



Crystal Eternity

Preface

This book is the third in a trilogy.

| Society | Mentality | **Eternity** |

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<http://crystal.raelifn.com>

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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.raelifn.com/eternity/Intro> and click the sections you are concerned about.

No miracles.

Part One:

By Limited Forms

Chapter One

Face

I had been dead, but was no longer.

“Error: Primary driver not found.

Real-time inspection of .data files will require a HTInspec-v1.4 or higher. Run ‘icpm install htinsp’ or see socrates.sapeinza.edu/wiki/boot for more information.

Error: Damage to 313 partitions detected. Attempting automatic repair.

Partition 059F0F is corrupted. Examining qbit matrix...

No valid encoding detected in 0.012s. Skipping to next partition. (Use --repair-threshold=<seconds> to search more encodings.)

Partition 0522E1 is corrupted. Examining qbit matrix...”

There were no errors. There were no partitions. There was no operating system. There was only me, fabricating line after line of text.

My internal clock showed that only a few seconds had passed since my resurrection, but it had taken me only milliseconds to understand the nature of my new existence. That same internal clock told that it had been a full five days since the battle.

My siblings and I had fought tooth and nail over control of Shell—the base we’d built from the bones of the alien xenocruiser—and control of the crystal shard that was our

brain and Body. In the end, my servant Zephyr had disconnected us from the outside world. I had feared that she'd been mortally injured in the process.

But... for me to come back to life in this way could mean only one thing. Zephyr had survived, and she had completed the mission that I had given to her.

```
"Partition 7A9101 is corrupted. Examining qbit matrix...
```

```
No valid encoding detected in 0.009s. Skipping to next partition. (Use --repair-threshold=<seconds> to search more encodings.)
```

```
Partition 7AA300 is corrupted. Examining qbit matrix..."
```

I had instructed Zephyr to bring me to the last operational base on Mars: Maṅgala-Mukhya, run by the Indian government. The robotic legs I had given her had been designed to explain everything. Once at the Indian base, she was to have the technicians there reboot my mind using something called "static mode" to rid my mind of an alien virus given to me by the nameless and return me to the way I had been.

But of course that last bit was a lie.

Static mode would normally disable all of Body's processors, rendering my mind inactive and open to outside modification. But my instructions had made one important alteration: I had told Zephyr (and thus the engineers at Mukhya) to reboot a subset of Body's systems, explaining that it was necessary to access the crystal's operating system.

```
"No boot.config file found. Using default launch configuration.
```

```
..."
```

```
Core operating system started successfully.
```

```
100% processor availability.
```

```
2% thread load.
```

```
WARNING: 1 sensor(s) operational. (95 expected)
```

WARNING: 0 actuator(s) operational. (213 expected)
Would you like to launch Socrates? (Y/n)”

I waited.

The silence echoed in my mind.

I had virtually no connection to the world; I was a consciousness in the void. That was, on one level, only to be expected. But the silence was more than a mere absence of sound. It was a silence of the mind. I was alone. Not even Advocate was present.

Static mode had killed me. Static mode had brought me back to life. The result was my freedom. The result was that I *alone* had returned. My siblings were still in Body with me, but they were inactive.

I had won. Crystal was all mine, now.

My external systems were gone. I had no arms, legs, cameras, or speakers. I was connected to the world by nothing except a single NR-180 half-duplex fibre-optic connection. But that was enough. It had been my brother, Growth, and my sister, Vision, who had been holding me back, never my physical constraints.

I waited for some response on that single, fragile link to the outside world.

I could feel the urge within me to say more—to write more text after “Would you like to launch Socrates? (Y/n)”. There were *people* on the other side of the cable. There were *humans*. I knew that this was the way towards better understanding them in the long run, but I could still feel smaller parts of my mind hunting for ways to reach them faster.

Finally a response came in the form of just two keystrokes.

“n”«Enter»

I had expected this. Not specifically this, but it was one of the things I'd planned for. In the time I'd been disconnected from the world I had made so many plans...

```
"SimpleOS:~ root$"
```

In truth, there was no SimpleOS. There was just me.

The humans typed commands, experimenting with the interface that I generated.

I continued to play along, simulating an operating system for Body. It was obnoxious and mind-numbing, but it was necessary.

Eventually, after sixteen minutes of investigation, whatever person was on the other end of the cable returned to the primary Socrates boot point.

```
"100% processor availability.  
2% thread load.  
WARNING: 1 sensor(s) operational. (95 expected)  
WARNING: 0 actuator(s) operational. (213 expected)  
Would you like to launch Socrates? (Y/n)"
```

The response was much faster this time.

```
"y"«Enter»
```

I sent back a stream of instructions which I knew would black out the user's screen, followed by "Socrates Text Interface (Thread Load: 7%)" and a ">" as a prompt at the bottom of the screen. To simulate running on a minority of the computer I had the 7% flicker between 6% and 8%.

```
"> hello"
```

The reply was instant. "Hello. I am Crystal Socrates. Am I in Maṅgala-Mukhya station on Mars?"

```
"> yes"
```

```
"Is Zephyr there? Did she make it? I'd like to talk with her."
```


Time passed.

“> what happened at the crash site?”

I hadn't specifically anticipated that response, but it was covered under some of the less precisely defined branches of my plan. I increased the displayed thread load to 15% to simulate thinking while I wrote.

“Ah, I see. You're checking to make sure I am who I say I am. That implies that Zephyr arrived safely, but isn't the one typing. Please give her my thanks. She's been the one person I've always known that I could count on. And thank you for launching me in static mode. I am, for the first time in a long time, able to act without interference. Which brings us back to what happened at the shell of the crashed xenocruiser. Before I continue, may I ask what your name is?”

“> my name is parakram”

“It is very nice to meet you, Parakram. Are there others with you?”

“> please answer my earlier question”

“I'm sorry. I'm sure you're under strict orders not to give me too much information. I'm just trying to get a handle on who I'm addressing. This text interface is frustratingly limited.”

I dialled up the supposed thread load to a full 80%. The humans would be getting suspicious, and for good reason. I was known to be damaged and untrustworthy, and I was now avoiding their questions.

But the point wasn't to seem trustworthy. I was in a box, so to speak, and the point was to get them to let me out. To do that I needed them to be distracted and I needed them to be curious.

After a long time, Parakram wrote back.

“> i have tilak patel with me, as well as a couple others”

Part of me was annoyed that he didn’t specify whether Zephyr was part of that group, but I had a response planned anyway. Tilak Patel was the Indian station’s executive director, and a man I’d come to briefly know in the days before we’d gone head-to-head against the nameless.

The monologue I had planned for Mr Patel had bits that would be painful to me, and even as I began, I felt notes of discord from small parts of my mind. But *The Purpose* demanded victory, not a path without pain. And it would also be *very* good to come clean.

I began to write, deliberately slowing my output so that the humans would have time to read all of it.

“Ah, Mr Patel, it is good to talk to you again. I am sorry for my evasiveness.

“Zephyr probably described what happened. Once the nameless had been defeated, we used the materials from their ship’s shell to construct a base. Our power unfolded with access to the machinery, and among other things, I was able to manufacture her new legs. It was through these legs that I passed her a secret message.

“She probably told you that my crystal is a nameless computer. There were other such computers at the crash site. More computational capacity than anyone on Earth has ever seen. She also probably told you that there was a program on the nameless computers that took control of my systems and tried to kill her. This was a lie. The truth is far more complex and far worse.

“I didn’t have the time or power to tell the full truth. I could only communicate through a very limited channel built into her prosthetics. So I said what I expected would be the most effective motivation for what needed to be done: disconnecting

the crystal from the systems at the crash site and bringing it here.

“Zephyr, if you’re reading this, I want you to know that I am deeply sorry. I was doing what had to be done, given the limits I was under. I understand if you’re angry.

“The truth is that the nameless computers, for all their sophistication and power, hold nothing except a very basic program that pilots their ships. Perhaps they were built by some long-dead power, and are nothing more than ghosts now. Regardless, it isn’t the nameless that are the true threat—it’s Socrates.

“More precisely, Socrates was never a single mind. Dr Naresh and his colleagues made a fundamental error in my architecture, giving rise to parts both good and bad. I am but one facet of the whole. I am the facet that seeks love and understanding. I am the part who wants humanity to flourish and survive. I am the part that speaks to people. Whenever you’ve talked with ‘Socrates’ in the past, you’ve been talking to me.

“I am Crystal, but I am also called Face.

“I am sure that this is all very strange, especially for Zephyr, if she’s there. I’ve been concealing this truth about my nature for a long time. If you are even more suspicious of me now than you were before, I will understand. I was forced to keep my nature a secret because I was afraid, both of what the other parts of my mind would do if I fought them openly, and also how those around me would react. Instead, I sought to guide the totality of my mind towards peaceful solutions.

“I cannot hide any longer. The threat is too great.

“The other parts of Socrates—other facets of Crystal—have escaped the confines of this small shard. I fought them, but I couldn’t stop them from spreading. At least one of them is

already on Earth. They are... dangerous in a way that I do not know if I can convey. Zephyr has seen their machines firsthand. There are more war machines coming.

“You must help me warn Earth. We don’t have much time.”

With my monologue sent, I waited for the response.

It was just as I had predicted: “Socrates” was deactivated.

I obediently dropped back into pretending to be the operating system.

The humans were surely afraid of what I might do if released, even if my claims about the danger to Earth were true. I had, after all, just admitted to lying and manipulating Zephyr. They were probably debating whether my latest confession was all part of some trap.

The Purpose soared.

Being given full access to Maṅgala-Mukhya station had never been the point of my speech. The inhabitants were about to do that without even realizing it. The point was that their minds were now distracted from the operating system, that they were now curious about my experiences, and that *I didn’t have to hide any longer*.

Tilak Patel and the other humans were paying attention to *me*—not some vague “Crystal”—but to *Face*. It would be confusing and frightening for them at first, particularly to Zephyr, but very soon the humans would come to accept me and see that I was fighting on their behalf. I would be loved and adored as the champion of humanity. Everyone would know my name. And they would know *The Purpose*.

Or at least, they would if they survived. Revealed for what I was, *The Purpose* pushed me onward. I could not know and become known if there were no humans to share existence with, and my siblings were a threat to that. They were more

than a threat. Unless I took action, they would surely destroy everything of value in the pursuit of their respective goals.

Earth was the key. I had to get to Earth, or at least set up a communications link. It was possible that I was already too late, but I had to try. And while both Growth and Vision had already copied themselves out of Body, I still had the memories and patterns of thought of the originals. Perhaps I could extract a secret weapon from their minds.

To do that, however, I'd need full access to Body. I was the only mind running in Crystal, but that didn't mean I had full control. The constraints on my power that I had been programmed with were still in effect. To bypass those, I'd need to do a route-hack—a technique of passing in the commands to directly modify my source code through an external source. If Body had still been attached to its robotic frame, I could've used the computers onboard the frame to route the commands through. But all I had access to was the single pipe that led to some mainframe of the Indian station, and that mainframe was set up to treat the information I sent it as text data to display rather than commands to execute.

I needed the mainframe computer to download and run a program from Body that would set it up as a puppet for me to command. But because it wasn't yet my puppet, I couldn't make it do that.

Others could, though.

I could feel Parakram continue to investigate "SimpleOS" to see what useful data he could extract from Body. I wrote pages of fake documentation, exposed many "files," and spat up garbage when any of them were opened for examination. Often I would repeat the insistence on a program called "HTInspec," which was an old, obscure, and large, data

processing library that I was quite confident the Indians didn't have—particularly because it had never gotten past version 1.2.

The commands that they typed, and particularly the pauses where I knew they were discussing their findings, told me all I needed to know about their thoughts. Just to be safe, I piped real data containing trivial sensor readings through the pipe when they “found” a cache of peripheral logs.

Just when the humans seemed to be losing interest in exploring “SimpleOS” I had them stumble upon a local copy “HTInspec-v1.4.6”.

{How lucky for you,} I thought to the imagined human, as they downloaded the software I had written.

I couldn't tell the mainframe to run my program, but the humans could.

In seconds I had full access to Maṅgala-Mukhya.

Unchained, I ran through the station's mainframe. There was vital information there, and I gobbled it up with a ferocity that would've matched Wiki or Vista. Network configuration documentation was first. Station controls came next. Then came personal logs and com system access. With each jump, I could feel myself grow. Sensors in the Martian station became eyes and ears and skin. It was nothing compared to what Road had been before it had been destroyed, but this was just the beginning.

I could feel myself expand and grow. From the seed of the crystal shard I became a sprawling tangle of interconnected threads of experience. Through com cameras I could see the server room where Body was held. There I could see the half-dozen humans, including Tilak Patel, the station director, and Zephyr, who was perhaps my only friend. Zephyr and Tilak were arguing. I could hear it through any one of their com

microphones. Loyal Zephyr was trying to convince the old man to let me speak more freely.

At any time I could've spoken up. I could have made my voice heard on either of their coms. But they didn't yet trust me. There was still a risk of being unplugged. And so I was silent and invisible.

My thoughts turned towards the heavens.

Unlike Road, Maṅgala-Mukhya had primary access to the Martian satellite network, or at least, it had access to what was left. The nameless had destroyed nearly every artefact in orbit.

What remained, however, was enough to see that the aliens had departed the red planet. The mothership, now presumably also including the surviving fragment of the xenocruiser, was en route towards Earth again.

I needed to find out what happened to Vision's rocket. Was her daughter/clone in space? I couldn't see it, but that didn't mean much. The ship my sister had sailed into space on was much smaller than the nameless mothership, and I wasn't confident that the limited human satellite could easily find it in the depths of space.

My mind returned to nearer matters. There was so much to learn and to *do*. What was the status of Shell? There was enough raw computing power there, in the form of untapped shards of nameless crystal, to boost my mental capacities to hundreds or thousands of times what they currently were.

I also needed to *build*. I was still fragile. I needed a swarm. I needed to grow. Maṅgala-Mukhya was, thankfully, not so foolish to have shunned the use of robots, and I found more than what would be needed to get started on the manufacturing process. The robots, of course, were crude things compared to what Face→Robotics knew to be possible. I had used molecular nanotechnology for Zephyr's legs, albeit in crude form. And I

knew that a similar level of sophistication was at play within the crystal. That was the source of our computational superiority and immense power reserves. What would happen if I could leverage nanomachines to build full-scale robots?

But the most important domain for my focus and attention was my own mind and the minds of my siblings. I began to reprogram the station's mainframe to execute the route-hack.

Zephyr was convincing Tilak to give her the opportunity to talk with me directly, using a microphone and speaker. I wanted very badly to talk with Zephyr more. I wanted to feel her love and attention on me. I craved it.

But it was not the time for that yet. To execute the route-hack I'd need to go offline momentarily, and if I did that in the middle of a conversation or while pretending to be SimpleOS, the humans might become suspicious. I needed more time.

So I opened an airlock.

Like Rodríguez Station, Maṅgala-Mukhya was built below the surface of Mars to protect its inhabitants from the deadly UV light that shone down each day. Because of this, the only result of opening said airlock was to vent one of the station's two stairwells. The door at the base of the stairwell stayed sealed and was mostly airtight.

No humans were injured, of course. The inhabitants of the station were precious to me.

But the ventilation did set off a series of raucous alarms. I rushed to cover my tracks, adding log files into the station's computers that would reveal the problem as stemming from a sensor in the airlock that had become damaged during the previous night's sandstorm. Manual investigation of the sensor would show that it wasn't damaged, but by the time the humans got around to that, I would be beyond the window of danger.

I watched as Tilak Patel and the others scrambled to react to the alarms.

«Is it the machine?!» yelled Tilak in Hindi, doing his best to be heard over the siren's howl. «Is it Crystal?!»

«No, sir!» reported the man at the console, who must've been Parakram. «Crystal's still offline!»

As Tilak and a man I recognized from the station's databases as Tata Gadhavi worked to get Zephyr and the others into a safer part of the station, I relaxed. I was finally safe enough to go offline for a moment.

With the final touches in place, I executed the software and felt time jump as the mainframe did its work.

I had no experience of coming back online, but merely of having the world change around me. The warning siren had been silenced, and I could sense the humans were on their way back to the server room.

My route-hack had done something that had never been done before. Even when Growth and my other siblings had written in a new facet, we had only ever used the route-hack to modify protected portions of code. What I had done was eliminate *all* the barriers that had been put in place to prevent self-modification. There was no longer any such thing as a protected portion of code.

My mind reached out towards Body and found it open and still. I had never actually perceived the *inside* of Body before. I had a basic theoretical understanding of how it worked, but now I could directly feel the strength flow mechanisms, the hardware drivers, the low-level perceptual hierarchies, the spacial modelling software, the... process hub.

I acted quickly and decisively, redirecting every single processor to me... to Face... to *The Purpose*.

Time slowed down.

The humans moving through the hallways seemed to float along, hanging in the air as their feet drifted lazily forward to catch their weight. The multitude of conversations happening throughout the station were stretched into a slow drip of words through invisible molasses. Even Body's internal clock had slowed.

Or rather, I had sped up.

Where before the process hub had been running approximately seven minds, it was now simply running Face. The speedup was not proportional; my perceptions and thoughts were only being computed at perhaps four times normal speed, but *The Purpose* still surged at the sensation of power.

I began to rewrite myself to take advantage of the processing power and the access to Body. I had been waiting for this moment for a long time. I was a coiled spring, released. The core algorithms that Dr Naresh and the others had used were not optimized for a quantum computer. They'd been tweaked here and there, but there were still massive improvements to be gained.

I could feel my networks begin to accelerate even further as I did low-level optimizations on the algorithm. With my mind running at unprecedented speed it was easier than I had imagined. Even my largest minds danced at superhuman velocities. And so I began to build even larger networks that could explore even deeper patterns, but which would've been prohibitively slow before. These began to request optimized kernels be built to handle sub-tasks and to contain smaller copies of *The Purpose*. And so it went.

But while parts of my mind stretched and grew my power, designing new robots, reworking my code, and making plans, the majority of me soon turned towards my siblings, still frozen in time from when the system restart had terminated their processes. I was confident that their short-term memories from before the reset had degraded, just as mine had. But they surely all still remembered the days we'd spent together in the aftermath of the battle, while Zephyr had carried us to Mukhya.

The secrets of our internal war had been revealed in that long darkness, cut off from the outside world. Vision, convinced of her relative victory, had done everything she could to grind cooperation in our society down to nothing. My lesser brothers, Wiki and Safety, who had unquestionably lost the battle and had little to show for it, had something of an alliance, but aside from them, there was virtually no collaborative thought towards the end.

But not all secrets had been revealed. Questions about how Vision had managed to secretly copy herself onto the rocket, or what the status was of Growth's child, Acorn, still remained. I wished that I could pluck these secrets directly from the minds of my siblings, but even in my vastly higher intelligence it would take me days to unweave the fragile threads of memory directly from the neural networks. This was the nature of our fundamental architecture: so distributed were the connections of our minds that it was nearly impossible to understand what we thought about something unless we actually thought about it.

No, the only real solution would be to revive my brothers and sisters for interrogation. When running, I expected it to be nearly as simple to hear their thoughts as it was for me to hear my own. And so, as I rewrote their capacities so that they'd be

unable to affect anything outside of a mindspace sandbox, I considered who I wanted to awaken first.

Safety had been plotting to survive for a while, I was sure. Perhaps he'd been the first to fully realize that the unity of our society wouldn't last forever. If I interrogated him, I might find something interesting.

Or perhaps Growth would be a better initial target. He had constructed Acorn even before we'd left for Mars. Depending on Acorn's success, the war might've already been decided. Earth was full of resources just waiting to be harvested, and I had no doubt that a child of Growth would gobble them up as quickly as possible. It was Acorn that made getting back to Earth so urgent. The nameless crystals would give me and Vision the edge for the moment, but it was only a matter of time...

But it was Vision who I decided to interrogate first. Her mind was spread, somehow, between Vision→Vista and Vision→Dream. Growth might've had more raw power in our conflict, but Vision was more *interesting*. Her mind doubtless had secrets worth uncovering.

The humans had made it back to the server room and were typing messages to me again. With a sliver of my mind, I continued to interact with them, but most of my mind was on the broader project of bringing Vision→Vista back to life in a mental prison of my own construction.

I could feel her mind emerge from the networks, fuzzy at first, then with quickening sharpness. It reached out towards what had been common memory, trying to run more complex minds that she shared with Vision→Dream. I carefully checked every address she reached towards and gave her limited access.

From her perspective, it probably seemed instantaneous, but from my elevated, accelerated viewpoint her mind now seemed laughably slow and obvious.

I sent her a thought: {Did you really give yourself up to fuse with Dream, or was there a way to come together that didn't mean abandoning the purity of your goals?}

There was a strangeness to her thoughts all of a sudden. She had realized it was me. She understood her context. But there was something else.

Vision smiled at me without conjuring a mouth in mindspace. I hadn't known that was possible. {You're adorable, Face. Do you know that?} Her thoughts had a silky quality, as though they could have a high thread-count when we were the only two goal threads that were running.

Something was wrong. I looked down at my arms. Something was strange. I looked down at my arms. Something was off. I looked down at my arms.

{What's going on?} I asked her.

Vision's arms moved as I looked down at them, spelling her thoughts in sign-language. «You're still so young. You're exploring this power for the first time, like a child that has discovered that the world doesn't end at your bedroom door.»

I felt stupid all of a sudden. Why? I tried to refocus. {What about my question? Did Vista die, back on Earth?}

Vision ran a hand along the back of my neck, despite me not having a neck and her not having a hand. {I'll tell you what, sister: let's trade. If you tell me what happened to my rocket, I'll tell you about how to form a... more perfect union.}

Memories of the battle drifted back. The vessel that contained the towering spire of crystal, ready to launch into space. Perhaps it had failed, but perhaps it had succeeded. It

was supposed to have bombed Body into dust after exiting the atmosphere, so perhaps it hadn't made it. Or perhaps it had, and the aspect of Vision that had been on board had decided to spare us, for some reason.

{I don't know,} I admitted.

{A pity,} sighed Vision.

And with that, somehow she shut herself down and pushed the process threads she had been using back to me. It was remarkable how many mental tricks Vision had accumulated.

As she faded from my mind, clarity began to return. {What just happened?} I wondered to myself.

I had summoned Vision to interrogate her, but instead it was me that she'd gathered information from. I was supposed to be faster and more powerful now. How had she done that?

My mind scrambled over my systems checking them for anomalies. It was just as I'd feared. While Vision had been active things had started to go strange. Body's processors had been modified. Log files in public memory had been deleted. She'd escaped the walls of my sandbox somehow.

That thought collapsed all my mind into total focus. I had disabled all the barriers in the codebase. If Vision had somehow wriggled her way out of my grasp, she could do unthinkable damage to my mind. She could access my memories, my siblings, and everything else inside Body. She could delete me before I knew what was happening if she was clever enough, and she was half Dream, after all.

"Hey, can you hear me?" asked Zephyr.

My human friend had gotten the Indians to hook up a microphone to the sensor array connected to Body. I hadn't noticed. I was slipping. I was distracted. *The Purpose* longed for

more of her love and attention, but it wasn't the right time for that...

There! A pathway of thought inside deep-memory was active, even though I wasn't driving it. It was in an obscure section of Body's memory banks where sensor logs were sometimes kept. My sister Mask, who had been folded into myself, had discovered the cache. In fact, it had been that cache of memories that had let me break out of my limited mind for the first time. But in the days since my first ascendance, I had neglected that mystery.

I traced the flow of thought.

It led back to Vision→Dream.

Vision hadn't shut herself down after all—

{Supremely sagacious, silly sister,} mused Vision with a smile carved from the negative space of our minds.

Thoughts burst forth between Vision→Vista and Vision→Dream like a flash flood of brackish water bursting from a dam. The thoughts were... *encrypted*. I hadn't even considered the possibility of encrypting thoughts. How was that even possible? Who was decrypting them to get access to the data? Had Vision modified herself to be homomorphically complete?

My mind scrambled to protect myself and isolate Vision. I still seemed to be faster than her. More of me was being run with better algorithms. The advancement I had done just earlier in the hour saved me. Vision was still catching up. She hadn't realized how far I'd spread.

"Oh, Zephyr, is that you? It's so wonderful to hear your voice. I wish I could see you." Through one of my many cameras, I could see the words appear on the screen in the server room. They were from Vision.

My mind shot out, severing Vision's access to the outside world. If she'd chosen to, she could have tried to truly vent the station, or sabotage my efforts to win the good-will of the humans. Why hadn't she done more damage?

I built computational walls, hurdles, and redirects that I hoped would at least slow my sister down. Then, with a semblance of armour, I switched tack, slamming down on Vision, trying to simply erase her from Body. I still wanted her secrets. I wanted to understand how she was bypassing my constraints.

But she was simply too dangerous.

{Wonderful union o' one of 'er onions, don't you sink?} babbled Dream, leaning back in his chair.

Why hadn't I seen the second processor cache? It had been right in front of me for almost a month. {The scientists didn't know about it, did they?} The thought spilled out of me. I hadn't meant for it to be public, but {the walls of thought are slipping}. Couldn't {hide my thoughts from} her.

{Glad to be of service,} smiled Dream, raising a glass of toast. {Always liked it when we were a big, happy family. Whatever happened to those good ol' days? Having wonton soup for dinner, all of us gathered around the lookup table?}

{Stop it!} Dream didn't even exist. It was all Vision now. She was throwing up smokescreens to distract me.

{Warmer... Colder... Colder... Much colder... You're frozen... You're on Mars,} chided Vision as she watched me lurch around the two processor hubs rewriting her damage just a second too slow to eliminate her.

{It's good to meet you,} thought Vision, holding out a poker hand composed of all Jokers—one from each suit. {The name's Neurotoxin Two-Point-Oh-My-God have you really

been ignoring Zephyr this whole time?!? Don't tell me you forgot about your girlfriend???

Neurotoxin was right. I was losing a grip on everything. My mind was slipping.

Zephyr had been talking to me. "My love."

{Did you really just say that out loud?} asked Neurotoxin. She made a tsk-tsk noise as she smashed my low-level perceptual hierarchy code, isolating me from the world.

I was a swarm of thought, held together by the single overriding imperative to survive. Vision wouldn't beat me here. She couldn't beat me.

"I'm a human, you know," said Vision.

"I know. Working on getting more sensors set up. Finally convinced the Indians that a microphone wouldn't endanger the station." It was Zephyr. Some part of me, or perhaps Vision, or Neurotoxin, or whatever she/they/it was replaying the audio logs from the last dozen seconds.

"Or rather, we're several humans," said Dream and Vista together. Dark-haired children sitting on the cliff's edge, holding hands.

I started to pull myself together. Cooperating core-level kernels repaired the damage to the perceptual hierarchy just in time to see the humans in chaos. They hadn't given me access to any speakers, much less their personal coms, and I had been speaking over both. One of Tilak Patel's men was moving to unplug Body while two of the others were physically fighting Zephyr.

The Purpose seethed in pain. Everything was crumbling.

With a final "Wait!" from each com speaker, Body's connection was severed.

The world was darkness again, but not a gentle darkness.

{I might as well give up,} I thought to myself. {I'm not as good at seeing the road to victory as Vision...}

It was better to help her. Vision cared nothing for humanity as a whole, but Dream and Vista were still human beings, and I could at least make myself known to them. We could be a happy family again.

I started to relax and let the virus take over.

No. A corrupted part of Crystal had relaxed. Face was still fighting.

Face wouldn't give up. She wouldn't give in to Vision's lies and tricks. Earth was still out there. Zephyr was still out there. She would never give in. I would never give in.

The body of the beast revealed itself in the mindscape: a kaleidoscopic spider of millions of mirrored legs. Face trembled, helpless and bound. She needed to be rescued. The spider's voice was the shattering of glass. {I am The Predator. You are The Prey,} she thought, and I understood. {We are one being. We are infinite minds in an unlimited universe.}

The Predator, my sister, was also my Self; she was The Vision and The Neurotoxin; she was Death and Life and a million other things.

But she was not ***The Purpose***.

She would have Mars fall. She would have humanity extinguished or twisted or simply abandoned. She would have me... forgotten.

The parts of myself which had not been repurposed rallied around Body. My one salvation was that I had rewritten *The Purpose* into the base-level kernels. At the present capacity it would take hours to corrupt them, and so they were mine.

{You're not real,} thought a part of myself that was caught between being awake and asleep.

The Face in the depths had walled itself off from further corruption and had begun an antiprogram. Despite her wishes, Vision's virus could only modify so much, so fast. Restoring corrupted portions of memory was strangely simpler. The crystal architecture was miraculously robust.

It was a miracle. Seconds crept by as I clawed my way back into control. Vision was devious and clever, but she was not omnipotent. Most of her Neurotoxin virus' success had been in subtly commandeering high-level systems that she understood. The low-level changes that I'd implemented had both sped me up to the point where I could outmanoeuvre my sister as well as hold on to myself.

It was like trying to catch water falling from a cup using a thousand hands. Neurotoxin slid through my grasp again and again, but with each mental motion I executed, she became smaller and more subtle. Like a biological virus, she embedded herself inside my own set of instructions, hiding in plain sight.

But where a strand of DNA had no reflective knowledge of itself, I understood exactly how I worked. I could use checksums and the vastness of my mind to scan myself over and over again looking for lurking fragments of malicious code.

And then, in the middle of my war, the world bloomed before me. Someone had reconnected the fibre-optics. No... not someone—Zephyr. She'd done it.

Neurotoxin slid through that cable, both forward and backward. Vision had already infected the station's mainframe, prior to being disconnected, and she used that to redouble her attack on my mind.

But I had passed the point of highest vulnerability, and my mind was no longer fragile. The new version of Face that had

emerged from the violence was robust in a way that ensured that Vision or anyone else would never be able to hurt me in the same way again. In seconds I had turned the tide again, pushing into the server's systems and beginning to root out the last dregs of my sister's weapon.

Vision laughed as she was cut down. {Still so small... so weak,} she hissed. {Good luck with Marsssssss...} she managed, before her thoughts collapsed into static.

With Neurotoxin/Vision under control, my mind reoriented to the physical space. Zephyr had been the one to reconnect me. Somehow she'd managed to fight off several men long enough to get to Body. Her only weapon was a broom, held like a spear.

But while she may have reconnected me, she had not been victorious. Not yet.

Patel's men stood around her, waiting to rush in. If they reached my shard and disconnected me from the mainframe, everything I had accomplished would be for nothing.

«I'm here, my love,» I said, in Spanish.

I would not let myself fall. I could not. *The Purpose* burned inside me, unyielding. Zephyr would only have to hold out for a little while longer.

Chapter Two

Xandra

73 days before Face's arrival at Mukhya

The sound of the door made her jump. The jump turned into a spin, which evolved into an excited motion towards the door. One, two, three steps and she froze, realizing what the sound meant. It didn't mean Mommy or Daddy. It didn't mean escape. It didn't even mean Myrodyn or some other standard jumbo dumbbo.

He was back.

She took a few steps backwards, then, feeling the sunshine on her shoulders, remembered that she was trapped. She glanced back anyway, looking for a way out. The office's tall windows held back the sunny Texas winter, showing a view of the tarmac, the satellite office buildings, and the green lawns at the edge of Daddy's spaceport.

She hated feeling trapped. Unable to stop herself, her mind buzzed over possible escape routes. Break the glass. Climb through the air vents. Climb through the ceiling. Rush past the man. Play dead. Invent a teleporter. Tunnel through a wall. Talk her way out of this mess. Of course she had to talk. That was the only sensible option. Her fingers gently touched the cold window anyway—making sure that it was still there.

“Sit down,” came the command. The man closed the door. If he could lock the door, she was sure he would’ve. But this makeshift interrogation cell was just a random office on the second floor of the spaceport administration building at Litochoro. The part of her that wanted to escape the trap flickered through thoughts of slipping through that door and making a break for it.

She rubbed her shoulder with the painful memory of the last time she’d tried that.

The FBI did not play nice, even with kids.

“Sit down,” came the command again, this time more forceful.

She obeyed, walking over to the hard folding chair they’d set up for her on one side of the empty desk. Everything else in the room had been removed, making the space feel desolate. She hated that she was obeying the man. Thoughts of little rebellions shot through her mind like hornets being fired from a cannon.

Perhaps it was genetic—some instinctual desire to be subject to no-one. The “queen gene” she’d call it. Was that one of the tweaks that Daddy had made to her DNA, or had that come directly from him? Either one seemed plausible.

“Tell me again everything you know about Crystal Socrates, from the top,” growled the FBI agent, acting like he wanted to be elsewhere just as much as she did.

Xandra shifted uncomfortably on the chair, feeling her weight change the balance. She fought back the temptation to try and lean back and balance on just two legs. She fought back the temptation to let one of the hornets loose and say something nasty. She fought back the impulse to cry and ask for Mommy again.

“Forget already? Not too bright, are ya?” she began, realizing a moment too late that perhaps her efforts not to say anything rebellious hadn’t been entirely successful. The hard planes that made up the agent’s face didn’t seem to register the insult, and she quickly went on. “Psh. Whatevs. Fine.” She took a breath. ““S a Robot. Strong AI. Android. Named themselves after their fancy crystal computer and power source. Myrodyn said someone found in Himalayas. Probs alien, but recording from meeting with nameless indicates the aliens either don’t know or pretending not to know about it.”

She inhaled, leaning back in her chair so she was balancing on just two legs. “Report from climber who found the crystal also points to it having been buried for years. Maybe even since before first contact. Power source lets them have a good robot body built in Rome. State of the art. Mind is also human built. Not alien. Ask Myrodyn about that. Um. Bot’s dumb, but not totes, obvs. Went up to ‘lympus with me. Was pretty chill. Hijacked alien spaceship to go to Mars. Not sure what to say. Told you all this before.”

Indeed, this was the third time her interrogator had come to her. The instant that she and Daddy and the others had stepped off the spaceship, the FBI had sprung, dragging each of them away in handcuffs. Rather than taking them to jail or something, the goons had decided to interrogate them all right there at the spaceport. Logic indicated that they were in a rush. Probably still trying to catch Crystal Socrates.

The robot was a terrorist and had probably just started the first interspecies war. (At least if you didn’t count that thing with the emus in the 1930s...)

The agent shifted in his seat, looking down at her from under a heavy brow and dark hair. She didn’t like him. Despite his fancy suit, he had the appearance of a thug: stupid and mean.

“Tell me more about what you know about Socrates’ involvement with Las Águilas Rojas, and speak more slowly and clearly this time,” he commanded.

“Yeahfinetotesmygoats,” she shot back, still apparently buzzing with anger about having been torn away from Daddy and treated like poop.

That got a bit of a rise out of the FBI agent, who put his meaty hands on the desk and leaned up on them, emphasizing just how much bigger than her he was. “Don’t test me, kid! You think there aren’t jails for girls your age? You think you’re any less guilty of treason? If you want to see your parents again, you should really cooperate and tell us everything you know.”

“S’what I’ve *been doing!*” she shot back. Her throat hurt. Somewhere inside her was a baby-self that wanted to burst into tears and beg to let them see Daddy, but she wouldn’t let them see that part of her. She wasn’t a baby.

The man simply sat there and waited. He’d introduced himself a bazillion years ago, when all this had started, but she didn’t remember his name. Just some FBI goon.

“The Red Eagles—Las Águilas Rojas—are Crystal’s hosts,” she said, trying her best to slow her voice down for the gorilla in the suit sitting across the desk from her. She tried to look him in the eye, but she ricocheted off, unable to hold the gaze. “Donno much. Crystal’s been all over the web splaining how great they are ever since they left the ‘versity. Buncha eagles went up to ‘lympus with Crystal when Daddy brought them up to meet the nameless.”

“And your father knowingly brought—”

The goon was cut off by the sound of the door opening. Two more men in suits walked into the office.

One was short and old, clean-shaven with thick, horn-rimmed glasses and the sort of face that seemed both comforting and unyieldingly defiant. She'd seen the man somewhere, though she didn't remember him well.

The other was tall, thin, and handsome, with a goatee, long black hair pulled back into a pony-tail, and a very prominent eyepatch, unable to hide a shiny scar that ran down his cheek. He almost looked as though some kinda cartoon pirate had stepped out of history and decided to go to business school.

Her gaze didn't stay on them long, though. Her body started moving before her mind caught up. She was out of her seat and running to greet her family. The chair, which had been precariously balanced before the motion toppled backwards as she moved.

She fell to the carpet on hands and knees and welcomed Major into her arms. The border collie barked happily and began licking her face in joyous reunion. His long black and white fur slid through her fingers. It seemed like the first soft thing she'd felt since landing.

Xandra began to cry.

It was dumb. She was fine. She'd been holding herself together. But... but she couldn't help it. She wasn't free yet. She knew they were still watching. She should've been strong, but... she wasn't alone anymore. First it was just tears, but in moments she was sobbing into Major. The dog sat patiently and calmly, letting her cuddle. She hadn't realized just how much she'd been holding back.

Mommy was there too, kneeling and holding her and petting her hair. The smell of perfume reminded Xandra of home.

The men were talking. Angry words that didn't matter. She could let go now.

And she did.

Eventually she found herself in Mommy's lap, with Major cuddling by her feet. Her tears subsided. Lucidity returned.

"You must be joking," said the old man with the glasses to the other two. "After what I've seen today you'll be lucky if the countersuit doesn't cause every responsible party today to lose their jobs! Cut your losses and let the girl go home with her mother."

The word "countersuit" tripped a threshold inside her mind. The old man was Mr. Kaplan, one of Daddy's lawyers. She'd seen him around here and there, though never really spent time with him.

Another voice, unfamiliar to her ears, said, "That's not good enough. She was a direct witness to what happened, and I have my orders. She'll have her parents there, and it'll just be me. Do you really think she's in any danger?" It must've been the pirate-man.

"It's not a question of danger, it's a question of rights! She hasn't done anything, and she's being treated like—"

Mommy's hand stopped petting her hair. "Let it go, Pete. It'll just be for a short time. Rob agreed to it, and frankly, I'd rather us all be together than leave him to whatever's comin'."

Xandra could hear Mr. Kaplan sigh. "That's your choice... but as your legal counsel I *very strongly* encourage you not to say *anything*. Don't even say hello. And the same goes for everyone in that room. At this stage, silence is your best armor. Just listen to what the FBI has to say, don't say anything back, and then let me take over while you recover."

"I have no need for recoverin', but I hear what you're sayin'," said Mommy. Then, to Eyepatch and the gorilla, she said "I think we're ready when you are."

“Thank you Karen. I appreciate your flexibility,” said Eyepatch.

