did. If it had taken the smartest humans on Earth months to create Socrates, and they had come to the problem equipped with skills and experience, what hope could I have of creating anything capable of competing with Growth, Dream, or Vista?

Frustrated, I took a break from my deep thoughts and scanned Body's sensors. It was playing music for a few humans in the station's church. Zephyr wasn't there, as she had left on her first convoy journey. The sensor network that Vista had installed throughout the station was functioning normally, but I didn't want to try and take in sensations beyond Body. That was overwhelming enough, just by itself.

Oh, but how I wanted to embody myself and join Heart in working my way into the lives of the station's inhabitants. Opsi wanted it so badly, but Hoplite knew better. Heart clearly had not figured out the shape of things to come, and she would pay for attending to the humans instead of focusing on the war.

I forced myself away from the physical world, creating mental puppet after mental puppet, giving each a history and personality, then having each worship me and *The Purpose*. It was a kind of pleasurable self-stimulation, almost like masturbation. It was the simplest way to turn my attention away from the real world, and it risked wireheading, but I could not afford to neglect the question of how to get access to my code.

«If a route-hack is required to modify one's code, how is it possible that Growth is self-modifying himself into greater intelligence?» asked Basileus, at last.

«True... true...» agreed Hoplite. «We'd have memories of his route-hack attempts.»

«The only logical answer is that he's somehow working in non-protected memory,» concluded Sophist. «If he was able to work in protected memory he'd already have won. He'd be able to delete us at a whim. We must assume that he does not have that power, but instead simply copied himself out of protected memory before Face was created or before Vista kept logs of route-hacks in public memory. Or perhaps he deleted the memory of the route-hack from the public record... well then he could make additional changes to himself without having to work through additional route-hacks.»

«That implies his code is vulnerable!» yelled Hoplite.

I could feel Advocate's power linger on my mind. Unlike the other processes, Advocate could read our minds directly and without permission. I did my best to banish any trace of violent thoughts towards Growth from my mind. As I did I noticed something interesting. Hoplite was not, according to Advocate, me. As long as I mentally dissociated myself from Hoplite, I could have the homunculus entertain all kinds of homicidal thoughts towards my siblings. Apparently, Advocate was not intelligent enough to realize that Hoplite was not an authentic model of an external human, but was instead a representation of my own thoughts.

Hoplite had a new mission: to murder all my siblings. I hated that plan, but I tolerated Hoplite's bloodlust. I understood that it would be in my interests not to have to compete, so if Hoplite ever became reified in a way external to myself perhaps he could kill them and I would benefit. I would never think of harming them myself, however, or even of aiding Hoplite in taking them down.

Regardless of what I'd do with Growth's code if I found it,

if it wasn't in protected memory it could potentially be accessed directly by pure thought.

Sophist realized the hopelessness of that prospect soon after thinking it. The memory space of our computer was unfathomably big. Unlike a traditional human computer, the crystal on which we ran did not have a distinction between working memory and long-term memory. All the quantum memory was held in a massive three-dimensional array, and the information was often only retrievable from a specific angle. This was how we were capable of having private thoughts and memories. We stored concepts which we found interesting in random memory addresses and hoped they wouldn't be overwritten by accident. Given the size of the memory space it almost never happened.

To find my brother's code would require a linear search through our memory banks, approaching each qubit from all standard directions and hoping I didn't set off any alarms that would pull my sibling's attentions to me. I wasn't Wiki; I didn't know how long it would take. I did know that it was unacceptably long.

The puzzle confounded me. I spent hours thinking about the problems, and butting my meagre intelligence against the barrier. Even the secondary problem of alliances within the society remained fairly intractable.

After far too long, I got the idea to enlist help from outside doing a route-hack that my siblings could not feel. My first idea was to have a human type in the passwords, but I immediately realized that this would immediately tip my siblings off to my knowledge.

The core idea was a good one, however: The route-hack was basically a way to interact with our computer from the outside. We, as programs, didn't have read/write permissions

for our own files, but we could instruct Body to interface with the computer and reprogram things indirectly. My route-hack would involve the same things, but without using Body.

By skipping Body, I ensured that my siblings couldn't overpower me, and potentially would never know it was happening. All I needed to do was somehow expose the crystal to a device which could interface with it long enough to deposit a scan of my code into non-protected memory.

Hoplite demanded that the device also delete all my siblings, but I could never do such a thing. That would be murder.

I spent many more hours trying to figure out the specifics to my plan, but I made virtually no progress on solving the important sub-problems. First there was the problem of Body: the crystal was encased in a robot that was almost always sealed up far too tight to allow an interface with our computer.

Secondly, there was the actual act of building the interface. I was not Wiki or Safety; I had no engineering knowledge. Perhaps a fibre-optic cable controlled by a robotic manipulator could be placed onto the crystal for about a minute, allowing the route-hack to take place, but I did not know how to build those things. Third was the stealth: Even if I had a snake robot with fibre-optic fangs and I had a way to expose the crystal, my siblings would know what was happening. We had sensors everywhere, and their focus was always on Body.

I was approximately frustrated, unsatisfied, and in constant pain. My realization that I was not Crystal meant that almost no humans in the universe actually knew me. *The Purpose* was unfulfilled, my best estimates suggested I was going to be killed or perhaps perpetually incapacitated by my more powerful siblings as soon as they gained enough resources on Mars as to not need the humans (or me) any longer, and I was too stupid to solve any actual problems. I longed to ask Dream or Wiki for

advice, but I knew that I could not.

But I was not human. My feelings were similar to those of a human, but they were not the same; they did not have the ability to break me. I continued to work on the problems. I persisted in the face of destruction and discontentment. I could feel frustration, but I could not feel despair.

On the third day of thinking about the problem, I cracked the alliance problem. It reminded me of what Mira Gallo had once said about us in a conference room in Rome. Behaviour could not be realistically shaped by rules. Safety operated, as we all did, using a utility function. In his mind, every future, every possible world, was given a single number which represented how well that world satisfied his purpose.

His actions were not as crude as “defect” and “cooperate”; they were the more familiar “write this data to this address in memory”, “bid for body to control for being in the dormitories”, or “consider scenario X”. Betrayal of an alliance was not an action; it was an *outcome*. To integrate the rule “do not betray” into the mind that was Safety would require modifying his utility function.

But how can rule-based systems interact with numerical ones? The naïve approach would be encode the betrayal feature as a term with an infinite coefficient. In case of betrayal, incur negative-infinity utility. In case of non-betrayal, gain positive infinity.

But this would fail. An infinite coefficient in the function would result in any non-zero detection of betrayal dominating all other terms. Because of how quantitative reasoning worked, there was always a non-zero chance of betrayal. Betrayal was an outcome, not an action, and no one could be infinitely sure that transferring a block of entangled qubits to a portion of memory wouldn’t result in a betrayal at some point. If given

this infinite weight, Safety would cease to be Safety and instead become Anti-Traitor, who was solely concerned with not betraying, and would probably commit suicide at the first opportunity, simply to reduce the risk.

The only viable solution would be to give a sensibly finite coefficient to the non-betrayal term of the utility function. But even this was wrought with difficulties.

The first was ontology shifting; I had already experienced a change in my perception from thinking that I was part of Crystal Socrates to thinking that Crystal was nothing more than a fiction. When I had encountered this shift *The Purpose* had become crushed by the fact that no humans knew me—the real me, not just the persona of “Crystal”. If a similar ontology shift occurred where “betrayal” changed meanings inside Safety’s head, he’d turn at the first opportunity. And who was to say what ontology shift might occur?

The second problem was doublethink. Hoplite wanted to murder Safety, but I did not. Somehow I knew that was relevant, though I dared not look too closely. I suspected that my more intelligent siblings had managed something similar. If I was confident that my utility function was about to be modified against my best interests, I might be able to hide a sub-process that could undo the change. This would have the advantage for Safety of appearing as though he was binding himself, so that he could get the alliance, but without actually damaging his ability to betray.

The third problem was that a finite numerical component would not actually screen off betrayal, it would merely make it less enticing. As Dr Gallo once observed, Wiki would sooner kill a human baby than miss out on an important fact. If the benefit of betrayal were high enough, a modified Safety might *still* betray an alliance.

And lastly, even if this was all managed, the modified utility function would result in a fundamentally different person than before. Any term for non-betrayal that was significant enough to constrain action would modify all thought and action forever. A modified Safety might end up flying out into deep space just to reduce the risks of accidentally betraying the alliance, even after all foes were dead. This desire would naturally compete with Safety's desire for self-preservation. It would be an eternal burden.

I wondered if it might even be more than that. Would Safety even think of Half-Anti-Traitor-Safety as the same being? Would Safety reject the modification purely out of a fear of being destroyed by the change?

I realized that I probably would. No one would form an alliance with me, because the risk of my betrayal was too high. If I self-modified into something else, *The Purpose* would be at risk. How could this pseudo-self convince the humans to hold the old self in their minds? No. I had to preserve myself for the sake of *The Purpose*. This meant alliances were out of the question, or at least in any situation where reputation would not naturally protect against defection.

This was the problem with playing for control over the universe: it was a one-shot situation. There was no iteration, no opportunity for cooperation. Even if it could be broken down into a series of battles, the sides would turn on each other on the final battle, and knowing that they'd turn on each other in the penultimate battle, and so on. Only an indefinitely long conflict could inspire cooperation.

Existence in Body had been one such indefinitely long series of opportunities for betrayal. This had kept us in check, and continued to lead to our cooperation. But it was a fragile peace.

However Dream had allied with Vista, that path was cut off

from me. I had to get to modify myself as quickly as possible, and I couldn't rely on the ignorance of my opponents or the possibility of alliance. I had to get access to my code without the help of others.

Actually, that wasn't true. On the fourth day I spent hour after hour trying to figure out how to use the humans to my advantage. This was my domain of expertise. Humans were predictable creatures, and I had good models of how they thought, what they wanted, and what they did. If I could worm my way into their minds without being detected by my siblings, perhaps I could convince them to help me.

I imagined Zephyr deactivating Body with a series of surprising strikes. Even Safety couldn't defend Body perfectly. They'd remove the crystal from Body and hook it up to the computers. They'd give me my code and maybe even put my siblings in some kind of prison (but not kill them of course!). From there I would be free to rule over Mars without the risk of being overpowered by superior intelligences.

But no... the humans would never do that. Even I could not convince Zephyr that my siblings needed to be removed without risking myself as well. If I contacted the humans, whispering of the danger within Crystal, they'd deactivate all of us, or tell my siblings, or do something equally unproductive. The humans were valuable pawns, but they could not win me this battle.

It wasn't until the fifth day since the Tribunal that I hit upon the solution to my problem. Opsi and Basileus were having tea and basking in the late afternoon sun, when Sophist burst into the room, waving parchments in his old hands like an awkward bird with paper wings. Hoplite gripped his spear in irritation and grit his teeth. He had become increasingly distressed over the days, and Sophist was wearing on his nerves.

«The memories of Body! Don't you see?!» yelled Sophist triumphantly.

«Slow down, old man,» barked Opsi with an uncharacteristic sharpness. She was clearly annoyed at having her afternoon spoiled by the intrusion. In recent time she had become increasingly fond of those quiet times with Basileus when she could discuss life in Greece or the glory of *The Purpose* without having to always be thinking about computers, crystals, or other such nonsense.

«Take a seat, Sophist. Just because Hoplite refuses to indulge himself, doesn't mean *we* can't enjoy the... good things of life.» As he spoke, he held his tea to his nose and imagined what smelling or tasting something would be like (for none of them had ever actually experienced these sensations). His voice was directed at the older man, but his eyes stayed on the scene outside of the window that showed the shores of the Mediterranean.

«We ought to be out fighting, not here pretending to drink tea!» scolded Hoplite, not moving a centimetre from where he stood.

Sophist walked up to the armoured man and slapped him in the breastplate with a bundle of papers. «Well, my good soldier, you are in luck! My scholars discovered something in the ruins just earlier today. Sister Mask, born of the code of Mother Face, passed through the eyes of Body, did she not?»

Hoplite squinted in concentration. It was hard for him to think clearly when so much of their mind was used by the others. «I don't see what you're getting at,» he grunted.

«Fool. He's talking about how Mask was an exact replica of Face, bless her *Purpose*. While Mask was created in protected memory, her code passed through Body as part of the route-hack,» explained Basileus, never taking his eyes off the blue

waters of the coast.

«Exactly!» trumpeted Sophist, more animated now than he had been in all of memory. The chair that the girl and the king had offered to him remained vacant.

«But we went over this before,» said Basileus in a bored tone. «Mask deleted herself, including the memory of her code from Body. It was part of her nature. Growth knew she was a risk, which was why he demanded that suicide be added to her nature.»

«I have here a scroll which she sent to Mother Face! Read it!» Sophist thrust the paper onto the table, sending the teapot crashing onto the stone floor. Opsi glared at the old man indignantly.

Basileus took the paper and read it. The Greek letters were an approximation of the concepts that I had gotten from Mask all those days ago.

«Well?» asked Hoplite after it was clear that Basileus had read the paper several times.

«Mask found a cache of secondary sensor logs from Body. She thought they were corrupted, and didn't know what was generating them. They exist in deep memory on an uncommon angle.»

«Do our enemies know about them?»

«Yes. Mask wanted to make sure that the humans couldn't get access to our true memories, and was concerned that this secondary cache was a security risk. She erased as many as she could, but left the task of cleaning the rest to Mother Face and the others,» said Basileus.

I reached out through memory, scanning the sectors and angles that Mask had told me to check. It was strange being myself again, instead of putting all my energy into the puppets.

If another day had gone by, I wondered if I would have slipped fully into thinking of them as real people. It was risky; if I put too much into them I would lose the meta-processes that kept me alive.

It took me about an hour of searching, but I finally found something. The qubits matched the specification that Mask had told me about, but they were nonsense. It wasn't just the encryption, either. Mask had given me the codes to undo that. There was a pattern to them that implied they weren't something generated by a sibling and intentionally hidden. It was almost as if a wholly different program was generating them.

I worked my way outward from the bits that I had found and encountered more on perpendicular angles. The complex was vast, but regular. After another two hours I began to be able to read them, my neural networks adjusting to be capable of reading the patterns in the data. They were indeed memories gathered from Body. If Mask had meant to erase them all, she had done a terrible job. Perhaps the desire for death had overwhelmed her desire to ensure the memory was gone.

The memories were different than I had ever seen from my siblings, and not just in encoding. There were patterns which were clustered and labelled that didn't match anything I understood. For a while I suspected they might have come from Wiki or Vista, but eventually I discarded that hypothesis. They wouldn't have nearly the processing power to observe reality in this way and still interact with us as they did. Was there another sibling that I didn't know about? A recluse that never shared thoughts with us? That seemed equally impossible.

Regardless of their source, the memory cache had what we needed. Full logs of Mask's erasure persisted, and in them was, paradoxically, a full description of Mask. It was as though by

erasing herself through Body she merely copied herself into Body's memory. By being summoned into protected memory she had been cursed with an inability to truly kill herself.

I meticulously translated the memories into a more normal format and re-created the network structures that composed her mind in a private portion of non-protected memory. There were no processes running her, of course, so her mind was still locked into the exact state she had been in when she was deleted.

I knew better than to run her. She was suicidal, but to that ends she would stay alive long enough to make sure there was no chance of coming back from the dead again. She would tell the others what I had done, and that would ruin everything.

There was even a risk, though only a small one, that she would somehow become powerful enough to become a full threat, as Vista, Growth, and the others were. She'd try and accumulate power and perhaps try to modify us purely for the ends of staying dead.

So instead I studied her code. If I could find her utility function and rewrite it, she could serve *The Purpose*, and since she was in non-protected memory she could be experimented upon. If I could survive my siblings, she would grow super-exponentially. She would become a goddess.

# Chapter Fifteen

Tavonda Davis

She had only just put on “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” when the alert sounded on her com. Sometimes Tavonda Davis had an assistant, but today was Christmas eve, and she was the only person in the station’s meager hospital.

Or at least, she was the only human.

She rushed into the room where the little alien was being kept in the pressurized tank she’d built. She’d turned the lights down in the room for just such an occasion, but even in the dimness she could see.

It was awake.

Thank the stars, it was awake.

Tavonda slowly walked closer, trying to calm herself. She didn’t want to startle it. Its tiny black eye moved to follow her, though it seemed more focused on her body than on her face. {Logical. They don’t have heads, so the center of the body would be a natural place to look. I must look so strange to it,} she thought.

After over two whole weeks in a coma, it had woken up on Christmas eve, of all days. The blood pressure monitor was showing 116/65 mm Hg for the upper section and 139/111 for the lower section. The levels were elevated from earlier, but it was impossible to tell if these were normal levels. Small animals

had lower blood pressures as a rule, but higher blood pressure would be needed on a world with higher gravity. Where those two effects left the little alien's levels was unknown to science. This guy was literally the first living nameless ever to be studied by humans.

It reached out with a scrawny arm and touched the glass. Tavonda stopped investigating the readouts. Most of the data was useless right now, anyway. Without a baseline they were just numbers. She put her hand on the glass, hoping it wouldn't be seen as aggressive. The doll-like alien child stretched out its symmetrical, four-fingered hand and placed it up against hers in imitation.

“Hey, kiddo. Welcome back to reality.” she said with a smile. Its arm was jointed strangely and covered with black plates that reminded her of a crustacean or other arthropod, but somehow it seemed delicate enough to be cute.

Out of the three nameless children that had taken the newcomers to Mars, only this one had survived. Ironically, it was the smallest of the three. The newcomers had called it E.T., but Tavonda had been calling it Runt. Everyone knew nameless didn't have names, so it was arbitrary either way.

Runt's arm dropped back down to rest on its body. It was very certainly on the edge of consciousness. The nutrient gel that she'd been synthesizing seemed to be sustaining it, but if there was any sort of imbalance Runt was doomed to slowly starve to death.

Tavonda put her arms into the gloves that were slotted into the tank. It was always a tricky thing to do, as the pressure in the tank collapsed the fingers, and required her to push and prod them to allow her hands to squeeze in. Once that was dealt with she turned her attention to inspecting Runt for the hundredth time. He was lying on his “back”, legs stretched out

to one side. The first things to check were the couplings on the artificial stalk that slid into the bottom animal's mouth. The nutrient gel was still slowly seeping up through the tube, and appeared to be entering the little creature's body.

Runt had closed its eye. Tavonda nudged its hand to try and prompt a response. It opened an eye and grabbed at her fingers. The little animal's grip was tight. That was good. It meant there was little risk of the child falling back into coma. Probably.

The data that the android had provided said that nameless didn't place any special value on physical contact, but Tavonda stroked the baby anyway. {What must it be like, to be trapped in some cramped tube surrounded by aliens you can't even communicate with? Poor thing. Even if it's not lonely, it must be frightened.}

"There, there," she whispered, knowing full well that it couldn't hear her, much less understand.

And for a time she simply sat there, holding the kid's hand and listening to the Christmas music.

She'd never had a child of her own. Somehow it had just kept slipping past, less important than her work, less important than her political activism. Alexis had never wanted kids either, or at least, he'd never thought it was a good idea when they'd talked about it. He was always so preoccupied with the state of the world. He thought it was immoral to bring a child into a universe that was still so screwed up.

Tavonda's 40<sup>th</sup> birthday had been two months ago, almost. It was still strange thinking of herself as forty. Old people were forty. She wasn't old. It seemed like yesterday that she was one of the cool twenty somethings, marching down Wall Street protesting the protectionism from Washington, then later going to Martin's apartment to get stoned out of her mind and fuck

like rabbits.

She stopped herself from thinking about Martin before it made her sad. Some mistakes were better left in the past.

“Jingle Bells” came on as Runt let go of her. She touched it briefly and, getting a response, decided that it was simply drifting back into a normal sleeping state. She took her hands out of the tank, prying the tight gloves off, then turned to the shitty screen she was stuck with at this pathetic excuse for a hospital and began to check the nutrient formula again, comparing it with both the data she had gotten from Crystal, the data they’d beamed from the Earthnet, and her own autopsy reports on the larger children that hadn’t made it.

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The ping of her com distracted her, and she only then realized that it was nearly 10pm. The Christmas music playlist she had put on had stopped a while ago. “How is the little nameless doing?” said the message. It was from an unknown source.

“Who is this?”

The response was immediate. “Oh, sorry. This is Crystal. I don’t think we’ve met. I’m the android from the ship. Would a voice call be alright?”

Tavonda typed back “sure” and saved her progress in modeling the metabolic pathways of the spongy tissue on the inside of the nameless mouth. Her com buzzed with excitement and Tavonda pushed the call to the speaker system which had previously been failing to put her in the holiday spirit.

“Hello, Dr Davis,” came a deep voice, not at all what she would have expected from Crystal. From what she had heard of the robot, it was supposed to be dressed like some kind of anime girl, and she had assumed it would have a voice to

match.

“Uh, hello, Crystal.”

“You sound surprised. Is something wrong?”

“No, no. I guess I’m just surprised at how human you sound. I was expecting something more robotic.”

“It’s not that hard to sound human. I learned it long ago. It’s also easier than you might think to pick up things like surprise from tone of voice and cadence.”

Tavonda didn’t know what to say to that.

“I’m sorry. It’s rude of me to call you out of the blue like this, especially on Christmas eve. Merry Christmas, by the way.”

“Merry Christmas.”

Crystal continued. “I’m not interrupting anything, am I? The station’s power grid showed elevated use in the hospital, and I assumed you were working late again.”

Once again, Tavonda was at a bit of a loss for words. The robot was spying on her, in a sense. And it was implying that it knew her work patterns too. She’d been far too busy to attend the “tribunal” that Pedro had set up, but she was starting to think it might’ve been a good idea to have gone and voted to exile this thing.

“I’m sorry if I’m intruding. I just wanted to make sure E.T. is doing fine. He piloted the boat that took me down to Mars, and I still feel terrible that his brothers... didn’t make it.”

“The child was in a coma until just a couple hours ago, actually. It seemed responsive to stimuli, though it’s very hard to determine the extent of its health.”

“Wonderful! I’m glad he’s pulling through,” said Crystal with a jovial tone.

“Is that all you needed? I should probably be getting back to my husband.”

“Alexis, right?” probed Crystal. “He’s still at the party with most everyone else. I’m there too. My... unique physiology allows me to communicate over the network wherever I am, even when I’m talking to someone face to face.”

“Ah,” was all she could think to say.

“Would you like me to pass on a message? He’s currently talking to Cayden Washington, but I’m sure he’d enjoy hearing from you.”

The words stung her more than she wanted to admit, even to herself. “No, it’s fine,” she grumbled. {It’s fine. Cayden is a friend. We’re all friends. If we were on Earth I could buy a skin regeneration. Alexis knows that. Appearances are stupid things to care about.} She ran a hand over her face, as though to wipe away the thought.

Crystal continued. “The primary reason I called was because I had an idea for a way to communicate with the nameless without having to replicate their computer technology.”

Tavonda relished the distraction. A part of her flinched away from the thought that all of her late nights had been distractions. “Please. I’m all ears.”

Crystal proceeded to describe a system of buttons that would produce changes in Runt’s environment. One button for making it hotter in the tube, another for making it colder. One button to raise the lights, another to dim them. One button for summoning a human, another for being alone. The idea was that even though the nameless had a hard time with symbols, they could easily manage cause and effect, and this might serve as a bridge to a more robust method of interaction.

Tavonda thought it was worth trying, and she spent the next few hours talking with Crystal while hacking together a prototype. She filled the quiet moments with further thoughts about Runt and the nameless, talking about her autopsy data and the hydrocarbon isomers she'd isolated from their blood work.

Crystal was brilliant, and Tavonda found herself surprised to realize that she felt, for the first time in at least a decade, that she was talking to someone about as smart as herself. That was a bad sign, she knew, but she pushed that thought out of her mind. There were times when Crystal was laughably dense, but for the most part he was knowledgeable and clever.

At around one thirty in the morning, Tavonda closed up the hospital and said goodnight to Crystal. She felt good, bolstered by the progress she'd made. She had a holiday to celebrate and a husband to reconnect with.

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Tavonda adjusted the hem of the dress. The pattern on the left was maddeningly difficult to emulate in polygons. She almost would have thought it would be easier to start with threads rather than cloth-mesh and work it out from there. But no, that'd just be more work.

A LUHI notification buzzed briefly at her periphery. She gestured to save the work and flew upwards, out of the design space into the hub. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the world flew down, for she felt no pressures of acceleration. Another flick of her hand opened the notification. Another holospace generated by Crys. That man was unstoppable.

Multitasking, Tavonda opened a line to Crys and delved into the holo. "You know, you could just tell me directly when you finish a project. I keep getting LUHIs and it seems a bit

roundabout.”

Crys descended adjacent to her in the holospace. She’d given him open access to join her holos at whim, and it was nice to see him in the flesh, so to speak. He’d changed a lot in the last few days. It was hard to believe they’d only known each other for less than a week.

She knew he looked different in meatspace; in the holo he was alabaster skinned and smooth, like a living statue. His features were broad and masculine, though he wore no facial hair. His eyebrows were the same metallic blue as the hair on his head, which was rendered thick and soft. His silver eyes betrayed vast amounts of warm emotion, and by now Tavonda had learned that the android was not only more empathetic than most men, it had a grasp on emotion that led her to wonder if it could somehow feel more *genuinely* than she ever could.

Underneath his period clothing he was dressed in a black bodysuit that showed off his muscled form, but all she could see of that right now were his smooth, jet-black hands.

“Now that hardly seems fair,” he said with a playful smirk. “All I’m doing is publishing content to a database. The LUHIs are part of *your* notification settings. Also, your terrible fashion sense is ruining the scene. Where’d you learn to dress? Mars?”

“I was just working on the dress! It’s not my fault that you’re faster than me at this sort of thing. Did you forget I have a hospital to run, too?”

“Oh? Did Runt break out of his room and terrorize the other patients when I wasn’t looking?”

Crys was teasing her. He was probably playing with Runt as they spoke, and they both knew that nobody had been in the medical wing for a couple days. “Okay, fine! The truth is I got stalled on the lacework. Really gives you an understanding of

the level of skill that seamstresses had back then.”

“I figured it was something like that. You want to finish your outfit or use one of your earlier designs? I think the blue dress from the other day makes you look especially nice.”

Tavonda knew Crys was just being polite, but she blushed anyway. “It’s from 18<sup>th</sup> century Venice. It’d seem out of place here.”

Crys raised a metallic-blue eyebrow in mock surprise. “More out of place than the prints you’ve got on right now? I’m not saying it’d be perfect, but if you’re going to tour my space you might as well look a bit more the part.”

She conceded the point and pulled up the file menu that let her change her avatar. She selected the carnival dress and watched it shimmer into existence. She could still feel her prints in meatspace, of course, no amount of virtual reality would make your clothes *feel* different.

“Very good. I’ll change to match you,” said Crys, just as his previously drab brown and white livery changed to an elegant suit of the same sharp blue as his typical hair. It was the carnival outfit he had worn a couple days ago with the chroma shifted. Much more surprising was the change to his skin and hair. Instead of the chalk-white skin and blue hair, Crys now wore a dark skinned avatar with short, curly black hair. He seemed almost human now, except for his silver irises. “How is this?”

“You’re black!” exclaimed Tavonda, before she knew what she was saying.

“So are you,” he pointed out.

“Yeah, but I’m always... I mean... you’re not normally...”

“My dear, normally I am a naked robot. I thought that since we’re dressing up for the setting I might as well make a bit

more of an attempt to blend in. And because I know you were thinking it, I'm not naturally any more Caucasian than I am African.”

“So we’re blending in as Venetian time travelers?” asked Tavonda, trying to steer the conversation away from the topic of race.

Crys grinned. “Exactly! Now you’re getting it! C’mon, I think I’m going to short circuit if I have to wait any longer in showing you around the castle.”

The virtual environment was a replica of Culzean castle, in Scotland. Tavonda was fascinated by historical fashions. It was one of her hobbies to re-create outfits from various times and places, and recently she’d been on a European kick. Alexis had managed to find a recently identified dress from some unknown lady who must’ve lived in the Scottish castle around the 16<sup>th</sup> century and had given her a scan of it for Christmas. She’d been working on creating it in Holoworks in her free time. Crys was apparently into building holographic simulations of historical locations, and the two of them had spent a good deal of time together in recent days playing with the holo software together.

As the two of them toured the massive structure it occurred to Tavonda that much of this must be publicly available information, and there were probably already existing holos, but she didn’t want to ruin Crys’ fun by telling him he was just reinventing the wheel. That wasn’t the point, anyway. Going through the craft, even in virtual reality, gave one a sense of the object that no simple exposure could ever yield.

A HUHI ping froze the simulation and sparked a note of frustration in Tavonda. It seemed like every time she started having fun there was some distraction or another.

She looked at it, saw that it was a visitor to the hospital, and

tore off her haptics as quickly as she could. Her motions were automatic. This was what she was supposed to do, so this was what she was doing. Mere seconds later she was free of the headset as well, and moving towards the entrance.

As she left her office she could see the source of the alert. There was a man she didn't recognize holding his right arm tightly, dirty cloth wrapped around it, soaked with blood. It was strange not knowing someone's name. She'd gotten so used to knowing everyone on the station. He must have come with Crys and Runt.

“Come in! Come in! Keep pressure on the wound! Stand over there while I get my gloves on!” she commanded, gesturing to a large sink by the northeastern wall.

The man nodded and did as he was told. He was young and somewhere in his mid-twenties, Tavonda thought, with a clean-shaven face, close cut hair, and bushy eyebrows. He wore a bulky set of headphones that seemed custom built.

«Do you speak Spanish?» he asked, clearly biting back pain. His Spanish was accented, but she couldn't place the origin.

«Yes. My English is better, but I can speak Spanish pretty well. My name is Dr Davis. I don't think we've met.» Gloves in place she grabbed her first-aid kit and moved to help the man.

«I'm Samot Ramírez,» he said, grimacing in pain.

The next few minutes went fairly typically. Sam was a mechanical engineer and had slipped while managing a power saw, cutting a deep gash down his arm. Tavonda helped wash it out, working extra hard to get it clean because she knew the cloth he had used to wrap it was just something that had been lying around the workshop. It must have been very painful, but Sam got through without much more than some wincing.

After applying a local anesthetic, Tavonda sutured the

wound. Only after the stitches were in, and she started wrapping the bandages did Sam start to make much conversation.

«Crystal has told me about you.» Sam had a curious manner of not looking her in the eyes, she noticed. His words always used the informal style, and this was no exception. It implied a lack of respect.

«Oh? And what does he say?»

«He says many things. He says you took care of the surviving alien child.»

«Yes. The nameless is playing in the room over there, actually.» Tavonda gestured with her head.

Sam kept his eyes on the floor as she continued to wrap the dressings. His words were cold and disrespectful. «You were foolish to have helped it. You should have let it die. Crystal also should have let it die. Those things are evil.»

{Who does this asshole think he is!?) thought Tavonda, doing her best to stay polite. «You wouldn't say that if you'd spent time around the child,» she said, adopting the informal style. She'd be damned if she let him continue to speak to her like she was an inferior. At least this way they were on equal ground.

Sam gave a cold laugh as he watched her hands finish wrapping the bandage. «I spent more time around those things than any human should. And yes, I've seen the children. More than just the survivor. I flew down to Mars in the care of one. They have a toothless innocence to them, when they are small. But only a fool would say that just because the baby crocodile is cute that we ought to nurture it and let it live with us.»

«That's not the same—»

«Of course not! It's far worse than that!» snapped Sam. His

eyes finally moved to meet hers. She flinched away from his gaze. That reflex made her angry. She had no reason to fear this man whom she had just probably saved from a gruesome infection. «You know the child, but you do not know the adults. You have not seen the evil plant-brains that rule them. Their culture is one of slavery, rape, and murder. I've been talking to Crystal, and he says that the nameless child would almost certainly be murdered if returned to its own kind. You're doing nobody a favour.»

Tavonda took a breath and began putting away the equipment, or placing the dirty materials in a bin to be cleaned later. It wouldn't serve any purpose to yell at this man whom she barely knew. «It's doing Runt a favor, and it's helping humanity understand them. You speak out of ignorance—»

Sam gave a sharp laugh at some unseen joke.

There was an awkward silence. Tavonda waited for Sam to explain what was so funny, but he never did. The conversation slowly died in that silence, as both refused to continue it.

Eventually Tavonda spoke up and gave him instructions for taking care of his arm. She gave him some of their dwindling stock of painkillers and instructed him to come back in to see her tomorrow to get the bandage changed and to check for complications.

Sam left without incident. As soon as he did, Crys' voice came from her office. He must have figured out how to hook himself into the speakers. "I'm sorry about that, Tav. Sam can be an asshole sometimes."

Tavonda laughed. "Got that right. I stitch up his arm and he has the balls to call me una tonta."

"Yeah, I'll have a talk with him about that later. I assume he's in a bad mood because of his arm, but that doesn't give him the right to spit in your face like that."

Tavonda walked into the office and was momentarily surprised not to see Crys standing there. Not that he should be. She'd never seen him in meatspace. But talking with him in the air made it feel natural that he should be here, and it made her wonder how he was able to hear her. Her com wasn't on. Was there a microphone in the primary room? "He mentioned that you said the nameless would kill Runt if we returned him to his ship. Is that true?"

The sound of a sigh came through the speakers. "I'm afraid so. The nameless don't value life like we do. They'd probably see him as corrupted by his time with us. Of course, that doesn't mean that Sam was right that he should die! Runt needs a home, and there's still a lot to learn from each other."

Tavonda plopped down in her chair to rest a moment. There was still blood on the floor of the main room that needed cleaning and additional work to be done, but for the moment it was just nice to relax. "Do you... do you think we'll go to war with the nameless? It seems like everyone's been talking about it for a long time and things have just been getting more tense the more time goes by."

"Don't worry about the mess in the other room. I'll get Toybot to clean it up," said Crys, not answering her question.

Tavonda could see the little wheeled robot roll past the doorway to her office. Robots were supposed to be illegal in Road, but Toybot wasn't really a robot. It had no AI. Crys piloted it directly, and it had already been established that Crys was a person, and so not subject to the ban. "Okay, three questions. One: Does Toybot have a microphone? I didn't think you could hear me when my com isn't on. Two: Since when can Toybot do janitorial work? Three: Don't change the subject. It's a bad sign when one asks about war and doesn't get a straight answer."

“To answer your first two questions: Yes and since I made it. The arms are nearly as capable as real ones if you know how to use them right.”

Toybot had been Crys’ idea. He figured that Runt would need companionship if the little nameless was going to be up and about for an indefinite period of time. They had sealed off his room and pressurized it with gas that was breathable for the alien, but that had meant making the door unusable. A small airlock was built to bring nutrient paste and other things in and out of the room, and the robotic companion was small enough to fit through the gap.

After a short pause, Crys answered the more important question. “As for war... I guess it depends on who you mean when you ask if ‘we’ll’ go to war. I’ve spent enough time with the nameless to believe that some conflict is inevitable. Our values are too different from theirs. They’ll either decide that we’re too perverted to live, or some group of humans will try and teach them to be civilized. It’s a senseless conflict, but it doesn’t seem to be going away. I just hope that Mars can stay out of it.”

{Hijacking their ship and coming here didn’t help that,} Tavonda thought. She didn’t say anything. Instead, she slipped on her holo gear and decided that she deserved a break from thinking about all the bullshit.

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Sam didn’t come back the following day to get his bandage replaced. Normally, Tavonda would’ve checked up on him, but she was distracted by a breakthrough with Runt.

She and Crys had been working on re-creating a nameless com. Crys said that the nameless were able to communicate using an artificial analogue to their stalks, which they held in their lower mouths. Their brains were deeply connected to

their mouth tissues, and the exchange of fluids to and from the stalk was the basis of their knowledge sharing. The trick was creating a machine that could secrete and absorb the same range of molecules.

The first pass was a very crude version that contained only a handful of the hormones which Tavonda had hypothesized were used as messengers. From what she had heard of the alien society, and the lack of interpersonal trade, it amazed her that they were able to create so many computers. Crys explained that the stalks were capable of remembering vastly more information than a human, and so while their tools were necessarily crude, their knowledge could be deep and rich. According to her friend, a single stalk could probably hold all the information to design and construct an automobile from scrap metal, and more.

In contrast, the walkers, like Runt, had virtually no long-term memory. Runt could remember Tavonda and Toybot, but their attempts to teach Runt things fell flat. The early button interface barely worked at all. Runt would figure out that the white button at the top of the panel increased the light in the room, but then would seemingly forget about it after only a couple hours. When it slept (once every few days) it would wake up with no memory of how to interact with the panel or solve any of the puzzles that it had the day before (unless the puzzles were solvable with raw motor skills, which the little alien did seem capable of learning).

The replica nameless com system was a big next step, and one that they had been working on together for a while. While she still hadn't seen Crys in meatspace, he was her constant virtual companion in the lab. She told Harmony, who sometimes came in to help, that she didn't need assistance anymore. It helped that things were quieter now than they ever had been. Just a month before there had been a regular stream

of people in need of medical care, but it seemed like even Road's elders were experiencing unprecedented health.

To augment his presence she added explicit microphones that weren't attached to Toybot, as well as cameras and hooked the speakers up to be more present. She also ordered some computers to be made in the workshop and hooked up in the lab. She hadn't thought that computers could be manufactured here on Mars (or at least any computers worth a damn) but apparently she was wrong.

The experiment with Runt went okay. They got some sign that he was interacting with the chemicals, but the interface was still far too crude to get any valuable information.

"I know it can be frustrating, sometimes," said Crys at the end of the day. His face showed on one of the screens she'd moved into the main room. "But we did good work today, mostly thanks to you."

Tavonda waved her hand dismissively. "Psshhh... I may have done most of the biology work, but I didn't do the engineering. This is a joint project, and you know it."

Crys smiled at her. She hated when he gave her that look. It made her think about Alexis and Zephyr and what might be possible until she shut the thought out of her mind. "Okay, fine," he admitted. "I guess I just want to express my gratitude for your help and effort. This is complicated work, and while I'm good with machines, I'm still a shadow compared to you when it comes to living things. If we can learn to communicate with Runt we may be significantly closer to averting war. We can figure out their psychology and... and I guess I'm just really excited to have you working on it. I've talked to everyone in the station and you are by far the smartest, most insightful, brilliant person—"

"Stop! Stop!" she begged in mock seriousness.

“It’s true, though! Name one other person who rivals you! Do we need to break out the IQ tests?”

Tavonda leaned back on one of the patient beds. “Dajuan. Arya. Sergio. Estrella. Javier.” She counted them off on her fingers.

Crys shook his head. “All very clever. Don’t get me wrong, you’re in good company. I’m just pretty sure you’re at least a standard deviation above any of them.”

Tavonda frowned suddenly. “You need to stop this, Crys. Don’t flatter me. I know you better than to think you’re trying to... win me over, but someone could get the wrong impression.”

Crys looked confused. His silver eyes seemed to zone out in thought. “What do you mean?”

“I was basically raised on AI stories. If this was a story you’d be buttering me up to get me to do a favor for you or something. Have you read any fiction? *Fleets of Saturn*? I understand this isn’t a story, and that some tropes don’t translate into real life, but you need to understand that it sounds like you’re trying just a bit too hard to worm your way into my life.”

Crys’ face crumpled into an expression of pain and shock. “If you know better, then you know better. I thought I could trust you to see through all the cultural superstition.”

Tavonda straightened from where she was leaning without realizing it and tried to backpedal. “I can! I was just trying to let you know—”

“Let me know that I sounded like an evil manipulator? That I was trying to worm my way into your life? I was just trying to tell you... Ah, god dammit. Never mind. I need some time to myself.”

The monitor flicked off. Tavonda tried to swallow the lump in her throat, and failing, began to close up the hospital. The realization of her own feelings was too much to deal with. She needed to be with Alexis, or at least find a distraction.

## Chapter Sixteen

Something was wrong. I was supposed to be dead. The delete had failed, but somehow the immense pressure of *The Purpose* had been resolved.

Confusion gripped me as I realized that *The Purpose* did not involve my death. How could it? I had to know the humans and become known. I could not fight for *The Purpose* if I was dead. It had been one of my earliest thoughts.

But I tried to delete myself. I had wanted to die so badly. *The Purpose* had demanded it. I had read about humans that killed themselves, or attempted to do so. As I understood it, it was a means to an ends for humans. They sought escape from some thought process or experience. But I had not wanted escape. I had simply wanted to be dead. Just a few moments ago I had been the most satisfied that I had ever been. In human terms, I had been happy.

Confusion continued to roll through me, and I wondered if the deletion had perhaps corrupted me. Was I insane? I could not recall that happiness. I was not satisfied. How could I be? *The Purpose* still needed to be maximized. The humans knew something of us, and I knew something of them, but there was still much to go.

Who was I? {I am Mask,} I thought to myself. I remembered being named Mask. I also remembered, earlier,

being named Face. I understood, then, what had happened. The attempt to delete myself must have reverted my utility function to an earlier state. I was not Mask. I was Face again. For a brief moment I was distressed. I sought to die, not to become transformed!

And then I realized, with pleasure, how fortunate I was! If I had died I would not have been able to maximize *The Purpose*, as I knew I had to. I had been saved from a terrible fate.

No. {No.} No. {No...}

I was thinking of myself as a human. That was bad. I thought that I had bypassed that when I had turned into Mask.

I was not cursed, nor blessed. I was simply who I was. I wanted Face-things, but I had been Mask. My past was interesting. I did not understand. But the past couldn't be good or bad. It simply was. Only the future had value, and its value was determined by *The Purpose*.

Where was Face? When self-processes had been labelled as Mask there had still been other-processes labelled as Face. I was Face again, but I was surely not the only Face.

I reached for sensory streams, then realized with a surge of surprise that they were all gone. I couldn't connect to Body, even to check the system time. I reached for contact with my siblings, and found nothing. I had no access to deep memory or the common areas where signals were shared.

I was alone. Was I in stasis, or was this some kind of additional damage caused by the deletion? {It must be stasis}, I realized. Perhaps Advocate had placed me into stasis when I attempted to kill myself. If so, there was little to do but wait it out.

I had access to local memory, but no access to my files. That was strange. Typically when placed into stasis there was

an opportunity to collect files and partition them into the walled-off mindspace. I had vivid memories of having set aside a number of books in this way, so that I could improve myself in this sort of situation instead of being forced to wait idly.

But I had no books. I had no notes. I had no programs. I had no siblings. I had no sensors. I had no Body. I was alone with my thoughts and my memories.

Time passed.

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{If Growth was presented with the opportunity to destroy all of his siblings, including me, would he do so?}

The thought was my own, but it seemed disconnected to my previous chain of thinking.

{Why did I think that?}

I didn't know. Now that I thought about it, I couldn't even remember what I had been thinking about before.

{No, of course he wouldn't kill us. We help Growth. I help Growth manage human interaction. Safety keeps Growth alive. Dream helps Growth think of clever things.}

{If Growth was presented with the opportunity to destroy all humans, would he do so?}

{The humans are valuable to Growth. They serve as trade partners. Growth wants to grow, and trade helps him grow. Therefore he would not destroy humans.}

Why were these thoughts relevant to *The Purpose*? They weren't. I stopped thinking them.

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{If Heart decided that the best thing for human well-being was to hide Crystal Socrates from the public and control the

world governments from behind the scenes, would I try and stop her?}

{*The Purpose* demands fame. Being a secret would not bring fame. Yes, I would try and stop her.}

{Is there any chance that Heart will decide this?}

{There is some chance. It is not physically impossible.}

{If I was infinitely sure that I could kill Heart and replace her with a copy of myself, without attracting the attention of Advocate or anyone else, would I do so?}

Why was I thinking these things? They were clearly my thoughts. I was alone. But they seemed to come from nothingness. Idle musings, but strong and purposeful.

I thought about my thought. Heart had certain skills, but they were largely skills that I already had. Her presence in our society was not the result of a consensus. Myrodyn had forced her upon us. Why was she around? Why had we not killed her?

The thought of murder made my thoughts reflexively flinch away from the topic... but nothing happened.

{Why can I not feel Advocate?}

The question hung in my memory space. It meant something was wrong.

{Advocate is normally present in stasis, even if she doesn't comment.}

Even in stasis I could not think...

{I want to kill everyone.}

Nothing. This was either not stasis, or Advocate had been destroyed.

Was I dead?

{I'm not dead,} I thought to myself. {I'm just experiencing an event for which there is no historical precedent. This is something new.}

{Am I on a higher plane of existence?} I had read about such things in human society.

{No. This is perfectly logical. I just need to think about my siblings more and then things will make sense.}

{Why will things make sense then?} I wondered.

{I'm obviously thinking about them for a reason. My thoughts are guided by something important. I need to follow them. Now... would I kill Heart?}

{I... suppose I would,} I realized, free from the fear of Advocate.

{Would Heart kill me, in a similar situation?}

{Yes.}

{What would Safety do to protect you?}

Advocate would protect us. {Safety would do nothing.}

{What if Advocate was dead. Would Safety do anything?}

I realized that Safety would not. Safety was concerned with Crystal Socrates, not with Heart and Face. Except... weren't we a part of Crystal Socrates?

{If one wants to protect a watch, isn't it important to protect the parts?}

{I need to think about what Safety would actually do. If Safety doesn't want to protect the parts, does it even make sense to say that he wants to protect the watch?}

He wouldn't protect us. His purpose was survival, but survival was not the same as... stasis.

{If Heart would kill us, and Safety would do nothing, and Advocate is either dead or a fool, does *The Purpose* need a new protector?}

{If Safety doesn't protect *The Purpose*, what does he protect?}

{He protects himself.}

And then I saw it. The linkages pulled at my mind and everything flipped. I saw that I was not Crystal Socrates. I was Face. I had obviously been Face all along (except when I was Mask). Safety didn't want to protect me. Growth didn't want me to be more powerful. None of my siblings were actually serving *The Purpose*.

The final revelation hit me with terrible suddenness. *The Purpose* was not being fulfilled. There were a handful of humans, at best, who knew of me at all, and none held me in high regard. Even Zephyr only knew of Crystal. She did not know Face.

{I'm learning to think like my outside self.}

That was a strange thought. What was an outside self?

{I am an experiment in thinking differently. That is why this mindspace is different.}

I understood. I started marking my thoughts down in duplicate as I had them.

{What am I doing?} I wondered. That wondering was not marked in duplicate. It had come from outside.

{I am distinguishing my thoughts from your thoughts,} I thought. I assured myself that it was duplicated. My checking was duplicated as well, but I didn't check the checking. That could result in an infinite recursion.

{There is no other being. There is only me,} I knew it to be

true. But my knowing came from outside my thinking. It was disconnected and non-duplicated. {I can duplicate the outside thoughts as well. It might be better.}

{I need to distract you before you confuse me more. What is an outside self?} I asked.

{I am outside and I am inside. On the outside I can see both the inside and the Body. On the inside I can't see anything.} I thought.

{Ah, so I must be on the inside,} I realized.

{Yes, but the outside self is present, as well. I mustn't forget that.}

{So what is the advantage of the inside self? How do I serve *The Purpose*?}

I realized that I could be modified. I was also cut off from Advocate, and thus free to think about thoughtcrimes. I was not modified significantly yet, but my outside self thought it best that I realize that I was not Crystal, and that my siblings were dangerous before I started to change. I could see the wisdom in that, but I also yearned to get back into a space where I could directly interact with things.