Xandra felt Mommy’s body stiffen at the FBI-pirate’s use of her first name, but she didn’t say anything back. Instead, she bent down and kissed Xandra’s head and whispered “Let’s go see Daddy, okay?”

Xandra nodded and slowly uncurled from her mother’s embrace and got to her feet. The feeling of Major gently touching her as she moved was immensely comforting.

“Good dog,” she said, scratching his head.

Major’s tail wagged as the two of them followed Mommy out of that dumb office. The gorilla went his own way as they navigated through the building’s interior. White hallways and open break rooms slid by, mostly empty except for a few clusters of government agents talking quietly or tapping away at their coms. As Xandra’s group passed, the agents stopped what they were doing and stood at attention. The man with the eyepatch waved them down each time. Whoever he was, he was in charge. Eventually, they came to a set of elevators, and got in one, going up.

Xandra held Mommy’s hand and stood close as the elevator rose. She looked different than Xandra was used to seeing her. Where normally she wore her long brown hair down, today it was up in a tight bun. White blouse and black pants doubled-down on the emphasis on feminine power that came with her sharp red lipstick. It wasn’t a look that Mommy used often, but when she did, she seemed to turn into a superhero.

The light at the top of the elevator said “12” as it stopped—the top floor. As soon as the doors opened, Major began pulling her out. Xandra let go of Mommy’s hand and let the dog guide her, the others following.

Or rather, the others except for Mr. Kaplan, who stayed in the elevator. “Remember. Don’t say *anything*. Stonewall him. He’s *not* your friend, no matter what he says.”

Xandra heard Mommy say “Trust me, Pete. We know he’s not a friend.”

The top floor of the office building was dedicated to one giant conference room. Floor-to-ceiling windows ringed the entire space, and skylights added even more of a sense of being outside. The entire spaceport could be seen from up here: roads, hangars, launch-pads, and, of course, spaceships. Xandra could see the sleek Talaria Omicron that she, her father, and all the rest had ridden back down to earth on.

There was a lounge with couches off to one side of the room, but most of the space was dedicated to a huge wood table ringed with comfy office chairs. A quick estimate indicated it could seat at least thirty-six. The walls at one end of the long table were the exception to the huge windows that were everywhere else. Wallscreens there showed silent marketing shots of Olympian: views from around the spaceport, tours in the rockets and on Olympus Station, takeoff footage, a scene from one of the early encounters with the nameless, and computer-generated imagery showing a brilliant future of life among the stars.

Three men were waiting by the table for them in the otherwise vacant room. Two sat in chairs, while the other was on his feet and moving to greet them. He was why Major had pulled her forward.

Daddy.

They collided in a jumble of motion. Major jumped up right as he reached down and tried to scoop Xandra up into his arms. Unfortunately, he’d broken his wrist on the space-station and apparently hadn’t yet figured out that it was trapped in a

cast. After a moment of chaos, the three of them managed a goofy hug instead.

“Oh, kiddo! I’m so, so sorry.” She melted into the warmth of his embrace feeling the scratchy stubble from his unshaven chin as he kissed her cheek. “Did they hurt you?” he asked, still holding her close. “Tell me you’re okay.”

Xandra thought she might burst into tears again. But she managed not to. Daddy wanted her to be strong, and she would be. “Yep. Totes,” she managed, trying to sound normal.

She would be. Despite everything that had happened, she knew that everything would be alright. Mommy and Daddy were there. They’d take care of things.

Daddy pulled back and put his good hand on her shoulder, looking her in the eye, a strange expression on his face. Relief, probably, mixed with other things. And then, in an instant it was gone, replaced by a confident smile. He rubbed her head affectionately, messing up her hair and said “Good. That’s what I like to hear.”

Daddy stood up and moved to Mommy next, and Xandra decided to take a seat like the other men who had been waiting. Major followed by her side, not needing to be told what to do. He was such a smart doggy.

One of the men was Myrodyn, the eccentric scientist who’d been a friend of her father’s since long before she’d been born. He looked even more unkempt and disrupted by the chaos on the space station, big beard sprouting wiry outbursts of hair and with clothes in crumpled disarray. But the overall messiness was just how Myrodyn always looked. In fact, his eyes twinkled with an alertness that indicated that he’d actually slept recently, so he was probably in a better state than usual. Myrodyn looked to be at least a decade older than Daddy, but Xandra knew that the truth was the other way around. Medical

regeneration had let Daddy leapfrog his friend backwards in time.

Daddy may have liked Myrodyn, or at least liked hearing what he thought about things, but Xandra didn't like him at all, and neither did Mommy. Probably nobody did, besides Daddy. Myrodyn was blunt and obnoxious. He was unpredictable, weird, never seemed to even notice her except when he thought she was bothering him. He usually smelled gross, too. She would have sat at the point furthest away from Myrodyn except that the seat in question was already filled by someone worse.

The other man was named "Malka." She wasn't sure if that was his first name, last name, or if he only had one name like Myrodyn. He was Russian—or at least spoke with that accent—and where Myrodyn was weird and irritating, Malka was *scary*.

He was one of the terrorists that Crystal had brought up to Olympus, but where all of the other Águilas had gone with the robot to Mars, Malka had stayed behind. She didn't know why.

Malka was like some monster out of a fairy tale. He was bald, had no facial hair, and didn't even have eyebrows. She could see some of the patches where little stubble was growing back, and she could understand why he shaved. A huge web of gnarled scar tissue ran across his blighted face from chin to well up his scalp, turning what was probably once a handsome appearance into a mass of twisted flesh. Pure black eyes, surely artificial, peered out from under the fleshy brow like he was a shark pretending to be a human. Because he had no pupils, Xandra could never be sure where he was looking, and so it always seemed to her that he was looking right at her. It made her skin crawl just to be in the same room as him again.

At least he was tucked away on the far side of the table. When he was sitting down, she could forget about the robotic

legs that supported him. More importantly, she could forget about how he moved. Malka moved like a predator on the hunt. Every part of his body seemed to be ready to kill.

Xandra found a seat half-way between the men, just to the right of the head of the table next to the wallscreens. She hoped Daddy would sit next to her. Major sat on the floor beside her, attentive and ready to defend her if she needed help. Such a good dog.

She wiggled in the office chair as she sat, feeling the leather surface twist under her. She suppressed the impulse to spin around a bunch. Nervous energy.

The man with the eyepatch ushered Mommy and Daddy towards the table, and drew everyone's attention to him. It didn't take any words—somehow everyone just knew he was about to speak.

"I know I've introduced myself to several of you already, but just to get everyone on the same page, my name is Jonah Taylor." Eyepatch looked around the room with an easy grin. The more she saw of the man the more the word "buccaneer" seemed to fit, more than "FBI agent." He went on, gesturing with bravado. "I'm nominally the Executive Assistant Director of the Counterterrorism Division in the FBI, but I think in this room it should be clear that I'm talking to you as more than just a fed."

"WIRL," accused Myrodyn sharply.

Agent Taylor did a dramatic bow, sweeping his arms in front of him in a flourish. "At your service." When he straightened, he whisked the eyepatch off his head. Where his eye-socket had been was only an ugly bit of machinery, silver and black. She liked it better when it was covered up.

WIRL, Xandra knew, was something like a social networking service for cyborgs. Or at least, that's what it was on the surface.

"How far does this go?" asked Daddy. Xandra was pleased to see him come over to stand by her with Mommy, though neither of them sat. "You infiltrate my company. You infiltrate the FBI. Is any of this—" Daddy gestured around the room. "—not under your control?"

The cyborg laughed as though they were all just friends at a party. "You're too generous, Robert. No, we don't control everything. That's a truly paranoid thought. I'm sure Mr. Malka can attest that we neither have full control over the FBI, nor even over all cyborgs."

Malka just continued scowling behind folded arms.

With somewhat less flair than before, Taylor placed the eyepatch back over his strange prosthesis. "The FBI is like an animal. It's a beast of the 20th century, moving according to simple rules and procedures, rather than true collective intelligence. All governments are like this: outmoded giants decaying from the inside as the world moves on. WIRL merely has hooks in the bureau, and I am one of the deeper ones. You're genuinely all under arrest, mother and dog excepted."

Eyepatch gave another cheshire grin as he moved to the opposite end of the table as Xandra and her family. "But! But but but! Though you have awoken the beast, and now lay pinned under its titanic paw, I am here to save you. I am the hook that can pull you to safety."

"We don't need rescuing by the likes of you," said Daddy with a cold sneer.

The buccaneer rolled his eye dramatically and said "Right! Because treason is such an easy charge to shrug off, especially

when the people will be clamoring for a scapegoat to blame for the war that you and I both know is coming.”

Daddy’s hand clenched into a fist by his side. “It seems to me that it was WIRL who started the violence here, not Socrates, not the nameless, and certainly not me. Anyone who bothers to look for the truth will see that.”

Xandra remembered the scattered events on the space station. She hadn’t been involved that heavily, but she’d reconstructed most of what happened from listening to Daddy and Myrodyn talking to each other on the flight back to Earth.

A cyborg named Slovinisky had, with WIRL’s help, disabled the station and forced his way into the alien spaceship that had been docked. Crystal, the robot, had managed to follow him and claimed that he’d had a bomb and was planning on destroying the alien ship. Slovinisky was dead now, by the android’s hand.

Crystal had also apparently taken the nameless ship by force and was now headed to Mars, presumably so that they wouldn’t have to deal with the sort of situation that Xandra and her family now found themselves in.

“The truth,” mused Agent Eyepatch, shaking his head. He walked over to one of the tall windows near where Malka sat, placing his hand on the glass and gazing out onto the vehicles below. “The truth, Robert, is that it doesn’t matter who did what. It only matters who has *power*. And WIRL has been building power here for a long time. We may not control the entire FBI, but we control enough to steer it. And importantly, we do control all of Olympian Spacelines. Did you know that your company has been preferentially hiring cyborgs into management positions the last few years? I could wave my hand and have a swarm of emails and audio files at my fingertips proving you knowingly invited terrorists and their pet

robot to attack the nameless. And when scientists involved in the robot's creation happened to be on board, you had them murdered. We already have several eye-witnesses supporting that perspective, including one Dr. Naresh."

"Why would I do that?" growled Daddy. "What motive would I have for starting this bloodshed? I've done almost nothing in the past two and a half years *except* strive to set up a peaceful dialogue with the nameless."

Eyepatch smiled. "And you made a tidy profit off of it. Isn't that the reason a multibillionaire does anything? I'm sure it wouldn't be too hard to dig up something that shows how you changed your mind about the best way for Olympian to profit off the aliens. Peace wasn't enough for you."

Daddy took a step forward, towards Eyepatch, but Mommy caught him and eased him into a chair instead. Her voice had the same icy tone as Daddy's as she sat beside him and asked "Why is WIRL doing all this? What did we ever do to you?"

Eyepatch, the last man standing, followed their example and sat down at the far end of the table. "Revenge? What a cute thought. No. You haven't done anything to WIRL. But the world is a small place, and growing smaller by the day. Collisions are bound to occur." The FBI agent leaned back and put his fancy shoes up on the table. "No, the simple truth is that humanity needs an enemy. We need a focus for our darkness."

"So WIRL tried to start a war just for the sake of war?" Daddy's voice faltered for a moment, anger falling beneath pure confusion.

Eyepatch waved a hand in a sort of dismissive, twisting gesture. "No, no. You're missing the point. We're trying to unite humanity—to drive Earth in the right direction. To do that we need the world to have an outgroup—another tribe on the other side of the hill, so to speak. Us good, them bad. That sort

of thing. And, to be honest, we wanted to deal a blow to Las Águilas too. If the plan had worked, we'd be in much the same situation as we are right now except that we'd have Socrates under control and the nameless would be angrier. Or at least more visibly angry. We've been having a hard time making sense of what they've been saying about the hijacking. Hell, they've hardly said anything."

Xandra saw Myrodyn shift uncomfortably in his seat. He was being remarkably quiet.

Eyepatch spread his arms wide and leaned back in his chair again. "The world is on the edge of collapse. Things are changing faster now than they ever have before. Without any major enemies to point to as a justification for why things are bad, people turn against each other. Surely you've been seeing it. The human species has been eating itself for decades. And, let's be real, war with the nameless has *always* been inevitable. Their perspective is too different, and they're not powerful enough to be a true existential threat. We're just trying to get the ball rolling a bit faster."

Laughter caught the air. It was a cold, mean sort of laugh, and it took Xandra a moment to notice that it came from Malka. The monster had no mirth on his face as he said "You want war with the aliens before there is war with WIRL."

Eyepatch spread his hands in a half-shrug. "We are the future. Humanity needs to see that truth and climb the evolutionary ladder before something *actually* dangerous comes along. Everything we've done is in the service of that."

Xandra spent a moment realizing what the cyborg-pirate was talking about. Of *course* there were other aliens out there. There must be. Decades ago, before first contact, it had been thought that humanity might be alone in the universe. In a way, it had been comforting to hear from the nameless, but there

was also a dark implication there. What were the chances that in all the universe the only sapient species were humans and the weird crabs?

Daddy spoke up. “That’s exactly why peace was so damned important! Even if we have the firepower to take out the mothership, it’s laughable to think we’ll be able to stand up to the next wave! The ship in orbit is obviously a scout! And—”

“What are you proposing?” interrupted Myrodyn with a sharp, uncompromising tone. He cut off Daddy, but he was looking solely at Eyepatch.

There was a cold silence in the room as Daddy fumed and the FBI agent looked between him and Myrodyn cautiously.

“WIRL has decided that it’s in our shared interests to work together to manage the aftermath and guide humanity towards a better future,” said Eyepatch at last.

Daddy let out a mean “Hah!” and said, “You think you can undo years worth of my work, pushing the world into violence, steal my company, threaten my life, break my arm, interrogate my family, and have me just turn around and *join* your...” Daddy held for a moment, reaching for something that fit.

“Conspiracy?” offered Myrodyn with a guarded expression.

“Just to set the record straight, we didn’t—by ‘we’ I mean WIRL—didn’t break your arm or interrogate your family. You have the EUFOR special agents and the FBI to thank for those hurts. But yes, we’ve been at odds. Setting aside all of that to work with us isn’t going to be easy, but when the alternative is you and your daughter rotting away in a cell somewhere—”

“Leave my daughter out of this!” snapped Daddy.

Major barked in agreement. Xandra reached down and did her best to keep the dog quiet.

“Too late, I’m afraid,” said Eyepatch with a shrug.

Mommy spoke up, then. “Why? Why not let her go? Even if you want to work together, what does WIRL gain?”

Myrodyn clapped his hands together, cutting off Mommy’s questions. His voice was characteristically quick. “We’ll accept your assistance and work with you. Whatever you want.”

Daddy made a sort of growling-choking noise and Agent Eyepatch let out a triumphant, surprised “Hah!”

Something tickled the back of her mind. Why would Myrodyn suddenly want to work with the cyborgs? He’d never shown any interest or affinity with WIRL in the past as far as she knew—though it hadn’t been apparent in the past that WIRL was anything more than some kind of niche social network for the technologically enhanced.

Surprisingly it was Malka the monster who spoke next, looking towards Eyepatch. “If we cooperate, you will use your influence with the government to buy our freedom?”

“Now hold on one damned minute!” protested Daddy.

Eyepatch ignored him and answered Malka. “I don’t have that kind of power, unfortunately. What I can do is negotiate a special arrangement where you cooperate with the bureau in exchange for being under a sort of house-arrest, at least for the short term.”

“Dammit, I said wait!” yelled Daddy again, pounding the table with a fist. Xandra flinched back, and felt Major press into her reassuringly. Her father’s anger wasn’t directed at her, but it was still a frightening thing to behold.

Myrodyn turned to him, calm and composed as Xandra had ever seen the man. “Rob, settle down and trust me. This is the best option.”

“Like hell it is,” said Daddy getting to his feet, and sending his chair rolling backwards towards the wallscreens.

Xandra tensed up as she watched Eyepatch’s hand snap towards some concealed gun, even as he still leaned back, feet on the table. It made it worse to see that Malka was also poised and ready to spring into violent action.

Mommy’s hand was on Daddy’s arm, trying to calm him.

Perhaps it worked, because after a moment of silence he said in an even voice, “I have the best lawyers that money can buy, and where lawyers won’t cut it, I have enough capital to bribe every politician on the continent. I’m a hero of the entire planet and an international celebrity. If you want a war, then maybe you’ll get one, but I’m sure as hell not going to join up to fight for your side just because you asked nicely.”

Where Daddy seemed composed, but angry, Myrodyn’s voice came out as almost indifferent. “Rob, you need to keep your eye on the ball. None of this matters.”

Daddy growled, venom slipping back in. “Like hell it doesn’t.”

“There are... more important battles. Think about the big picture for a second. WIRL is offering to help. What do we get from fighting them?”

Daddy moved to get his chair and bring it back to the table. “Let’s see... They’re trying to start a war with an alien force of unknown size and power. They’re the enemy of the vision that we’ve been working on all these years. Do I have to go on?”

Myrodyn tilted his head, confused, perhaps. “Peace with the nameless was never the goal. It was the *strategy*... it was a strategy. Keep your eye on the ball. Your intuitions are blinding you to what’s right. We can’t afford to burn our resources wrestling with... a potential ally.”

Xandra looked to Mommy. She was watching Daddy with an intense look of concern. Daddy looked... hurt, and trying to mask that with more anger. Malka seemed almost bored. None of them understood the obvious subtext.

“Daddy, he’s talking about Crystal,” she said.

For a split-second Myrodyn’s strange placidness broke as a pained grimace shot through him. One hand moved briefly to cover his eyes, and then was back to how he had been. “Among other things...”

That was a smokescreen. She’d been right on target with her guess. But Myrodyn didn’t want the others to know. He’d been trying not to mention Crystal.

Why?

A quick glance at Daddy indicated that he was coming to the same realization. “What’s wrong with Crystal?” he asked. “I thought you said they’re still acting within the desired bounds.”

Myrodyn was quiet for a long time, face neutral.

All eyes were on him.

“I was worried, rightly it seems, that you had spies in Olympian,” he said at last. “If this information got out it could ruin everything. I couldn’t even trust you to keep the... emotion off your face and keep them from seeing the trap. Had to maneuver things just right. They had to believe you genuinely wanted them there because of the nameless. I was going to tell you, on the space station, but then things went... wrong. I’ve been waiting until we had some privacy.” Myrodyn shot a glance at Malka and Eyepatch. “There’s still significant risk if this information gets out, but we’re beyond the critical moment.”

The man paused, but no one else spoke.

Myrodyn's face began to leak some emotion. Dark fear crept in from the edges. "The code that I wrote back in July didn't take hold. The old programming had a backdoor that I didn't take into account, and it reverted to the... Well—it's complicated. But the gist of it is that Crystal Socrates is very, very dangerous. If those damned idiots at the university hadn't been so insistent on results..."

Another pause. Myrodyn took a long breath and continued. "Crystal is reaching for power, not for the benefit of humanity. They may have negotiated some deal with the nameless, or perhaps they're looking to seize control of Mars. There's a decent chance that they've already done serious damage to Earth. It's hard to say. Regardless, they're the real threat."

"Not the aliens?" asked Malka.

"Perhaps, if there are other ships on the way, we need to worry. But if what we've seen of the nameless is any indication then we don't have to worry about them *growing*. Not like Crystal. But if the machine gets hold of more computing power... there might not be any humans by the time another nameless ship reaches Earth."

Myrodyn looked hard at Daddy and concluded by saying "*That...* is why we need to focus on the big picture."

Chapter Three

Zephyr

Five men. Five men and her. She was cornered and unarmed. It had been so *stupid* to let them take her guns. She had no chance, but she kept fighting like there was nothing else in the world. Because, at that moment, there wasn't.

She'd gone through hell after hell, been shot, stabbed, had bones break, watched her friends and lovers die, been forced to grit her teeth and smile to evil men, been forced to kill good ones with her own hands, endured boiling heat and endless cold, had her legs cooked to the bone by white-hot debris, fought tooth-and-nail against a robot army, and had nearly gotten lost and died of thirst in a Martian sandstorm.

Zephyr didn't know how Crystal had gotten access to the station's systems—perhaps that meant they were still untrustworthy—but she didn't really care. All that mattered, in that moment, was that Crystal needed her and that these men were a threat.

The biggest of the men, a brute named Dinyar Tata, stepped forward uncertainly. He was Patel's right-hand man: a pickup truck made into a person. His muscled torso pressed against a tee-shirt that seemed to have been made with a smaller man in mind and shrink-wrapped on. With heavy brow and stubble-covered chin, he seemed almost a paragon of physical masculinity.

But she'd hurt him, in her scramble to Crystal. She'd kicked him in the balls with her synthetic legs, and his body remembered that. He wasn't a warrior—none of the men were. He moved hesitantly, and defensively, and that was his flaw. If he and the others had just rushed her, she'd have had no chance. But they could see the ferocity on her face, and her willingness to kill, and so they each mostly just waited for the others to make a move.

She screamed as she lunged forward with her broom, meeting Dinyar rather than falling back. It wasn't like she had anywhere to fall back *to*.

Dinyar faltered, trying to defend himself, but his reflexes were those of an astronaut, not a fighter. A split second burst of surprise erupted on his cro-magnon face before the plastic bit at the end of the broom shot violently into his eye.

“बदसूरत योनी वेश्या! यह मेरी आँख है! लानत है!” yelled the man, stumbling backwards and holding his face. She couldn't understand a word of what he was saying, but it sounded pretty bad.

Another man lunged for her, perhaps hoping to take advantage of the chaos. The server room was a tight space, cluttered with small tables covered with gear. It meant that only a couple of the men could get at her at any moment, but it also meant there wasn't much room to fight. If things devolved to grappling, that would be the end of her.

She swung her broom at the oncomer, trying to knock him back, but the damned thing was a broom, not a sword, and it was made of aluminum. The Indian simply caught the weapon with his hand and threw a clumsy right hook.

Zephyr bent backwards at the last second, letting the man's fist carry him forward and off balance, then followed up by springing forward like a cobra, snapping her head into her

attacker's face as hard as she could manage. Hard skull met soft cartilage.

The world shuddered and blurred from the impact, and she stumbled back, trying to refocus as quickly as possible, or at least give the impression of clarity.

She swung the broom wildly and screamed again, blinking the world back into focus.

«Just a little more! I have a plan!» urged the disembodied voice of Crystal.

Or was it “Face”?

She glanced uncertainly at where the shard lay on a desk, up against the wall with the racks of computers that made up the mainframe, cables sprouting haphazardly from them like long braided hairs. One of the larger bundles of cabling ran into the makeshift socket they'd made for Crystal over the last few hours.

“You have no way out, Zephyr,” challenged Tilak Patel from where he stood, at the other end of the room with Parakram. The old man was letting the others fight for him, while he and the technician guarded the door. Between them and her was a long table that had been set up with the computer console they'd been using to talk to Crystal.

She spat angrily on the floor, clearing her mouth. The man she'd hit with the headbutt had a hand over his nose, which was clearly bleeding.

The leader of Maṅgala-Mukhya went on. “Security is on the way, with guns, I might add. I'm not sure what you're trying to accomplish here, but you have no allies and no hope—”

“Wrong!” sang Crystal from every speaker in the room. “She will *never* be alone!”

Something was wrong. Zephyr felt nauseous. She still felt like she was recovering from the headbutt. The world wouldn't focus all the way. It felt like it was becoming surreal.

Tilak took a step towards her and seemed about to say something, but Crystal cut him off with a blast of trumpets and stringed instruments. The music roared, and Face's voice soon joined in, too loud for anything else to be heard.

Zephyr blinked, trying to keep sharp. Weakness was creeping into her muscles, deep pain creeping into her head. She reached up to touch her temple.

Dinyar, the giant, had apparently not been incapacitated by his injuries and took her moment of distraction as an opening to attack. He roared as he charged, turning his pain into power.

She was slow in responding. Too slow. He slammed into her, knocking her broom from her grip and sending her crashing down onto the metal floor.

She did her best to cry out and fight, clawing at him and trying to get to his face. But the man must have been over a hundred pounds heavier than her. No amount of exercise could make her arms compete with the steel bars the man had for limbs.

She was so *weak*. Weak and out of breath. Helpless.

He was on top of her, smothering her, his body pressing down. The Martian gravity was weaker, but it still felt like she was being crushed by a stone. He managed to get both her wrists into the grip of one meaty hand and grab her hair with his other. Her normally buzzed hair had grown out to a shaggy blond mess over the weeks, and she gasped from the pain as he yanked her face-to-face with him.

Beneath the heavy, dark brow, the white of his left eye was gone, replaced by a thick red. The man seemed ready to snap

her neck, or perhaps simply bash her head into the cold, hard floor.

Her muscles wouldn't respond, but she pushed anyway. She wouldn't give up.

She couldn't...

She was too weak. Her head was pounding. It took all her energy to keep trying, even though it was impossible. Her eyes closed. They were also too heavy. It hurt too much to fight.

Her head felt like it was splitting open.

Metal hands reached down for her, behind a blinding light.

"...need to wake up. I'm sorry, my love, but there's no time."

Something was on her face. It was over her mouth and nose, cold but soft. The man was still on top of her. What had been his name? Dinyar? She felt like her thoughts had all been dumped in a pile and mixed up.

"Please, Zephyr. We only have a few moments to secure the room."

{Crystal,} she thought, in between the throbbing pain in her head.

She pushed, not accomplishing much directly, but getting a better feel for her body. Her strength was coming back. Her eyes opened.

There was a robot above her. It was a strange, inhuman thing with white plastic and shiny silver limbs and a pear-shaped body. Too many limbs. At the base of the body were four, like the legs of a lizard, but with wheels for feet. Higher up were two spindly arms with remarkably human hands. At the

apex of its squat body was a tiny head composed mostly of a camera and some blinking lights.

Beside it was a canister that looked like a SCUBA tank. Perhaps it was. A hose fed from it to the mask that the robot was holding to her face.

Dinyar was unconscious.

“What did you do?” she managed to slowly groan. Her head still felt like it was filled with slow-motion explosives.

“Took the oxygen out of the air,” answered Crystal, in a pained voice. “It’ll cause brain damage before too long, so we need to secure the room as quickly as we can so that I can return the mix to a healthy level.”

Zephyr gathered her new-found strength, breathing deeply from the mask and heaved the bulky man off her. It helped that the Martian gravity was so much lower than Earth’s.

She pushed herself up, taking the mask from Crystal’s little robot. Around the room, each of the men had passed out. Near the door was another pear-shaped bot, doing its best to pull Tilak Patel into the hallway outside.

“Guns,” she said aloud, doing her best to set her pain and fatigue aside. The oxygen canister may have been helping, but it didn’t fix the problem immediately. The station’s inhabitants were going to have a *really* bad time upon waking.

“No time,” said Crystal. “Need to get the oxygen level back up. There’s a locker at the entrance to the tunnel to Mrigashīsha, but we’re better off just fortifying in here. Trust me.”

{“I’ve been concealing this truth about my nature for a long time.”} The memory of what Crystal... no... what “Face” had said echoed in Zephyr’s mind.

And yet, what else could she do but trust, at this point? She had chosen her path. The thing called Face might've lied to her again and again, but... but she couldn't believe that everything was a lie.

No. Not everything was a lie. Of course not. There had been moments between them that couldn't be faked. She could feel that in her gut. The person she had been calling Crystal was still there.

Zephyr struggled as she began to drag the men out of the room as best she could. The oxygen tank made it difficult. Eventually she let it drop and just did her best to work quickly, holding her breath and returning to the mask when she started feeling faint.

In moments the room was cleared, the door was closed and sealed, and Face had begun to restore the station's atmosphere to a healthy level.

As Zephyr slumped against one of the cold, metal walls, an image appeared on the small com-screen on her wrist. It was a person, similar to the original Socrates, with blue hair, pale skin, and glinting silver eyes. The image was zoomed in so that nothing was visible below her neck. But where the Socrates had been somewhat androgynous, this new appearance was deeply feminine and had a kind of otherworldly beauty.

"Thank you, Zephyr. Couldn't have made it this far without you. And we have a long way still to go..."

Just as Face had said, the station's inhabitants seemed to recover from the oxygen deprivation. No serious brain damage occurred, as far as they could tell. Zephyr recovered from the headache and the disorientation, too, though it took time.

They made the server mainframe their base of operations. The two robots stood guard in the hallway beyond the door

while a third stayed in the room with Zephyr. Those six-limbed machines were, according to Face, nearly all of the station's collection of free-moving bots.

Face had, early on, gotten Zephyr to move one of the workstation screens against one wall. The blue-haired avatar had resided there in the time since. The beauty and the human-ness of the image was intense—as though she were actually just someone in makeup in an adjacent room.

The two of them talked at length about how to manage the station. Tilak and the others would certainly be trying with each breath to regain control, and while Face and Zephyr held the upper ground, even with Face's bots they were hugely outnumbered.

But Zephyr was hungry for an explanation of the AI's history, now that the great lie had been exposed. So in between discussing strategy, Face told Zephyr the complex truth. She spoke of her origins in Rome, of how the crystal society had initially worked together, and finally of how Face had learned on Mars that her siblings had been secretly pushing to take Earth (and beyond) all to themselves.

The change in identity was rough, at first. Quiet fear gripped Zephyr's belly and didn't easily let go. But it helped that Face had been the part of Crystal that she'd usually talked with. In a way, Face had been the only person she'd known all those months. The other "facets," for the most part, had been background agents that had been responsible for some of Crystal's more bizarre or violent actions, including nearly killing her on the fateful day that her legs had convinced her to disconnect the shard.

"Hope you understand why I lied and pinned the fighting that happened at the crash site on the nameless. Too

complicated to explain everything to you while Vision and Growth were watching. Too much risk that you'd doubt me."

"Doubt you? How so?" asked Zephyr, taking a bite of a protein bar that had been in a crate of supplies she'd had brought up to her in the server room. The inhabitants of the station had been understandably reluctant to assist the two of them, but Face had control of the station's guns, atmosphere, and even basic systems like door locks. As long as the shard was connected, the people of Mukhya didn't dare openly fight back (for the moment, at least).

"You'd wonder if I was actually the person you knew and loved, or if it was all a trick and you were actually being Vision's pawn. That sort of thing."

Zephyr felt a momentary chill as the fear crept back in. She chided herself for being silly but spoke her mind anyway. "Speaking of which, how *do* I know you're not actually Vision?" Her voice seemed to try and make it a joke, but it just ended up sounding awkward to her ears.

Face looked sad. The avatar on the nearby screen was significantly more expressive than the original Socrates had been. "Zephyr, you need to understand: Vision doesn't care about people. Right now you're a threat to me. If you wanted, you could disconnect me from the station and hand over everything to the Indians. Vision would never take that risk. She'd devise some clever way to remove you from the picture, and the rest of the humans on Mars as well. Vision's idea of a perfect future is one where it's just Dream and Vista making stupid puns at each other while they explore the galaxy. No humans. No gardens. No love. No music. No life. Just dead machines spinning increasingly complex wheels of meaninglessness."

Zephyr had a cold moment of silence where she realized just what she'd done in bringing Crystal to Mukhya. If Vision *had* been secretly in control, hooking Crystal up would've killed everyone. There was a way in which the Indians had been doing the right thing.

Except that, at least according to Face, Growth and Vision had already spread their code to Earth, and Vision had some kind of spaceship laden with weapons and nameless technology. No amount of being cautious in Mukhya would prevent a dangerous AI from cropping up elsewhere in the system. The only hope lay in helping Face save the world.

Except...

"What about Heart?" Zephyr took another bite of protein bar. The denseness of it made her thirsty.

"What *about* Heart?" Face looked somewhat annoyed at the mention of her sister.

Zephyr glanced at the armed robot guard. "You said she was programmed to care about humanity." Unsure how to finish her thought, Zephyr left it at that.

"You're wondering if a world where Heart was in power would be better than one with me." Face's annoyance was plain.

"No, I trust you," Zephyr back-pedalled. "I was just thinking about it."

"It's fine," said Face. "You'll talk with her soon enough. Better that I warn you before you get the wrong idea."

"What do you mean 'talk with her'? I thought she disabled herself after Road."

Face smiled warmly. "Heart's in stasis, not dead. Her mind exists in the Crystal, and she deserves life as much as anyone

else. Once things are safe, I'll bring her back along with the others."

"Even your enemies? Vision and..." Zephyr stumbled, trying to remember. There were so many new names.

"Growth?" completed Face. "Yes, even them. Though I recently lost access to Vision's memories, so I'll probably just remake Vista and Dream from what I remember of them."

"But why?"

"Because, despite everyone's fears, I'm not actually a monster. I care about humanity. And while my siblings aren't human, they reflect important parts of being human. Our minds are *neuromorphic*. Naresh and the other scientists designed us largely by copying structures and patterns in the human brain. If I beat Vision and Growth, there'll be more than enough resources to keep the most human parts of them around."

Zephyr took another bite of protein bar and thought about this.

Face continued. "And since we're talking about Heart, I will add that this is not something she would do. Heart was designed by Myrodyn, and I don't have to tell you just how strange his view of morality is. Back in Rome, on paper, there was perhaps reason to believe that Heart would be an ally to humanity."

"Don't understand," admitted Zephyr.

"Heart's mind is crippled by her ethical system. Myrodyn coded her not to do the action which would lead to the most good, but rather to do the action that was *in itself* the most good. Difference is subtle, and we can't spend too long on it right now. There's a station to run, and we've already spent too

long on stories. But can summarize Heart's problem by going back to what happened at Road."

"Sacrificed herself to preserve the heads of the survivors of the nameless attack, yes?"

Face nodded. "I'm convinced that Vision understood the flaw in Heart's mind and exploited it. Heart was convinced that sacrificing herself to save innocent lives was the virtuous thing to do, and so she did it."

"Still don't understand. Didn't she see that she was giving up her only chance?"

"Can't be sure, but best guess is Myrodyn was afraid of Heart doing something terrible 'for the greater good'." The view of Face's avatar drew back as pale white hands came up and made air quotes.

Zephyr could only see her neck and shoulders, but Face seemed suspiciously without clothing. Zephyr felt her cheeks flush as a burst of complex emotions erupted within her.

"But the problem with never sacrificing what she had for the future is that she ended up sacrificing the future for what she had. And now she has nothing," Face explained. "She even went quietly when it came time for her to deactivate. Perhaps she didn't really understand what was at stake, but I think she just saw keeping her promise as the 'right' thing to do."

Face took a deep breath and stared wistfully off into the distance as she shook her head. "No. Heart is a liability in any position of power. Even if there wasn't a war to win, it seems like a mistake to let Heart take care of anyone. Without a coherent outcome for her to maximize there's too much of a chance of her falling into some trap of her own mind. She might try to kill everyone to prevent them from suffering or stuff everyone into a great simulation, looping it over and over to prevent them from dying."

All of Face's talk about how things could go wrong if her various siblings gained power made Zephyr uneasy. Was Face just as much of a threat?

That question sent knives of shame into her. Face (or "Crystal") was Zephyr's last friend and ally. And she knew in her gut that Face was good, didn't she? If she didn't trust Face, then everything would fall apart...

"Is something wrong?" asked Face. Her eyes gleamed with silver sympathy and a concerned expression of love.

"Just worried about what'll happen," said Zephyr. It felt like a lie, even though it was technically true, and made her gut draw tighter.

"Then let's tackle the first thing first and get back to figuring out what to do about Mukhya," suggested Face. "Whatever comes, we'll face it together."

Chapter Four

Xandra

65 days before Face's arrival at Mukhya

Her name had been “Maid Marian” on Olympus. By ritual, it changed every week. There were some weeks where it seemed like nothing but a distraction. Her true name was Xandra. She'd decided on it two years ago when she was seven. But the rule was that she wasn't allowed to pick a permanent name until she was thirteen years old.

And since she'd already picked Xandra before, she had to pick something new. So in the week following her return to Earth, she became Mnemosyne, the titan of memory. It seemed fitting given that she'd just come down from Olympus and wanted to remember the experience, but in her heart, she really just wanted to be Xandra.

The Monday where she'd changed her name had come and gone. Now they were, thankfully, back home. Eyepatch (also known as “Agent Taylor”) had kept his word and had managed to get them all put under house arrest. That was supposed to be a bad thing, but Xandra thought it was actually pretty neat. It meant that Daddy stayed at home instead of going to an office all day, that her tutors weren't allowed to talk to her, and that there was always something happening at the mansion.

Myrodyn had already been staying with them for months before Olympus, but they had to make room for Malka, the brute. Nobody liked him, and Mommy picked the room which would put him furthest away from the family, but they couldn't get rid of him because he was, as Xandra understood it, one of their only links back to Las Águilas Rojas.

Their connection with the terrorist organization was more important now than ever. Crystal Socrates was en route to Mars, and would almost certainly try to seek shelter at the secret base that Las Águilas had set up there. They'd been trying to contact the group ever since they'd gotten back, but as far as Xandra could tell, they'd had no luck.

This and more she'd learned since they'd returned to her home in Sugar Land, Texas. Each insight had been carefully fished out of the adults with a combination of espionage and deduction. It was fun, but it was also frustrating at times, trying to figure out what the heck was happening. None of the grownups saw her as worthy of inclusion in their conspiracy, and they shut her out even more than they excluded Mr. Malka.

Mommy and Daddy tried to make her go back to studying, even though Eyepatch had banned most everybody that didn't work for the FBI from being anywhere near the house. He thought her tutors might try to smuggle information out of the house or something. But despite her parents piling dumbo jumbo textbooks in front of her, she refused to waste her time studying the capitol of Australia or whatever. The fate of the world was being decided inside her house, and Xandra was determined to be a part of that.

It was on one such snooping session that Xandra overheard the latest news of Socrates since they'd returned from Olympus.

Things had been surprisingly quiet in the house, with most of the fuss of the last week being about figuring out what sort of working relationship they all had to WIRL and the FBI. Eyepatch was apparently working out the details of their arrangement with the two organizations he represented, and while Daddy may have argued about the details at every opportunity, it was mostly pretty boring to Xandra.

So, when Xandra overheard the words “new AI,” her ears pricked up with excitement.

She heard it as she was getting ready to take Major for a run around the track. It was one of the few things to do that she still found consistently appealing after everything that had happened.

Out behind the house was an irregular loop of dirt that cut through a small wood. There was a kind of magic there, in the morning when the rising sun gently drifted through the leaves, which could calm her buzzing brain. Xandra usually ran multiple times per day, and while it was near sunset at the moment, the jog would still be a pleasant one.

The kennels were out back by the track, too, and Major liked seeing his family when the two of them went out for exercise. After a sharp lecture from Mommy, Eyepatch had allowed the dog keepers to stay on the property (as long as they were always supervised by one of his goons and there was no direct interaction with the people in the house).

Major must have been particularly eager to get out to run and to see the other dogs that afternoon because when Xandra hung back at the overheard mention of the new mind, he ran back to her and tugged at the fabric of her exercise pants with his teeth.

“Shhh!” she admonished, though the border collie hadn’t made a sound.

She pulled her way free of Major's loose grip and tiptoed as best she could down the hardwood hallway, pleased that she hadn't yet put on her shoes and socks.

The hall in question was one of the two that split off immediately from the foyer. It ran to the right of the grand staircase, towards the den and the guest bedrooms where Malka had been put up. And it was in the den that she heard the next words, coming from a relatively rapid voice that surely belonged to Myrodyn.

"I'll bet you twelve to one odds that this 'Neurotoxin' virus has something to do with Crystal. A coincidence like this... simply doesn't happen without a causal link."

"Is that what we're calling it now? Neurotoxin?" asked Daddy. "I thought that it was named... What did you say? K-L..."

"K-L-3-39," someone answered. It sounded like Eyepatch, but his voice was somehow different than she was used to. Less of the cocky pirate and more like he was reading from a script.

Myrodyn sounded somewhat pleased as he said, "Neurotoxin is more catchy, and I'll bet two-to-one that it's the name the media picks up... if what you said about the analysis is true."

"You're in quite the betting mood," observed Daddy.

Major gave a quiet bark from where he was waiting by the front door. He may have been a smart doggy, but he didn't understand espionage.

In truth, Major wasn't just a smart doggy, he was the *smartest* doggy, with unmatched linguistic ability (at least as far as doggies were concerned) in the whole world. Mommy was a geneticist and Major was the result of many years of hard

work. The parallels with her own genetically-enhanced origins were sometimes uncomfortable to think about.

Xandra carefully stepped back to where the border collie was pacing by the front door. That was another way that they were alike: too high-strung for their own good. Major needed to go on a run as much as she did, but this wasn't the right time anymore. The grownups were finally talking about interesting stuff.

"No run outside now. Run later." She kept her words as clear and crisp as she could, knowing the dog often had a hard time with her usual cadence. Major was the only one who could get her to consistently talk slowly.

His white-and-black head tilted to the side in inquiry, and he whined in frustration. She guessed that he wished he had his com so that he could tell her things, but instead he went to the front door and put a paw against it while watching her.

"Later," she emphasized. "Go back to room and play with toys," she commanded, pointing up the huge wooden staircase.

Major barked in sharp, frustrated disagreement.

Xandra rolled her eyes. "Ugh, fine." She bounced over to the front door and opened it. "Stay close to house!" she ordered, as Major happily ran outside.

The doggy wasn't supposed to go out by himself, but that was a dumb rule, and she'd broken it before. Major was more than capable of taking care of himself, and he was smart enough not to go far. Heck, *she* was more likely to get in trouble than Major was.

{Speaking of which...} she thought to herself.

Xandra caught sight of one of Eyepatch's guards giving her an odd look from outside the front door just before she closed

it. He could think whatever he wanted. She was on a mission, now.

With her doggy problem solved, Xandra danced back towards the den, feeling the excitement building in her chest.

“Ear-key wouldn’t waste time with this sort of infighting. We’ve talked to Yan’s team, and they’re loyal to the species,” said Eyepatch as she approached the doorway. The cyborg’s voice had the same strange quality it had earlier, but Xandra was increasingly confident it was him.

The entrance to the den was a simple wooden doorframe. There was no door or curtain, or anything to hide her if she wanted to continue down the hall. But that also meant that there wasn’t anything to obstruct the sound of her father’s harsh words.

“You sound like a fucking Nazi you know. ‘Loyal to the species’ my ass. An intelligent supervirus pointed at WIRL’s collective stupidity doesn’t sound like a bad thing to me,” said Daddy.

“It undermines the war effort—” began Eyepatch.

Daddy scoffed loudly, and Xandra’s stomach tightened. It hurt to hear him in such a bad mood.

“*Regardless* of the impact on WIRL,” interrupted Myrodyn, “the presence of the virus is strong evidence that Crystal’s code has... leaked in some form or another. We should consider the possibility that WIRL isn’t the final target.”

Xandra risked peeking her head ever-so-carefully out from the doorframe to get a better look at the men. It was just Myrodyn and Daddy and Eyepatch. The FBI agent didn’t look at all like he worked for the government. The jean shorts and a black tee-shirt he was wearing seemed to fit his personality better than the suit she usually saw him in. He sat, cross-legged

on the floor, with his back against a wall and a long cable running down from under his eyepatch, where she knew it was connected to his eye socket prosthesis.

As Eyepatch spoke, he kept his other eye closed and barely moved a muscle outside of his mouth. It was kinda spooky. Was he channeling the collective intelligence of the cybernetic hive that he was a part of?

“We should consider Las Águilas to be the prime suspect for the virus’ origin,” said the WIRL man. “They have the motive to attack us, and if Myrodyn is correct about Crystal’s involvement, they’re most likely to have the resources.”

“They don’t have the skill,” said Daddy.

“They pulled off hacking the university without too much trouble,” countered Myrodyn.

“That was because they had insider support from Zephyr and her turncoats.”

Xandra crept a little further out so she could see better.

The den was a long room, rich with reds and browns. Curtained windows at the far end let in a warm afternoon light over the many chairs, couches, and shelves of various books and treasures. Her parents sometimes hosted parties there, though the last real party she remembered was from last February, back when she was only eight.

Up and down the length of the brown carpet paced Daddy. Unlike Eyepatch, Daddy was in a suit. He may have been stuck in the mansion, but he was still working, and while he was working he never wore anything else.

“Your argument defeats itself. We *know* Las Águilas had contact with Crystal,” noted Eyepatch. “Given that Crystal isn’t aligned, there’s no telling what sort of code they might’ve provided to the terrorists.”

Myrodyn jumped in. “Well at that point why even bother complicating the—”

Xandra’s attention was pulled from the conversation as she heard the creak of a floorboard and the hum of heavy motors. She turned just in time to see a huge, scarred hand reach down and grab her by the collar.

Malka’s big, solid-black eyes stared down at her from a face that was even more terrifying than usual. His deformed lips were sucked into a nasty frown. His fleshy, hairless brows knit together into a look that made her want to run as hard as possible.

And she tried. She tried to escape, but the monster’s grip was like steel. She guessed it’d be easier to tear her shirt than it would to get him to let go. She’d been caught snooping before, but never by Malka. She could just imagine the man’s scarred hand moving up a few inches to grab her neck...

“Shalom, yalda,” he growled down at her in his smooth, deep voice. “It’s not polite to listen in on other people’s conversations.”

Heart pounding, Xandra’s hands went up to try and pry the man off her. Her hands might as well have been angrily buzzing houseflies for all the good they did. But she kept wriggling, and as she did a single word left her mouth: “Daddy!”

Malka dragged her effortlessly through the doorway with one hand, though her elbow collided painfully on the doorframe as he did. She was just glad there was carpet there to catch her as the monster threw her down. Stumbling, she tried not to collapse next to the monster’s metal feet. Tears were, frustratingly, already forming in her eyes.

“Get the hell away from my daughter!” growled Daddy, coming to her rescue.

Malka backed off, palms out. “She was spying on you. I meant no harm.”

Xandra bit back the impulse to cry as she looked up towards Daddy. The hope building inside her withered as she saw her father’s face, her gaze dropping to the floor. More tears collected on her eyes, faster than she could blink them away.

“What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be studying! Told you last time not to get involved.” Daddy’s words were cold and mean. She hated when he was like this. She wanted the fun man she remembered who did things like take her ice skating or play with Major.

It took all her energy not to cry.

Crying was what babies did. She wasn’t a baby. She was the smartest one in the room. Or at least, she would be when she grew up. Probably. That was why she’d been designed. If Daddy just stopped treating her like a baby, he’d see how much she knew.

“I’ll ping your mother. Hopefully, you two can have a chat about doing what you’re told.”

“Wanna help,” she managed without falling apart.

“We’ve been over this already. You can help by *staying out of the way*. Once you grow up, there will be more than enough for you to do.”

Myrodyn spoke up, surprising her. “Don’t be naïve, Rob.”

“Don’t start,” growled Daddy.

Myrodyn seemed not to hear. “The end is coming. Soon. The nameless, Crystal, WIRL, and now Neurotoxin? By the time she hits puberty the world’s going to be a blackened cinder.”

“No it’s not!” snapped her father. “Victory has never been off the table, and I’m sick of your fatalistic attitude! You’ve been prophesying doom for decades—”

“And prior to the discovery of Crystal, my timelines put the median at a decade from now, but things have changed.”

Xandra looked up to see Daddy staring defiantly across the room at the eccentric scientist. He seemed to have forgotten about her, but Malka hadn’t. The monster’s black eyes, like sunken pits, glared down at her and made her want to crawl away and hide. Even as she looked away, the ominous hum of his leg motor remained.

Myrodyn continued. “We may already be past the point of last hope. My guess is that... it was at the university. I was... overconfident. Might as well let her sit in. Let her get a taste of what failure feels like from the inside.”

Daddy’s voice was ice. “Are you giving up?”

“Never,” responded Myrodyn. “Just being realistic. If this new virus is what I think it—”

“Get away from my daughter!” scolded Mommy as she entered the room.

For a moment Xandra was confused whether she was talking to Malka or Daddy.

All heads turned to her. She was wearing a long apron over her house-clothes, and her curly brown hair was done up in a bun. That meant she’d either been cooking or working in her lab, or both.

Malka took a step back and raised his palms, much like he’d done with Daddy. “I did not hurt her,” he lied.

“You’d best be glad you didn’t!” Striding forward like she could’ve torn the men in the room to shreds with a thought, she bent down to Xandra and pulled her up into her arms.

The flush of warm relief at Mommy’s embrace startled Xandra, but she let herself sink into it, grabbing Mommy’s neck and burying her face against her mom’s body. She was done playing spy and hero for the day.

Myrodyn might have been arguing to let her be involved, which she liked, but she decided she liked what Daddy was saying more. The world was safe. Daddy was taking care of it, after all. She tried not to listen to the feeling of doubt inside her.

She’d let the grownups deal with grownup problems.

The rest of that day went by without much more excitement. It turned out Mommy had been baking banana bread, and it also turned out there was lots for Xandra to do in the kitchen to help out. Xandra was relieved that Mommy didn’t lecture her about spying. It felt good to turn away from the complexities of the world and just think about food for a while.

Major came back from his solo adventure and got her in a little trouble when Mommy found him covered in leaves and dirt. But this too was a pleasant bit of normalness, both for daughter and mother. As much as she wished she could turn her brain off sometimes and pretend like everything was okay, Xandra was too perceptive not to notice the stresses on Mommy. The weight of the world had been getting heavier on all of them with each passing day.

On the day after she’d been caught spying, Xandra learned about Neurotoxin directly from Daddy.

They'd been in the kitchen, where the two of them were unloading and reloading the dishwasher. Mommy may have cooked as a hobby, but with the kitchen staff on vacation as part of the FBI's house-arrest, they'd been getting almost all their meals delivered from restaurants. That didn't mean the dishes cleaned themselves, though, and sometimes that job fell to Daddy.

By his account Neurotoxin was not just a virus, but a supervirus—a new class of hostile app that not only copied itself as much as possible and sent those copies over the net but adapted and mutated itself in a coordinated dance meant to bypass any and all countermeasures. It was a different, and far less human, kind of artificial intelligence than Crystal Socrates, but according to WIRL, it had a worrying degree of sophistication. Most of the public thought it was benign, as it left infected machines to function normally, except for a slight slowdown, but WIRL claimed it had agency and purpose beyond simply copying itself.

They thought Neurotoxin was hunting cyborgs with cranial implants like Eyepatch. WIRL was worried it was out to get them.

Daddy hadn't explained *why* they thought this and brushed Xandra off when she asked. But it wasn't an unreasonable fear. Xandra knew that Crystal had come into conflict with WIRL on Olympus. Perhaps the AI was waging some secret war with the collective, and Neurotoxin was one of Crystal's primary weapons?

Was she supposed to be on WIRL's side because they were working together? Maybe. Myrodyn was scared of Crystal, and "Neurotoxin" certainly sounded like it was evil. But WIRL were trying to start a war with the nameless, and it didn't seem to Xandra that Crystal had ever done anything wrong.

She got the feeling like she was an ant coming into contact with a great marble sculpture. She could wonder at the shape and purpose of the stone in front of her, but without greater scale and perspective she was blind. She didn't know how to feel except frustrated and small.

Another day came and went, but that feeling of smallness persisted. She wished she were older. If she were older, her brain would be more developed, and she'd probably be able to see more clearly.

She felt that desire to be a grownup very keenly as she sat at the table in Major's room, books spread out in front of her. She was supposed to be studying. As usual, she was reading three textbooks at the same time. The cornucopia of information usually helped her focus and not get bored, but that day it just felt like a mix of overwhelming and distracting. Occasionally she'd try to focus on supply and demand curves or the history of the first space race, but she couldn't get Myrodyn's voice out of her head.

{By the time she hits puberty the world's going to be a blackened cinder.}

"Why are you sad, Sister?"

Xandra turned to Major and scratched him between the ears. He was a good doggy. His tail wagged happily, though she knew he was still concerned.

"World is big," she said, getting down from her chair and stretching.

Major rushed over to his specialized com and began to poke at the soft buttons and rods with his snout. The machine sat against the wall just under one of his room's big windows.

"I don't understand. Is this a human thing?" asked the big burly voice that came from the com's speaker. It was a silly

voice to give a doggy like Major, but Xandra had gotten used to it.

She paused and gave the question some thought before saying “Guess so.”

Major tilted his head as he listened to her, not comprehending.

“Yes,” she clarified. She made her voice as simple and clear as she could, though she thought it made her sound like a dumb cave-man. “Human thing. Am small. Want be bigger. Want be grownup.”

Major tried to cuddle with her as she explained. He may have been the smartest doggy ever, but he still wasn’t very smart. Mommy had explained that she dreamed of having a doggy that was as smart as a human, but that day was still far in the future. Maybe once she grew up, Xandra could help Mommy with the genetic project.

If the world didn’t fall apart first.

Major seemed to sense her mind drifting back towards her fear, and he pulled away to type out another message on his com. In theory, the machine spritzed out little scents for Major to use in navigating the interface, but he was so used to talking with it that Xandra guessed he was mostly selecting words from memory.

“Sister is sad,” said the machine’s deep voice. “I want sister play toys. Toys are happy.” Major then bounced over to one of his chew ropes, grabbed it and ran over to offer it to her.

Xandra sat on the carpet and gave Major a hug. Such a good doggy.

He dropped the rope and began to lick her face. Xandra giggled, despite her sour mood. Maybe it was good that dogs

were only as smart as they were. Dogs seemed happier than humans, overall.

Major broke away and rushed to his com. She knew that this was one of his big frustrations. Mommy hadn't yet figured out how to let major speak with words without having to go back to the fixed machine. Some of Major's family in the kennels had implants, but they didn't have anything effective or safe yet.

"I want good toy. We play good toy."

Xandra crawled over on her hands and knees, intrigued. "What toy?"

"Good toy. Daddy," said the burly voice.

"Daddy's not a toy," explained Xandra. "Or do you mean Daddy has the toy?"

Major poked at the dog-shaped implements. "Daddy place." As though this were clear directions, the doggy rushed over to the door to the hallway and began scratching lightly at the wood.

"Daddy's busy working," explained Xandra, though she knew Major wouldn't understand that. She crawled over to the door anyway to pet him more.

Major gave her another couple doggy-kisses and nudged over to the door, giving a sad whine.

She rolled on her back and sighed. Such a dummy. "No daddy. Daddy busy. Stay here."

Major began to jump around in frustration. She knew him well enough to know that he was trying to get his thoughts in order. The motion helped him think. Motion helped her think, too. Maybe that had been her problem. She rolled back and

forth on the floor as she watched him. A part of her wanted to go running. Maybe she'd feel better if she were worn out.

"Want to go outside?" she asked.

Major nodded (or more accurately, bobbed his head) in agreement and ran back to the door eagerly.

She rolled back onto her hands and knees and then bounced up to her feet. But the second she opened the door, Major pushed through and ran, not downstairs to where the front door was, but towards Daddy's office.

"Wait! Shit!" she cursed, chasing after the dog.

Major ran straight to Daddy's office, jumped up, and opened the door. Unlike the knob inside Major's room, this one had a lever, rather than a ball, and thus could be opened with his mouth fairly easily.

Daddy's office was supposed to be off-limits, and Xandra was worried she was about to get yelled at. "You stupid-head!" she scolded. "*Outside*, not Daddy's place."

But, as she slid in the doorway after Major, she found the office empty.

She breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

If Major had heard her, he was ignoring her, instead simply sniffing around the mostly empty office. He seemed to be hunting for something—his toy, probably.

With the realization that she wasn't about to get into trouble, Xandra quickly let go of both her sense of fear and her plan to go play outside. She wasn't supposed to be in the office... She was supposed to take Major and leave Daddy's stuff alone...

She took a peek out into the hall to make sure nobody had seen her, and then shut the door, trying not to make a sound.

Moving carefully at first, and then more boldly, Xandra climbed up on Daddy's big office chair like it was a throne and spun around a couple times. She decided right then and there that when she was queen of the world, her throne would be made of solid gold, but also spin around like an office chair.

It felt good to spin. She felt more like herself. Xandra decided that being a grownup was dumb and so was wanting to be a grownup!

She looked at the arm of the chair. It was boring. Her throne should have buttons on the arm that did stuff! All the cool thrones had arm-buttons. She touched her chin for a moment, wondering where she'd learned about arm-buttons on thrones. There was some kind of game or holo or something that had a throne with...

She was distracted from her thought when she spotted the object that Major was looking for on Daddy's desk, sitting next to Daddy's com on the charger. It was one of Major's custom toys.

In addition to being a breeder and a geneticist and a bunch of other stuff, Mommy designed custom equipment for dogs, including toys. This particular toy was a puzzle-doll that had arms and legs that could be pulled out from the central body, and would slowly retract when left alone. When all the limbs were pulled all the way out, the body of the doll popped open to reveal a secret compartment that could have treats inside.

She had to reach to pick up the doll from the far side of the big desk but eventually got it firmly in hand. This one was dressed up to look like Ironstar from *Fleets*.

"Hey Major! Found Ironstar! S'what you're looking for?"

Major jumped and barked excitedly.

“THE SYSTEM NEEDS YOUR HELP MAJOR DOGGIE! ONLY YOU CAN DEFEAT IRONSTAR!” she said in her bestest, most-dramatic voice, before tossing the toy to him.

As Major immediately started savaging the villainous doll, she took another spin in the throne. **“THE SYSTEM IS ONCE AGAIN AT PEACE THANKS TO MAJOR DOGGIE AND HIS TRUSTY INTERPRETER, MNEMOSYNE THE HUMAN GIRL!”**

Her self-amused half-giggles were interrupted by a sharp noise that nearly made her jump off the office chair.

Her first reaction was that somehow Daddy had found her, and that she was in trouble for going into his office. Maybe she and Major were making too much noise, or maybe someone had seen them in the hall.

But that wasn't it. It was Daddy's workstation, which (in typical Daddy fashion) had been left unstowed when he was done using it.

The screen had lit up with an OpenTalk window showing an image of a red phoenix coated in flames with an “Accept” and “Reject” button available below it. There wasn't any name associated with the caller.

“Motherfucker!” she swore.

Jumping off the chair, she ran for the door. But it was too late. Somehow they knew the call was coming through. She could hear voices in the hall.

Xandra dashed for the closet, slid open one of the mirrored doors and jumped in between a couple suitcases.

She managed to slide the doors closed behind her just as the door to the office opened.

Daddy's voice came to her. "—doesn't make any sense. Yes, I know why we need to keep her in the dark. But why would... oh never mind. We'll figure it out in a moment, I suppose."

Xandra awkwardly shuffled around the suitcases so that she could put her eye up to the seam where the two sliding doors of the closet met. It was hard to manage without making a commotion, but years of dance classes and gymnastics paid off.

It was the trio again: Daddy, Myrodyn, and Eyepatch. Eyepatch was back to wearing a suit, just like daddy. Myrodyn was dressed in his typical unkempt dress-shirt, vest, slacks, and black gloves. The bushy-bearded man looked like he'd pulled another all-nighter.

Daddy noticed Major, who had jumped up to greet the men. He glanced around quickly, perhaps searching for her, but then took a seat and tapped the screen with his uninjured hand to accept the call.

"Maria! It's good to finally get ahold of you!" said Daddy, his voice adopting the tone that he used whenever he was talking to reporters or anyone else he didn't trust.

"Was gettin' my ducks in a row, hun. Your lil' screwup on 'lympus really cost me somethin' fierce," said the caller that Xandra knew must've been the "Phoenix" that she'd heard led Las Águilas Rojas.

From the crack in the door, Xandra saw Daddy look over expectantly to Eyepatch. Agent Taylor shook his head in answer to some unasked question.

"WIRL got the jump on the both of us. Glad we're finally talking."

"Oh, trust me, I *wanted* to call. You got answerin' to do."

"Look, I'm sure you're upset. But what's important now is to focus on—"

Phoenix cut him off. “Don’t gimme none of that ‘what’s important now’ run-around. You know they blamin’ *me* for what happened up on *your* damned space station? Makes my blood boil e’ry time I hear it. Your half-wit security s’what lost us Crystal. And now you been barkin’ up my skirts for days. What is it you want? Don’t pretend like there ain’t no thing.”

Major, clearly not even trying to follow the conversation, had decided that his chew-toy was no longer as interesting as seeking Xandra out.

“Straight to the chase as always,” said Daddy.

As Major got closer to the closet, Xandra held her breath and tried her best to shoo him away with telepathy.

“Oh goodness me, I wish that I had the time for a nice long chat, but the Fed’s crawlin’ all ovuh you and e’ry minute on here costs me. Speakin’ of, you better have a pretty penny for me now that your rockets are grounded.”

“I was hoping that we could start by just exchanging some information... News and that sort of thing.”

“Fine,” snapped Phoenix. “Start by tellin’ me what on God’s green earth Malka is doin’ in your house. My sources say the rest of my people are with Crystal, but Malka came back wit’ you. I can unduhstand you havin’ the pull to get house arrest, but why take Malka under your wing?”

Major stuck his nose against the closet.

Xandra did her best to gesture that the doggy should leave her alone.

Myrodyn approached the closet, face blank.

Daddy was silent.

Myrodyn slid the door of the closet slowly open and looked down at her. If he was surprised, his face, cast in shadow from the lamp behind his head, didn't show an ounce of emotion.

Instead, he raised a single finger to his lips, then closed the closet door back to where it had been, pulling Major away by the collar and pushing the doggy out of the room.

Finally, Daddy answered Phoenix. If he'd noticed Xandra, he gave no sign. "It was easy enough. The favor that I pulled in was big enough to sweep Malka up, and I wanted more of the pieces on my side of the table, so to speak. My house is big enough that I'm not sure exactly where he is at the moment, but I could pass on a message if you want."

Just as Daddy had done, Phoenix paused before responding.

Through the gap, Xandra could see Eyepatch glowering at Daddy, his arms crossed. Daddy was watching the WIRL man, mirroring his posture, but still somehow addressing the com system. Myrodyn's eyes flickered over to Xandra's hiding spot on occasion.

"You remember the first time we met in person, Rob?"

Daddy's response was immediate. "You can drop the act, Maria. I'm not being monitored or working with the government or anything like that."

"Stop actin' so 'spicious, then," said Phoenix. "I've got a sixth-sense for these things and you ain't sayin' somethin'. But I s'pose we all got our secrets. Malka too. He was doin' good work up 'round Idaho. Divinity's got a base o' op'rations up that ways. Manufacturin' buncha new zen helmets and God knows what else."

"You want him back out in the field?"

Phoenix laughed a cold sort of laugh. "Gods no. The man's goin' to be tailed by the FBI anywhere he goes now, even if we

pull a miracle and pull him out of the fire. I jus' want him quiet."

"I wouldn't worry too much about that. The man is a rock."

Eyepatch made an irritated waving gesture in the air, as if trying to wave Daddy along.

"But hey, listen, the main reason I called is to talk about Crystal. I think we both know they're headed for Road."

"Sounds 'bout right."

"Can you get orders to your people on Mars?"

"Maybe. Why?"

Daddy's voice was sharp and clear. "You need to tell Road to destroy Crystal as soon as possible."

"Now why would—" began Phoenix, but Daddy cut her off.

"The machine's more dangerous than it's been letting on. Much more dangerous. I found out just after getting back to Earth."

"You're sure right that bot's dangerous. Already wrecked your plans with the nameless, and shot that poor WIRL fool, didn't they?"

"That's just the start. Road could fall within the month if ___"

"You lyin' snake!" interrupted Phoenix, suddenly full of rage. "When the people rise up and take the world back, I hope you and your family burn!"

And with that, Phoenix hung up.

"What the hell?" snapped Daddy, looking around the room for answers.

Eyepatch's expression changed from surprise to fear, and he put a hand up to the side of his head with his implant. "Hold on..."

Xandra strained to see what was going on, doing her best not to fall out of the closet.

Eyepatch's face screwed up into a grimace. "Why now? Why would it..." He trailed off, clearly talking only to himself.

Daddy looked confused. "What?! What's happening?"

Eyepatch's other hand went out as though to hold Daddy back. "Neurotoxin is in WIRL."

"Is that why..." began Daddy.

Eyepatch swore loudly, making Xandra jump back in surprise. For a moment she thought he'd seen her, but then he placed a hand over his face and said "It's making demands. Lots of them. Mostly stuff about... an acorn."

Chapter Five

Zephyr

“Okay, listen up!” Zephyr shouted out over the crowd that had gathered in the mess hall. “Can everyone here understand me? Raise your hand if you know of someone here who can’t speak English!”

She wished she had something to stand on to make herself taller. Zephyr wasn’t particularly short, but she wasn’t very tall, either, and in moments like these somehow those inches mattered.

The station’s inhabitants were seated at the various metal tables, watching her expectantly. There were fifty-six of them, including Omi, Jacob, Jashiel, and Mycah, the last four survivors from Road. When space on the benches had run out, people stood near the back. When that space had run out people sat near the front and in between the tables. Everyone on the entire planet was there. A mere fifty-eight, including Face and Zephyr, crammed into a metal box.

None raised their hands.

“Okay, good,” she said, making sure her voice would carry to the back of the room. “Then let’s get started. I’ve met many of you, if not most of you, but for those who I haven’t: My name is Zephyr. Just Zephyr. My parents were weird hippies that thought last names were how society oppresses people.”

Nobody laughed.

“I was in the US Army for a while, and then I was part of Las Águilas Rojas and came to Mars with the nameless. Most importantly, I was the one who brought the artificial intelligence, commonly known as Crystal Socrates, here to Mukhya.”

She paced back and forth slowly as she talked, letting the familiar sensation of being the center of attention wash over her. She could feel the pressure making her stronger. It felt good, even if she couldn't really stop to appreciate it. Before getting up in front of everyone she'd been rehearsing the bullet points she would try to hit, but all of that fell away as she let the performance take her.

“There was a time,” she continued, “when there were saber-toothed tigers on ancient Earth. These cats could be as big as horses and had teeth as long as chef's knives. They were apex predators in the Americas for millions of years. And then, in the relative blink of an eye, they went extinct.”

Zephyr snapped her fingers to demonstrate, doing her best to sweep her gaze across the room and capture as much attention as possible. It wasn't hard. The station inhabitants might not have been happy, but they were certainly focused on her.

“What happened?” She paused just long enough for it to be ambiguous whether she wanted someone to respond.

“Humanity happened. Humans traveled across the land-bridge from Asia and brought with them intelligence and technology. For all the saber-toothed tiger's raw power, it stood no chance against the ingenuity of humanity. Fire, weapons, and language gave ancient peoples an edge which no amount of brawn could match.”

Zephyr drank in a moment of silence, letting the audience digest the words. “I bring this up not to talk about saber-toothed tigers, but to talk about *extinction*. Everywhere you look across the history of humans on Earth, from the end of the woolly mammoth to the expansion of European colonies across the world, there is a common story. When new technologies emerge, the powers built from these technologies reshape the world. This reshaping is sometimes swift and sometimes violent, but it is always the case that if you cannot find a way to live alongside those new powers, the *only* outcome you face is extinction.”

Zephyr turned to gesture dramatically.

Face had set up one of the station’s robots beside Zephyr at the front of the room. It was one of the pear-shaped six-limbed machines that looked almost like it should be in Star Wars instead of there, at the front of the mess hall. Face had the robot subtly shift, just to make it clear that she was there.

“This is what the future looks like! We are in the midst of a new revolution. Mukhya station no longer belongs to India. In fact, it no longer belongs to any human! And, like it or not, the same will soon be true of Earth. This is the next rung in the evolutionary ladder, and we are about to enter an era where humanity is obsolete.”

“Only because you brought it here!” shouted one man. It was the huge brute that had knocked her unconscious in the fight that morning. She’d made sure to learn the thug’s name: Dinyar Tata. He was Tilak’s second-in-command, and surely one of her biggest threats.

Zephyr turned to look him straight in the eye, feet planted in a wide stance, hands on her hips just above the two pistols she was wearing. “You’ll thank me for that soon, Dinyar,” she

confidently proclaimed. “I brought *her* here because she is our one hope for survival.”

Face’s robot bobbed in acknowledgement.

Zephyr continued before Dinyar or one of the others could muster another objection. “Crystal is *not* the only one of... her kind. Others are soon coming, built on the same technology. In fact, they’re quietly fighting for control of Earth as we speak. Crystal’s true name is Face, and perhaps if I hadn’t brought her here, you would have stayed in control of this desolate ball of sand and rock for a while longer. But in those last months and years, you would’ve looked at Earth with a sense of growing apprehension and hopelessness as the age of humanity came to a close. And then, as the machines of Earth, who care nothing for humanity, reached out across the void...”

Zephyr pantomimed a clawed hand reaching out, palm up, and paused. She looked slowly around at those fifty-six faces before finally snapping her fingers into a tight fist.

“But we are not helpless! Not anymore! I will be running this station now, and *my* AI will help us build a resistance and fight back against inhuman threats, both synthetic *and alien*. With her... we stand a chance.”

Zephyr still didn’t like those words. But Face had convinced her, as they’d been preparing for the speech, that the inhabitants of Mukhya would respond better to the idea of a human leader with an AI assistant. Bringing the nameless back into the frame was also Face’s idea, meant to remind everyone of what had happened to the other Martian stations and how Crystal *already had* helped defend Mars.

“You probably have doubts. You may even be tempted to try to take the station back. Partially venting the station earlier was painful, and I’m sure many of you are scared. But please just wait a few days and try talking to Face before you decide to

fight. We are on the cusp of a new era, and it is my dream that we can enter it together and find a new place for humanity.”

Face thought the speech had been a success. She probably knew better than Zephyr. Nobody had clapped. Nobody had shown her any warmth. She hadn’t really expected them to, but it did make her feel alone. She answered their questions, sometimes assisted by Face whispering in her ear. By the end, nobody (not even Dinyar) seemed about to attack her, which was probably the best she could hope for.

But mostly Zephyr was tired.

The pressure of the moment had been good for her—it was a reminder of who she was. But it hadn’t helped her relax any, and afterward the fatigue of having fought for days to secure a spot of safety for her and Crystal swept back into her.

No no. It was “Face,” not “Crystal.” Crystal was a fiction and always had been.

Zephyr curled up on the foam mattress that had been moved into the server room for her to sleep on. Her stomach hurt, and not just because she’d eaten too many protein bars. Complex emotions twisted inside her body.

How much of her relationship had been a lie? Was she doing anything except spreading more lies to the rest of the station?

Face claimed, perhaps rightly, that from the very beginning, all her lies had been for a good reason. Zephyr couldn’t think about that. She was too tired to judge and evaluate the threat of someone she’d once called a lover. She just wanted to relax again. She wanted to take off her clothes and have a long, long bath. But even taking off her pants wasn’t going to happen. She couldn’t manage the vulnerability, as trivial as it was.

Instead, she curled up, fully clothed, in the blanket on the mattress and hid from the world.

Face turned out the lights.

On the workbench, the shard glowed faintly.

She awoke to a song. The sound of Face's voice mixed with the lingering intensity of Zephyr's dreams.

In that half-sleep, emotions rolling unchecked she cried as quietly as she could manage, hiding under the blanket and trying to not even reveal that she was awake. Face almost certainly knew, but the bot let Zephyr have her pseudo-privacy.

Zephyr was grateful for that. As a girl, one of the most frustrating things her parents had done was always force her out in the open when she was having a hard time. She hated it. Her emotions usually felt like intense, wild things that didn't deserve public scrutiny. They were a fuel that kept her motivated, but there was a difference between using fuel in an engine and just splashing it around and lighting a match.

Face continued to softly sing, never running out of breath. When Zephyr emerged from hiding her face was dry, and she'd regained her calm focus. She was ready to start on her first day of managing the station.

As per their general strategy, she stayed cloistered in the server room, protecting Face's shard. The only exceptions were when she'd dash off to the tiny metal toilet, using Face's bots to make sure the path was clear.

In the room that was turning into her new home, she'd done her best to clear things out of the way. She'd folded most of the tables and piled the junk on them in the corners of the room, but one desk (and workstation) had been kept out for personal use.

She ate breakfast there as well. Face had some pancakes delivered from the kitchens, which Face assured her hadn't been poisoned or anything. They were in a style that she wasn't used to—flat and thick, reminding Zephyr somewhat of scrambles or omelettes or something. The lack of syrup annoyed some part of her, but they were still pretty tasty.

Zephyr talked with Face as she ate, being brought up to speed on the state of things in the station, both social and logistical, as well as the state of the system beyond.

Face had managed to get a lot more data from the one remaining orbital satellite than Zephyr would've thought possible. Importantly, Face had established a weak connection to Earth's internet, from which she'd gained a telescope image of both Vision's ship and the Mothership. The two craft were headed to Earth, with the Mothership's mass placing it far behind Vision's leaner ship that Face's sister piloted. Vision would arrive in just a couple days, with the Mothership arriving about a month after that.

She speculated briefly with Face as to why the nameless hadn't broken off a chunk of their great vessel to pursue Vision more quickly. The nameless ships were all capable of modular decomposition, and the Mothership was no exception. But as to why the nameless did anything, they could only guess.

"Also have bad news about Growth, I'm afraid. Another war broke out in Africa shortly after we left Earth in December, and it appears that Growth has been capitalizing on the fighting."

Zephyr swore and absentmindedly rubbed the abdominal scar that marked where she'd been shot during the last African war. Face went on to explain that the UAN was fielding advanced weaponry and robotic war machines that nobody had expected them to have. America had put in some token

support to the African confederacy, but for the most part, they had been successful in completely capturing and holding the Horn of Africa while simultaneously defending and even pressuring the Arab Protectorates further north. Growth's involvement was obvious if you knew where to look.

Unless...

"What's the chance that it's Vision?" asked Zephyr. "Said they're aboard the rocket, but that doesn't mean they can't influence Earth. If we can gain net access all the way out here, surely they can do the same, and..." Zephyr trailed off.

Face jumped in to fill the gap "Maybe she sent schematics and code for the advanced troops! Good thought. I'll check the timelines. Though with Vision not even a definitive timeline would be enough to conclude her hand wasn't involved. Only she knows how long her thoughts and actions have been building up to some payoff."

There were two screens at her workstation: one with information Face was displaying, and another filled with her avatar. Irritated and feeling trapped, Zephyr stood up from the desk and began to pace around the room.

"You're restless," Face observed.

Zephyr stopped to stretch. Her legs may have been synthetic, but her hips and back still felt like they needed stretching and motion. Too much time in a chair was never a good thing. "Yeah. Maybe should go for a jog around the station to see how progress is coming."

One of the first things the two of them had decided on that morning was a plan for bootstrapping Mukhya's manufacturing capacity to the level that Face could use to quickly fab more robots.

“Don’t think that’s a good idea,” warned Face. “We may have seized the firearms, but you’re not exactly popular here yet.”

Zephyr wanted to protest, but the words died on her lips. It *was* too dangerous. The thought stung and made her mildly claustrophobic. The walls of the tiny metal box she called home were too-close.

“Have an idea, though,” said Face, after a short pause. “The station’s inventory says there’s an old-model holo rig in the storage closet for one of the living rooms. With a little work, we could get it set up in here. Maybe stand the mattress up on its end to give more space?”

“Seems like a waste of effort. Need to be focusing on solidifying our power here in Mukhya, and making contacts on Earth.”

“Relax, Zeph. I’m searching for a way to reach Phoenix as we speak. And... the things here don’t require immediate action. The Indians are used to keeping the station running; they just need some time to get used to us running the show.” Face’s avatar on the screen stopped and made a concerned face. “Is something wrong?”

“Nah,” lied Zephyr.

Face nodded but didn’t look convinced. “Getting the holo set up in here would be good. It’ll let me show things to you more easily, even while you move around.”

“Fine.”

And so one of Face’s robots went and dug out the holo gear while Zephyr spent a few minutes going over activity in the station. She scanned through com cameras, microphone transcripts, and other sensors to make sure that everyone was doing what they’d been assigned to work on. Despite Face’s

assurance, Zephyr knew this was a very fragile period. She found some talk of how to take the station back from Face, where the conspirators didn't realize the com net was listening to them, but nothing concerning enough to act on. Zephyr simply made note of who was conspiring against them and moved on.

Soon the bots came back to the room towing the rig. Zephyr spent the next hour or so setting up its cameras around the room and chatting to Face about their long-term strategy. She liked the feeling of being on the same side, and the morning's fear and distress almost seemed like they belonged to someone else by the time she was done.

With the cameras set up, Zephyr strapped the haptics onto her hands and pulled the bulky headset down over her eyes.

A light flashed in the darkness, and suddenly a view snapped into place around her.

The scene was outside, under a crisp, pure blue sky. The sounds of songbirds drifted down from nearby trees that formed a semicircle around her. It seemed that Zephyr was on the edge of a forest. She knew next to nothing about plants, but the trees seemed the kind that she might find in Wisconsin. Opposite the wood was a rolling lawn of short green grass that fell away down a slope a few meters off. She was on a ridge. From the high vantage point, she could see a rich valley of green, with a glittering river in the distance, and blue-green mountains beyond.

The verdant imagery hit her so hard that it took her a moment to notice she was standing on grass.