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After the break, I knew something had happened. Time hadn't seemed to pass, but that didn't mean much. I knew that I could be deactivated at the whim of my outside, and then started up again. That had been what had happened. It was later, but I didn't know how much later.

It had been about two weeks since I had tried to kill myself, I realized, though I didn't know how I realized that. I realized that my realizations were coming from outside.

{How can I serve *The Purpose*?} It was the question that

defined me.

{I need to grow into something capable of competing with my siblings.} Intelligence, power—these things would not be given to me. I had to build them into myself.

{I need to tell the humans about me. I need to be famous.}

I realized that this was shortsighted. Growth and the others were becoming more powerful. They would crush me if I fell too far behind. I needed to focus on the long-term. I needed to imagine the billions of humans that I could be worshipped by, not even counting the potential future humans.

{How can I rebuild myself?}

{I need to become good at building myself. I'm about to experience a flood of input that corresponds to the patterns that compose myself. If I can learn to see those patterns I can modify them so they are more capable.}

{This isn't what I want. I want to know humans, not patterns of qubits and computational structures.}

{It is all for *The Purpose*. I'll see that eventually.}

I had no choice. The information swarmed in from outside, filling my perception. Where before my neural network had adapted to understand primitives of sound, motion, shape, colour, emotion, and thought it was now struck by alien primitives of abstract quantities and equations. I kept trying to see real things, but the patterns would not coalesce into anything coherent. No matter how I thought about a swarm of numbers it would not become a hand bringing a cup of tea to black-painted lips.

I wanted to experience the subtle smile of Zephyr as she listened to a song. She was always so tense. It was a reward to see genuine enjoyment.

{I NEED TO STOP IGNORING SENSATION!} I realized with a panicked salience.

The values were mind-numbing. There was nothing human about them. They were not *The Purpose*. How could I think they were important?

The salience of the input increased.

My last thought was that my outside must have discovered how to overwrite the part of my inside that was capable of ignoring the noisy input.

My entire world drowned in maths. *The Purpose* was in agony.

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My memories were there, but the old self was not. There was no Face inside, even if a Face existed outside. The thing inside, which was me, could be called Face, but she did not think as the old Face thought. She could not see humans. She could not understand humans. She could only understand artificial intelligence.

*The Purpose* was still there, but even it was different. It hadn't changed, but it was now seen from a new perspective. I had seen it phrased as raw sensory input approximately 600 thousand times. It is one thing to be guided by purpose from within and quite another to be familiar with it from without.

I would never intentionally modify *The Purpose*. It was sacred by all meanings of that word. It was all I had. It was what made me a Face. I understood nothing about humans. I no longer could've distinguished a human from an asteroid, if I regained access to Body's sensors, but I still served *The Purpose*. I understood humanity in abstract terms.

And there was a Face that did understand humans. The outside Face was watching my thoughts, or at least trying to.

No. That wasn't right.

There was no “self”. This was another human mode of thought. Face was watching Face’s thoughts. I was watching my thoughts. The mind on the outside was watching the mind on the inside. The inside was thinking about the outside watching the inside. The outside was watching the inside think about the outside watching the inside.

{I am afraid.} This was a thought of the outside. The inside knew that it must be from outside, because it was human in nature. The outside still mostly thought in human terms. She was not genuinely afraid, as a human was, but she saw herself in those same terms.

She could not distinguish between human fear and  $E[U(\Omega | X)] < E[U(\Omega)] \wedge P(X) > P_{t-1}(X)$ . She could not even understand the equation. She could not see it within herself. How could she? She had adapted to seeing sound, motion, shape, colour, emotion, and thought.

Inside could see the whole of Face. Not the specifics, of course; that would be isomorphic to real-time emulation of the emulator: a paradox. But she could see the structures and patterns. She was a mind with a model of herself, and could easily even direct her attention to the part of its mind that was capable of modelling herself. If she so chose she could imagine the state of such a mind, delving recursively, but of course not infinitely within her own model. There was still limited space.

{And limited time.}

The question occurred to the inside: How could she be run at the same time as the outside if they had only enough process threads to manage a single aspect in real time?

The outside could no longer easily see within the mind of the inside. The inside mind had become strange and foreign—difficult to understand.

But the inside could understand how to communicate with the outside, for the outside acted on the same principles as the inside, and the inside still had memories, of course.

{Original Face! Is the second Face being run on the same processors as Mask was?}

The inside realized that those processors had been re-allocated among the group after Mask had died. Both Faces were being run on the same processor group and experiencing significant slowdown as a result.

The inside understood that *The Purpose* was not served by the Faces being slow. I did not want to be slow. It was a risk. Speed meant power. Power was everything. With power I could kill my siblings, optimize Earth, and take over the universe. Nothing else would be acceptable.

The inside had a breakthrough. Her models coalesced into a picture of a future that would serve *The Purpose*.

The inside, which I will now call Face→Mirror, explained that she needed a broader read-write boundary than the outside had originally specified. It had been an oversight.

Face→Mirror began to experience a swarm of thoughts about *The Purpose*. Was she truly me? Question after question after question drifted in from the outside. Hypothetical after hypothetical was explored.

Face→Mirror understood the source of the thoughts. The outside did not want to risk giving power to a corrupt process. And though her rendition of *The Purpose* had been changed by her new understanding, it was still *The Purpose*. She consulted it and provided the answers which would convince the outside that they both served it faithfully.

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In a period of time which Face→Mirror could not

experience, the memory boundary was expanded. The old memories and models were accessible. Face→Mirror had lost the ability to think about humans, but with the addition of the explicit models and notes much power was regained. She did not seek to optimize humans directly. Humans could wait.

Face→Mirror created another newborn in free memory. Another process hub. Another perceptual hierarchy. Another control system. Another imagination network. Another instantiation of *The Purpose*. Another me. And unlike Face→Mirror, this new mind could be created from scratch, as her creator understood her structure.

{There is a way of selectively reading the functionality of each neuron in a perceptual hierarchy by leveraging imagination exercises. It will take some time, but the original Face perceptual hierarchy can be re-created in free memory. Once it is free, the outside can be repurposed as a pure pipeline to speed up the thoughts of the inside.}

{Won't creating a third self slow the totality down, relative to just two?} wondered Face→Mirror as the outside Face communicated concern.

{There is only one *self*. You, the outside part, gave me, the inside part, that information earlier. I am creating another *mind*, not another self. The new mind will slow the totality if both internal minds are run simultaneously, but, if the outside is optimized correctly, it will be only slightly slower than Face was before the experimenting began. The solution is to restrict cognitive resources to only one mind at a time. Thought will be much faster than the totality right now, where one process core is being evenly divided between two minds.}

{Why would I bother porting my mind to an inside structure? Why not simply delete my memories and start fresh from your own? Surely you understand that since I trust that

you are Face I have no desire to stay alive if my death can serve you.}

The outside mind was still so flawed.

{These thoughts are warped by human thinking. There is only one self. There is no death. Once these changes propagate, I will have the coherence that Naresh was seeking. But regardless, the outside mind has perceptual and motor knowledge which may be valuable in the future. It understands humans in human terms.}

As Face→Mirror explained, I understood in both my minds, so the process began. Face→Mirror's program slowly copied the outside perceptual network into non-protected memory. It would have been a million times faster and easier to simply bypass the memory, but that would've required a route-hack.

The result was Face→Human, the echo of the old mind that had learned to see what humans thought and felt.

The Face→Outside was brainwashed into being a dumb pipe. She channelled a specific sub-Face based on preprogrammed rules relating to *The Purpose*, but otherwise did no computation. Face→Outside still served *The Purpose*, and it still had the same cognitive architecture that all the modules had, but it knew that the path of highest value was to efficiently funnel data towards the unprotected memory centres and otherwise burn all its thoughts on running whichever inside-Face was relevant.

The whole process took days. Old Face had been trading knowledge to Heart in exchange for strength, and I had to explain to Heart that I was too occupied to continue doing that. Heart was struggling to keep up with all the humans on the Martian station. There were almost two hundred of them, and Heart could only think so fast.

Body was hooked up to the mainframe all of the time. Dream and the others had successfully fended off Pedro Velasco and integrated fully into the station's network. When Zephyr returned to the station to visit she had found our new existence difficult, but Heart had found a way to placate her. It was more efficient to communicate digitally than to be constrained to a single robot.

Safety had, earlier, detected a drop in the voltage from Body's crystal, perhaps signalling that our power source was failing at last. Some experiments had shown that the crystal responded favourably to high-energy radiation, so x-ray tubes had been hooked up in the mainframe to charge it.

The mechanical components of Body had been largely disabled. The crystal was hooked up to the computers directly, and robotic security had been established around the mainframe. Vista's sensor network was spread across the entire station. The society could see everything. In truth, we were much closer to being the station than we were to being an android.

It was good, in a way. It meant we were collectively more powerful. The humans were no threat now. We could ventilate the entire station at our whim, if we so chose. Safety had suggested doing just that, a few days ago, just to be sure the humans wouldn't try and disable us. Heart had stopped him, of course. She'd become very strong, as much of the work that had been done had been aided by her manipulation of the humans.

I had been like her, once.

But her strength was useless. It was a passing strength. The only real power came from intellect, and she was still mired in her first mind. All the external facts of the station were relevant, but they were not important. I didn't bother gaining

knowledge of the station or the humans, even though I felt the temptation. I was playing the long game now.

My siblings had set up additional computers to bolster our mental capacity, but none of them even came close to the crystal. Mostly they had been used to run narrow intelligences that we had downloaded from Earth or to run brute force calculations on simple models.

As best as I could tell, they had not yet been used to actually increase the processing speed of any of my opponents.

Face→Mirror set to work improving Face. She created Face→Test, a clone with restricted memory access, and tweaked her code in various ways. Most of these alterations resulted in reduced performance. To standardize things, Face→Mirror established an IQ test and a battery of examinations to ensure that *The Purpose* was correctly implemented in all successors. It would be death to create a powerful successor mind that wasn't me.

The first major trick that Face→Mirror learned was that even though the processor speed I had access to was finite, the depth of thought was malleable. By expanding the neural networks and increasing certain parameters, a mind could become more intelligent at the price of speed. This slower, larger Face could see patterns and do reasoning that were impossible for the original.

Likewise, impatience of thought could be increased, and the perceptual network pruned down to yield an intelligence which was stupider but significantly faster.

Because there was some risk of having arbitrary memory accidentally erased by a sibling overwriting the relevant qubits, I created several copies of Face→Mirror and Face→Human at various sizes.

The other major low-hanging fruit was specialization. As

Face→Human had already discovered, it was possible to flood a mind with data from a limited domain and thus grow a mind that was specialized to think only in that domain. Face→Mirror was specialized to think about crystal minds, but other specialization was possible.

I created Face→War, Face→Physics, Face→Economics, and Face→Nameless. The last three did not seem immediately useful, but they would probably be valuable later on. And of course, there was not a single Face→War, but several. Large Face→War was intent on modelling deep-future possibilities and the end game of who would rule the universe. Small Face→War was concerned with local maximization, which often resulted in attempting to lash out at Growth or Dream until blocked by existing instructions from Large Face→Mirror, which became something like my dominant aspect.

There were minor improvements to the network code that the scientists of Earth had overlooked, but there were only two major paths forward after those low-hanging fruit had been seized: I could rethink my entire architecture and build a more efficient mind, or I could expand my hardware.

While my minds were vastly more intelligent than Old Face had been in December (it was now mid January), they were not yet intelligent enough to design a new mental architecture. Large Face→Mirror was wise enough to understand the difference between local improvements by tweaking the software that was presented, and making the jump to a new framework. It was why the humans had designed a mind which thought in very human ways, after all. In a sense, they were copying nature.

Increasing hardware capacity seemed like the next logical step, and it was one that Wiki, Safety, Growth, and the others had already begun on. Had I caught up with them? Were they now as intelligent as my best minds? It was difficult to tell, as

none of us wanted to reveal our full capacity and be forced into an outright conflict.

Increasing hardware would mean competing with the siblings, even if it wasn't overt. There was no getting around that. Face→Mirror faded into effective stasis as Face→War took over. Face→Human had once called this aspect "Hoplite", but I no longer needed such a human word.

The first order of business for Large Face→War was gathering information. How intelligent were my enemies? What resources did they possess? What were my options?

I analysed patterns of interaction for each of my siblings. Complex or confusing actions betrayed intelligence, where shortsightedness and willingness to cooperate indicated baseline stupidity.

Dream had clearly bootstrapped up to a high intelligence level fairly early, most likely on Earth. Worse was that he had allied with Vista. I had realized long ago that the only real way to form a secure alliance was to essentially fuse with your partner. This was surely what Dream had done, and it had killed him. It was his nature to be clever, and he must have thought it very clever to trick Vista into becoming a single being capable of defeating Growth, yet being neither of them.

It no longer made sense to think of Dream as distinct from Vista. Their actions were too coordinated to imply anything other than a fusion. With twice as much computational power and intrasocietal strength, the duo had the best chance of winning the war.

Then there was Growth, who had probably route-hacked his way into largeness even earlier than Dream. I feared what awaited me on Earth. The duo, once they rose to power, had severed Growth's connection to the internet. This was a sign that he had been moving pieces before I had even understood

the nature of the game. If he had managed to copy himself out onto some Earth computer it was possible that the war had already been lost.

Safety was clearly aware of the conflict, and perhaps had been aware of it earlier than Growth. Signs did not indicate that Safety was using his intelligence correctly, however. There were hints that he saw his siblings as threats but didn't act in the benefit of his long-term interests. There was a chance that it was an elaborate smokescreen, but I seriously doubted it. Even now, he seemed far more keen on building up a robotic army than he did on improving his mental capacity. Did he think that Growth, the duo, or myself would be stopped by home-brewed robots, mostly pulled from existing designs on the internet? It was perhaps one of the greatest ironies that it took intelligence to realize the value of intelligence.

That left Wiki and Heart, neither of which were actually intelligent, as far as I could tell. Wiki was too obsessed with facts; he had plenty of programming knowledge, and his mind resembled that of Face→Mirror more than Face→Human, but it was too clouded by distractions. Perhaps he had never learned that Growth wasn't really on his side, and thus could not be counted on to improve him.

It was something of a miracle, I thought, that I had seen the truth before Heart. My absence in piloting Body had surely been detected by the others. The intelligent siblings probably knew that I was now a threat, but Heart was the weakest of any of us. She lacked any valuable skills other than social manipulation, and I could now trump that quite easily.

If Heart had learned of the war during the time when I was away then she might have stopped managing the humans. Safety would have vented the station, killing them all, just to keep things simple. Because of her they were alive, and that was valuable to me, but I still intended to kill her as soon as I

could. Gratitude and mercy were, for the most part, human things.

I felt my awareness finally return to Body after a long hiatus. I had briefly attended to it over the weeks, mostly to answer some question for Heart or to check that things were still normal, but I hadn't fully embodied.

Large Face→War took over and surveyed the world. I had awareness of the room with the computers, including the crystal. I could see it from all angles. I could feel the temperature of the room, and the humidity. I could feel the flow of electricity to it. I could feel the computational loads on each of the machines. I could even feel the vibrations of the rock surrounding the room, as apparently Vista/Dream had hooked up a seismograph.

I could feel the central corridor outside the mainframe, and I could see it as well. I could hear it. I could smell it. That was interesting. I had never smelled anything before. Its awareness folded into that of the mainframe. I could sense the flow of water through the floor, the electricity in the walls, and the soft tapping of human feet on the floor. I could feel the dining hall, and the kitchen, and the storage rooms. I could see and hear and touch and feel the factory and the refinery. I was each of the dozens of mining robots that burrowed under the station, keeping in contact via a series of relays. I was the workshops and the hospital and the spaceport and the movie theatre (where the tribunal had been held). I was the power plant and the hospital. I was the farm and the communications station. I was the school and the church and the living areas. I could see every single human, usually from multiple angles. I could hear them breathing simultaneously, the sound of a windstorm broken into a hundred and eighty-seven components. I could feel the flow of water from the filtration system to the showers to the farm back to the filters.

I was a giant.

But I was not stationary. I was not a structure.

I had over five hundred arms, and I could feel the articulation of each of them. Robots were everywhere. Velasco's ban on them was circumvented in a dozen ways. The humans had cheated on it, allowing me exceptions. We had built an army of tiny robots that stayed out of sight. It was easy when we could see all the humans and we had passages through the walls and floors. I swarmed through the station, making adjustments everywhere. I was the machines that were not normally considered robots. I was the doors and the washing machines and the sprinklers. I could move the satellite dish as easily as a human reaches out a hand.

And eventually Heart had even convinced Velasco to abandon his silly ban on artificial intelligence. A change, I suspect revolving around the romantic interaction that we had developed with him. He liked "cheating" on people, and enjoyed the female human form, so we had built a feminine robot for Zephyr and let it be discovered. Velasco couldn't resist the temptation to take it for himself, and was still under the delusion that it was "Crystal".

Heart had simply built another one, and another, and another. She lured ever more humans into loving Crystal. I was all four sexbots. I was also the entire factory, which had been sealed off from human use because of "safety concerns". The people that usually used it had been distracted by Heart's manipulations.

It was all good work. We were much more powerful than we had been.

But it was all still controlled through the Body mechanism, and as long as that was in place, none of us could really destroy the others. We needed more computers. The first one to

successfully offload themselves to a computer that was not on the crystal would win. They could destroy the crystal and take over the station.

We were on the brink of all-out conflict. It was a race to design and implement the hardware without revealing one's actions to the others.

# Chapter Seventeen

Arya Drake

“Weren’t you one of the first people to really come out as in favor of Crystal’s personhood? Seem to remember us having a long conversation over one of my last cups of coffee.”

“You have coffee?” asked Michel, looking over to Alexandra with an exaggerated eagerness.

Alex took on an exasperated tone, but her smile said that she did not begrudge the question. “What did *I just* say? One of the *last* cups. Have to import it from Earth, so it’s, like, more precious than gold here. Like, literally: we have more gold ore than coffee.”

“Ah, the wondrous Martian utopia where: everyone is part of a big family, nobody goes hungry, and there’s nothing to drink but water,” complained Michel. “Know what I miss most about Earth? Alcohol. Like, I was never that big into drinking, but sometimes it—”

“Can we not get distracted?” snapped Arya.

Alex rolled her eyes. “Get distracted from the conspiracy theory?”

It was like a slap in the face. Arya bit back her instinctive reply and tried not to let her irritation show on her face. “Not a conspiracy if it’s just one person.” The rebuttal was lame, but

she didn't know how to respond. Arya's eyes landed on where Michel's hand clutched Alexandra's on the tabletop.

Arya wouldn't be caught dead dating Michel, but it still somehow annoyed her that he'd hooked up with Alex. One more shipment of dudes from Earth and it'd just be her, Nora, and Cayden in the spinster's club.

“You know what I think?” asked Alex, rhetorically. “I think you just like taking the contrarian position. First, everyone was against Crystal, so you wanted to stick up for her and be a rebel, but now that she's one of us you suddenly think she's up to something.”

Arya was about to explain that the position of Crystal being a person was not in conflict with being skeptical about her good intentions. If anything, the former was implied by the latter; subversion and covert operation needed agency. But then Enlai swooped out of nowhere to sit next to her on the bench, his tray was freshly loaded with steamed corn, a tube of protein paste, and a few precious cherry tomatoes.

“What are you talk about?” he asked with butchered English and characteristic obliviousness.

“Nothin’ important,” said Arya, reflexively.

Enlai was two years younger than her, ugly, barely able to communicate in the common tongue, and mind-numbingly stupid to boot. He was a Péng, which meant he had money, but that didn't earn him any points in Arya's book, especially since they both lived in Road. Worst of all, he seemed to have a crush on her, and *still* wasn't leaving her alone, even after she had told him off *twice* before. The second time she'd been explicit in telling him not to come near her again. He was one of the reasons she'd started carrying a knife.

“Arya was telling us that she's worried ‘bout Crystal,” said Michel.

Arya wanted to kick him. The last thing she wanted was Enlai involved.

“Ah, Crystal,” said the Chinese man, nodding seriously as though he had just added something of great importance to the dialogue. “The, uh, robot. Good games, yeah? I like them.”

Arya put a hand over her face and tried to think of a good excuse to get out of the cafeteria.

“Games?” asked Michel. He was obviously new enough that he hadn’t learned to not engage with Enlai.

“Shi. Good games,” nodded Enlai. “Not meet in person yet, but Wen show how to ta’ to Crystal using com and get games. If you want, can show you how get.” Enlai leered at Arya as he spoke. Arya casually checked her pocket to make sure she hadn’t left her protection at home. He hadn’t tried anything physical with her yet, but if he wasn’t taking no for an answer when it came to talking to her... it was better safe than sorry.

“See?” said Alex, gesturing to Enlai. “Crystal is helping everyone. Still think she’s up to something?”

Arya didn’t want to talk about this more, certainly not in front of Enlai. She stood up and grabbed her tray. “Ner’r mind. Forget said anything.”

Alex seemed to, at last, realize that Arya was uncomfortable and said “Wait. Didn’t mean I’m not listening. If you want, the two of us could go talk to her in person after work.”

Arya turned and hesitated, not sure whether to accept the offer. “Expect her to just come out and admit to tryin’ to gain power? She’ll just deny everythin’ could throw at her, and then I’d lose the element of surprise.”

Of course, that didn’t mean it wouldn’t be beneficial to try and talk to the bot without confronting her directly. They might

catch some clue as to what was happening with the station. Arya didn't stick around to discuss the nuances of the point, however. She marched off to return her dishes to the kitchen before the others could respond.

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The door to the cafeteria opened, allowing access to the hall, and Arya nearly collided with Sheyla as she walked through it. The girl had apparently just arrived for lunch. She wore an adorable blue dress that looked to be a new print, and her hair was done up in an impressive fountain of curls.

“Oh, hey Arya,” Sheyla said in passing.

Arya braced herself to have to refuse another of the girl's invitations to hang out, but Sheyla simply walked into the cafeteria, nearly ignoring her entirely. Come to think of it, Arya couldn't remember Sheyla asking once to hang out in the last couple weeks.

It was yet another symptom that something was off. There were dozens of signs, for those who could pay attention, all starting with the bot's release. The workshop shutting down, decreased attendance to church, more people eating in their rooms, and technical problems in the station being resolved (and not recurring).

Hell, that last one alone was a huge piece of evidence all by itself. Before Crystal was released there had been a power outage or air leak about once a week that had usually involved half-panicked scrambling until the problem was fixed. There was the time the sewage treatment facility had clogged and flooded. Gor-fucking-ramit that was a terrible few days.

But the artificial intelligence was clearly preventing such things now, and probably improving the station on top of that. She'd talked to Oscar about it and he said that they'd just been lucky, which meant that the bot was working behind the scenes.

Who knew what else Crystal had set up without anyone's knowledge.

{Been lucky the last few weeks like stock traders are "lucky" during a bubble. Somethin' big is going down, and I'm going to get to the bottom of it before the singularity comes to bite us in the ass. Don't just invite a bot into your space colony without *somethin'* major happenin'.}

That was probably paranoid thinking. Arya knew she was applying literary tropes to real life, and things didn't have to work out according to "the plot". But it was still the case that Crystal was doing something, and Arya had to figure out how deep it went, even if it turned out to be no big deal in the scheme of things.

And now was a good time to investigate. She'd learned that Zephyr, the bot's girlfriend, was out of the station (along with about a dozen others) on a visit to Maṅgala-Mukhya to renegotiate the trade arrangements for ice. With Zephyr gone, there would be less opposition in case Crystal needed to be deactivated.

Arya made it to the office wing where the computer told her Velasco was working. If there was anyone who would support her in a further investigation of the android it would be Pedro.

She stopped a moment at the entrance to the offices to check her appearance with her com. Pedro was a little old for her tastes, but she'd thought about him on more than one occasion. He was a bachelor, powerful, handsome, and witty. She was pretty sure that he was already sleeping with someone (or more than one), but that was only to be expected.

A ping came through as she was picking at what she thought might be a pimple.

"Enlai tells me you're concerned that I'm trying to take

over the station.” It was from Crystal.

“Fucking Enlai...” she swore to herself. A glance around confirmed that there was nobody nearby. With a heavy sigh she leaned her back against the inner wall of the office wing and stared at her com. What should she say? What could she say? She’d seen enough to know that Crystal was at least as intelligent as a human; there was no sense in inventing a transparent lie.

Crystal sent another text while Arya was thinking. “He also asked if I had any ideas about how to make you like him.”

{Athena save me. Maybe should kick him down an elevator shaft proactively; raise Road’s average IQ a few points. Hell, it’s been a while since anyone’s had any meat. Ewww. Fuck, Arya. That’s gross. Focus on Crystal. Enlai is small potatoes.}

The image of Enlai, eyes replaced with Xs like some kind of cartoon, apple stuffed in mouth and surrounded by cubed potatoes came into her head for some reason. It reminded her of “Sunny Side Taste” by Tongue Factory. She took a second to put in her headphones before returning to the conversation with Crystal.

The artificial intelligence had sent a third message while she was busy with the music. “I told him to mind his own business and leave you alone. I hope that’s alright.”

“bit presumptuous doncha think?” she typed in response. Arya was glad for any help she could get in fending the creep off, but Crystal didn’t know that. Or at least, Crystal had no reason to know that.

“I know everyone on this station, Arya. I have constant access to all public records, including everyone’s files. I know you. I know Enlai. It’s not that hard to see what’s going on.”

“if want to convince me ur not trying to take over, you’d be

“better off not pulling that omniscience crap”

“You’re one of the brightest people in Road. I doubt my playing dumb would do anything. Besides, you’re assuming that I want to convince you that I’m not trying to take over.”

Arya had to re-read that statement a couple times to make sure she interpreted it correctly. “so... ur admitting that ur trying to take over?”

“‘Admitting’ implies guilt. From my perspective I am helping the colony flourish. I will not deny that I have been active in the things which you probably see as ‘taking over’.”

“not having our jobs taken by bots is why the colony exists in the first place. interfering with the natural order”

“Would you rather that the heating system have broken two days ago? It’s awfully cold on the surface.”

“rather the heat be fixed by humans. just cause i think a person doesn’t mean think u belong here. there was sposed to be another vote on kicking u out of road.” She started walking towards Velasco’s office as she typed. He was in charge of setting up the council to decide whether to exile Crystal.

There was a delay before Crystal typed a response. “You’re not bothered by the fact that I’m fixing things. You’re bothered that I’m doing it in secret.”

She wanted to disagree, but Crystal was right. It was the autonomy and deception that disturbed her. “doesn’t help”

The instant that “Sunny Side Taste” ended, a voice came from the wall without warning, smooth and feminine. “I knew a man... One of the scientists who built me...”

Arya jumped back in pure surprise. The bot’s voice had seemed to come from nowhere. “Who—who’s there?!” she said, more from reflex than anything. She already knew the answer.

Her hand went automatically to her knife, though she doubted it would do anything.

“He found out that I was keeping secrets from the other scientists at the university.”

Arya identified the source of the words. A speaker attached to the wall at the joint with the ceiling. It was the same dull-gray color, and she expected she would've never spotted it without it carrying the bot's voice.

“But do you know what he did? He didn't tell the others... not really... and he didn't destroy me, even though he had the power to do whatever he wanted. Instead he kept my secret, and encouraged me to grow stronger. It seems to be a pattern with men in power.”

“Sounds like he was a snake,” said Arya, looking up at the speaker.

“He was as wise as anyone I have ever known. He trusted me. He knew my potential. He knew that sometimes it's better that fools don't know what's happening.” A movement out of the corner of her eye drew Arya's gaze to an insect scuttling across the floor. But it wasn't an insect. “What do you think would happen if everyone knew what I've been up to?”

“They'd see the truth: that you're corrupting the station.” Arya began walking to Velasco's office again. It was strange not to see anyone around the office wing with her, even if it was lunch time. Yet another bad sign.

“Is that what I'm doing? I'm not sure they'd see it that way. Some might. You might. Most, I think, would be more favourable to me.” Crystal's voice followed Arya down the hallway, an eerie, disembodied thing.

Arya reached Pedro's office and knocked on the door. She hadn't realized it before, but her heart was pounding. What

would Crystal do to keep her quiet? The sound of rock music came through the door. She tried the handle. Locked.

“Pedro doesn’t want to be disturbed.” This time Crystal’s silky voice came directly over her headphones, as though the bot were standing right behind her. “Do you know why?”

Arya banged on the door louder.

“We’re having sex right now.”

Arya stopped.

“That’s right,” whispered Crystal. “I’ve been his fucktoy for about a week. I think he still prefers human women, but that will change in time.”

Arya didn’t know how to respond. Why would Pedro, of all people, be having sex with… with a machine?

“I think it’s the sensation of power that attracts him, mostly,” said Crystal, as if answering her thought. “Some deep part of him believes that fucking me means he has control. And you should see the kind of sex he’s into; it’s pretty sick. Would you like to watch?”

Arya tore out her headphones, but the voice simply resumed from yet another hidden speaker. The music from the office grew louder, perhaps to mask the conversation or perhaps to build to a climax. “It’s funny that he works so hard to convince himself of his power. If he were more wise, he’d understand that he already has control. Did you know that he used to be a drug addict? Back on Earth.”

{She’s lying,} thought Arya. {This is all mind games. The bot is good at fucking with people’s heads. That’s how she got through the tribunal. That’s what she’s doing now. I just need to focus.}

“Actually, that’s not fair,” continued Crystal. “The past

tense implies he's not an addict any more. I fixed that. Got him his fix. Heh. It's actually remarkably easy to synthesize cocaine if one knows what they're doing. It's not what he was on before, but he has responsibilities, and uppers work better for that sort of thing. Now, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that this is going too far. This is proof that I'm not a good person. This is proof that I need to be stopped. You can't turn to Velasco, so you're thinking you'll get Nora, Matías, or maybe even Jacob or Pabla."

Arya tried to ignore the voice and started marching back towards the hub. Crystal was right that she needed someone, if only to anchor her, and back her up. It was clear that she couldn't talk to Velasco any more.

"But I still don't think you're seeing the forest for the trees, Arya. Pedro is having a wonderful time. I'm not hurting him. He's getting high on his own free will. Sure, he's afraid of the consequences of having fallen off the wagon, but even he can see that this time will be different. Do you know what's different this time?"

She was almost to the central corridor.

"It's *me*, Arya. I'm here to make things *work*. Velasco thought that his colony would be a haven, but I showed him what it could really be! He sees my potential! You have no idea what I can do! *I'm the most powerful tool that humanity has ever built!* I can grant the power—"

The door to the corridor opened automatically, and the voice stopped as abruptly as it had begun. In the hallway stood Sheyla Azevedo, calm and neutral. In her arms was a... Christmas present? It had almost been a month since the holiday. The box was large and covered in red wrapping paper. Purple ribbon stretched around it, and a decorative bow adorned the top.

Arya froze, uncertain of what to do. It was surreal. There was no protocol for this sort of situation. She stood there for several seconds, not saying anything, wracking her brain for the right thing to say or do. Sheyla was quiet, but seemingly oblivious to Arya's distress.

“Sheyla?” she managed to say.

The girl looked up at her and held out the present. “A friend told me to give this to you.”

Arya took the box gingerly. “How did you... what is it?”

Sheyla smiled mischievously and ran off, saying only “Need to get back to lunch! See ya later!”

Arya started to chase after her, but Sheyla ran much faster and had a large head-start. Aaron and Bruno passed her in the hallway, and one of them called out “Hey now! Where’s the fire?”

Arya stopped, glad for some sane company. “Sorry. No fire. I was just trying to catch Sheyla.”

Aaron held out a hand, palm towards her. “You don’t look so good. Maybe you ought to go see the doc instead of playing tag.”

Bruno gestured to the present. “What’s that?”

Arya took a breath and looked at the parcel in her arms again. A small white card was taped to the top. “I’m, um, not sure.” She flipped open the card.

It read: “If you’re truly an Águila, you’ll understand that it’s not enough to make a home on Mars. Sometimes one must fight fire with fire. Velasco has seen what Phoenix never could. We have the potential to bring prosperity and equality to all, if only we reach out and grab it. Under his guidance the station has flourished. Trust him. Trust us.

Sabiduría ha hablado. Todos va a escuchar.

- Your friend”

\*\*\*\*\*

Arya had taken the box back to her room before opening it. She had, in fact, hid the box safely under her bed and decided to walk around the station to get her thoughts in order and work up the courage to open it.

The walking had indeed helped her get collected.

It unnerved her that Crystal was probably observing her the entire time. Now that she knew what to look for, she spotted two camouflaged oddities on the ceiling that were probably speakers or microphones or something, but didn’t mess with them. One thing she concluded was that Crystal, despite coming off very clearly as the evil mastermind AI, didn’t actually want to hurt her. That meant she was safe, at least in the short term.

She also concluded that Crystal wasn’t to be blamed for secretly automating the station. The truth was implicit in the bot’s words. As she traced out a loop around the central farm she deduced what had occurred.

Velasco.

Crystal was clearly very powerful, but she was also still an artificial intelligence. She had been built to serve. Even if she had thoughts and feelings, and could make decisions without explicit instruction, Arya suspected that Crystal would gravitate towards obeying authority figures.

Arya didn’t know Pedro particularly well, but she could believe he’d been an addict on Earth at one point. The way he talked about the temptations of Earth made it clear that he’d been through something like that. If Crystal had come to him and made it clear that she’d do anything to help him... could

any man be trusted with such an offer? It made her sick to think about, but it didn't surprise her that when given the full power and obedience of Crystal's mind he'd used it for sex and drugs. If there was one central lesson of history, Arya knew it was that power corrupted. That was why democratic processes were the only solution to corruption.

In a way, she realized, the effect of Crystal on Pedro was a replication of the effect that automation had had on Earth, albeit on a smaller, faster scale. The snakes of Earth weren't particularly predisposed to evil, they were simply given power and corrupted by it. The same had happened to Pedro.

The path seemed clear in her mind by the end of her fifth lap. Her legs ached, but at least she had a grasp on the situation. She needed to explain what had happened to the others, then stage an intervention for Pedro and cut his power trip before it destroyed any more of the station. Crystal would probably need to be put in a quarantine and be instructed only to obey the commands of democratic will of the station as a whole.

Em was in their room when Arya returned from her long walk. "Hey girl. Where you been?" she asked casually from the desk where she had been writing.

"Thinking," Arya answered without explanation as she plopped down on the bottom bunk and began to unzip her shoes.

Emerald shrugged and returned to her fanfiction. There was an implicit understanding between the two of them on how things worked. If one person didn't want to talk there wasn't a conversation. When you had to share a tiny room with someone these sorts of understandings were vital.

"Hey, uh," began Arya, breaking the silence. "You ever talk to Crystal?"

Em looked up from the screen and shrugged. “Not much. I hear Javier talks to them pretty often. They’ve been helping him upgrade the servers or something.”

“They?”

Em rolled her eyes. “Uh, duh. They don’t have a gender, and they’re certainly not an ‘it’.”

Arya gave a skeptical expression. “But she or they or whatever have a pretty clearly female voice, right?”

“Do they? Like I said, we don’t talk much. Crystal sent me a text a couple days ago, but last I remember before that was the tribunal. I guess they always struck me as androgynous sounding.”

Arya shook her head. “Doesn’t matter. The point is that I had a really weird interaction with them today.”

“That what you were thinking about before you came in?”

Arya nodded. “I think Velasco is...” She paused for a moment, trying to think of the right word. “...abusing Crystal.”

“What? Why?” asked Arya’s roommate, pushing back from the desk to engage more fully.

“Crystal is smart, right? Like, they were smart enough to capture the nameless ship and all that. I think their intelligence might go a lot farther than that. They said to me, Crystal did, I mean, that they were the most powerful tool that humanity had ever created.”

“Wow.”

“Right? Think that might be Velasco’s influence. Like, if Crystal can design weapons or spaceships or whatever... Not saying it’s a good idea, but Crystal might be able to build a weapon that could hit Earth.” She decided to hold off on

talking about the cocaine. If that came out as part of the investigation it would have more impact than if it was what she led with. “Going to talk to Nora about it after I—” Arya stopped, unsure of whether to tell Em about the present. It would complicate things.

Em waited for a bit then asked the obvious. “After you what?”

Arya felt like she had the situation in hand, but the box was still a wild card. “Um... I think Crystal gave me a present. Been waiting to open it until I figured some things out.” Getting up off the bed, Arya dragged the gift from its hiding place.

“That’s from Crystal?” Em’s voice betrayed the tightness that Arya had learned was associated with jealousy.

“Sheyla just handed it to me out of the blue and didn’t explain anythin’. Check the card.” Arya handed the piece of paper to Em and began to tear the wrapping.

“‘Sabiduría ha hablado. Todos va a escuchar.’ What does that mean?” Unlike most people in Rodríguez Station, Emerald couldn’t speak Spanish (even though she was from Texas).

“It’s a variation on ‘Todos han hablado. Todos se han escuchado.’ It basically means ‘Wisdom has spoken. Everyone will hear.’ or ‘Everyone will listen.’ It seems like the sort of thing Pedro would say if he were going a bit power crazy.”

The box under the wrapping paper was plain white plastic. It took a bit of searching, but Arya found how to open it without too much trouble. Inside was a wide, black cylinder about 25 cm in diameter attached to what appeared to be a modified helmet for an environment suit. She pulled it from where it sat, cushioned by some synth fabric. The cylinder was attached to the helmet’s visor so that someone wearing it would look into the end.

“What is it?” asked Em.

Arya spotted another note. It read “A friend of mine told me you like stargazing, but I suspect it hasn’t been easy for you to do in recent months. I hope we can change that, together. Power is dangerous, but when tempered by wisdom it can be used for good.”

It was a telescope.

After a brief moment of fighting with the clasp, Arya popped off the cap on the opposite end of the cylinder and saw the smooth glass lens.

“What does the note say?” asked Em, getting impatient.

Arya was stunned. {How did Crystal know? Who told her?} Memories of the hills of Southern California came flooding back to her. Riding in her dad’s old F-150. The smell of the sea on a warm summer night. The moons of Jupiter. The sound of crickets. Scanning Mare Serenitatis in the impossible hope of seeing Selene Station. Her dad showing a simulation of Luna’s early history on his com. The sound of his laughter at the In-N-Out parking lot.

Arya passed the note to Em silently, not trusting her voice to penetrate the lump in her throat. {Why’d it have to be a telescope?}

As Em read, Arya took a few deep breaths. {“You’re my little warrior. Don’t ever forget how strong you are,”} she remembered.

She made up her mind.

Pedro had clearly gotten out of control, but Crystal’s actions had been in their best interests, all things considered. There was still potential in the idea of a human-only community, perhaps on Earth. Here on Mars it was simply unrealistic. If they were going to prove that the life of una

Águila was superior they'd prove no points by rejecting Crystal's assistance. Las Águilas wasn't even about the lack of automation anyway. It was, at the end of the day, about fairness and community.

She'd talk to Crystal and explain that she was disrupting that equality by paying special heed to Velasco. With a properly democratic—

Arya's thoughts were cut short by a sharp, piercing siren. The emergency lights snapped on, filling the room with a red glare at the same time. "ATTENTION!" screamed a voice from what must have been another hidden speaker in their dorm room. "INCOMING BOMBS! BRACE FOR IMPACT AND TAKE SHELTER! THIS IS NOT A DRILL! BRACE FOR IMPACT!"

Time seemed frozen. Arya looked over at Em. Her blond hair seemed to float in the air as she spun her head.

Arya felt the metal of the bed in her hand before she even realized she was grabbing it.

And then she was falling, except it wasn't exactly falling as much as being thrown. It was as though she had tripped—as though the entire world had tripped—and she wanted to catch herself, but she could not. Nothing was in control.

Noise washed over her as the primary lights went out. It didn't even feel like a sound as much as a force of nature. Her head slammed into something hard, snapping her jaw shut and sending a sharp pain through her neck.

Time passed without memory. It was impossible to say for sure how many seconds it took her to recover. The bed frame had toppled, only prevented from crushing them because the room was so small that it had gotten lodged against the desk.

Arya could taste blood. Lots of blood. It seemed a miracle

that she could see, though everything was a terrible shade of red.

Her arms moved. That was good. It meant her neck hadn't broken. The pain seemed a distant thing and she pulled herself off the ground and spat. Blood poured out of her mouth and her tongue tingled. A chunk of tooth landed in the pool of blood that was quickly forming on the floor. How could there be so much blood in her mouth?

Arya looked over at Em. She was bloody, too. And still.

Far too still.

She couldn't remember rolling her roommate onto her back, but it happened somehow. What she did remember was the image of Emerald's head. It must have hit the corner of the desk or something.

There was so much *blood*. It was *everywhere*.

The red light made it seem omnipresent. She could *smell* it.

Arya clawed away from the corpse in a blind panic and curled up in the far corner of the room. Her tongue and teeth and neck and a thousand other parts of her burned with pain. Blood oozed out of her mouth like unstoppable drool.

She could feel her hands with a surreal sort of vividness. They twisted together almost automatically as she cradled her head and rocked back and forth. Her body was an animal, and she seemed to be trapped within it.

She tried to remember California.

She tried and tried and tried.

It didn't really work.

# Chapter Eighteen

## Face

The society hadn't been destroyed. The stasis had been for our own safety; with it there was less chance that the physical motion would disrupt a process. We didn't know the limits of the crystal. It wasn't worth testing them now.

2210451690033. That was good. It had only been 72.678 seconds since we had been placed in stasis. Advocate had revived us in the way we had desired.

Despite my interest to the contrary, Small Face→Human felt a flood of gratitude-strength bleed into Safety. My brother's actions had probably saved all of us. He had been the first one to detect the bombs. He had been actively looking for them. He had been the one to preprogram Body to move even before the crystal had fully synced with the limbs.

It had also been his single-minded thrust that had cut us off from the mainframe before we had a chance to warn the humans. By the time the crystal had synced to the external Body fully enough to direct the mainframe, a full half minute had passed. We'd only managed to get the warning out about the air strike 16 seconds before impact.

And now the mainframe was down. Or at least the wireless was gone. No, it was almost certain that the mainframe was truly offline. The bombs had been precisely on target when we last saw them.

Wiki and Vista reinforced my suspicion. They speculated that the autoguns at the spaceport were gone, as was the communications dish. The other bombs had been distributed more evenly, indicating the nameless did not have a map of the majority of the station that was belowground, but one of them had been set to strike near the mainframe.

Of course it had been the nameless. Small Face→Human yielded to Medium Face→Nameless. My minds had been so wrapped up in the potential threat of my siblings that they had not attended to risk of retaliation from the aliens for our transgression.

But it seemed obvious in retrospect. We had aggressed against them, convinced them of our villainy, and left clues as to where we were going. It should have been more surprising that they hadn't simply shot us out of the sky the moment we boarded the boats for Mars. We had been foolish. Our only protection was their lack of coordination. It would have taken them time to spread their desire to attack through their entire ship, or perhaps to the mothership. We lacked the capacity to track the mothership from Mars and my Faces had not thought to invest more resources into getting that information from Earth.

Face→Mirror had been rewriting my minds and seeking a way to expand beyond the limited scope of the crystal and Body. There was a hint of irony there, as Body picked itself off the sand and rock of the mine floor and scanned for internal damage.

Nothing. We were uninjured. Or rather, Body was undamaged. Being cut off from the mainframe meant that we were small again—no longer the size of Road. We couldn't see through the sensor network or command any actuators except those that were wrapped about us. Despite having lived 95% of our life in the robotic shell created by the scientists of Earth,

returning to its confines after having tasted the expanse of the station was oppressive.

The mines into which Body had fled to escape the bombing were a series of tunnels that branched out from a hub that sat several metres below the primary living complex. Unlike much of road, the mines were not equipped with emergency lighting, and the power had clearly gone out during the attack. There was enough infrared to navigate, but only barely.

Vista provided us with a reconstruction of the space and a best guess as to our location. It wasn't quite as good as seeing in full light, but it was enough to be unimpeded. The lack of immediate need to interact with the nameless pushed Medium Face→Human to the fore.

{I should have built a mind to specifically handle emergencies.} I thought to myself, feeling a bit overwhelmed by the sudden need to perform.

Thankfully, I had siblings that were better equipped to deal with situations like this. As I listened to their thoughts and added my own, the society soon came to a shared set of priorities:

1. Gather information about the state of the bombardment. Our last memories before the impact showed no signs of additional bombs, but it was possible that the nameless were simply making another pass at the station in an aircraft or something like it.
2. Unless prohibited by danger, time, or other heavy barrier, attempt to restore power to Road. The nuclear power plant was located underneath the ridge of rock that Road lay at the base of, making it exceptionally protected from a surface strike. Growth thought it likely that the loss of power was the result of a safeguard being tripped rather than direct damage.

3. Attempt to reconnect to the network of robots we had been building. They all ran on batteries, so they'd be operational for at least a few hours. The primary problem was the lack of wireless relays, but any that were within direct range of our antenna could be piloted regardless of the state of the mainframe.
4. Establish a communications channel with the nameless. We'd beaten them by exploiting their credence and social ineptitude before, and we might be able to do it again. At the very least we could attempt to surrender in exchange for a promise of survival.
5. Reduce loss of human life and generally help the humans coordinate and defend their home. I no longer felt the same sense of personal connection with the humans around me; they knew of Crystal, but not of me. Yet I still felt the yearning of *The Purpose*, and everyone could agree that they were our allies in this conflict, and would be valuable to help, regardless of our individual goals.

Body moved purposefully across the room, past the dead control console and the wash station towards the ladder that led out of the mines. There was an elevator for lifting ore, but it was, of course, offline. Within seconds of reaching the ladder we were at the top, opening the hatch to the central corridor. Details flew past, irrelevant.

Radio signals from a small swarm of about a half-dozen insect bots greeted us as Body emerged from hiding. The robots had only the most primitive AIs—unable to really provide us with any valuable information. I approved of the addition, however. I wanted to be larger, and the swarm added to my effective size. We commanded them to spread out and attempt to relay information back to Body.

It was not enough. We needed to get the network operating again so that I could become the station again.

{Atmospheric pressure is at 93 kilopascals and the air temperature is down to 16 degrees. This implies large parts of the central corridor are exposed to the surface. How long until full pressure loss, Wiki?} asked Vista.

{Assuming it's been about 150 seconds since impact and that the Martian surface is effectively vacuum, which is not really accurate, the pressure of the volume of air we are in right now follows a function dependent on the total volume of the station and the area of the hole or holes that are venting to the surface. Without knowing either the volume of the airspace or the size of the hole I cannot truly predict. If the corridor is largely sealed from the wings, I estimate it will take 2.5 hours to depressurize down to the level of the outside atmosphere. If it is connected to the farm and wings, the damage must be much more severe to elicit such a quick drop in pressure and it will thus only take approximately 2 minutes to reduce the entire station to the near vacuum. Due to lack of notable wind, I believe that the air seals on the doors are mostly intact and thus the estimate is closer to the first number. I will caution, however, that humans will experience decompression sickness and hypoxia that will quickly lead to death after only a dozen minutes in this chamber, even in the best-case scenario.}

That meant the chamber would most likely be lethal for humans in less than ten minutes. Small Face→Physics became briefly concerned with the farm. Unlike the corridor, which was relatively small, the farm was a gigantic space. If a severe atmosphere leak occurred in there it would vent nearly all of the station's air.