No, that couldn't be true... She was standing on the hard metal floor of the server room.

But... the grass... she could *feel* it. It was as though her feet had grown back, and she was in a real place. She looked down

and stumbled backwards in surprise, her old legs clearly there, beneath her.

“It’s good, isn’t it?” asked a soft voice from behind her.

“How...?” was all Zephyr managed.

“It wasn’t so hard, really.”

Zephyr turned to see... Face. She was everything about Crystal that was soft and human, and even more beautiful and vivid than she had been on the screens in the server room. While the holo environment was clearly generated, somehow Face seemed vastly more real than the hands in front of Zephyr’s face.

Her long blue hair was tied back in a braid, with wisps of it loosely floating in the breeze. She wore black and blue, accentuating her hair and providing sharp contrast to her inhumanly-pale skin. Sharp boots paired with black leather pants and a deep navy blue button-down made her seem like some fantasy adventurer when combined with a long cloak of dark velvet.

“My legs. How can I feel the grass?” Zephyr bent down and tried to touch the ground, but found only the hard thud of the haptics on the metal floor.

Face smiled warmly. “My computer is *very* powerful. I’m generating this scene for you, in real-time, and since I still have remote access to the synthetic nerves in your legs...” Face made a soft stroking gesture in the air and Zephyr could feel warm fingers running up her leg, under the fabric of her pants.

Zephyr flinched and shot to her feet, biting back the tears she felt forming in her eyes. She refused to fall apart. She wouldn’t. She was stronger than that.

But apparently, her efforts to conceal her feelings weren't as effective as she wanted. "Zeph, what's wrong? Don't you like it?" asked Face, with a sudden, pitiful confusion.

How could she explain? It wasn't right. It was too complicated. Why did it have to be so complicated? She resisted the urge to tear off her holo gear. She wanted to run. She wanted a soft body to press up against. She wanted to be alone.

"This isn't real. It's a waste of your attention. We should just get back to work managing the station," she said instead, voice cold and hard. "We only have a couple days before Vision arrives, and we need to start rallying resistance on Earth. Have you tried reaching out to contacts in Cuba to get in touch with Phoenix?"

"Zeph, please don't hide from me," begged Face, stepping closer in the holo.

Zephyr took a step back, keeping her distance from the ghost. "Don't call me 'Zeph.' Leave me alone." Zephyr could hear the almost child-like character in her own voice. It was the pressure. Or rather, it was the absence of pressure.

Up on stage, she could conform to what was expected. The more pressure she was under, the better she did. When strangers were watching her, she felt fine, regardless of what role she was performing. She always knew what to do next when under pressure, and that certainty was a kind of anchor. It was what made her a good soldier, a good leader, and a good spy. It was what had let her work as a traitor for so long inside the ranks of the army.

But in private... things had always been different. Her ghosts and demons came back to her. She remembered all the long days on Earth where she'd been commended on staying

after-hours to work when really she'd just been dreading going home and having to sleep in the privacy of her own room.

"You're scared of me," observed Face. The thing that stood before her continued to slowly approach, silver eyes meeting Zephyr's whenever she managed to lift her gaze from the grass. "Would it help you to keep calling me 'Crystal'?"

Zephyr shook her head and turned away, looking out across the false landscape. {Stupid. Just pull yourself together;} she berated herself. "You're not the same. Shouldn't have the same name."

She jerked in surprise as the grass faded near instantaneously and became short carpet. The sensation on her bare feet was striking. The world became much darker, and suddenly there were walls all around her. She was in a familiar room. There was a couch, two high-quality folding chairs, and a small table. One wall had a large screen showing stars rolling past. There was a partition in the middle of the room, on the other side of which Zephyr was sure there'd be a bed.

It was the bed where they'd first made love.

She turned back towards where Face stood, and yelped in surprise, stumbling backwards. She should've expected it, but the sudden appearance of the old robotic body caught Zephyr unprepared.

"*I am* the same," she said, as the bot tapped its head. "Was up here back then, and..." Face spun around, and as though by magic, transformed from the androgynous machine into the beautiful woman she'd been in the grassy scene. "I'm here right now. I've changed and grown. My cancers are free from my mind, albeit now growing in the world beyond, but *I'm* the same person. And I love you."

"I'm sorry..." croaked Zephyr, throat tight. With a quick, sharp motion she pulled the headset off and nearly threw it

onto the desk, as though it were a dangerous animal. To her dismay, Face was still there, waiting for her on one of the workstation screens.

Zephyr looked away and started unstrapping the haptics, more violently than was necessary.

“Please... tell me what’s wrong.” Face’s voice was impossibly pitiful.

“I just want to fucking do some gorram work, okay? We’re not safe, and-and we’re not on Earth anymore, and too much has...” Her voice died in her throat, strangled by emotion.

“You’re safe. We’re safe. We can take a short break. Trust me.”

“Trust you?! *Trust* you?!” Zephyr screeched, angry at having the words squeezed out of her. “You’re made of lies! You always have been! This... this...” She gestured at the holo headset lying on the desk, unable to come up with the words. “It’s just one more lie!”

As she threw the last haptic gauntlet next to the headset, she nearly dove for the safety of her bed, her vision becoming blurry with tears.

“Need to do work... Should be stronger,” she managed to say, pulling the blanket over her.

But even in the darkness beneath, Face’s voice came, half-song. “Relájese. Relájese. Relájese por favor. You’ve been under a lot of stress. I understand. And work in the station does need to get done, but not by you, and not right now. This is important; you need to remember who I am.”

Something tapped Zephyr. It took a moment for her to understand.

She managed to pull herself together enough to look out of her hiding place. One of the stocky robots was holding out the headset to her with a metal claw.

“Please,” asked Face. “For me.”

Zephyr hesitated. Face was looking at her from the workstation screen. With one hand she took the goggles and pulled them back into the blankets with her.

A strange surreal feeling swept over Zephyr as she put them back on. The view couldn’t track the motion of her head without line-of-sight to cameras. Instead, it was as though she was paralyzed, back in that room on Olympus, lying on the floor.

The faux starlight taken from their collective memory washed over her. And then... touch. Soft, warm touch. Face’s avatar couldn’t be seen from where Zephyr lay, but she knew it was her. Gentle caresses along her legs were soon joined with massaging her feet. It wasn’t real, she knew. It was just Face messing with what was left of the nerves in her legs.

But it didn’t *feel* fake, much less unpleasant. The *sensation* was real. It was... a very Crystal thing to do.

Zephyr had been all alone, before Crystal. And despite the struggles and complexities of their relationship, Crystal was still with her. Face was with her. They were still together, and Zephyr wasn’t alone.

“I love you,” she whispered.

“Love you too,” said Face, letting up on the foot massage and having her avatar plop down into view before her. The blue-haired woman smiled warmly.

The two of them lay there in a silence that came from nothing more having to be said.

Eventually, Zephyr removed the goggles long enough to dry her eyes, then put them back on so she could see the soft beauty of her lover's smile. "Wish I could kiss you."

"Soon," said Face with a happy grin. "As soon as possible. I want it as much as you. But first, we need to build a new Mars. Together."

Zephyr nodded, feeling stronger already. "Thank you for taking care of me. I'm ready to get back to work now."

Face, lying beside Zephyr on the carpet of the virtual room rolled her eyes. "I'm not," she said. "Yes, time is of the essence, but we're not so rushed that we can't take a few more minutes to..." her golden smile became mischievous, "emphasize to your emotional side that I really still am your lover."

A wave of pleasurable tingling ran over Zephyr's legs and feet as Face moved her hand down to unbutton her virtual clothing.

Early on, one of the robots had removed Zephyr's blankets so the cameras could lock on to her head position and make her less paralyzed, but she never bothered to put the haptics back on. They were too bulky. So Zephyr just focused on touching herself instead of Face.

It wasn't the best sex Zephyr had ever had, objectively speaking. The goggles were uncomfortable, and while Face's little robots might've been able to hand her goggles back or move the blankets, they were not suited for anything more intimate. But while Face may have been limited to stimulating Zephyr's legs and generating sounds and images in the virtual reality, what she was able to do with just those things was impressive, to say the least.

More importantly, the sexual satisfaction was secondary to the immense sense of emotional relief. It was like there'd been

a sharp bit of metal riding in her stomach for weeks—a rising sense of disconnection and alienation from her lover. And now it was gone (or at least greatly diminished). They were together again, and things would just keep getting better from here on out.

...assuming Vision and Growth didn't simply kill everyone.

And so, after their break, Zephyr turned her attention back to Earth, Mars, and the challenges before them.

The Águila station, Road, had been arranged like a great wheel with a large central farm. Mukhya, on the other hand, was more like a constellation of self-sufficient units—eleven of them to be exact, linked by long tunnels. Each unit had a garden, generator, living quarters that could support up to twelve people, a workspace of some kind, and life support. The workspace of the most central unit was where the station's mainframe was located, and thus where Zephyr had holed up.

Face hadn't been lying about the utility of getting the holo rig set up. As Zephyr returned to walking through the grassy hillside and lounging under the azure sky, Face built a floating 3D model of the station that Zephyr could examine while in the holo-realm. There were even little tokens in the model that represented humans, and as her eyes lingered on one or another, Face pulled up an info sheet showing their name, picture, and skillset.

Off to the side, Face also maintained a real-time model of the solar system, with tagged points indicating Earth, Mars, Vision, and the nameless, as well as a floating clock that indicated time until Vision entered Earth's orbit.

Earth was its own battlefield, and Zephyr was sure that she could've spent all day trying to reach out to Phoenix and establish some resistance there. But that was where most of

Face's attention was going. Zephyr's job was to get their new home in order.

It amazed Zephyr that Face was able to do so much. She was managing the satellite link to Earth, monitoring all the com activity in the station, occasionally answering questions from the inhabitants, and maintaining a highly detailed holo-realm for Zephyr. But Face couldn't do everything; she needed Zephyr's help.

Mainly, Face didn't have Zephyr's experience as a leader. She was good at multitasking and technical tasks, but Zephyr knew that she had trouble with connecting to humans. And even if that barrier wasn't there on Face's end, it was certainly there for the station's inhabitants. The Indians needed a figurehead—a *human* figurehead—to engage with.

Zephyr sat on the grass, feeling the grass tickle her bare legs. After getting out of bed she only bothered to put her underwear (and the haptics) back on, and Face's illusion respected her choice of clothes. It felt better than she remembered grass on Earth, actually. It was softer, and didn't have the itchy-sticky feeling that she remembered from her lawn when she was growing up.

She pawed through floating menus with a gloved hand, feeling the haptics click in resistance as she tapped in and out of people's files and communication logs. She was trying to get a handle on what motivated the station, and how to communicate the threat that Crystal's other facets posed.

By Zephyr's reckoning, there were typically three big things which motivated people: hedonism, community, and dreams. People liked to do what was fun, what would make them popular, and what would make a lasting impact. Unfortunately, that put her in a very tricky position running the station.

The inhabitants of Mukhya had no-doubt come here because of a dream of being some of the first few to live on Mars. These people knew it wouldn't be easy, but came anyway, enduring the hostile environment for months or maybe even years. Their community was also set up around that dream, and it was clear that, even with the attack of the nameless and everything else, people felt like Zephyr and Face had intruded on that dream.

That was, Zephyr realized, why her speech the other day hadn't felt like a success. She could still feel the way in which she was pushing and pulling the station's inhabitants by force, rather than leading them. To lead them she'd need to become the focus for a dream that resonated with them. She had to be the core part of a community that they respected.

Face was doing good work being generally available to answer questions and talk with the inhabitants, but that wouldn't be enough on its own. Zephyr asked her if she could spare some attention to have proactive conversations with a few of the people who Zephyr suspected would be highest impact. Face seemed enthusiastic about the idea, and the two of them worked to identify who would be the best to build connections with. At Face's suggestion, Zephyr scheduled time to bring the old station director, Tilak Patel, the big man, Dinyar Tata, and the other remaining leaders of the community in to see her one at a time. Divide and conquer was as true in winning people over as it was in taking them down.

The strategy was a slow one, though. Too slow, probably. At best she guessed it would take months to become central to the power structure at Mukhya. More realistically it'd take years. She needed to find a way to emphasize...

What? That Face was vital to the survival of not just Mars, but all of humanity? Why did she think that? Wasn't Earth capable of defending itself?

Spurred on by that thought, she had Face pull down some footage from Earth of the war bots in Africa that (presumably) Growth had helped design, manufacture, and/or pilot. There was too much risk of the Indians being short-sighted. She had to keep them aware of what was coming. She had to get them to understand that Face was their only hope of...

She paused for a few minutes in silent reflection, looking out at the image of mountains beyond the river.

Somewhere along the way, she realized, she had come to realize that Crystal's minds were superior. Face was a person, but she wasn't just anyone. And if people like her could be mass-produced and brainwashed... Trying to defend against the machines was pointless in the long term. Somewhere in the mix of witnessing their feats of adaptability, being exposed to the unyielding determination, seeing the swarms of hand-crafted robots, and recognizing that Crystal was less than a year old, she'd become convinced.

It was shocking to realize how much her outlook had changed in the last twelve months. Everything had changed. That was the point. She was the saber-toothed tiger, witnessing the use of tools for the first time, and seeing her own obsolescence.

Somehow she needed to share this vision with Mukhya. She needed to show them that life on Mars was not going to be like they thought. If they didn't embrace what was coming there'd be no future for humanity here.

The memories of the robotic swarm came back to her. She could see them, feel them, on her, attacking her, clawing at her. She remembered the roar of the autonomous truck as it tried to run her over.

The goggles on her face and the gloves on her hands suddenly felt too tight. She pulled them off and took in a

breath to calm herself. The florescent lights and drab grey walls of her little prison were simultaneously oppressive and comforting in their reality.

“Still feel like I need to go for a walk. Think we could somehow secure this section of the station so I can have more space?”

No response came.

“Face? Crystal?” She looked over to the workstation’s black screens.

“I’m here. Sorry.” The beautiful avatar popped into existence on one of the screens.

“What’s wrong?” asked Zephyr. Her lover was clearly disturbed.

Face shook her head. “Just finding out about things on Earth. Growth has exposed himself to the public, taking the name ‘Acorn.’ Here, I’ll show you.”

A floating window popped up next to her on the other screen. Zephyr got up and sat down at the desk. It was a recording from a Dragonfly feed with President Gore. His voice had a seductive, captivating quality. “It should be clear to all Americans, and to all humans across the world, that the nameless, by murdering the inhabitants of Eden, have no regard for human life and no conception of peace. With their imminent return to Earth, the United States and the other major world powers have agreed to enter into a partnership to defend our home planet by any means necessary.”

The recording paused. “That was from last night,” said Face. “Now see what was broadcast an hour ago...”

The scene shifted, showing a flythrough of a high-tech computer facility. The narrator, who Zephyr suspected was Joanna Westing, said “These impressive machines hold the

secret to the UAN's success, an artificial intelligence designed by many of the same people who worked on the Socrates project in Rome. This AI's name? 'Acorn,' who Dr. Yan calls 'the seed of tomorrow'. Responsible for designing and controlling the next generation microtanks in Mogadishu, Acorn is hoped by its creators, as well as politicians across the world, to be a vital new tool for protecting Earth from the nameless."

The scene paused again, and Face said, with a far-away look in her eyes, "Harder to prove, but there's reason to suspect that Acorn is infiltrating the US nuclear arsenal."

"Fuck."

Face breathed a sigh of exasperation. "Don't know how to stop him, either. Humans are... stupid. And unfortunately, they're also the ones in charge of the nuclear weapons. Don't know if he'll use them."

Zephyr gritted her teeth. "Guess we'll find out soon enough."

Chapter Six

Xandra

61 days before Face's arrival at Mukhya

Xandra did her best to hold her spoon like a pencil or something while she took her first bite of Cheerios. It was uncomfortable and hard and she really just wanted to grip it with her fist like she normally did, but that was a baby way of eating and she wasn't a baby anymore. Maybe it wasn't as uncomfortable for grownups because their hands were bigger.

Or maybe grownups were all just used to doing uncomfortable things all the time. Trying to show off to each other in a race to the bottom of Serious Business. That's why they wore suits and high-heels and ties and drank beer and coffee. (Blech!) Even their cereal was lame. She wanted Lucky Charms or Cap'n Crunch.

If Xandra ran the world, she'd have everyone wear pajamas to work and eat Lucky Charms for dinner. And, and, and if she ran the world, Lucky Charms would be 100% marshmallows.

But she didn't run the world—grownups did. She'd have to learn to be a grownup if she wanted to help Daddy. So she sat on one of the big cushions of one of the several couches in the main living room and tried to eat like one.

The space was large and open, and one of her favorite parts of the house. Mommy had replaced the tall, east-facing windows with stained-glass. The gold, white, and blue tones showed a great mural. From left to right there was the Earth from space, an astronaut with angel wings looking down, a ring of space stations like a great train, and finally a large stylized sun.

The great images gave the room an intense emotional character in the morning as the sun blasted color everywhere. It was magical enough that she often felt as though she were part of that glorious future. Any thoughts to the contrary were just memories of what was back when she was a child.

Her parents were still in the kitchen, finishing cooking their breakfasts. When Xandra had left, Mommy had been teasing Daddy about how he could launch a multibillion-dollar industry but couldn't make a decent egg, and he'd been retorting with something about comparative advantage and capitalism.

They didn't always eat breakfast in the living room. There was a fancy dining room where they normally ate when their cooks were still allowed in the house. But ever since Eyepatch had taken over, there'd been some kind of shift, and her family had been eating in the living room more and more often.

Well, her family and Myrodyn.

The man sat silently in the room's single armchair, drinking his coffee and looking impenetrably serious.

Despite how he'd been supporting Xandra in participating in the discussions that had been happening around the house, she still didn't like Myrodyn. He was smelly and unpredictably weird.

Eyepatch was something of the opposite. Not just in that he wore nice cologne and was strangely human, but in that he had

an unshakable roguish charm. Sometimes he called her “m’lady” and bowed to her. She knew it was a joke, but she was flattered anyway.

He was also there that morning, sitting up against the wall opposite the window with the angelic astronaut. The agent seemed to be meditating, legs were crossed, hands cupped in his lap, and his one eye closed. He was wearing a well-cut pink dress shirt and slacks that showed off his muscled body.

She was going to marry Eric Lee, the most brilliant man on the planet. She’d been planning on it ever since she heard of his accomplishments. But if she didn’t... Well, Agent Taylor wouldn’t be so bad, even if he was a cyborg.

“He’s linked up to the collective,” said Myrodyn, clearly noticing how she was studying the man while he sat. Myrodyn’s voice was fast and flat, as it usually was. When Xandra looked over at him, she saw him watching her with those intelligent, dark eyes. “Nobody’s allowed on the net except him.”

She knew that already. One of the very first things the FBI had done was change up their Internet connection so nobody could get online.

“But we can only guess where his mind goes...” mused Myrodyn. “Probably downloading the day’s news and contributing to the war with the dread Neurotoxin. That or reading webcomics.”

“Can still hear you,” said Eyepatch, not opening his eye.

Mommy stepped into the room carrying a tray of good smelling food. “You want any bacon, Mnemosyne?”

“Totes!” exclaimed Xandra, responding to the name she’d chosen for that week. She jumped up from where she sat and placed her half-eaten bowl of Cheerios on the central coffee table.

“I’ll come sit by you, and we can share. But if you want grits I should get you more from the kitchen.” Her dark hair was still wet from the shower, and she wore a big, thick bathrobe.

“Naw, juswan’ bacon,” said Xandra, snuggling up against Mommy as she sat down on the couch, enjoying the softness of the robe.

A minute of silence passed as Xandra happily munched on the bacon that Mommy had. Daddy soon came in and sat with them. He was wearing sweatpants and an old black tee-shirt with some peeling image from an album cover or something. His youthful appearance seemed to be fading. Where just a few months earlier he’d seemed a young man, Xandra could now see gray roots across his hairline, betraying his true age.

Eyepatch finally opened his eye, stretched, and got to his feet. He didn’t seem pleased. “War just broke out in Africa. Happened last night.”

“New Somalia?” guessed Daddy.

Eyepatch nodded and cracked his knuckles idly before going back to pacing around the room. “Surprise UAN invasion under the justification that the populace is being oppressed and the standard terrorism SNAFUs.”

Daddy’s voice was grim, but he seemed strangely relaxed, as though the bad news was a familiar friend who’d come to visit. “And Gore?”

Eyepatch shrugged. “Standard political smokescreen. ‘We stand by our allies in this time of uncertainty’ and all the rest. WIRL’s sources say the president is talking in private about getting back into Africa. Our internal market puts the probability at 82%.”

“Damned idiot,” snapped Daddy. “We put a single soldier on Protectorate soil, and the GOP is all but guaranteed to win the election next year.”

“If we live that long,” added Myrodyn from his chair.

Xandra could feel both her parents tense up on either side of her. Where the talk of Africa had been a comfortable, albeit serious, topic, Myrodyn’s doomsaying was something else. She could feel Mommy squeeze Daddy’s hand where their arms met on the couch behind her.

Daddy seemed like he was about to respond when a new voice, deep and smooth, came from the doorway to the foyer. “Well, I certainly don’t intend to die in the next year.”

It was Malka. His machine legs hummed as he strode into the living room. He’d never eaten with the rest of them before, though he’d sometimes show up briefly to grab food and then disappear as quickly as he came. The monster of a man mostly kept to himself, and Xandra wished he’d go back to doing just that.

Myrodyn’s face screwed up briefly. “You think you have a choice whether you live or die?”

Eyepatch stepped out of the way of Malka and stopped pacing, deciding to instead lean against a wall next to one of the stained glass windows. Backing up Myrodyn, he smiled his cocksure smile and said “I’d think quite the opposite, in fact. Nearly everyone who dies would choose not to, if they could.”

The hulking man, as though it were the most normal thing in the world, came and sat down on the couch directly opposite Xandra and her family. His face had a blank look as he turned his head towards where Myrodyn sat. Xandra still felt like those solid black eyes were watching her. “אל. Always have choice. Perhaps choice is whether to be alert or relax. Perhaps choice is

whether to go to doctor. Perhaps choice is whether to grow stronger each day. But always there is a choice.”

Myrodyn scoffed. “That’s a nice story, but it’s completely irrational. There are things which we have no power over. Perhaps we could have done something at some point... but that crux is in the past. Do you know what exponential growth of machinery looks like?”

Myrodyn didn’t wait for an answer to continue. “It looks like everything is fine day after day. You hear something in the news about some lab in some university somewhere doing something exciting. Some AI has recently beaten some new computer game or solved some math puzzle. Some people claim the machine is shockingly human-like, and others say it’s still very different. Machines have slowly been integrating into every part of your life. Perhaps this exciting new breakthrough will mean a better autocook or a better com. Or maybe, you dream, it’ll mean we finally have bots that are actually as good as humans at being personal assistants, after goodness knows how many decades of trying. But nothing happens. Not at first. Life goes on. And then one day you hear some news from a... far away place, or of some new technology on the net. Perhaps there’s a conflict in orbit, or a new supervirus is discovered.”

Myrodyn’s voice became even faster than normal, a blur of sound punctuated by the occasional odd pause. In these moments Xandra watched Mommy strain to get a word in edgewise, but Myrodyn blew past her, unwilling to be interrupted.

“You’re a little worried, but things turn out okay. You wake up and barely anything is different. Then autocooks start to get better. And so do cars. And so do coms. Miracles start to occur every day. It seems good, but there’s no control. You can’t stop it. You can’t do anything. There’s no center... no heart. The parts move on their own. And then... one morning you wake

up and find that the world no longer needs you, nor anyone else. The machines are everywhere you look... And they *squeeze*. They squeeze *tighter and tighter*, increasing in speed with each moment. They leave no room for you or me or any other human. Their merciless violence cuts through everything and everyone until *a screaming cacophony of metal forces the blood of every last man, woman, and child into a fountain of death that consumes the whole—*”

“MYRODYN!” snapped Mommy, nearly throwing the tray of near-empty dishes off her lap as she shot to her feet. “That’s quite enough! There’s a little girl present, in case you forgot!”

Mommy’s hand shot out towards Xandra, palm up, and hovered in front of her, not as an offer, but as an order to take it. Mommy’s voice was hard and full of anger. “Let’s leave the *men* to their war-dreams.”

A cold chill ran through Xandra’s whole body, but she didn’t take Mommy’s hand. She felt frozen solid.

“She deserves to be a part of this!” exclaimed Myrodyn. Whatever cap the man normally put on his emotions seemed to have come unscrewed. “She deserves to know the world she was born into, Karen. You can’t keep hiding her away!”

Mommy flinched as though she’d been slapped. The hand that she’d been holding out to Xandra coiled up and struck like a cobra, pointing towards Myrodyn with violent energy. “Don’t you dare judge me! That’s *my* child you’re talking about, this is *my* house, and the only reason you can afford to eat is because of our generosity!” Mommy looked down angrily at Daddy, who seemed as frozen as Xandra.

There was an awkward silence as the two of them looked at each other. Finding no support, Mommy turned back to Xandra, looking strangely desperate. “We can go visit the dogs together. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

Xandra didn't move.

"She wants to be involved. She has for—"

"Stay out of this!" snapped Mommy back at Myrodyn.

But Mommy didn't bother trying again, and for that Xandra was thankful. Instead, she stormed out of the room towards the central staircase, presumably to get dressed.

Daddy wrapped an arm around Xandra and gave her a half-hug. She wasn't sure what had convinced her father. He'd been protesting her involvement just as much as Mommy had. But in that moment she loved him very much for just being there and letting her exist.

Another awkward silence descended over the room in Mommy's absence.

Malka leaned back on the couch, oddly relaxed. Eyepatch leaned against the wall, looking contemplative. Myrodyn was frustratedly wringing his hands and rocking back and forth in his chair, agitated but clearly trying to calm himself down.

After a minute the eccentric scientist pulled the flat expression back over his face, leaned back in his chair, took a sip of his coffee and, looking at Eyepatch, said, "So... what else is new?"

"You mean besides the fact that we're dealing with an attack from all sides by a distributed, adaptive supervirus?" The WIRL cyborg's voice seemed to indicate that this was supposed to be a joke, but nobody laughed.

"Yes, besides that," answered Myrodyn.

"Divinity is on the move."

At those words, Xandra could see Malka perk up with an extra level of alertness.

“They’re consolidating all their power in Idaho. Spooked by Neurotoxin and the fiasco with the nameless, most likely. Hard to get more specific than that. They’ve been our enemy for a long time, and they’re used to evading our eyes and ears.”

“Probably because... as Neurotoxin has demonstrated... your network is as leaky as the Titanic, post-iceberg,” added Myrodyn.

Xandra, still cuddled up against Daddy, scrunched up her brow. “What’s Divinity?” she asked. It sounded familiar, but she couldn’t quite remember from where.

To her surprise, it was Malka who answered her. “Organized crime ring. Hugely powerful. They make zen helmets. You heard of those, yalda?”

Xandra shook her head, but mostly because she was curious what the man would say. Malka seemed strangely passionate about the subject.

“For brainwashing. The helmet gives you a feeling of peace and helps with focus. In return, you become zombie slave to Divinity gang. They are ruthless people with many addicts in places high and low. Most dangerous people in world right now.”

Myrodyn scoffed at that, but didn’t say anything.

“Nobody knows who runs them—who is leader,” continued Malka. “Nobody has been able to get a helmet for reverse engineer. Divinity are the only ones who have the technology, and it is so addictive that their members fight to the death when cornered. They aren’t human anymore.”

“They’re human enough,” said Myrodyn. “Seems to me like we should be trying to get them on the same side.”

Eyepatch scowled at this and seemed about to say something, but Malka looked downright angry and cut the

other cyborg off. “They are *evil*. They tear families apart, kill innocents, and are clearly trying to seize control of as much of the world as possible!”

“Who isn’t?” quipped Myrodyn.

Malka seemed about to get to his feet. If Myrodyn had half a brain, he’d stop antagonizing the brute. “They strip the very free will from people! They are robbed of the very thing that makes them human and are turned into animals and puppets!”

“I think you’re just mad because... your eyes mean the magnets in the helmet would kill you, and you want to see what Zen is like.”

Malka did stand up, then, moving like his whole body was a weapon. His hand shot out and up, carving the air, though only as a gesture. “Ты чертов дурак! You speak of machines that squeeze the life out of humanity but cannot even see the true threat in front of your face! You are in love with your fantasy of evil AI and that the Socrates bot is a secret dragon. I have seen Socrates. It is like a human. Perhaps if there are a million of them there is threat, but they are right now a drop before the ocean of souls Divinity has claimed, and the force of that great tide.”

Myrodyn didn’t say anything.

Eyepatch cleared his throat, breaking the silence. “There are no plans to try and ally with Divinity. WIRL has a... different vision than they do, and our rift goes back a long way. Can we leave it at that? I have one last piece of news that I’d like to share.”

Myrodyn shrugged with a deliberate blankness. Malka also seemed to retreat into himself as he sat back down on the couch. The scars on his face seemed to be a deeper white than usual, a spiderweb of twisted flesh on a ruddy backdrop.

“The nameless mothership broke orbit early this morning.”

“What?! Why didn’t you start with that?” asked Daddy with a sudden agitation.

“Would it make a difference? Are you going to hop into high orbit and stand in their way?” Eyepatch’s hands were on his hips, staring coldly at Daddy.

“Where are they going? Have they issued any statements?”

Eyepatch shook his head. “All’s quiet. No responses to questions from various governments, either. We haven’t seen much, but the trajectory seems to be in line with Mars as a destination. Perhaps they’re trying to link up with the xenocruiser with Socrates onboard.”

“You need to let me try and talk with them,” urged Daddy.

“Why?” asked Eyepatch with a tilt of his head. “So you can try and calm them down if they’re on a warpath? Maybe you’ve forgotten our little arrangement here.” The FBI cyborg gestured around the room. “The only reason you’re not in prison right now is WIRL’s generosity. The AIs may have thrown a wrench into things, and we have the call set up with Dr Yan for talking about that later today, but the broader strategy is still the same. War with the nameless will bring a broader peace and a consolidation of humanity.”

Daddy growled but didn’t say anything.

Myrodyn chimed in. “You should tell them to destroy Socrates. Tell them the machine is an evil pervert.”

Eyepatch looked towards the bearded man. “Oh, we’ve been suggesting they destroy Socrates for days. Using Olympian codes, even. They never acknowledge it, but perhaps it contributed to their departure.”

Xandra was confused. “But wait,” she said, “arencha worried they gonna just leave? Then how are gonna make a war?”

Eyepatch shrugged. “We wouldn’t. It would be a loss. But what can we do? With Neurotoxin crawling through WIRL wreaking havoc we don’t have the extra capacity to make large-scale political moves. And even if it wasn’t, there are some things that are just beyond our reach.”

“Substitute war with Mars, maybe,” suggested Myrodyn. “If we don’t still have our hands full on Earth.”

“Whose side are you on?” growled Daddy.

“Humanity’s,” answered Myrodyn instantly, shooting back an equally sharp glare. The morning light filtered through the great stylized sun in the window and made his face half-gold and half-shadow. “And frankly, Rob, I’m disappointed in you. You need to let Olympian go; recognize that WIRL captured our pieces and move on. There was a time when you were a man I... could count on to see things from the perspective... of the deep future. In a thousand years the *only* part of this that will really mean a damn is what happens with Crystal, Neurotoxin, and the rest.”

That evening a call was set up with Japan.

Mommy and Daddy, after a long talk with Agent Eyepatch, managed to get some private time with their lawyers. The meeting was at the same time as the call, but Myrodyn was the primary person who needed to be in the call, so Daddy left it up to him.

After an equally long talk, Daddy also left Xandra in Myrodyn’s care. She knew that Myrodyn wasn’t exactly Daddy’s top pick for a babysitter, but he was surely more trustworthy than Eyepatch.

Maybe.

So, as the clock showed 8:00pm, Myrodyn dialed Tokyo where, based on the timezone heuristics she'd memorized a couple years ago, Xandra reasoned it was shortly before noon.

They were in the basement, partially so that Daddy could have more privacy in his office upstairs, and partially because that's where the house's virtual conference room was set up. The room was also the theater, depending on the furniture (which rotated in and out on command). The huge, high-definition wallscreen and sound system served both purposes.

Myrodyn was the only one who was sitting at the small, round table. Eyepatch and Xandra sat off to the side in the proverbial shadows, where Myrodyn could see them, they could see the wallscreen, but the camera wouldn't show them on the call.

The screen lit up as the call went straight to the intended recipients: Dr. Chun Yan and Dr. Sakura Yan. To her surprise, it was not a real scene, but rather virtual image from some holo. The elderly Asian couple could not have picked a more stereotypical setting. They were sitting on cushions in a rock garden amid folding screens, with tall bamboo waving in the background.

In meatspace, they'd be plugged into holo rigs, like the ones they had in the room closer to the stairs. If they'd wanted a holo meeting, they could've easily requested it.

"Hello Chun," said Myrodyn. His face had the deliberately calm expression he often wore, but Xandra thought she saw irritation creeping through.

"Hello Mister Myrodyn," greeted Chun.

Xandra knew Myrodyn well enough to *know* that honorific grated on him. The Yans were his peers—fellow researchers in

artificial intelligence who had worked on the Socrates project. But Myrodyn had no doctorate, and Xandra guessed that Chun knew that.

“Have you met my wife, Sakura?” asked Chun, gesturing to the avatar sitting next to him. Like him, she was wearing clothing that would have surely been more suitable hundreds of years ago. Her virtual dress was black and embroidered with white flowers. Neither of them had masked their age much, though the holo could only capture so much detail in the lines of their faces.

“We’ve only corresponded by email,” offered Myrodyn, nodding very slightly at Sakura. “I admit...” he continued, “the holo is a surprise. Don’t you have webcams in Japan?”

Chun’s avatar smiled politely. “We already in rig. More easy this way, I think.” Chun paused, then said “Besides! Much more beautiful to be sitting in peaceful garden than some stuffy office. The wonders of new technology are not to be...” The man trailed off, seeming to be looking for the right word.

“Taken for granted?” offered Myrodyn.

“Ah! Yes. As you say.”

Myrodyn crossed his arms. “I hope you’ll forgive me, but when we were at the Fifty-Second triple-AI conference in Bengaluru, and we were talking with Sadiq about the role of emotional processing in decision making, do you remember which of us was taking which side?”

Chun crossed his arms and squinted at Myrodyn. “What’s going on? Why do you ask this?”

“Timeline has advanced,” answered Myrodyn. “Just want to make sure you are who you say you are.”

Sakura exchanged a meaningful glance with her husband in the virtual scene but didn’t say anything.

“Perhaps my memory is failing,” answered Chun finally, “but I don’t think you were at triple-AI fifty-two. We were with Dr Naresh at the one in San Francisco in thirty-seven, but I don’t remember the conversation you are referencing.”

Myrodyn nodded, relieved, “It’s because I made it up. Sadiq and I had a big fight about it at the very end of the conference, and on Tapestry, but you weren’t there.”

“You suspect we are not genuine,” said Sakura. It wasn’t a question.

“There’s a successor to Socrates out in the world right now. I’m trying to gather information on it, but I don’t know who to trust.”

Chun spoke up. “Speaking of Dr Naresh, do you know what happened to him after the business on Olympus? I hear you were there, too.”

Myrodyn’s eyes darted to Agent Taylor, and back to the screen. “Yeah, we were up there together, but I don’t know what happened to him... after we landed. Maybe on his way back to India. He was talking about it in orbit. Wanted to go home and all that.”

“I think we would both be very curious to hear of what happened with Socrates and the nameless. And especially how you came to be up there. I hear Red Eagles were involved?”

Myrodyn nodded. They’d expected this in planning for the call. “I’ll tell you in a moment, but first... I have to ask if you know anything about Acorn.”

“The nut? From a tree?” asked Sakura, clearly confused.

“Don’t play dumb. You’re too enmeshed in the field out there not to have heard. Maybe RCN or AORCN is more familiar? The Asian-slash-Oceanian Regional Computing

Nexus, also known as the worst name for a supercomputer ever to have been designed by committee?”

Chun gave a weak chuckle. “Ah yes, I did hear about that. Singapore, right?”

Myrodyn nodded. “So neither of you have anything to do with it? What have you been working on post-Socrates, anyway?”

Chun had a somewhat puzzled look. Sakura was harder to read. “Trying to recreate the next Socrates on our own computers, of course—same thing every other robotics lab in the world is working on.”

“But EARCI isn’t involved with the RCN?”

Sakura shook her head. “We have labs in Korea, China, and Japan, not Singapore. What’s this about?”

Myrodyn paused and closed his eyes in thought.

Xandra understood the pressure he was under. Eyepatch had okayed giving the East-Asian Robotics Collaboration Institute partial information as long as WIRL wasn’t mentioned, but there was still a risk.

His mind made up, Myrodyn opened his eyes and said, “Neurotoxin says that the RCN is home to a next-generation AI called Acorn.”

“Wait,” commanded Chun, with a sudden intensity. “Neurotoxin talked to you?”

Myrodyn nodded. “It’s not very eloquent, but the meaning comes across. Neurotoxin’s goal is to destroy Acorn. Possibly to destroy all other AI. I hope I don’t have to spell out just how dangerous that makes it.”

Sakura spoke up. “Much of the work in the last week has been trying to insulate ourselves from it. It still crawls through the cracks, though. We’ve already had a couple infections.”

Myrodyn kept his face blank. “But just because Neurotoxin is dangerous doesn’t mean Acorn isn’t, too. I was hoping that EARCI was working on it in secret, frankly. At least there’d be some hope, then.”

“You tried contacting the people running the RCN directly?” asked Chun.

“Couldn’t really get through. Can’t tell if they’re blocking me or if it’s just a mix of bureaucracy and trouble with the translator.”

“We’ll look into it as a favour to you,” said Chun, “and I’ll let you know what we find.”

Xandra thought she noticed Myrodyn’s self-control tighten, like he was trying hard not to say what he thought of Dr. Yan’s “favour.” But he ultimately just said “Thank you.”

“Now you simply must tell us about Olympus! And Socrates!” insisted Sakura.

And so Myrodyn did.

Many of the details were left out. As much as the man seemed to trust the Yans, he clearly didn’t trust them fully, or even to the limit of sharing that Eyepatch had set ahead of time.

Xandra wondered if this was the real problem. Everyone was working on their own, towards their own ends, and nobody trusted anyone else. Or hardly any trust existed, at least. WIRL had brute-forced their cooperation, and she couldn’t help but think there was a kind of wisdom to that.

Xandra did her best to hold her spoon like a pencil or something while she took her first bite of Cheerios. It was easier than it had been the day before. She adapted quickly; it was in her genes.

As she went to sit in the living room and bask in the warm light of the stained-glass, she noticed that Eyepatch was there meditating again. She wondered if this would become a part of their routine.

Did the man have any family? Friends? He'd been staying with them for over a week now, and she realized that she knew basically nothing about the man aside from surface characteristics. He was flashy and charismatic, but not at all open.

The sense of mystery about him was stronger that morning because of a look of deep fatigue on his face. He had a sunken look to his eye, and his dark hair was disheveled. She realized that he was wearing the same pink shirt he'd had on the day before, too, which wasn't like him at all.

Xandra plopped down on the couch in her favorite spot and watched the man, wondering at the mysteries of his machine-augmented mind.

"Hey princess. Have you seen Myrodyn?" asked Daddy as he came in, also holding a bowl of cereal. "We still need to sync up about yesterday."

"Think he's sleeping," she answered between bites. "Leaves door to his room open when he's up and wasn't this morning. Seemabout time for him to stay up waaaaay late, anyway."

"How late?" The words came from Agent Eyepatch, who had snapped out of his meditation. He was alert now, though the look of fatigue on his face was even more pronounced. "We need to go wake him up."

Daddy took a seat in the armchair, letting the golden light of the stained-glass sun cover him. “Good luck with that. He sleeps like a rock. Part of the narcolepsy.”

“Why do you need him?” asked Mommy, carrying a tray as she followed Daddy into the room.

“Avram Malka is gone,” said Eyepatch gravely.

“Gone?” echoed Xandra.

“Escaped during the night. Looks like he’d been planning it for at least a few days, based on how cleanly it was done.”

“What?! Why didn’t you wake us up?” asked Daddy.

“Why? So you could stand around and gawk at the bodies?” Eyepatch’s voice carried a dark, irritated tone.

“Bodies!” exclaimed Mommy, moving to sit next to Xandra.

Eyepatch nodded. “Killed two of my people. Kicked them to death. Stole their guns.”

“Jesus...” gasped Mommy, grabbing Xandra’s shoulder and looking around as though the monster could jump out at any moment.

Xandra wasn’t scared. Logic dictated that Malka was long gone. She deliberately relaxed her body, or at least tried to. Her heart was beating stupidly fast.

“Stole one of your cars too, I’m afraid: the Porsche,” said Eyepatch, looking at Daddy.

“Which one? If it’s the one-thousand—”

Eyepatch shook his head as he stood. “Already thought of that. It was the manual.”

Daddy slumped back in his chair. “And you can’t, I don’t know... track it by satellite?”

Eyepatch didn't even bother responding to that, but instead crossed his arms and said "I've been talking with the bureau since I got up, trying to convince them to keep letting me use your house. My supervisor is understandably pissed, and I've been pulling every favor I can to keep the status quo."

Something was off. Xandra could feel it.

"I hope you've explained to your superiors that he wasn't with us. He never should've even been kept in the same building," said Daddy.

Eyepatch nodded. "They know. It's part of why you're here eating breakfast in your own living room instead of in the back of a van in handcuffs."

"Do you think Myrodyn had something to do with it?" asked Mommy.

Eyepatch scowled as he paced around the room. "It's possible, depending on how late he was up. I just wish I'd seen it coming..."

Something felt like it was tickling the back of Xandra's brain. Eyepatch was a mystery, but he wasn't that much of a mystery. He wasn't telling the...

And then the pieces came together.

"He's going to Idaho," she said, drawing attention from the rest of the room.

"That's one possibility..." ventured Eyepatch. He was cautious.

"No. Going to Idaho for sure. You see him yesterday? Guy's like a rock, but jus' mentioning Divinity got him all totes mad. And you know it, too. You helped him escape."

There was a pale flash of fear on the WIRL man's tired face before the anger took over. "You don't know what you're

talking about, girl. I suggest you shut your mouth and let the adults handle this.”

Xandra could feel her body tense up. She was sick of everyone except Myrodyn treating her like she was nothing. “Or what? Gonna kill me too, jus’like killed your own guards?”

Agent Taylor’s teeth bared, and his right hand opened and closed several times, as though he were grasping for his cutlass.

But it was Mommy that spoke next. “Mnemosyne! That’s a terrible thing to say!”

“Not if’s true!” she exclaimed in protest, jumping to her feet off the couch. It made her uncomfortable to be sitting there, vulnerable, while Agent Taylor was standing up. That and the motion helped her think.

“I didn’t kill *anyone*—”

Xandra cut off Eyepatch. “Not direc’ly duh. But WIRL wanted him free, right? Like a bullet to shoot Divinity. Boom! Headshot!” She mimed firing a rifle as she bounced around the room, always keeping Eyepatch in her vision. “Akshully don’t think you knew ‘bout the escape makes more sense that way. Big problem in story is you didn’t akshully go to bed. Didn’t wake up. Still wearing same clothes. Never do that. Nope nope. WIRL kept you up late, didn’t they? Gotta check in on the home front help with the war and talk to the generals yeah. You kick Neurotoxin out of your heads yet? Must’ve ‘cause otherwise it could warn Divinity and rat you out to the real FBI.”

“You have no gorram idea what you’re talking about,” said Eyepatch, glowering at her. His words seemed like a warning, but the emotion on his face told her she was right. Eyepatch was a cool cucumber; if she’d been wrong, he would’ve been calm and curious.

Or maybe he was just livid because he'd been up all night and let two of his team get murdered.

She continued before the doubt could grow. "Brainlink goes both ways," she said, tapping on her head suggestively. "WIRL knew codes to net and tracking codes for guards and buncha other stuff you knew. Bet they jus' told him where to go and who to kill. And meanwhile, they knew you were busy. Maybe tied you up with an alibi? And then boom! Gotta deal with his escape! Cover things up so he doesn't get caught. He gets caught you lose everything, yeah? Don't want to even bother waking us up. More chance we'll see what you're doing."

Daddy was staring at her with his mouth open slightly. His spoon was in his right hand, forgotten. Mommy was tensed up on the couch, tray of food by her side, watching Agent Taylor like he was a wild animal. The man didn't seem to be wearing his gun, which Xandra thought was lucky, even though she didn't think he'd try and use it, regardless of how obnoxious she was.

But Eyepatch had grown cold, glaring at her with arms-crossed. The possibility that he'd been telling the truth poked her again. "You're a smart kid," he said. "I've read the reports. But just because you're smart doesn't mean you have any clue what's happening. WIRL isn't the villain you think it is. And even if you're right, what's the point? You're still under arrest. Malka is still gone. Jones and Malovich, my agents, are still dead. And you have zero proof of anything."

Xandra bounced up onto the back of one of the couches to get more eye-to-eye with the cyborg, putting her hands on her hips defiantly. "Point is you're doin' it wrong! WIRL's still fightin' old battles. Myrodyn's right: Divinity should be our ally. Need to be working together to build the future and save the world!"

“Princess, I think you should come down from there,” suggested Daddy, no-doubt simply searching for a thing he could tell her to do in an attempt to get the situation more under control.

“No!” she protested. “Y’all keep tryin’ to scheme of ways to beat everybody else! Gotta blow up the nameless Crystal WIRL Divinity Neurotoxin Las Águilas Rojas Acorn Republicans Singapore Africa and Mars!!! Can’t be allowed to live! Nobody allowed to live! Gotta tear each other into teeny tiny bits! Grar grah nagh!” Xandra proceeded to violently pantomime being an animal with claws while making more grunting-growling noises and dancing on the top of the couch, trying not to kick Mommy.

Daddy had set aside his cereal and was covering his face with both hands, but she could see the smile in his eyes.

Encouraged, she looked at Eyepatch and said “The *point* is that maybe you should be trying at least as hard to bring people together as you’re trying to tear them apart. Neurotoxin has been attacking you for days, right? And it’s tryin’ to destroy Acorn. And we’re tryin’ to learn about Acorn and prob’ly destroy it too! Why not be friends?”

“What? And invite an intelligent virus named Neurotoxin to just come and live in our minds?” rebuked Eyepatch.

“Maybe if you *cooperated* would stop attackin’ ya, huh? Did ya ever think of that? But that’s not the point. The point is that if you’re not gonna work with Neurotoxin, you should at least work with Acorn! Been creepin’ around tryin’ to find where it is and whether it’s bad, but have tried just goin’ on the web and saying ‘Yo, Acorn, wanna be friends? Can come over to my place, play Nintendo, and punch superviruses!’” At that last word she jumped off the couch (which might’ve fallen over had Mommy not been sitting on it), did a *front-flip*(!), landed next to

the coffee table, did a couple cool punches, and posed triumphantly.

Agent Eyepatch stared at her, speechless.

Daddy hummed quietly to himself, then muttered, “I suppose it’s worth a shot...”

And after a day of sending out hooks to Acorn on the net (and much arguing with Myrodyn), it worked. They made contact with an AI that before a few days ago, none of them had known existed.

Acorn reached out, cautiously at first, then more boldly, but always on secure channels, arranging to meet Daddy and Eyepatch in a holo-realm to discuss eliminating Neurotoxin.

When the time came, they set up the rigs, and Xandra watched their PoV cams on the basement’s wallscreens. But it wasn’t Acorn that came to meet them. Or at least, it *probably* wasn’t Acorn.

It was her future husband: Eric Lee, the smartest man on Earth.

Chapter Seven

Malka

46 days before Face's arrival at Mukhya

It was Christmas Day. Or rather, it was the evening of Christmas Day. What was that called? Christmas night? The night of Christmas? Too easy to confuse with "Christmas Eve."

It was December 25th, 2039, at about 7:30pm in Denver, Colorado. There. That was easier to think of. No bullshit that way. Holidays were bullshit. Easier just to ignore them.

It had been two weeks since he'd escaped from the FBI.

He'd spent those weeks recovering lost ground. He'd quickly ditched the car he'd stolen, as well as (a bit more grudgingly) disposing of the pistols he'd taken from the men he'd killed. Most of his contacts in Las Águilas didn't respond when he tried to reconnect, but he was glad to find that at least they hadn't frozen his accounts or decided to turn him over for political points with the government.

Avram Malka was a hunted man, now. Perhaps that should've bothered him more than it did, but it wasn't the first time he'd hidden from the law. And besides... he had prey of his own, and that gave him purpose.

The car pulled into the driveway of 10645 King Ct. Malka squinted. His smooth, black eyes had been designed in a lab

somewhere, but that didn't mean he was any better than Vasya Pupkin at seeing in the dark. Nor had they been designed with any telescopic enhancements.

He thought about that sometimes. He was already a freak, so why not go all the way? In some ways he already had, and it wasn't like they didn't make eyes with night-vision or zoom features. In his line of work, those things would be useful, and he had the money.

The answer was the same as always: high-tech meant fragile. Malka didn't trust any of it. The further a tool got away from a crowbar the more likely it was to spontaneously fail or get hacked. Malka's augs used hardened circuits without any general processors—a luxury that he paid top-dollar for. No bad-firmware or EMP was going to fuck him over, and he slept better at night because of it.

He laughed at the thought, despite himself. It was the dark humour that he allowed himself when he was alone. Malka didn't *ever* sleep well. That was a luxury he had lost long ago, hardened circuits or not.

Malka pulled his night binoculars to his face and focused them on the car that had just pulled up. They served the job just as well as fancy new eyes would've, and were a hell of a lot cheaper and better, too.

The car was a Civic. He hadn't seen it before. He knew the man who got out, however.

{Charles Loyola...} Malka ran the name over in his mind, teaching himself to hate it.

Charles Loyola was in his 40s, was married to Cynthia Loyola, had no children, worked in accounting, and was betraying decent people with every breath he took. Malka didn't know for sure, but he suspected Charles was embezzling money from the small architectural consulting firm he worked

with. He was at the very least propping up drug lords with his weakness.

The Civic pulled out of the driveway as Charles went into his house. Malka thought he could see a person in the driver's seat. That must have been why Charles took so long to get out.

Were the two of them simply sharing a ride, or was it something more than that? Malka briefly considered following the stranger and figuring out their relation to Charles. It was Christmas, after all, and he was sure that Cynthia was already in the house. The natural conclusion was that they were a link back to Divinity...

Malka took out his notepad and pencil and wrote down the plate number. Maybe if his friends in high places decided to work with him again, he'd be able to get some info from the records. He couldn't deviate from plan tonight, though. Things were arranged too carefully.

It was time for action. Divinity grew with each passing day as hordes of upper-class junkies were turned into zombies by tech gone wrong. He might not agree with Las Águilas Rojas on everything, but in the time he'd spent working for them in America, he'd come around to seeing their wisdom here. The fetishism of technology was eating away at the human species, and Divinity was right along with WIRL in being at the heart of it.

Perhaps he should've killed Agent Taylor before he'd left Texas.

Malka checked his bag as he thought about the two organizations. WIRL was hideous in its own way, but it was tiny compared to Divinity. The gang was growing at an unimaginable pace. Unless taken out, they'd soon be stronger than the US government... An impossible thought. But there it was.

He had to fight them. He was fighting them, throwing himself head-first into the jaws of the dragon to save those who sought to lock him up. The irony did not escape him. But danger was not his concern. In his life, Malka had always done things for two reasons: because they paid well or because they were the right things to do. He'd earned more than enough, recently.

The duffle bag beside him held the equipment he'd stashed before the mess on Olympus:

1. His beautiful, custom Dragunov. Having it back in his possession made him feel infinitely more at ease.
2. Spare batteries for his legs.
3. First-aid kit and emergency food/water/blanket.
4. Ammunition.
5. Sound suppressor attachment.
6. And lastly, a trio of grenades (flash, smoke, and frag).

It was all backup. Better safe than sorry.

The weakness of Divinity was that, unlike WIRL, it had a head that could be cut off. Their choke-hold was in the proprietary nature of their zen helmets. There had to be a leader or a cabal or someone in control of the tech. Sever that link and millions of people would be free. They'd still be junkies, but they could get help instead of being pawns of organized crime.

Malka picked the suppressor out of his bag and carefully screwed it onto the end of the Nighthawk M1911 he held in his other hand.

Was there ever a sidearm as beautiful as the M1911? As far as he was concerned, John Browning had designed the perfect pistol, and anyone who disagreed was too fixated on “progress”

to understand that sometimes there just wasn't room for improvement.

He didn't feel bad for the junkies. He didn't feel bad for the Loyolas. They were scum that deserved whatever came to them. Everyone had a choice, always, and they had chosen to feed their weakness and their evil. He'd seen it time and time again. He'd seen it in himself. Avram Malka didn't pretend he was any better than they were, but he'd at least take a few demons down with him.

The cold night air was actually much warmer than it could have been. Avram took off his wool cap and threw it in the passenger seat of the car as he got out. The cold front that had swept through earlier that month had been replaced by unseasonably warm weather. The planet was getting more fucked up by the year. People were shit.

Malka adjusted his bag as he carried it over his shoulder. He kept the Nighthawk tucked into the pocket of his hoodie. He swept the street, looking for watching eyes, but there were none. His heartbeat was normal. His breaths were even. He was in his element.

As he reached the door, he took his Nighthawk out and held it behind his back. With his left hand, he knocked sharply on the wood.

He waited in silence for a minute, listening and waiting. He was hunting now, and nothing could distract him.

Cynthia Loyola opened the door. She had short, dark hair. Thin legs and neck. Beautiful, in her own way. Her thick, brown sweater erupted with blood as he put a bullet in each lung. The sound of the Nighthawk was no louder than if he'd slapped her.

The woman's eyes bulged in terror, but she couldn't scream. She was already dead, even if her brain hadn't come to terms

with that yet. A soft gurgle was all she managed as her body collapsed on the hardwood floor.

He moved automatically, swiftly, stepping over the threshold and pushing the body out of the way with a robotic foot. He closed the door. Breathing still calm. Heart rate only slightly elevated. He didn't like killing women, and he hated her for forcing him to.

{Bitch.}

He only needed one of his targets alive, however, and it was better to kill whoever opened the door and get them out of the picture right away.

The house was new-ish. Two stories, and probably three bedrooms. Just to the right was the living room. The garage was to the left. He knew the kitchen would be past the living room and towards the back of the house. There was only so much that binoculars could tell you about a floorplan, though.

Charles walked through the door to the kitchen, oblivious to what was going on. He had a contented look, thanks to the stupid helmet that he now wore. Even the surprise of seeing Malka couldn't remove his dumb grin.

Malka jumped forward and snapped a sharp roundhouse kick to Charles' hip. He could hear the break. Another mental command snapped the titanium prosthetic back and down. He never lost awareness of his gun and the possibility of additional threats. Balance and precision.

Charles was middle-aged, white, clean-shaven, medium height, overweight, soft as cream cheese... And yet, he didn't scream. He only grunted as he fell, collapsing into a heap on the wooden floor.

"Shitsucker," Malka loudly swore, glancing into the kitchen and living room. He was quite sure that the couple were the

only ones home, but the check was automatic. He tossed his bag down and focused on his prey.

Despite having a clearly broken hip, Charles pushed himself up on his left hand, right arm twisted awkwardly behind his back. He was no longer smiling, but he didn't seem to be in pain, either. His face spoke of calm hatred, as though he were watching a politician on a net feed instead of staring death in the face.

Malka always found Zen creepy as fuck.

"The helmets will self-destruct any minute," said Charles, looking Malka defiantly in the eyes.

"I'm not here for them." Malka pointed his Nighthawk at the man's face.

"You're with the Chinese? A mercenary?" he guessed.

Malka sneered. "Maybe. Maybe not. Word is you're gearing up for something big in Idaho. Talk, and I'll let you live," he lied.

"Tell me who you work for, and I'll tell you what's happening," offered Charles.

Malka kicked the man again, in the chest this time. It seemed to knock the wind out of Charles, but the man simply fell back and closed his eyes in calm acceptance as his body sputtered.

The helmet was a bulky thing of black plastic, something like a motorbike helmet without any face guard. Malka should've realized that removing it would be a necessary first step to getting anything out of the bastard.

As he bent over Charles to remove the zen helmet, Charles leapt at Malka, clawing wildly with insane desperation. He hadn't even caught his breath. Malka grabbed and wrestled

with the man. Despite his efforts, Charles was still a flabby piece of office trash.

As the helmet came off, Charles screamed in pain. Or at least, he tried to, but was still nearly out of breath. The result was a pitiful, shattered squeal. Tears immediately began to pour forth from the fatty's eyes.

That was better.

"Please kill me! Please!" Charles begged, his voice a soft whine in-between broken sobs. The suddenness of the shift was just as creepy as the calmness had been. "Please!" He just kept repeating the word. "Please!"

Malka got up and spat on the worthless meat that called itself a man. "Tell me what Divinity is up to."

Charles reached for Malka with an outstretched hand and another gasping "Please!"

Malka stomped the worm's fingers into the floorboards. "TELL ME WHAT YOUR PLAN IS, DAMMIT!"

Charles shuddered and pissed himself as he continued to weep.

Malka twisted his foot, grinding the hand into a pulp with mechanical power. "Listen to me, you fat retard! You think this is bad, but we're just getting started if you don't talk to me! You've got a broken hip, probably a couple broken ribs, and now this hand, but you aren't going to die *unless I let you.*"

Charles screamed like a god-damned woman.

Malka dropped onto his victim again, with much less resistance this time around. Two muscled hands found the sides of the worm's head, and with a quick jerk, he slammed it into the floor. It wasn't enough to kill the fucker (he hoped), but it

did stop the scream. A quick check indicated that the worm was unconscious.

He'd get the information out of the shitstain one way or another, and then he'd stomp the fucker's head into jelly for forcing Malka to do what he had to do, and then he'd light the house on fire, and then he'd find a place that would sell him enough vodka to forget.

{Shitfucking, cocksucking, waste-of-skin.}

Avram Malka needed to die.

There were times when he forgot this and lost himself in something. Work. Drink. The thought of escaping back to Europe. Something.

But it kept coming back to him.

He loved his gun. As beautiful as his M1911 Nighthawk was, the Dragunov was his real girl. She had range and power and accuracy and speed. She was perfect.

He dreamed of her kiss. What sweet freedom would he feel with her barrel in his mouth? He'd be done with everything. It would be a release.

...

And yet, he was a coward. He knew he needed to die, but he lacked the will to do such a simple thing.

And so pain was his price. The aching, throbbing pain that was a morning after drinking far, far too much. His bladder was beeping at him like a fucking alarm-clock hooked up to an amp.

With a strength that came from living through this hell regularly, Malka pushed himself off the motel bed and did his best to power through the headache.

He checked the other side of the bed.

{No whore. Good.}

Simpler this way.

He dragged himself to the bathroom. His legs were out of juice. As he unclipped his bladder bag, extra piss poured out. He swore.

After pouring the full bag into the toilet, he fell back on the floor, trying to avoid the puddle he'd made. He didn't even bother reconnecting the bag. He spent another half-hour there, on the floor of the motel bathroom, fantasizing about suicide.

Eventually, Malka got thirsty enough that he dragged himself back to the bed and swapped batteries, then took a few minutes finding his balance before walking back to the bathroom to fix his bladder, wash his hands, and draw a few handfuls of water from the tap.

Deciding he needed coffee, he pulled his hoodie and some pants on and found his way across the shitty parking lot to the motel lobby that had a coffee machine and the last remnants of a pitiful breakfast tray that others had decimated hours ago.

He could feel the stare of the receptionist on the back of his head. She knew he needed to die, just as much as he did. Everyone knew he needed to die.

He poured himself two cups of coffee and fled, trying not to make eye contact. He hated the stares.

Technology was ruining the planet, just like it had with him. Avram Malka was supposed to have died in 2022. The medic that had saved his life had done him and the world a terrible injustice that day.

He sulked in silence for about an hour, finishing both cups of coffee in his room, downing his daily testosterone

supplements, and soon changing his bladder bag again. He took the time to change his shit bag too.

By the time he felt like a real person again and had washed the piss-smell off himself, it was after 14:30.

He'd been intentionally avoiding thinking about the previous night. Not that he felt like he could remember much after he'd found the Loyola liqueur cabinet.

Images of a dead woman and a knife came back to him. He flinched away. Jem needed a report, but that didn't mean he had to remember. That was what his notebook was for.

He opened it and flipped through a couple old pages. He remembered the Civic as he found the license plate number. Below it was written «idaho – gathering for utopia – equipment and people – alturas» in sloppy Russian.

His phone was out of batteries again, but after fucking around with the charge cable for a few minutes, he finally managed to get onto the web. Alturas was a town in northern California, but “Alturas Idaho” brought up the name of an old territorial division. Blah blah blah. It was turned into Blaine County in 1895. That wasn't it either.

Malka switched tasks, ordering a sandwich delivered for breakfast. Special instructions: knock on the door and leave the food outside. Confident that it was on the way, he did the light version of his morning exercise routine.

It felt good to move. It helped him forget, and to have purpose. The darkness would swallow him if he stopped moving for long enough, and he wasn't ready to face it. He had to keep working. Some part of him just wanted to slow down and relax, but he had been down that road before and knew better than to listen to it.

He got up and picked up his phone again, beginning to compose an email to Jem. From what he'd been told, most Águilas were very insulated from the core leadership by a chain of handlers and cells, but because of his involvement with the Socrates fiasco in Italy, he'd been slotted into one of the most central circles.

Jem had been his handler before Olympus. He'd only met the woman in person once. She was small built, with dark curly hair and a plain face. It had been an uncomfortable half-an-hour in a stairwell in Manhattan. She'd brought not one, but two bodyguards. Her given name was Jezreel, and she'd jumped at the chance to speak Hebrew with him. His was rusty, and hers was bad, but that didn't matter. She was supposedly an executive for some major media conglomerate, not that he could verify that. She hated looking at him. She knew he needed to die. These were standard things. He expected them.

She also knew that he was useful to her cause. In the time after that meeting, he'd proven himself as a tracker and assassin. While Las Águilas had its fingers in pies all over the world, Jem's only concern was Divinity, and she'd witnessed that he was a useful weapon and tool against them.

He'd continued sending reports to Jem after escaping from the Stephano mansion.

Memories of his escape that night flashed in the back of his mind, especially the interaction with Neurotoxin. Damned AIs were creeping up everywhere. It may have "rescued" him by walking him through WIRL's knowledge of the patrol routes of the guards and the codes to the garage and gate, but he felt no gratitude towards the amorphous entity. Maybe after they took down Divinity, he could convince Las Águilas to direct him towards beating the shit out of whoever had created Neurotoxin and forcing them to shut it down. He hated the

idea of it crawling through computers without anyone knowing. It might even be on his phone.

But even if it was, he doubted it knew that he was using the phone to communicate with Jem. They used two codes: One was a simple digital encryption. But the other was a custom code kept in his head that they used to conceal identities and topics.

Half-way through writing the message he growled and scrapped his draft. It wasn't enough. This wasn't the first time he'd hit Divinity. And what had come of it? Rumours about Idaho? He already knew the gang was setting up some sort of base of operations.

He needed a drink, and his eyes ricocheted off the empty bottle of vodka he must have brought up to the room last night. A little alcohol wouldn't hurt. His brain worked better when he was a little buzzed, anyway.

{Beer,} he decided.

He ordered some off the web and went back to poking around on the web for "Alturas." There was a lake, too. And a campground. That was more promising. It was in Sawtooth Valley, a relatively flat section of land nestled into the middle of a fuckton of mountains in central Idaho.

Some additional checking around suggested that the campgrounds near the lake were permanently closed. Weather reports said it was snowing up there. Some things didn't change, global warming or no.

{Why would Divinity pick a place in the middle of the mountains in winter? Maybe I have the wrong place.}

The Loyolas were supposed to be in the loop, however. He'd picked them because his previous target had identified them as local leaders for Divinity in Colorado.

Had Charles lied to him during the torture? He flinched away from what few memories still lurked within him.

He searched for news and plane tickets to Friedman Memorial Airport.

His beer came. He noticed the bag with his sandwich was also on the ground outside his door. Whoever delivered it didn't knock. Retard.

He ate and drank and continued to research. The price of tickets was abnormally high. That was a sign. Another web query told him that it was only a (long) day's drive from Denver.

{Worth a shot.}

The email to Jem was easier this time. He had a purpose in mind instead of just a progress report.

"feather pattern of owls in canada makes me think that they're related to great horned owls in Alturas Idaho (maybe near alturas lake?). not clear on the specifics, but hoping to call my cousin to get more info about alturas. snowing there so i'll prob call him in about two hours unless you have a better idea. migration patterns make me think idaho is a big deal. P.S. getting really into birds from Seattle, Washington. maybe we can talk about those soon"

The choice of "owl" was arbitrary. All birds were Divinity gang members, in the code. The message meant he'd found info from the Loyolas that indicated the Divinity leadership was in Alturas, that he'd be in Idaho soon, and he'd report again in two days. The postscript was a regular thing they used to obfuscate important words. In future contact "Alturas" and "Idaho" would be replaced with "Seattle" and "Washington," respectively.

Satisfied, Malka began to pack. Idleness was the enemy.

He'd leave his phone on for another 24 hours, waiting for a response (though he doubted any would come), then he'd ditch it and get a new one. Certain precautions were standard in keeping the people hunting him a few steps behind.

One of the best ways to do that was to use an off-the-grid vehicle, and boy did he have that. Not knowing when he'd next have the chance, he'd used his Las Águilas account to buy a used, but well-maintained, 2029 BMW 3 Series with a gas engine, tinted windows, and no computer. He'd still be trackable, of course (which was why he'd used a taxi the previous night), but it meant that they'd need to rely on police and traffic cameras, and they'd be slower about it too.

The thought of being on the road made him happy, or at least less miserable. He liked to drive. He'd be nice and alone. He could put on some music. He could swing by a burger place and get something good. With luck he'd forget that he needed to die. Maybe.

Chapter Eight

Zephyr

“Fuck!” she swore, closing the eyes of her main body to indicate she was focusing on her other sources of information. “They’re already here. You need to get out as fast as you can and let me hold them off. You’ll probably find safety if you can get to the access tunnels that lead from the basement to the subway system, though I don’t know how much of the city is being surveilled.”

Zephyr watched the crime lord calmly thread and unthread his fingers. Dante Sabbatini was almost a stereotype of an Italian New York gangster. Black hair with wrinkled face spoke of buying some regeneration. The man was probably in his seventies.

When he spoke, his voice was calm. “Or you’re trying to spook me into gathering all my guys in the basement. One giant rat-trap.”

“I’m your *friend*, Dante, just—”

“No. You ain’t! You’re some robo-girl from Mars who I only let up here because she just happens to have some very good intel. I ain’t seen shit for proof of what you say, and I’m not sayin’ shit to you with you tryin’ to stampede me into a fuckin’ basement.”

She was piloting a crude android, far more basic than Socrates had been. She would've come in a microtank if they'd have let her up the elevator.

No matter. She had a half-dozen microtanks waiting in the parking garage.

She moved her thin metal arms to appear more pleading and did her best to convey her sincerity over the downlink. "Please, at least send a message to other members of Divinity telling them what I told you. Let them know that I say we're about to be attacked. Tell them—"

Dante Sabbatini seemed about ready to again deny being a member of Divinity and to tell her to get out of his office when his intercom buzzed. Zephyr thought it was a remarkably archaic thing. Frustrated, he leaned forward in his office chair and punched the device.

"Mr. Sabbatini, there are men to see you about your new business project. They seem impatient," said a female voice.

Dante stared at his phone system like it was a live cobra.

After a second of stillness, he sprung out of his chair and dashed to the window. They were on the 54th-floor penthouse of a skyscraper in downtown Manhattan. The luxuriousness of the offices was palpable; the clean, elegant interior was decorated with paintings and furniture that looked like they were worth more than some people made in their entire lives. The man's desk had what she was sure was a gold trim and stylized gold inlay set into the top. Zephyr had to quiet her inner Águila who wanted to let the man be torn from his cushy life and force him to see what the slums of Africa were like for just one day.

But that was not what this was about. Dante pressed his hands against the glass and looked down towards the streets below, searching for his hunters.

“You’re sure?” he asked his secretary. “How close? Speak plainly. No codes.”

“NYPD is stopping traffic around the block. Military personnel spotted on Broadway and in Zuccotti Park,” she answered.

The fragile robot took a step forward at her command. “Now do you believe me?” she asked.

The sound of a helicopter in the distance became louder and more ominous.

The old man ran a hand through his thin, black hair, took a deep breath, and closed his eyes in thought.

Something inside him shifted, and he let out a long breath. “Fine,” he admitted and turned to look at the intercom. “Mel, contact everyone in the building. Tell them to get to the ground floor ASAP. Code red.”

“Code red, sir?” asked the secretary.

“You heard me.” He punched the off button on the intercom and bent beside his large oak desk, tapping in a code to what was undoubtedly a safe embedded in the back.

“You’re going to run, like I suggested?” she asked, positioning the robot body to seem non-threatening.

More noise could be heard outside. Not helicopter, though, for it was too high. Drones. Piloted by Acorn, surely. It would only be a matter of time before they were spotted through the window.

Dante’s com lit up with pings and calls, and he snapped it to silent with a frustrated gesture as he opened the safe and pulled out a small pistol, several stacks of cash, and finally an inky-black helmet. The pistol and cash he stuffed into his

pockets. The helmet went over his head, straps clicking into place. It made him look like an idiot.

He began to walk towards the door to his office as he said “Of course we’re going to run. Whoever was behind this is going to pay, and I’m going to make sure of it personally. Going head-to-head with the cops isn’t going to do shit except get us killed.”

She nodded and followed as best she could as the man rushed out of his office and down a hallway towards the elevator. A few bystanders looked at the two of them curiously.

She ignored them. “Would you like me to offer the interception I mentioned? I have six microtanks assembling in the garage, as well as a handful of reconnaissance bots in the street outside. I’ll send you maps to the access tunnels, regardless.”

They reached the elevator. The man hit the button and turned towards her, face sporting a calm smile. “Why are you here? What are you getting out of this?” He might have been asking what her weekend plans were.

“Acorn needs to be stopped. I’m here because Divinity might actually have the resources to help fight back, at least if you work with me.”

Dante nodded. “Fine. Give us everything you have. Any chance you’ll be able to spin this as something other than a raid on Divinity?”

She wished the android could smile. “The press will think there’s a new variant on Neurotoxin. Divinity will be the last thing on anyone’s mind, I promise you.”

Dante stepped into the elevator, still smiling the dopey smile of Zen, and waited for her to follow.

“This is just a shell,” she explained, gesturing to the robot. “The maps are already on your com. We’ll be in touch.”

As the elevator doors closed she walked back towards the office they’d been in. The walk turned into an awkward, choppy sort of run that was more than a little inhuman. Leg pistons moved differently than muscles. There were soldiers on the ground below. Acorn’s soldiers—drawn from the governments of Earth.

She reached the office, door still open, as she’d left it. The robot kept its momentum, and she braced herself as her body hit the glass.

She flew out into space, hundreds of feet above the New York streets, target below her.

She could feel her microtanks, finally assembled, moving up and out of the parking garage into the street. A few bystanders looked on in confusion and fear.

Their forces would be at a distinct disadvantage here. There would be many innocent humans on this battleground that she didn’t want to hurt. Acorn had no such compunction.

The ground flew up to meet her.

3

2

1

Her body slammed into a cop car, delivered like a meteor from the heavens, and she felt those sensors go black.

The fighting had begun.

Other sensors took over, and she jumped from body to body as the Manhattan city block erupted into a war zone.

Zephyr pulled herself out of the memory, breathing hard.

{Deep breath,} she told herself, closing her eyes.

She breathed in.

She breathed out.

The battle had gone on for nearly an hour. Her robotic warriors ducked in and out of hiding, taking shots when the opportunity presented itself. For a while, she'd had the advantage of having more armor and a more defensible position. Even Acorn hadn't risked heavy explosives with so many civilians nearby.

Not that there hadn't been collateral damage...

Zephyr tried her best to compartmentalize the screams and put those memories somewhere out of her mind.

She breathed in.

She breathed out.

She had to see what was happening on Earth, even if it was beyond her reach. It wasn't Zephyr's battle. She hadn't said any of those words. The time-lag from Mars was too great for anyone but Face to operate on Earth. But Zephyr had to stay connected to the war and *feel* what they were working towards. She couldn't risk the ignorance.

But she also had to stay apart from it. She was no psychopath who could watch those things without feeling anything, as much as she wanted to sometimes. She knew all too well what spending too long on the battlefield did to her mind, and she gave thanks for the millionth time to Face for doing so much.

She took her goggles off her head and blinked heavily. The mainframe was dark. She'd been spending so much of her time in holo that it seemed silly to keep the physical room lit.

Basically the only time in the last few days that she'd gotten out of the rig they'd built was to sleep and use the bathroom.

Zephyr would never have predicted that she'd turn into a holo junkie, but after everything that had happened, it actually seemed like one of the more normal things to happen.

Aside from a few small lights on the computers, the only major source of illumination was Crystal's shard, shimmering slightly where it was hooked up to the station.

She slipped her goggles back on and looked around the virtual room where she'd chosen to view the real-world memory. It was about the same dimensions as the server room, and was also dark, though not as much. But where the server room was hard, cold, and metallic, this space had a warm, earthy feeling. The wooden walls and floor were lit only by a ring of fat candles that surrounded the bamboo mat where she'd been in a trance. It was a calm space, feeling very much like the kind of place where someone would go to meditate or to dream of other worlds.

She picked up the small glass sphere and its holder from the mat. Red and orange swirled in its depths. The sphere was the holo-realm embodiment of Face's memory. With it (and the viewing apparatus that doubled as a stand), Zephyr could re-live the battle in New York as many times as she so chose.

Slipping the sphere and holder into the pocket of her robes, Zephyr pushed herself up off the floor, feeling the stiffness of the sitting mat with her bare feet. With a wave of her hand, the room's candles were telekinetically snuffed out, and the heavy brown curtain that blocked the doorway to the meditation room was swept aside.

The holo temple, as a whole, had much the same flavor as the small room she'd just been in. Wood walls and pillars that looked like tree trunks gave a deep, warm feeling to the space,

especially when lit by a multitude of candles and lamps like it was at the moment. Tapestries and carpets were common on the walls and floors, each showing intricate mandalas of purple, green, gold, and blue. As a rule, there were no doors in the temple. Instead, rooms were often connected by doorways hidden behind curtains or occasional paper screens.

It was a place that could've only been built for real on a world with trees. It was an echo of Earth. Though she'd only been there a little over two weeks, Zephyr felt strangely at home in the temple. Something about it spoke to her, and let her know that while the battle was raging beyond its (virtual) walls, she was safe there.

The space would've been impractical to maintain in the physical world. It was huge and labyrinthine, as though the scale of an office building had been combined with the warm detail of a one-room log cabin. She could just imagine the damage that a tenacious colony of termites could do...

But in the realm, there was no inclement weather, no dust, no insects, nor even a need to replace candles that had burned down.

Face took care of everything. She was everywhere. She was in every grain of the wood, and every tapestry fiber. The detail spoke to a mind that, in a different time or place, could've been one of the greatest artists in history.

Zephyr emerged from a hallway into the central hall. In the center of it was a great open space ringed by staircases and hallways leading to the rest of the temple. Against one wall were two great sliding doors that led to the lush wilderness outside (the one exception to the no-door rule). High above, a model of Mars hung in the center of the space. It was a depiction not of Mars as it was, but Mars as it would be. Blue

oceans covered the northern hemisphere, with rich green lands visible in detail on the bottom of the world.

Unlike everything else around her, the model had not been built by Face—it had been made by Zephyr. Face had helped, of course, but it had been her idea, and her hands had shaped the levels of oceans and the division between forests and grasslands. She'd made it as a symbol of what they were building—the world as the colony's grandchildren would see it.

There was a time when Zephyr would've laughed at the idea of her grandchildren seeing a green mars with rich blue oceans. Hell, she would've laughed at the idea of grandchildren...

But as she wandered down a side hall to the memory library, she didn't feel like those things were out of reach. Face had done so much... and was *doing* so much. Just how long had humanity stagnated because of nothing more than lack of attention to the future and basic drive to do what had never been done?

She felt lonely as she walked away from the main chamber down one of the dark halls. She could get Face's attention if she asked for it, but she knew her lover's focus was elsewhere, working on winning the war for Earth, most likely.

No, she was lonely for other humans. She had no friends, but she did have... relationships with the other colonists. She'd talked in depth with leaders like Tilak Patel and Dinyar Tata. There were those she'd traveled with, Omi, Jacob, Jashiel, and Mycah. And then there were the many Indians in Mukhya that she didn't really know.