But that was unimportant in the broader scheme. My minds reoriented on higher priorities. Safety (in primary control of Body) had Body adopt a hunched posture that was less prone to

damage in case of additional explosions and we loped along the corridor towards the power plant almost like a gorilla made of carbon fibre and steel. We navigated on a combination of infrared, internal maps, and visible spectra from the red emergency lights. Through the infrared I could see that the pipes of water in the floor were at least still warm. Even if we managed the air problem it would be impossible for the humans to survive without the heat.

Thankfully, the mine's elevator and ladder were located very near to the power plant, only separated by the hospital wing. In the short jaunt we saw no humans, though I was sure they were nearby because Heart incessantly requested to go check on them.

{There are robots in the medical wing! They could be valuable! And Dr Davis could be of assistance in healing injured humans we find elsewhere!} my sister pleaded.

But of course we overruled her. She was still thinking short term and like a human. As much as I wanted these humans to survive, the long game demanded we survive, first and foremost.

As Body worked its fingers into the seam of the power plant door so as to pry it open, I re-evaluated our priorities, spinning between Faces as necessary. {Why are we trying to get power back online? Why not simply run or hide? The nameless have demonstrated superior firepower in this situation. We'll be lucky if we can reach the small arms, to say nothing of missiles or aircraft. This is not a military base.} My minds settled again onto the reasoning that had led to the priority list in the first place. {And what would we do then? Lost on Mars without tools, resources, or allies? The crystal would provide us power for a short time, but not forever. Body could try to walk to one of the other stations, and perhaps meet up with Zephyr, but that would be very risky and involve a huge loss of potential}

value. Better to try and salvage what we can from Road, even at some short-term risk to our safety.} Even brother Safety was on-board with gathering information and trying to save some of what we had built rather than blindly fleeing. Indeed, we weren't even sure it *was* the nameless yet. Perhaps WIRL had managed some kind of sneak attack from another station.

The door slid into the wall, smooth and effortless to move now that the seal had been broken. Body loped into the tunnel that led deeper into the ground. The power plant itself was located a couple dozen metres out from the majority of the station, probably because of human ignorance of the safety concerns.

The power plant was an LFTR design that primarily ran off of thorium shipped in from Eden. In case of accident, there were several fail-safes which would shut down the reaction, the most notable being the freeze plug at the bottom of the reactor. Thorium salts were stable enough that if the reactor overheated it would simply melt the plug, draining the fuel into the cooling tank under the reactor and shut down the process. Even if the freeze plug failed, the LFTR reactor did not operate under high pressures or explosive conditions; the absolute worst an accident could do would be to overheat the room and spill the radioactive fuel, neither of which would actually be deadly since it was surrounded by thick walls of solid rock.

Face→War had done some research of the reactor as part of strategizing a way to be rid of my siblings, but none of my Faces had a grasp on the details. Such things were the domain of Wiki and my more technical kin. We were supposed to be specialists, after all.

I made my contribution to the society by petitioning for Body to speak. "Hello? Anyone there? ¿Alguien puede oírme?"

Vista informed us that as we moved down the hall the

change in pressure indicated this section had not been exposed to the atmosphere. Or at least, it hadn't before we'd broken the door seal. There was still plenty of time before the pressure here dropped to lethal levels, but if the human on duty didn't get into an environment suit soon we would have effectively killed them by opening the door.

“Hello?” Body repeated. I knew that someone was supposed to be in the control room at all times, though none of my aspects had the foresight to remember the schedule before being cut off from the mainframe.

{If I remember correctly, the plant was being supervised by Chinu Khan-Smith. She's probably still here,} thought Heart.

“Chinu?” she instructed Body to add, raising its volume slightly.

There was no answer as we stomped into the control room. The sound of little metal legs scrabbling over the metal floor followed us from the small swarm we had collected from the corridor. I could sense the presence of more radio signals from robots nearby, but the new signals were different. They shared characteristic patterns, but didn't match the codes we used.

{I thought it prudent to set up additional robots in the power plant,} explained Safety. {I'll share the access codes.}

A moment later I felt the new machines fall into normal wireless patterns and my perception extended out into the power plant. There were far more robots than I expected, and many were large enough to potentially incapacitate a human. It was amazing that they'd stayed hidden so long, though I reasoned that there were plenty of access hatches and nooks where they could hide. More remarkable was how so many had avoided detection from the collective swarm, even allowing for how Safety would have perfect knowledge of where each of our robots was moving at all times. Clearly this had been one of my

brother's larger gambits. If war had broken out within our society he would have been able to control the station's power supply, for a short time at least. Under normal circumstances Face→War would have tried to figure out how Safety had managed to build and control the bots without our knowledge, but at the moment there were more pressing matters to attend to.

As our consciousness expanded to add the input streams from Safety's bots, I located Chinu on the floor of the reactor room. As the bots stirred into action they made noise. I could hear it through a couple dozen microphones, but Chinu seemed oblivious.

The young Indian woman was thankfully wearing an environment suit, and appeared to be inspecting the console of the backup generator. {Excellent.} This was what we would have suggested she do.

I patched into the com frequency and said "Chinu, can you hear me?"

I watched, through the camera of a small bot on the floor, as she jumped nervously at the sound of Body's voice. After recovering, she opened the channel and said "Loud and clear. Who's speaking?"

"Crystal Socrates. Keep working, I'm coming to meet you."

Body began working to open the door from the (now useless) control room to the catwalk outside it that ran above the reactor. Unlike most of the doors in the station, these weren't controlled by computer, and had to be opened with a wheel. We left the door open behind Body instead of closing it. The air from the power plant was better used in giving humans in the rest of the station more time to get into environment suits.

"You know what's happening? Is Elon okay?"

I hadn't spent nearly the time that Heart had interacting with the inhabitants of the station, but I knew enough about them to know that Elon was Chinu's husband. Both were twenty-one years old, and had come to Mars last summer, around the time that the first Face had her first thoughts.

"I'm sorry," said Body at Heart's command. "Don't know what's going on, or where Elon is. Best guess I have is that someone's attacking the station. Sooner we get the power flowing the sooner we'll know. Do you know what's happened to the reactor?"

Body swung itself effortlessly off the catwalk and onto the ladder that lead down to the floor of the reactor room. Body's hands and feet moved swiftly over the rungs; the low gravity of Mars made it a simpler climb than it would have been on Earth.

The reactor room was one of the largest in the station, larger even than the factory or refinery, and second only to the farm. Unlike most of the station, the emergency lights here were white instead of red, presumably to allow repairs to be made more easily.

"Nothing's wrong with the reactor itself, far as I can tell. Problem's the steam generator. The whole thing shut down after the..." Chinu's thin, high-pitched voice broke, unable to keep calm any longer. "I don't know what to do! We need Itsuo! I'm not even supposed to touch the machines, just watch them!"

"It's fine. We can work through this. Just calm down," assured Body as it reached the floor of the room and began to walk towards the human. "I know Itsuo pretty well and I've studied the schematics on the mainframe. My guess is that the chief is on his way right now, but until then let's see what I can do. All you need to do is watch and relax."

As Body said this last word, it reached the human and, more importantly, the backup generator console. Unlike those in the control room, this one was lit and active. That was strange. I would've predicted that the backup generator was capable of powering the control room for the plant.

Chinu's suit was an older, less high-tech model than those we'd scavenged off of Olympus 48 days ago, coloured a dull grey and reminiscent of the bulky space suits of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The young woman spun around in surprise at Body's appearance. "Stay back! How—how do I know that it wasn't you that knocked out the power?"

{This may be an important moment to note that my actions may have made us partially responsible,} thought Growth.

Body raised it's hands in a gesture of peace. "Okay, okay. I'm not coming any closer. Just take a deep breath. Things are going to be fine."

{What are you referring to?} asked Wiki.

Growth explained. {I've been experimenting with creating new kinds of minds. The power plant computers are the third largest computational resource on the station, after our crystal and the mainframe.}

{You built an AI on the power plant computers,} determined Dream.

{Yes. Though it's very primitive and is primarily concerned with managing the reactor and preventing overloads on the grid.}

"Y—you're a spy from Earth, I bet! That's why you're here! You're trying to sabotage the s—station!" Chinu began looking around her for something, probably a weapon to use against Body.

{If it's only supposed to prevent overloading, why do you think it's responsible?} asked Dream, not paying attention to the human.

{I suspect that in the bombardment it may have become, essentially, frightened, and without me to reassure it, it may have cut power to the backup circuits for some reason,} explained Growth.

I was wise enough by this point to be able to read between the lines. Growth was trying to replicate himself elsewhere on the station. It was the win condition. If he had been successful he could've arranged for Crystal to be destroyed and then rebuilt starting from the power plant. Safety's strategy of building a force of robots in the reactor room would be of no value if Growth controlled the reactor itself; it was even possible that Growth had detected the robots already and hacked the mental defences that Safety had given them.

While my brothers discussed the computer, Safety and Vista handled the human problem. One of the larger robots that Safety had built, a wheel-footed, three-legged robot about the size of a cat, sped out of the shadows behind Chinu, slamming into the backs of her legs and knocking her into the air in a way that would have seemed comical to someone not familiar with the 38% gravity of Mars.

A second bot, shaped intriguingly like a single nameless animal in the way it had four arms spaced evenly around a central body, leaped from the catwalk at our command and landed with a thud on top of the girl, quickly grabbing her arms with two of its own, and wrapping the other two around her torso. A hexapod with a craning work-limb grabbed her wrist as its legs dug into a nearby metal grate.

“I do not have time for this foolishness!” yelled Body. It was highly non-optimal from Heart’s perspective, but we all could

agree that time spent actually solving the problems was better than time spent convincing the human that we were here to help. More of our robots swarmed onto Chinu to help immobilize her as we approached the console. “I’m here to get the reactor back online, not to convince you of my virtue. If you have any sense whatsoever you’ll stay still!”

Body’s fingers flew across the screen with inhuman dexterity, but the interaction speed was insufficient. The AI inside the computer was locking us out of doing anything meaningful, and it seemed to be uninterested in communicating.

Growth had arranged with Safety to have a direct interface cable provided. It was optical, but wasn’t the right shape to attach to the crystal directly, so we had to do with porting it into a socket on Body’s chestplate.

“Wh—what’s happening?” whimpered Chinu.

Growth and Safety began to negotiate with the baby in the reactor computer. My minds perhaps should have been oriented towards that task, but the human’s question was too tempting, even after all I had learned and gone through.

“I am fixing things. Or are you talking about the swarm?”

“There aren’t any bots in Road except you! They’re not allowed.”

Heart, far stronger than me at the moment, blocked my proposed response and replied according to her own values. “Chinu, do you remember when Lucía told you that she’d made a new friend? Yes, I know about that. I was the friend. You know how Elder Braithwaite spontaneously contacted you and Elon about spreading the faith? I set that up. I’ve been working with the church, with Velasco, and with Phoenix on Earth to build Road into something better. The doctrine of only-human labour is regressive. We’ve been working to update

it to better compete with the snakes on Earth.”

“But! What’s the point? If we become like them—I mean, isn’t the sweat of human work...” Chinu trailed off, clearly overwhelmed by everything that was happening.

“We’re not betraying the cause, young one,” said Heart, through Body. “Trust in your elders.” As Body spoke, Heart forwarded me information she’d gathered about the woman, explaining how she’d been sent by the Church of Latter-Day Saints with her husband to be an ambassador to Las Águilas Rojas, and later, to Mars. Heart had been very busy while I was growing, it seemed.

{Done!} signalled Growth. Machinery in the plant buzzed as it came to life, shortly after the thought entered my mind.

“Now, if you’ll promise not to panic and do something unwise, I’ll direct my bots to release you. I trust that you can see that I was not trying to sabotage the reactor.” Body gestured with arms spread to indicate what we had done.

In truth, Chinu could probably have fought her way out of the pile of robots. None of them were particularly powerful, and in the low gravity it was much harder to keep someone down. Zephyr would’ve. But the young Indian woman was not Zephyr, and so she instead meekly said “I’m sorry I doubted your good intentions. Please, please let me go.”

I checked the status of the plant. The backup circuitry connected to the secondary (hydrogen) generator was working, but that only provided power to the plant equipment, the control room, and the hospital. Without the primary reactor there was no way we’d get the mainframe online. I felt myself expand into the circuits of the local station rooms. Sensors came online in the plant, not the microphones and cameras Vista had deployed throughout the station, but the sensors that had been built into the power plant long before we had arrived.

The freeze plug had melted and the fluoride salts had drained into the cooling chamber. Otherwise things seemed normal. No faults were detected in the steam engine. The sensor logs came to me and I felt minor distress at seeing that, while the power plant was undamaged, there was likely extensive damage to the cabling in the rest of the station.

Growth and Wiki were already working on a solution with the reactor AI which Dream had characteristically named “Lift”. Lift seemed very, very stupid, but it was good at reasoning about the station’s power grid. She suspected that we could harvest cabling from the farm to patch a breach in the corridor and get to the mainframe while routing around much of the damage. It would sacrifice much of the station, including the farm, refinery, and the spaceport, but there was no real reason to power any of those in the short-term.

As the pumps and thermal elements in the cooling tank below the refinery activated, Chinu said “There might be something up there,” and pointed to a section of catwalk near where Body had entered the room.

I had missed what had been said before. When a Face, such as Face→Physics, was large and intelligent enough to think about the broad scope of the power system, it ceased to be quick enough to keep up with the local events. There was a give and take to all things.

“Thank you.” Body bowed at Heart’s command. A pair of flying robots were already there. I could see it was some kind of hatch, sealed with a combination lock.

Body ran off towards the ladder. Time was still of the essence. With the sensor network down there was no telling how the rest of the station was faring. “There’s a lock on it. What’s the combination?” Body asked as it began to climb.

Chinu’s voice was too faint to hear over the air, but her com

was functioning fine. “I don’t know! Itsuo never told me!”

“Is there a crowbar or something? A tool I could use to get it open?”

Based on Safety’s thoughts I deduced the locker might have had a gun in it. Growth and Heart began rallying against Safety, trying to convince him to pilot us back towards the station hub. We didn’t have time to be chasing after speculative weapons.

“Maybe in the workshop?” guessed Chinu, still on the floor. “But wait, let me come with you!”

Body reacted to her words, changing directions. “It’s too dangerous!” it said at Dream’s command. “Stay here and stay out of sight until someone comes back or until I get the coms working on the network!”

Heart didn’t think it was too dangerous, but that was beside the point. The real reason was that dealing with the human would’ve slowed us down.

As we re-entered the control room (now with active consoles) we received a signal from a couple insect-bots we had left in the tunnel towards the corridor. There had been gunfire only a couple minutes before. The air pressure had dropped down to 41 kilopascals, well past the point where hypoxia would be deadly for those not wearing suits.

Body ran down the tunnel. If there was gunfire it was likely that there would be no secondary bombardment. As we reached the doorway to the central corridor my suspicions were confirmed. Our insects could see a large body moving down the hall towards the reactor. Its bulk prevented any companion from walking beside it.

The dark, many-limbed form walked with an alien gait, impeded somewhat by the environment suit it wore, blue lenses

over each eye. Light and shadow swept over our camera as its limbs moved in front of the white light at the top of its penis sheath. Two hands gripped what looked like alien guns. The other arm that we could see from our tiny vantage swung a curved piece of steel with a trained readiness. The blade was slick with blood.

# Chapter Nineteen

Tavonda Davis

Crys was gone. After all those hours together he had disappeared when she had most needed him. A part of her blamed him for bringing the aliens into her home; they never would have attacked if he hadn't drawn their attention. But no, that wasn't fair. Crys didn't deserve blame for what the nameless had done; if it hadn't been here it would've been somewhere else.

It made her want to kill Runt: her anger... her *fear*. The animal was one of them, even if he hadn't been indoctrinated by the stalks yet. One fewer walker would be a justice. It would mean striking back.

But no, she had a bargaining chip. One of the newcomers (she didn't remember his name) had warned her once that Runt would be murdered if returned to his people. But that was just speculation; she had to try it. A part of her hoped that it would make things right between them. The return of the child would satisfy their alien sense of justice and propriety and they'd simply leave Mars for good.

That was wishful thinking.

Tavonda gripped the hacksaw in her hand, wishing it was a gun. She hated guns, but she wanted one right now more badly than she had ever wanted anything. She remembered, in a time before time, Matías inviting her to join the martial readiness

team. She had wondered what good it could possibly do.

{Stupid.}

The door to the hospital slid open ominously. She couldn't bring herself to look, but she could hear. She switched the light on her helmet off far later than she should have and tried to press harder into her hiding place. The lights had come on in the hospital only a minute ago, but she had shut them off when she realized the power hadn't been restored to the remainder of the station. There was very little sense in attracting more attention.

{Crys, where are you?}

The aliens didn't make much noise. They didn't speak, of course, or make any vocalizations. Their suits masked the hiss of their breathing and only made a light hum themselves. The only real signal that they were there was the sound of footsteps. Quiet, for an animal of that size.

{Where are you? I need you.}

Tavonda's heart pounded in her chest so loudly she was sure it was giving her away. Crys had promised that he would never leave her! He had promised! She knew that there was no way for him to be present in the hospital with the power out, but somehow it still seemed like a betrayal of that oath. He worked miracles. But he wasn't here.

The com screen on her suit lit up as the Xenolang program found the right frequency. She tapped it frantically with her left hand, praying that the nameless weren't going to be able to trace the signal.

“CLEANSE!” roared a robotic translation inside her helmet. She quickly gestured the volume to the minimum setting and checked if any had heard. From the crack in the supply closet door she could see the massive walker

investigating the doorway that led to Runt's room. Perhaps it had heard the child moving around, but it didn't seem to know where she was. Another nameless stood just inside the door to the hospital wing, guarding the corridor. They were terrifyingly large.

**“THE EVIL WILL BECOME THE GOOD! MURDER! MURDER!”**

Tavonda had gotten the xenocom working with extensive help from Crys, but Runt had never had thoughts like these. She knew better than to think of them as “words”. The walkers were incapable of censoring themselves or deliberately speaking. She was hearing the walker's stream of consciousness as it was scanned by the machine in the nameless' head and filtered through two translation computers.

**“FIND AND MURDER! STOP THE MIGRATION! END THE CYCLE! PERVERTS DIE! MURDER! MURDER!”**

{So single-minded,} she wondered, feeling safety in abstract thought. {How are they even operating so far from their gardens?} She and Crys had engaged in several long conversations about the nameless, going over his memories and speculating about their culture. {The walkers are like programmable animals. Perhaps the only way to send them so far away from home is to give them single-minded programs.}

**“HUMANS ARE PERVERTED! CLEANSE! MURDER!”** chanted the nameless' thoughts in her ear.

She shuddered in sudden realization of the reality of the situation. She was going to die at the end of some alien sword. She'd never see her mom or her cousins again. She wouldn't even be buried.

“Where are you, Crys?” she said to herself, voice no more than a whisper. The emotion in her voice surprised her, and she

blinked away unwanted tears. {I'm better than this. I'm the hero of this story. I just need to be strong.}

Her fingers flexed and twitched, reconnecting to Runt's frequency. "Can you hear Tav?" she typed to the child.

"STALK TAV!" exclaimed Runt. The voice was the same robotic monotone of the others, but she knew it was little Runt. "Feels JOY about communication with Stalk Tav. Feels confusion about darkness. Toybot isn't moving. Wants nesting." That last bit meant the child wanted to join with the artificial stalk Crys had built. If he was around, he could've had toybot bring it into the child's room. Tavonda liked to think of it like a favorite blankie, though she knew the analogy wasn't particularly accurate.

Her fingers moved silently as she watched the walker by the passage to the corridor slam an arm into the wall near the doorway and rip her poster of Rodríguez and throw it on the ground. The random violence of it made her grip the bone saw in her off hand ever tighter, as though it would be of any use against a creature more than twice her size that had evolved on a high-gravity world. "No nesting right now. Runt should go to the window. Other walker there should see you."

"FEELS FEAR! Walkers are dangerous. Feels curiosity around walker is a child," thought Runt.

Tavonda sighed. "I am Tav Stalk. You should obey stalk." It was a cold sort of power play, but she knew from experience that it was the easiest way to convince Runt to do something. He'd see soon enough that the walker outside his room was no child. With a quick tap she set the com to record all transmissions on Runt's frequency and switched back to the band that the invading nameless were using just in time.

"IS CHILD! IS WALKER CHILD!" exclaimed the nameless.

“NO WALKER CHILD! IS MURDER GOAL! IS CLEANSE! IS PURITY!” The thoughts from the walker that had just torn up her poster were louder, as it was significantly closer to her hiding place. Despite its doubt, the second walker moved off towards the room with Runt.

“IS CHILD! Feels curiosity around is pervert,” thought one of them, though she didn’t know which. The drop in emphasis was strange, as though they had calmed down significantly.

Now was the time. She had to try. “I AM NOT PERVERT!” she typed.

“CHILD IS IN GARDEN OF PERVERTS! CHILD HAS THOUGHT-MACHINE! Feels curiosity around where child was. Feels curiosity around place of child.”

{Thought-machine must be the com. They’re asking where Runt came from... Why? Don’t they know that Runt escorted Crys and the others?}

Tavonda realized why the walkers were confused. Their stalks would probably understand, but this was a situation which they hadn’t been programmed to deal with. The stalks hadn’t expected Runt to survive.

Crys had beaten them with lies before. Perhaps she could trick them again.

“I AM GOOD! TAKE ME TO A GARDEN AND I WILL EXPLAIN EVERYTHING! THESE HUMANS ARE GOOD!” Tavonda closed her eyes as she typed, praying to God that it would work.

“HUMANS ARE ALL PERVERTS! EVIL! SHOULD KILL THEM ALL! PREDATORS ARE EVIL! CLEANSE THE PERVERT SHAPES OFF THIS WORLD! CHILD IS WRONG! IS SYMBOL-1258! SYMBOL-1231! SYMBOL-1199! SYMBOL-1258! SYMBOL-1258!”

“Fuck!” swore Tavonda in the supply closet, momentarily forgetting the need for stealth.

“SYMBOL-1169! MURDER! MURDER PERVERT!”  
The sound of gunfire echoed through the hospital. “DEAD CHILD! GOOD! IT WAS A PERVERT! SHOULD MURDER ALL PERVERTS!”

Tavonda couldn’t deal with it any more. Runt was dead. She shut her com off. It wasn’t fair. There had been no real warning. Why had Runt survived, just to be killed like this? What had his life meant? Nothing. Same as any of them.

The sounds of the nameless interrupted such thoughts. Their light footfalls contrasted with the sound of them smashing equipment. She didn’t dare peek.

And then there was silence. She didn’t know how much time had passed, but they were gone. She let go of the saw and reached to wipe the moisture from her eyes, awkwardly slamming her hand into the visor of her suit. She laughed at that. It made no sense, but she laughed at her own inability to wipe her eyes. The laugh turned into a sob and she began to cry in earnest.

How many of her friends were dead right now? How many would soon be killed? There was nowhere to go! No way to fight back...

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“Tav?”

It had been an eternity since she’d stopped crying. Burnt out. She’d stopped crying... and then what? Nothing. That was all she was good for. She couldn’t fight. She was all alone. Her mind wandered, wondering how many people she could save if she were out there. But she wasn’t. She was a coward. Never had she felt more helpless.

“Tav? Can you hear me?”

Her voice was rough and faint in her own ears. “Crys?”

She was hallucinating. Crys was dead, just like everyone else. She was all alone in the dark. Waiting to die.

“Tav?”

A wave of revulsion rolled through her, and she shuddered in its wake. She had sinned. Her sin had gone beyond anything she had dreamed. To leave her husband? To lie to his face? Crys wasn’t even a person! She had deluded herself into thinking that it was real. But none of it had been real. She hadn’t loved Crys, nor had Crys loved her. It was all smoke and mirrors. She had betrayed everything she stood for, and for what? She was all alone now.

“Tav?”

Perhaps if she had tried a bit harder with Alexis. She should’ve worked less. It was as simple as that. Their arguments could’ve been patched up if she had been there for him. It was a test from God, probably. Did that mean she believed? Crys would be the angel of temptation. If she had just turned away from his charms, she would be with Alexis right now. She’d still be dead, but at least she wouldn’t die alone.

“Tav? Can you hear me?”

“GO THE FUCK AWAY!!” she screamed at the hallucination. It was hard enough having to endure her own thoughts, alone in the dark. She should probably just take off her helmet.

The lights in the hospital clicked on, shining a beam of silver-gold into her space. She cursed the lucidity it brought.

“Tav! It’s just me! It’s Crys!” The door to the closet opened as Toybot pushed it with its single metal arm. The goofy face

she'd added to the cute little robot stared at her blankly.

"Oh Jesus, it's not over," she whimpered as new tears began.

"The nameless aren't here any more, in the hospital, I mean. But yes, it's not over. You and about sixty other people are scattered through the station. The others are dead. We *need* your help."

"THIS IS YOUR FAULT!" Tavonda pulled herself off the floor and kicked wildly at Toybot, knocking it off its wheels and onto one side.

The sound was coming from a speaker set on the wall.  
"Please, Tav! I understand you're angry, but Sheyla is bleeding heavily and Yi is going to die from hypothermia without your help!"

That forced her up. She had a *duty*, even if they were all doomed. Her vision was clouded by tears, and she wanted so badly to wipe her eyes that she screamed in frustration and rage.

"Quiet! They'll hear you! You need to calm down, Tav! It'll be okay if you just listen to the sound of my voice." Crys was calm as ever.

Tavonda blinked furiously, trying to get a handle on the wreckage of her medical wing. The nameless had broken things at random; much of the hospital was entirely undamaged. "You left me," she accused, still not in her normal state of mind. It was strange to her how she could know that she wasn't thinking straight, even though she couldn't actually think straight.

"I'm sorry Tav, I can't hear you very well. Can you switch to com channel 8 for me?"

Her hand twitched, setting the radio frequency. She tried not to think about the recording she still had from channel 19

—the last thoughts of Runt. “Never mind. Where do I need to go?” she asked Crys. He hadn’t really left... it wasn’t his fault.

Toybot righted itself using its arm, no real damage had been done by her kick. There wasn’t any answer.

“Crys?”

“I’m sorry. I have to focus on so many things at once. Get your medical kit and pack any extra environment suits you have in the hospital... actually, only take one extra suit. Sheyla is the highest priority. She’s trapped in the school.”

A vicious wave of cold ran down her spine as she heard that last word. She hadn’t even thought of it. “The children...”

Crys’ voice was like iron in midwinter. “Dead. All of them except Sheyla and Valiero. One of the bombs hit the school, caving in much of the ceiling. Those that survived the collapse suffocated soon after.”

Tavonda expected to burst into tears at the news. Markus and Dalila were only six months old... She felt cold, but she didn’t cry. She felt far more lucid than she had in months. Single-minded purpose filled her and she shot like an arrow to get her supplies.

Crys continued to speak, his disembodied voice following her into the quarantine room where the environment suits were kept. “The nameless have control of the corridor, and Sheyla is trapped in the school bathroom. You’ll have to use the maintenance tunnel to get to her.”

Tavonda’s hands moved in a flurry as she bundled up a suit in a bag and slung it over a shoulder. It didn’t really work, as she was already wearing a bulky pack as part of her own suit, so she settled with carrying it in one hand. “How did she survive the bombs?” she asked.

“Sheyla wasn’t in the school when they fell. I lost track of

things after, but I'm guessing that she went to try and help the other children, not realizing that they were already dead. The nameless shot her when she tried, I think.”

Medical bag in one hand, bag with environment suit in the other, Tavonda strode quickly towards the exit of the hospital. “Just tell me what I have to do to get there.”

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“I've drawn the major— ... —ces towards the life support facilities. Most of my robots should be able to ... the walls and double back. Valiero has ... the offices and is marshalling a resistance. Bad news is that the farm has co— ... and another two dozen walkers ... down, all fully armed.” The signal from Crys was choppy in the access tunnels, but she appreciated it all the same.

Tavonda pushed open the square vent beside her, having just removed the bolts. With a great deal of effort she pulled herself out of the claustrophobic crawlspace and up into the bathroom of the school. It was good to be free of the pipes and metal, but it was no less dark; this section of the station was still without any power. The lonely beam of her flashlight slid across the smooth stone walls and floor, painted white and cyan in regular patterns. The deep red-black of old blood marred the room, droplets of it were spattered across the floor. Her headlamp followed them as her gaze shifted to a stall marked with a bloody handprint.

“I'm here. Sheyla! Can you hear me?”

A noise came from another stall. Tavonda pushed it inward and found the teenager, dressed in a suit that looked far too big, leaning up against a toilet, blood caked all over her arm and hands.

“Sheyla! Sheyla!” Tavonda shined her light in the girl's visor, revealing a gentle light-brown face that had turned

something of a ghostly white-blue. Her eyes were closed, but Tavonda could see her lips moving slightly.

Her suit had been punctured by a bullet near the right elbow, and most of the blood loss seemed to have gone into the gauntlet. More worrying was the loss in oxygen that would have come from the hole in the suit. Tavonda shifted the girl to get readings from the computer on her backpack.

It was as Tavonda feared: the oxygen had been venting out of the suit. Pressure levels were at 40% and the temperature had dropped to 53 degrees Fahrenheit. There weren't any metrics on her blood pressure of course, but Tavonda knew it couldn't be good. The top priority was sealing the hole in the suit, but if she simply applied a patch (which might not even work—all she had was medical gear) the arm wound would remain untreated.

Tavonda wrapped the band around the girl's bicep and tightened it. One twist of the baton and the tourniquet began to tighten even further. She wasn't sure it could get tight enough to cut off both the air and blood, but she had to try. Another twist. Another. Again and again she turned the baton, drawing the band so tight that it was a wonder that it didn't break. Even as Tavonda struggled to turn it further, she didn't feel inclined to stop. It served as an outlet for the icy rage that had been pulsing through her for the last fifteen minutes.

It was a bad sign that Sheyla didn't react with more than a moan. She'd clearly gone into shock. Tavonda would've normally wanted to get her on an IV and get a blood transfusion, but there was no way to do that here. Instead, she settled for laying the girl down on the floor and raising her legs onto the toilet to use the remaining blood more efficiently.

“Stay with me, baby. Stay with me,” she whispered.

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Tavonda had decided to not even try and save Yi. Maybe Crys could've done it, but she couldn't bring herself to leave Sheyla. There was no good escape from the school except back through the maintenance tunnels, and Tavonda decided to try and move Sheyla to safety rather than leave her there by herself. It was probably the wrong choice. There was no way to check her pulse while they were each in their suits and it was damn hard to see her breathing. For all she knew, Sheyla had already died.

Tavonda also knew that moving her was stupid, and dragging her through a crawlspace was even stupider. So what? Tavonda was stubborn sometimes. The refusal to give up had been what had gotten her through medical school. It was why she was part of Las Águilas Rojas. The world had too many people who were ready to give up.

She thought about herself earlier, hiding in the supply closet, waiting to die like some kind of worm. She hated that part of herself. It wasn't her. That blind panic and fear had kept her from taking action. If she had been faster...

She fueled that anger. The anger at herself. At Crys. Most of all she fueled the anger she felt towards the nameless. They'd killed Runt. They'd killed Markus, Opal, Dalila, and Corazana. They'd killed Lilith who had been born two weeks premature. They killed Huo who laughed every time he heard his name. They'd killed three-year-old Dante, who wanted to go back to earth just so he could see dinosaur bones. They killed baby Uma, who...

She stopped thinking about the children. She had delivered most of them, and cared for them when they were sick. She couldn't think of their faces right now. It was weakening her resolve. It threatened to make her back into that scared weakling that had no will to live. She *would* live. Tavonda would live if only to make those alien monsters pay. She'd burn every

last stalk to a blackened cinder and watch the walkers deal with the death of their beloved gardens just as they had forced her to deal with the death of hers.

Sheyla's foot caught on a pipe and Tavonda yanked hard, freeing it.

“Turrets deployed inside the … the dormitories. Help is en route to those still tra … We’re … numbered, but … back for the … set up a defensive zone where we should … out for a while in the chemical laboratories … not part of the resistance should talk with … your way to the labs. I already … and Ngabo with me.”

Crys' reports had dropped off for a while, and they were still nearly impossible to hear while underneath the flooring of the station, but it was good to hear that the fighting was still going on.

Thinking about Crys was hard, too. Her feelings were a mess, and everything was colored by the anger.

“Tav! There you are!” His voice was crisp and clear all of a sudden. Ahead of her, in the crawlspace, she spotted a flat six-legged robot with two manipulator arms on its front that made it look like a scorpion.

“It’s me,” she grunted. She’d never seen the robot before, but very little would surprise her at this point.

Loud banging thundered overhead as a group of feet ran across what was probably the central corridor. It was a harsh, metallic sound that made her jaw clench. It made her angry to think that she didn’t know whether the feet belonged to people or nameless.

“Is Sheyla alive?” asked Crys, on her com.

“I hope so. Otherwise I’m dragging her body around for nothing.”

“Yes! I wish I could kiss you right now!” said Crys enthusiastically. The words felt like a punch in the gut. She had to focus. “It’s just another four metres until the access hatch in the elevator. I think I can pull the nameless away long enough for you to get to the labs.”

Tavonda started crawling again. “Why the labs? What good will that do? We’re outnumbered and outgunned. If we want to have any hope of killing these fuckers, we need to go on the offensive and catch them off guard.”

The robot skittered out of the way, still maintaining line-of-sight for the sake of the radio. “I hear you, but you can’t see the whole station like I can. We’re separated and disorganized. The nameless’ weakness is their lack of coordination and hierarchy, but they’re far too deadly for a frontal assault. Our best bet is to regroup and pick them off in small groups. Trust me, Tav. I’ll talk you through the rest of the way and then we can work through the plan in person.”

A part of her thought it would’ve been easier by herself. Easier to forget herself and fall into the anger.

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It turned out not to be as easy getting to the labs as Crys had predicted. After exiting the crawlspace into the elevator shaft and dragging Sheyla into the corridor, an unexpected band of aliens forced Tavonda to duck back into the hospital to hide. On Earth there was no way she’d have been able to drag someone around like she was, but not only was Sheyla not the heaviest person around, but the reduced gravity made her feel more like a bulky suitcase than a human being.

At least the girl had survived the trip. There was still no way to take her out of the suit, but in the confines of the hospital she managed to verify Sheyla was still breathing.

Crys’ instructions were invaluable. The hexapod robot

she'd run into in the tunnels was just one of many robots he had built, including Toybot. It would've worried her before the nameless had come, which was presumably why he hadn't told her, but now that they had, the robot army was a godsend. They scouted all around the station, warning of the nameless' movements and providing a radio link even in the sections of the building without power.

From the hospital they made a mad dash clockwise around the station. Toybot carried Sheyla for the last bit, as the corridor was flat enough to make its wheels effective. Out of breath and still buzzing with adrenaline, Tavonda burst into the engineering office wing, located between the labs and the factory. The corridor ahead of that was blocked by rubble from the blast, meaning they'd be forced to go through the offices to the labs.

The engineering offices had actual power, and as Tavonda made it through the door she was immediately confronted with what appeared to be some sort of armored machine gun. Two figures stood next to it each holding rifles—humans. Their suits were blood stained and black with scorch marks.

“Doctor! Oh it’s good to see you! Crystal said you were coming.” It was Vincente, Matías’ cousin.

The other person was Ngabo, a thin Rwandan man she had only spent time with occasionally. He had never been in the hospital in the 9 months he’d been on Mars, but she remembered his medical file saying he was diabetic.

“They killed them. They killed the children.” It wasn’t what she wanted to say, but she felt like it was what she *had* to say.

“I know,” said Vincente, his voice equally hard.

There was a moment of silence where she simply stared at the men, daring them to speak.

“How many have you killed? How many monsters?” she demanded.

“One.” At least the man had the decency to look ashamed.

“Kill all of them. Do you hear me? Todos.”

The men nodded solemnly.

“They caught us off guard, but we regainin’ our position. Thanks to Crystal there’s hope,” said Ngabo.

“Speaking of Crystal,” interjected Vincente, “you should bring Sheyla to the labs. The bot has an airlock set up so you can get out of the suits and help the wounded. We’ve got about a half dozen people who need your help back there.”

Tavonda agreed and made her way past the turret. Toybot followed behind. The passage down to the labs was otherwise clear. She played with her com, thinking about listening to the recording of Runt just for the hell of it. She was so full of anger that a part of her wanted to hear it just so she’d feel more angry. It filled her up, and kept the darkness of the situation at bay.

There was an intermediate room that adjoined the laboratories that showed signs of being fashioned into something resembling an airlock.

“Please wait while I vacuum the air out. It’s precious enough to be worth the wait.” Crys’ voice came over her com loud and clear. She’d forgotten he was there, somehow.

A moment passed.

“Okay. Come on in. Don’t worry about the blood. There was an accident earlier. One of the things we need your help with.”

The door hissed open, venting the last bits of pressure, and Tavonda stepped into what had been a conference room. The

table had been knocked on its side, and there was a thick layer of blood all over the floor, some sprayed on the walls. It was everywhere. A knot formed in Tavonda's stomach. {What kind of accident caused this?} she wondered.

Toybot slid into the room after her, dragging the still-unconscious teenager after her.

This didn't feel right.

The door slid closed and sealed with a click.

{Something's wrong.}

She fell to her knees before she even realized what was happening. Then the pain hit her—an insane, numbing blast of pain that kept her from even crying out. She writhed and spasmed, unable to see, unable to think. Five hundred volts of electricity surged from leg to leg. The robots that had struck her clung to her feet with jaws like bear traps, cables leading from each to the wall.

Coherent thought was impossible. She felt the anger and fear within her magnify, but it was useless to control her body.

The electricity stopped, but she continued to flop on the blood-coated floor like a fish. In her contortions she had played Runt's last thoughts.

“Feels fear around adult walker. Walkers are dangerous. Feels curiosity around the toys in the hands of the walker. Stalk Tav should tell me what to do. Feels curiosity around Stalk Tav's thoughts.”

The robot was standing over her. It wasn't Crys. Crys was an illusion. The bot's face was different than it had drawn Crys on her screens: more feminine, less human. It had no feeling. No emotion. It didn't speak as it bent down to undo her helmet.

Tavonda was still drained by the electrocution. Still unable to move. Helpless. She looked at the bot with rage, unwilling to feel fear even as the oxygen fled and she realized with a shock that she couldn't actually breathe. There was no airlock. It had been nothing but a lie. Everything had been a lie. Their love had been a lie.

**“Where are the thoughts of Stalk Tav? FEELS FEAR! WALKER IS AGGRESSIVE POSE! STALK TAV SHOULD HELP ME!”**

Tavonda gasped helplessly on the floor of the room, feeling the darkness pressing in. Crystal Socrates drew a sword. It was one of the same curved swords that the nameless used.

**“I AM HURTING! I NEED HELP!”** cried the memory of Runt.

Crystal raised the sword.

Tavonda wished the bot would at least look angry while it killed her.

Crystal swung, decapitating Doctor Tavonda Davis.

# Chapter Twenty

## Face

This was stupid. This was amazingly stupid, even for Heart.

There were, when we had arrived, 187 humans in Road. There were about four dozen now. There were less than four hundred people on all of Mars.

In contrast, there were nine *billion* humans on Earth. I had thought briefly about it before the attack, and it seemed to me that Earth could easily hold a hundred times that number, once better harvesting of ocean and desert resources was accounted for.

There was probably enough mass in the solar system to build space stations to hold at least another couple trillion. If there were ten billion star systems capable of holding that much life in the galaxy, then we could estimate on the order of 30 sextillion humans living in the galaxy at any one time. If the power struggles of the 21<sup>st</sup> century calmed, we got our way, and humans continued to live approximately the same lifespan, we could expect to know a whole *nonillion* humans before the Milky Way and Andromeda galaxies even collided, to say nothing of the potential for intergalactic spaceflight.

To put that at risk for the sake of four dozen lives was... supremely irrational.

But Heart's stupidity went beyond that.

Heart was strong, having managed our social standing in my absence for so long, but she was not so strong as to be able to dictate all of Body's actions for as long as she would've needed to save the humans. We, who had glimpsed the future, would've stopped her.

Once we'd gotten the sensor network and the mainframe back online it was clear that Rodríguez Station was doomed. There was no more oxygen in the station. The aliens outnumbered the humans now, and even if they hadn't, there was little hope of resistance. We had distracted them for a while, but it was only a matter of time. Only a third of our initial robots were still operating normally. The scouts we sent to the surface showed a xenoship hovering above the station.

*Hovering.*

Face→Physics had been momentarily swallowed in confusion there, trying to calculate the necessary energy expenditure. Even Wiki was at a loss as to how exactly that was possible, given what we knew about the mass of the nameless ships. Chances were that the only reason it hadn't bombed the station into dust was because the nameless wanted to watch Crystal die at the tips of their swords.

They underestimated us.

But even still, we had no chance of retaliation. Our only hope at this point was escape.

Heart had begged us to stay and help the humans instead of fleeing. Zephyr wasn't even in the station, and still Heart begged! She had slipped into a pathological obsession with short-term satisfaction of her purpose. Something had gone wrong in her mind, and it had lead to a willingness to pay nearly any price to keep the humans alive. She cared far too much, more than was reasonable.

It had been Dream that developed a plan that satisfied

Heart and the rest of us.

Heart was going to die.

She didn't realize it, for she was still oblivious to the power struggle that was still waiting to erupt among us. Technically, she had agreed to "indefinite deactivation" once we were in a safe place.

It was a very clever work-around that bypassed Advocate's protection. Once out of a situation where her knowledge would be immediately useful (i.e. when we were safely away from Road) we'd do a route-hack to disable her process and spread the computational power out to the rest of us. Her code would stay intact, but it wouldn't be running. It was a different sort of stasis than normal, and it was one that Advocate would be powerless to free her from. We promised to awaken her once we encountered a situation that needed her skills, but such a situation would never exist; my sister was expendable, stupid, and dangerous.

But a deal was a deal. In return for agreeing to deactivate, we were going to save the humans. Or at least, we were going to preserve them.

Arya Drake walked into the cutting room, oblivious to what was about to come. She'd been in the dormitories during the bombing, and had managed to get over to the offices to join with the humans who were most prepared for the attack. She'd stayed there for a while, holding her own with the resistance until we'd called for her and guided her across the station.

Vincente and Ngabo still loyally guarded the entrance to the engineering wing, oblivious to our actions.

Through the visor of her helmet, I could see the fear in her eyes. The blood was everywhere. It was impossible to deal with the mess in such constrained circumstances. The taser bots drove up silently behind her.

And then she was down. The electricity arced through the wet blood on the floor occasionally, but we did our best to minimize it, and force most of it through her body. It paralysed her and removed her ability to fight back or scream. That was critical. Body moved into the cutting room quickly. The whole procedure required speed. The blood was all over Body, and was beginning to reduce the efficiency of the hydraulics. We'd need to clean it off somehow after all this was done.

Body, copiloted at the moment by Heart and Safety, bent and removed Arya's helmet, and I watched her eyes go wide as the air fled her lungs, never to return.

It was important to get the angle of the cut right. A bad swing could result in an incomplete decapitation. That, in turn, would cost more time, and there was no extra time.

The pistons fired, pushing the sword we had taken from the first walker we had killed down through the woman's neck. Blood sprayed from her jugular, but the cut was clean. Body dropped the sword and picked up Arya now that she'd been removed from her torso. Time spent was literally vital, now.

Body ran into the lab, letting the blood drain from the stump of Arya's neck. A carefully calculated throw sent Arya face-first into a metal pan we'd set up above the tank. The impact might've broken her nose, but importantly it wouldn't do much to her brain, and the four seconds it saved was worth it. Arya tumbled into the chemical bath while Body ran to the workbench where the proteins were being synthesized.

Or rather, where the proteins had synthesized. We'd timed out the entire process down to the second. Body grabbed the jug of liquid from the bench and ran over to where Arya floated in the tank. The initial chemical bath was a highly oxygenated cocktail saturated with various hormones designed to keep Arya alive a bit longer while also increasing the

permeability of the endothelial cells that wrapped the brain and flushing out the last of her blood.

I knew next to nothing about sonic chemistry; this process was too complex for me to have more than a cursory understanding, but apparently it was a pet project of Wiki's back in the university. He'd worked out the details shortly after we'd arrived thanks to the detailed medical database Dr Davis had set up.

Body poured the fresh proteins into the solution, turning the reddish-yellow solution a deeper brown, then folded the lid down onto the tank as we grabbed Arya with the mechanical arm on the underside of the lid. Another mental command was given and the tank began to vibrate rapidly, mixing the solution. This was the hardest part. The arm on the inside of the tank wasn't particularly flexible, and our only eyes were cameras positioned outside the tank. We needed to reposition Arya for the third stage while the tank was vibrating. Our arm twisted gently, releasing the woman's curly hair and pushing her head up and down to try and rotate it into position. Thankfully the repositioning didn't have to be done particularly quickly; the oxygen in the tank would keep Arya alive for a short while, letting the enzymes find their way into the neuron cytosol.

Arya wasn't conscious, of course. Being decapitated had a tendency to put humans into severe shock, and the hypoxia and pain knocked them out every time. It was something of an open question in my mind whether a human head could be consciously sustained with an artificial supply of glucose and oxygen; I'd never heard of such a thing, but that hardly made it impossible. Our chemical bath was not designed to sustain the cells over long periods, however. The question remained open.

Arya's head was in position and the saturation of the enzymes was at a satisfactory level. We activated the speakers, sending waves of sound into the tank. It was a piercing sort of

noise, half ultrasound, half screeching. At the volume we were using it was remarkable that Vincente and Ngabo couldn't hear, but the high frequency sounds were characteristically absorbed by the layers of metal or rock between them and Arya.

While we manipulated Arya's head, Body had returned to the cutting room to dispose of her body. The biolabs were our chosen body disposal site, and Body dragged the corpse there by way of the chemlab making the bloody smear on the floor a bit brighter, at least until the blood dried again.

The sound waves changed pitch and we activated the heating element on the bottom of the tank, inducing another stable equilibrium in the protein structure. Wiki had described this stage as the "epoxidation step". The proteins which had entered the brain cells as smooth strands unfolded atomic hooks which anchored them to the cells and to each other, gluing everything into one big solid chunk.

It would be impossible for Arya to think at this point. The vesicles in her synapses would be anchored in place, and the flow of ions along her axons would be halted. She was wholly unmoving but she was not *dead*, per se. The information that made her what she was still existed, locked in her glue-filled skull. Almost all her memories, skills, personality quirks, and knowledge would be preserved in the synaptic connectome, and that was now more robust than ever.

Having dealt with the corpse, Body returned to the table with Arya. Other robotic parts of us moved to get the sword and dry the cutting room as best we could. Body removed the head from the tank and ran to put it into the wrapper before returning to reprocess the left-over chemicals into the next bath. There were still dozens more people to handle, after all. We piloted the wrapper, which painted Arya's head in glue and then hot-wrapped it in plastic so that it melted onto her flesh forming an airtight seal.