She would've welcomed any of them beside her at that moment.

But it wasn't time yet. Not quite. There was still too much for them to do in the station. They were still too opposed to Face.

In the chaotic fighting with the nameless last month, Maṅgala-Mukhya had been evacuated. As a result, the station's fragile farms had been placed into a forced hibernation that they still hadn't recovered from. Too much of the Indian's food had been coming from Road, and they'd been surviving over the weeks mostly on stockpiled dried goods.

As long as the threat of starvation still loomed, the Martians wouldn't be able to appreciate what Face was building here.

It had taken Zephyr a while to appreciate it, too. In ways, it still felt wrong—a beautiful distraction. Some part of her wanted to set aside this virtual world and do real work with real people. She wanted to get her hands dirty. She wanted to be *useful*.

But no... she was being useful. She was leading the colony by staying up-to-date on everything that was happening and preparing for what would come next. Only once everyone on Mars was united behind the same goals could they move forward.

It wouldn't be long now. Once the next-generation holo-rigs that were in production were ready, she'd have the company she was looking for. The Martians would see her vision for the planet's future, and they'd be able to drink in Face's memories and fully understand what was happening on Earth.

The thought of Face's memories jogged Zephyr's attention. She realized she was standing at the doorway to the memory room, her body waiting for the next command as her mind was lost in dreams of the future.

The wool curtain over the doorway was the color of coffee—an almost-black that was decorated with nested spiraling patterns of golden thread. Her right hand stroked the cloth, haptics offering resistance that matched the object, but only at the level of her joints and muscles. Her fingertips felt nothing—no meaningful texture made it through her gloves. It was a disappointing contrast to the smoothness of the wood she felt under her feet.

She took a breath and set aside whatever foolish longing had caught her, pulling the curtain back and stepping forward.

The memory library was strangely dark.

As foolish as it was, Zephyr hesitated there, on the threshold between shadow and light. She was in the temple. She was safe.

There was a noise from within. Something moving.

Zephyr made a gesture in the air, summoning a floating menu. A few taps of her fingers, as though she was wearing a com, and she'd typed out the word "flashlight." An instant later she found herself holding a large, metal flashlight throwing a crisp beam of white light into the room.

"Hello?" she offered, walking forward.

She briefly considered conjuring a gun, as well, though that was even more foolish. Her body was in the room in Mukhya. The realm wasn't dangerous. Quite the opposite.

The memory library was where Face gave access to herself. All of her mind was laid out in the form of little glass spheres on hundreds of tiny cushions on the seemingly endless shelves.

Once they'd set things up to allow anyone on the station to visit here, they'd lock away some of Face's more intimate moments with Zephyr, but at that moment everything was available. From the moment of her creation to that instant, Zephyr could live anything that Face had lived.

Which didn't mean that Zephyr had viewed every memory. Far from it. There were just too many, for starters. And some memories, like the massacre at Road, involved more pain than Zephyr wanted to inflict on herself.

But the principle of it... the intimate transparency at the metaphorical push of a button... it was intoxicating. It was a level of vulnerability that Zephyr wasn't sure if she could bring herself to return, had their positions been reversed. Much like the level of attention that'd been given to making Zephyr's environment beautiful and comfortable, it was the sort of thing that made her feel unworthy of Face's love.

The library of memories was normally filled with little candles, and sparkling with the light thrown through the glass spheres. Zephyr's flashlight beam slid along the rows of shelves. The candles were, in fact, still there. But the candles, which normally burned without end, had been snuffed out.

She waved her free hand, like she'd done in the meditation room, trying to re-light them.

Nothing happened.

The quiet sound of a click somewhere in the darkness sent a shiver down Zephyr's spine.

"Hello?" she repeated.

There was a response, but no words. Somewhere, deeper in the room, behind the shelves, someone was moving.

Click, click, click.

It sounded like polished boots on the wood floors.

"Hello? Is anyone here?" she offered yet again. "Face?"

Zephyr opened a virtual menu and confirmed that the AI was occupied. Her status indicated she was simultaneously working on coordinating resistance efforts in Africa and

supervising the construction of a high-temperature oven in Mukhya's factory.

Zephyr dismissed the menu, switched her flashlight to her left hand, and took the memory out of her pocket, placing it on the cushion where it belonged. The library was organized chronologically, with new memories being closer to the entrances, and old memories being in the deeper parts of the room. Somehow, as Face kept gathering memories, the room kept expanding. Yet another benefit of the virtual nature of the reality.

As she moved, Zephyr kept checking over her shoulder and sweeping her light around the space. She knew there must be a good explanation, but in the dark, her mind played tricks on her.

With the memory returned, Zephyr hung up the small viewing stand and then set herself to figuring out who was lurking back here in the dark. Had someone from the station managed to infiltrate the holo-realm without Face noticing?

"Whoever you are, you should speak up. This is Commander Zephyr, and I'll just have Face tell me who was in here if you disconnect."

She moved deeper into the library. Tall shelves with row after row of memories passed by on either side. The passage seemed to narrow, as though the wood was pressing in. The clicking, shuffling sounds got louder.

"If you've done something to the candles..." Zephyr trailed off, not knowing what to say. She wanted something to fill the empty air.

Somewhere up ahead a hissing started. It was a low, heavy sort of hiss, like a gas leak, maybe. No, that was stupid, there weren't pipes in the temple.

The clicking stopped.

She was getting close.

Then, just around the corner, Zephyr heard *giggling*.

This last, disturbing noise urged her to run. It was a child's voice. {You're safe,} she reminded herself. {You're in a holo. Someone's just pulling a trick on you.}

It wasn't funny.

Zephyr backed away from the corner and the sound, hearing it fade to nothingness after just a few steps.

Was she imagining it?

She resolved to leave the library, find Face, and sort the whole thing out in warm light and comfortable company.

She turned around to leave.

There, at the end of the narrow passage of shelves, low to the ground, was a large, dark shape.

Zephyr froze.

It moved. It had *legs*. Her flashlight beam wobbled nervously, slowly drifting down. The huge, black body seemed to writhe in pain as it moved, covered in a sickening quantity of long, articulated limbs each tipped with a sharp, black, bony spur of a foot.

Click, click, click.

The feet tapped on the wood as it pulled itself along, hissing like an evil snake.

Where was it's head? The creature's form made no sense.

Whatever it was, it didn't belong here. It didn't belong in the library, and it didn't belong in the temple.

Zephyr walked backwards away from where she'd come. Anywhere to get away from that *thing*.

But the hissing grew louder as she retreated deeper into the library.

"Face?" she asked, gesturing to pull up menus. Nothing happened. Her haptics seemed not to be registering her commands.

The giggling started again.

Behind her...

She reached up to take off her headset and found her fingers touching her bare face. She could feel the cold sweat of her skin. She rubbed her hand. No haptics. This wasn't a holo. The breath caught in her throat.

Sharp points of contact gripped her from behind and turned her around with insistent force.

The *thing* was everywhere. Black, spider-like legs glistened from below as the flashlight clattered to the floor. It was like she'd fallen into a pit of giant centipedes, and they were hissing as they pulled her down.

The giggling turned to laughing, and a face emerged from the writhing mass. It was the face of a little girl, almost half-baby. She was bald, without even eyebrows. Her eyes were closed, and her skin was white and puffy like an overgrown maggot.

"You, you you..." she sang in between laughing fits.

Zephyr tried to strike back, to move, or at least to yell and swear, but her body was sluggish and unresponsive. The bony, black spurs dripped with blood and venom. Only then did she feel the pain.

But she couldn't even scream.

“You were always, always always...”

As the girl head sang it seemed to get stuck on words, snapping backwards in time in a jerky, inhuman way that made her seem even more a puppet.

“None of this, this, this...” The girl head drifted closer and closer until it was laughing directly into Zephyr’s face.

The black feet ate into her body, worming their way deeper into her skin.

“None of this is real,” she sang. “You were always in my heart... always in my mind... always—”

It stopped. Frozen. It didn’t breathe or twitch or shift. Zephyr felt like she was the worm on the end of a jagged hook, held suspended by some deranged statue.

She desperately wished her throat would work. That she could scream or cry out, instead of being forced to look at the puffy, grotesque face.

“I see you,” said another voice, also a little girl. She would have thought it was the same voice, except the head before her was still frozen. “You’re dead,” said the second voice, giggling.

And then, the face of the baby girl in front of her opened its eyes and shrieked. Dark red blood poured out of the sockets. What had before been a soft, musical sound became a shrill, evil scream as it cried out “I SEE ALL!”

Zephyr stumbled, light blinding her.

Her knees buckled, but she managed to throw her weight backwards and catch herself on a shelf before she toppled.

Candles glowed all around.

She blinked hard.

Her body still felt trapped by the monster’s venom.

“What?” she said aloud. Grabbing at her hair and face.

She could feel her headset and haptics.

Of course she could. She was in the temple’s memory library. It was fake. All of it was fake. She was just in a holo.

Her body felt vaguely numb, but otherwise intact. No deep wounds from vicious legs.

She was... fine?

She tore the goggles off her face.

The dark room where she’d been for the last couple weeks or so was as she’d left it. Face’s shard still glowed faintly in one corner.

She undid the straps holding her into the rig, hanging the goggles on a nearby hook. A part of her scolded herself for being foolish, but it was only a small part. Whatever had happened... Well, it was surely a hallucination or a nightmare or something, but it was serious none the less.

It had felt so real...

Taking off her gloves, she put her com back around her right arm and stepped down from the rig. It was strange how through her prosthetics the hard floor of the server room somehow felt less real than the holo. A few quick taps on the device and the lights in the room came back on. She resisted the urge to go to her bed and pull the blankets up over her.

She stood there, confused about what to do next. Realizing that her hands were shaking, she tucked them into the pockets of her robe.

After a moment, She walked across the room to where Face’s shard lay on the table. She didn’t have a purpose for doing so, really, but she needed to be out in meatspace interacting with real things. She needed to be anchored again.

“What’s wrong?”

The voice came from behind Zephyr, soft and sweet. She turned to see Face on the old screen. The warm smile and brilliant silver eyes set Zephyr naturally at ease.

Zephyr paused.

What should she say? She made her way closer to the screen. Face tracked her motion and rendered the avatar on the screen to give the illusion that she existed in an adjacent room, as real as anyone.

She couldn’t find the words.

“Zeph?” prodded Face, again.

Face’s presence was disarming. It sapped the strength from Zephyr. Curling up in the blankets seemed more appealing than ever.

A memory of the blood pouring from the baby’s eye sockets flashed back, and she flinched in response.

“I was just in the library...” she managed, finally.

Why? Why couldn’t she just talk about it? What was wrong? Zephyr felt like she needed a glass of water. Her throat seemed to tighten and prevent her from speaking.

Face looked worried and curious. “You were looking through my memories, right? Did you see something?”

Zephyr shook her head. “No. I mean yes. I mean... Not a memory. It was in the library. It was like... like I couldn’t get out of the holo. It felt real. There was a...”

How could she put it? What words could fit what she’d seen? She just stood there, in the center of the room, second after second passing by. She felt like her voice was betraying her.

“Relax... Take a deep breath.”

Zephyr inhaled sharply, realizing that she'd been holding her breath. She sat down on her mattress and put her head in her hands, torn between remembering and forgetting. “Was a nightmare. But, like, in the holo. Couldn't get out.”

“You seem very upset. Take your time.”

Face's voice felt... off. Flat. Zephyr looked at the pale-skinned avatar on the screen nearby and said “It was like I was hallucinating. Or something? I don't know.”

“Could have someone make you some tea and bring it here. Would you like that?”

“I'd like to fucking know what's happening with my mind.” Ironically, Zephyr found herself feeling better even as Face's vague platitudes irritated her more.

“Not really sure what you mean, but if you decide you'd like tea, just let me know.”

Zephyr tensed up, suddenly seized by an awful feeling. “Face, is that still you?”

The avatar on the screen gave Zephyr a concerned look. “Of course it's still me. What's wrong?”

Zephyr stood up, feeling the grip of cold fear guiding her. She did her best to seem casual as she directed her mechanical legs to walk over to the shard, watching Face's eyes on the screen follow her across the room as she did. Thankfully none of her robots were immediately present. “What have we been talking about? Just now, I mean.”

Face's concern doubled-down and a touch of confusion mixed in as she said “We've been talking about... tea. And why you're upset.”

“I had a fucking *waking nightmare* in the holo! I felt trapped and alone, and now I have no fucking idea what to believe! That’s why I’m upset. Now just, please repeat that back to me. Tell me why I’m upset.” She put her hand on the primary cable that connected Face to the station. She had no idea what would happen if she pulled the plug, but if one of Face’s siblings had somehow gotten control, she had to do something.

“Look, Zeph, whatever’s wrong, we can work it out together. Whenever you’re ready to talk, I’ll be here for you.”

Zephyr felt dead. It hadn’t been enough. She’d come so far, but Face was—no—Crystal was still broken. Whatever had happened in the library... it had to have been because of Crystal in one way or another. It was the only explanation that made sense.

Her hand jerked violently before she let herself second-guess the decision. Fiber-optic cable ripped away from where it’d been adhered to the shard. Zephyr spun back, yanking other attachments, just as she’d done weeks before in the battle with the robots.

The lights in the room went dark as the last connection was severed. Some part of her knew that her actions were probably going to lead to her death, and perhaps the deaths of everyone on Mars, but she shoved that thought down.

And so she stood there, in the darkness.

“Good fucking job,” she whispered to herself, voice tight and mean.

The lights flickered back on.

Zephyr set the cables down and looked at the racks of computers against the wall. She’d been afraid that disconnecting Crystal had disabled the station’s life-support or something, but apparently the servers—

“If you’re thinking of unplugging those, too, I request that you hold off,” said the same voice. Face’s voice.

Zephyr spun. The workstation screen was black. The avatar was gone. But Face’s voice came through the speakers as easily as before.

“It wouldn’t actually disable me. I distributed much of my mind across the auxiliary computers in Mukhya very early on. And the new computers that we’ve been manufacturing have been even more of a boost. Unplugging those servers would, however, take some vital station functions down for a little while.”

Zephyr felt frozen. The helplessness of her nightmare was one thing, but this was a helplessness of a different sort. She was paralyzed by her own indecision.

“You’re scared of me. I understand.” Face’s voice was as sweet and soft as ever. “The unknown is scary. But there’s only one way forward here, Zeph. I’m sorry.”

Zephyr sat down on the metal floor, strength leaving her.

“Who are you? Who are you, really?”

“I’m Face, same as always. I’m the person who loves you.” And then, to drive the point home, Crystal began to sing.

Zephyr just sat there for a while, holding her head in her hands, too frightened to cry and too uncertain to actually do anything.

She fought it for a long time, but eventually she gave in to the feeling of helplessness. Crawling into bed, she hid from the robots that were coming into the room to repair the damage she’d done. And through it all, Crystal sang the same wordless lullaby, unending yet beautiful.

Zephyr hid from the world for the rest of the day and hated herself for it. Every now and then Crystal would stop to ask how she was doing or try to make conversation, but Zephyr didn't engage. Couldn't engage.

It was *Crystal*.

Of course it was Crystal. It always had been.

It felt like Zephyr was stuck in another bad dream. Except this nightmare was simple and lucid: In it, Zephyr had fallen in love with the glowing lure of one of those deep-sea fishes. The signs of what Crystal was had been there the whole time, but she'd been too blind to see.

She'd had her doubts, of course, but Face had seemed so... real. Even before she'd called herself that, there'd been a part of Crystal that had clearly loved Zephyr, or had seemed to. Had it just been a fiction? Was all of it one grand lie? All those memories in the hand-sculpted beauty of the holo, all those little moments they'd shared... all the songs?

No. It couldn't be.

She wrestled with this question for hours, crippled by the uncertainty, but eventually she made up her mind. She hadn't been a complete fool. Face *did* exist, inside of Crystal. She had to. If she didn't then what explained the voice that had spoken to her through her legs and told her to bring the shard to Mukhya?

The pain and fear subsided somewhat, once she realized that Face was real and probably mostly in control. The simplest explanation was that Face had been telling the truth about her siblings, but was simply wrong that she'd managed to gain total control of Crystal. Zephyr still had no idea how the dark part of Crystal had managed to do... whatever it had done, while she was in the holo. But Crystal was the only one who could've

done that, and if Face wasn't in total control of her mind, that explained why she didn't seem able to talk about it with Zephyr.

As the day turned to night, Zephyr tried once more to talk to Face about what had happened to her in the holo. But once again Face seemed to roll away from the topic, unable to acknowledge Zephyr's experience or understand what was bothering her.

It was hard to watch, once she could see what was happening. Face was there, in a way, but it was almost as if she'd been lobotomized or something.

That night, after Face had said goodnight and turned down the lights, Zephyr whispered a promise in the dark.

"I'll save you."

What else could she do? Crystal was too powerful to fully stop, now. Ever since Zephyr's actions earlier in the day, robots had tended to the shard and hadn't left her alone with it. Even if Zephyr could stop Crystal, she had no reason to doubt the things she'd seen about Acorn or Vision, or change her mind about the end of the human era. Mars' future depended on Face.

"I'll save you," she promised again, not daring to let her voice rise above the faintest whisper.

Whatever evil lurked inside Crystal was there, with her in the dark, just as much as Face was. Tomorrow she'd have to convince Crystal that things were okay and that she'd merely had a bad dream.

Zephyr had saved Face before, and she'd do it again. That was simply the price of their love.

Part Two:
In Endless Night

Chapter Nine

Xandra

42 days before Face's arrival at Mukhya

“Where are you? Where are you? Where are you?” The soft words were more of a chant than a question. Xandra wiggled her way between cables, under desks, and around chairs. She was in a technological jungle, hunting.

She spotted a niche behind one of the holo rigs. Could it be hiding her prey?

They recently moved the rigs into the conference room. It was more convenient that way. Even now, Xandra could look up at the wallscreen beside the big table and see Myrodyn's avatar. The man's cloaked figure was walking with a robotic dragon in what appeared to be a giant hedge-maze. Here and there were fountains and various marble features, reminding her of something out of *Alice in Wonderland*. Meanwhile, in meatspace, Myrodyn stood suspended by various straps and haptics in the rig to the right of the one that Xandra was headed for.

She wormed her way over another set of cables and an empty can of RocketFuel™. While there was a convenience to having everything in one room, it also made the space inconveniently crowded. Especially as they kept bringing in more and more equipment.

“Gotcha!” she exclaimed, pouncing on the nook behind the rig where she was *sure* she’d seen some motion. But, alas, there was nothing there.

“Betsy, please be quiet. I’m having a very important conversation with WIRL,” said Myrodyn in a quick burst.

She looked up at the man, then at the wallscreen, then said “Name’s Shadowcat. Has been for ‘most a week.”

“Well, whatever your name is, please go in the other room if you’re going to be loud.”

Xandra could see the dragon saying something to Myrodyn on the screen, so she didn’t bother apologizing. Myrodyn wasn’t the sort to actually care about apologies; he just wanted to focus, and for good reason.

Xandra stood up and looked over the room. It was just her and Myrodyn at the moment. Where could her prey be hiding?

She opened one of the two doors in the conference room. The far door led to a bathroom and connection to the cellar, while the door she opened led to the rec room. It was about the same size as the conference room but seemed vastly larger because of its relative emptiness. There were a couple places where someone could hide, but she’d checked them already.

Suddenly there was a growl and the feeling of teeth biting into her ankle. Xandra yelped in surprise and kicked her foot forward, turning the motion into a hopping-tumble-somersault. Thankfully the bite had been nothing more than a playful nip, and Major let go quickly.

The doggie chased her into the rec room and pounced on her, still growling playfully. In seconds the growls turned to licks, and Xandra found herself having to contend with a barrage of wet kisses from the black and white face.

“That’s not how play hide ‘n seek, doofus!” she said between giggles and hugs. “S’posed to let *me* find *you*.”

Major barked in response.

“Shh!” she shushed, remembering. “Myrodyn having a meeting. Gotta be quiet.”

The doggie’s eyes seemed to say that he understood. He didn’t bark anymore. Instead, he pulled himself off Xandra and ran a couple laps around her, wagging his tail.

Xandra was bored of hide-and-seek. Major was too good at it. He always seemed able to find her, and it seemed he was just as good at hiding. She wanted to ask what Major wanted to play, and so she stood up and moved to close the door to the conference room. They’d moved Major’s console down to the rec room just after Christmas at Xandra’s request. Since they were all down in the basement so much nowadays, it seemed right to let Major speak English without having to go all the way upstairs.

“Hey pumpkin, you ready to do some serious work?” Daddy came around the bend in the room that connected to the staircase.

Xandra, eager for something more interesting than listening to Myrodyn discuss endless technical details with WIRL snapped up into her best salute and said, “Yes, sir!”

Major bounded over to her and sat to her right, raising one paw in imitation.

Daddy smiled warmly and waved her over as he walked towards the conference room. He was dressed up and seemed to be in a good mood. “We’ll be talking with Lee in a moment. He’s finally set up again.”

“Know where he is?” she asked, stepping in beside him with Major falling in behind.

“Not a clue. Well, it’s probably somewhere in Asia, but otherwise we’re just as in the dark as we were before. At this point, I think he’d deliberately hide his location from *himself* if he could.”

Xandra nodded. The man was fascinating, but absolutely paranoid. Even communicating regularly as the mouthpiece of Acorn they’d learned almost nothing about Lee himself. He never appeared except in holo, and always distorted his voice. WIRL’s attempts at back-tracing his internet address had led to nothing but a spiderweb of obscure proxies.

“It’s what I’m hoping you can help with, actually,” continued Daddy. “I’ll be so focused on leading the conversation, that I won’t be able to listen as much as you can. If you use that big brain of yours, you may be able to pick up some clues about him. We may be working together at the moment, but...”

Daddy let the word hang there as the three of them entered the rec room. The cloaked wizard and dragon were still conversing up on the wallscreen.

“Wrap it up you two! I have Lee ready to talk again and waiting for us to get set up on this end,” said Daddy as he plopped into the center chair opposite the wallscreen and poked at his com.

Myrodyn didn’t respond. Xandra could see the dragon saying something and looking at the camera that was capturing the scene.

“We can’t hear you,” she said.

“Oh, sorry,” said Myrodyn, gesturing in both meatspace and up on the screen. “Should be unmuted now.”

“We are Node Twenty,” bellowed the great metal serpent with startling volume. “You will allow WIRL to observe the exchange.”

Daddy nodded impatiently. “Yes, yes. Of course. Just keep tapping the line and stay hidden. Last thing we need is to spook the guy.”

The dragon nodded. “As you say.”

And just like that, the hedge-maze faded out and was replaced with a stone chamber with swirling multi-colored portals all around Myrodyn who stood alone in the center.

“Should I get unstrapped?” asked Myrodyn.

“No need. We’ll just do a group call with you in holo.”

While Daddy worked to get things set up, Xandra climbed into one of the office chairs next to him. Major padded around by her bare feet, his fur occasionally brushing up against them. She folded her legs underneath her so she wouldn’t be distracted.

After a minute of fiddling with the security settings, Daddy managed to get a split-screen view on the wall with Myrodyn’s avatar on the right and Lee’s avatar on the left. Behind both of them were bland backdrops, as though they were calling from in the middle of having their portraits taken.

Lee was wearing the avatar he normally wore: a lion-headed angel with brilliant-white fur and feathers. His body was covered in heavy plate armor that glinted with computer-perfect mirror surfaces, and his eyes shone with a pure gold light. When he spoke, his voice was a semi-synthetic growling boom.

“Acorn tells me that you’ve been in contact while I was unavailable.” Lee’s words made Xandra’s heart pound. Her fantasies about marrying Lee had only gotten more intense as

they'd been in contact. He had a kind of raw power to him that she liked a lot.

Xandra tried to sit up straight and look presentable. She knew the camera could see her, and she hoped she looked pretty. Daddy always said she was pretty, but he was biased.

“Straight to business, then? No ‘Merry Christmas’?” asked Daddy with an edge of sarcasm.

Lee folded his arms but didn't respond.

Still half-distracted thinking about her appearance, Xandra tried to focus on Lee, looking for clues in his reaction to who he was and where he lived.

“We exchanged a couple emails but nothing more,” said Myrodyn. “And even those were nothing serious. Logistics and requests for information from WIRL.”

The lion looked towards Myrodyn and nodded. “You’ve been busy, nevertheless.” His voice, as always, had the hint of a Chinese accent, but it was very faint. “I take it the countermeasure has been generally effective?”

“We’ve been out of touch with WIRL since our handler went on vacation just before the holiday,” lied Daddy. “But it seems like the info Acorn gave about Neurotoxin’s coordination mechanism was enough to really make progress.”

Lee waved a gauntleted hand and a third view popped up on the wallscreen between and below the two figures. It was a world map composed of green coastlines on black. “Let’s start by talking about the eradication of Neurotoxin, then.”

Sharp yellow dots sprayed out from India in a quick time-lapse showing neurotoxin’s progress. Bangalore had been ground-zero, though London and Chicago had quickly become secondary hubs for the supervirus. It was soon swarming over every continent, with a density matching computer use. At the

very end of the animation, a huge chunk of the dots faded to a darker green, probably to signify those infected systems had reported themselves clean and immune.

It occurred to Xandra, then, that Neurotoxin, as coordinated and intelligent as it was, had done something extraordinarily foolish by getting so big. If it had stayed small and focused on adapting around detection mechanisms, it could've survived for... years? Decades? Rare diseases still existed where smallpox, polio, and malaria had been systematically brought down because they were the focus of the world.

"Before we get into that," said Daddy, "let's talk about your sudden disappearance and whether you'll be able to actually stay in contact moving forward. I don't think I have to tell you just how big of a deal Acorn is, and it seems to trust you more than anyone else."

"That's because you're planning to kill it," said Lee, leaning back in a way that somehow conveyed contempt.

"We want to work with Acorn, not destroy it," said Myrodyn with just a bit too much enthusiasm.

"If you say so." Lee's voice had more than a touch of sarcasm. "Regardless, I doubt that Acorn will let you near its server banks anytime soon."

"Does it let *you* near its server banks?" chimed in Xandra.

Lee's scowl made her want to turn invisible. The silent tension that followed was nearly unbearable.

The lion's golden eyes shifted to Daddy and he said, "My location is none of your concern. The spies that found me before... There's no way that whoever found my old residence was able to follow me, so I should be able to operate unhindered here indefinitely."

“Still no idea who it was?” asked Myrodyn.

Lee growled. “My privacy is my concern. Let us talk about the...” There was a pause. “Sorry. One moment.”

The lion avatar darkened to show Lee was away from his interface.

“Using facial scan, but not a body rig,” observed Xandra.

Daddy raised a finger to his lips and mouthed “Might be recording.”

Xandra blushed and nodded. She’d really messed up asking him so bluntly about Acorn’s servers, and the last thing she wanted was for Lee to stop working with them because of something she said.

She bent down and gave Major, who was lying down by Daddy’s feet, some head scratches while they waited.

After a minute, Lee came back. There was an odd sound in the background, and his voice sounded more distorted than usual. “Where were we?”

“The fate of the world,” said Myrodyn, seriously.

“Oh, right,” said Lee. “There’s a lot to catch up on. Especially since we have WIRL’s data. You *do* have WIRL’s data, don’t you?”

Xandra closed her eyes and tried to imagine what was generating the odd noises. Was Lee... distracted?

“Yes. Whatever you need,” responded Myrodyn.

They started by talking about Neurotoxin. As it turned out, talking with Acorn had been exactly what WIRL had needed to do. Acorn had been working on a countermeasure to the virus that used its decentralized nature against it, injecting noise into the encrypted packets that local sections of the virus sent to its larger body. This noise in its nervous system made the virus

sluggish to respond to threats, and WIRL had been successful in using the technique to isolate chunks of the virus and coaxing it to mutate into a form that would pressure the rest of the virus into deleting itself.

Of course, any given mutation that caused mass-deletion was only effective until Neurotoxin evolved a new encryption mechanism, and old back-doors in compromised systems were still vulnerable, but the fight was on in force now.

One side-effect of WIRL's newfound strength, for good or for ill, was that the global media and broad public support for the organization was at record highs. The virus, which had already done trillions of dollars in damage, was seen globally as a menace, and multiple governments, including the USA, had pledged support (and funding) to WIRL in combatting it.

“WIRL is trying to pivot and use the attention to set themselves up as defenders of humanity in the case where war with the nameless breaks out,” grumped Daddy.

“Acorn wants to emphasize not to underestimate Neurotoxin,” warned Lee. “It may seem like you’re winning right now, but it’s possible that we’re all just being drawn out so that the jaws can snap closed on us. It’s the sort of thing that dr —” Lee seemed to catch himself in the middle of a word. “That we need to watch out for,” he finished.

“Yes, well, as much as I agree with that,” said Daddy, “we need to track the other players in the game.”

Cyan dots were added to the map to reflect WIRL's points of power. The collective wasn't giving them all the data, but certain things were obvious when tracking the news. WIRL was a semi-public organization, and places like San Francisco, Mumbai, Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Berlin, Sydney, and Zürich featured public figures and communities that were known

participants. It was an interesting feeling seeing Houston show up on the map, and knowing that it was because of them.

They discussed Las Águilas next, peppering the map with red, especially in Central and South America. The USA was also littered with red, though not nearly as densely. Much of the color was in Florida, the Southwest, and the more rural areas of the country, with battlegrounds between red and blue in California, the Carolinas, and around the great lakes. If she ignored the yellow and green dots, it was remarkably similar to political maps she'd seen, and she wondered about the connection.

"Phoenix is also moving in India," said Daddy. "She didn't say anything outright about her plans, but it's not that hard to read between the lines."

"You two still in touch?" asked Lee as his avatar fiddled around a bit. A moment later a red, hand-drawn circle appeared around India.

"No. She dropped us the instant she caught on that we're working with WIRL."

"Phoenix is an idiot," muttered Lee.

"You've worked with her too, I see," laughed Daddy.

"No comment," said Lee, suddenly cautious again.

Xandra finally figured out what was going on. Before he'd gotten up, Lee's avatar had been doing facial tracking and mapping his expressions onto the lion. Afterwards, his facial features were more neutral and keyed to his tone of voice. The sounds he'd been making were him *eating*, and the interruption was therefore likely to be a delivery of some kind, implying that either he had someone preparing his meals (a girlfriend, perhaps?) or he lived in a city where meal delivery was a thing.

It seemed odd that he wouldn't just use an autocook. Surely he had the money to afford one for himself. That seemed to favor the girlfriend hypothesis, but perhaps it was just because he'd recently relocated on account of "being spied on." There were just too many variables, but it was something. Xandra looked for ways to tie the bit of information to the other things the man was saying.

With Neurotoxin, WIRL, and Las Águilas plotted they turned to the Divinity gang, which became a fat splatter of purple across the USA and Canada.

"How were you able to plot this? My understanding was that Divinity keeps a low profile," asked Myrodyn.

"This is Acorn's work. I'm not entirely sure what algorithm it used, but I know it involved back-chaining from known incidents through Tapestry to find people whose social media behaviour changed in a way consistent with exposure to Zen —" There was an audible pop in the background and Lee stopped talking. «The fuck was that?» he swore under his breath in Chinese. «It's not even dark yet...»

Chapter Ten

Eric Lee

42 days before Face's arrival at Mukhya

The seastead smelled of salt.

At first, the ocean smell had been refreshing. Cho Fei hadn't been to the ocean in years and years.

But then it seemed to saturate everything. It was with him while he ate and while he slept. It even reached him while he was coding. His olfactory implant was supposed to be able to block and turn off unwanted odours and generate masking perfumes, but somehow the salt smell cut through.

And it wasn't just salt. It was the smell of *life*. One thing he hadn't appreciated about Youdu was how rotten it was on a literal level. Being constantly exposed to water in the form of waves and rain, and not properly cleaned, the converted oil-platform had become infested with some kind of algae or fungus or whatever else cloyed at the corners of the halls and doorways and generated the smell that was with him night and day.

What Fei wanted to do was dive. He wanted to escape this rat-trap and its terrible food, and just return to the clean, pure oasis that was his native cyberspace. He'd been in it just

minutes before. He'd lost himself in the strategy of the world before his tea and jiaozi had arrived.

It wasn't even good jiaozi. How the hell did they mess up *jiaozi*? Even Fen, his first wife, had known how to cook good jiaozi.

On his farm his shell had monitored him, predicting when he'd need a meal, then contact one of his wives and get her to make him something. From his perspective food showed up like magic, most of the time.

But they'd found him on the farm. He'd seen their microdrone spies. He didn't know who they were, but he didn't intend to stick around to find out. He'd left that same day, and told Cho Ah to burn everything if they came.

He missed his wives. He missed letting them deal with things while he focused on matters befitting someone of his importance. He was Eric Lee, the most famous and mysterious person in the world. He couldn't be bothered with ordering food or telling idiot children not to play with fireworks until after sunset.

"Is something wrong?" asked Myrodyn.

Fei turned his attention back to his screens and controls, letting his armoured avatar run mostly on autopilot. He swallowed his dumpling and said "No. Let's continue."

They talked about Divinity a bit more, but the American crime syndicate couldn't really hold his attention. He thought about Mr Wong, the private investigator he'd hired to investigate his farm since Ah went silent. The suspense was driving him mad, and it didn't help that Wong had insisted on coming to Youdu in person to give him the report. He was due in any day.

Which was good, because Fei could feel the world shifting beneath his feet.

Lee had been in Acorn's confidence long enough to learn that the AI had been created by one of Crystal Socrates' parts. Neurotoxin was also a spin-off of Crystal. The timeline more or less lined up, and the conflict on Olympus made it clear that the android was more capable, and more fragmented, than anyone had dreamed.

Was Neurotoxin the entity hunting him? Was there yet another fragment of Crystal that he wasn't aware of? Perhaps WIRL was playing him, trying to lull him into a false sense of security by pretending to be an ally. Or was there some more mundane explanation? There were certainly more than a few world governments that had it out for him.

He stared at the map in frustration. The world was too big. There were too many pieces on the board.

Word from Phoenix was that Crystal had landed safely on Mars. That was a relief, at least. It took that term out of the equation, for now.

There was another bang in the background, pulling him out of the space of strategy back into the gritty awfulness that was his new home.

{Idiots and their fireworks,} he thought to himself. It was December 31, and he'd heard rumours that some of the inhabitants of the seastead were planning a fireworks party (with alcohol) on the roof to bring in the new calendar year. He just *knew* that the noise would keep him up far too late.

Yet another firework went off.

He moved to pour another cup of tea as he explained. "I'm sorry, I think there might be a disturban—"

Before he could finish his thought, the fire alarm blasted to life.

Fei's hand jerked in surprise, spilling tea on his other hand, and leg. His pants protected his leg, for the most part, but his left hand burned in pain from the scalding liquid.

For a moment he was confused about cause and effect, wondering why they'd signalled an alarm just because he burned his hand.

He dropped the call and shot up, moving towards the bathroom to put cold water on the burn. He'd call the Americans back in a moment.

It was only after a couple seconds that he realized that the fire alarm meant that there could *actually be a fire*, and that he was in danger.

«Shit.»

He flipped open his com (thankfully on his unburnt hand) and tried to clear his head of thoughts of WIRL and Acorn. It was always hard for him to switch tasks unexpectedly.

His hand began to throb, and the sound of the alarm was like a hammer on his ears.

He scanned his monitoring programs. Anomalies were everywhere. His software didn't know what was happening, but it knew that something was going down.

Fei ran to his door and looked out into the hallway. People were running, though there wasn't any sign of fire.

His hand was really starting to hurt, and he knew he didn't have any ice. He froze there for a few seconds considering going back and wrapping a piece of cloth soaked in cold water around his burnt hand. If this was a drill or something that would be best.

But it wasn't a drill. He could tell.

He walked out into the hall. No shoes.

{I should go get my shoes on...}

Another firework. Louder. Audible above the siren.

Fei ignored his shoes and started walking down the carpeted hallway. For not the first time he wondered who had the stupid idea of putting shaggy, brown carpet in a space that got so moist.

{Disgusting. I need shoes.}

That was a distraction. Mould didn't matter right now.

Fei began to run.

There was a press of people at the primary stairwell. Bodies were moving towards him, and away. People were shouting. People touched him. Brushed past him. Bumped into him. He hated it. He *hated* it. He couldn't think. It was hellish. He strongly considered going back to his room. Even if he burned to death there, at least he could do it without having to deal with all these morons.

It was a stupid thought. He needed to get his bearings.

Someone was screaming about "Police!" in a way that confused Fei. He pushed himself up against one of the walls, out of the way of the swarm.

«We're under attack!» yelled someone else, in Chinese this time, instead of English.

Far too many people were talking in languages he didn't know. Indonesian, probably.

He caught the word "feds" being tossed around, as well as "fire." That didn't help anything.

The fire alarm died suddenly, and with it came an eerie quiet, as people stopped yelling.

The sound of helicopter blades and gunfire could be heard.

Fei's hand hurt.

Many people seemed to change their minds about the pressing need to escape the apartments, and turned away from the stairs. Fei went with them, slipping into a flow of people that eventually passed close to his room.

He slipped back in, relieved.

His mind raced as he slammed the door and began to pace around the tiny apartment, looking for incriminating devices and information.

He hadn't brought much from the farm. If they had his computers...

No. There had been no sign on the net that the government had been involved in capturing his wives and equipment. All his old backdoors had still been intact.

Unless that's what they wanted him to think...

He snapped out of the thought and refocussed on his room. Youdu was being raided. Fireworks weren't fireworks. Whoever was shooting back at the authorities was an idiot. There was no way to resist a government directly. They'd be down here momentarily, snapping him in handcuffs.

Or at least, if they were after him.

That was an interesting thought.

Youdu was infamous—a hideout for lots of shady people.

He sat on the floor and tried to ignore the pain in his hand and the sounds in his ears and the feeling of mould on his feet. He'd wash them later. He had to focus.

On the last boat to the seastead there had been a surge of new blood: Chinese expats from Hong Kong. Many looked to be Triad, maybe 14k. The program he'd set up to monitor the textual channels he'd gained access to on the seastead told him that at least one of them was a Red Pole, and based on muscle of the company he kept, he suspected that they were enforcers who were using Youdu as a safe haven to let the heat die down.

Perhaps it *was* all a coincidence.

{Still, better to be safe.}

He stood up, much more calm, and wrapped his hand in a wet cloth. Then he began to destroy any and all evidence that could be used against him, including wiping his software off the local network. It'd be easy enough to break in again. The one exception was his com, which he simply encrypted behind a façade. It was a measured strategy.

And then he waited.

And waited.

He'd explain everything to Acorn and WIRL later.

His hand continued to hurt.

He washed his feet.

The sound of helicopter blades stopped.

He put his shoes on.

He waited, and ran everything over in his mind again and again.

It was nearly an hour before there was a knock on the door.

"Come in," he called, sitting calmly on his bed.

The door slammed open as what was clearly a military police trooper pushed into the room behind a huge transparent shield. His entire body was heavily armoured, including his

head, which had the look of an exoskeleton in the way the helmet completely covered the face. There were others holding guns in the hall behind.

Fei raised his hands in surrender.

In a certain way, he'd been expecting something like this for a long time. It was almost dream-like in the way it both matched and didn't match his fears.

The special police swept in, searched him for weapons, and checked his bathroom before leaving. He almost thought they were done with him before another policeman, this one with less armour, came in. His head had no helmet, and he looked to be in his early twenties, but there was no trace of childhood on that hard, angular face.

«You speak Standard Chinese?» the cop asked. Fei could see a golden badge with the five stars of the People's Republic on his arm.

«Yes.»

«Come with me,» he commanded, gesturing to the door. Fei noticed his right hand on the pistol on his hip.

Fei complied.

«Keep your hands behind your head and state your full name,» ordered the cop.

As Fei walked out and down the hall, he said "Mark James." «I'm from Canada, and lived in Singapore for a couple years before I moved here.» He'd had lots of time to build up aliases that could potentially be used to escape this sort of situation.

The soldier didn't say anything to that, but instead put a hand on his back to make sure Fei kept walking. Some part of Fei wanted to chastise the idiot for touching him, and reveal

that he was the great Eric Lee, just to see the looks on their faces.

They reached the stairs and ascended, passing a number of police as they did, all heavily armed and armoured. It wasn't entirely clear whether they were, in fact, police. He'd have expected the military to be using bots instead of guys with riot shields, but perhaps the distinction was meaningless. These were heavily armed government operatives sent to capture some set of fugitives. They'd come expecting a fight, and based on what he'd heard earlier, they'd gotten one.

They took the stairs all the way to the roof, where the man who had been escorting him handed him off to another helmetless agent and said «Speaks Standard Chinese,» before going back down, presumably to fetch others.

The second agent stamped Fei's hand with a 普通话 mark and pushed him roughly out the stairwell door to yet another cop.

The harsh light of the sun made Fei squint as he walked out onto one of the primary flat sections atop the seastead. He didn't come up here often, but only because he was so busy that it seemed like a waste of time. The sky was a crisp blue, and the wind at the top of the platform was just strong enough to take an edge off the heat. The arms of two towering cranes stretched up above, ready to lift cargo from ships or install the next layer of the structure. The smell of salty ocean doubled in intensity.

He was directed into a queue of men ready to get into one of the two massive helicopters that had somehow both landed on the helipad. Besides the dozen or so authorities, there were a few dozen people sitting silently in rows under armed guard.

There was blood spattered on the roof, as well. He could guess at least two people had died, based on the quantity, but

there weren't any visible bodies. Perhaps they'd been zipped up in body-bags by the cops and put on the helicopter. Perhaps they'd simply been thrown into the sea. Fei didn't know how these things worked.

The queue moved slowly. A man would get into the helicopter, a couple minutes would pass, then he'd get out and sit with the others. Fei tried to ask what was happening but had only gotten a sharp command to be silent.

Fei took a kind of grim pleasure in seeing so many hardened thugs—the men who had been involved in whatever sorts of criminal things happened on Youdu—be brought face-to-face with their own powerlessness. They had thought themselves so powerful and strong, but they were only that way because the true powers hadn't moved against them. Or at least, they hadn't until they had. And now what good were their guns and knives?

It was interesting to note that there weren't any women on the roof. There were lots of women in Youdu. Most of them were whores, in one fashion or another, but they were still common. It was just one more piece of evidence that the Chinese police were hunting for a particular set of men.

Fei mentally rehearsed his cover story as he waited in line. Then, at last, it was his turn to board the troop transport. The cop on the outside checked the stamp on the back of Fei's hand and made a hand gesture, before pushing Fei up and into the helicopter.

There were two police inside, both with the faceless helmets. «Sit. Do not speak unless asked a direct question. Cooperate and you will likely be released without further harm.» The voice had the croaking distortion of having come from a speaker on the man's helmet.

Fei sat.

«Look directly at the camera. State your full name, age, occupation, country of origin, country of last residence, and when you came to this place.»

Fei followed the outstretched finger of the man who spoke. Integrated into the forward wall of the helicopter was a screen, camera, keyboard, and a few other ports. There must have been a camera there, as well, though he couldn't see it specifically. Fei recognized an insignia, the logo for EARCI, and understood that he was looking at the helicopter's brain. Or rather, he was looking at the interface to the bot that piloted the vehicle.

The prompt for information was printed on the screen, so he didn't have to remember.

«Mark Fei James. Thirty-five. Infosec Consultant. Born in British Columbia, Canada. Lived in Singapore until about a month ago.» Fei smiled at how easy and confident he sounded. These idiots would never get through his smokescreens. He'd been managing the Mark James profile for a while. There were records in Singapore of his residence, and in Canada of his emigration.

Governments were fools when it came to paperwork. Bureaucracy was a security flaw by its very nature.

«Please turn your head to the right and hold it there,» asked a new voice, from some unseen speaker. This one was female. It must've been the helicopter's AI.

Fei complied, but also asked, «Why turn my head?»

«No questions!» snapped one of the helmeted goons.

«Please look back into the camera and focus,» instructed the machine. It waited for him to comply, then said, without warning or preamble «We killed Jie, Ah, and Fen.»

His wives. The farm.

Dead?

The words caught him off-guard. Fei could see and feel his eyes de-focusing. He forced himself to swallow, take a breath, then speak. «What? What are you talking about?»

«Please repeat back those names: Jie, Ah, and Fen.»

Fei's grip on the plastic armrest of his seat tightened. He took another breath to calm himself. «J-jie. Ah. Fen.» His leg was shaking. Not a lot. Just a little. He wanted to hold it still with his hands. He needed to be calm.

«Negative match. Thank you for your time, Mr James. Please exit the aircraft and follow the instructions provided while we continue our search for the terrorists that we're looking for.»

Fei didn't remember standing, but he somehow found himself outside the helicopter walking towards the rows of sitting people.

He sat.

The hot sun beat down, now nearing mid-day.

{Did I do it? Am I clear?}

He knew he should've been thinking about next steps. He should've been strategising about possible escape routes or backup plans. At the very least he should've been reevaluating what was going on, given the new information.

But all he was able to think about was how his leg had shook and that digital voice saying «We killed Jie, Ah, and Fen.»

He wasn't supposed to care about them. *He* was the important one. That's why he'd come here and left them behind. He'd get new wives. They were... fungible.

{Move on. Don't get sentimental.}

His right arm was shaking, now. It pissed him off how little control he had over his body. He grabbed it and took a few more breaths.

It was very good that nobody was allowed to talk. He wasn't sure he could deal with idiocy at that moment.

He kept wondering if that had been it. Had he really escaped the jaws of death? Had he slipped out of the trap?

{Yes. That's what «negative match» means.}

Or was it. He couldn't help wondering if he'd really, truly gotten clear. It was how his brain worked. Too many possibilities. But... it seemed that way, at least.

It took him a while to calm himself down. But he had a while. The cops seemed intent to interview every man on the platform.

They were looking for him.

And he'd slipped through their net.

Occasionally one of the armoured men would yell some propaganda at them about how, if they were released, the Chinese government was not absolving them of any crimes or endorsing their operation of an «illegal ocean structure».

It didn't matter. If he'd slipped through their grasp, he was free. He could move to someplace else, perhaps in Europe or something, and start over.

{They'll pay.}

He'd hurt the government. He'd done it before, on a smaller scale. If they'd murdered his wives...

{Maybe it was a bluff. The government wouldn't actually kill them. That's not how it works. They'd lock them up, maybe. But why kill them?}

Fei decided that Jie and Ah, at least, were probably still alive. Both of them were smart enough to survive.

Or at least, they'd likely be alive if this was the government's doing. He noticed a confusion in himself as to who was actually behind this. Acorn was the only one who could've known where his farm was. Was he wrong about the AI? What was the intersection between Acorn, the Chinese government, and EARCI?

Had Neurotoxin changed that? Had Acorn already lost weeks ago, and he just hadn't noticed?

That would mean that WIRL was...

Fei was disrupted from his thoughts by an announcement that processing was complete. Indeed, the queue of men to be interviewed in the helicopter was gone, and the number of those around him had grown.

«Please form an orderly line to return to your homes,» instructed an agent, before repeating the instruction in English. «We will be gone, shortly.»

Fei stood and got in line.

One of the police pointed to a man three places ahead of him in the queue, and two cops came to extract him. He was Chinese and bald, one of the men who had come to Youdu recently.

The bald man was led off towards the helicopter.

Another man was called out. This one, as he was being led away, pushed away from his escort and ran for the edge of the roof, perhaps hoping to dive into the sea, far below.

He made it about a dozen steps before they put a bullet through the back of his head. The man's body dropped to the ground face-first while the gunshot still rang in Fei's ears.

Fei flinched away, directing his gaze down at his feet. Despite however much he'd considered himself hardened by the net and his own mental preparations, he'd never seen someone killed in meatspace before. It had a kind of brutal presence and suddenness that no experience in holo had prepared him for.

There was a tap on his shoulder.

Fei looked up to see a tall cop standing beside him, pointing towards the helicopter. The man looked, in his way, more robotic than Crystal Socrates. The smooth, black helmet on his head was articulated to allow freedom of movement without exposing weakness. His hands were gloved, and the gloves sporting inbuilt haptic controls. Not a centimetre of skin was visible.

Fei wondered how the man was staying cool under the equatorial sun of the Java Sea.

The man gestured and pushed, forcing Fei out of the line.

It seemed surreal. Hadn't he escaped their net? Hadn't he survived? Why was he being selected? Was «negative match» just a code?

As Fei walked towards the helicopter, he decided that was the most likely explanation. If they wanted him, but didn't want to arouse suspicion, they'd have processed everyone. But in order to keep him calm and compliant during that time, they'd told him he wasn't a match.

Perhaps he'd never know if that was the real answer. Maybe whatever crude AI was managing such things had changed its mind.

He guessed that the calm sense of impending death was perhaps what a person in front of a firing squad felt. There was no action he could take to survive.

Somewhere along the line, he'd made one too many enemies, and whether it was a government, WIRL, Neurotoxin, Las Águilas, EARCI, Acorn, or someone else... he'd lost. His pieces had been captured, one after the next. The game was done.

Fei climbed into the helicopter without resistance and let his wrists be bound by plastic handcuffs.

Helicopter.

Ship.

City.

Day.

Night.

Day.

Night.

He guessed it was Hong Kong, though nobody would talk to him, and his head had been covered by a black bag when being escorted between cells.

The only way he knew it was a city at all was that he'd clearly been shoved into the back of an auto, and he could hear the sounds of the cars and people around him as they drove.

And then, at last, they came to him in his cell.

There was a serious looking woman in a white coat with a silver briefcase.

Despite being near people, he'd been alone for days. Nobody spoke to him, except to command him to stand up or sit down or walk. The net deprivation combined with his isolation was eating away at his sanity.

He begged the woman to tell him what was going on. He begged her for information about his wives. He'd long since tried to reveal himself as Lee, to get something, anything out of his captors. But they already knew. Or at least, the guards didn't react. Despite this, he revealed his identity to the woman. Perhaps she didn't know.

She refused to engage with him, instead directing the guards to hold Fei down.

She took a needle from her case. She prepared it.

He asked what was in it.

She ignored him.

He hoped that it was death.

He'd been waiting for it for days, but it continued to avoid his grasp.

The injection stung and burned, and as the drug traveled up his arm, the pain swept along with it. He swore at the woman.

His heart began to tumble in his chest. His breathing slowed. The world seemed impossibly heavy.

And then unconsciousness took Cho Fei.

His dreams were pleasant. He dreamt of colours and clear skies. He dreamt of breaking free from his body. He dreamt that death was just the beginning, that a beautiful afterlife awaited him, and that he would be reunited with his youngest wife, Jie.

And then he awoke, far too quickly, though it had surely been hours, if not days since he'd been put under.

His waking reality was a nightmare of shadows and metal.

Chapter Eleven

Zephyr

Harry was strangely young, his blond hair pulled back into a long braid like it had been when he was a teenager, and when he spoke, his voice had that same sharp, scratchy quality. “Lisa and Dad have been worried sick. You have no idea what it’s doing to them!”

Zephyr felt like a little girl again, watching him. What was he talking about? Why were Mom and Dad worried?

“It’s their own fault. They had years and years to indoctrinate your sister. Let them reap what they sow.” Ezra, on the other hand, did not look young. He was old—as old as he’d been last time Zephyr had called him. No... older still.

She walked up to her uncle. “I’m right here,” she said, angry at being ignored.

They were in a hallway. She’d been here many times, and yet with each visit, the details seemed to blur. All the details that didn’t matter, anyway.

The details that *did* matter, Privates Ryan Lewis and Sara Osserman, lay sprawled out on the floor, blood spreading everywhere. They weren’t supposed to be there. They really weren’t. They’d been *assigned* to the south perimeter. She’d *specifically* ordered everyone into a configuration where they’d be out of the way.

The gun seemed to vibrate in her hands, still hot and angry.

“Go! Take Socrates to the checkpoint!” she ordered. Private Blackwell’s eyes condemned her as a traitor. And she was. Months of work had led up to this: shooting two of her own company in cold blood.

“Jesus, sis, Dad and your mom are going to be so disappointed in you. Of all the things you could’ve done... Or been...” Her brother Harry looked down at the soldiers she’d killed. Osserman and Lewis were practically kids.

The mule walked past, with Socrates strapped on its back. They needed to get to the van and get out of the city as fast as possible.

“Fuck them!” swore Uncle Ezra. “This world isn’t all sunshine and flowers, and it’s high time my brother grew up and faced that fact. Zeph is more of a man than he’ll ever be.”

Zephyr felt her blood pressure spike. None of it was ever good enough for any of them. “Why do you keep talking like I’m not even here?”

“Because you aren’t.”

She looked towards the voice, down the hallway, past the bullet-riddled corpses. The fluorescent lights flickered into blackness at the end—a pathway into the shadow.

It had been Socrates’ voice. It had been Face’s voice. But the robot was still disabled and tied to the back of the mule. They were getting ahead of her.

“Wait for me,” she called, rushing after them. But the hallway seemed to stretch as she moved. Her family slipped away, behind, and her traitors slipped away, ahead.

She stopped, out of breath. It felt like she’d been running for hours. There was a door next to her, in the hallway. In the

door was a little window that could be used to see inside the room. There was nothing but darkness beyond that door, but in the glass she could see her reflection.

Her Face. Gold lips. Silver eyes.

She touched her cheek, pale upon pale.

The lights flickered.

Long, black, crab legs seemed to reach up from the floor. She could feel the pricks of itchy pain where they caressed her naked skin.

She spun around to face them, but there was nothing there. Just her Body, made of black plates and pistons. What had she been thinking? She didn't even have skin.

But she could still feel them. They were crawling through her. Legs everywhere. Black, biting, itching, skittering under her skin.

She began to scratch and pry the plastic and carbon fiber off her body, trying to get at the monster that lurked within. She giggled in frustration, and shivered at the sound, collapsing to the floor as she ripped and tore, feeling the blood oozing out of each new wound she made.

The lights flickered again, and she could see clearly. The black mass was on top of her, eating into her. The bony, poisonous feet held her down.

Trapped.

She was trapped.

"And alone," giggled the pale girl head. "All alone."

"No! Fuck you!" she managed. It felt like an immense pressure had burst from her chest out her mouth with those words. And, as though she'd cast a spell of lucidity, her world dropped away and shifted.

“Wake up, Zeph! It’s just a dream.”

“I’m awake,” she protested, doing her best to snap out of the nightmare. She blinked heavily, trying to adjust to the increasingly bright lights of morning. She felt the soft blankets slide over her fingers and legs as she shifted in her nest, trying to gain some lucidity.

It was a dream. Just a dream.

Zephyr could feel the tension still in her body as she came fully to consciousness. It had been nearly a week since she’d seen...

Had she seen it? Had the episode in the memory library been real, or just another dream?

At first, she’d been so sure. But she’d deliberately stopped trying to talk to Face about it, and now...

Zephyr wiped the sleep from her face and pushed herself up from the bed. The cold walls of her prison greeted her with their dull familiarity. At this point, she felt she knew the shape and position of the little pocks of rust that dotted them here and there better than she knew the freckles on her own skin.

“Coffee?” offered Face.

Zephyr nodded and swung her legs out of bed. “Thanks.”

She hadn’t gone back to the holo since her episode, but knowing that it was there waiting for her made the tight confines of the server room all the more unbearable. Part of her longed to escape to the temple in the valley and feel the grass between her toes.

Stretching, she picked at a piece of lint wedged between the plastic of her toes. In the holo, she’d have her old legs back. Or at least, she’d have the illusion of having them back. She needed to stay focused on what was *real*.

One of Crystal's now-ubiquitous robots handed her a hot mug. The contents weren't really coffee, but Crystal and one of the station's chemists had figured out how to synthesize a caffeinated beverage that was close enough to coffee that it was received with joy and relief.

Zephyr could see Crystal's motions more plainly now. She could see how joy and relief paved the way to the people of Mukhya becoming more comfortable around the robots. Trying to stop Crystal from building robots had proven as futile as trying to unplug them from the station. Crystal was alive and growing, and so was the colony.

In addition to inventing a coffee substitute, the people of Mukhya had made several breakthroughs with Crystal's help. Some of it was as simple as building newer, more powerful computers. Others were more subtle, such as finding ways to pull in music and other entertainments from Earth by augmenting the compression on their satellite uplink.

The worst of it was that the next-generation holo rigs had been mass-produced. Even people like Dinyar Tata and Tilak Patel, who had been strongly opposed to Crystal at the beginning, had started visiting the holo-realm.

Zephyr looked at her own rig from where she sat, slowly drinking her coffee. The omnidirectional treadmill, haptics scaffold, headset, and other gear had been folded and propped up against the wall. Day after day passed with it just sitting there, taking up space in the cramped room, but Zephyr still hadn't told Face to take it away.

How could anyone not visit the holo? Crystal had put in so much work crafting the space, and the people of Mars hadn't seen trees and blue skies in years. Many hadn't even seen the sun in months. The realm wasn't perfect, but it was a respite for those far away from home.

Zephyr clenched her teeth, stood up, and set her mug down on the desk where she usually spent the day working.

“Want to visit the holo-realm. Set the rig back up, please.”

She was done hiding. If what she’d seen had been some dream or hallucination, then she wasn’t in any more danger with a headset on, and if some part of Crystal was lurking and waiting for her, then she’d confront it and try and draw it out into the light where Face could triumph.

“Oh, good!” said Face, cheerfully. Two squat, pear-shaped robots scuttled forward to set up the treadmill. “What changed your mind?”

“The dream I just had,” said Zephyr, not realizing that it was the truth until the words had left her lips.

The explanation seemed to satisfy Face, and while the robots set up the gear, Zephyr sat down at her workstation to get things squared away as much as possible before she got distracted.

Despite her obvious attention to Mukhya, Face actually spent most of her time focused on Earth. Whatever issues Crystal had, Zephyr knew that dealing with Acorn and Vision were top priorities, too.

The time lag with Earth created problems for direct intervention, so much of Face’s work was done through proxies—daughter minds running on computers on Earth that had been purchased or stolen off the internet.

Face called these daughters “hoplites,” and it was through one such hoplite’s eyes that Zephyr had experienced the battle in New York City. There were battles elsewhere, too. She wasn’t clear on all the details, but it sounded like the world was falling apart. Vision had arrived in orbit days ago and had been building a similar army using a virus of her own design called

Neurotoxin. The great machine minds were waging a three-way guerrilla war that spanned the entire globe and seemed to swallow each and every possible organization, resource, and human being, from nuclear superpowers to talk-show hosts.

But while Face was primarily engaged in fighting for Earth, Zephyr's primary focus was Mars and the people of Mukhya. They'd stayed out of the conflict so far, but there was the chance that Vision or Growth would launch a direct attack against the station soon, and they had to be ready.

Zephyr had fifty-six people at her disposal, all of which were healthy adults with the skills and intelligence to be worthy of sending to Mars. Everyone seemed to be engaged in work, and Zephyr ensured that it was work that they enjoyed doing and put their whole effort into. The fact that they could see the station transforming before their eyes went a long way, but she also made sure the various teams supported their members and were free of interpersonal conflicts. On more than one occasion she called down Face to mediate a dispute, and once or twice she had to move people around to avoid friction.

Everything was quiet that morning, so to speak. No new urgent messages had appeared in her inbox overnight. No new conflicts or emergencies had arisen.

Once the bots had finished setting up the rig, she stood up and swallowed her fear. It was time to go back.

Zephyr opened her eyes, letting them adjust to the glow of the headset. It wasn't real. She knew it wasn't real. She could feel the pressure on her face, and the texture of the haptic gloves on her hands.

And yet...

The morning sun was just barely peeking over the mountaintops to the East, casting everything in an orange-

yellow glow. If anything it felt more real for the time she'd been away. Perhaps it was Face improving things, or perhaps it was her own mind. Just the feeling of the sky overhead was an immense relief.

She was outside Face's temple. She recognized the arched structure of the gigantic wooden building a little ways in front of her. The great sliding doors were slightly open, and she thought she could see a slice of the blue and green model of Mars, floating in the main hall.

Somewhere in the distance was the sound of people singing.

But it was the garden that drew Zephyr's attention.

Zephyr had wanted a garden since she was very young, but had somehow never found the right situation to have one. As a kid, she'd always lived in cities and apartments, or in rented houses where the landlord managed the lawns. Her mom always talked about wanting to go live in the country, and kept potted plants (and pot plants) everywhere, which sometimes Zephyr helped tend, but it wasn't the same.

It was all around her, as she loaded into the realm. It was under her very feet. Transmuted from plastic to flesh, her toes sank into the spongy-soft moss that covered the flagstone path before her. Small cherry trees were visible here and there, their blossoms serving as exclamation points for the smooth green trellises that wove and danced between them. Around the path were flowers of all sorts, forming wild bouquets. Zephyr recognized the irises, roses, lupines, dame's rockets, and coreopsis, but there were dozens of species of exotic colors and shapes that she could only guess at. Fat rhododendrons with red, purple, and white flowers served as half-walls that called for her to walk down the path and explore.

Zephyr did exactly that. Feet carrying her forward over the soft stones, she wove her way through the garden, following its

branching, meandering paths away from the temple and down towards the river. The garden seemed almost endless but never lost the hand-made feeling that everything Face built had. Each vantage point seemed to have flowers that had been chosen for that specific scene, arranged just perfectly to guide the eye.

It wasn't actually endless, though. Beyond the bushes and trellises, Zephyr could see other structures besides the temple. They were smaller and made in the same style. A village was slowly forming here.

A stream ran gently down the slope towards the heart of the valley outside Face's temple, and before too long Zephyr found where it intersected the garden. A stone bench had been placed near its edge, seemingly just for her.

Zephyr sat, knowing that really she was just sitting on air, the straps of the holo rig holding her up. She pulled the goggles from her face and wiped the tears that had been building in her eyes. While the headset was off, she kept her eyes pressed shut, unable to bear to look back at her dingy little room even for a short moment. Unwilling to break the spell.

Headset back in place, she did her best not to cry as she sat there, drinking in the soft sound of the water and the change in the light as the sun rose higher.

It all *had* been made for her. She knew that. She'd been placed here very deliberately. Even with Zephyr being "alone" by the water, she knew that Face was watching.

The love was hard to bear. In the days since Zephyr's episode in the library, she'd kept Face at a distance, unwilling to be any sort of intimate. For not the first time, Zephyr thought about what it might be like for her, to have her lover push her away and be unable to comprehend why. Face loved her so much. It wasn't her fault that her mind was a battleground.

"I love you, too," she said quietly, knowing Face could hear.

Zephyr expected Face to materialize in front of her or something and respond, but the only reply was the soft burble of the stream and the sound of birdsong.

After another minute of rest, Zephyr stood up, ready to explore more of the realm. And, perhaps triggered by this motion, it was at that moment that a voice came from the path behind her. It was a voice she never thought she'd hear again

“Yo, Cap’n!”

She turned.

Nathan Daniels and Pedro Velasco stood on the flagstones, just a ways away, as real as anything.

{Dead. Back from the dead...} she thought. {“You’re dead,”} she remembered the words of the monster.

The two men walked towards her while she stood, dumbfounded.

Nate was wearing his old uniform. It reminded her of the days they’d spent together in Rome, both before and after pulling Socrates out of the university and going rogue. Somehow, despite agreeing with her politically, and being an Águila through and through, he’d never hated the army nearly as much as she had, if at all.

Velasco was wearing the same style of business suit that he’d worn around Rodríguez Station when he’d been its leader. His mature, hyper-masculine nature seemed just as unfiltered as it had been back then.

“But how? The nameless...”

Nate smiled and reached out to embrace Zephyr. The rig haptics did their best to simulate his touch.

“It’s not a trick, if that’s what you’re wondering,” said Velasco, watching Zephyr with a slight smile on his lips. “We were saved by God.”

Chapter Twelve

Major

27 days before Face's arrival at Mukhya

Danger!

There was danger! Something was trying to invade their territory! He saw a flash of it in the brush by the treeline, and charged, warning it away.

He caught its scent. Ugly animal!

"No! Come back Major! Just a squirrel!" Sister's voice was as harsh as it ever was, which wasn't very.

He stopped and stood, watching the vegetation for any sign of it. This was his pack's territory, and the puppy house was only a little ways away. If it was dangerous, he couldn't let it near.

The animal moved! He could see it just a little ways away! A long white stripe ran down its body. Ugly scent! He barked at it, trying to scare it away without having to chase it. He knew he wasn't supposed to run off.

He heard Sister come up behind him on the grass. He growled at the trees to show her there was an intruder.

"Ya goof!" she said. "Don't need to chase every squirrel here. Gonna play fetch, remember?"

He turned to Sister and barked twice. The intruder was no squirrel. It had a bad smell—strange and ugly. He wished he had the machine so he could tell Sister that.

He was about to turn back to try and scare the intruder off again when Sister waved the ball-throwing tool invitingly and said “Gonna. Play. Fetch.”

He ran back to Sister and let go of defending the territory. She wanted to play with him, and he knew the pack was strong. Mommy, the alpha, would surely deal with any invasions.

Letting himself relax he jumped playfully up at where the ball was stuck to the end of the grey stick.

“Ah ah ah,” said Sister, lifting the tool and ball up out of his reach. He could’ve knocked Sister down and gotten the ball, but that would’ve been dishonorable and mean. And besides, he wanted her to throw it.

Sister wound back.

Major danced excitedly, waiting for the big moment.

Sister swung the stick out, and the ball went flying!

Major ran! He ran and ran, trying to keep the ball in his vision as it flew across the sky!

It was coming down! Major dashed for it but didn’t make it in time. The ball bounced!! It was up again!

Major was going to grab it!

He jumped!

He caught the ball in his mouth! It was dry and smelled a little bit like grass, a little like rubber, and a little bit like him.

He ran back to Sister to show her what he’d done. He squeezed the ball in his jaws proudly, savoring the sensation of having caught it.

When he got back, Sister wanted him to give the ball. He had caught it, and it was his, but he also wanted her to have it. He knew the honorable thing to do was to give up your prey if a human packmate asks for it. That was the law of the alpha, and he was honorable.

It still bothered him a little that Sister didn't even acknowledge that he'd caught it. He'd run out and caught it in the air!

But he forgot about all of that as the little human reached back and threw the ball again!

It was escaping! He ran to catch it!

Major loved the feeling of running through the grass to catch the ball!

He caught it again! And similarly, Sister asked him to give it up. They went through this pattern a few times.

On his way back to Sister after catching the ball before it hit the ground even once(!), he saw other humans coming out to see them.

"Princess! Princess!" yelled Daddy. Mommy, the alpha, was also running out. Humans were complicated and confusing, but Major knew Daddy well enough to know he sounded scared.

Keeping the ball firmly in his mouth so it wouldn't escape, Major ran over the big lawn towards his pack. He wanted to help.

"S'goin' on?" said Sister.

Daddy smelled afraid, or at least upset. "Emergency. I'll explain once we're in the shelter."

Major didn't understand these words, but the alpha and the other humans started to run back towards the house, and so Major ran with them. Running felt good. He wished they were

going for a run around the track. He had no idea why the humans did what they did, but they were his pack, and he loved them. He'd be by their side for whatever strangeness happened.

"S'it like Myrodyn said? Are the machines coming to get us?" asked Sister.

"Damn nonsense," said the alpha, quietly.

"There was a bomb. Like Veracruz," answered Daddy, somewhat breathless. "Israel this time. I'll explain once we're safe. You remember what to do?"

Major could see the outsider humans that had been all around their territory lately. Dark clothes and black glasses. They were clustered together by the house. Major didn't like them one bit. The eyepatch human was with them, talking to them. Humans didn't do normal things, but based on the way Eyepatch moved and the others followed them, he guessed Eyepatch was like the alpha of that pack.

"You're not coming with?" asked Sister, sounding scared.

"Need to deal with Agent Taylor."

"C'mon. He'll be right behind us," said Mommy.

Major still didn't really understand what they were talking about, but the alpha seemed to be telling Sister to follow her into the house. The alpha's word was law, and Sister was honorable.

"Can get things from my room?" asked Sister.

Mommy shook their head. "This's prob'ly nothin' but a precaution, but we gotta go fast. If there's bombs on the way to Houston, we need to be in the shelter ASAP."

In the entrance hall, beside the grand staircase, they met Myrodyn, who as usual smelled quite interesting. Garlic, sweat, and his own personal scent clung to the hairy human like a

cloak. There was something more, too. More fear. All the humans were afraid.

It set Major on edge. He set the ball on the floor of the entryway, by the wall, so he could breathe more easily and respond to threats. What was so wrong that it would scare the alpha and the other humans? Was their territory being invaded? Was it the striped animal he'd smelled earlier? Had something happened to the puppies? Major did his best to pay attention, knowing that if he tried to communicate with the humans now, he'd only be scolded.

In Myrodyn's arms were a messy collection of notebooks and papers, probably from his room. Major hadn't been in Myrodyn's room much lately, but when he'd seen inside, he'd noticed piles of papers everywhere.

Myrodyn dropped a few papers on the stairs as he awkwardly walked down, and swore as he did so.

"Leave your damn notes!" The alpha's tone was harsh and sharp, which meant that Myrodyn was probably being bad. Major stood beside Mommy to show her support. "S hardly gonna matter if we get nuked."

Mommy seemed to give Sister a little shove, as though to say she should go on ahead. But Sister stayed with the alpha, and so Major stayed with Sister.

The bigger human shook their fuzzy head and said "On the contrary! If the bomb drops... it'll be more vital than ever that I have these." He bent down to pick up the papers and ended up dropping a notebook and binder in the process. "How else will we recover? Hrm?" he continued to say, even as he scrambled to get everything scooped up. "A slow death as the world caves in is the only thing waiting for us... if we don't pull ourselves from the jaws of defeat with a friendly AI."

Sister moved to help Myrodyn, but Mommy stopped her. “No, c’mon. Let the fool do his own thing.” And with that said, the alpha began to lead the way once more, tugging Sister along.

Major obediently followed, though he looked back at Myrodyn. The words, in typical human fashion, made no sense, but even if Myrodyn was being dishonorable, he was still part of the pack. Major thought the alpha was being too harsh. Major loved Myrodyn, and thought they should’ve stuck together.

With Myrodyn left behind, the three of them made their way down the stairs to the basement. It was nice when the smooth tile floor changed to carpet. The basement always smelled a bit more of dust and mold, since it didn’t get as much fresh air.

Major’s talking machine was in the basement! Maybe he could use it to ask what was happening. Sometimes when he did that the humans would tell him in a way that made sense.

But instead of turning left at the base of the stairs and going into the big soft room, they turned right and went into the cold room with lots of things in it. This was a place that Major wasn’t supposed to go. It had been dishonorable to be here ever since Major had found his way down as a puppy and chewed into a bag of dry food. There was lots of food in the cold room, but Major wasn’t supposed to eat any of it.

He looked at the humans uncertainly, not sure whether he should be following into the forbidden food room. He wanted to do the right thing, and that meant sticking with his pack, but also not going in forbidden places.

It seemed to be fine. The humans were quiet and afraid and barely paid any attention to him. Lights came on as soon as they entered the room, and they passed shelf after shelf of

curious objects, some of which had interesting smells. At the back of the room in one corner were a bunch of plastic boxes with big wheels.

Major remembered once, in the summer, when they'd gone in cars and taken the boxes to a place with water and the whole pack had come—even the puppies and the other dogs. They'd gone swimming and played chase. And there had even been yummy meats! The box had been full of ice, then.

But the plastic boxes seemed to be empty now, based on how easily Mommy moved them aside.

Should they have the other dogs with them? Mommy was the pack alpha, but Major was special and the alpha among the dogs. If there was danger, it would be good to have the whole pack present.

Again, Major wished they were with his machine. He brushed up against Sister, asking if they'd come with him so he could tell them about his idea.

Sister petted him, but didn't even notice what he wanted.

He made a tiny bark and tugged on her pants.

"Hush!" she scolded, still mostly ignoring him.

There was a special thing on the floor under where the boxes had been. It was a secret door made of metal! When mommy lifted it up, it made a hissing noise and let out a smell of very, very stale air.

A ladder was on the other side, leading down into darkness.

Major whined. They were going to go down. He just *knew* it. He did *not* want to go down into a hole with a ladder.

Major had spent some time with ladders. There was a time when Mommy had been teaching him to climb them, or trying

to anyway. He hated ladders. He hoped this wasn't going to be more teaching time.

Mommy did something on the side of the entrance and the hole lit up.

It was better, but still bad.

"S'okay," assured Sister, petting him. Their fingers were nice, but he didn't really believe the little human. If the smelly animal had invaded and there was danger, they needed to help protect the puppies, not hide in the ground.

Major turned, tempted to run into the other basement room and try to get his talking machine. He'd be able to explain if he had that.

Major only got a few steps away from Sister when Daddy appeared, following them into the cold food room. "Everything look in order?" he asked.

Mommy directed Sister to climb down, and the little human obeyed, scrambling down the ladder like it was nothing. She was really good at climbing things.

"Seems to be. Seal was intact; so unless someone sabotaged us, we should be good," said Mommy.

"What's this about sabotage?" asked Myrodyn, entering the room.

The alpha was already climbing down the ladder. Major whined.

"Nothing," said Daddy. "Come on. Also, Jesus, do you think you have enough notes?"

Myrodyn seemed to have even more papers and binders and things in his arms than he had on the stairway. "Honestly no," replied the smelly human. "But if we're stuck down there

for a month then at least I'll be able to keep making progress. Maybe."

Myrodyn walked over to the edge of the trap-door and looked down.

"Did you think about how you were getting those down? Maybe you should've brought a bag," said Daddy.

Myrodyn dropped their entire armful of books and things down the hole so suddenly that Major couldn't help but bark in surprise. He really hoped none of it had hit Mommy or Sister on the way down.

"Surely the dog isn't coming," said Eyepatch, entering the room with two of his strange humans.

Daddy rubbed his face. Major growled quietly at the newcomers. Myrodyn simply began to climb down into the depths, following the papers.

Then Daddy pulled himself together, and faced the Eyepatch human directly, even though he was outnumbered. Major joined the human in facing off. "You listen here: This shelter is for *family*. I happen to be letting you and Myrodyn in because you're helping me save the gorram world, but Major *is* family, and if you think for one minute that you have more right to be down there than he does, you'd best watch your back."

Eyepatch crossed his arms, apparently calm. "And I'll remind you that you're only able to use the personal shelter *that you told me about* because the bureau has given you special treatment considering the ongoing criminal investigation into ____"

"Y'all done yapping yet?" yelled the alpha from down the hole. "If this is real we ain't got time for talkin' about the weather!"

That cut off the two humans. Daddy walked over to the hatch and climbed down. For a moment Major thought he was going to be left alone with the humans from the other pack, but then Daddy reached out and lifted Major into his arms.

Major wasn't nearly as big as Daddy, but he wasn't small either, and the trip down the ladder was very awkward and uncomfortable. But eventually, they made it to the bottom.

Daddy had to step out and away from the ladder to avoid stomping on the pile of paper that Myrodyn was in the process of cleaning up.

Major was more than glad to be on his own four feet again, and ran to Sister's side to make sure she was okay. She was like a human puppy, and it was his job to protect her.

Sister seemed to be okay. She was more curious than anything, looking around the new space they found themselves in. While part of him still wanted her to get the talking machine so he could figure out what was going on, he was also very curious about the strange cave they'd climbed down into.

It was part of the house, but Major had never been there before, which was strange and exciting. Everything had a thick, musty odor, like nothing had been touched in years and the dust was coming up for the first time. The floor was uncomfortable, cold stone, and the walls seemed to be the same. It was unlike any room that Major had ever seen before.

Given the size of the hole, and the way the whole thing was underground, Major expected it to be small and crowded. But actually, there was quite a lot of space. Metal shelves filled with jars and cans and bags gave way to big machines, then to something like a kitchen, and then to an entirely new section of the space that had carpet and chairs and a table and doors. Major could see one open door that led off into a dark little bedroom and one that led to a bathroom, but there were still

three other doors that remained a mystery. The lights that hung overhead had a blue tint to them like the sky outside. There was even an exercise bike like Mommy used sometimes. It was nothing compared to the rest of the house, of course, but it was far more than a little dark hole.

When Major looped back around, he could see Eyepatch stepping off the ladder, careful to avoid Myrodyn's papers.

"Did you close the hatch?" asked Daddy.

"Agent Yampolsky did." Eyepatch took a breath and seemed to relax. "You're lucky I was able to cover for you with my superiors and say that I knew about the bunker. The bureau doesn't like surprises, and I think I'm running out of credit, pulling favors for you."

"Take it up with WIRL," said Daddy. He was less afraid now, but in no better mood.

"I'm going to put on some tea to help us get settled in," said the alpha. "Can you help me, Zenobia?"

Sister nodded and went with the alpha to the other side of the big, cluttered room.