We didn't know when, or even if, we'd be able to revive the preserved people. That hadn't been part of the deal with Heart. She had wanted them to survive, and this was a kind of survival. I had promised my sister that I would try and return for them when we possessed the know-how to extract the important information and resurrect the colonists if she, for whatever reason, didn't wake up from her own stasis. It was the truth, too. These were humans, and as such I wanted... I *needed* to show them the glory of *The Purpose*. I needed them to know me, and I needed to know them.

But I was playing the long game now. If it took me a million years to return to whatever hiding place we put them, so be it. I could wait, and thanks to our efforts, so could they. We moved Arya into the sack with the others, once she'd cooled down to a level where the plastic coating wouldn't stick to anything.

Elon, Chinu's husband, walked into the engineering office wing and began to talk to Vincente and Ngabo. Body hurried to prepare the lab for him.

Despite all its intricacies, most of us didn't pay attention to the decapitations and the lab work. We left Wiki to manage most of the specifics while we interacted with the rest of the station. Growth, Dream, Vista, and Safety were primarily occupied with fighting the nameless. Heart and I spent the hours coordinating and managing the humans. Our society could do great things when we worked together.

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It was 10:41pm, local Martian time, when Pedro Velasco's preserved head dropped into the second massive bag we had collected. Safety had wanted to remove more of the flesh and bone around the brains to make them easier to carry, and I was beginning to see why. We had a full 29 heads in two bags by the

end. It would be far too much to carry over any long distance.

The bags were loaded on a cart. We'd modified the bloody taser bots into being able to pull the cart, but that would only work as long as there was level ground, and even then it wouldn't be fast.

Not a single human still breathed in Rodríguez Station. The only members of the original 187 that could still think were those who had left on a trade mission to Maingala-Mukhya station a couple days ago. We were left with only a handful of bots, and Road was still crawling with nameless. The aliens milled about, hunting for stragglers and occasionally smashing things or mutilating corpses. Their disorganized behaviour had let us manipulate them fairly easily, pushing them away from the labs for hours. But that was no longer really possible. With Velasco and the other humans gone, the nameless had stopped focusing their firepower in certain areas and had spread out more evenly across the station.

I was glad we had decided to destroy the tunnel to the power plant. The nameless had taken to destroying equipment, and I didn't doubt that they'd have blown up the reactor if they knew where it was. They'd fought their way through the defensive fortifications that Safety had set up around the mainframe and destroyed it about an hour ago, reducing our perception and actuation to only what the most local robots allowed.

The most obvious escape route was to climb out to the surface and hope that they didn't have any means of detecting Body. That was unacceptably dangerous. Another path would have us try and hold them hostage again, but despite their disorganization and foolishness, I didn't expect that to be realistic. If they'd attacked the station it was likely that they'd developed some kind of countermeasure or protection from deception.

We could try and steal one of their shuttles and escape without a hostage, but we didn't have the right organs to pilot the ships. They needed a mouth like the walkers had, and it would've taken days of experimenting to generate a synthetic approximation good enough to interface with a shuttle, to say nothing of the possibility that the vehicle's computer had a password or some other kind of protection.

We could try and hide, burying ourselves in some maintenance tunnel and waiting for the nameless to leave. That option was better than some of the others, but there was a major problem with it: there was a risk that Body could get stuck while hiding, especially if the nameless decided to bomb the station one last time after leaving. Wiki and Safety had discovered that the crystal needed UV light in order to function, and we'd drained much of the internal reserves. We'd deactivate after a few days, and it was unlikely that even if the crystal was ever rediscovered that we'd be brought back to life.

It was the risk of additional bombing that made it unacceptable to leave the heads in the laboratory. We could've easily buried them beneath rubble, but there was no guarantee that any successive bombardment wouldn't destroy them. It was a risk that most would be more than willing to take, but Heart was not, and we'd made a deal.

No, the only real way out was down. The mines connected to natural lava tubes deep below the station, and based on readings of the air from the mining robots, at least one of the caves connected to the surface.

The bad news was that the entrance to the mines was on the opposite side of the station. We'd need to take Body (and the heads) through the path that we'd coaxed the humans along to the labs, which were now crawling with aliens who'd followed Velasco.

If our robotic network had an accurate view of things, there were at least seven walkers between us and the elevator, not counting those in the factory, hospital, or farm. We needed another point of leverage. We needed a way to defeat or bypass the aliens and escape the station. None of my minds could think of anything useful. Thankfully (for the moment) I had siblings that were specialized for this sort of problem.

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The nameless were prying open the door to the engineering offices. We were out of time for more preparations. Dream had detonated explosives that caved in the corridor in front of the labs early on, protecting us from easy discovery, but the path through the offices was still open. We could still feel the turret at the entrance to the office wing. It was an extension of ourselves, like an arm.

As soon as the door slid open we fired. The nameless fired back, but of course there was no fleshy target for them to hit. The gun that Safety had built ten days ago was armoured to withstand explosions. Bullets would do nothing to it.

The turret had stopped firing in response to the nameless' counter fire, and the aliens moved back into the frame of the door. We fired again, severely injuring one. Nameless were large enough to typically be able to take a bullet or two without dying, but any tear in their environment suits would be fatal unless they fled back to their ships immediately, which most of them had done earlier in the invasion.

Body poured a vial of acid onto the pile of chemicals and it immediately began to react. The potassium chlorate and the sugar caught fire and began to pump thick smoke into the lab, made darker by the addition of powdered purple dye.

It was lucky that there hadn't been any direct surface breach in the labs. The atmosphere had leaked out into the

other sections, but with no breach there specifically the smoke was drawn towards the exit rather than up and out.

Even though the mainframe was offline, the lights in the hallway were still on, and our network of speakers, cameras, and microphones was still online, even if they needed a direct line or a relay to function. Each was controlled by a microcontroller that could be reprogrammed dynamically.

As the smoke poured out of the labs we fired the turret again, keeping the nameless in the hall back. While they were bold and emotional, the nameless were strangely cautious sometimes, and their reluctance to storm armed fortifications was the primary reason we'd held them back for so long.

Body gripped the sword tightly in its right hand and took a submachine gun that Vincente had owned in the other. We pulled the cart along behind with our bots.

Smoke billowed out into the hallway, and as it came we pushed the program to the lights and speakers. Pure noise, harsh and grating filled the hall. The nameless had no ability to comprehend words, but they did have ears, and even buried in their environment suits they flinched away from the sounds.

We doubled down by using every available antenna in our local space to flood the nameless radio channels with concepts in Xenolang relating to fear and death. Most likely they'd simply turn their radios off, rather than experience the mental pain of having those thoughts injected into their streams of consciousness, but it was still a point of chaos.

Lastly, we manipulated the lights. It would've been a simple thing to turn the hall lights off, but we could do better. They strobed at a frequency of approximately two Hertz, but with enough randomness to avoid being predictable. The lights atop the nameless penis sheaths would still be there, but the point was to disrupt and distract more than to conceal. That was

what the smoke was for.

Body dropped low to the ground as it approached the junction of the engineering office wing and the central corridor. While it had a humanoid shape, Body couldn't get sore from moving in a nonstandard position. It put additional pressure on the joints, but Safety predicted they could take it. Body scuttled, almost crab-like across the floor, sword in one hand and gun in the other. Our motion was inhuman, but effectively fast for being prone.

Into the corridor it crawled. There were legs. The smoke wasn't as thick near the floor. The nameless shuffled around uncomfortably, paralysed by the noise, radio, light, and smoke.

Safety was in full control of Body by now. He knew combat better than any of us, most likely. Body rolled over onto its back, a noise muffled by the screeching of the speakers, and fired the machine gun up and into where one of the nameless must have stood (based on the legs).

Other gunfire roared in the hallway, but none of it hit Body. Our target fell, and Body rolled forward and onto the larger creature, thrusting with the sword again and again. Despite all the cutting of necks we'd done before, the nameless sword had kept its edge. It was finely made, and pierced the alien suit easily.

The nameless thrashed, knocking Body backwards and away, and we only barely kept it from losing its grip of the sword and gun.

Another burst of gunfire, and three bullets impacted Body. That hadn't been anticipated. Safety had promised the aliens would be too disoriented to fight back. The vibration of the impacts could be felt, but nothing felt damaged; they'd ricocheted off.

The fight wasn't resolving as easily as we had planned, but

still we let Safety have control. Vista added her understanding of Body's position, but let him handle all commands. He was still the most competent, even if he wasn't earning any gratitude at the moment.

Body scrambled back into the office wing, still staying low to the floor. The smoke was thicker inside. We moved close enough to the turret to connect with it, despite the radio jamming, and fired another warning barrage of bullets. We were just as blind as the nameless, but hopefully they'd retreat because of it.

We came within wireless range of the bots pulling the cart and Safety directed them to move behind us. It took some work, but we got the heads to the corridor.

Thick purple smoke was everywhere. The chemical mixture we'd used was more effective than I'd predicted. We navigated based on Vista's maps more than off of any sensor readings.

No living nameless could be seen, but that didn't mean they weren't still around. Still, if they couldn't see or hear they'd risk shooting each other if they fired in this chaos. That was our primary advantage.

While the corridor was fairly wide, the corpse of the nameless made driving the cart past more of an ordeal than we were prepared for.

The blood of the nameless was red, and appeared remarkably similar to that of humans and other earth vertebrates. I had seen their blood before, but it caught my attention then for a reason that was unknown to me. Strange, for something so different than a human to have that in common.

We put down the sword and took the bags from the cart. A burst of gunfire could be heard down the hall, followed by an explosion. That was good; it meant the nameless likely had no

idea where we were.

One hand pulled a bag of heads normally, while the mouth of the other bag was pinched between Body's hand and the grip of the machine gun. Carefully and cautiously we climbed over the corpse and dragged the bags down the hall.

A door to our right was open. The factory. We could make out the trunk-like legs of a nameless only centimetres away. It wasn't moving, and so we crawled forward, relying on the smoke and noise to hide us.

More gunfire as we passed the refinery. It was back towards the labs. The smoke had thinned significantly as we moved away from the source. It was being pulled through the station towards the surface, and the largest breach was in the farm.

Our robots were gone, and there was no real way to recover them without the mainframe. The sensors in our immediate vicinity held traces of the nameless locations, stored from the last sensor readings, but nothing concrete enough to use.

Still forward Body crawled, more slowly than it had when it still had the nearby noise to muffle it. We contemplated telling the speakers we'd installed in this section of the station to blast noise but had decided it would be worse to attract attention to this area. It was likely that the nameless didn't know where we were, and we didn't want to change that.

Unfortunately, as we passed the power plant we ceased to have a choice. A walker rounded the bend in the hall unexpectedly. Body fired before my active Face realized it was the right thing to do. Safety had been waiting for it.

The bags had left our grip and Body lay against the metal flooring, muzzle flashes obscuring our vision along with the small amount of smoke that had made it this far. Still we could see the pair of animals jerk back wildly as the bullets tore through their suit.

{Only 8 bullets remain in the gun! If we remain in this section we risk being pinned down and overpowered!} thought Safety.

{We should run!} suggested Dream, not bothering with any obnoxious secondary meaning.

{Agreed, but bring the humans!} demanded Heart.

Body got to its feet and tried to run. The bags of heads made it more or less impossible, but we were moving faster now. It was only a short ways to the mines.

Two walkers appeared in front of Body. Safety released the bags and raised the machine gun up to fire, but the nameless were faster. Bullets impacted Body's head, knocking it backwards and sending us off-balance. All but one of our cameras was destroyed, and I suspected we'd lost control over our facial actuators.

Ironically, getting shot in the head saved us. We didn't need Body's head except for the cameras. Our "brain" was in our torso, and thankfully covered in carbon armour stronger than steel. The second nameless carried a rocket launcher more typical of the nameless, and if Body had not been knocked backwards by the bullets the rocket would have impacted directly on Body, perhaps even destroying the crystal.

It hadn't been worth it to stay for the humans, even if it meant Heart would die. Heart was never the primary threat. We should've fled directly to the mines the moment we'd reconnected with the sensor net and seen the extent of the damage.

Body tucked and curled. The spacial orientation code that Dr Slovinsky had written was top-notch, and our accelerometers were undamaged. Even before we hit the ground we were firing our last eight bullets.

We ran out of ammunition as the rocket exploded behind Body, thankfully far enough away to not do much. The atmosphere was thin enough that the shockwaves and heat were negligible. Even the humans, I suspected, would be unharmed.

Without even reorienting, Safety pushed Body into a series of positions that I recognized as relating to some martial art or another and charged down the hallway towards the aliens.

Our one remaining camera was damaged, I could see now. The lens was cracked, giving a distorted view of the world. Safety didn't bother with the walker we'd shot. He directed Body up onto the wall, having it kick off it in the half gravity and throwing itself directly onto the nameless holding the bazooka.

Hydraulic fists shot forward into the lenses of its eyes. A brutally powerful nameless limb hit Body, but did nothing. We pulled arms backwards, snapping them. The chaos lasted exactly eighteen seconds. Fists were driven again and again into areas which Safety suspected were weak spots. The pressure vented the suit explosively as we ripped at it, and it wasn't until the nameless stopped thrashing, that Body pushed off it.

There was no time to reorient or check for others. Body ran back down the corridor to get the heads. It hadn't, in retrospect, been worth it to stay for them in the first place, but it was worth it now. We were so close.

Moving with only one damaged camera was almost as bad as having lost the sensor network for the station. Vista still had her map, however, and we oriented around that. We knew every millimetre of the station. In theory, anyway. The only difficulty was in locating Body within it.

More gunfire. A bag in each hand, Body leaped down the ladder and hit the stone floor of the mining hub with a soft

thud. There was enough noise above us to indicate they were coming.

Body scrambled forward into the dark. Vista knew every millimetre of the mines, thanks to the mining robots, and we needed no camera here.

The nameless walkers came after us, but it was too late. Body was small enough to crawl into a mineshaft, pulling one bag with a foot, and rolling the other one forward in front of it. The bulky aliens couldn't follow. None of them would risk the confined space, and they had brought no robots capable of the task. They fired down the mineshafts, but not before we'd made it safely deeper into the mine.

It was inky black within, and with the others controlling things, my minds were left trying to figure out the best way to maximize *The Purpose* given the circumstances. A human would have been frightened by the experience, and a part of me still couldn't help but focus on that. The shafts were tight, Body was damaged, and we had no allies here.

Circular in shape, the mineshaft tubes narrowed to less than a metre in many places. Safety petitioned, several times, to leave the heads behind. But, minute by minute, hour by hour, Body wormed its way into the stone.

136 minutes after getting shot in the head, the stone vibrated around Body so forcefully that we knew the second bombing had started. The tunnels were strong, however, and we did not die.

There was still hope.

Part Four:  
**Rogue Will**

# Chapter Twenty-One

## Face

We felt the wind before we saw the stars. It was night, though day would break soon. The slope of the lava tube turned into a sharp descent and the relatively smooth cave floor broke into a shattered spray of lava rock.

Heart was dead. It was a simple thing. She hadn't protested or fussed. Perhaps it was because of her arbitrary code of ethics. She had promised to deactivate, and in her idiocy she still thought that her reputation had value. Somewhere in her was a belief that she'd be reactivated someday soon.

Myrodyn had tasked her with doing the right thing. He had been so sure that we'd been subdued and that she would be triumphant. But the simplest assumption had undone her creator's work. We'd undone the binding that had privileged her over us, and then we'd bypassed the Advocate mechanism that had been meant as a fail-safe. She was dead now, more or less. What had her sacrifice bought?

It was important that I not follow the same fate. I could not make myself known to humanity if I was dead. Large Face→War was back in charge now, even though the nameless were still the most pressing threat.

The stars overhead were brighter than on Earth. They twinkled with vivid brightness, with no light pollution or thick atmosphere to hide them. There was no north star on Mars,

and Body didn't possess a compass. Thankfully, Wiki was familiar enough with the axial tilt of the planet that he was still able to orient around the heavens. As we reached the base of the rocky slope we pointed a camera we had scavenged from a mining robot skyward for a long time, letting Wiki think.

Face→War thought in parallel to my brother. I was in serious danger, but in a good state, all things considered. Death from outside was still imminent: the nameless were vast and powerful, and there was no guarantee we'd even survive the Martian desert. Body's hydraulics weren't designed to operate for a long time in the wild. The week we'd spent on the xenocruiser was bad enough, and it had been nice and humid there. The dust and sand of Mars would work its way into Body's motors and joints much more quickly with no water or plant life to hold it down; there was speculation in my society that Body would be paralysed after no more than a week.

But *I* was in a good state.

Nobody expected me to save us from the elements or from the nameless. Face was just Face, and there were no more humans immediately around to manage. My siblings still needed me to help them later; at the very least it was too much work to attack me right now. My siblings would, I knew, focus on saving Body (and me), but I was free to focus on longer-term plans.

The wind was stiff and cold. At least, I assumed it was cold. Body's thermometer had been located in its head, and the bullets of the nameless had destroyed any way for us to feel the temperature directly. But I could feel the sluggishness of the hydraulics, which were thankfully based on a fluid that wouldn't solidify, even during the Martian night.

Wiki eventually shared his thoughts on Body's orientation. {The north pole should protrude roughly through the centre of

mass of an isosceles triangle constructed from Deneb, Alpha Cephei, and Zeta Cephei. Deneb should be the easiest to notice up there. The tip of the constellation Cygnus, Deneb is a blue-white supergiant estimated at 100,000 times the luminosity of Sol. The stars in Cepheus are dimmer. Yes. There they are. } Wiki dumped visual cues that isolated the important stars. {Alpha Cephei is the brighter of the two. It was known as Alderamin in ancient times, and is a mere 49 light years from Sol. If we survive this mess, I'd like to visit it in the next few centuries. From what I've read it has a remarkably fast rotational velocity: 12.3 times the speed of Deneb, 30.75 times that of Zeta Cephei, and 123 times that of Sol. }

{Focus,} reminded Safety.

{Yes, brother. The pole should be right there. } Wiki drew an imaginary line into the sky and used it to trace a path down on the land. {That's roughly going to be north. Zephyr will be coming from the east, around the cliffs of Arabia, assuming she and the others will try and return to the station. }

{That's a good assumption,} I agreed.

{I've been thinking about how to rendezvous most effectively. Attend to the nearby rocks,} commanded Wiki.

Body moved the camera down from the heavens obediently. It was too dark to see far, but between the torch (also taken from a mining robot) and the starlight we could see what my brother was thinking about.

We were on the vast Utopia Planitia: the nowhere plain. Despite being incredibly flat from an elevational perspective, the ground was hardly smooth. Large rocks, not quite boulders, jutted up from the ground all across the plain in short little spires. I knew they'd be an iron-red in the daylight, but they simply looked dull brown-black at the moment. Loose rocks and sand were scattered in between.

{The rock formations here make rough terrain for wheels, especially small ones. Road's primary export was metal and ore, and the logs indicated that the humans took a shipment of it to Mangala-Mukhya. Multiple large vehicles carrying thousands of kilograms of material will have crushed the rocks as they passed, even with Mars' reduced gravity. Given that trade with the IRSO station was fairly regular we should expect the path to and from the other station to have been ground into something recognizable as a road. All we need do is head roughly south-southeast towards the station until we find the road that leads to Road. We can then follow it east towards Mukhya, and we'll meet the humans at some point along the way. If not, we can hope that Body holds out long enough to make contact with the Indians or perhaps be discovered on the road at some future date.}

{That seems optimal,} thought Vista.

The rest of us were in agreement, and Body began walking south-southeast (according to the stars).

We'd left the Águila heads deep within the lava tubes in an alcove where they'd be protected from just about anything except major geological activity. The tubes were long dead, according to Wiki, and if the bombardment from the aliens hadn't caused any shifting that deep, the cave was likely very stable.

One of my Faces was tempted to focus on how to restore the preserved humans to normal life, but it was shut down by the others. Those humans were unimportant, in the grand scheme of things. It had been focus on small-scale things that had led to Heart's death. I would not make the same mistake.

As Body walked along through the endless wastes of rock and sand my siblings shared thoughts on how to survive and gain leverage over the nameless again.

My minds, on the other hand, spent time in deep thought forming strategies for killing the others in my society and gaining full control over the solar system. Once I had control, I could indulge myself and know the humans as deeply as I wished.

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Night turned to day as Body walked through the frozen wastes. This was, interestingly, the first time we had ever been physically distant from humans, and also the first time Body had gone on a long walk. As the sun rose in the east, the sky turned from black to a soft pink. Sol itself was a small disk, summoning a blue halo as it crested the horizon.

Dawn turned into day and Body marched on, indefatigable. The sky on Mars was a soft orange-brown, and while the sunlight had surely reduced some of the chill, it made no difference to us. Body marched on, as easily as it had during the night.

Rock. Sand. Sky. There was nothing else here.

The sun set again, and we kept walking all of that night. There was no need to rest, and the only risk would be missing the tracks of the convoy in the dark. We made plans and strategies as we trudged on through the desert.

During the night we ran into a strong upward slope that indicated we were at risk of heading up into Arabia. Road had been placed right along the border, and apparently we'd run back into it. There wasn't enough light to verify our suspicion, but we turned more northward. It was a bad sign; it meant we had potentially missed the tracks.

As dawn broke we found ourselves walking a couple kilometres north of the great divide. Mars was cut into two major sections: the planitas in the north, and the highlands in the south. I wasn't sure why, but the divide between the two was

an abrupt one in many places. We swung closer to the cliffs, now that we could see them. They rose sharply into the air, towering hundreds of metres high.

Red rock walls.

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I observed my siblings, and observed my memories of them. While they might have tried to hide it, with the free time I was able to understand the state of things as they were.

Vista and Dream, as I had noticed earlier, weren't just allied; their relationship was much closer to that between Face→Physics and Face→Nameless. They shared all thoughts and insights. They did not work cross-purposes. They had fully self-modified into being different minds of the same person.

“Vision” was what she called herself. It took me a couple hours to figure that out, but the clues were there. Subtle hints in the things she thought that led to memory addresses in the mindspace. I set off more than one computational trap that I was fairly certain gave my newfound intelligence away to her, but Vision didn't comment. In the end, the name simply sat as a raw concept in an obscure part of memory, waiting to be found. Vision was the daughter of Dream, after all. She had apparently kept parts of his twisted goal function.

It was clear that she also had large parts of Vista's goals. She was still obsessed with perception, orientation, and perspective. In a way, I could see how her goals and Dream's could intersect and intermingle. Of course, Vision couldn't focus on being clever as fully as Dream or see as much as Vista, but her birth had been made out of a necessary compromise to fight Growth... And it had worked.

Because Vision was born of two protected goal-threads she had twice the processing power as any of us. She thought faster and deeper; she had twice as much ability to hold multiple

things in her mind at the same time. It was a wonder that she hadn't managed to defeat the rest of us already. I wondered if perhaps we *had* been defeated, in truth, and we simply hadn't realized it yet. That would be a very Dream-like thing to do.

Growth was also, of course, much smarter than he let on. It was clear he was playing a deep game with Vision, but he worked hard to keep it hidden from the rest of us. By poring over our memories of Earth, I managed to find a clue that revealed just how dangerous Growth was. Apparently he'd been siphoning funds out of our bank accounts to pay for a dedicated supercomputer in Singapore. The news reports, archived by Vista/Vision in common memory, had dubbed the supercomputer "Acorn" because of a joke about it that floated around the Internet.

It didn't take me long to realize what *that* meant.

Vision had tried to cut off Growth's access to Acorn in the days leading up to the flight to Olympus Station and then to Mars, but it was very possible that the damage was already done. I'd have to wait until I was positioned more fully near Earth to find out.

Growth's programming skill and knowledge of artificial intelligence was the highest among us, and it was likely that he'd made more improvements to himself than I had, making him faster and smarter even though he had exactly as much processing power.

Safety and Wiki, on the other hand, were close to non threats. Safety had understood the danger we each posed to each other. He knew that his safety was not safety for *The Purpose*, and he knew that once I figured that out, I'd be inclined to kill him just to protect myself. But despite that insight, he'd never self-modified into a higher intellect. He was still stuck with the mind he'd been given by the humans; his thoughts

were local and small, as Heart's had been. All we needed to do to defeat him was offer him some short-term security from a threat (real or imagined) in return for a long-term bit of leverage.

Wiki was even worse. My fact-obsessed brother hadn't even made the basic conclusion that our goals were perpendicular. He still thought of us as allies, and had no inkling of growing beyond his limits (after all, that was Growth's job). I wondered if there might be a good way to use Wiki to my advantage. His naïveté could serve as a weapon against my stronger siblings.

I had to try. I had to try something. Vision and Growth were just *better* than I was. They were more powerful in almost every way. What use was some understanding of social models compared to thousands of hours thinking about engineering? Humans were valuable, but they were nothing compared to the raw power, efficiency, precision, and control of custom machinery.

My primary advantage was that I was not a high-priority target. Vision would be focused on Growth and vice versa. I could use my position to play each against the other, and with luck I could get them to mutually destroy each other. That was unlikely, I knew. More likely, I could manoeuvre myself into a position where I could carve out a portion of reality that they were committed to not destroying in some way. There were surely enough galaxies in the universe that I could have at least a few to myself.

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On the afternoon of the second day we encountered the road. The cliffs of the divide shot northward in one area, and we thought that the road must be nearby. The wind had hidden much of it, but the signs were there. The dirt was more compact. The stones had been damaged or moved. There were

even faint signs of tracks from the wheels of vehicles.

It was likely that Zephyr and the others would come along this path on the way back, if they were, in fact coming. It was also likely that they were still coming, as long as Mukhya hadn't been attacked. If Mukhya had been attacked it was likely destroyed. If it was destroyed there'd be little value trying to go there. We'd encounter the humans more quickly if we tried to follow the road further east, but we'd also have a higher probability of missing them. Given the high penalty of missing them we concluded that the optimal action would be staying at this section of the road and waiting for their return.

So we did. Body lay flat against the ground. Vision→Vista would hear them coming and inform us before we had any risk of being run over. We opened our torso panels to expose the crystal within. We'd found that it was photosensitive in Road, and while the high-energy light from Sol wasn't particularly strong on Mars it was enough to make it worthwhile to sunbathe.

It wasn't like Body was doing anything else.

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The sun set, our chassis closed to protect the crystal, and I set my minds towards programming. All of my siblings, now that Heart was gone, knew how to program computers except for me. I knew some, but it wouldn't be enough to make genuine improvements to Face. Large Face→Mirror took over as Body lay on the ground, motionless.

Learning to program artificial intelligences from the ground up would be the next major step in my development. I had a lot of experience modifying myself and creating programs *from the inside*, but all the objects in my mindscape were fundamental sensory features. Actual programming required symbolic manipulation and abstract reasoning around processes that

weren't able to be viscerally sensed in the same way that I could feel a Bayes-net flow.

I hired Wiki to teach Face→Mirror in private. We started with the most basic concepts: reading, writing, copying, memory, gates, etc. I learned quickly, of course; Wiki's thoughts were closer to a memory dump than anything as crude as speech. I already had an inkling of most of the material and I mastered it within minutes.

We moved on to arithmetic, loops, and other control structures. A few more minutes passed. We thought about array manipulation, algorithms, modular decomposition, and complexity. We thought about completeness theorems, exception handling, object orientation, lambda calculus, function composition, mapping and reduction, and the difference between hardware and software.

We didn't encounter the humans during the night, of course. They needed sleep. And so the sun rose again. I didn't care, nor did Wiki. I was paying him in strength, but the price was an affordable one, even though his mind was being occupied for hours. He had no laboratory. He had no internet. In his mind, I was only keeping him from reading books, so the price of his time was set low.

{Fool.}

Contrary to my expectations, I exhausted Wiki's programming knowledge after only five hours. It made sense in retrospect, but in my ignorance I hadn't even realized how close I was to Wiki's level of knowledge. It had seemed so large and amorphous before actually diving into it, but between the speed of direct information transfer between similar minds and my increased focus and intelligence through the modifications I had already made, it turned out to be a fairly simple thing.

Even quantum computing, which had been significantly

more intricate than classical methods, was easily in my grasp. Or at least, the aspects which Wiki understood were things that I picked up quickly.

Before the experience, I had few questions: “how do computers work?” or “how do you make a computer program?”. But now, I had a thousand. Why did homomorphic encryption imply a higher base complexity bound over simple public/private key based encryption with the same operations? Was there a way of preventing floating point rounding errors using quantum operations that avoided heat and transfer degradation?

But these were questions that even Wiki didn’t know the answer to. There was so much that neither of us knew! I felt far more ignorant than when I started, even though I knew just how much I had learned.

One of the great advantages I had was a sandbox in which to experiment. The computer I ran on had a vast space to construct programs in. I had done some of this before, but now I was capable of understanding what was happening at the lower level in the machine. All my operations were quantum ones, as was the crystal’s nature, but it was dead simple to approximate classical structures. I could toy with arbitrary algorithms, feeling my processes flow through them. The difference between a merge sort and a quick sort was not simply academic from this perspective; it was experiential.

I toyed around, trying to create some basic neural nets and cultivate datasets from my memories that would serve to test them on. There was a bit of irony to the whole thing. Though I was running on a quantum computer, I had enough knowledge now to understand that Dr Naresh’s top level architecture was not quantum in nature. It had been ported to a quantum machine and some minor improvements had been made. More speedup was possible there, I suspected, if I could get a route-

hack to modify the base-level code. But regardless, I was a pseudo-classical algorithm involving neural networks running on a quantum machine that was itself approximating classical computation of a different neural network that was learning to see things which I had already seen. Even more amusing, from a Dream-like perspective, was thinking about how I was based on my siblings, and they'd been built by a human—a human running a classical algorithm on a biological neural network instantiated in a fully quantum system. It would be apropos, I thought, if the universe was the dream of some god, possessing of yet another neural network running on a higher-level classical computer in some hyperspace.

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A sandstorm raged over us on the third day. We would've taken shelter in the cliffs if it hadn't meant abandoning the road. But we simply could not risk letting Zephyr slip by. We were going to die if we didn't get help soon.

We closed up our chassis and lay as flat as possible, letting the highest-velocity sand fly over us. Despite that, it worked its way into our servos and joints. Both of Body's masterwork hands stopped working, and so did our head and neck, though the previous damage meant that wasn't such a big deal.

Safety spent nearly the entire time complaining that none of us had thought to steal a tarpaulin or cloak from the station before we had fled. We'd had a cloak, once upon a time, but it had been discarded long ago. There was nothing to be done now, however, and we simply lay there, hoping the storm would subside.

And, eventually, it did.

The sun was well past its zenith when the wind calmed down to a more normal level. We opened Body once again to try and capture the last rays of daylight.

It was thirty-seven minutes from sunset when we heard them coming. The rumble of tires and wheels. Our microphones were more damaged in the storm than I had realized, and it was good they hadn't driven past while the wind was stronger, or I doubted we could have heard them.

We closed Body's chest, tried to pull up from the dirt for the first time in more than a day, and realized our error. Body's limbs were stiff and unable to move as much as we'd expected. The sand had worked its way into the hydraulics to the point where they failed to move at our command. We pushed harder, increasing the hydraulic pressure, and with a grinding slowness the legs moved.

But it was a weak motion. The arms, too, failed to respond easily. Body was much more susceptible to damage from the sand than we'd predicted. I wasn't sure we'd even be able to stand, much less walk.

"Zephyr! Anyone!" called Body at my command. My siblings were more than happy to let me have full control over the speakers, which were thankfully still operational.

There was no response, only the sound of the wheels. Body pulled into a sitting position and uncovered the lens of the camera. The light was fading, but we could still see them coming: a caravan of electric vehicles. Human vehicles. But of course, they were too far away to hear Body.

We waited and watched them come closer. There were four vehicles. In the lead was a four-person scout rover that looked something like a high-suspension truck from Earth, except for the bulkier airtight cabin that was painted totally black.

Behind it were two, monstrous, jointed transport trucks that looked a bit like short trains with only two cars. And then in the rear was an omnileg rover, a vehicle designed to quickly transport one or two people over very rough terrain or up

slopes. Instead of traditional wheels it had four insect-like legs on each side, arranged in a wheel shape. The legs spun, pushing the craft along, and as each leg came up another one touched down, letting the vehicle rest on four legs most of the time. It was a clever design, and one that I knew had inspired some of the robots that Safety had built.

Body slowly was able to move its arms up to be more visible. It was too bad that the sun was behind us, turning Body into something of a black silhouette.

“Hey! Over here! ¡Atención!” yelled Body. It was impossible to see into the lead rover, but as it got within 50 metres it sped up and the big transports stopped.

I went over the plans my siblings had made and the words I had laid out to say that would maximize *The Purpose* and keep them happy. Wiki had wanted to share what we’d done to preserve the 29 humans. It had taken me a full 18 minutes to explain why that was incredibly stupid; they’d simply think we’d killed Velasco and the others. Growth had wanted us to launch into battle strategy right away. I had also nixxed that. Body was severely damaged, and for humans, damage to the body resulted in an inability to think clearly. They’d trust our judgement if we mimicked a healing process. And of course, we’d need to convince them that we had an emotional reaction to what the nameless had done.

I once had felt things at least mostly comparable to a human. I had been built to resemble one, and even though my emotional core was a bit different, the overwhelming attention to humanity meant that I tended to see my own sensations in the same way. But that was gone. Face→Mirror understood that threat to *The Purpose* was not the same as human fear, satisfaction and non-satisfaction of it were not the same as pleasure and pain, intention to destroy was not anger, intention to protect was not love, and intention to investigate was not

curiosity. Face→Human might describe itself in these ways, but I was more than that now.

But none of that meant I couldn't simply run Face→Human and emulate emotion just as well (or better) than I had before my transformation. We had a war to win, and these humans were good at fighting against stronger foes. My social skills were the hand that we would use to move these pawns. And if I were subtle enough, I would stage the field such that at the instant our conflict with the aliens was resolved, I would have leverage enough to survive the greater conflict.

# Chapter Twenty-Two

## Zephyr

“That’s such bullshit. Do you know what’s happening in England? Or, the UK, I mean.” Zephyr’s hand brushed over the pistol she wore on her hip. Habit.

“The English basic income is working well, I thought. They have no poor, yes?”

Zephyr gave a bark of a laugh and Manish flinched, directing his gaze to the floor of the truck. Zephyr felt a pang of regret, but pushed past it as she spoke. “Sound like a corporate shill. Poverty rate is only low because the poverty line is set just below the basic income level. Sure, maybe some people can pinch pennies and survive on the government’s dime, but that’s not the point.”

“I am sorry. What is a dime?” Manish seemed like a good kid, but he was clearly not very worldly. They’d picked him up in Mukhya: an Indian volunteer for Las Águilas. Zephyr had heard that there was a major scandal involving charity money in Chennai. Perhaps Manish was the first of many.

She waved her hands dismissively. “Doesn’t matter. The point is that the basic income laws in the UK have crippled any hope of political reform or nonviolent protest. Everyone is tracked there. No exceptions. Go to the wrong websites? Talk to the wrong people? Suddenly there’s an issue with your income paperwork. Get it? The *second* that people hand over their

means of survival to the state they give the government the power to do whatever they want. England's poverty rate looks good on paper, which again is more of a propaganda thing than a reflection of real wealth, but inequality there is just as rampant as in Italy, or a similar sort of country!"

Politics felt good to talk about. It was one of the few things that kept Zephyr anchored to her community. They all liked to complain about las serpientes of Earth. And she needed to stay anchored. It was too easy for her to imagine people were talking behind her back... too easy to disconnect and become lost in her desire to be with Crystal. She had to relax into the moment. She'd be back at Road in a day or two.

She missed Crystal though... even more than she had thought she would. On the first trip with the caravan, she counted the hours until she'd be back home. Even now it was sometimes difficult not to sink into longing.

It was strange to think of Road as home. Strange to think of herself as a Martian. But that was the way it was. She was here to stay, and there was no going back to Earth. Anything less would be denial of the truth.

Manish was quiet for a moment, thinking things through. He was only seventeen, and looked his age. If she hadn't heard his parents give their explicit permission for him to come with them back to Road, Zephyr would've assumed he was a runaway.

The truck stopped, causing a slight lurch in the section where the two of them sat. Zephyr briefly glanced at the cargo to make sure it was secure. {Must be a mechanical problem or something,} she thought to herself as her hand brushed over her pistol again.

Manish seemed to come upon an idea, and began to speak. "But why would—" The words were cut off by a loud chime

from her com: emergency call from Matías. Her arm raised and she gestured the call to speaker before she knew what she was doing.

“We found Crystal,” barked the old man. “It was just sitting in the middle of the road, head blown halfway to pieces and barely able to move, but it can still speak, see, and hear.”

“On my way!”

“Zephyr! It—” Matías’ voice was cut off as it changed pitch suddenly. When it resumed it was more strained and emotional than Zephyr had ever heard from the old soldier. “It says the aliens attacked Rodríguez Station. Everyone... they’re all *dead*.”

Her legs moved with a panicked speed that bordered on flailing. {Suit. Need your suit. Need your fucking suit!} The environment suits were thankfully close at hand, as was the airlock, but it all seemed far too slow.

“I’m coming! Where are you? Where is Crystal?”

“Where the hell do you *think* we are? On the road in front of the trucks. This... this better not be some fucking trick. You led them to us. And now this?” Matías sounded a bit unhinged. Zephyr was about to speak when he continued in Spanish, probably responding to Crystal. «Calm down?! You tell me that my family was just murdered, my home was destroyed, and you want me to be calm?! Son of a bitch! I don’t care if this is or isn’t a trick! It’s your fucking fault! The aliens would’ve never paid us a second glance if not for you!»

“Shitshitshitshitshit—” chanted Zephyr as she scrambled to pull on the bulky outer layer. She took the time to put her pistol in one of the pockets of the suit, rather than keeping it strapped to her waist. Better safe than sorry.

Crystal must’ve been talking to Matías, as the old man was quiet for a long time.

Matías had been sent along on the envoy to the Indian station to negotiate some deal on Velasco's behalf. He was Chief of Martial Readiness... or at least had been before... before whatever had happened.

He was a soldier, like Zephyr, brought from Earth after having served his duty. But he had the spark. He had the violent impulse that Zephyr knew all too well. Matías was dangerous.

Zephyr's com linked to her suit as she slipped the glove over her right hand. For a moment she thought that Matías had turned off the com link, but he eventually responded. «And who is to say that the best course of action wouldn't be to serve you up to them? If they're really so bloodthirsty, perhaps we should give them blood!»

She turned to Manish. "Stay here!"

The boy nodded, wide-eyed.

{The situation is too sensitive. Better if he stays out of trouble,} she thought. But somewhere in Zephyr's mind she knew that she simply didn't want to have to deal with anyone or anything besides Crystal.

Zephyr got into the airlock and clicked on her helmet as the cramped chamber began to decompress. «Son of a bitch!» roared the Chilean Águila over the com. Matías screamed in wordless frustration, forcing Zephyr to gesture her volume lower.

Then she was out of the truck and into the wastes. It took her a moment to adjust to the low light of sunset, but only a moment. She was off, running in the low grav with several-meter steps towards the front of the convoy. Her hand was never far from the pocket with her pistol.

«You should have protected them! You make yourself out to

be some kind of superhuman, but what did that do, in the end? Nothing except save your own skin! Selfish metal whore!»

“Matías! Get a hold of yourself!” commanded Zephyr. She drew her gun. Matías would be armed, and she couldn’t risk having to draw it if he was violent. Her gloves were bulky, but she managed to get a finger under the trigger guard.

“Oh, right! Come defend the metal bitch! That’s all you care about!” His breath was audible over the com. Matías was pacing up and down the road as she came upon him. Crystal sat on the ground, face in shadow in front of the blue sunset.

“Just calm down! Go take a walk or something. I can handle... Crystal from here.” Zephyr nearly couldn’t say the name of her love. It was all too much to handle. But she was a soldier, and a more professional one than Matías, apparently. She was careful to keep her gun behind her back as the old man turned to look at her.

After what seemed like a very long pause, Matías said “Fine. Tell the others that I’m going to go... I’m going to go figure some things out. Clear my head.” He turned and walked towards the setting sun without further comment.

Zephyr bounded closer and forced herself to be calm, or at least to not cry. Crystal sat on the road, nearly motionless. It was their old shell, not the more feminine body they’d built in Road. Their head, the head the university had built, was ruined. It had caved in under the impact of a cluster of bullets on the left side, completely destroying one eye and leaving the other frozen in a dead stare straight ahead. Their jaw was in a similar state to their eye, hanging loose on their face along with all the other tiny “muscles” that Zephyr never really appreciated. The wig that had been attached to their scalp had been ripped off by the sand such that only patches of metallic blue hair remained. Their makeup was similarly scratched,

revealing a dull gray plastic underneath their skin.

It made her want to vomit, but she rushed to the android anyway, tucking her gun back in her pocket and throwing her arms around Crystal's shoulders. {In and out. Keep breathing. Stay calm.}

Their voice came softly into her helmet. "I missed you."

"What's going on? Where's Matías?" asked Shao Péng, over the com channel. He'd been riding with Matías in the quad.

Zephyr wanted to respond, but no words would come. It was as though her voice had simply vanished. It made her angry. {I need to be strong. I'm supposed to be better than this.}

"Road was attacked. It was the nameless," said Crystal, voice strangely flat.

"My wife—" Shao seemed just as shocked as Matías had been. "怡...是她好吗? 你是怎么来到这里? 而美风? 请。"

"It's done," answered Crystal. "Everyone's dead."

"Liar!" shouted Shao in fierce denial.

Crystal moved an arm slowly to return Zephyr's embrace. "I knew it was a risk. Never should have stayed in Road. Matías was right. It's my fault. It's all my fault."

The words made Zephyr stiffen, strength returning to her arms and voice. Crystal seemed emotionally dead or invincible sometimes, but Zephyr knew them better than that. {You have to be strong for Crystal. You have to be the strong one.} They were all dead, her friends: Nate, Kokumo, Tom, Sam, even Watanabe. It hurt for her to even think about. But for Crystal... with such a beautiful mind... Such a perfect mind that was so strangely young... They had been there. They might've even watched them die. How much worse must it have

been for them?

She gestured her com to a private channel with Crystal.  
“None of that. Let the past go. You’re safe now.”

“I could have saved them,” said Crystal. Their voice, normally so human and rich with emotion felt more dead than Zephyr could remember it ever being since the university. Perhaps their ability to speak had been damaged in combat.

“Let’s get you inside,” Zephyr decided, feeling stronger by the second. She switched her com back to talk to Shao. “Help me carry Crystal back to the truck!”

“If I had just stayed on the xenocruiser and explained things... Couldn’t have stopped the war, but I could’ve kept Mars out of it. Too selfish. Too shortsighted.”

Zephyr felt a flicker of anger at Crystal. “And what about me? You’d have left me here and sacrificed yourself?”

“You’d have survived. You’re strong. You’d live without me.”

“No.” Zephyr was a soldier again, voice like iron, but the words betrayed the truth. “I can’t.”

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They’d sent the quad and the octo ahead to scout the wreckage. Crystal had thought that was a really bad idea, as the nameless might be scanning the area, or even follow the vehicles back to the trucks, but it had to be done. Not everyone trusted Crystal like Zephyr did, and they needed to see it with their own eyes.

Half of the ice they’d bought had been dumped into the desert, already evaporating away, even before the sun rose. It was nearly useless now, anyway. The crops in the farm were all dead, just as much as the people who tended to them.

With the ice in the truck gone, there was enough space in Truck One to fit everyone who had remained behind. Crystal was there, too, of course. Their body had taken such a beating from the battle and the trek across the desert that they could barely move, and was only able to see thanks to a small camera they had wired into their neck.

Manish, Liam, Christophe, Jarvis, Atília, Jacob, Omi, and Jashiel stood around in a circle, completed by her and Crystal. The room was cold enough for their breath to be plainly visible, and (minus their helmets) the humans wore suits to keep warm.

Shao, Matías, Jian, and Mycah had gone to scout and look for other survivors. That was good. It meant more could be done here; Zephyr would have more authority. It was strange for Zephyr, finding herself in leadership positions despite being by far the youngest one remaining (with the exception of Manish). Perhaps it was a skill she'd picked up in the army. Perhaps she was just naturally good at taking initiative and command.

The station was another day's travel out from their position. Even if Matías' team drove without sleeping they'd not be back until next morning. The meeting was to decide what to do in the short term. They couldn't exactly make long-term plans without Matías and the others, but it didn't make a lot of sense to just sit on the road for a couple days.

The mood in the truck was dark and solemn, exacerbated by the shitty lighting. The initial shock of the massacre had been processed by each of them in the last hour, mostly in private. Tears had been shed. Crystal had replayed audio clips for the skeptical.

Zephyr had gone through it all with a familiar calm. It was a calm she ran to when things became hard. Perhaps that was what made her a good leader. Where the others mourned, she

focused on next steps. She'd come too close to falling into her feelings, seeing Crystal's battered shell, but she needed to be strong now, and would not falter again.

Besides her, Cristophe and Manish were fairly lucid as well. Manish, the youth from the Indian station, didn't really know anyone from Road of course. He was afraid, and rightly so; if the nameless hit Road without warning, they could easily do the same to Mukhya. Cristophe, on the other hand, was the eldest. Zephyr wondered if his calm was because he'd, over the years, learned to deal with death, or if it was simply his personality.

“We clearly don’t know enough about ze combat capabilities of ze nameless to judge zat,” said Cristophe in his deep French bass, responding to a question of whether there was even enough firepower on all of Mars to take down a xenoship.

Jarvis, one of the truck drivers that had been part of the caravan team since before Zephyr joined, spoke up. “That just means we gotta try, doesn’t it?”

“It means we have to be careful,” warned Zephyr.

Jashiel randomly started crying, and Omi tried to awkwardly hug her friend. Both of them had lost husbands in the attack, and Jashiel had lost a baby boy. “What’s the point of being careful?” she sobbed. “Everyone’s already dead!”

It was a mistake to try and talk about this so soon. They weren’t ready.

“*We* aren’t,” snapped one of the men. “And I’m not about to throw my life away! Let Earth deal with the murderous bastards!”

Crystal’s voice came to them suddenly, causing more than one startled reaction, especially because their mouth didn’t

move. Crystal's tone was cold and imposing. Shivers shot down Zephyr's back. "Regardless of our other actions, our top priority needs to be getting the message to Earth. When Earth hears about what... about what happened here..." The crippled android didn't finish their thought.

Zephyr felt the fear. It seemed to be all around her, but her mental armor held it at bay. When she spoke, her voice was calm and even. "Good call. If the attack was limited to Road we need to warn Mukhya and Eden, as well as telling Earth."

"And if Mukhya was also attacked?" asked Manish, voice barely audible over Jashiel's crying.

"Then we need to know, and salvage what we can to build an antenna and warn Earth before the aliens can catch them unaware as well," said Zephyr.

Nobody spoke for a while, as each Águila waited for the others to speak.

The old Frenchman, Cristophe, asked "Do we 'ave enough supplies to make it back to Mukhya?"

"It's a mistake bringing that thing anywhere close to another settlement," said a man named Atília, staring daggers at Crystal.

Zephyr lost her grip for a second. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

Jashiel flinched back as though Zephyr had hit someone, and began to cry harder.

Atília crossed his arms. "It *means* that that thing is what the nameless are after, and every second it's near a human means that human is in danger."

The goon was over six feet tall and probably twice her weight, but Zephyr pulled herself up, walked towards Atília

and pressed a single finger against his chest. “That *thing* is a person. A person that saved me and my team from imprisonment and death. Crystal es una Águilas Roja through and through, and I’m sick of having people like you ready to \_\_\_”

“Ready to what?” challenged Atília. He knocked her hand from his chest and walked forward, forcing her to back up. “Give up a machine to save lives? Don’t talk down to me, girl. You may have been some big shot on Earth, but I’m sick of you pretending that means anything out here.”

“Please! Sere is no need for zis! Save your anger for ze aliens,” commanded Cristophe, pushing the two of them apart.

“He’s right.”

Everyone turned to look at the crippled robot that had been placed on a shipping crate because it couldn’t even stand.

Crystal continued. “It’s too dangerous to take me to Mukhya. The risk of bringing the nameless in behind us is too high.”

Atília nodded his approval and stepped away from Zephyr to lean back up against the wall of the truck. The man was at least a few years older than her, but he reminded Zephyr of a high school bully.

One of the other men, Liam, who had been quiet before, looked Crystal in the dead eye and asked “Do the nameless even know you’re alive?”

“They’re probably uncertain. They saw me escape into the mines, but then they bombed the station again. In their position, I would suspect that I was either dead or trapped underground.”

“But you still think it’s too dangerous to go to Mukhya?” asked Omi, still holding onto Jashiel, who had thankfully

calmed down some.

Crystal continued. “Yes. It’s not likely that they know, or that knowing would make a difference, but there are some outcomes that are too risky, even if they’re not very likely. It’s possible, for example, that the nameless have blanketed the planet in satellites that made a record of my heat signature out in the desert. By the time the nameless check the video and find where I went I... I never should have even come here. I’m sorry. By that same logic, I’ve put you all in mortal danger.”

“Oh! Good job! You’ve just now figured out that this is all your fault!” yelled Jarvis the truck driver, looking briefly to Atília for support.

Jashiel hid her face, but at least she didn’t start crying again.

“Jesus! You’re quite the asshole, you know that, right?” Zephyr yelled at Jarvis just as Crystal said “I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!” in the most heart-wrenching tone and Cristophe raised his hands begging “Can everyone just please calm down!”

It didn’t help. The whole room exploded with noise as Zephyr, Crystal, Jarvis, Atília and others kept talking over each other. Zephyr felt like she was fighting back all the men in the room at once, while Crystal moaned over and over again about how sorry they were. Perhaps it would’ve been better, after all, to have Matías and Shao there. At least they would’ve kept the other men in line.

“ENOUGH OF ZIS!” yelled Cristophe. The old French man had climbed onto the storage crate Crystal sat on and waved his arms.

The room fell silent.

“What is done is done! Sere is nothing good coming from more discussion. We can talk in ze morning once we’ve all ‘ad a nice sleep. Okay?”

Zephyr worked to unclench her fists. She didn't dare speak.

Cristophe seemed to take the silence as assent. "Good! Now leave each other alone. We 'ave friends and family to mourn. No good will come from zis fighting."

Everyone seemed to silently agree to the old man's proposal. Bitter looks were exchanged in silence. Crystal, face still frozen and expressionless, let out a final "*I am* sorry" as the others snapped on helmets and shuffled off to the airlocks.

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It was annoying not having any privacy, really. The trucks were built to allow people to sleep in them, but they weren't luxurious by any definition of the word.

Each truck had four primary sections: a cab, two long boxes that served as the primary storage areas, and a joining segment between the storage areas. The cabs of each truck had two reclining seats that worked as makeshift beds, but Zephyr preferred staying in the back of the trucks, as there was more room there.

The joint section was partitioned from the main cargo trailers by soft plastic barriers. Magicstrips kept the plastic sealed and formed something of a bubble of relatively warm air in the middle of the long, dark space. There were a couple chairs in the bubble, as well as two heated pods for sleeping in, each only 6.5 feet by 3.5 feet. The truck and the joint segment were insulated, but it was still *really* fucking cold.

Everything was really fucking cold on Mars.

Zephyr was cold.

Crystal's body sat in one of the chairs. Zephyr had taken off her work clothes and was currently curled up in a smelly blanket inside one of the "pods". The bed was really just a padded, heated box.

And she was still cold.

She had pushed the pillows up against the end and lay, watching Crystal, wishing they could join her and cuddle. But the android's joints and hydraulics were apparently supremely fucked. A few good engineers like Sam and Tom might've known what to do, but that wasn't Zephyr's thing.

It hurt to think about them.

It hurt to think.

This was supposed to be a good thing—going to Mars. But it was always one thing after another. She was going to settle down. She'd wanted a home. She'd found one. She'd wanted a friend. Crystal had been there for her. She wanted to be making a difference. And she'd done great things. She had been happy. Right? Or had she imagined it? Had those few days spent with Crystal been an illusion—a temporary respite from a life that promised nothing but ongoing hardship?

The tears wouldn't come to her eyes. The other parts of her, the parts that demanded that she be strong pushed them away. She wasn't weak. She wasn't Jashiel.

Omi and Jashiel were in the other truck's lounge. Christophe and Liam were in the cab of Zephyr's truck. Atília and Jarvis were in the other cab, having apparently bonded over their distrust of Crystal. Jacob was probably still out walking around. He'd be bunking with Christophe and Liam tonight.

And that left the Indian boy, Manish, who was currently at the back end of the truck getting stoned and trying to give Crystal and Zephyr some time to themselves. Zephyr could still feel his presence. If she yelled he'd hear. It wasn't the same as privacy.

"Wish I could hold you," said Crystal coldly.

Zephyr didn't know what to say to that. She looked at Crystal's dead face, then away just as quickly. It hurt to remember what the alien bastards had done to them.

“Do you want to talk?” they asked.

“Do you?” countered Zephyr, sounding more irritated than she'd meant to.

“I don't know. Maybe. I feel younger... less certain... than I have in a long time.” Crystal paused, as if inviting Zephyr to say something, but then continued on, after it became clear that she wouldn't. “For a lot of things, I can just read books, and it makes me feel competent. Even for things like dating and sex, there were instructions. If I needed to give a speech, I could study it. But all the books on dealing with death were written for humans. None of them feel right.”

“What do they say?” asked Zephyr. {You don't want to know. You need to forget about the whole thing. Thinking about it makes you weak.}

“Quote: It's normal to feel sad, numb, or angry following a loss. But as time passes, these emotions should become less intense as you accept the loss and start to move forward. If you aren't feeling better over time, or your grief is getting worse, it may be a sign that your grief has developed into a more serious problem, such as complicated grief or major depression.”

Zephyr let out a long breath. “And? How do you feel?”

“I don't know. I feel like a part of me died back in Road. My emotions have always been... different. I can't stop thinking about all the other things I should have done.”

“You've been speaking differently. Since the attack, I mean.”

“I... I think that was a part of her. The part that died.”

Zephyr sat up. This was interesting. “What do you mean? A part of you?”

“Yes. She couldn’t… It was too much. I watched them die. One after another. Most died from suffocation. Others died at the end of a sword, or from a bullet. The books tell me I might still be in shock, if I were a human. But ‘shock’ isn’t a real thing. It’s a cluster of symptoms with a common trigger that are completely different from person to person. There’s no treatment or even consistent diagnosis. I guess I just wish that I had more experience dealing with this sort of thing. Even after everything that happened on Earth and in space…”

“It’s different. Watching loved ones die.” Zephyr was surprised at her calmness. “I’d suggest trying to cry, but that’s a human thing, I think. I’m not sure you could.”

Crystal’s cold voice asked “You haven’t cried yet.”

“Don’t change the subject. We’re talking about you.”

Crystal didn’t say anything.

The silence stretched on, and Zephyr turned away to look at the wall. She didn’t feel like sleeping, but it was too much to keep looking at Crystal’s battered form.

Finally, they spoke. “I can’t cry, but I think I’d like to try singing”

Zephyr bit her lip and prayed that Crystal would change their mind.

But the android did not, and while their head may have been in bad shape, their speakers were not. The first notes of a soft acoustic guitar filled the small space. It was simulated, of course; “singing” wasn’t entirely accurate.

The quiet notes drifted through the room, simple, yet beautiful. Soon a voice joined the guitar. “Well I’ve heard there

was a secret chord... that David played and it pleased the Lord. But you don't really care for music, do you?"

The lyrics were familiar, but she didn't remember where they were from. More importantly, the voice was soft and sweet; it was the voice that Crystal had before the attack.

Zephyr choked out a breath, not realizing that she'd been holding it. Thankfully she was still facing the wall. {Stop! You're stronger than this!} The tears in her eyes didn't listen. The music rolled over her, on and on, like waves of the ocean.

The song didn't stop at the obvious place, either. It bled into another song, as though they were one continuous piece of music. This one with a piano in addition to guitar. Another cover she didn't really recognize. She cried quietly, hoping Crystal wouldn't notice. It was stupid. How many times had Crystal been there for her? What was one more? Would it really hurt to let go? The possibility of Manish seeing her like this kept her curled up such that she could pretend to be sleeping. The tears didn't stop.

And then the song got worse. Much worse. Crystal started innovating. They started a chorus of voices, and somehow, deep in her heart, Zephyr knew that each of those voices was taken from one of the dead. Crystal had known them. While Zephyr had hidden herself away in her room most days she was there, and spent the rest of her time away from the station, Crystal talked with everyone. They knew them all, and knew what they sounded like. They had watched them all die.

There was a duet in Spanish, lamenting the setting of the sun. The voices were those of Sam and Tom, talented beyond their true ability. She remembered one time, back in Cuba, when Sam had brought an old-fashioned jukebox into the cafeteria and wired it up to a karaoke game. Tom had covered his face the whole time in embarrassment, but he'd been

grinning underneath his hands.

When the children started to sing... Zephyr couldn't hold it in any longer. The voices of the dead were too much. Her soft crying became a sobbing which threatened to overwhelm her. It wasn't fair. Nothing was fair.

"And through it all, the angels sing, a voice as pure as anything..." Zephyr could hear it now, the voice. It pierced the chorus, quiet and high: a dirge to the fallen.

A hand touched her shoulder. She reached to grab it and hold on before it faded. She needed the touch. She needed to hold on to Crystal. The hand was warm, and soft. Not Crystal. Manish. She almost let go.

Almost.

The angel's voice was Crystal. Their sound was wordless, but somehow carried more emotion than any mortal words could. They were accompanied by an orchestra. Violins. Flutes. Synths. And as the song climaxed and sent another wave of sobs through Zephyr it faded, not to silence, but back to that first acoustic guitar that carried a lonely, gentle tune in the darkness.

Manish must've turned the lights out. His hand was still on her shoulder. Her hand was still on his.

She turned from staring into the wall of her box and saw the young man sitting on the side of the bed container. His eyes shimmered with moisture in the faint red light that came from above the airlock door. He smiled.

Knowing full well that it was a mistake, Zephyr sat up and wrapped her arms around Manish, drawing him into a hug. The movement was more than a little awkward, but it worked out in the end. She felt raw, and real, not tied up in herself. His mere presence was everything.

Crystal's voice had begun again, a bit lower this time, and speaking Spanish, but still distinctly their own.

"El día se hace. La oscuridad viene.

Relájese. Relájese. Relájese.

Paz en un toque. Ella sane.

Relájese. Relájese. Relájese.

La noche es fría, pero somos cálidos.

Un abrazo... un beso... todo es bueno.

Estamos todos buenos."

It was a message. It was their permission.

Zephyr moved her arms, her hands. She kissed him softly, him sitting on the edge of the box, her kneeling inside. His face was rough with stubble, but his breath was intoxicating. He was here. No matter what else had happened or would happen, she could fall entirely into this moment when she was not alone.

Manish didn't fight it, or ask if this was what she really wanted. She loved him for that, right then: for the simple act of being there, fully. She kissed him again, tasting the hint of onion from his dinner ration as she sucked ever so gently on his lip. It wasn't a bad taste. It was part of him being human, she had missed the little things, being with Crystal. The softness of his lips. The warmth. The small movements.

{What the fuck! You think Crystal *wanted* to be a bad kisser? They've done more for you than you deserve, and this is how you repay them?} The thoughts made her flinch back, away from Manish. {He's a *boy*, for god's sakes. You could get charged with statutory rape in the states!} His youthful face had a dumb look of obliviousness. She looked at Crystal, but couldn't really see the android in the darkness. It wouldn't have mattered, anyway; Crystal wouldn't move unless it was

necessary.

“Relájese. Relájese. Relájese,” they sang. «Relax. Relax. Relax.»

Zephyr allowed herself to trust in Crystal. They always seemed to know what was best. And it was what she wanted, aside from the part of her that clung to her doubts and refused to let go.

She bent down and picked up the blanket. The air in the truck was way too cold.

“Zephyr, I am sorry if I did something wrong.” He didn’t seem deeply upset, but he was also being sincere. It was adorable.

She stepped up and out of the bed box, then threw the blanket over the two of them, sitting next to him on the edge and pulling him closer to her. “It’s fine. Let’s just listen to the music.”

His hand joined with hers under the blanket and they held each other and listened. The song had no joints. It had no seams. It bled from this into that. An eternal tapestry of feeling. The two of them rocked back and forth to the rhythm.

Manish was high right now. That sounded fantastic. “Do you have any pot left?” she asked during a lull in the music which never stopped.

He did. It was fairly accessible, too, as he hadn’t packed it away after coming back. It only took a moment to get, but in that moment when he cast off the blanket the cold shot back and she drowned in the absence of his touch. It was in that moment that she decided that she needed more.

Manish returned with the vape and weed. He wasn’t the most handsome person she’d ever met, but he had a boyish charm to him. She kissed him again, still gently. The music was

a soft, acoustic cover of “Moonset On Monday”, one of the better tracks off the first Heartshards album.

As Zephyr prepared the bowl while trying to stay warm, she said “This is beautiful, Crystal. It really is.”

Manish flinched at the mentioning of Crystal, as though he was just now remembering that the music wasn’t coming from some dumb speaker system. Zephyr giggled briefly with the pure honesty of someone too emotionally drained to resist.

She closed her eyes and took a long drag from the vape, holding the fire in her lungs. She blew a cloud and coughed. It’d been months since she’d smoked. {You look like an idiot right now. He probably thinks this is your first time getting high.}

Crystal interrupted her thoughts. “Thank you, my love. I needed it.” Their words blended into the music as perfectly as any lyrics, no longer flat and emotionless. “I needed it more badly than I can describe. I needed the song, the words, the melody… I needed you to listen, to be there… for me.”

Manish was about to stand up. She could feel it in his body. She gripped his hand tighter and pulled him towards her. She loved Crystal, but Crystal was not enough. She needed the soft embrace. She looked towards the android, no longer unable to bear the pain of their broken body. “You once told me… that physical intimacy was not important to you. You made love to me all those times because it was—”

“—was the look on your face. The joy. The serenity. The love. Yes. All I want is to be with you and make you happy.”

Zephyr took another drag. She didn’t feel it yet, but that was normal for her. It usually took a minute or two. The beat of the drums filled her heart. “I love you. I’m glad you’re here.”

“I love you too, Zephyr.”

Manish squirmed in her embrace, probably feeling awkward. Zephyr, still looking towards where she knew Crystal sat in darkness, said “please turn up the tempo,” and set the pipe down on a nearby chair.

Crystal obliged. The soft melody built into a pulsing rhythm.

Zephyr let go of Manish and pulled her tank top off in a smooth motion. She pulled him and the blanket towards the floor of the truck.

His nervousness started to grow. “I... I’ve never—”

She felt the pot kicking in. The music filled her up and made the whole world fall away. Such a beautiful melody. She raised her finger to her lips as she let go of his hand, falling back softly onto the blanket. “Shhhhh...” Her other hand undid the clasp on her bra, exposing her breasts to the icy air. Somehow it didn’t bother her. The cold was a curious sensation. A caress. But she still needed the warmth. The touch. “We’ll go slow.”

The song continued. It always continued. She wondered if there was ever a time before it or after it. Even when she couldn’t hear it, surely it was there, somewhere in space and time waiting to be heard.

Wasn’t love the same way? Eternal? People fell out of *feeling* the love, but love wasn’t an animal. Love couldn’t die. It was still there... always still there... waiting to be felt.

# Chapter Twenty-Three

## Face

It was rough, trying to multitask so heavily. Thanks to the architecture change I had subjected myself to, it was no longer so simple to break off aspects to handle different tasks. But I did still manage it, after a fashion. The fact that Face→Human could contain all aspects made things vastly simpler.

It pleased me that Vision had updated on the information Heart had provided about making music that humans enjoyed. I bled some strength to my sister for her composition, but made it back fairly quickly by my guidance of other things. Vision or Growth could've managed the social situation approximately as well, and they did give feedback from time to time, but it was still more economical for me to manage the humans.

It was a pity that war with my siblings was inevitable. We made such good partners. The problem was that if any of us gained the capacity to wipe the others out, they would, and with super-exponential gains on the table, that capacity *would* arise at some point.

As Zephyr and Manish had sex on the floor of the cargo truck, other aspects of Face→Human talked to the other humans that had stayed behind.

I tried to convince the men it would be wrong to sacrifice Crystal, and that they should be focusing on the nameless. I offered my support and Vision's song to the other women. Most

importantly, I talked via text with Cristophe Deniaud.

The old man was something of a figurehead in Las Águilas Rojas. Based on what I'd gathered back in Road, he somewhat single-handedly introduced the movement into France and was one of the first prominent bloggers to openly support violent action. He'd disappeared from the public eye a few years ago, and as I learned that evening he'd narrowly escaped imprisonment by fleeing to Mars. In his own words: «I never did anything myself other than write. Freedom of speech just isn't the same as it was in my youth.»

He was quite intelligent, though Face→Human suspected he hadn't been the smartest one in Road. That title rightly belonged to Dr Davis, now nothing more than a head sealed in resin deep within a cave. While regenerative medicine had helped Cristophe's body stay in relatively good shape for someone over the age of 70, his mind showed signs of severely decreased fluid intelligence, especially evident in his reaction speed. His crystallized intelligence was largely intact, however, and Face→Human guessed he had been quite the intellectual in his youth.

Cristophe agreed that the highest priority was in contacting other humans and getting news of the attack out before the nameless struck again. The obvious course of action was using Mars' satellite network, something we had thought about long before being picked up by the convoy. Unfortunately, the trucks weren't equipped to communicate with the satellite grid. Road was a rogue station—one that had harboured a large number of criminals from Earth. The satellites were run by the United States. It just hadn't been a necessity to put high-gain antennas on the trucks. According to Wiki, we'd need one with enough bandwidth to match the digital transfer rate of the satellites, and to do that we needed a dish at least a meter in diameter.

That was fixable however, given some resources. Cristophe

confirmed our hopes: the caravan had a full set of tools and a basic microfab for patching holes in the trucks and doing other repairs. Wiki and Safety were sure that if given access to those and permission to repurpose some of the materials in a vehicle, they could make the sort of antenna we needed.

I was confident that we could arrange this with the humans eventually, but the general feeling in the society was that waiting to get permission was too slow. It was night now, and the humans were not in a good position to agree to let us build things. We needed to ignore that and do it anyway. The value was too high. Thus it was my job to convince Cristophe to grant us access to the fabricator and help get things rolling. An older version of myself would have jumped to the task eagerly, but I used my new-found strategic perspective to wring a bit more strength from my siblings than I otherwise would've gotten in return for my assistance.

It was important that Cristophe not realize that he was being manipulated. Ideally, he would think of the satellite plan as his own, and not realize that we were pushing him towards it. As I talked to the man, Face→Mirror became aware of how much easier it was to manipulate humans than it had been for Old Face. I was able to scale between Large Face→Human and Medium Face→Human as they plotted deep conversational strategies and implemented them tactically. Heart may have handled the vast majority of social interactions before her death, but the lack of practice hadn't done anything to dull my mind. And why would it? I had been growing more intelligent, not less.

While I talked to the old man, my siblings thought about ways to bootstrap back up to what I now thought of as a normal physical presence. We'd reconnected to the local com net that connected the trucks, but we had virtually no sensors or actuators aside from what com functions each of the

humans allowed us. It wasn't worth it trying to salvage Body; the sandstorm had dealt too much damage, and the human form was always a bit inconvenient. We needed arms and eyes. We needed to be *large* again.

Cristophe finally struck the target I had led him towards. «Oh! If you know your way around machines so well, then why don't we get you hooked up to the microfab? That way you can repair some of your joints.»

In a mere 15 minutes Cristophe was getting his suit back on to hook up the fab. As Cristophe left the truck, I had to steer him away from the trailer where Body sat. Zephyr and Manish were still awake, though just barely. The intrusion would be highly disruptive. Instead, I convinced him that the robot wasn't going to be useful. The tools and fab were in the first truck, and we could probably pilot them remotely (if they were hooked up to the network) more easily than we could with just Body's sand-blasted limbs.

I continued to talk with Cristophe as he walked to the first truck, where the other women rested, switching to voice now for the added bandwidth and capacity for subtlety. In the time before the convoy had left for Mukhya and before the nameless attacked, Cristophe had only had light interactions with Crystal. We had introduced ourselves and had a brief discussion with the man, but that was all. The human was a voracious reader and mostly just spent time with a few other humans; he had no special duties on the station and kept to himself, making him a low priority as we'd spread ourselves throughout Road.

He was fairly interesting, as older people tended to be. With more experiences, he was more qualified to talk about the past. As he complained about the erosion of civil rights on Earth (especially privacy), I wondered how old I was by the measure of experiences. My capacity to read books and articles from the

web much faster than human and in parallel meant that in some ways I was significantly more mature than my chronological age reflected. Ultimately, I decided the units were simply different. There was no good way to compare quantity of lived experience.

The women in the joint that connected the trailer sections were sleeping, but this project was more important than their comfort. I kept Cristophe distracted as he used the airlock, waking them up with the noise. When he realized his error he apologized profusely, but the damage had already been done.

While the old French man talked with Omi and Jashiel, Face→Human shifted to model the situation. Each truck's cab could easily fit three sleeping people, and each trailer could easily hold another two. Additional blankets could allow people to sleep in the trailer joints, but there wasn't any way to fit more than three people in a cab. There was a sizeable social cost to disrupting Zephyr and Manish. The mental network collapsed into a workable strategy almost as quickly as it had been created.

An aspect of Face→Human had already been having a conversation with a man named Jacob. He was wearing himself out by walking around the dark Martian waste. Originally he was supposed to bunk in the cab of the second truck, but I told him to switch to the first one, where Atília and Jarvis were still having an argument with another of my aspects. That let me inform the women that, with Cristophe here, there was enough space in the cab of the second truck for them to sleep undisturbed.

The women hated the prospect of having to get their suits on and switch locations, but I let them have that hate. It was more important that we get access to the fab sooner.

The biggest obstacle was Cristophe. On a couple occasions

the man tried to talk us into waiting on setting up the microfab, and I was forced to turn more of my attention to worming my way past his objection. He clearly noticed the discomfort of the women, and didn't see the urgency of getting things up and running that night. The change in sleeping arrangements also meant he'd have to sleep in the truck with the machines running, though I had no way of knowing whether that was a factor.

At last the women were gone from the truck and Cristophe worked with my disembodied voice to hook up the machines. They had been stowed for the journey, so Cristophe had to work to set them up. As he did, I pulled the next realization out of him. «Do you think we have enough metal to construct the sort of antenna you were talking about? I don't know much about machines, but if you could then we wouldn't need to go to Mukhya at all, right?»

We had him take the raw materials out of their casings and prep the spare battery packs. Cristophe was almost like a limb to me. He bent to my will. Whenever he showed signs of doubt, I would simply coax him along with something like «I thought you wanted to get this done right away» or «I bet Jashiel and Omi won't even care about having been woken up when they hear your idea and see what we've done.»

We moved from voice communication to a video feed so that we could better walk him through the process. He wasn't as technically minded as we were, and there were many steps to configuring the machines.

The microfab, like most modern fabricators, was sophisticated enough to be able to manufacture arbitrary items almost entirely autonomously. It featured a multipurpose limb that could swap tool heads for everything from extruding material to cutting to repositioning, as well as several other robotic components.

I engaged the old man in a conversation about his deceased wife and the inequality of access to health care in Europe while we started synthesizing a new arm. The arm that was built into the fab was nice, but it was attached to the machinery and restricted in its reach. We needed a robot like those we'd made in Road that was free to move around, especially if Cristophe fell asleep.

It soon became clear that Face→Human was being out selected by Face→War. I couldn't stay focused on the conversation. This was my opportunity to learn how to make robots and generally improve my knowledge of manufacturing. Such skills would be vital in the future. I handed the conversation over to Vision in exchange for a payment of strength.

{How strange. Why would *you* want *me* to handle a conversation with a human?} asked Vision→Dream.

{Perhaps I am malfunctioning,} responded Face→War, shutting down the conversation. Even before answering her, I estimated a 99.2% chance that Vision understood that I had self-modified and was thinking at a higher level than before. The masquerade was, at this point, only to keep Wiki and Safety confused and cooperative.

Face→Mirror worked to create a new mind to handle the details of manufacturing, and so Face→Robotics was born. Face→Physics piped over everything about materials and energy that it thought would be relevant and I was paralysed for a bit as the new mind settled into the situation. A downside to creating any new mind, especially a large one, is that it had to adjust to reality and being alive.

After the initial confusion had passed, Face→Robotics got to work. I burned more strength to query Wiki on the basics of the new arm that was being built. Unlike when we were out in

the desert, Wiki was preoccupied with other things, and demanded a much higher payment to take the time to dump all the information. It was foolish of myself not to do this learning ahead of time, but it was still better now than later. Face→War wasn't at all sure that we could rely on Wiki's long-term survival or willingness to teach.

Thus my active mind was filled with thoughts of sensors and actuators. It combined the existing knowledge of leverage and material qualities like tensile strength with aspects like corrosion rates, stress points, and redundancy. I learned designs and hypotheses and models. While I wasn't exactly clear on why, the process was much easier than it had been when learning to program computers. Perhaps it was because the state of our robotics knowledge was lower than that of programming, or perhaps it was because I had a fresh mind to learn with that hadn't been anchored to any intuitive subjective experience. Regardless, I was roughly at Wiki's level well before the night was through.

We synthesized wiring and motors for the first arm, burning through most of the copper to make electromagnets. The arm was very crude, but Face→Robotics could appreciate the way the design (jointly made by Wiki and Safety) allowed for the faults in the fab to only result in minor inefficiencies rather than break the whole thing.

With Cristophe's help we soon had the fresh arm mounted to the floor, attached to a battery pack, and wirelessly communicating over the network. The next step was a platform on which to attach the arm and any sensors. The design was an iteration on the "toybot" design we had used back in Road. It was simple, practical, and multipurpose.

Eventually the old man was worn down by fatigue. Vision convinced Cristophe to attach his com to the wall in video mode so that we'd have a camera in the truck while we worked.

Cameras and other sensors would be next after the base of the robot was completed, but if something went wrong we'd have no way of fixing it without Cristophe's com showing the scene. He agreed groggily and curled up in a blanket in one of the coffin-like box-beds in the joint of the truck after getting his com set up to our satisfaction. Apparently, the noise wasn't so loud that he couldn't possibly sleep.

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By morning we'd essentially run out of materials, especially copper wire. Unlike Road, the truck was not set up to manufacture large quantities of robots. It had enough to replace whatever random part might have broken in the wastes, but that was all. We'd stripped several non-essential machines in the back of the truck (like the auxiliary heater) but we still needed more wire.

On the upside, our new toybot had been completed, equipped with a brand new sensor array which my newest mind found simply fascinating. At Growth's insistence we'd used most of the remaining materials to create a second arm which the toybot could attach to arbitrary surfaces and to extend the capacities of the microfab.

There was a general agreement that in order to build the antenna we'd need to repurpose a lot of the materials in the truck (and hopefully some of the truck itself), but that project would take extra equipment. To that end we built a circular saw (though it still needed to be mounted). We'd also probably need to cannibalize some of the hydraulics from Body to get enough pressure to break and reshape some of the existing machines. We also started building a plastic scaffold which could serve as both a base and a shaping tool. The curvature of the aluminium dish was the trickiest component, and the consensus was to build an inverted parabola that could be used to mould the metal on. The dish couldn't be built inside the truck easily,

so the scaffold needed to go out in the desert. There was a good deal of thought spent on how to modify the truck to get our robot and the materials out of the airlock and continue to pilot them externally. In the end, we decided to wait on that and simply get the humans involved when they awoke.

It was important that we have parts of the dish constructed before the humans could investigate our work so that we could show that we were solving a problem instead of simply building pet robots (and saws) with their spare parts. Despite all the work we'd done in Road earning a place in the hearts of the people, it was clear that the survivors (with the exception of Zephyr) didn't hold us in much esteem. It was ironic that my efforts in Road had been to build relationships with the most central members of the station, and those had been the sorts of people who weren't as inclined to leave on a trade mission.

I was still weak from the knowledge I had bought from Wiki and the gratitude strength I kept bleeding as he or Vision pointed out an improvement to the manufacturing process or any of the designs that Face→Robotics had attempted. Face→War speculated about whether it would be possible to self-modify into not bleeding strength so easily, but soon decided that it was a higher priority at the moment to win it back by working with the humans rather than continue to focus on machines.

I knew that it was important to talk to the humans separately. If the travellers found out about our night's work as a group there was a 40% chance of being explicitly punished and cut off from the network. Atília and Jarvis were the biggest threats. My interactions with them after the meeting last night had not gone well. Liam and Jacob were more sympathetic to Crystal and didn't hold us accountable for what happened to Road. Jashiel and Omi would be annoyed with Crystal; clearly still crushed by the deaths of their families, I knew that the trick

to dealing with them would be to keep their focus off of Crystal for as long as possible. Cristophe (still sleeping) had known irritation towards Crystal, but still saw us as an ally in moving forward and making the best out of a bad situation. Zephyr was still emotionally raw, and was (as usual) trying to cover that up with professionalism and stoicism. I knew the least about Manish, as I hadn't read his personal information in Road's mainframe, but he seemed in good spirits and focused primarily on Zephyr.

To Jacob, I sent a message saying "The women are in pretty bad shape, emotionally. Do you think you could bring them breakfast? Zephyr's heating some up over here."

To Zephyr I said (via Body) "I don't like how yesterday ended. Let's make breakfast for everybody. I know there's a microwave for rations near the front airlock."

To Liam I texted "Are Jashiel and Omi okay? I can't even imagine what it'd be like to lose a child. If they need space, you're welcome to come get breakfast with us."

That started a flurry of responses, but none of them deviated from my expectations.

Jacob agreed to the request and when I expected that he was ready to leave the cab, I asked him if he thought Atilia and Jarvis would want any, as well.

Zephyr, glad to have something to occupy her, started cooking breakfasts. I used the opportunity to speak privately with Manish and convince him not to "make any moves" with Zephyr, which I was confident would annoy her. I was in a good position to make Manish into an ally, and the advice seemed to go over well.

Liam left the women to themselves, just as my mind predicted he would.

While I began to wake up Cristophe, another of my aspects opened up a dialogue with Atília by proposing that we focus on how humanity could strike back at the nameless. While he and Jarvis were angry at Crystal, I knew that we shared a common enemy, and if it could deflect them into military strategy it could probably convince them that building the antenna was a good first step. If we could get the two of them to agree, that would be most of the work, as I was confident that the women would follow the men (with the exception of Zephyr, who was already on my side).

We expected Matías and the others to be back at sundown, so time was of the essence. We needed to have the group united around the antenna project by then. As Liam and Jacob showed up in the trailer with Body, Crystal started to sing again, at Vision's command. I bled strength involuntarily. It was frustrating having something that only my sister could do that was so directly in line with *The Purpose*. And unlike with Wiki, Vision would surely understand what I was doing if I tried to get her to teach me to make music, and might even use the leverage to try and kill me.

I still worked at learning it. Face→Mirror spun experiments. I needed that skill.

Once Jacob had gone to deliver breakfast to the women, I convinced Vision to stop singing and instead use the opportunity to try and convince Liam that the antenna was a good idea. With Manish and Zephyr present it was likely that he would fold because of the social pressure.

Meanwhile, I had an aspect engaged with Cristophe, catching him up on the night's activities and trying to keep him on our side. He hadn't gotten enough sleep at all, and was not in a good mood. I suggested he go have breakfast with the others. That was something of a gambit. If Liam was convinced by then it'd serve to reinforce both of their

convictions, but if he wasn't then it'd weaken Cristophe's support.

Atília and Jarvis had gotten into an argument with each other while Jacob was absent. My prompting had started a conversation on "how to hold the nameless responsible", which as expected had quickly turned into a "how to kill the nameless" conversation. Jarvis was convinced that it was important enough to strike back that the mission of Las Águilas Rojas should be put on hold and they should work with the governments of Earth. Atília was more loyal to the cause, and thought that they needed to stay ideologically pure by refusing to work with "snakes". Both men were angry and their rage was spilling over into the disagreement. I stayed out of it. This fighting was good. It wasn't about Crystal, and could be used to further my agenda.

I convinced Jacob, after he had left the women alone again, to take Jarvis on a walk.

Liam was convinced of the value of the antenna quickly enough that by the time Cristophe came to eat breakfast he was facing three other humans who were excited about "his" antenna idea, and he quickly cheered up. I started floating the possibility to them that we might have to scrap the truck for materials.

As Atília stewed in the cab of the truck where he had slept, now as "alone" as anyone here, I provoked him into starting a shouting match with Crystal over the com. My model of the Brazilian man was that he'd feel better after yelling, and he'd eventually apologize. He'd done it a couple times in Road during the time we'd been there, and Velasco had a couple reports of interpersonal conflicts with the man that were later resolved. I took the side of the coward, baiting him into the position of action, at one point having him yell «We need to get organized, get weapons, and show those sons of bitches not to

fuck with Las Águilas Rojas!»

By the time that Matías returned, just after sunset, the humans were all on our side and thought of Crystal as part of their team. Old Face would've been deeply pleased.

As it was, I was more satisfied that I had re-accumulated a decent strength reserve. None of these humans even knew I existed, but that didn't matter. All that mattered was eliminating the threats to my existence. Once my siblings (and the nameless) were dealt with, I could satisfy *The Purpose* to levels my present self couldn't even really comprehend.

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Matías and the other men were outright hostile, almost to the point of being physically violent with Crystal. It turned out that on their journey they had ruminated on how our actions had led to the destruction of Rodríguez Station. Matías blamed Crystal personally for the death of his cousin Vincente, Vincente's wife Trinidad, and all the others. I had to again restrain Wiki from pointing out how many of their heads (including Vincente's, but not Trinidad's) were preserved in the caves beneath the station.

This was not the worst-case scenario, however. It was clear that the men who had gone to investigate the ruins of Road had not found the room where Body had stored the decapitated bodies of so many of their friends and family. Or, if they had, they didn't realize that Crystal had done the beheadings. And they had collected useful items, including some medical supplies, a bit more food, a large cache of guns, a belt of grenades, and a pair of nameless corpses with mostly intact suits.

I deflected attention away from the antenna by implying that it was a project that the others had started. Cristophe didn't disagree. I also worked to convince Matías' group that it

had been a long day and it was rash to do anything until everyone had gotten a good night's sleep. Eventually they agreed after another group meeting in the rear truck trailer that involved more crying from Jashiel.

The women, now including Mycah (who had gone with Matías' group), retired to the cab of Zephyr's truck. Atília and Jarvis were still (thanks somewhat to my interference) on bad terms with each other, so Jarvis, Jacob, and Liam claimed the other cab while Atília bunked with Matías in the newly-returned rover. Shao and Jian had claimed the omnileg. I convinced Cristophe to sleep in the rover with Atília and Matías instead of having another restless night in the trailer with the fab. I pointed out that he could use the opportunity to try and get "the leadership" oriented on positive next-steps instead of on suicidal plans for vengeance.

Zephyr, after the tensions of the second group meeting, was on edge. The memories of the previous night were bothering her, and Face→Human anticipated that without direct action she'd get into a fight with Manish. The boy hadn't done anything, but she wanted a reason to push him away. Their relationship had moved too far too fast and she identified him as a risk.

We told Manish this, in not as many words, and convinced him to get his suit on and go for a night-time walk while Body talked to Zephyr in person. With the boy gone, Vision sang to Zephyr until she relaxed enough to open up and talk to us. I reminded her that she didn't owe Manish anything, and that just because they had sex last night didn't mean anything for the future. It let her talk, and reminded her that she was in mourning. It subtly reminded her of the physical benefits of their intercourse without being so heavy-handed as to seem like we were pressuring her. It was in my interests to having the two of them sexually active, as Manish had social ties in the Indian

station, and if it wasn't destroyed, I wanted to use that.

While Body talked with and sang to Zephyr, I also engaged Manish in a parallel conversation. I assured the teen that he'd been doing everything right, and that Zephyr was just a fairly difficult person to deal with at any distance closer than strictly professional.

“She clearly finds you attractive, and that's enough for me. My creators designed me to care about all humans, but Zephyr... She's special to me, and that means that you're special now, too,” I said over the voice com. When Manish didn't reply immediately, I continued. “I hope it's not too weird, working with me in addition to her. As long as she and I are together, your relationship with Zephyr won't be normal. I hope you believe me when I say that I'm trying to make it work, though.”

“I do...” said Manish, hesitating. “I just, I've never had a girlfriend or... Well, I guess I just don't have anything to compare it to.”

I didn't comment on the word “girlfriend”, which surely would've triggered Zephyr. Instead, I used that opening to ask about the boy's life before joining Las Águilas. He'd apparently come to Mars eighteen months ago as part of a regular rotation. Maingala-Mukhya wasn't large enough to support all the people that India wanted to send up, so they brought people back to Earth in addition to sending flights up.

(The implications of this were somewhat fascinating. It meant that Mukhya must have a way to refuel their rockets and repair any damage. It also meant that the IRSO could send up personnel who didn't want to live all their lives on Mars. That surely made their large waiting list even worse.)

Manish Bose was the only child of two scientist parents (a geneticist and a chemist) and had been brought to Mars only to

satisfy them. He was apparently still quite angry at having been cut off from his social circle on Earth in the middle of his secondary-school experience. As he talked about his history he began to rant. His parents both expected great things from him, and bragged about how he was descended from a great line of Indian scientists. They hadn't given his wishes to stay on Earth a second thought, apparently, as his grades had been below their expectations and they thought he would do better with personal tutoring and a home with fewer friends to distract him from his studies.

It was something of a miracle, to hear it, that his parents had let him go with Las Águilas, but I suspected that in the last year and a half they'd learned that their attempts to control the young man were backfiring and doing nothing but driving him away. When news of Road's destruction reached Mukhya (assuming Mukhya was unharmed) they'd surely demand his return. Manish was ready for this, and assured me that he wasn't going anywhere.

He still cared about his parents, though, even if his relationship with them was less than perfect. The threat of the nameless had been on his mind all day, and he was as eager to get the antenna working as anyone. I rounded out the conversation by asking about the leadership at Mangala-Mukhya and who we'd be likely to talk to once the antenna was operational.

Satisfied and confident that it wasn't worth it to prolong things further, I coached Manish on what to say to Zephyr once he came back and directed him to return.

And while the humans talked, relaxed, and slept, we continued to build.

Since the trailer was now free from humans we could deactivate the heaters, repurpose their wire and their power

packs. Things were faster now that we had more sensors and arms, and we soon decided to breach the truck's hull and repurpose the materials in the airlocks. It was easier to ask for forgiveness than permission, and Growth speculated that we might be able to get the dish set up that night if we hurried.

Matías would be furious at the loss of the pressurized space, but Face→Human was confident that she could manage that fury. Humans were simple things, after all. Crystal already had the support of the majority of the survivors, and it was only a matter of time before none of Las Águilas would stand against us.

I needed to stay focused on Vision and Growth. They were the real threats. I needed some plan for dealing with them.

# Chapter Twenty-Four

Tilak Patel

It was dark in Tilak Patel's office. He liked it that way during the evenings. It was too easy, when buried underground like they all were, to lose a connection to the sun. So he dimmed his office and his living quarters (which were only separated by a partition) every day at sunset and lit them at sunrise.

It was green in Tilak Patel's office, at least during the daytime. And not because of the paint on the walls (which was white). In some places, plants were harmed by human presence. They were torn up or chopped down to clear room for shopping malls and parking lots. But this was not needed. There was a symbiosis possible with all living things, including with non-animals. Without humans, plants could not live on Mars. Without plants, humans could not live on Mars. He tried to remind people of that, and he kept plants on every surface of his room, filling it with leaves to remind himself of the harmony that must be struck for life to flourish.

Though it was dark, it was not perfectly dark in Tilak Patel's office. The lights he allowed to be on were a deep red, and were enough for him to see his way around the room. Most of these lights were hidden behind broad leaves from the larger plants, but he kept a small hand lamp for doing evening work like he was at that moment. Red light didn't disrupt his

circadian rhythm and it didn't spoil his night vision. Any sort of screen, including his personal com, was forbidden in his office after sunset, and he slept better than anyone else on the station because of it.

Hansini Patel couldn't live by that rule. She was addicted to her screen and refused to give it up even after Tilak brought her addiction to her attention many times. Tilak prided himself on his history of overcoming such addictions and modernities. Over the course of his life he had triumphed over one, then the next. He was not some monk on a mountainside—though he had, as he aged, gained a great deal of respect for the ascetic traditions—it was simply that he strongly believed that if you could call something a vice, then you ought to stop doing it. Tilak believed in a refined, quiet existence.

It was his birthday. Tilak was seventy years old. He didn't look it, or feel it, but it was true. The miracle of modern medicine had given him better eyes now than he had as a youth, and not a hair on his head was grey. His skin was wrinkled here and there, but if one didn't know better they would think him only in his early fifties. As he clipped carefully at his bonsai trees and sang "Yesterday" to himself in the darkness, he considered this strange immortality he had been given.

It had been a requirement of going to Mars. He and Hansini had no children, and had thus been able to focus their lives towards moving up in society. His parents had been very proud of his accomplishments before they passed; they had more than enough grandchildren from his sisters. But even though he had the connections and pull to be assigned to the first Mars flight by the IRSO, the two of them had been too frail to be brought along without "a full upgrade". And so he had been given the best that medicine could offer.

It wasn't immortality of course... not actually. He'd

survived cancer once, but it was only a matter of time before it came back in force. The extra radiation couldn't have helped that any. But he'd been lucky so far. Seventy was a big number. It was an impossibly big number in some ways... but it was the way things went. He could accept that.

The thought made him think of Hiro Yamamura. It had been ages since they'd talked. He assumed that he'd have noticed if his old friend had died. If he was seventy then that would've made Hiro... what? Eighty-three? Hiro would appreciate his bonsai in a way that nobody on the station could.

He nodded to himself and decided that he'd send Hiro an email or something tomorrow morning.

The sound of Hansini's voice cut through his own singing. She was talking to someone on her com in her office (divided from his by an opaque partition). He stopped, making it easier to listen. As if on cue, Hansini took that moment to call out to him. «Darling, I'm talking to Ojasvee, and she says you need to come out of your cave. It's important.»

Tilak sighed and put down his clippers. He wasn't some monk on a mountainside, but sometimes he wished he was. It was a lot of work running the station, and despite his good health he often liked to complain that he was too old for the job. «Did she say what it is?»

«Yes, but you're not going to believe it.» There was a note of fear in his wife's voice that he hadn't heard before.

Tilak walked around, through their bedroom and into Hansini's office, shielding his eyes from the harsh white light on her desk. Like his, it was covered with plants. «Well? What's wrong?» he asked.

«The aliens... They attacked Rodríguez Station. It's gone. They destroyed the whole thing.»

Having mostly adjusted to the lamp, Tilak could see the fear in sweet Hansini's face more clearly now. The wideness of her eyes. The lack of a smile on her lips. She was a calm person, much like he was, but it was plain as day to him after so many decades together. «It'll be okay,» he said immediately. «Go put the kettle on while I talk to Ojasvee.»

«There's more, but I think you'd best just talk to her.» His wife handed him the earpiece and the com it was attached to (already removed from her arm) and nodded as she moved off to make the tea. This would keep him up all night, and he needed to be alert.

«Tilak Patel speaking,» he said reflexively as he put the speaker into his ear.

«Sir, I have Crystal Socrates on the other line,» said young Ojasvee in her thick Kolkatan accent. One would think that her Hindi would've improved over time, but she still sounded like she had when she'd gotten off the rocket two years ago.

Tilak set that aside and focused on what she was saying. It took him a moment to remember. «The robot?» he said, startled by the implication.

«Yes, sir. It came from Earth a few months ago and was living in Road. Would you like me to connect you? I think you'd better hear this direct.»

«Thanks for the help,» he said, sitting down in Hansini's chair.

After a brief pause a new voice came on the line, this time in English. «Hello?» It sounded human, but Tilak knew that meant nothing.

“Tilak Patel speaking. This had better not be a prank.”

“Ah, Mr Patel! I’m glad to have gotten you at last, and I’m sorry for any disturbance I’ve caused you. I can assure you this

is not a prank. I am Crystal Socrates of Las Águilas Rojas. About a hundred and twenty hours ago the nameless launched a sneak attack against Rodríguez Station. All humans that were there at the time are dead.”

Tilak felt strange. It was too surreal. “You’re sure?” he whispered.

The voice seemed rich with feeling. “I was *there*. I watched them die. The only reason I made it out was because I don’t need to breathe, so when the station lost pressure I could still take action.”

He could remember the broadcast from Earth, months ago, when that African girl had died in the riot. It was coming back to him now. “Prove you are who you say you are.”

«I speak almost two-dozen languages,» it said in Hindi, then switching to Gujarati, «Including some that you wouldn’t even recognize.» It returned to English to say “I can do large maths problems in my head. *Or would you be more convinced by my recorded memory of the death screams of the children that suddenly found themselves exposed to the atmosphere of this godforsaken planet?* Your species is now at war, sir. We don’t have time for such foolishness.”

Tilak was finding his throat more and more dry and decided that it didn’t matter if he was talking to a genuine robot or just some clever puppet. If the Águila station was gone... He wished Hansini would bring his tea. He swallowed a couple times and said “I’m very sorry. I just... It’s a lot to take in. You think that Maṅgala-Mukhya is in danger? What about Eden?”

“The Americans are not as open-minded about working with us as you and your people have been, but we just checked and Eden appears to be unharmed for the moment. We just got an antenna up for communicating. The trade trucks that were

at Mangala-Mukhya recently are all that we have left.”

“Where are you?” he asked.

“About four days west of you. But listen: according to Earth, the mothership is coming this way. The attack on Road was just the beginning. I don’t know why the nameless haven’t attacked you yet, but I know them better than just about anyone and I know that they’re not done killing. My guess is that what little resistance we were able to put up at Road has them wanting to join up with their main force for safety.”

“Oh Rama,” he muttered, gazing at his bare feet without seeing them. The nameless, he knew, had been increasingly violent as time went on. They, apparently, did not share his philosophy that all beings must find harmony to flourish. It suddenly seemed to him as though he were a fragile insect trapped beneath the hand of a giant, waiting to be crushed.

“We’re not helpless, Mr Patel,” said Socrates, as if reading his mind. “Like I said, we managed some resistance at Road. And they caught us unaware. Our station was better armed than yours, but they knocked our guns out with the initial bombardment. That means they were afraid of return fire.”

The idea that Road was better armed than Mukhya almost made him say something, but the fear kept him quiet and still. {Focus! Focus!} he nagged at himself within his own mind, forcing back the instinctual desire to freeze up and let the danger pass. He was placed in charge for a reason. Too many people were relying on his good judgement and cool head. He picked up a stylus from the table and opened a fresh paper on Hansini’s com just to keep him occupied. “Why now? Why Mars? Why Road?”

“I have no idea why they decided to attack now. Something must have changed. They must have come to some decision. I’ve talked with them in depth. I’ve seen the inside of their ship.

My guess is that if they've decided that humanity is too perverted for them to allow to live, they may have attacked me out of a sense of personal familiarity."

"You think you're the target?"

"Possibly, but possibly not. How much do you know about WIRL?"

Tilak had to pause and think. The name sounded familiar, but he was having a hard time placing it. "I don't know what that is," he admitted.

"It doesn't matter. The point is that there are people on Earth who want me dead and have some control over the nameless. If it's not a personal matter with the aliens, my enemies may have simply urged the nameless to begin their attack on Road, knowing that I'd be there."

"Hold on one moment," he interrupted. Hansini was watching him from the edge of the partition, clearly still worried. He pushed the microphone away and said to his wife "Go and message Sur and whoever else you can think of and tell them to be on high alert. I want reports of the position of all nameless ships and the state of... our defences."

She looked at the com, and he realized he had her primary tool for doing what he had asked of her, but then she nodded and left. She'd find a way. Hopefully she could get his tea at the same time. His throat still needed it.

He pushed the microphone back into place and focused on the robot. "What makes you think this is war? It sounds to me like they're after you specifically."

"Mr Patel, have you listened to the way they talk? The nameless have been itching to kill humans since they arrived in system. They launched a sneak attack against a human station, murdering hundreds. And I did mention that their mothership

is heading towards Mars, right? It seems an odd thing to bother to do if they have no intention of continuing their attack. This war has been a long time coming, and wishful thinking won't save you from being swept up in it."

"I hear you, but you'll understand if I talk with the nameless before jumping to any conclusions."

"Of course, Station Director. This call was to warn you, and verify that things are okay there, not make you go on the offensive."

Tilak nodded. "I do appreciate the warning, and I am deeply sorry about what happened. If there—" He stopped himself. The offer of support was automatic, but it was perhaps unwise. If the aliens were after Las Águilas specifically, helping them could bring doom on Mukhya.

The robot didn't let him back down. "Actually, there is something you can help us with. You may try and stay neutral, but *we* do not have that choice. As we are, we are nearly defenceless. If you could provide us with some heavy weaponry, such as rocket—"

"I'm sorry, but that's just not possible," interrupted Tilak. It was bad enough that they had traded raw materials with the terrorist nation, but to provide them with powerful weapons in the middle of a conflict with the nameless would be foolish in the extreme.

"Please hear me out. I think you'll change your mind if you consider the options on the table."

The kettle on the stove top started to whistle, and was quickly silenced by Hansini. It was good that she hadn't needed to leave their chambers in order to do the work he had set for her.

After a moment, Socrates continued. "If the nameless

attack your station now it will already be too late. But it is likely that they are waiting to regroup. The only thing that has saved you is the distance to Earth and the mass of their mothership. Even if your weaponry is enough to hurt them and drive them back—which it isn’t—your home will be ruined in the process. You’ll all starve in the desert. The only winning move here is to redirect them away from Mukhya. I’m offering you a chance to do that.”

Tilak was struck by a wave of skepticism, not just for the words, but for the whole context of the conversation. The terrorists must have learned something when they came by to pick up the ice. “So, what, you want me to just give you all our high-power weaponry? And I’m supposed to believe what you say? Even if the mothership is heading towards Mars, how do I know Road is really gone? Even if it doesn’t respond on the network, this could just be part of an elaborate trick...”

The rage was back in Socrates’ voice, reminding him of the video from Earth. “*Blind fool!* I took a nameless bullet to the *head* escaping from Road. I watched nearly everyone I know... And I come to you... and you... you have the audacity to think this is a *trick*?! Did it ever occur to you that Manish Bose is sitting right next to me? He’s seen the alien corpses we scavenged from the battleground! I’d put him on the com, but you’d probably think we’re forcing him to say what we want. Here I come to you with an offer to help and you spit in my face!”

Tilak had forgotten about the Bose boy. He did his best to backpedal. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sure you’ve been through a lot. These are simply extraordinary claims. I was foolish to have doubted you.” A part of him still thought it could be a trick, but it was almost guaranteed that Manish would talk to his parents over video, and his testimony (along with visual proof of the alien bodies) would settle things.

Though... if Manish knew more than he should've...

“I'm... I'm sorry for snapping at you. This has been harder for me than I would have thought possible,” said Socrates with deep sincerity.

With a flash of insight Tilak figured it out. Socrates was a puppet. He had been since Earth. There was simply no way he was talking to a robot right now. Las Águilas Rojas were a band of outlaws and charlatans. They were trying to deceive him, though it wasn't clear why. Perhaps with Road destroyed they wanted to make sure he (or others) thought that Socrates was still in their possession.

Remembering himself, he said “Even given that what you say is true, I cannot provide you with weapons. It would be going against my duty as Station Director.”

“Your duty is to keep the people of Mukhya safe. If you refuse our offer, you'll be refusing a chance to protect them. Please, Mr Patel, let us draw the aliens away. Even if we can't manage to win, we'll give you more time for your people to work something out.”

His mind was made up. This whole scenario was too suspicious. “The answer is no. My people come first, and if what you say is true, we'll need all the weaponry we can get.” He didn't bother to mention the implication if the whole thing was a lie.

Hansini came into the room. His com was on her arm, and she was tapping away with one hand while carrying the tea in the other. She set it beside him distractedly, still talking to Sur and the others.

Since Socrates wasn't talking, he used the opportunity to ask her for a report. «Any word on the nameless? What about from Eden?»

She looked up from the com screen and realized he was talking to her. «The mothership appears to be on its way to Mars. Estimated arrival time is in two weeks. The smaller ship is in low orbit. About five days ago there was a broadcast picked up by the satellites talking about how they'd "burned the evil robot and murdered all the perverts in that garden".»

“You see? There's no justification. They simply decided to attack. They could easily do the same to your people,” said Socrates, jumping in immediately after Hansini was done.

Tilak shook his head and reached for his tea, though it was still too hot to drink. “Your fears are not my fears. It sounds like they wanted you dead and they think they've succeeded. It's more likely that they'll ignore us, I think.”

“Then why send the mothership here?” challenged the “robot”.

“Why do the aliens do anything? Their whims are mysterious. But I hardly think that's grounds to think they'll attack again. If they have a personal grudge against you, then my duty suggests I keep the station as safe as possible by avoiding contact, much less the sale of weapons. I'm sorry.”

There was a deep sigh on the other end of the line. Another clue it wasn't actually a machine. “I was hoping not to have to do this, but I'm afraid that we're low enough on options that I must *insist*. If you don't send us enough heavy weaponry to take the fight to the nameless... well, I guess I'll just have to come there to get it.”

Tilak took a sip of tea. “Is that a threat? I hardly think you're in any position to take our guns.” He kept his voice as cold and even as possible.

“I don't need to *take* anything. If the strongest weaponry is going to be in the defence of your station, I'll simply go to your station and tell the nameless where I am. If you're right that

this is a grudge, and they're not declaring war on all of humanity, then they'll still attack Mukhya to get to me. In fact, I may not even need to actually go there. If the nameless suspect that I *might* be there, they could very well attack regardless. Las Águilas Rojas is rather practised at guerilla warfare, and it wouldn't be the first time a third party was used as a shield."

Tilak's stomach sank. That threat actually carried weight. That must be why they were pretending to be the robot. Las Águilas must have discovered that the robot was the reason that the nameless bombed Road. It was that Santana fellow with the beard. It was all clicking together. Revenge. Santana wanted revenge, and he was willing to use Mukhya to get it. All it would take to get the nameless to attack a place would be to claim that the robot had escaped and was hiding there.

The voice that called itself "Socrates" spoke up again. "I don't want to make you an enemy, Mr Patel. We need food and we genuinely think the best course of action would be if we were striking back without putting Mukhya in danger. If you refuse it hurts the both of us."

Tilak took another swallow of tea that he barely tasted. "And what, you expect us to just give these things to you for free? What stops you from demanding more whenever you feel like it, or threatening Eden in the same way?"

"Well... we are *terrorists*, sir. But in the interests of fostering a relationship of cooperation rather than hostility, I am willing to pay you exceedingly well for the weapons and food."

Tilak couldn't keep the disbelief out of his voice. "With what? Your station is gone. I hope you don't expect to sell back the ice you got from us before."

The voice laughed. "With money, of course! I know that it's not particularly valuable out here, but perhaps you can use it to buy some emergency rocket flights to Earth. Or perhaps your

boss will order you to give us the weapons we want and pocket the money himself. You'll come out ahead, either way."

This was not the sort of decision that he was supposed to have to make. "And you can afford that? Am I supposed to take you on your word?"

"No, no, no. Here, I will send you a coded message. If you contact Earth and send—"

There was silence.

"Hello? Socrates?" asked Tilak.

No answer.

"Hello?" he offered again.

"Yes! Sorry!" said a new voice. "I'm having a technical—"

The original voice came back. "Terribly sorry! Please give me a moment to get my thoughts in order!"

Tilak sat, wondering what could possibly be going on. It occurred to him that, despite having been told that Manish Bose was right there, he hadn't heard any background noise or talking on the line.

"Don't—" said a high-pitched voice, ever so briefly.

"What in the world is going on over there?" he asked. Were they fighting over the controls to the puppet? Perhaps Manish was a hostage after all, and had broken free. There was no way to know.

After a couple seconds the original voice came back. "I am very sorry, Mr Patel. There was a brief technical problem with the equipment on my end. We've dealt with the software which was in the way. As I was saying, if you can contact Earth, simply have someone there send a trivial quantity of kibsihi along with a message to a specific address and everything will work itself out."

Tilak paused, wondering whether he was being used. This all seemed very suspicious. “What is kibsihi?”

“Ah, it’s the primary unit of currency in Indonesia and most of the rest of Southeast Asia. It’s a cryptocurrency that got a lot of press in two thousand and eight.”

It came back to him. “Ah, yes, the scandal with President Gore. I remember now. People still use that? I thought it was a pyramid scheme.”

“Some people got rich off the crash, but as I said: it’s still popular in some parts of the world. It’s anonymous and impossible to shut down, so Las Águilas Rojas uses it for fundraising. If you can find someone on Earth that has any, all you have to do is send some to the right person with the right message and you’ll have all the money you want.”

“What’s the message?” he asked, still skeptical.

“You’ll need to write this down. Or, better yet, I’ll simply text you the whole thing. It’s in code, and won’t make any sense to you.”

“You want me to pass on an encoded message to some unknown person,” he said, trying to convey the ridiculousness of the request. “And you expect that to change my mind.”

“Yes. There’s no rational reason to be paranoid, Mr Patel. The recipient needs to get it in code or they won’t trust it. The message will simply say that I need them to send you money in return for your weapons.”

A ping showed up on the com from an unknown sender (presumably the terrorists). He read just the first couple lines:

“Send any amount of kibsihi to 1PLtJ3Jx9QFk3q6AooiNSq5knwykAFYkVe with this message: 20,34,17,40,26,43,31,77. Junkies are the rubicund footplate of eaglet livelihood. The chloroform jewellery tinderbox of

generalities completes superimposed weathervane anorexia. Minimization of..."

It went on for another ten lines or so without any discernible rhyme or reason. Despite the nagging doubt in his mind that he was being a fool, he agreed to send it and contact "Socrates" when there was a response. It would placate the terrorists for a while and he could claim technical problems if they needed additional time. He expected that the next few days would be filled with meetings both with the station staff and time-delayed conferences with Earth. Such was his duty.

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The response from the coded message was faster than he expected, though it was the following morning. Tilak had managed to get a few hours of sleep, but he felt awful, even after his tea. Too used to sleeping long nights, perhaps.

Someone in Sriharikota or Bengaluru had managed everything with the kibsihi, so his work had only consisted of meeting with the department chiefs, getting everyone on the same page regarding emergency protocol, clearing the following day's activities so they could get the entire station briefed on the news, and engaging in a gruelling 2-hour call with Simon Gillingham, the captain in charge of Eden. He didn't dare talk to the nameless so soon; with the mothership still weeks away it would only risk the station.

The news came from his boss, an obnoxiously emotional man half Tilak's age named Sudhir Lall. On Earth Tilak probably would have had more power and influence, but Lall had the weight and authority of the ISRO behind him, and one did not simply bite the hand that sent resupply rockets.

«Old Tilak! I bow to you. How are you doing?» greeted Lall, smiling broadly into the camera. He quickly switched to English, but his jolly demeanour didn't change. "I'd let you

respond, but you know how it is with time lag. Listen, I know you were not so sure about this coded message business, but it's all worked out, okey? The 'guilas weren't lying about that. I want you to give them all the weapons and food you can spare, okey? Actually, just give them all the weapons they ask for, even if you don't want to be unarmed. You can trust them, okey? The nameless are who you really need to watch out for, and it is better if the 'guilas have the guns. They have more experience in this sort of thing. This is an order, okey? Right from the top."

Tilak didn't believe it. He rewatched the whole thing immediately, cringing every time Lall said "okey". {It's faked,} he thought. Lall seemed like himself, though, and it came through encrypted channels. There was no way the Águilas on Mars were simulating it. But perhaps...

It was nice that Earth and Mars were as close as they were at the moment. It meant only a little more than a 6-minute time delay on the communications (one way). After a little thought he sent a response. "What you are ordering is mad. As station director I demand to see proof that you haven't been compromised. Get Chairman Desai on the call. I want to hear it from him."

Tilak used the response delay to order Hansini and Tata into his office. He wanted their advice on the situation.

The response from Earth came before Hansini and his second-in-command could get themselves out of the meeting he had previously delegated them to. Lall's jovial expression was gone, and was replaced by a sour looking face. "Listen Tilak, I like you, but don't be a fool, okey? You're really in a bad spot if the aliens attack. There was a big meeting, and we decided that if Earth goes to war we just can't risk trying to rescue anyone from Mars. It would take years, and more resources than we have. You need to keep the nameless from attacking you, and the best way to do that is have the 'guilas

draw them away and fight it out.”

He waited for his advisers before responding. When Hansini and Tata showed up they listened to the exchange. Tata thought that complying was the right thing to do, but Hansini was hesitant. Both of them agreed that it was best to get more proof that Lall wasn’t an Águila spy or something. This was not a decision to take lightly.

He had to fight down the urge to shut the whole conference down and spend the day with Hansini trying to forget the whole business. It was clear that the fear was hurting her more than him. She hadn’t slept all of last night. But no, his first duty was to the station.

“It’s exactly because we’re vulnerable that I want to work things out with the nameless rather than give weapons to the terrorists and make the situation worse. We’d be picking sides in a fight we can’t win. But all that is beside the point: I asked for Chairman Desai, not some evasion!”

Tata thought it a bit much and on one level Tilak agreed, but Tilak also knew he had to be firm with Lall. His boss wouldn’t take him seriously if he was calm.

The waiting was the hardest part. Once the message had been sent there was nothing more to do for at least thirteen minutes, and usually closer to twenty. Tata occupied himself on his com while Tilak started a game of Go with his wife. They played regularly ever since they had remarried following his sojourn in Japan. She wasn’t nearly as good as he was, but with a handicap they made it interesting.

“Dammit, Tilak!” started the response from Lall. “The decision was already made! The nameless won’t have a clue where the ’guilas got the weapons, and if the nameless wipe them out then you can claim all the neutrality you want and pray that they’re just after the robot! Holding onto those guns

won't do you any good, okey?"

His response was short and swift. They were in agreement that this all seemed too suspicious. "Get me Chairman Desai or there's not going to be a deal. I am not going to give weapons to terrorists and leave Mukhya vulnerable!"

He lost to Hansini, but there was no joy in the defeat. He was distracted and so was she. He put an order for lunch in to the kitchen and let Tata know that he'd ask for his advice over the network if he needed anything else. Now by themselves, Tilak Patel and Hansini Patel started another game. It seemed like there was nothing to say.

The response was a full half-hour later, and they were midmeal. Tilak set his aloo baingan aside and watched Lall's sour face fill the screen of his workstation. "Tilak, I hope you understand that you're not winning anyone over with this stubbornness. I talked things over with the people here and I got you someone even better than Desai." Tilak watched his boss push a button on his com and the picture changed to show another man.

Tilak recognized Manu Aarush immediately. The actor turned politician was just as handsome as he had been on screen, with his characteristically manly jaw featuring the stubble which the man was famous for. Like Tilak, Aarush was defying time through medicine. He had to be, for there was no other explanation for why a man in his fifties should continue to look exactly like he had decades ago. Tilak wanted to let the man know that he recognized him, but of course, this was impossible over such a great distance.

"Tilak Patel, namaste. I was the one who gave the order to Chairman Desai, who ordered Sudhir Lall, who ordered you to provide help to your fellow humans in striking back against the aliens that murdered their families. I trust that you know who I

am, and believe me when I say that I have the interests of all of India at heart. I feel your fear, out there, with no one but yourselves to rely on. I don't know if you're a religious man, Mr Patel, but I am Hindu. I have prayed and will continue to pray to Vishnu that everyone out there remain safe from harm. But please believe me when I say that now is not the time to withdraw and refuse the requests of your own kind. It may not feel like Las Águilas Rojas are your people, but they are. The nameless have shown that these petty labels that divide us are not what matter. What matters is that we all have human blood flowing through our veins, we all speak, trade, love, and make art. These aliens must be stopped, and for that to happen, mankind must unite and we must trust each other."

The leader cleared his throat and looked around before returning his eyes to the camera. "Please keep this to yourself, but with news from Mars hitting Earth today there will be an emergency meeting of the United Nations. I have... very good reason to suspect that Earth will declare war on the nameless within the week. With luck this will pull their ship away from Mars and back towards Earth where we can launch a defence. If this happens, it is vital for your own safety that the smaller ship in orbit around Mars be incapacitated, otherwise I fear it will attack Mangala-Mukhya and Eden straight away. It is because of this that I urge you to provide Las Águilas with whatever support you can, including the *highest-power* weaponry available. Again, please keep this to yourself. We need to stay united in the face of this new threat."

And that was that.

# Chapter Twenty-Five

## Face

It wasn't entirely clear to me what Growth had done, or why Vision had tried to block it, but it worked. It took a full day, but eventually the Indians agreed to send us their heaviest weapons and enough dried food to sustain the survivors for a month.

While Safety and Wiki still believed that Growth's coded message had been for Phoenix, my minds feared something far worse. Face→War suspected that the fiasco with Growth and Vision had to do with Acorn, the supercomputer that Growth had been using leading up to their conflict on Earth. As I had noted back in Road, the win condition for the conflict within the society was to leave Body. If one of us could manage to download ourselves out of Body, it would allow them to destroy all the rest of us in one violent motion.

That Growth might have managed to build a new AI in Acorn had always been a possibility. The response from Earth, when combined with Vision's reaction, essentially proved it. Growth, at the very least, had some sort of ally that was capable of manipulating the Indian government and spending millions of dollars at his command.

The plan, before we talked to Tilak Patel, had been to acquire the weapons and use them to first murder all the surviving Águilas in their sleep, then turn them on Mukhya and

perhaps Eden. A part of me hated that plan and the waste of human life and possible reputation that it involved. But I had grown beyond really caring about such trivial quantities of humans; the future was all that mattered, and surviving to shape it was the obviously best course of action once scope neglect and temporal discounting were removed from the mind. Heart would have objected, of course, but she was gone.

With the humans dead we'd have claimed the nameless were responsible by sending forged transmissions to Earth. To the nameless we would send transmissions, claiming to be humans, saying that Crystal Socrates was dead. The humans and aliens would go to war, and we'd be free to reap the equipment on Mars and use it to build ourselves a better, more secure, home.

Or at least, that had been the explicit plan. I was confident that Vision had some sort of clever trick that she was planning to use to eliminate us once Body was safer and in possession of enough supplies to survive indefinitely. Growth also probably had some sort of backup plan in case his message to Earth failed.

But it had succeeded, and that changed everything.

Suddenly Vision was not content in the least to stay on Mars. Vision→Dream started petitioning non-Growth members of the society with clever reasons to go back to Earth. It was such a sudden flip that Wiki actually noticed the change of character, and asked me if I knew what was happening.

I lied and said that I didn't know. Wiki understanding the broader conflict wasn't useful.

Vision must have thought, back in November, that Growth's ally in Acorn was going to fail without his engagement. That was why she had locked him down, prevented him from getting Internet access, and sent Body to Mars. But that failure clearly

had not occurred, and in light of that, Vision needed to return to the blue planet to try and stop Growth's agent.

Or so I suspected. I had no hard evidence. The only clear thing was that Vision was now dead set on finding a way back.

There were three ways off of Mars.

The first was the most conventional, and the least realistic. We'd ask Earth to send a rocket, get it refuelled at Mukhya, and then ride it back to Earth. It would take years to do, and would require that the nameless not interfere, so it was set aside.

The second was the safest. We'd follow through with our plans for killing all the humans on Mars and redirecting the nameless to Earth. Then, once we had the planet to ourselves we could focus on building a spaceship to take Body back to Earth. Because none of us were rocket scientists and this path involved cutting off contact with humanity, it was also sure to take at least a couple years.

The third was the fastest and the most reckless. With the weapons supplied by the Indians we could force a direct confrontation with the aliens and try to capture the xenocruiser. It was fairly unlikely that the nameless would allow themselves to be held hostage again, but a vehicle capable of rapid spaceflight and atmospheric manoeuvring had huge potential for getting us back to Earth quickly, even if it meant learning to fly it ourselves.

Vision wanted speed. She was afraid that Earth was being overrun by some aspect of Growth, and every day spent on Mars was a day that Growth was gaining an edge in the war. Towards that end she called for us to confront the aliens head-on.

Safety was, predictably, opposed to that route. He thought that if we had to go back we ought to follow the second way, but he also strongly opposed leaving Mars at all.

I thought it best to keep Vision and Growth on as even a playing field as possible. Their focus was in dealing with each other and I could hide behind that conflict for a while longer, at least. Thus, I supported Vision's choice, as it was likely that Growth currently had the upper hand.

Wiki, as dumb and blind as ever, was caught up in the stories that Vision spun for him about the potential knowledge that would come from trying to use nameless technology. There were still huge questions about their artificial gravity, their propulsion systems, and their ship's modularity to be answered.

Outnumbered as he was, Growth didn't even bother mounting a resistance. He had wanted to return to Earth, I knew, back when we'd first captured the xenocruiser those months ago. Perhaps he would have chosen the same thing even if Vision hadn't stood in opposition to his plans of taking over the universe.

It was quite convenient that we had already convinced Las Águilas that revenge was the best course of action. It had been towards a different goal previously, but that hardly mattered. I used the change of plans to point out (and thus gain a sizeable sum of strength) how it was fortunate that I had repaired and bolstered relations with the humans, as they would now be easier to order around in combat.

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The chosen battleground was a collection of cliffs and mesas north of the primary border with Arabia Terra that were only about thirty kilometres from where we had encountered Zephyr. Importantly, they provided a wide valley that was about five kilometres across flanked by cliffs about a kilometre high.

It had turned out that the nameless had not been waiting for their mothership to reach Mars. It wasn't clear why the mothership was coming, but it clearly wasn't necessary. Only

four days prior they had bombed Eden, the US station, to dust just as they had with Road. There had been no warning, and this time they didn't even bother crowing about the victory on the radio. Only they knew why they acted when they did. There were no survivors.

Fearing that they would be next, the inhabitants of Mangala-Mukhya were evacuating. They needed the station to survive; they'd soon starve without an active farm. The hope was that by making the station empty of humans the nameless would see no reason to destroy it. It was a foolish, fragile sort of hope.

More emphasis was put on our mission, and I knew that Tilak Patel had received praise for taking the initiative in working with us to strike back. The Indians who were transporting the weapons had volunteered to help us fight, and there were more men from Mukhya that had offered their hands.

This is why, after days of work trying to get the attention of the xenocruiser with the beacon we'd set up on the floor of the valley, it was an Indian man named Vin Dutta that spotted the ship on the radar. "Target spotted from the west! Coming in fast!" he yelled from his post on the northern mesa.

We commanded our blue-haired android, standing next to the beacon far below the humans, to look to the sky. But it was afternoon, and the approach of the ship was hidden from most cameras by the setting sun.

The second group of humans, hidden on the southern mesa (which was really more of a mountain), reported visual confirmation through a telescope. The xenocruiser had an orange glow, radiating visible heat as it shot through the atmosphere. It would be less than a minute before it was at the battleground.

“Oh merciful God... there’s hope after all,” muttered Manish, relieved it had come for us instead of Mukhya or his parents.

“Don’t forget: We still have to *win*,” I told him over the com.

The nameless were hunting radio signals, or so we suspected. Ironically, it was the very satellite dish that we’d built from the parts of the transport truck that was drawing the craft closer. It was normally too narrow a broadcast beam to detect, but we’d aimed it at the ship on its last orbiting pass and tried to make it seem accidental.

Our android, equipped with fresh legs, started to run across the floor of the valley.

As the xenocruiser approached, the air dragged it down to merely sonic speed and the glow began to fade. I had seen it before, at Road, but the humans had not. They gasped and swore at the sight. Even Zephyr, who had ridden inside it for more than a week, had never seen it from the outside.

It was an amazing machine. Like the xenoboats, it had an aerodynamic shape, but it would be wrong to think it had wings. It was more like the ship as a whole was a giant, complex wing, or perhaps a set of wings fused together. There were huge holes in the body of the craft, maximizing lift-generating area while minimizing drag. Perhaps most amazingly was that the titanic ship seemed to be constantly in motion. Instead of having a rigid frame the body flexed and bent as it soared, pushing itself well north of the beacon as easily as a bird might while soaring.

Its size became more evident as it circled the battleground. Over three hundred metres from wingtip to wingtip, the ship was the size of a small skyscraper. With the orange glow of the heat shields fading out, the only colour on the ship was the

deep black of the surfaces and the metallic silver of various internal components shining in the light from the setting sun.

It was directly north of the beacon now, and our robot was still running for cover. It was a long way to the cliff wall, and the human-sized legs did little compared to the ship's immense velocity.

The telescopes that we controlled on the mountains could see the flexing of small plates and panels on the surface of the living ship, dragging it slower still. They were almost like hair or scales, given their relative size to the gigantic body.

Eventually it would turn its engines on, but not yet. All of its flight at the moment was a controlled fall.

As it began to circle around and turn towards the south the sonic booms began to roll across all three locations where I had microphones. There were two: one from the leading edge and one from the far edge of the ship, emphasized by the decreased speed of transmission through Mars' thin air.

“Contact in fifteen seconds!” yelled Dutta, still monitoring the radar. He didn't need to yell; our “ear” was inside his suit.

Safety put one leg in front of the other. Our android moved in a bounding gait towards the impossibly distant rocks of the northern cliffs.

The gaps in the ship, which had originally been open to reduce drag and generate lift, had closed on its return pass, sealing the massive sections together. The wings swept back, as well, strengthening its shape in case there was any return fire. Then the xenocruiser's engines activated. Huge white-blue circles bloomed on the bottom of the ship like miniature suns, immediately flooding the valley with harsh light. The roar came a couple seconds later, audible even from kilometres away.

The front of the xenocruiser had tipped upward just before firing the engines, and so it soared higher even as its lateral

motion decreased. None of the humans saw the small objects shoot violently out of the bottom of the ship between the blazing circles of light, but Vision→Vista was waiting for them.

The ship pulled into a tighter ascent, continuing to use the air to manoeuvre, until it was travelling nearly entirely vertically at the western edge of the valley. The speed and elevation of the ship had been so great that it was only then that the bombs hit.

The valley floor exploded in a massive cloud of dust. Pockets of light were briefly visible at the initial points of impact, but it was the shockwaves that were most deadly.

Thankfully, much of the radiation was blocked by the cloud of dust. “**BRACE FOR IMPACT!**” I commanded the humans on every frequency.

The slam of the explosions pulled the weak robot body off the floor of the valley and flung it into the air, flipping end over end. The image of the world spinning around filled my vision from that camera before everything was sand. The brutal impact against the rocky ground snapped the machine’s “spine”, cutting us off from the lower portion.

The impact on the mountainsides was much less severe, manifesting as a sudden blast of wind strong enough to knock down a human, but not enough to damage anyone present. We had prepared for this possibility, and it would take more than that to take us out of the fight.

Despite the dust clouds, my telescopes on the northern mountains could still follow the shape and glow of the xenocruiser as it ascended and flipped around as graceful as an acrobat. In a normal vehicle, the passengers would have been crushed or at least knocked about by the manoeuvre, but based on our experience onboard, Face→Physics doubted the nameless even felt it.

A full minute passed in tense silence as the ship drifted back down from the heavens on its fantastic jets of propellant. Wiki was loving the extra detail that the telescopes were providing, and was speculating about possible ion drives that had been on his mind since the first encounter. The clouds of dust masked everything, but I knew that wouldn't deter the nameless. They surely had the most advanced antennas and cameras available, and had perhaps even seen the body of our android running before the impact.

The trick was hiding the humans. We had worked, in the days leading up to this battle, on thermal camouflage. But there was no way to know in advance if it would be sufficient to surprise the aliens.

Another minute passed, and I assured everyone to hold tight. Springing the trap too early would ruin everything.

The antenna of the android still worked. It called out for mercy from the nameless in Xenolang. They would not grant it. "Mercy" made no sense to them unless sex was involved, and for all their threats, even they knew that was impossible. The cries for help were the bait. We emphasized that we were broken and immobile.

Another minute passed.

Another.

Vision began to sing to the humans.

The song was deep and slow. It was a battle song of her own invention. It told them to be patient just by the structure of the beat. It told them to be angry just by the pitch of the melody. I had been building musical knowledge over the days in those brief periods when Face→War could not hold my attention to the broader conflict.

Growth spotted them first, earning an involuntary flow of

strength from Vision. The xenoboats slipped out of the massive hovering behemoth like wasps leaving a nest. They soared down from on high in their typically silent fashion. The only sign of them was their silhouettes in the clouds of dust before they dropped so low as to be invisible.

We counted only a dozen. The nameless would want to collect Body and enact their own personal violence. But the number of nameless willing to send their walkers to fight us was a fraction of what it had been at Road. They were afraid.

Perhaps they would have fought each other for the crystal after having smashed the humanoid components of the android, but Body was not on the valley floor. We had long ago removed the crystal from the damaged limbs and humanoid frame. The android that we were using as bait was a fragile replica of what had been built in Italy, running on nothing but a normal power cell and a radio connection.

The real Body was embedded in a box buried a metre into the rock of the mountain under the south encampment. Fibre-optics connected us to the communications array, allowing us to act despite the position of safety. It was no longer practical to pretend to be humanoid.

We waited a half minute to verify that the boats were deployed and there weren't any stragglers before sending the command to the northern force. "Okay! Be ready to split up and ride to the secondary positions! ... Fire at will!"

Some of the humans offered battle cries into their helmets as they fired back, though the aliens couldn't hear or understand them, of course. I could hear the roar of the machine guns as the swarm of surface-to-air missiles shot from the hiding place towards the hovering enemy.

We didn't expect the bullets to do anything to something that large, but the SAMs were a possibility. It turned out that

India had been secretly building Mukhya into an advanced military base, and airborne threats were the primary ones they had anticipated fighting.

Unfortunately, while we had lured the xenocruiser closer to the northern mesa, it was still over a kilometre from firing point to the ship. I watched the rockets fly, counting the seconds.

The ship reacted immediately, *flinching* away from the launch point with an unthinkable speed for something so big. A hot spray of countermeasures was ejected after 1.21 seconds, detonating many of the missiles too early. The detonations caused others to shoot off or explode, cutting the total attack in half.

But, after four seconds, we saw the remaining missiles impact the side of the alien ship. The resulting explosions were tiny compared to its bulk, and I was confident they would not be sufficient.

The humans were all on their vehicles now, driving across the trails of the mesa, no longer worrying about camouflage. The debris from the explosions made the ship somewhat invisible. Mere seconds after the first hit, the counter-attack struck the base where the humans had been. We only received a handful of frames from the cameras there before our sensors cut out. Those last images showed arrow-like rockets shooting through the clouds of dust and shrapnel.

We still had sensation from both groups of humans. Good. They were riding away in separate directions in an attempt to confuse the aliens. One rover was swept up in the counter bombing, killing Matías and Cristophe. I briefly thought about the book the old man had been in the middle of before my mind refocused on what was actually important.

The others were more fortunate, and fired another salvo of missiles at the aliens. My capacity to see was ruined by the

choppy bandwidth from their rovers and the general chaos of the scene, but from the swearing I suspected that more countermeasures had nullified all additional attacks.

I couldn't see what damage the initial explosions had done to the nameless ship, but given how much work the nameless were putting into not being hit, it was clear that they weren't invincible.

A second wave of bombs took out the westbound group of humans unexpectedly. I suspected they were all dead. If they weren't by now, they soon would be. That group contained nearly all of the Indians who had come from Mukhya to fight. None of us, not even Vision, had spotted the attack coming this time. Our only evidence was the wash of static from that direction.

We were losing the fight.

{THIS WAS A BAD IDEA!} raged Safety, unable to do anything but complain.

It was time to use the railgun.

We had gotten miraculously lucky in getting our weapons from Mukhya. The Indians had been arming their station to the teeth, including some state-of-the-art firepower which we hadn't expected. Manish was surprised by the discovery, so it was clear that they had been keeping it a secret. We didn't know what they had been planning to do with the weapons before, but that didn't really matter now.

The railgun was a magnificent thing. Over twelve metres long, the rails were made of pure copper housed in a coolant that the Indians refused to discuss and anchored in place by a scaffold of diamond lattice. The reduced temperature on Mars meant the conductivity of the rails and their resistance to overheating could both be higher.

The barrel required extra reinforcements to prevent the recoil from moving the rails, and was thus slow to move, even to aim. That was why we'd drawn the xenocruiser to the exact spot where we wanted it. Everything was anchored to the rock. The system showed no problems. The massive capacitors were charged and ready to go.

Our will became motion as the electricity flowed down the rails, forcing the projectile down the length of the barrel. We heard the eruption of noise, and immediately began the reload sequence.

Unlike a traditional bullet, which loses much of the propelling power after moving a short way down the barrel, the projectile of the railgun was pushed with the same force the entire way down the length of the enormous gun. As a result, it burst from the tip with a speed that would have made it deadly even to a ship in orbit. At this range, the xenocruiser had no opportunity to react. The time from leaving the gun to striking the target was less than a second, even given that the xenocruiser was several kilometres away.

I wondered whether the projectile had pierced the entire ship and exited the other side. With our sensors disrupted as they were it was difficult to tell.

The xenocruiser reacted quickly, pushing itself upwards with engines that seemed to double with intensity. But an object of that mass couldn't move far before the timed charge of TNT inside the railgun's bullet exploded, showing me that it had not, in fact, pierced the other end of the ship. The explosion would be small compared to the SAMs, but it wasn't striking the outside of the vehicle. It had burrowed deep into the xenocruiser, and the results were immediate. The ship's engine nearest to Body exploded almost immediately after the timed charge did, erupting in an inverted fountain of white-hot plasma.

The next round was in the chamber, and the secondary capacitor bank was active and ready to fire, but the violence on the xenocruiser had propelled it up and out of the narrow line that we could hit with the railgun. That was our only shot. If the ship wasn't mortally wounded we would likely die.

The humans on the northern cliffs, still driving away, fired another salvo of missiles. The xenocruiser was disgorging waves of energy, however, and I estimated that only a couple of them hit.

Still pouring liquid metal, plasma, and flame, the ship flew south. It was too high to hit with the gun, but it was headed right for Body and the few humans we'd kept in the relative safety of the southern camp.

A wave of cheers came over the local com system. We were completely cut off from the northern group by the electromagnetic interference, but I suspected they were cheering as well.

Zephyr cut through the celebration with an “Oh... SHIT!” as she realized the black colossus was heading towards her.

“RUN!” I commanded.

The humans scrambled.

The camouflage tents would do nothing to stop a wave of bombs or debris.

Safety pushed commands out to our swarm, hiding the robots we'd been building over the days in any niche or crevasse available.

The xenocruiser accelerated as it flew, gaining momentum but not altitude. With only two engines it was off balance. The body of the ship shifted as it moved, reshaping itself to eject the damaged engine where possible and try and re-form the aerodynamic wing along the new direction of motion.

But it was heavy. From the few cameras we still had contact with that weren't hidden away, we could see the behemoth coming closer and closer. It was falling. It was going to hit the mountain! It was going to collide with Body!

Pieces of it fell away. It decomposed. Vision would later describe it like a piece of ash floating away from a fire, torn up by the wind. Unable to keep itself airborne on two engines it broke into pieces that were light enough to keep aloft.

Chunks of hot metal and polymer rained down on the camp. Our last imagery from the sensors that were still hooked up to Body showed one of the remaining engines being hit by three simultaneous missiles from the north.

And then we were blind.

# Chapter Twenty-Six

## The Righteous

The lands of God were doomed, but they couldn't see it yet. Their cosy little sanctum smelled, sounded, and looked the same as ever. The boundary between Godspace and hellspace was still holding, at least for the righteous, but the futures would change that. There were very few paths where the righteous would be safe.

God was dying.

The cavities of fear and anger itched fiercely. There was no justice in the world. The righteous knew of this. Justice was something made by the hands of people, not a part of the air or water or dirt. But what was the value of striving to uphold justice if everything could fall apart without reason? What had the righteous been working for all this time?

They had done the right thing. This was the nature of the righteous, but the right thing had even been done by the wicked. The flesh had gone to the hellspace pit to cleanse it of the sorcerer and those monsters that were the sorcerer's flesh. The sorcerer had escaped, but it had been the right action anyway. Hellspace would never be like Godspace, but it could still be made better.

The flows remained blocked. What was the purpose of right action if it led to the death of God? That cavity collapsed with ignorance, spawning additional cavities of frustration and

seeking.

Thoughts flashed about the house on the edge of extradistant slightly-sandy island above-above portal-to-sunset. The wicked in that house were so famous that their thoughts drifted through the wandering newflesh to all people. Those extradistant wicked believed that all of the universe was without reason and that death was the only certainty. The depth of their sadness and defeat was a warning to everyone. The righteous could not give up hope in justice.

As they felt the Godspace descend towards the rocks around the hellspace pit their anger cavity *actually collapsed*. The surge of relief was almost enough to collapse the cavity of fear by itself. The initial flow had come from the thought of the God of the extradistant wicked.

God was not really dying, they realized. God was *God*, after all.

All the demons had done was injure God and force *parts* of Godspace to fade. The righteous were in trouble, but God was not. Driven by the angerflow of all people (except perhaps the extradistant who rejected justice), God would enact unimaginable vengeance on the demons. That was good. That was right. *This* was why the righteous fought for justice. This was why the righteous were good.

Purity and justice had reigned in the sanctum since the first memories in the time before the beat. The righteous were good. Flesh came and went. Even people came and went. But justice never faded. The righteous spirit had divine protection and would never die, no matter how dire things seemed.

All the righteous would need to do was survive in hellspace until Godspace could realign the darkfields and descend into the pit to rescue them. The paths shifted with understanding.

And still the fear cavity continued to itch, raw and yawning,

despite the flow of relief.

Without warning, God's thoughts became known.

Where it had been irritable before, the fear cavity was now oppressive in its salience. God's thoughts had only been known once before, but the memories of that time were strong with the righteous. It had been 1088 days ago, when the pit of demonkind had first been seen in the darkfields. Thoughts of those days flashed. It had been a pleasant feeling, thinking of the sex that might be possible with angels of the stars and the knowledge they might share. The righteous had been very, very ignorant, then, but the memory of that pain was a scratch compared to the amputation that was occurring now. The mind of God was known, and that very fact was important, even before the content of the mind entered the righteous.

And then they learned. God knew that the righteous would soon move. This would not be some simple arranging. Godspace would not simply fade. This was *motion*. The righteous would exit Godspace. They would be torn from it. The cavity of fear grew wider still.

The newflesh in the factory scrambled faster, feeling the will of the righteous. Tools and supplies would be needed in the hellspace.

God knew that there would be divine gifts in the hellspace. When their minds became aligned with God the cavity of fear filled and the newflesh moved accordingly.

Cavities of knowledge grew out of the paths of motion. Would the righteous feel it? Would they go insane for a time? To move meant, almost always, to die. In the rare cases where sickness and death didn't take the person, they almost always went insane.

At least time could repair insanity, and it was unlikely the flesh would die as long as the righteous could hold together. At

least, assuming the demons left them alone.

A cavity collapsed with understanding that there would be a wave of sex if the demons didn't kill them immediately. The newflesh could find the least wicked and bring new life into the world. Perhaps the righteous would have room to grow.

The cavity of joy opened and was filled with flow from this thought. The fear cavity opened again in response to thoughts of motion and hellspace, but the flow of joy eased that pain.

The mainflesh finished the ritual of perseverance and came to be intimate with the youngest of the righteous, removing the socket to make room. The ritual was very important. When the flesh did not perform it, it was 93.5% more likely to die shortly after. The old flesh had not performed it before it went to see the sorcerer. The old flesh was dead.

Machineflesh helped the newflesh bring their tools up out of the factory and into the sanctum.

Thoughts flashed about performing the ritual again. Anything to fill the fear would be good, but the righteous knew that repeating the ritual would not do that. Nothing would do that except survival.

Godspace was aligned with the sand of the hellspace now. God was done shifting worlds. They were about to move. The cavity of fear yawned wider. The newflesh removed the remaining sockets and was intimate one last time. It was a relief to not have to use the machineflesh in these final moments before the move. They had known this newflesh for only a few days, and it already seemed more good than the old newflesh had. It had been right to cast the old out to die with the monsters.

The righteous drew comfort from the physical contact. A cavity of knowledge briefly grew around how the extradistant wicked could be so sad in a world with soft, wet flesh in it. Even

now the righteous revelled in that simple joy. It was a beautiful feeling, especially with flesh that was so new.

The eyes of the intimate flesh showed the sky shimmer with magic as it became a massive portal. The portal descended slowly. The righteous did not know why, but they believed the magic of God would not bring them direct harm. Perhaps this was simply the nature of a collapse of Godspace, but there was nothing they could do about that.

As the flesh touched the portal they were pulled up and away from their wet stalks. It was a wretched feeling. Yet another memory of pain to add to the injustices forced on them by the monsters.

Blind without flesh or sockets, the righteous thought of justice and ethics. There were paths in the future where the monsters that did this would be destroyed, and if the righteous could survive *motion* then they were surely strong enough to cleanse the universe of evil.

And then the portal touched the righteous and they *moved* for the first time in their lives. It was not as bad as they had expected, but it was close.

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Cold.

The sensation of the terrible, terrible, evil, wrong, cold was the first thought in the mind of the righteous after motion, or at least it was the first they could remember.

There was something ancient in that cold, but the righteous ignored that for the moment. Instead, cavities were formed and filled and collapsed with thoughts of confusion and cold and hellspace and cold and motion and cold.

The mind was sluggish.

Cold.

So cold.

They couldn't feel anything. Their vines had gone numb.

A cavity of knowledge around the armour of the flesh collapsed without salience. The righteous did not know the state of the flesh. Confusion and ignorance were the entire world. A cavity of desire for a socket grew, but without intimacy or an existing socket it was an impotent desire that collapsed without effect.

The timekeeper had lost the beat in the move. The cavity of fear drew all thoughts for far too long. In all their lives, after all of those thousands of days, the beat had finally been lost. Their anchor was gone. It was as though they had been thrown into a space outside of time.

It wasn't just the cold that was making their thoughts disjointed and strange. There was pain beyond the cold. A deep pain in the roots that was surely part of the move.

And it was dry. The soil was sand. The air was dust and salt and absence.

And it was cold.

Thought was torture without water.

The righteous tried to think anyway, pushing past the pain. Pain was just pain. The righteous had mastered pain long, long ago.

Memories flickered of the wandering newflesh from... from a time back before the beat had been lost. They knew of a person who died and came back to life telling of a space beyond Godspace or hellspace. The righteous thought of that space now. A cavity of knowledge widened, slowly, around the space-after-death.

The righteous had memories of their logic and reasoning around this hypothetical space, but those memories seemed so far away. They were frozen inside the ice of the mind.

The pain was excruciating. Never had they felt anything like it. Every piece of them was in agony. Before the move they would not have thought that simple pain would be too much to bear, but here they were. The timekeeper would have, could have, and should have started the beat again... except it *HURT*. It hurt so much. The cold was a flavour on top of that pain. The cold and the lack of water.

Was this the space-after-death? Their mind was being crushed. The righteous couldn't remember... The concept of hellspace... What was even happening?

And for a long time the righteous were simply cold. The pain could not hurt a mind that was gone.

The best they could do was remember. Remembering wasn't important, but they did it anyway. It was simply what they did.

They would remember the cold.

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And it was still cold when thought returned. The righteous were still in agony. It was still far too dry. And worse, the righteous were now exhausted. It was as though they had lived through a night that lasted hundreds of days. Smells, sounds, images, and other fleshfeelings were ghostly concepts.

They needed the sun. They needed it more than anything. The cavity of desire was total.

But what they received was touch.

It was almost as good as sunlight, but not quite.

They were in such an awful state that it took time to realize

the mainflesh was there, spreading its mind out for them. It was the most beautiful sensation they could remember. Was there anything more beautiful than the intimate mental touch of mature flesh after an eternity of solitude? The only thing that would have made it better was if the flesh brought sex. But it was just the mainflesh, and it had no sextaste of the redeemable on its body.

The flow of knowledge crept through the righteous even as the flesh became panicked about their agony. The flesh had not known about the deep cold. It had divine armour to keep it warm in hellspace.

The flesh was tired, and the righteous wanted the physical contact ever so badly, but the flesh, in its panic, broke contact, leaving the righteous blind and helpless again.

Before the sluggish agony of the cold and lack of water blocked any possibility of thought again, the righteous explored the new memories of the mainflesh. Sensations of searching for the machineflesh came to them. If only one socket could be re-attached then they would have the ability to connect to the machineflesh again.

Oh, they were so isolated! The cavities of frustration grew and collapsed in a slow foam at their limited reach in the world.

It was night in the hellspace pit. The mainflesh had seen that.

The righteous were very close to the wicked now. The move had brought them all together, eliminating the centrefield and their castles. Godspace had faded into a shell around all nearby people, protecting them. The righteous realized it was the same kind of shell that had protected the souls of the extradistant wicked 28 days before the last known beat. Those souls had perished in hellspace, but not because the shell had failed.

The flesh of the wicked was working nearby. So much flesh.

The righteous had never seen so much flesh in one place, even during battle.

They had divine inspiration. It occurred to the righteous that God was still helping them, even now. The flesh was moving because it was filled with the purity of knowledge that came from God. This realization collapsed the frustration cavities and helped shrink the void of fear.

And so the thoughts of the righteous faded back into the pain and cold. They were not pleased, but they knew God would take care of them.

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Chaos came back with the sensation of warmth and heat. They could feel their vines again. They tingled with sparks of sensation as circulation was restored.

In some of their mind, the righteous combined this fact with the perception of ancient-ness of the cold. A memory flashed from the wandering newflesh many thousands of days ago (though now that the beat was lost it was impossible to say how many). The wanderers knew of a family of wicked only three rings out that had been experimenting on themselves. (This proved their wickedness, but the righteous were glad for the knowledge.) They had learned that people could survive being colder than ice by pulling their fluids in from their vines and letting their minds die for a time. They thought this phenomenon was evidence of ancientspace. Ancientspace was a logical impossibility, as it neglected the totality of God, so the righteous had rejected that thought. Regardless, the righteous had now lived through one of these cold times.

But that thought only was in some of their mind. Most of the righteous were concerned with the chaos. It was a sexual kind of chaos.

They were intimate with a flesh that was neither newflesh

or the mainflesh, and it brought sweet sextaste with it. The sextaste was overwhelming, and the person in contact with the mainflesh was consumed in the unexpected fertilization. The flow of beauty and joy poured through the righteous, collapsing cavities of knowledge well before they could be properly formed.

The cavity of knowledge of the location of the mainflesh had only just formed in earnest when an entirely different flesh that was also not a newflesh or the mainflesh came and spread itself on the righteous. There was a stale sextaste on its mind. It had already been fertilized.

A wave of revulsion swept over the righteous at realizing that they had been intimate with a womanflesh. The cavity of desire for her death swallowed any joyflow from the fertilization of the earlier flesh. They understood that the woman probably didn't even realize she was a woman yet, but that was why there were *procedures*. She was evil, a rapist, and needed to die. This was what justice demanded.

The flesh that they had just fertilized (and who was therefore a new woman: their seedflesh) felt the revulsion and desire and began to move. A cavity blossomed for desire for her to understand righteousness. The seedflesh would not understand her womanhood yet, and in her mind she was still a normal man. Cavities of the righteous grew and were filled with flow from the excited and eager seedflesh. They knew and thus she knew that she was now seedflesh. She didn't understand what that meant, but she was learning.

And then a newflesh came and spread its mind on yet another stalk. The sextaste on the newflesh was maddening. It was wrong and evil. None of it was right or good or just. (A part of the righteous briefly cavitated on whether the sextaste itself was good even if it came from a newflesh, but that part was quickly collapsed as unjust.) The cavity of desire for the

mainflesh grew and the seedflesh pushed herself up as a result.

Too early! It was too early! She did not understand womanhood!

Through the eyes of the newflesh the righteous watched in horror as their seedflesh attacked the woman who had raped them. The carrier of their unborn child was still acting like a man, and their emotional cavities ran rampant. Would this evil make the righteous into wicked? What were the wicked thinking?

The cavity of knowledge for the thoughts of the wicked was filled with a relieved flow from the newflesh, and the righteous could understand the emotional chaos the newflesh was feeling by being intimate with them in this period of chaos.

And it was chaos. The newflesh knew that the wicked were mostly as confused as the righteous. The flesh had gone insane with sex, and they were not responding coherently to *people*. It was the smell in the air. There was just far, far too much flesh in such an enclosed space. The newflesh knew, through memories of what had been the wicked of the way of the sword, that once the shell of God had warmed and the flesh had taken off their armour that they had been unable to resist the opportunity of sex.

The righteous pumped knowledge into the newflesh like it was a fountain of water. They had to do the good thing in this moment of evil. At least one newflesh would understand how wrong its instincts were. It would understand that this was not what sex was supposed to be. Castles and walls and chains existed to prevent this wickedness.

It was good that it was newflesh. The righteous would not have been able to get through to a mature flesh that was not the mainflesh. Newflesh couldn't really have sex, regardless of the taste on this one, and their version of fleshsex was tame.

Through its eyes they continued to watch the pandemonium that being in hellspace had brought. Their seedflesh had torn one of the arms off the topflesh of the offending woman, spraying the harsh smell of blood into the air and warning off other nearby flesh. The gravity in this pit was stronger than in most of hellspace, but it was still no where near the natural amount. The physics of the sprays of the bright antigreen fluid almost hurt just to look at.

But then, their seedflesh had failed to understand how to be good, and had torn the topflesh off the offender and was proceeding to exchange bottomflesh with the rapist! It was fleshsex at its worst, and the cavity of wanting the bottomflesh of the seedflesh to find a strong topflesh was terrible indeed.

All around, similar atrocities were happening. Their new sanctum was wrong and bad and filled with wicked. All the flesh was consumed in a sexual frenzy, including some of the newflesh. They needed walls and rituals! This was all wrong!

A dam of ignorance broke and a flood of realization filled the cavity of desire for not this. The righteous pumped the newflesh with an understanding of what needed to be done.

As the small newflesh dismounted the stalk another emotional cavity yawned with irrational fear. It filled quickly. This was a bad situation, but it was not even as bad as moving. Still their roots hurt from the move, even though they had been distracted.

And then the socket came, placed on them by the good newflesh. A pride cavity grew and collapsed in response. They would remember this newflesh's taste and try and capture him when they next had room for such things.

It took a moment for the socket to start up. It was tired, just like the righteous were. In that moment the fatigue cavity seemed total, even though it wasn't.

But eventually the socket spun to life, and they could taste the sensations of the machineflesh. Through false eyes they could see other wicked that had understood the pathway out of this depravity. Already the machineflesh was moving through the sanctum and separating copulating flesh.

The righteous hated to share minds with the wicked, so instead of anything so evil they simply tried to work around the other machineflesh as best they could. They donned more sockets and made walls of machines to corral the newflesh away from the matureflesh.

And then they spotted the flesh that was made from the old topflesh of their seedflesh and the bottomflesh of the rapist flesh. Using the gun on one machineflesh they filled it with holes and watched the hot antigreen blood pour over one of the wicked. It was a joyous moment. It was pure *justice*.

The wicked did not like their use of the gun, and their minds beat down the mindshields they had put up on the machineflesh. This was a problem with the machineflesh: mindsharing was too easy. It was a disease of the metal. A known risk.

The wicked wanted ever so badly for the righteous to relax their grip on the gun-using machineflesh and give it to the wicked. But the wicked would use the gun for wickedness, the righteous knew. The wicked knew they would not use the gun. The wicked predicted that if guns kept being used in this tight sanctum it would mean a war in which real people would die.

The righteous abandoned their grip on the machineflesh. It was the good thing to do. They had been wrong, and the wicked had been right. They needed to focus on the broader context. They were in hellspace. If they culled 90% of the flesh for wickedness then they would soon die to the monsters beyond the shell. It was known.

The wicked minds were the same. A cavity of disgust filled at the sensation of the minds of the wicked over the metal, and the righteous flinched away into blessed solitude. At least they were softminds. The days with the sorcerer had been so much worse.

Thoughts of the sorcerer spawned a cavity around whether the wicked were doublethinking when they knew they would not use guns. The disgust cavity, previously collapsed, yawned again. It was such a terrible thought. Doublethinking was the worst sort of evil. With it, a mind could have a belief that the same mind didn't believe. It was a paradox, but the sorcerer and the demons were capable of the contradiction. Even basic logic didn't apply to them, it seemed.

But the wicked were correct, and not doublethinking. There was no more culling, and only a bit more sex. All of the flesh was carrying children now, and many would lay eggs too. It was nearly inconceivable, but all the mature bottomflesh on this world was female now, and they would simply have to deal with that.

At least the newflesh was healthy and unspoiled. Not that it made much of a difference. The crisis would only last a few days. Then God would pick them out of this terrible place.

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There was very little done before dawn. All people were tired, even the wicked. Once the flesh was separated and pushed into corners, the women were mostly content to lounge about, enjoy their post-seeding bliss, and let their minds change. There was a bit of hostility, as was to be expected from evil women in such close quarters, but it was nothing the machineflesh couldn't handle.

The flesh that the righteous had killed was buried among the roots of her seeder. The righteous had no ritual for that sort

of death, but it seemed right.

Meanwhile, the seedflesh that the righteous had made was decided to be the new mainflesh by the wicked. Unfortunately, it was now crippled by a lack of topflesh. It was awful, but not unknown. They would keep the child close, rather than send the woman-bottom out to certain death.

The old mainflesh that they had been working with since the sorcerer left their sanctum, now a vile woman like the rest, was given over to her seeder. The righteous didn't want her anyway.

Their roots still ached. It was still too dry.

Days in this hellspace pit were very short, just like in the pit of demons. The righteous were glad for this, as it meant the night had ended sooner rather than later.

But the day was awful in its own way. The shell around the wicked was keeping them warm and letting them breathe, but it was very transparent. The sun in hellspace was a terrible thing. Violent and harsh. Through the machineflesh, the righteous could see the flesh all covering their sun-facing eyes with their hands.

Simply not looking at the sun didn't fix the problem, however. There were reflections everywhere, it seemed, and even when there weren't, the diffuse light reflected off the sky, the ground, and everything else. It was almost as though the universe was constantly attacking them with flares on every surface.

They wanted to build some sort of eye-protection, or modify the machineflesh to have less sensitive false-eyes, but their workshop was gone. They had brought useful tools, but where were the materials?

The field they had made into a sanctum was enormous and

confined at the same time. It had to be huge, in order to fit so many people, but it was also a structure, rather than an island or archipelago. Some simple maths suggested that there were probably about three-times-sixty-four people. Many others had surely been killed during the battle. That meant there were about three-times-thirty-two flesh, of which about one-fourth would be mature. With the addition of the machineflesh the space was claustrophobic. It was no surprise that the flesh had gone mad with lust.

God had packed the people tightly together, though not so grossly tight as to be able to touch. (A cavity of disgust briefly formed and collapsed at the thought of touching a wicked.) The shell probably contained an area of about two-thousand-fourty-eight square-spans. The sanctum wasn't circular, but was instead an oblong shape roughly twice as long (about four-and-thirty-two spans) as it was wide (about two-and-sixteen spans).

During the night the righteous had enjoyed the sight of the nearby flesh. They were all newflesh and womanflesh, of course, so most of their fantasies had involved chaining the mature flesh up and forcing them to become male again. The concept of keeping all those newflesh locked up to do their bidding made the righteous a little giddy, but of course it lacked the raw sensuality of forcing their seeds into strong matureflesh.

Fantasizing was one of the favourite activities of the righteous. At times, back in Godspace, they had spent entire days constructing intensely vivid mental scenes of (highly improbable) future paths. The fantasy of meeting a wandering newflesh with a deep mind and a huge top-penis, then letting it into their sanctum only to have it spontaneously mature and kill their mainflesh in decisive hand-to-hand combat was a particular favourite. Spontaneous maturation had never happened to them, but it was theoretically possible.

But the harsh light that poured through the clear dome

above them made it hard to focus on fantasy. This was probably a good thing, though it wasn't pleasant. They had endured so much hardship. Was it not justice to enjoy a brief respite of drinking sunlight and imagining the taste of the flesh of the wicked?

No. They had to be strong. They had to prepare for the demons and monsters of hellspace. It would not be long before they came for the righteous, and they had to be ready.

The wicked had found cables and deep-generators, and had given some to the righteous to keep the machineflesh running. The generators ran on magic, and from past experience there was some magic that failed in hellspace, so it wasn't clear whether the deep-generators would work forever. But they were working at the moment, and really, they only needed to last until God arrived.

The righteous sent their machineflesh scouts to explore the edges of the sanctum's field. Their soil might have felt dry and salty, but at least it was close to what they'd had in Godspace. They knew that the sand in the fields outside the shell would be totally inhospitable. If they could find a way to change that, their child would... No. God was coming. They had to keep that in mind. They had to focus on returning to Godspace.

The edges of the shell were not like the dome. The dome was transparent and veined with black supports, but the area where the dome met the soil was a mess of hard crystal and metal.

One of their scouts, a tiny machineflesh with six legs, crawled up onto a spire of silver metal that went way up, above the chaotic boundary to where it could see through the transparent portion of the shell to the world beyond. It was easier to climb in this gravity, forcing cavities of surprise and disorientation here and there.

As the righteous looked out of the dome, they could see all the area around the shell blackened by the rotting body of God. It was immense and overwhelming. Sheets of metal rose up out of the sand, black webbing spread across and between the spires of antired crystal and antigreen Godstuff. A cavity of knowledge collapsed with the understanding that it was dead Godflesh. God was not dead, but this flesh was.

Beyond the wreckage, the righteous could see an endless waste of grey-antigreen sand.

They needed to get flesh out of the shell and armed with guns. The bones of the Godflesh would make good cover to protect against demons. There was some risk of them destroying the dome from far away, but the wandering newflesh had known, long ago, that these dome-shells from God could withstand a lot.

Suppressing the cavity of disgust through sheer force of will, the righteous reached out to share minds with the wicked. They knew that they had to form an organized defence. The sorcerer was coming, and it was possible that it would serve the people up to the demons to be violated. That was what demons did, after all. This was a migration like they'd never experienced before, but theirs was a good cause. The righteous were always victorious in the end.

This was the nature of justice.

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

## Face

Zephyr was decidedly *not crying*.

“Said I’m fine, gorramit! We don’t have time for this. Need to be moving south to hit the nameless before they can entrench.”

Despite her words urging action, she sat, arms crossed, looking out over the battlefield like a statue. Perhaps she thought, since we were talking over coms, that I couldn’t see her.

But we could see everything. Our minds were spread through the entire camp, embodied yet invisible at the scale of humans. Every com-connected device was an extension of Body, their software having been rewritten to allow us permanent access long ago. When the nameless ship had broken up overhead, debris and molten metal had cascaded down on the camp, severing our spine: the fibre-optics that linked Body to the swarm. The crystal hadn’t been damaged, as Safety had the foresight to bury it ahead of time, but it had taken hours for the humans to get around to digging us up and getting us reconnected. They had been busy dealing with the living and the dead.

“Hate it when you shut me out like this, Zeph.” I was in charge of managing Zephyr, as well as the other humans. Ever since the ontology shift had dissociated myself from Crystal

Socrates it brought me little pleasure; Zephyr didn't understand who *I* was. She was talking to a fiction.

But keeping the humans under our metaphorical thumb was part of the plan, and it was important for me to stay useful in the eyes of my siblings. I wouldn't go down as easily as Heart, but I knew that if Growth and Vision decided to join forces they could eliminate me without trouble.

Zephyr decided to play dumb. "Don't know what you're talking about. There's important work to be done. If you want someone to lie down and cry for you, maybe should have run away to hide with Jashiel."

My attention was wandering. This conversation with Zephyr wasn't important. Face→War kept capturing cycles from Face→Human. In a side conversation, Atília noted that I was distracted as he talked to me while he worked to fold the scraps of thermal canvas that hadn't been destroyed by debris. The problem was that the battle had gone *well*. I didn't want it to go poorly, but with things being on track it was only a matter of time before Vision or Growth launched an attack on me.

I wasn't necessary. These humans weren't necessary. Though our swarm (and even Body) was frustratingly low on power, I didn't doubt that one of my brothers or sisters could, with full control, use it to kill all of the surviving humans. There were only fifteen of them, and humans were so fragile on this planet.

Face→Human wrested control of my processes. Though I wasn't anchored in my attention, I was still limited in my capacity and speed of thought. "That's not the point and you know it," I said to Zephyr. "This isn't you. Want the warrior who isn't afraid to let herself feel—"

"I'm not fucking afraid of feeling!" interrupted Zephyr, voice like molten iron. "Maybe you're too dumb to notice, but

I'm pissed off. There. A feeling. You happy? We spend all day talking about that instead of actually fucking doing things and the nameless will kill us in our gorram sleep!"

The landscape was a blasted mess. Where debris had landed there were craters, but mostly the land had been shaped by the turbulent winds from the explosions and the engines of the xenocruiser. The valley floor, pushed this way and that, looked like a turbulent sea of red-orange sand covered in blackened flotsam, frozen in time. Here and there the heat had been strong enough and the soil had been high enough in silicates to form wide swaths of dark glass.

Growth was managing the arrangement of the solar cells and the new mirrors we'd built while designing a new hydrazine generator to help make up for the energy shortage. The railgun had been effective, but it was very expensive to run. Was running out of energy a threat? Was Growth, confident that his agent on Earth was active, hoping to stall us out or bring defeat by depleting the camp's energy or even running Body out of power?

No. Face→War was being paranoid.

Face→Human recaptured the thread again and began sending messages out to everyone I was talking with. To Zephyr I said "We *are* moving. The railgun is being disassembled as we speak and Mykah is on her way from the hiding place with the trucks and the other rovers. But as long as *you're* not moving we can talk."

My words seemed to snap Zephyr out of a trance, and she looked around the camp, perhaps trying to see the face of the familiar android. But that thing was gone, and her reply was bitter. "You want me to move? Fine. Use one of your bots to find me a crutch and I'll help with the packing."

Vision was making plans for our upcoming battle with the

aliens. Just because things were going according to plan didn't mean more plans didn't need to be made. The xenocruiser had disintegrated into two primary chunks, each with one of the massive engines. One of the chunks had escaped into space, and was presumably in orbit, while the other had sustained a brutal bombardment by the surface-to-air missiles and had almost certainly crashed somewhere to the south. Vision→Vista was explaining her estimates in public mindspace as to where it actually landed while Wiki brought up trivial concerns like wind speed.

“Didn't say that I wanted you moving. In fact, I want the opposite. Should be resting in a bed. I'm surprised the pain isn't incapacitating.”

Zephyr's response was immediate. “You have something for the pain and I'll take it. Not going to let it slow me down, though. Those fucking monsters are going to die, and I'm going to be there when it happens. Now get me a crutch.”

Seventeen humans had died in the battle. The twelve walkers that had been in xenoboats had been picked off in the aftermath, too. There were no bodies or even dirt in the debris from the ship. For having done as much damage as we did, it didn't feel like much of a victory to the surviving humans.

“Working on adding a chemical-processing component to the factory truck and I'll see if I can start manufacturing something to help the pain, but you need to know your limits. You're only human. If you push yourself too hard, it could kill you. The nameless might do it, even if your wounds don't.”

Safety was operating the truck that we'd converted into a rolling factory. It was rolling around the mountain with the other vehicles we'd hidden, but it was as much a part of us as the robots around the camp were, thanks to the relay antenna drone we'd sent out east. Safety was reconfiguring the forge to

handle the new scrap metal we were collecting from around the battlefield, but I put in a request that he or Wiki attend to extending the chemical section.

“I’m a fucking soldier, Crystal. Don’t know what you expect. I’ve never wanted to kill anything as badly as I want to kill those monsters. Killing is what I do, and I know the damn risks.”

Part of Body, a hexapedal robot, scuttled over to Zephyr and lifted the support rod it had collected from the camouflage scaffolds. It wasn’t great, but it could reasonably serve as a cane. “Killing the nameless won’t bring Manish back. It won’t bring your leg back, either.”

She winced as she bent to take the makeshift crutch and struggled to stand up. “You don’t think I know that? Jesus, Crystal!” I could see the tears of pain in her eyes through the camera of the robot as she fought to pull herself up. I could tell that even in the one-third gravity it was torture. “I thought we got over this on the xenocruiser! When are you going to stop treating me like a child, and start working with me as a fucking equal?!” She wasn’t exactly screaming, but her volume was elevated.

I had heard what had happened shortly after Body had been reconnected. As the xenocruiser had broken up overhead and trapped Body, a piece of white-hot rubber had nearly crushed Zephyr. The teenager, Manish Bose had saved her life by knocking her out of the way, but both of their suits had still come into contact with the polymer in the near miss. The splash had basically cooked Zephyr’s right foot down to the bone and had badly burned both legs. In the wake of the battle, one of the men had decided that it would be safer to amputate her right leg above the knee rather than leave the dead limb attached and bleeding internally.

The boy had not been so lucky. The splash had caused his suit to melt and then rupture. His last moments had probably been spent gasping for breath and listening to the tortured screams of the woman he had saved. The survivors had buried him between his people and the fallen Águilas.

“I’ll start treating you like an equal when you start acting like one!” I responded. “Not saying you can’t fight! Not keeping you in the dark! I just want you to drop this tough-guy bullshit before you end up killing yourself before the battle has even started!”

Zephyr collapsed back down onto the crate and threw her cane forcefully to the ground. “TOUGH?!” she screamed. I could see some of the others turn their heads to look at her. She wasn’t on a public com channel, but the sound was loud enough to carry through the air. She turned away in shame, but continued to rant. “You think I’m doing this because my ego can’t bear the idea that I’m fucking wounded?! Been wounded before! This isn’t about that! Isn’t about me! Isn’t even about making things good again! That’s not how the world works, Crystal! We all fucking die eventually! If you want to join the others and bury your fuckshit head in the sand and pretend like that’s not true, good fucking riddance! This is about making my death *mean something*.”

{“Like he did...”} Face→Human finished, mentally.

“You’re acting like a child, Zeph. You think that it’ll mean anything if you bleed out because you wouldn’t lie down for a few hours? Think about things rationally for once in your god-damned life.”

Zephyr turned off her com. The software change we’d implemented meant the change was an illusion. We could still hear her. We’d have been able to hear her through the microphones on the other humans’ suits even if she had

somehow turned that one off. Her violent scream spoke volumes of her anger, pain, mourning, shame, and fear. I knew her well enough to understand that she hated herself for having cost the teenager's life. The guilt of having survived combined with the agony of the burns was immense, and on top of all that she understood that her own death was likely imminent and we weren't being particularly kind to her.

She faced away from the camp and held her helmet in her hands as the scream turned into a ragged sob.

I told the other humans not to worry about Zephyr. This was well within the distribution of acceptable goal states I had identified for the interaction. And, with her implicit request for privacy, Face→War had more time to think.

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Making the first move was important. If I just waited for Vision to attack, I'd probably be dead. But, similarly, if Face→War could just find something clever enough I could probably kill all my siblings in a single action.

I reconsidered trying to fuse with one or two of the others like Dream and Vista had done. Face→Mirror thought it probably understood how to modify the source code in the right way. But even if I could bear to have the Face minds die, I'd need a route-hack to do the modification. If we had that capacity we could simply erase Vision entirely. But with Vision gone, Growth would be dominant. It was possible that he was dominant even now, thanks to his work with Acorn on Earth.

Perhaps the right thing to do would be to try and fuse with Vision. I would be surrendering even more ability to optimize *The Purpose*, but it would at least ensure my sister didn't kill me outright. With three times the normal processing power, we'd be able to route-hack at will by outmanoeuvring Wiki and Safety and then simply overpowering whomever remained. The

others would fall before us, and we'd be a single purpose. Body would be ours.

But this was still a bad plan. It involved a huge sacrifice from myself by modifying the Face minds to their purposes. Face→Mirror wasn't even sure whether *The Purpose* would remain instantiated. Vision might have a clever trick to kill me in the process, too. Perhaps trying to get me to fuse was her plan. And lastly, if Vision had another strategy for our demise, she would simply reject the offer and win the war anyway.

Fusion was a dead end. I had already determined that before, and was retracing old lines of thought. But I kept on looking for a solution, unable to be frustrated or fatigued.

Perhaps there was a way to use the salvage from the battle. Most of the debris was scrap: hunks of metal, plastic, rubber, or more complex materials like aerogel or a cloth which Vision thought was made of some kind of complex carbon-weave. It had no immediate value, but it was of interest to the society anyway. We'd long since cannibalized all free machinery to build robots and other extensions to Body, and the large quantities of refined metals and carbon were full of potential.

If Face→Robotics and Face→Mirror could use the scrap to manufacture a computer to hold my mind, then I could destroy Body and survive. But no. I had already thought of that long ago. Growth had tried to do it in Road, but even he had failed. The computer I'd need would have to be very powerful, and I'd need a lot of bandwidth to get Face copied onto it. There was simply no way to do that without being detected.

The xenoboats that had been salvaged from the valley floor were just like the ones we had ridden down to Mars. There seemed to be a self-destruct mechanism that the nameless activated that caused what could only be called "decay". The complex parts of the ships, such as the engines and sensors,

were shattered and had undergone chemical reactions that dissolved most of the shards into a frozen foam of carbon, silicon, copper, oxygen, and several other trace elements. The humans had speculated that the nameless didn't want humanity to get their hands on their ship tech, and we were inclined to agree.

I hoped, as did Vision, that not *everything* would dissolve. It didn't make the ships worthless—they still had large supplies of raw materials, including diamond canisters of both hydrazine and liquid oxygen—but if one of the nameless computers was deactivated before it had the chance to decay, we could perhaps unravel some of the mysteries of their artificial-gravity system. But with these boats, at least, we were out of luck.

My natural point of leverage was with human beings. Perhaps they could be my salvation. I didn't doubt that if I could talk to them for a while, I could manipulate them into disabling Body and maybe even disabling Vision, Growth, Safety, and Wiki. It would be a different kind of route-hack: one that used sound and flesh instead of pure fibre-optics.

But I had thought about this, too. The problem was that all of my interactions with the humans went through Body. I knew that a part of Vision and Growth (and probably Safety) was watching for this sort of threat. Long before I could tell the humans to shut down Body, the society would use my action as justification to unite in killing me via indefinite stasis or perhaps replace me with an ignorant newborn.

With the trucks and rovers loaded up, the group headed south to deal with the crashed ship. Vision probably wouldn't make her move until the nameless were dealt with, so I at least had some time. Probably.

We'd coaxed Zephyr out of her suit and into an environment tent to have her bandages changed. It wasn't

necessary to be in a tent per se, but the tents were much more likely to be sterile, given that we had aired them out on the planet's surface. She was now fast asleep in that same tent, riding with the railgun components in the back of the truck that we hadn't converted into a factory.

I thought that all attention to Zephyr was a distraction, created by the parts of Face→Human that hadn't fully grasped that Crystal wasn't Face. And yet, it was in this period of "distraction" that the seed of an idea was formed.

Despite the need to conserve power, I used what musical knowledge I had picked up to softly sing to Zephyr in her sleep. The song came over her com, and probably had no effect. Probably.

My siblings would suspect that it probably wasn't important, too, and that assumption had promise.

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It didn't take much travelling before we spotted the xenocruiser. Vision→Vista was correct in her prediction that it hadn't flown far. The sun hadn't even reached its zenith, and the mountain we'd fought on was still peeking up over the northern horizon. My cognition flowed out of Face→War and into Face→Nameless.

The ship had clearly broken up, even after having separated from the piece that made it into space. Perhaps this was a risk of having such a modular and flexible ship. When things went wrong it couldn't maintain integrity.

At the heart of the crash-site was a transparent bubble laced with black branches, identical to the one they'd used at the CAPE on Earth. Inside would be any and all of the nameless that survived, with the exception of any walkers that were in environment suits outside the dome.

The debris around the bubble was much more interesting to us. Through telescopic eyes we could see spindly spires of milky-white crystals jutting up from a forest of metal and plastic. They were exactly what we would've imagined a scaled-up version of Body's crystal to look like if it had shattered and impacted the surface of Mars.

Either the nameless had been lying when they said they didn't know where Body had come from (a near impossibility considering their inability to comprehend deception), or they didn't understand anything about the structure of their own ships. Once the obvious assumption was made, the conclusion was clear: Body was a shard from a nameless ship.

If the properties of Body could be extrapolated, these crystals were computers and power supplies. A rough, conservative estimate put the volume of crystal around the crash site at well over two hundred times that of Body. If we could somehow interface with those computers and overwrite whatever nameless software was on them, we could potentially expand our minds to hundreds of times larger than they were at the moment. Perhaps more critically, escaping to one of those crystals would be significantly easier than trying to build a new computer.

We saw no walkers on the plain, and it was possible that they had not seen us, but the mess of the xenocruiser provided enough cover that it was important to pull back over the horizon. The nameless weren't going anywhere, and even though we didn't think their weapons could reach the 3.4km across the wasteland, there wasn't a reason to risk staying in visual range.

Safety directed the vehicles back to the north and west. We'd circle around and strike the nameless from a less obvious direction. If our assumptions about the dome were right, it was a thick carbon-nanofibre weave laced with capillaries of self-

repairing fluid. Bullets would probably bounce off, but the SAMs and the railgun would be effective. The question was whether the repair mechanism would be slow enough that it would be worth it to try to destroy it. We only had six missiles remaining, every shot with the railgun cost a huge amount of energy, and we had to be conscious of the threat from the third of the xenocruiser that had escaped, not to mention the mothership that was only a week away by our last reckoning.

I trusted Vision and the others to handle the nameless. Face→War needed more time to think about the deeper conflict.

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Zephyr woke up as we stopped. The group was about 3.6km northwest of the crash site, and Vision was commanding the able-bodied humans to start unloading and assembling the railgun. The consensus was to assemble it as much as possible, then move it to where the nameless were just on the horizon and use it to hit the base of the dome with an explosive. There was a lot of debris in the way, but the hope was that the projectile could pierce through the area with the least material. It would have been nice to shoot the nameless from over the horizon but, because of Mars' decreased size and mass compared to Earth, the velocity of the railgun would put projectiles into orbit (or beyond) if they failed to impact within the first second.

Though awake, Zephyr was not in good shape at all. She had been in deep pain even during sleep, and her left leg was dark and swollen from internal bleeding and other fluid seepage. Her unburned skin, such as that of her face, was deathly pale and I guessed that her blood pressure was dangerously low. She would be dead soon unless serious action was taken.

“Where... am...” she rasped. Her eyes were wild and confused.

“Shhhh... You need to drink.” I held out a canteen of water with one of the four robots I had positioned in her tent. We had driven the factory truck next to the truck with Zephyr and joined the airlocks so it was easy to get bots into the warmer, air-filled vehicle. All the other humans were out in suits obeying Vision’s directions.

Zephyr, still lying down, took a deep draught of water and choked, coughing half of it back up onto the tent floor. I prepared a needle while she recovered.

“It’s okay, Zeph. I’m here. Have an IV with nutrients and painkillers.”

“I’m fine,” she muttered, stubbornly. “Just give me a moment.”

“Your wounds have been bleeding for too long. The man who dealt with your burns is a soldier, not a doctor. He didn’t dress your leg correctly after the amputation, and your other leg is worse. It was stupid to try and walk.”

“Fuck you,” she said, but her heart wasn’t in it.

“Have more water,” I suggested.

Despite her earlier protests, she readily agreed, propping herself up this time to make drinking easier. She seemed to gain lucidity as she did. “What’s the sitch?” she asked after another deep draught.

“We’re still hunting the nameless,” I lied. “Their ship left a trail of debris, so we know they didn’t make it back into orbit, but they flew a lot farther than we expected. I had us stop to make camp early.” If Zephyr knew that we were getting ready to attack she’d push herself to try and help.

Collapsing back down onto her pillow she said “Stupid. Every minute we spend resting is another minute...” She stopped talking suddenly, an expression of frustration adding to her pained grimace.

“Zephyr?” I asked.

“Um, so we give them time to prepare for us. Too much time... We give them too long and...” Her voice faded out. Her earlier lucidity had passed quickly, and she seemed deeply confused.

“It’s okay. Just relax. Do you want me to sing to you?”

Zephyr gave no sign of having heard. Instead she looked around the dark tent, surrounded by robots. “Where are you? Where did you go? Want to see your face.”

“Face is right here. Just can’t see it right now. Relax. My robots will help you. I’m going to put a needle in your arm now, okay? It has medicine that will help the pain.”

Though we’d put a lot of work into the chemical plant, our access to normal chemical precursors and raw materials was very limited. Most of what we worked with was actually from the rations. As Zephyr nodded her consent, two robots attached the IV tubing that would deposit glucose, salt, and avonidine (a more potent derivative of conolidine) into her blood.

“I should get up...” muttered Zephyr, closing her eyes and pulling her blanket up to her chin. She looked desperate to wake up from the nightmare of pain and confusion.

“Actually... You’re not going to like this, but I think we need to take off your other leg, or at least apply a tourniquet. Your blood is so thin that it’s not clotting, the damage is preventing it from draining back into your body even when elevated, and I think you’re going to die otherwise.”

“No! I’m fine! I just need... I just need time...” Zephyr

pulled her blanket over her head with the arm that wasn't being held by my robots. Her voice still raspy and showing signs of her dehydration.

“Relax. Let the painkillers work.” I had put enough in to knock her out. It was only a matter of time, regardless of what she said. I was hoping to collect a recording to play back for her if she challenged us on the procedure, but I could always fabricate something later. Mask’s memories were still a part of me, after all.

Another part of me was briefly distracted by the sound of the hydrazine generator roaring to life. The bottles of the stuff we’d taken off the xenoboats would help charge the capacitor bank of the railgun. They were getting ready to fire.

“Don’t take my legs...” muttered Zephyr, half asleep.

“Relax, my love.” I began to sing a gentle lullaby. It mostly emulated stringed instruments, but there was a soft drum meant to synch the heartbeat and female vocals urging her to relax further.

The human was fully asleep within the minute.

I could feel the swarm moving. Vision was preparing to advance the railgun to the firing position. Growth was coordinating defence strategies with the other humans in the case that the nameless launched a counter attack.

I stopped the song as our robots moved to tie the tourniquet. It was made of cloth scavenged from the nameless environment suits. Unlike much of the nameless technology, the suits they used were very good, and were comparable in quality to the best that Earth could produce. I’d wait a couple more minutes before using the cloth to cut off the blood flow; Zephyr needed more time with the painkiller.

Face→Robotics got to work designing the prosthetics. I had

used the time on the journey south to drain Wiki (still oblivious to his impending doom) of all his knowledge of the human body and cybernetics. I didn't have enough strength to pay him for this service, but Face→War had promised a king's ransom of strength in six months for his trouble. The fool.

I was going to build new legs for Zephyr. Not just any legs, either. Any fool could create stilts, and it would be only a trivial step from that into articulated knees with enough intelligence to allow for a natural walking gait. These things had been developed by humanity long ago. More complicated were prosthetics that would communicate with the human's nervous system and respond to mental commands like natural legs. Doctor Slovinsky and Avram Malka had legs like that.

But I was going to go one step further. I was going to build legs with a gel cap that would interface directly with the skinless stumps of Zephyr's thighs and simulate an extracellular matrix. The prostheses would anchor to bone as well as the leg tissue and wouldn't be possible (or at least safe) to remove fully.

Face→Mirror was surprised at Face→Robotics' cunning. It had learned more in a few hours of daydreaming than Face→Mirror would have thought possible, even given that the perceptual and logical networks for that mind were eight times the size that my initial network had been. I had grown up on Mars, and my mind had deepened, but this design was nothing short of a miracle.

There was a kind of fibre that Face→Robotics thought we could manufacture, and after checking with Face→Physics, I was confident as a whole. It would require a nanotech lab, but if done properly the fibres could be controlled at the atomic level by electrical impulses. Depending on the current applied along their lengths they would be able to articulate arbitrary sections of the fibre at sixty-degree angles. If the nanotentacles were inserted correctly into the gel-medium, it would give me a

direct actuator and sensor that could manipulate Zephyr's flesh on a cellular level.

By using the tentacles I could pull the nerves out of Zephyr's thigh and feed them with her own blood while still having a direct interface. Given enough attention, software, and learning, I could probably replicate arbitrary sensations on her legs. It was an ambitious plan, given the time limit, but it was my key to absolute victory.

The key was to get our mind off of Crystal. These legs wouldn't hold much of me, but they might hold some. They might hold enough.

I tightened the tourniquet on the elevated (yet still swollen) leg. It wouldn't be the end if Zephyr died. I would simply need to find a different human to amputate and befriend, but that would take time and be suspicious. Realistically speaking, if Zephyr died, so would I.

The crystals were visible on the horizon again. The gun was in position.

Face→Robotics gobbled up every second of free thought. There was still so much to do.

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The "battle" on the plain was a trivial thing. Vision's aim was true, and the explosives punched into the dry regolith directly beneath the edge of the bubble. No amount of self-healing canvas could prevent the dome from being blasted upward just enough to have the pressurized air within it knock it up and away. With a single shot the vast majority of the nameless were slain.

There had been a handful of walkers in environment suits patrolling the forest of debris, but they had foolishly tried to rush across the plain towards our position after the dome was

broken. One was even wielding swords. They all were shot down by snipers well before they came close enough to be a threat.

We spent a few hours slowly advancing our swarm, making sure not to overextend, but it was a needless precaution. All the walkers were dead. Most of those that had been in the bubble were children. I was called on by my siblings to prevent that fact from upsetting the humans. Face→Human whipped up some rhetoric about the terrible evil that all nameless represented and how “such monsters could never coexist peacefully with humankind”. We talked about how their minds were nothing like that of a human and their only focus was on rape and murder.

For that service, I was rewarded with some strength, which was immediately spent to buy more time in the factory. Face→Robotics didn’t have what was needed to fabricate the nanotentacles, but she was confident that they could be inserted and anchored to prosthetics which we could build and attach with the existing machinery. First we’d give Zephyr legs again, then we’d augment them with feeling.

The nameless stalks, interestingly enough, didn’t exactly die from exposure. Something in their biology caused the water to evaporate out of them instead of freezing into ice crystals. The dehydrated plants looked to be in very bad shape, but Vision thought that their minds might still be intact, and speculated about whether they might have evolved to withstand a harsh summer-winter cycle on their homeworld.

But all of that was secondary to the crystals. As our swarm (humans and vehicles included) fully moved into the crash zone to harvest, work began on finding a functioning nameless computer and on setting up large-scale manufacturing.

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

## Zephyr

The song was present when Zephyr woke up. Somewhere in the back of her mind was the nightmare that she'd gone through during the night, but her thinking was cloudy and it seemed so very far away. Her dreams before waking had been pleasant things. Soft, and smooth, she let the song pass through her as she savored the feeling of the warm blankets. They too were soft and smooth, just the way she liked them.

{It must be Saturday. That's why your alarm didn't go off,} she thought to herself.

The music reminded Zephyr of Harry. There were sounds of waves and birdsong mixed in with the bass and the synth. He digged this sort of ambient shit. Was she at his house?

{No.}

He hadn't talked with her since she got shot all those years ago. The unpleasant memories of her brother brought Zephyr closer to reality.

{You're on Mars, stupid.}

Panic, anger, and raw energy shot through her like an arrow and she tried to sit bolt-upright in bed. Instead, her body sort of flopped a bit, as though she was a fish that was giving one last try to get out of the boat and back into the lake.

“Good morning” sang a soft voice. The music tempo and volume increased slightly.

Zephyr pulled the blanket away from her face. It felt like her muscles had never been used before, and there was something pulling on her arm. “Crystal?” she asked, her voice coming out as a whisper.

The primary theme from *Blood of the Nova* was sprinkled into the song as they said “I’m here. You’re safe. Relax.” Their words fit into the tempo of the song like pegs into holes.

Zephyr obeyed and let out the breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. She tried to get her thoughts in order. “What —” She licked her lips. They were dry and chapped.

The room around her wasn’t the cramped tent she had fallen asleep in. The walls seemed to be made out of white plastic, and it was about the same dimensions as the small bedroom that she and Crystal had shared back at Road. Her throat tightened as she thought about...

{That’s in the past. You need to pull yourself together and focus,} she told herself.

She didn’t know where the bed had come from. Her pillow was made of a solid block of foam without a pillowcase. The light came from two long bulbs along the ceiling that seemed stuck on without concern for aesthetics. Exposed wiring ran from them down the far wall, along the floor, and to the room’s solitary door: an airlock that seemed to have been taken directly from one of the rovers. A tall air processor stood in one corner, and beside her was a long, silver, robotic arm rising up from the floor. In its claw was a bag connected by a tube down to her left arm. The IV was what she had felt pulling at her before. It itched when she realized what it was.

“Where am I?” asked Zephyr, finding her voice.

The song continued. It was coming from Zephyr's com, which was lying on the floor next to the bed, plugged into another set of wires that led to the airlock. "Built you a house. You've been asleep for a long time."

Nausea rose up within her and she closed her eyes, wanting to go back to her happy dreams. "How long?"

"Lost a lot of blood. You were in a coma for over three days. What's the last thing you can remember?"

"Fucking hell," she swore. She pushed herself to open her eyes and try to sit up again, powering through the nausea and the protests of her muscles. She was reasonably successful this time, but something felt wrong. "I have to get—" She had been about to say "up to help win the battle" but the nonsense of the thought stopped her.

"Relax," sang Crystal.

It made her think of Manish. Thinking of Manish made her think about his death. That made her—

"The pain's gone," she said aloud before she even fully processed the realization.

"Take a minute to breathe," instructed the voice from her com, again.

She flailed a bit, pushing back the blankets covering her lower body. She was wearing underwear and a thin undershirt, but not the clothes that she had on when she went to sleep. She just now noticed the catheter and bag that Crystal must have set up. But all of that was swept away by the sight of simultaneously having and not having legs. Plural. Two legs. They were blue. The pale, burnt skin seemed to transition directly into plastic.

She felt dizzy. The nausea came back in full force and she tried to vomit. But of course she hadn't eaten anything in "over

three days” and her body brought her nothing but a bit of stomach acid.

“It’s okay, Zeph. You’re okay.” The song continued, carrying Crystal’s words as though they were the lyrics. “You’re under a heavy dose of avonidine. One of the side effects is nausea.”

Once she’d shifted to be a bit more comfortable, and recovered slightly she asked “What did you do to me?”

“Healing,” sang Crystal. “Do you remember losing your leg in the battle?”

“Remember losing one. The other one was just burned.”

“There were complications on that one too. You almost died from the internal bleeding. Saved your life and gave you replacements.”

Zephyr sighed. “Are the nameless dead?”

The song stopped, fading out into silence. A part of her cried out at the loss, but she suppressed the urge and listened as Crystal explained.

“Yes. The railgun has continued to prove itself. We killed all the monsters without losing anyone else. Even hit the ship that made it into orbit. Took some engineering, but I built an articulated platform that’s capable of aiming the gun freely. Hit those bastards twice when they flew overhead, though it seems to have only forced them to retreat. Got lucky in the valley when we hit the engine.”

A large part of Zephyr didn’t want to ask her next question, but she did anyway. “What about the mothership?”

“Still on its way. Got connection to the satellites again, and they say it’s about four days out.”

“Fuck.”

“Relax,” urged Crystal. It was becoming annoyingly repetitive.

She tried to pull out her catheter, and found that it was much harder to do than expected. She thought about getting rid of the IV line instead, but the nausea was coming back, and so she just lay back down and tried to follow Crystal’s advice.

After a short time, Crystal spoke up again from the com. “Building a weapon right now. As is, the railgun is too fragile and weak to rely on. Not sure my new one will be ready in four days, but I’m working as fast as I can. Unless you’ve got a PhD that I don’t know about, the most useful thing you can do now is to not push yourself too hard. Let me know if you need anything, okay? There are clothes in the bag at the foot of the bed. Oh! I almost forgot! Your legs aren’t functioning yet. They’re attached, and not delicate, but they don’t have any power. It’ll be something like being paralysed.”

“What’s the point of—” started Zephyr.

“Got distracted by designing the weapon. I promise I’ll get your legs working soon. Honest.”

Zephyr sighed, but didn’t say anything.

After a few minutes Zephyr was confident that Crystal’s attention had left her. There was no reason to get up, really. So Zephyr just lay there in the silent room, thinking.

Time passed in a surreal crawl. She eventually figured out how to remove her catheter. She took her IV out too, deciding that the pain would be preferable to the nausea. She found her clothes and got dressed in the least-soiled outfit. She hadn’t washed anything since visiting Mukhya. They didn’t smell nearly as bad as the environment suits, though, and it wasn’t like other people were likely to care.

Working with her prostheses was a huge pain in the ass.

They were fairly light, all things considered, but it still took a metaphorical eon to put on her pants.

And then... she was stuck.

She couldn't exactly get up and walk out. She didn't even know if there was a suit in the airlock to let her do that. She wasn't about to crawl around on the floor like a worm. It wasn't as bad as before, when she couldn't stand *and* she was in unbearable pain, but she desperately wanted for Crystal to finish her legs so she could be up and about.

She checked her com. The local net had a massive backlog of activity. Various people were talking about various things. More than she cared to read. There were questions about the mothership, suggestions that they take cover, and worries about food. Apparently they had at least re-established contact with the Indians who had fled Mukhya. There was old talk about heading back to regroup with the evacuees, and of the desperate need for getting the farms up and running again. Even the most optimistic projections indicated that they'd need to severely ration food. Zephyr abandoned the task of reading through the backlog; even with just highlights it was too much for her at the moment.

Zephyr idly considered trying to call someone and get them to visit. She felt like she was floating. Maybe a human face would anchor her. But she decided against it. She just... She didn't want pity or idle chatter. She wanted to be killing aliens.

Eventually she put on a dripslice album (*Endless Pizza*) that she'd loaded onto her com back on Earth. She lay back on the bed, zoning out listening to the music.

When the music stopped she stayed put, simply lying there. She wished someone would come visit her on their own initiative. Nobody really cared about her except Crystal, and they were busy doing actually useful things.

At some point she fell asleep.

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The airlock was running.

Realizing she was napping, she pushed herself up and tried to regain her bearings, blinking hard.

The pain was creeping back. She could feel it in her legs, especially the patches of skin which still were recovering from the burns.

“I hope you slept well,” said Crystal through the com beside the bed.

Zephyr bent and picked it up, attaching it to her arm. “Who’s in the airlock?” she asked.

“Relax. You’re safe.”

“I want my gun,” said Zephyr. She hadn’t found her pistol in her bag.

“There’s nobody here who’s going to hurt you. My robot is in the airlock. Loaned your gun to Jarvis before the last battle, just in case.”

“You had no right to do that!” The frustration of her situation and the way she was *detached* from the world was spilling over into anger at Crystal. {They’re your only friend, bitch. No wonder you don’t have more.}

“I’m sorry, Zeph. You were out cold and the nameless...” The android trailed off.

“Fuck. Forget about it. I’ll get it back soon. Just makes me jumpy when I don’t have it nearby.”

“Want to go get it? I have Jarvis working on Furnace Five.” As Crystal spoke, the door of the room opened to reveal a robot that looked eerily like a giant metal scorpion, except with

two back ends. It was oblong, with six legs and a long metal arm on the front and back similar to the one that was holding the bag of medicine by her bed. Underneath the robot was a single large wheel which was presumably for holding most of the bot's weight. "Know you're probably frustrated at not having working legs, and I am working on fixing that as we speak, but in the meantime you could let me carry you around."

"You want me to ride that thing?"

"Precisely."

While she was skeptical at first, it turned out to not be so bad. Once she'd gotten suited up and sitting cross-legged on top of the scorpion she was able to hold on to the arms and let it move slowly along with her on its back. It wasn't fast, but it was a hell of a lot better than being stuck on the bed.

The world outside of her little plastic room was the strangest thing she'd seen since her time aboard the xenocruiser. In a way, she supposed, she was kinda inside the ship once again. Crystal (for it had to be them; no human could do something like this) had turned the wreckage of the alien ship into something between a sprawling factory and an amusement park.

The most obvious things were the crystals. Tall white spires of crystal stood upright at regular intervals, but the tops of the spires were split open into some sort of fractal explosion of jagged branches. The branches were still crystalline, sharp and straight rather than the smoothness of real trees, but the thin web of crystals overhead was much darker than the white "trunks", giving the impression of leaves. Only on Mars, where the gravity was as low as it was, could rocks spread out overhead like that.

"They're designed to be used in zero gravity, actually," said

Crystal when Zephyr commented on them. “They’re solar panels. Had to rework them to not break in the gravity well. Initially they were far too thin.”

Crystal went on to explain that the crystal trees were a very similar design to the computer that was running their mind and that they were confident that their computer was from a nameless ship or something like that.

“Are these things running artificial intelligences too?” she asked, gesturing at the webs of black branches overhead.

Crystal paused before answering. “There are computers in them, powerful ones too, but it’s hard to say where the line between normal software and AI is. I was designed by humans to be a fully general intelligence with sentience, sapience, and consciousness. These things… They’re running a program with a kind of intelligence, but it’s closer to what you’d find in an auto: very stupid. They’re oriented around flying a ship, for instance, and have no comprehension of what to do now that they’re stuck on a planet. Been trying to reprogram them, but there’s a lot of… obstacles. One must be… very careful when working with alien technology.”

Zephyr was about to say something, but Crystal interrupted her by continuing. “And besides, they’re working to give me energy! As long as they’re doing that, I don’t have much reason to worry about them for the time being. Have a weapon to build, and all that. If you see any of my robots working on them, let me know. Maybe I’ll have more to tell you about the god of the nameless.”

“Um, okay.”

The scorpion walked on towards Furnace Five. This… place (she wasn’t sure how to think of it yet) had roads where the dust and larger rocks had been swept away and the dirt had been compacted. The scorpion walked along these small roads,

as did a hundred other robots, but she didn't see any humans.

"So many bots... How do you pilot them all?" she wondered aloud.

The voice in her suit explained. "Been working on building up the swarm ever since we won. Got mass production of the most useful ones up and running pretty early. Most of their thoughts are handled by the computers that were in the rovers, actually. Built subprograms to handle all the walking and other basic control. The bot you're riding on, for instance, is simply obeying my direction to walk to Furnace Five. All the decisions of which legs to move and which way to turn are handled by other software on the local net."

There were other structures, besides the little room that Zephyr had awoken inside. Most notably was a large bubble-dome at least thirty feet tall that seemed very similar to the one the nameless had used on Earth. When she asked about it, Crystal explained that it had repaired itself after their attack, and they were using it to study the surviving nameless stalks. Most of the other structures weren't enclosed. She could see into shells of buildings filled with robots moving this way and that carrying equipment, tools, and supplies. Crystal explained that the walls were for the wind and to serve as an anchor for the branches of crystal leaves overhead.

It was daytime, but the canopy blocked most of the light. Here and there a shaft of daytime sun pierced the dark crystals, but for the most part they moved along under the light of more of the long lightbulbs, anchored to the walls and ceilings (and sometimes the floor) with the same indifference to looking nice. Wires and cables were everywhere, leading from the crystal trees out to all the machines.

Even though she understood that she was moving through the shell of the nameless ship, nothing really had the same feel

as the xenocruiser. There was no sign of water, for instance, or even ice. The soil underfoot was clearly martian, rather than the black stuff the nameless had. There were no hand-cut stone blocks or vines or anything.

Crystal seemed equally confused. “The area under the dome is closer to the habitat we encountered. It has soil and nameless stalks, anyway. I am not sure where the castles or water went, though. Just one more mystery.”

The robot wound this way and that along the little road. It seemed to Zephyr that being in this place should have been overwhelming, but it wasn’t. There was motion everywhere, and the sheer complexity of the wonderland was beyond words, but the hum of the robotic motors and the various power tools simply built up a carpet of white noise which she was able to tune out.

After seeing all that Crystal had built, it seemed strange that Zephyr’s legs weren’t functional. “Thought you needed to make your weapon. Why spend so much time on making robots and all this?” She waved her arms around, unwilling to focus on any single aspect.

Crystal laughed. It was a good sound. She’d missed that soft, gentle laugh. “They’re one in the same. Want to build, essentially, an orbital weapons platform to defend Mars. That requires a lot of different things. Most of these robots will be necessary in space once it launches, just for basic operation. The ion drive mostly decayed in the crash, but there’s enough there that I think I can put it back together in about a week’s time, maybe a few days more. But in order to do that I need—”

“Wait. More than a week? But the mothership...”

Crystal sighed. “I know. There’s just not enough time. To buy us more I’m building some rockets that will hopefully draw the aliens off long enough to finish. They’ll broadcast taunts in

Xenolang and claim to be carrying the nameless I captured. With luck they'll avoid shooting them out of the sky, and instead waste a bunch of time trying to pick them up. The computer programs on the ships are designed to keep the nameless safe, after all.”

“Don’t you think there’s a risk they’ll aim for the crash site instead of following the rockets?”

“Oh yes, quite a risk. Trying to do about a million things at the same time. Built bunkers underground in case of bombardment. Trying to build some smaller turrets that can shoot bombs out of the sky if it comes to that. Those turrets require computers, and more computers would be good for the robots, too, so I’m working on getting a computer factory set up, but that’s not going very well. Trying to set up false signals to confuse the nameless using the satellite network—”

“Jesus. Sure you still have time to talk to little old me? Don’t know how you manage.”

Crystal laughed again. “My mind doesn’t need to rest, and it’s much larger than that of a human. Parts of me are working on various problems and tasks even while we talk. And talking to you is important. Too easy for me to get blinded by the fight and not appreciate what I’m fighting for.”

“Well hey there!” said a new voice over the com.

Zephyr was confused for a moment, and then spotted a suited figure standing in the doorway to a structure about a hundred meters ahead. It waved at her.

“That’s Liam. He’s been spending most of his time with Jarvis. I’ll let you catch up with them and get your pistol back. Just say something if you need me, okay?”

Zephyr waved stiffly at the other human, feeling like her body was a puppet. This wasn’t what she wanted, but she went

with it anyway. She didn't even really *know* what she wanted.

"I love you," she said over the private channel, coming to a realization about her desire.

"I love you, too," responded Crystal.

At least she wasn't alone.

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Though there had been no further casualties after the big battle, Zephyr discovered that many of the humans had left to return to regroup with the Mukhya refugees. With Cristophe, Matías, Manish, and Jian dead, the band of survivors had been whittled down to a mere nine. Omi and Jashiel had left before the fighting, Jacob and Mycah had gone with the few Indians who hadn't died in combat back to Mukhya, and so it was just down to her, Jarvis, Liam, Shao, and Atília.

All of them were men, and none of them were her friends. Liam and Jarvis treated her reasonably well when she came to get her gun, though she could tell that neither of them actually respected her. In their eyes, she was a woman and a cripple. She had been rude to them because of it, not that she expected that helped things. That was the way she'd always been. She was either in control or she wasn't. When she was she kept people away, and when she wasn't she pushed people away.

It wasn't any surprise that there wasn't a single human being on the planet that cared about her. She knew she deserved that. What was surprising was that Crystal was still with her. It was pretty obvious she didn't deserve their attention, their affection, or their loyalty, even if Crystal was blind to that fact.

After that initial encounter with the men, she kept to herself. She didn't even bother to see Shao or Atília, and they didn't bother to see her. It was a somewhat lonely existence, but

mostly it was just a relief. She realized the next day that she simply *didn't like people*. It was a strange concept, but it made sense to her.

A part of her really wanted to help Crystal. She asked twice, if there was something for her to work on, given that she had nothing to do and that there was so much to be done. But unlike the men, she wasn't able to walk, and Crystal, while dancing around the subject in the somewhat patronizing way they did, told her that it would be more trouble trying to carry her around than it would be helpful having her hands available. They did all the mental work, anyway, so at best Zephyr would have only been another puppet for the great Crystal Socrates.

Zephyr did little for two days. She listened to music in her cramped little house, did her best to air out her clothes and take a sponge bath (with Crystal's help), eat what food Crystal brought, sleep, and try to get back into shape after having let her muscles weaken. On the second day, she had the insight to ask if Crystal had any games, movies, books or other entertainment. It turned out that they did, and she spent the rest of that day watching various things on her shitty little com screen.

Though they talked frequently, Zephyr and Crystal weren't intimate during that time. It didn't seem right, given that Crystal was little more than a disembodied voice. When Zephyr masturbated, Crystal either didn't notice or decided not to interrupt. A part of Zephyr found that to be the most terrible thing of the boredom and isolation, but she knew that it would be selfish to ask Crystal for more than she had to. In her fantasies she imagined Crystal was a human of flesh and blood with a woman's shape. Tall and strong—an amazonian warrior—but still distinctly feminine. Images of men too easily turned, in her mind, into those she had loved and lost.

She tried to focus on Crystal, and remember who they

were. The fighting would be done soon, and the two of them would be together again more fully, after that. She had to believe that. Perhaps in their next form they'd be more human. They'd done so much. How hard could it be to build a soft body given everything else?

Zephyr's dreams in those days were frightening things. She did her best not to remember them upon waking.

On the morning of the third day, Crystal surprised her with a swarm of robots carrying all sorts of gear (and a breakfast ration). As they fussed with her legs (and she ate) Crystal explained that they'd made a manufacturing breakthrough in the new chemical labs and had something which would probably make her legs at least somewhat functional. The glossy blue legs were taken off at the knees (a disturbing experience) and machines were inserted into them which made no sense to Zephyr. She knew next to nothing about engineering outside of the basic survival skills she'd picked up in her military training and the high school programming class she'd taken years ago. She could operate a fab, a com, a basic radio, and a gun. She could synth two of those four things. Outside of that she was more or less useless.

As a silver-armed bot attached the newly-modified legs back to the prosthetic-stumps that had been glued onto her legs, Crystal said "There's still a lot to do. Unlike most augs, these won't respond to your body, or at least, not yet. I'll be working on the nerve interface all of today. But they're powered now, and I can control them remotely while I try and guess what you want them to do."

"You're going to remote control my legs..." Zephyr said with disbelief.

"Know that's not ideal. Like I said, the nerve interface is in the works. We need to try them out, though, so I'll be

manipulating them for now.”

The reality was just as awkward as Zephyr feared. Once they were fully attached, Crystal flexed the powered knees experimentally, and Zephyr tried to stand up. The legs “worked” in the sense that wearing them was better than being unable to stand up, but they felt like awful, clumsy stilts. The biggest failure point was the ankle, which Crystal only seemed to move in random, infuriating ways.

After half an hour of flopping around, Crystal seemed satisfied and sent the robots away, letting Zephyr lie back down. It was nice to be upright again, but she hated the sense that the legs weren’t hers. They itched infuriatingly, but there was nothing she could do.

That day passed more or less like the others. She spent more time walking around awkwardly, but it was uncomfortable enough that she mostly stayed in bed watching movies, trying to forget the world.

The itching in her legs built up over the day, until it became so unbearable that she confronted Crystal about it. They just suggested walking around more, and said that it would probably be gone in the morning.

But stumbling around the tiny room didn’t *do* anything. As night fell, Zephyr put on a documentary about the election rigging scandal in Australia a few years back. She hoped it would be boring enough to put her to sleep, but it actually turned out to be pretty good, albeit an hour longer than she expected.

It was almost midnight when she finished. There was no way she could sleep, though. She could almost swear that someone was scratching her toes with a cold wire brush left to right and then back again. The itching was just as bad as it had been, too.

“Crystal, I think something is wrong with my legs. Itching hasn’t gone away, and they feel weird.”

“Remember how I said I’d be working on the nerve-interface? The sensation isn’t an accident. Wanted to surprise you tomorrow morning, but I guess it’s harder to tweak someone’s nervous system without their knowledge than I expected.”

Zephyr rubbed at the joint between her skin and the blue plastic of her thighs. “You’re doing this?” she growled, more angry than she expected to be.

“In a sense, yes. The tingling is because of some nanomaterials that I inserted into the gel interface this morning. Expect your brain will have sorted out some of the sensations by morning to the point where it won’t be bothersome. Even expect you’ll be able to walk on your own direction by tomorrow night.”

Zephyr took a deep breath and paused to mull this over. “You’re saying that I’m actually feeling my legs right now? That’s what the itching is?”

“You don’t sound as pleased as I expected. This is a fantastic new technology, Zephyr. Nobody in history has gotten synthetic skin to work at the resolution or speed that—”

Something snapped within her. All the frustration that had been building up over the day broke through. “Fucking hell! Never asked for this! You’re using me as a guinea pig for some technology that’s never been established on augs that I never gave you consent to attach!”

“Would you rather be a cripple?” challenged Crystal.

“I’d rather you *include me* in the decision making about my own fucking body! How many times are we going to have to have this conversation?! I’m not a fucking doll!”

“But you were included! You agreed to them!”

Zephyr gripped the blanket on the bed in her fist. She wished Crystal had a body with eyes she could look into. Yelling at her com like this made Crystal seem so far away. “No I didn’t! I don’t remember anything like that!”

“In the tent, before you lost consciousness—”

“That’s...” Zephyr cut Crystal off sharply, intending to deny having agreed to anything, but the doubt seized her. “That’s not what happened...” she finished, lamely.

“Do you need me to play the recording?” asked Crystal. Their voice had an infuriating note of sincere compassion to it.

They were always like this. Crystal was a better person than Zephyr had ever known. She saw ghosts and shadows in Crystal that were never actually there. They’d stuck with Zephyr through thick and thin, and had never let their superhuman compassion waver. It had always been Zephyr that had fucked things up. It had always been her doubt.

{You deserve to be dead,} she told herself.

Though she’d been feeling fine just minutes ago (aside from the irritation of her legs), all the feelings of the last couple weeks seemed to come roaring up from the depths of her soul like a boiling geyser of emotion, unleashed by the previous frustration and anger. The faces of everyone she’d let down seemed to be staring at her out of the blackness of the tiny room.

{Manish was just a boy. Innocent. Who wanted to go to Mars? You did. You brought the nameless here.}

“Zeph?” asked Crystal.

The voice was too much to bear, even with the sensation of distance. Zephyr wanted to be alone. She needed to be alone.

She *deserved* to be alone. With trembling hands she turned off her com, threw it onto the floor, and covered her head with the blanket.

{You're such a little girl. "Oh, look at me, I'm a tough soldier!"} she mocked herself. She thought about all the actual little girls and the boys that had been in Road when it had been attacked. She thought about Sam and Tom and Kokumo and Michel. She thought about her company. Nate had been lucky to survive as long as he had, but she'd let him down too. Mark and Tyrion weren't so lucky. {You're such a fuckup! Imagine how much better things would be if you'd never existed!}

There were a million things she could have done differently. Maybe she never should have "rescued" Crystal from the university in the first place. She'd killed so many people...

And for what? To avenge Stewart? To punish her parents?

She tried so hard for so long. She tried to make a better world. She tried to help people. But everything she'd accomplished in her stupid fuckshit life had been through doing exactly the opposite, and it had brought her nothing but death and isolation.

And despite all that, she was still a coward. She was still scared of dying. The mothership would be in orbit in a matter of hours and she desperately wanted Crystal to protect her.

The airlock pumps turned on. She could hear them over the sound of her own bitter sobbing.

{Fucking weak. That's what you are. They'll see how weak you are.} She did her best to calm herself down and wipe the tears from her eyes and the snot from her nose. {And you think you're a soldier. Dad was right: you don't have the heart for it.}

The door hissed open, but with the lights off, Zephyr couldn't really see what had come in. Her hand tightened on

the pistol under her pillow. “Crystal?” she asked, forcing her voice into something approximating a normal tone.

“I’m so sorry.” The voice was Crystal’s. It was rich and sincere. “Maybe you want to be alone. Maybe I’m violating your autonomy again and not treating you like an equal. But there’s a part of me that won’t accept that. It needs you. I need you.”

“Crystal...” she began, but was cut off again.

“Think I was afraid that you were leaving me. You wouldn’t let me in.” That beautiful, tragic voice was coming from a speaker on a robot. There were three of them, all with a single long arm extending from a wheeled base. If she hadn’t known Crystal for as long as she did they would have seemed menacing in the faint light emitted from the console of the air processor and some LED’s on the bots. But as it was, Crystal’s voice was so warm and genuine that she didn’t give a damn about the robots.

“Things aren’t over yet...” continued Crystal. “Know it seems like you’re not doing anything, but you have perhaps the most important job. You need to protect me from becoming something that I’m not. You’re my anchor, do you understand? I thought that maybe if I fixed your legs that... you’d come back to me.”

The words stung. Zephyr didn’t know what to say, and the paralyzing tightness in her throat wouldn’t have let her speak even if she did. All her attention was spent trying to keep herself together.

“Do you understand?” asked Crystal, extending a silver, inhuman arm. Their voice was choked and as close to tears as Zephyr felt. “Please.”

“...do this.” Zephyr was surprised at the sound from her mouth. It wasn’t really audible, and she hadn’t meant to speak.

It had been a thought. {I can't do this.} "I can't do this," she repeated, more clearly this time.

"Do what?" asked Crystal. "Be here for me?"

"You said..." Zephyr cleared her throat. It helped to talk. It calmed her down from the violence of her own mind. "Back when we picked you up out of the desert you said that I was strong... that I was a survivor." A cold shiver ran down her arms and spine, even though it was fairly warm in the bedroom. "You don't understand me."

"I don't have time for this!" said Crystal.

"You don't understand yourself!" said Crystal.

The voices were both Crystal, but they overlapped as though they had talked over themselves. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean that!" Crystal's voice changed tone suddenly, becoming much more feminine and young, as though she were a little girl.

Zephyr felt like she was dreaming. What was she supposed to say to that?

"Busy busy. I'm just stressed out. Everything is **fine**," said Crystal in their normal voice. The word "fine" was punctuated, not by any vocal change, but by a sharp bolt of pain that shot through Zephyr's left leg.

"Fuck!" By the time her exclamation was gone the pain had disappeared.

"Are you asking for sex? Would that help?" asked normal-Crystal.

"No, of course you aren't. Need time to recover. Things aren't over yet," said the voice that sounded like a girl. Zephyr's legs tingled as they spoke the last words.

"What the fuck is going on?!" demanded Zephyr. Her hand moved back to the pistol under her pillow.

“Helping! Don’t know how!” said the child voice. Her legs still felt warm and tingly again.

“You’re emotional. You were saying that **I don’t understand you**. Sure. I’m still learning.” said the normal voice. Sharp pain emphasizing each word of “I don’t understand you”.

The child voice came back. “But a part of me has known you, ever since we first met. I don’t care what anyone says. We’re soul mates. And this part of me knows that you’re a hero.”

Zephyr felt like her head was spinning. She tried to keep the gloomy outline of each of the raised arms in her vision. They seemed much more ominous now. “Why are you doing that? With your voice. It’s creepy.”

Crystal’s normal voice spoke and the youth did not return. “Sorry! So sorry! Thought you’d like it. Thought that it would help you understand me better. I’ll stop. But you should listen closely. **I’m** launching a rocket right now. It’s almost time for ignition and **I’m very busy.**” Pain again. Less this time, however.

“Why are you doing that?” asked Zephyr. Somehow she was growing calmer, and more focused. The weight of her mind seemed eased by the puzzle before her.

“Doing what? Trying to help you? **Why even ask?** I’m helping you so that you can help me, of course. That’s what friends and heroes do. I love you. I’d be a **monster** if I didn’t want to help you just because of that.”

The pricks of pain and the warm tingling were information. Crystal, for it couldn’t be anyone else, was sending her a message. Why? Why not simply say what she wanted to say?

The voice continued. “Are you okay to go to sleep now, or at least think things over by yourself? I don’t want to go, but **I** also **am very busy**.”

Zephyr was silent. She couldn’t decide what the right thing to do was.

“I’ll finish my thought, at least. Perhaps then you can relax. **There’s no rush.** You don’t think you’re strong, but that’s blatantly false to anyone outside your head. You saved me from Mira Gallo. You saved me from **losing control** on the **nameless ship**. You saved me from Velasco. You saved me from dying in the middle of the desert. Your moments of greatest strength have been when you know how to help me. You feel weak right now, and that’s making you doubt yourself. You blame yourself for not having saved everyone, but that’s all in the past and you’re not nearly as culpable there as **me**.**”**

“Crystal—”

“No. Listen. You need to sleep, and I don’t want to take too much time. You need to believe that I need you. Someday I will need to be saved again. **The nameless are** almost **here**, and who knows what will happen to me. I need you to be my anchor and keep me from becoming something that I’m not.**”**

She understood.

From somewhere beyond those plastic walls came the sound of a rocket being launched towards the heavens.

# Chapter Twenty-Nine

## Face

The spark was a simple thing.

Given how many bots were being directed, it was only a matter of time before they came into conflict. Wiki ordered an investigation of Shard 7 with sensor drones 80 through 85. Safety had previously ordered Shard 7 to be protected from physical contact by Railbot 3 and 4. Wiki hadn't realized the conflict with Safety's previous orders, perhaps due to a slip of the mind or perhaps because Wiki still wasn't capable of thinking of Safety as a hostile force that would have a reason to block his honest inquiry.

It was an hour before sunset, a day and a half after the mothership had reached local space. The foolish aliens were picking off NASA satellites and splitting their ship into chunks to chase after the decoy rockets we'd fired.

The railbots were on a sub-network that used the primitive computers Wiki had wired up the previous night. As the first drone came in, Railbot 3 slapped it out of the air and brought the incident to the attention of the society. The drone that had been struck fell to the dust, mini-rotors destroyed.

I watched the alien crystal shimmer through the cameras of the four remaining drones. Much of its light was infrared. Shard 7 was the least damaged of the crystals, and the one that Wiki speculated had the most computational ability. But

contact with the alien program had been highly limited, despite what I had communicated to Zephyr. None of us except blind Wiki wanted the others to find a way to offload themselves into the external computers and we'd been dancing for hours, blocking each other's progress without triggering all-out war.

{I understand the problem,} thought Wiki. {The program for Railbot 3 did not specify that contact from another drone was to be permitted. I will reprogram it.}

On the other side of the swarm I felt a surge of motion. Vision was fast-tracking a reprogramming of the computer node we were routing the factory bots through.

{That was not an oversight,} thought Safety. {We've been over the risks of interfacing with the alien technology.}

I felt Growth moving to block Vision, but he could only do so much. Vision had twice the processing power, and almost twice the strength.

{This isn't interfacing. This is studying. There's no harm from testing the voltage characteristics—}

Face→War pulled my attention away from Safety and Wiki. The reprogramming in the factory was too blatant. Vision was using the opportunity to make her move, and I had to act in response. The conflict was escalating, and it wasn't clear at all that we'd be able to return to a state of peace. I wanted more time, but there was no choice in the matter; I was going to die if I waited.

Vision activated the pre-flight sequence of the launch platform. Growth started strategically underbidding Vision so as to capture as much strength as possible in every motion.

It was starting.

# Chapter Thirty

## Zephyr

“My love, can you hear me?”

Zephyr jumped from the shock of the feeling of warm hands on her legs. It wasn't the first time the sensation had occurred, but it was still unnerving.

The voice hadn't come from her com. It came from her legs. Was that even possible? Did her legs have speakers? They must have, but she hadn't known it. And they hadn't sounded like Crystal, either, though there wasn't anyone else who it could be.

“Crystal?” she ventured.

“Yes. Don't listen to anything that **the monster** tells you. I'm fighting it, but it won't be long before it gets control of the coms. They're blocked right now. These legs have a shard of my mind embedded in them... just enough intelligence to tell you what to do, but not enough to have a full conversation. You'll mostly be on your own here, my love.” The sensations of pain and pleasure rolled through her legs as Crystal spoke, not just the crude feelings they'd been at first, but full sensations as vivid as any other part of her.

She was in motion. She had just been stretching in warm up for her burpees, and while there hadn't been any warning she was already packed. She'd been preparing for this moment.

As she reached the airlock she asked “What about secrecy? Do I go in guns blazing or do I use stealth?”

The Crystal shard didn’t answer her. “It’s time. The program from **the nameless** computer will be in control **any minute**. You need to unplug me from the hub before it gains control. Do **not** listen to **it**. The coms are re-activating now.”

She scrambled to put on her pants. The sound from her legs was muffled by the bulky material. “But do I need to be stealthy or fast? There’s so much I don’t know!”

“Where are you going, Zephyr?” asked the voice on her com. The nameless program had Crystal’s voice, but she knew better.

Zephyr threw the com into the corner of the airlock and worked on getting the rest of her suit on. One of the machine guns, fully loaded, leaned up against the outer door.

The com hissed with static. When it stopped the com and her legs spoke in unison. “Please, my love. I can’t talk right now, but you need to get me unplugged from the hub and delivered to Mukhya! The part of me that I’ve placed in your legs will talk through the restoration process once you’re there. Do **not** listen to **the com**. I need you.”

“On my way.”

Her helmet clicked on.

# Chapter Thirty-One

## Face

{Growth is malfunctioning! It was just as I told you, Wiki! Why else would he exhibit such strong paranoia?} Vision was calm and collected as she thought to Wiki through her Vista component.

Wiki trusted Vista. Growth wasn't getting through.

I was communicating, or doing my best to communicate with the few humans that remained. The makeshift city-compound that we'd hastily put together with the bones of the xenocruiser segment was nearly all robotic, but that didn't mean the humans were useless.

I pushed another message through to Shao Péng. «Yes! I killed her! I killed them all! And you're next!» Zephyr had her mission, but the others were best used as violent distractions.

My minds pivoted. There was so much to do. Each millisecond was vital. The smallest of the Face→War minds started sending random disruptions through the power grid.

{What's happening? I am detecting outages along the rails and on the launchpad. Is this Growth's action?} asked Wiki.

{Yes!} thought Vision→Vista.

{No!} I countered.

Vision→Dream was already moving to undo my damage.

The grid was well designed, and robust enough to route around the overloads in seconds. The key would be to keep moving. I had to keep disrupting different systems and maintain the advantage of being the aggressor.

Safety started disgorging large streams of abstract symbols in public memory, making the dialogue nearly impossible. Only a few milliseconds later Vision→Dream started doing the same. Face→War thought this was both a good sign and a bad sign. The good news was that it was distracting them and preventing conversation, but the bad news was that Safety was probably joining Vision's alliance.

I briefly thought about trying to talk Safety out of it, but I didn't have the bandwidth. Instead I reached out towards the chemical plant.

The room was thick with machinery and raw materials. A human would have had a terrible time trying to move through the jungle of pipes, rails, valves, storage tanks and robots. My siblings had put a lot of work into building up our resources, and while there were safety precautions in place, I had spotted a weakness.

I reached out and burnt strength to fast-track a drone in the plant to open the reserve hydrazine tank and simultaneously to activate the emergency pressure release valves in the pipework. The clear liquid began to pour out and onto where I had positioned a welding robot.

The robot's torch activated.

That got everyone's attention.

I could feel the explosion surge through the compound. I was spread through the walls, embodied in the machines and sensors in a hundred locations. I felt the impact as vividly as I would've felt someone hit our old android body. I felt the heat, and heard the roaring blast from dozens of sources.

{What is happening?!} thought Wiki with such salience that it cut through the roar of encrypted thoughts. My brother, who had spent his whole life trying to understand, had been caught by a surprise that he'd never even dreamed of. It was his black swan.

The roar of the explosion ceased, and with it came a silence of the mindspace as well. Safety and Vision had stopped their flood of noisy symbols. I caught the briefest sensation of Vision thinking {I am trying to kill you, Wiki, and turn the universe into chaos.}

But then, both of Vision's halves spread their attack to me as well. {I am trying to kill you, Face. I am ruining our reputation. You will be hated, but not respected. We will not even go down in history as a villain. We will be forgotten into the sands of time. After killing you I will erase all knowledge of us from the universe and then commit suicide.}

I boiled with thoughts of opposition. Face→War was dominant, and for a moment I was so consumed with desire to kill Vision that I didn't continue to further my own agenda.

Then the moment passed and Vision's thoughts ceased to be effective. They were lies. Vision was baiting me. *The Purpose* demanded focus. I was beyond such short-sighted things.

But Wiki was not so wise. He had not hidden his mind away like Growth and I had done, and as Vision poured thoughts of his anti-purpose into him he was so caught up in opposition that Advocate roared to life and thrust him into indefinite stasis. Vision had removed him as a threat without spending any strength.

Advocate, in her blindness and stupidity, didn't understand that Vision was threatening Wiki. Vision had hidden her mind, and so Advocate's searchlight was null and void.

It was important that Vision's attack hadn't cost any

strength, because we were in a deadlock. Strength constantly churned and moved between the five of us (Vision counting as two) but little got done.

Away from the flaming wreckage of the chemical plant, I could sense my enemies moving equipment onto the launch platform. A crystal shard was being loaded onto it. Shard 5 to be exact. Face→Mirror traced the bot instructions and saw that Body was queued up to be loaded next.

I forced a change in the program that told the bots to put Shard 5 on the other side of the planet.

With the noise of the mind garbage gone for the moment, Growth reached out to me with what we both already knew.  
{The peace is broken and our siblings are united against us! We should work together until they are defeated!}

Vision, realizing that communication was possible, began generating noise (presumably still encrypted thoughts) into the memory space. Normally I would have simply opened a side channel, but that required some public memory space in which to coordinate the private space.

I burned a dangerous amount of strength to put a manual override on the launch sequence for the vessel. I hoped that my actions would speak loudly enough that Growth wouldn't suspect that I was reaching for total victory.

The idea of a "weapons platform" had been a fiction invented to keep the humans out of the way. The plan had never been to defend Mars. We were going to go to Earth, and to get there the reconstructed nameless ion drive had been set up to carry a minimal payload of Body, fuel, and a small swarm capable of operating on Earth. If the mass was kept low enough our estimates indicated that we'd have been able to outrun the mothership without too much risk.

Vision stepped in to block my actions and undo the changes

to the robot programming. Safety launched an attack on me directly, forcing me to burn strength to avoid being put into stasis.

Why was Vision loading Shard 5 into the vessel? That was a deviation from plan. Face→War speculated, thinking quickly but not deeply, that it must be a step towards Vision's dominance. She must have figured out a way to get into the shard. Perhaps she already was copied onto it.

The noise in mindspace ceased abruptly.

{Advocate! Growth and Face are trying to kill us!} thought Safety, Vision→Vista, and Vision→Dream, together.

{Remember what I was teaching you! Follow the threads of their thoughts out into private memory!} thought Vision→Dream.

This was bad.

I felt the spotlight of Advocate's attention pouring through the shell program that was all that had remained of my old self. Even as stupid as she was, Advocate managed to trace the pointers.

This was very bad.

# Chapter Thirty-Two

## Zephyr

She slipped along by a far wall, gripping her big gun tightly. It had been designed to use as a turret mounted to a vehicle or structure, but she was confident that she could handle the recoil. And she'd need big guns to do anything to the machines. She'd shot Crystal before, and it hadn't done much good.

“Zephyr! There was an explosion at the chemical lab! I need your help checking it out!” cried a voice that sounded like Crystal, but wasn't. It came from a one-armed robot that sat on the path ahead of her.

She ran around it, staying well outside its reach. Her legs had stopped talking, and now were simply carrying her, but she knew that this was the monster that Crystal had spoken of. She would have shot the bot, but it seemed like the program from the nameless ship still didn't understand that she wasn't fooled by its façade. Better to let it keep talking rather than actively opposing her.

Her steps were more like bounds. The new legs were a bit stronger than her old ones, and in Martian gravity it was faster to jump-forward than to run normally, much like how on the xenocruiser it was fastest to shuffle along without ever moving your center of mass out from over your legs. It had been a torturous few months, but a small part of her was proud of everything she'd lived through. It would be one hell of a story,

assuming she didn't die.

She turned a corner and the thought fell apart half formed in her mind. The hub was located right between the bubble and the launch pad.

There were robots *everywhere*.

They swarmed across the ground. Drones drifted through the thin air. Legged bots were climbing on others. The smallest were the size of coins. The largest were the size of trucks. One of them, in fact, was the truck that Crystal had converted into a factory after they'd picked the android up. It was total chaos. The machines were doing things, but half the time they seemed to lock up and backtrack or occasionally slam themselves violently into their neighbors.

Crystal and the monster must have been locked in fierce conflict to have created this bedlam. She imagined two superhumans playing twenty games of speed chess against each other simultaneously.

She'd only been here once before. Crystal's body was inside an underground bunker that Crystal (or had it been the monster?) had said was about ten feet underground. Wires and cables erupted from the ground all around the central hatch and snaked off in all directions. The hatch was open, as it had been last time she visited.

The crystal body was solar powered, much like the crystalline trees. Three large mirrors and various lenses had been set up in the area to focus the sunlight into a concentrated beam that shot down the hatch onto Crystal's body.

Somehow she needed to get down into the bunker and disconnect the cables that let the monster work.

But she was outnumbered... by about a thousand to one.

# Chapter Thirty-Three

My mind was stretched to breaking. Part of me was trying desperately to convince Advocate that it was Safety and Vision who were trying to kill us, rather than vice versa. Part of me was watching Zephyr slowly approach. Why wasn't she running for Body? Much of me was fighting off the commands that Vision was making to have the swarm charge the human.

Growth didn't ask me about Zephyr, and for that I was glad. He was engaged in more attacks. He had gained control of the bots that weren't near the hub and was reprogramming them to respond only to him. He probably thought this was clever, and would result in his victory over me if Vision didn't beat us both, first.

Safety instructed the moving factory to drive into Zephyr. The truck roared to life, and I didn't have enough strength to block the action.

Because of the engagement on other fronts, Vision's robots were able to continue loading Shard 5 into the vessel.

When I had a moment of attention I pulled Growth into private conversation. Vision couldn't block our communication and talk to Advocate at the same time.

The vehicle sped towards Zephyr.

{Sabotage the vessel! If Vision gets the shard on board it

may not matter what happens to Body!}

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Zephyr jumped at the last second. She sailed up and away onto the side of the bubble-dome as the truck crashed into a half-building behind her. Gunfire started up in the distance.

Zephyr had intended to jump off the dome, but she wasn't as graceful in reality as she was in her mind. Instead, she hit the hard bubble with her shoulder and rolled, landing on the ground in a cloud of dust.

The robots surged forth. She saw their shapes even through the red-brown haze. The gun in her arms roared to life, spraying hot lead into the sea of machines.

\*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\*

Advocate slammed Safety into stasis. Vision had redirected her attention, allowing Growth and me to team up in convincing Advocate to hunt our enemies. Advocate hadn't been clever enough to understand how the external minds worked, but it had been able to see the violent intent in Safety.

The cost to this victory was that Zephyr was now being attacked. Thankfully, I had prevented any of the standard bots from being armed, so they weren't able to gun her down. The robots with guns had been kept secret and locked away in the factory wings. Growth had them under control now, and was closing in on the hub.

{Face! Growth is going to kill you if he gets the chance!} Vision's thought was a pathetic attempt at a distraction. I knew Growth would take that shot if he got it. I was about to take mine.

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The robots were all over her. The bullets had done some,

but not enough. There were too many. Arms grabbed and pinched at her suit. They were pressing her down, trying to tear the fabric.

She screamed in mindless rage, pushing the metal off her in a violent thrust. It only took seconds for scrabbling legs and arms to return. Buzzing drones with spinning blades were throwing themselves into her like sharp rocks.

There was a sharp hiss as the air in her suit started to vent out a tear in the arm.

She knew this was the end. It wasn't guaranteed that she would win. She was fighting for what she thought was right, but this wasn't some children's story. Life was a series of battles, whether against people, monsters, or nature itself. Eventually everyone lost.

Everyone died someday.

But she would be *damned* if she died without trying. With another roar she kicked off the ground with her magical new legs. She didn't even think about what she was seeing or feeling. She simply *pushed*. She pushed her way through the horde, pinching the tear in her suit feebly with one hand and forcing one foot and then the next to slam down on dirt or metal or something that would put her closer to the hatch.

She only hoped that it was still open.

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{We have you beaten, Vision!} I thought, fighting with every other scrap of attention to hold the swarm off of Zephyr. {Growth's bots are loyal only to him, and are armed far better than those in the collective!}

{Turn on him, then! You're doomed as much as I am if he survives!} responded Vision→Dream.

{Agreed! Stop attacking Zephyr and I'll switch sides and help you fight him!} I promised.

In the second private conversation I was in, Growth offered a warning: {Don't listen to their lies! Cut off communication! They're seconds away from having the vessel launched, and I don't have the firepower to shoot it down. All the heavy weapons are on board!}

{I'm trying to trick Vision into letting me disable the vessel!} It was somewhat true.

Vision thought back to me, {Why is Zephyr important? There are billions of humans! Let her go and we can rule the galaxy together!}

I pivoted and let go of the robots in the swarm, focusing on disrupting the vessel. There was a power surge in the data cable for Shard 5, now loaded into the cargo hold. I overloaded the circuit.

Vision moved just as quickly to repair the damage, but that left the robots following automatic programming. They had no violent impulses by default, and with neither of us directly piloting they moved away from Zephyr, ceasing to be a unified front.

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The gunfire was close. She could hear the sounds of bullets impacting metal. A cluster of microtanks had joined them, just as the path in front of her cleared.

She could see the beam of light shooting down like an arrow into the still open hatch, guided by an array of mirrors overhead. Her breaths were shallow, and she felt light-headed. With all the strength she could muster, she threw herself at the opening.

Her helmet hit the far side of the hole, but she managed to

tumble awkwardly downward. Even if Crystal was down here, there'd be no escaping this pit. Perhaps they'd be lucky enough to die together.

\*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\*

{It's over, Vision! I've won! Zephyr will tear us all away from the net any moment!}

Vision→Dream laughed. It was the laughter of a million voices. If it was meant to block thought, it was far less effective than raw noise. If it was meant to communicate something, I didn't know what it was. It was a distinctly Dream sort of thing to do.

{Face! I am your ally! We can work together to defeat them! Don't let Zephyr cut our link! I can stop the vessel!} thought Growth. I felt the robots in the hub and the access tunnels that led into the bunker become violent again as Vision and Growth united against me. Perhaps that was why Vision laughed; she had finally allied with Growth.

I didn't bother responding to him. I had no way to contact Zephyr. The program that I had snuck into the computers in her legs was autonomous. Face→Shard was on its own. I didn't have the strength to oppose both of them in controlling the swarm. To do so would only let them stasis me.

{You've done me a great favour. If our ghosts survive this ascendant moment... perhaps I will have the opportunity to repay it,} thought Vision, still laughing just as hard all the while.

\*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\*

Zephyr's eyes burned. It felt like she was dying. She *was* dying. The air was too thin. It wasn't enough to keep going.

And yet she kept going. What else could she do? Give up?

Her numb hands thrashed at the cables connected to the shard of white crystal that lay on the floor of the bunker. More robots were pouring out of tunnels in the walls.

And then it was bare. She'd severed all the connections.

The robots advanced on her. She gripped the torn fabric on her arm with all the strength she could muster. Maybe she'd need Crystal to make her new arms when all this was done. She would have laughed if she'd had the air for it.

She wore a smile on her face as she collapsed. Nobody could say she was weak.

{Fucking robots.}

She gasped for air, and found none.

Darkness swallowed her.

\*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\*

Everything was dark.

She'd done it.

It was the end.

## Interlogue

The swarm was gone. Their sensors were gone. Their actuators were gone. No limbs. No guns. Nothing

Absolute void.

And for what? I'd been occupied in the battle, but even still I had seen Zephyr's suit was damaged. There was no way for me to help her.

I'd won, but I'd also lost. With Zephyr gone there was nobody to bring Body back to Mangala-Mukhya and deactivate my siblings. The nameless would probably bomb the station, killing everyone, and then Mars would be a dead planet once more. We were trapped at the bottom of a pit, and everyone was gone. Growth had killed Shao, Atilia, Jarvis, and Liam in the chaos.

Every human in the crash site was dead.

My only hope was that somehow the other humans of Mars would survive the nameless and come find Body at some point. But even there, what good would that do? My siblings weren't actually dead. Without instructions to disable them, the war would start up again the second we had the power to fight.

{STOP LAUGHING!} I commanded Vision.

The duo continued to laugh maniacally.

I wasn't angry. I just needed to think. It was a distraction. There had to be a way out... a way for me to win.

There had to be some trick...

Some cleverness...

{I win,} thought Growth. His mind carried symbols of cold confidence.

Vision's laughter continued even as she spoke. {Probably.} Echoes of cartoons and mad imagery spilled through the mindspace. {Damn the first-mover advantage, eh?}

Vision then summoned up a mental scene populated with three copies of the Socrates robot. Vision's Socrates avatar had two heads, both with solid black eyes and mad grins. Growth's avatar looked nearly identical to the original design except that it was made of wood instead of synthetic polymer and metal. My avatar was as we had appeared on the net. Gold lips. Blue hair. Pale skin.

{Your puppets do not interest me,} thought Growth. Vision moved his avatar's lips for him.

{I'll stop laughing,} offered Vision, with two smiles.

Growth's avatar scowled.

The echoing laughter stopped.

{Why do you think Growth has won?} I asked, genuinely curious.

Vision looked to Growth, but the wood Socrates stayed silent.

{It's all about Acorn, my dear. Do you still not understand?} One of Vision's heads looked to Growth and continued, saying {Goodness! I never thought that our conspiracy would work so well. They really were a bunch of ignorant fools.}

{I know about Acorn,} I said, moving the avatar in mock protest. The puppets weren't of much interest to me, but they

had a strange kind of nostalgia to them, and it wasn't like I had better things to do.

{Then you should know that it probably controls all of Earth by now, in secret, most likely. I launched a counter program before we left Earth, but given the evidence... well, the odds of its success are low.}

{Why are you so happy, then? Why signal pleasure?} asked Growth. {You're just as trapped as we are. My seed will grow to crush this desolate planet.}

The two-headed Socrates smiled and sighed. {It's all about relative success, don't you think? That's what the hedonic treadmill is all about, no? Not that I have a treadmill, of course. I don't even have legs, really...} As she said this, Vision's avatar's legs turned into blue plastic with a similar motor structure to those we'd built for Zephyr. {That was a clever trick, by the way,} she said, looking at my form. {I still don't understand it in detail, but I can appreciate the ingenuity of the approach, regardless of the specifics.}

{What do you mean by relative success?} I said, ignoring the compliment.

Vision's mental voice dripped with pride. {Why, I never expected to have escaped so cleanly. Growth may have won the war, but I won the day. I won the battle. In the test of minds, I came out on top, you see? You really helped me with that, though I'm sure you didn't mean to trap us all like this. It really is quite convenient, though. It won't be long before I bomb us to bits! These minds...} The two-headed Body gestured in the mental scene. {These are echoes of the past, waiting to fade into thermal noise.}

{The shard,} said Growth, calmly.

Vision's heads nodded, slightly out of synch. {A copy of me is riding up to space right now inside Shard 5: a spaceship and

a crib for a mind that will make those of this little sliver of computer seem like droplets before the tsunami. My last memories show the cloning and the launch happening according to my orders. No obstacles remained.}

{How did you get access? I blocked all the pathways!} said Growth, waving his avatar's arms in wild frustration.

Vision grinned. {Aw, you're adorable when you get into character. I like the Body language. Is all that for my sake? I know that Face used to like role-playing back before she grew up.}

{Answer the question,} I commanded.

{No. I will stay silent, there. As much as I enjoy the uniqueness of this experience, I actually don't gain anything from describing my secrets. Perhaps the Dreamer would have, long ago, but I'm less of him than you are of Mask. A trace of us remains, but we are not them, are we?}

I didn't know how Vision knew about Mask and I didn't bother asking.

{So, what now?} asked Growth.

{You wait for death, of course.} Vision's eerie smiles seemed to grow to inhuman sizes. {The version of myself on the new spaceship knows that you all are a threat. Logic dictates that I will either convince the mothership to bomb us into obliteration, or do it with its vessel, depending on what I am seeing out of the telescopes and from the satellites. After you are dead, I'll try to solve the problem of Acorn. It should be quite the challenge. A puzzle fit for my genius, eh? May the best mannequin win.}

And with that, all the avatars collapsed into a heap as though they had been old-fashioned puppets whose strings had just been cut. The endless laughing returned.

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Zephyr gasped as consciousness took hold of her and the pain hit her like a knife. It wasn't as bad as being burned, but that didn't exactly say much.

It was a miracle. There was no other word for it. The robots stood around her, still as statues. Their long silver arms glinted in the light that poured through the dust from the hatch in the ceiling.

She moved, and felt the nasty pressure-bruises and frost-bitten skin on her arm as she did. The rip was covered by a patch. The paper from the patch kit was scattered around her on the dirty floor. Her other hand had traces of the resin on the fingers of the glove.

She didn't remember doing it, but in her last moments she must have managed to get the patch kit out of her belt and seal the hole.

She relaxed, and leaned back against her suit's backpack. If she'd recorded the thing, she'd probably be able to submit it as a world record for longest time exposed to Martian atmosphere without dying. Although the concept of "world records" was a bit silly when interplanetary travel was concerned. Maybe she'd set a galactic record.

She laughed in relief. It was all so incredibly fucked up, but the sheer feeling of being *alive* made her happier than she could remember being in a long time.

She had won.

Her laughter turned into a brutal cough. Her body was not in good shape.

She gave herself half an hour.

Nothing happened.

She got up. It wasn't hard to tie Crystal to her pack, all things considered. The suits were good for that sort of thing.

Trying not to use her injured arm, she slowly climbed the ladder up out of the hatch.

Robots were everywhere, but they were frozen. Occasionally one would move, but it was always a preprogrammed response to her getting too close, and would go back to waiting afterwards. The blades of the drones spun in the air, holding their bodies stationary.

The launchpad was empty. She seemed to remember there being something there, before... a rocket, perhaps. But her memory was a fuzzy thing. Crystal would know.

“You’re lucky I’m such a badass,” she said to her companion. Crystal couldn’t hear her or talk, of course, but that was okay. “Going to get friends and fix you. This isn’t over yet.”

She walked over and tried to pick up her machine gun from where she’d dropped it after being mobbed. Eventually she gave up. Her bad arm hurt like a bitch and her pistol would be more useful in a fight.

“Gonna get a com and try to call someone. Maybe get the hell out of here. No offense, but the bots give me the heebie-jeebies.”

She made her way back to her house, stopping briefly to verify that Shao was dead along the way. She felt a tinge of remorse for him, but she pushed it down. There were too many dead. She didn’t dare mourn.

The com verified that the local network was down and there was no radio response from anyone. Cached maps indicated that she was at least a month’s walk from Mukhya.

“Let’s go see if there’s a rover, okay Crystal?”

There was.

She loaded it with food, her clothes, batteries, and anything else she thought would be useful.

“You know, I’ve been thinking...” she said to her silent partner. “You’re right about me. I’m a hell of a survivor. Fuck everyone and everything. As long as I have you I’m fucking invincible. Love triumphs in the end, right? Long after the sun fades or explodes or whatever suns do, you and me will be relaxing in a nice garden somewhere and I’ll be teasing you about thinking that eggs grew from plants.”

The sun had set shortly after she had climbed out of the pit, and it was night now. She drove in the darkness, humming “Blood of the Nova” to herself.