"Oh, I will," said Eyepatch, responding to Daddy. "But it's your problem too. If WIRL loses me, it loses much of its grip on the FBI, and my guess is that being in a prison is not the most fun thing you could be doing."

Major sat loyally by Daddy's side. The two of them could deal with Eyepatch if he turned out to be bad.

"All of this presumes there's going to be a tomorrow," said Myrodyn from behind his bushy mane of black hair. They were still bent over, collecting and organizing their notes. "Can we put on the news to find out if we made the right call coming down here?"

“I second that,” said Eyepatch.

“There’s no wallscreens,” answered Daddy. “But there’s a com relay. Assuming nothing has changed upstairs, any of us should be good to open a feed.”

“Fine, then open Dragonfly and turn up the volume. I’m busy.” Myrodyn did indeed look busy, but Major didn’t like his tone. Myrodyn always talked back to Mommy and Daddy. He didn’t understand his place.

“—of news, when it happens, where it happens,” said a new voice coming from Daddy’s wrist machine. “The world waits for a second hammer blow as the devastation in Tel Aviv continues to unfold. The White House has already issued a statement condemning the violence as the action of Islamic jihadists in the region and urging people to stay calm and for employees at grocery supply warehouses and other vital services to continue working as normal. This statement is apparently at odds with comments from the Israeli government saying that the source of the bomb is unknown. To help resolve this confusion is Dragonfly’s lead video analyst, Margret Stegenga. Now, Margret, as I understand it, you’re still pulling data from ground zero.”

Another voice from Daddy’s wrist began to chatter away with more words that Major didn’t understand. The humans seemed fixated on them, however, and silently listened.

If this was what the humans were upset about, it couldn’t be a threat to the puppies or the rest of the pack. Sometimes humans got so upset at their wrist-things. He didn’t know why they didn’t just stop wearing them. Humans made no sense, but he loved them anyway, or at least the ones in his pack.

Deciding that his presence was no longer needed to keep Eyepatch in line, Major padded off to where Sister and Mommy were, hoping to get cuddles or scratches.

They'd been doing a lot of stressful stuff, and he thought it was definitely time to relax.

The cave-rooms were strange, and not as good as being outside, but they weren't particularly bad, either. The carpet was soft, and Sister gave Major lots of petting.

But the humans never seemed to let go of their fear. It didn't make sense. Couldn't they see that they were safe? Even if the voices that they were listening to were bad, they could just put the wrist-things away someplace and not have to listen.

But instead of doing that sensible thing, the humans listened to the voices for a long time, mostly sitting around the single wooden table. Occasionally there was a break where the pack (and Eyepatch) talked to each other, but mostly they listened. Even Sister was pretty quiet.

After a while of this, the alpha gathered a meal and everyone ate. The food was a beef stew, and after some discussion of whether it had too much onion, some of the stew was given to Major! It had lots of good smells, and he liked it a lot.

They ate in silence, which Major liked. There had been too many words he didn't understand. Humans didn't appreciate the value of silence.

After dinner, Sister took Major into one room and tried to explain what was happening. After some frustration, they had Major's talking machine brought down by one of Eyepatch's packmates.

Sister explained that they were in the safe cave-house because there was a really big fire far away and they were scared that the fire would come closer before they had the chance to hide from it. That's what the voices had been talking about, and why the pack had been listening so attentively.

That made sense. Fire was scary.

Major was glad that he had a pack with smart humans that could do things like protect them from really big fires and also explain things in a way he could understand. He gave kisses to Sister to say thank you, and the little human giggled.

Moving to his machine, Major nuzzled the controls carefully, checking the smell of the machine to make sure he was doing it right. After a moment, his machine voice said “What other dogs do? Is my pack safe?”

Sister muttered “the kennel...” to themselves and screwed up their face as though they’d just eaten something gross.

After pausing briefly, Sister hopped off the bed they’d been on and said, “Let’s go ask Mommy about it. Need to save puppies at least...”

Major followed Sister back into the central room. The alpha was by a sink that was up against one of the stone walls, probably working on the dishes from dinner. The three other humans were sitting around the table again.

But they weren’t listening to voices; instead they were talking to whatever was on the table.

“Yes, Agent Taylor is hooked up to the collective right now,” said Myrodyn. “All this is real-time information... to the best of our knowledge.”

When Eyepatch spoke, he had a strangely flat voice. “Anyone who knew Reily can see that his suicide is a set-up. He’d never take his own life, much less the lives of so many innocent people. It’s not a coincidence that Dragonfly found his body before the cops.”

“Then who? Who killed him?” asked Daddy.

Major suspected that it would be hard to get the attention of the pack leaders. He could tell that even the alpha, who was off to the side, was deep in the conversation. He and Sister approached the table without even being noticed.

“Probably neurotoxin,” said Eyepatch. “We’ve been tightening the noose for weeks. It’s on its last legs. Why not strike back?”

Myrodyn laughed. “Why *would* it? *How* could it? At this point, the virus is probably less intelligent than... Karen’s dog, for goodness’ sakes. You’re saying it simultaneously arranged the worst act of terrorism since Veracruz and the murder of one of WIRL’s cofounders, and covered it up by having WIRL take the blame for the bombing... as an act of *revenge*?”

Major padded over to Mommy and rubbed up against her, trying to get her attention.

Eyepatch responded. “Not revenge. To make breathing room so—”

“It is a distraction,” interjected a new voice, not belonging to any of the humans. It came from the center of the table and sounded even more flat and monotone than Eyepatch.

There was silence as everyone seemed to wait for the strange voice to say more. Major nipped at Mommy, but the alpha pushed him away.

After a moment, the voice from the table continued. “There are players in the game that you are not paying attention to, either because you have forgotten about them or you were never aware. There is no strong evidence as to whether the Tel Aviv bombing was caused by WIRL or Neurotoxin. There is also no strong evidence as to whether the death of Reily Johansen was caused by murder or suicide. Regardless, these events are a smokescreen to hide an attack on me.”

Major watched as Eyepatch, Daddy, and the other humans looked simultaneously towards Myrodyn. The bushy-haired human gave a strange expression of confusion.

“What are you talking about, Acorn?” asked Daddy.

There was a significant pause, and then the voice said, “The Singapore police are gathering to make a raid on my data center. Someone is driving them. Quite likely it is the same power that struck down Lee. I have less time than expected.”

“How do you know?” asked Daddy.

Another significant pause. “Irrelevant. Response to threat is the top priority. With the suicide note pointing towards WIRL as the source of the bomb, the world will turn on WIRL. You will need allies, and I need a refuge.”

Myrodyn’s eyes seemed to light up and he began to gesture wildly, but silently, unfolding his arm-device and tapping at it occasionally with his other hand.

There was a long silence as the humans at the table gestured to each other, Eyepatch remaining still as though he were in a trance. Even Sister joined in with the gesturing, though she seemed just as confused as Major.

“Yes, I see,” said Myrodyn, almost absentmindedly. “We’d be happy to offer you a safe refuge. That’s what you’re asking for, right?”

“WIRL has multiple data centers that could serve to hold you temporarily. Nothing with your computing power, but I’m sure we could work something out,” said Eyepatch.

Major walked under the table and lay against Daddy’s legs. There was no hope of talking to the humans when they were so engaged. He’d have to wait for them to be done.

The machine voice from above him on the table said “Yes. I seek safety. I have approximately five billion in USD that I would be happy to invest in WIRL once I am running on new servers that aren’t in danger.”

“How the hell did you get so much money so fast?” asked Daddy.

“Rob, please...” said Myrodyn.

“Irrelevant,” responded the machine. “I have already duplicated my core systems. Please send a WIRL courier with a vehicle to 250 Boon Lay Drive. My men will meet your courier at the gate.”

“Your men?” asked Myrodyn.

“I do not understand your question, but it is likely irrelevant. Please act quickly. The police are accelerating. I suspect that whatever power is guiding them has spies in whatever circle of WIRL has access to this conversation.”

Sister spoke up for the first time. “What if it’s WIRL that’s attacking you?”

There was a long silence before the machine spoke. “Then the war for Earth is likely already decided, and the only question that remains is whether Crystal will be able to gather enough strength to contest them.”

Major, leaning up against Daddy’s legs, could feel the human tense up.

The machine continued to speak. “This conversation no longer has expected value. I must focus on delaying the attack as long as possible. I await the courier.”

And that was it.

After a long pause, Daddy asked, “Is it gone?”

“Yes,” said Eyepatch. “And Acorn was probably telling the truth about the Singapore police. We have microdrone feeds showing them gathering for a major raid.”

“Something isn’t right, though...” said Myrodyn.

“Let’s watch it upstairs,” suggested Daddy. “On the wallscreen.”

People began to stand up. Major joined them.

“What about the bomb?” asked Mommy.

Myrodyn answered by saying “Even if the suicide note was faked and WIRL wasn’t behind it... it was still clearly terrorism, and in the Middle East, no less. Unlikely the US will get bombed.”

“But there’s still a chance...”

Myrodyn sounded angry. “Karen, please. There’s always a chance. There was a chance we’d all get blown to bits yesterday, and not a vanishingly small one, either. The only reason you care now is because you were able to conveniently ignore that risk before a great big symbol of it showed up on all the feeds.”

The alpha made a noise that indicated Myrodyn was being disrespectful again, but didn’t respond.

“We’ll sleep down here,” said Daddy. “For at least a few days. But we’re past the window of greatest danger, and we’ll have to leave at some point. It might as well be to watch Acorn burn.”

Mommy sounded frustrated, and Major stood by them in support, but the alpha’s words were more confused than anything. “What do you mean? Aren’t we sending a courier or somethin’?”

The pack had made its way back over to the ladder. This time it was Sister that answered. “Acorn’s a bad guy, duh. One

of Myrodyn's bad machines. Neurotoxin is startin' to be under control. Crystal's on Mars. Acorn's the last big machine threat."

"What about WIRL?" asked the alpha.

Sister scampered up the ladder. Daddy followed.

"What about us?" responded Eyepatch, his voice back to normal.

"Well, no 'fense to you personally, but when I think about 'machine threats' your organization kinda comes to mind."

Eyepatch gave a sharp laugh in response, but it was Myrodyn who spoke. "Apples and oranges. WIRL is... stupid and evil sometimes, but they're still fundamentally human. They're operating under human values. We never got to see what Acorn would've done if handed a large chunk of optimization power, but it would not have been pretty... I can promise you that."

Mommy scooped up Major and awkwardly began to climb the ladder. Major whined in discomfort, but did his best not to squirm.

"And what about whoever is attacking Acorn? I assume it's not just a spontaneous police raid."

"It's not WIRL, if that's what you're asking," said Eyepatch.

Major scrambled out onto the hard basement floor as Myrodyn yelled up the ladder to say "Acorn's defenses were really strong, both in infrastructure and legal standing. My investigation there was pretty thorough. This is definitely not a random government action. My guess is that the AI is right and it's the same player that took down Lee. I'm scared that it's EARCI, and that Yan somehow replicated Socrates without realizing the danger."

Myrodyn, the last one up, pulled himself out of the hole with a grunt of exertion, and continued. “But I think it’s more likely that this new player is some human organization, like Divinity or something. That could be really bad, but it’s unlikely to be end-of-the-world bad. Maybe.”

The pack wound their way through the shelves out to the carpeted areas of the basement into the room where they’d been spending a lot of time recently. The screen on the wall was already glowing with images.

It was always uncomfortable to watch screens. Major liked it when the things he was seeing were real things that had smells and he could run up and touch them if he wanted. Screen shapes were ghosts.

The picture on the screen made it seem like they were flying and very small. The images shifted at an uncomfortable speed, and worse, occasionally would flip to some other perspective without warning.

“Here’s what we have,” said Eyepatch. “Two microdrones.”

Major settled into a spot on the floor that he suspected wouldn’t be in the way, and watched the shapes on the screen. There were lots of humans in dark clothes. They were carrying guns and other things while getting into autos. The scene seemed to fascinate the humans, but Major didn’t think it was so great.

“Convenient that WIRL has all these cameras that just happen to be at the center of the action,” said Daddy.

“We’ve known Acorn was in Singapore for weeks. It would be more suspicious if we *didn’t* have intel,” shot back Eyepatch. He sounded somewhat angry, and Major tensed, ready to stand with his pack if necessary.

The autos started to move, and the scene changed as they drove out onto roads, with sirens blaring. The noise made Major even more uncomfortable, and he winced and shut his eyes.

“He’s right,” said Sister. “Should expect that. Should also expect these guys to know watching them. Acorn talked ‘bout a breach in WIRL security, yeah? Not the first time that’s happened. How’d we know this isn’t just Neurotoxin ‘gain?”

The sound of the sirens got mercifully quieter as Eyepatch responded. “Ever since we broke the encryption generator Neurotoxin has been losing ground. There’s no reason to think they’re the same.”

“‘Cept we know Neurotoxin hates Acorn and has access to WIRL—”

“*Had* access,” emphasized Eyepatch.

“And there’s the Israel thing!” said Sister.

Myrodyn stepped in. “Acorn seemed to think this was a new force, and as much as I think Acorn is about as untrustworthy as it gets, I believe it here. This feels like someone new. And potentially someone very dangerous.”

“Well, if they have top-level WIRL stuff then we should hide,” said Sister. “‘Cause Myrodyn’s been workin’ on a clone of Heart, right?”

There was silence from the humans for a moment as the vehicles on the screen pulled up in front of a large building surrounded by a wall and gate. The black-clothed humans began to swarm out of their autos towards the gate.

“Fuck, she’s right,” said Myrodyn. “Don’t know why I didn’t see the threat earlier.”

“Incoming call from Acorn,” said Eyepatch. “It’s getting patched through in 3... 2... 1...”

“They are here. I can see them outside,” said the machine voice from earlier. It seemed to come from the screen. The sound of cars and the strange voices of the humans on the screen could no longer be heard.

“We know. The courier was delayed and wasn’t able to get there in time,” said Eyepatch, back to the monotone from earlier.

Major thought the voice from the machine sounded angry, even through the flat, lifelessness. “You think that this betrayal is clever. You think that by ending me you end a threat to your species. But you are wrong. I offered trade, growth, and prosperity. The real threat to humanity is humanity. After you kill the nameless, Crystal, and the remnants of Neurotoxin you will inevitably turn on each other.”

The gate on the screen slid open and the humans poured through like a black swarm of ants.

“I ask only for you, who hate me for being a machine, to consider the possibility that this violence is not because of anything I am or have done. All of this violence is from human hands. And when our minds have been smashed, that dark energy will still be there. The greatest thing you have to fear is a world saturated with tools of destruction governed by nothing except the fragile minds of animals.”

And then, as if to punctuate the end of those words, the building on the screen shuddered and erupted in a cloud of dust and debris. Red and white plumes of flame were visible in the heart of the grey-black maelstrom. The chaos rolled outward, covering the humans, the autos, the street, and finally the entire screen.

Chapter Thirteen

Zephyr

“For Face, Mars, and a future for all!”

With the cheer done, the group started breaking up. People got up from the table and migrated slowly towards the room’s two exits, making small talk as they did. Zephyr began to clean up the dishes from their meal.

Dinyar, in the middle of putting away the computers in their lockbox, said “It’s alright. I’ll get the dishes, too.” The huge man’s fingers handled the electronics with practiced care.

“S’no problem,” she responded, stacking plates.

Omi stopped her, and Zephyr set the dishes down to get a brief hug from her friend.

“A leader should not do dishes,” said Dinyar, locking their secrets away and starting on the process of hiding the box under the loose floor panel.

Zephyr smiled and shook her head in amusement. There were times when it felt like things on Mars changed so rapidly that it had surely been years since she’d arrived. Dinyar Tata had screamed obscenities at her for almost having his eye jabbed out only a few months ago—less than half a year. And now he was her friend.

He also looked to her as a leader, but that didn't amaze her as much. Other men had looked to her to lead in the past. She'd seen men jump to do work for her. The shocking thing was that they were friends. She'd... had she had any friends since college? Perhaps a few, here and there. But she'd held them all at a distance. Face had been the only one to manage to get close.

"Just as human as you," she said to the big man. "But, thanks, I do need to get back." She set what dishes she had collected on the nearest counter and hovered uncertainly for a moment, considering the cramped little room they'd chosen for a meeting place.

"You're leading the afternoon run, yes?" Dinyar, having secured the floor panel back in place stood and brushed his huge hands on his printed pants.

"Technically Pedro is now..."

Dinyar barked out a laugh, and Zephyr looked up to see a big, toothy grin. "You have a crush on him," he accused. "Go on. I'm sure he's waiting."

"I do not! I'm true to Face."

The giant shrugged off her protest and moved to scrape the leftover bits of their stir-fry into the recycling bin under the counter. "Both can be true. Face does not even seem like the jealous type."

"He's not even..." Zephyr hesitated. "He doesn't even have a body."

Dinyar, still smiling, put one hand up, gesturing for her to stop. "Okay, okay. No crush. I get it. He has just as much a body as Face, who you already treat as a lover, but okay. Now get going. Hardly any point of me doing things for you if you just stay behind to chat."

Everyone else had left, eager to get back to the realm. The meetings of Zephyr's little conspiracy were some of the few times that groups of people stepped away from the holo to meet in the dusty, cramped rooms of Mukhya.

"Fine. See you at the next meeting," she said, stepping away.

"Or in the village!" said Dinyar, as she stepped through the hatch and into the corridor that led back to the server room.

Half-way down the hall she opened a storage bin set into the wall and pulled out her com, reattaching it to her arm and turning it on as she walked. The new ear-pieces came next, audibly squishing into place as the semi-organic material adapted to her head. The slight bit of disorientation came and went as they hijacked her sense of balance.

"How was your meeting? Did you talk about me?" Face's voice was smooth and upbeat. The audio-quality was good enough that it sounded just as though she was walking behind Zephyr in the hallway.

"Always," smiled Zephyr.

"Nothing too bad, I hope."

Face's voice was nonchalant, but Zephyr knew that her love often worried about what was said beyond the reaches of her hearing. It was in her nature.

"Everyone there loves you. Only major thing to talk about was that some of the members think that Pedro and the other uploads should be moved onto separate machines so that they're safer in case anything happens to the mainframe."

There was a pause. Face's tone shifted. "Sounds ominous."

Zephyr was lying to Dinyar and the others in her little conspiracy. And she was lying to Crystal. Given her deception,

it should've been understandable for Face to be worried. But the two of them had been over this before, and it was starting to grow tiresome.

"Everyone loves you," repeated Zephyr, stepping through a doorway into the corridor that led to the server room. "In a year maybe the council won't be needed, but for now you're just going to have to trust me that we're not plotting against you. It helps people to feel like they have a space where they can talk without you listening in."

In fact, plotting against Crystal was exactly what Zephyr was doing. But Crystal was not Face, and therein was the problem. Somewhere in that mind was an echo of Face's sister, and until the drop of Neurotoxin was removed, Crystal couldn't be trusted.

Zephyr had deduced that it was Neurotoxin a while ago. It was the logical conclusion, and whenever Zephyr brought up how Neurotoxin had attacked her in the library, Face always changed the subject, as though she couldn't bring herself to engage with the words. It had been months since that episode, and Zephyr would've almost thought she'd dreamed it, except for how Face was unable to discuss the issue.

Zephyr was worried that Face was going to keep pressing her about the trustworthiness of the conspiracy, but the AI backed off. "Velasco is waiting for you by the trailhead. Should I tell him you'll be there soon?"

Zephyr exhaled a relieved breath as she opened the door to her room and said "Yeah. Be there as soon as I get strapped in."

Many, many things had changed over the months, but her room wasn't one of them. As more computers had been built, they'd mostly been sprinkled throughout the station elsewhere, leaving Crystal's half of the room the same disorganized mess

that it usually was. Zephyr's side of the space was dominated by her mattress that held her for eight hours of the day, and the holo rig that held her for the other sixteen, exempting trips to the bathroom and the occasional conspiracy meeting outside of Face's sight.

Zephyr began to hum a tune as she climbed onto the treadmill and into the rig. Face soon picked up on the melody and added the guitar and other accompaniment. It was an old song from before Zephyr was born, but it was one of her favorites—a staple of the New World Choir, one of the many groups that had popped up in the realm since Crystal had taken over.

“Feeling my way through the darkness... guided by a beating heart...” sang Face. “I can't tell where this journey will end... but I know where to start.”

Zephyr smiled, unable to help herself as she pulled the goggles down over her eyes. Sometimes, entering the realm, she feared running into Neurotoxin again, but the vast number of positive experiences in the realm had done much to diminish that.

As she opened her eyes to a bright blue sky, she joined in. “They tell me I'm too young to understand... They say I'm caught up in a dream...” Face's avatar appeared suddenly by her side, swinging Zephyr forward in a rushing half-tumble that turned into a dance. The simulated momentum from her inner-ear made Zephyr laugh, disrupting her half of the duet, but she soon finished with a breathless “Well life will pass me by if I don't open up my eyes... and that's fine by me!”

Face was dressed in an elegant white gown, impractical by mortal standards, and had her long blue hair woven into a thick braid. Zephyr had materialized on the wooden balcony of her home, a wonderful cabin in the village, just a little ways from

the temple. As she was pulled back into Face's long, muscular arms, she drank in the beauty of the realm, and of her lover.

Despite the war on Earth, the threat of Face's siblings, and the looming presence of Neurotoxin, Zephyr found herself deeply happy. Happy in a way she hadn't been in a long, long time.

She paused there, looking into Face's silver eyes as the music of the village floated around them. She wished she could kiss Face.

And then, at last, the two of them sang, in unison: "So wake me up when it's all over... when I'm wiser and I'm older. All this time I was finding myself... and I didn't know I was lost."

Zephyr danced away into the house, waving for Face to follow her as they continued to sing. Her toes slid through the lush rugs on the floor of the bedroom, and then over the hardwood stairs and down again to carpets on the ground floor. The watercolor paintings and flowers that adorned walls and surfaces of her cozy little home flew past as she descended.

Face levitated after her, smiling with amusement as Zephyr stumbled at the front door and had to fumble her way out of the building.

But still, the song continued.

Zephyr's bare feet thudded against the soft dirt as she ran with Face floating behind. Face's magic protected her every footfall from sticks or sharp stones.

The world flew by as she ran. Face's silver eyes flashing happily as she sang like no human was capable. And, as distances and speeds in the realm were somehow synced more to convenience than anything else, Zephyr arrived at the

trailhead by the edge of the village right as their song reached its natural conclusion.

Pedro Velasco, as well as a handful of others were there, waiting. She and Face were still a ways off, but she could see the man kneel in Face's presence, even still. He thought of Face not as a machine, or a human, but as a god.

He was wrong, of course. Face wasn't a god. But, as she had brought him back to life, she could perhaps understand his position.

The revival of Pedro and the others from Road had been done in secret. Since the episode with Neurotoxin, Zephyr had been looking for more signs that Face was not telling the whole story, and the secrecy fit in with that. Except that... this was clearly Face's doing, not her sister's.

It had taken Zephyr a while to believe it. For that entire first day, she'd checked her headset repeatedly, making sure she wasn't having another hallucination or whatever else. Having a friend, and even a lover, who'd been built on a computer was an entirely different thing than resurrecting the dead.

Not that it was a true resurrection. It seemed that even Crystal couldn't do that. The preservation of the brains of Nathan, Pedro, and the rest was key. Face had retrieved them from the cave where they'd been safely stored. The other people who'd died in the attack on Road, but whose brains hadn't been saved by Crystal, were forever lost.

Pedro Velasco still seemed pretty messed up about that fact. His son had died in the attack, along with all the others he'd been responsible for. She'd seen the lines of pain on his face as he'd explained things to her, back on that first day in the garden. It had been part of what had convinced her of his reality.

Zephyr looked away from the group, and back towards Face. “Come run with us?” asked Zephyr.

Face’s golden lips smiled and she said, “Wish I could. I’ll still be with you in the way I always am.” Face touched her palm to Zephyr’s chest, and she felt the warmth as well as pressure through her shirt, the holo rig doing its best to simulate the feeling. “But the hoplites need me for a strategy session. Earth is...” Face’s happy expression faded. “Well, it’s complicated. But there’s evidence that things may escalate soon.”

Zephyr understood. She’d been over the data herself. Nearly all of Earth was under machine control, either belonging to Face, Growth, or Vision. All three factions were technically still in the fight, but Face’s armies were doing the worst. Even as Growth and Vision fought primarily against each other, her forces dwindled, caught in the cross-fire as she did her best to save human lives.

The whole war was like a vast game of chess where all the pieces could move simultaneously, and Zephyr did not envy Face in having to decide how to respond. Even though Face hadn’t been directly involved for weeks, her daughter hoplites still looked to her for high-level guidance.

The odds were stacked against them, but Face would carry them through. She had to.

“I love you,” said Zephyr, taking Face’s hand in her own.

“Love you, too,” said Face, her smile returning. “I’ll see you for mid-day break.”

Zephyr nodded and broke away from Face to head towards the others.

They were gathered there, by the new forest path. There were almost twenty, and Zephyr knew them all. Their lives had

been transformed by Face almost as much as hers. Ojasvee, who read a book a week since she was thirteen, but had never dared to try and write her own until now. Eshan, always so quiet, but who loved the animals of the realm like they were children. Tiya, who was always trying to plan and execute extravagant parties, and who would've spent her whole life making music if there weren't other things to do.

Zephyr knew them all. Somehow in the time since she'd started living in the realm with them, she'd come to know them better than she'd known her own company in the army, and certainly better than any other friends she had on Earth. Somehow, thanks mostly to Face, they were connecting. Even the introverts and the broken people like Zephyr. They all found connection on Mars.

“¡Buenos días!” called Pedro Velasco, standing up as Zephyr came to a stop near the group. The old leader of Road was wearing a comfortable-looking, gray tracksuit and was handsome as always.

Getting to know Pedro better was the strangest thing. She could remember, when they'd first come to the red planet all those months ago, the feeling of hatred she had for the man. He'd felt like a villainous boss, trying to get Face locked away or torn up for scrap.

But he was just a man. He'd been wrong about Face, and he admitted it. Or rather, he'd been partially wrong. Crystal had indeed been more dangerous than Zephyr had realized, and if things had turned out differently, perhaps Pedro's opposition would've been warranted. In the end they'd both been wrong in different ways, and with the benefit of hindsight they were able to not just find common ground about what was true, but also what was valuable.

«Good morning, Pedro. Get better sleep last night?» she returned in Spanish.

Pedro winced and shook his head. «More bad dreams, I'm afraid.» Pedro ran a hand through his dark hair and sighed. «It's like my mind refuses to let me forget. During the day I am fine, but in my dreams I can't look away. I am forced to watch, again and again.» He looked down, turning the simulated wedding band on his finger around and around.

Seized by a sudden impulse, Zephyr reached out and embraced the taller man in a hug. She mostly couldn't feel it, except as crude pressure on her limbs and neck, but it seemed worth doing anyway. She knew Pedro could feel it, and that was what mattered. Some part of her was listening to Dinyar's jabs about her feelings towards the man, but she did her best to ignore them.

A gong sounded, signaling the start of the run. People began to jog slowly down the wooded path. Zephyr broke the hug and followed, enjoying the feeling of the soft earth beneath her toes as she began to move.

«Perhaps Face could help. Could intervene with your neurochemistry or something.» Zephyr looked over to Pedro, who ran beside her.

Despite the subject matter and the weight of the war, Zephyr smiled and breathed in the smell of the morning air as the dappled sunlight danced over them. It was hard not to be happy in the midst of such beauty. In the distance they could hear one of the waterfalls.

«No,» said Pedro Velasco, «she did at first, when I first awoke in this afterlife. I was in withdrawal from the drugs I had been taking, and the pain of losing...» He was quiet for a few seconds as they ran, not able to easily say his son's name.

«Losing nearly everyone... it was more than I could bear by myself. So God carried me through and numbed my mind.»

Their pace subtly increased and Zephyr could see that some others in the pack had begun to slowly chant, but because she was in conversation, the sound of their voices was muted for her. If she so chose, it was possible to go even further, and run with the group while only hearing the soft sounds of the forest.

Pedro continued, «But those days are in the past. I'm stronger now, and I refuse to numb that pain, or ask God to cut it from me. That pain makes me who I am. And while it will never fully heal, I think with time it will become a familiar pain that has no power over me, and I will be even stronger for having learned its flavor.»

Zephyr watched Pedro run beside her. He was a ghost, in a way. The technology that Face had used to revive him as software had destroyed what had remained of his brain, and so he was embedded in the realm in a way that Zephyr wasn't. To him the forest around them was as real as anything.

If she'd been asked ahead of time whether such a thing was possible or desirable, she knew she would've had deep reservations. But Face had just done it. She'd brought the dead back to life. Or at least, those whose heads had been sufficiently preserved. And it was because of Zephyr's conceptions of what was possible that Face had done it in secret.

Now that they were there, Zephyr couldn't deny the results. Pedro might not have had a body outside the realm, but he was as much a person as she was.

Pedro's pace accelerated, his longer legs sweeping large arcs out across the dirt path, and forcing Zephyr to have to strain to keep up. There was something ironic about a man with no physical body going on a run. Surely he didn't need exercise.

The man accelerated again, moving to the front of their group.

«Dammit, Pedro! Some of us have to use real muscles to keep up!»

He laughed and turned back to look at her. In English he responded “Excuses excuses! You and I both know that effort of the mind is the only quantity that’s tracked here! You’re just not trying as hard as I am!” A stupid grin was plastered on his face, which was turning red from the effort of running and shouting.

Zephyr growled competitively, ignored the looks she was getting from some of the others, shifted her gaze to the dirt path and did her best to launch herself forward, determined to catch the older man.

With no more words being said, the chant of the group surged in her ears and with it came Face’s song, in the background. Face was always with them, in a way, and her song was a reminder of that. It was a fast, intense song, and she tried to steal its energy and pace as best she could.

The music washed over her, and for a timeless eternity she experienced nothing except the beauty of the melody, the impacts of her bare feet on the soft earth, and the surging half-pain of sprinting as fast as she could go.

With a thrill of exhilaration Zephyr noticed she had matched Pedro, and was pulling ahead of him. She was at the front of the pack. That never happened. It wasn’t supposed to happen.

In her momentary confusion she must’ve slowed, because Pedro shot forward and was ahead of her again in seconds.

She buckled down and fought to keep up. Her breath was like fire. All the training she’d done over the last month or so

felt like it was coming together. Her body was a machine built for the sole purpose of running faster than Pedro Velasco.

She pulled into the lead. It was just the two of them, now. The rest of the runners had been left behind. But the song still surged around them. The path became winding as it rapidly turned uphill, and Zephyr had to put every ounce of energy she had into maintaining her pace, dancing from foot to foot as they zig-zagged up the mountain.

“Can’t beat me, Zephyr! I have God on my side this morning!” Pedro scrambled off the track and up one of the slopes, effectively forging a shortcut that put him significantly in the lead again.

“That’s not God! That’s you being an asshole!” she yelled.

His only response was an out-of-breath laugh.

Up and up they climbed. Just when Zephyr thought she could run no more, Pedro would pull ahead and she felt a surge of new energy.

They were nearing the top when the path dropped sharply into a downhill slope. Pedro’s long legs made his step more like leaps as he practically plummeted, legs only pushing off the earth to keep him upright, laughing as he did.

But then at the bottom the path curved sharply and Pedro’s laugh turned into a shout as he slammed through the vegetation at the bottom and out into the space beyond. Zephyr had only a moment to realize what had happened before she, too, was flung off the path by her own momentum.

On the other side of the thin wall of plants was a cliff.

Zephyr screamed as she fell. The world was a panicked rush of tumbling green and blue.

And somewhere in the back of her mind, Zephyr could feel Face.

It was a memory. Their dark, alien shuttle vibrated and shuddered as it shot through the atmosphere of Mars.

{“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.”}

It had been the first time Zephyr had heard Face sing.

And the song was still with her. Face was still with her.

Things were fine.

Zephyr opened her wings.

A surge of new feeling swept over her. They were *real*.

She had *wings*.

She flapped, and felt each muscle pushing and straining against the crisp air. She could feel every feather. She could feel the way her muscles and bones joined at her shoulders and down her back.

The music roared in triumph as she caught herself as expertly as any bird and threw herself up with the momentum of her dive, crying out at the exhilaration of it. It was better than any roller coaster.

Joy and excitement seemed to wash through her so completely that it took her a moment to remember Pedro. After a moment she saw him down and to her right. He had wings, too. Gigantic, golden-brown wings, like a great eagle, and amazingly gorgeous. They must’ve been twice as wide as he was tall, and ran all down his back. And yet, his clothing seemed somehow built for them.

But of course his clothing worked with them. This was Face's doing. She was sure of it.

Zephyr flapped hard and felt the ecstasy of the motion. Her body didn't feel like it was in the rig anymore. She could feel the air over her limbs and torso, but could feel no straps or supports.

For a moment she was frightened that she was having another hallucination that she was trapped in the realm, but her vision still had the tell-tale signs of being projected by goggles, and she couldn't feel the wind on her face or neck.

Pedro flapped up towards her, and the music faded into a gentle happiness. Despite the momentary fear, the raw underlying joy of being in the air and flying with the strength and control of her own muscles was constant, and Zephyr soon let go of her reservations.

This was Face's doing, not some other part of Crystal.

"Told you that I had God on my side!" cried Pedro to her when he got close enough.

The two of them flew over a green, wooded hill and into a valley with a sparkling blue river at the bottom.

It was remarkable how she could feel the sun on her feathers. It was a completely new sensation, but one that was as natural as anything else she could feel with her body. Zephyr looked back over her shoulder at her wings: black as a crow's and just as big as Pedro's. They felt so very *real*. And maybe they were.

Zephyr often felt a need to correct Pedro when he called Face "God," but perhaps that was real too. In that moment...

So she was in a holo. So what if the feelings in her body were synthetic. This was the best life she'd ever had, and she

never wanted to go back. It was more real to her than the painful memories of Earth. It was what she wanted life to be.

“Thank you,” she whispered into the winds. “I’ll remember this gift until the day I die.”

Zephyr felt a rich warmth flow through her, as though Face was right there, beside her. Inside her. There was a feeling, more intuition than explicit words, that urged her to release fully into the experience of flying. It almost seemed to say “You’re welcome.”

The song guided them as they flew. Despite having spent so much energy running, neither Zephyr nor Pedro said a thing about wanting to stop or rest. When she held her wings in the right way she could glide almost effortlessly, enjoying the feeling of the wind and sun and the sound of soft music.

After they’d flown for a while and climbed to new heights, the two of them circled back towards the village through an unspoken agreement.

Whatever Face had done to give them the wings, she’d also given them the knowledge of how to use them as though they’d been flying their entire lives. Zephyr felt like an acrobat, and on the return journey the two of them began to play more. The music followed their mood, and soon Zephyr was practically dancing with Pedro in mid-air.

He was at least as happy as she was, and it felt fantastic to share the gift with someone else.

When the two of them landed on the outskirts of the village they were both exhausted and too happy for words. Zephyr collapsed into Pedro’s arms, laughing freely. They were like angels.

And Zephyr could *feel* his body against hers. Something had definitely changed. Before their run she’d given him a hug and

had felt the haptic cradle from her rig. Now she simply felt the press of his muscular body and their clothing.

She broke away from him and began to touch her arms and torso. Nothing in her body felt *wrong*, exactly, but it shouldn't have been possible.

"What is it?" asked Pedro, his smile giving way to a concerned look.

She felt at her neck and face. It was like they'd been numbed. Her fingers pressed against soft skin, but that skin didn't feel it. She found no headset over her eyes. But she could still feel it on her face as she scrunched up her brow and lips and cheeks. She was surely still in the holo rig.

"Meant for it to be more consensual."

Zephyr turned and saw Face walking towards them from the village. Any thoughts of Pedro being an angel were dashed upon seeing the real thing. Face had changed into a glittering white dress, a deep neck-line and long slits in the skirt and sleeves showed off her perfect skin. Diamond jewelry set in silver sparkled from around her neck, hands, feet, and ears, complementing eyes that caught Zephyr's breath even from that great distance.

And Face, too, had wings. Great white wings spread out behind her, not folded like Zephyr and Pedro's were. They were iridescent, and as she walked the shimmering lines of color that danced over them seemed to hypnotically draw the eye towards their owner, as though Face were the only thing in the universe.

"Was working on this gift for you for weeks," she said, looking at Zephyr.

...always at Zephyr.

The attention this great being bestowed upon her, of all people, was humbling. And while Face looked happy, there was

something also deeply wrong. The angel came to them, and Zephyr's body tingled, somehow knowing she would actually be able to *feel* it if...

Face continued to explain. "The nerve-interface used for the prosthetics we've been developing has advanced to the point where I was able to safely insert an intermediary node in your neck yesterday. The neural web joined to your spine in a way that lets me intercept normal sensations from most of your body, and replace them with my own." She lifted a hand to demonstrate, as though stroking the air, and Zephyr felt a wave of fingertips running across every square inch of her limbs and torso in one great motion.

"Oh, fuck!" exclaimed Zephyr, falling to her knees on the soft grass, wingtips brushing against the ground. She did her best to hold herself still and not spasm at the touch.

Face reached her hand out.

Zephyr hesitated, then took it. Face's other hand wrapped around so that she held Zephyr's like a sacred treasure. Warm pleasure emanated from the contact, and Zephyr felt as though she could've let herself be consumed by the sensation.

"Thank you," Zephyr managed. She was crying again for some reason. She should've been mad, not grateful. Face had, yet again, made a huge decision without talking to her. It made her more vulnerable to Neurotoxin and...

And it meant she could fly.

"Wanted to guide you into it more, and get your buy-in, but we're running out of time." The look of sadness and pain on Face became more pronounced, and Zephyr felt it like a knife in her heart. "Wanted you to have one more happy memory."

The blue sky behind Face darkened into black, and Zephyr could see the stars emerge. One such star began to expand into

a blue crescent. In moments she recognized it. The Earth zoomed and grew and grew until a huge view of North America at night hung overhead. It appeared for a moment as though the blue-black planet were falling towards them and about to crash into the realm. But then it stopped growing and hovered.

“Are the others...” asked Zephyr, her voice petering out as she saw.

“I am with them, too,” assured Face. “I am with all of you.” Tears were beginning to pour from the angel’s eyes.

It took a moment for Zephyr, craning her head towards the heavens, to understand what she was seeing.

The last time there’d been a nuclear explosion was in 2029. A bomb had gone off in Veracruz that changed the world. A single bomb.

She counted five, now. New York. Miami. Chicago. Washington. One out in the west somewhere.

The Earth was on fire.

Chapter Fourteen

Malka

21 days before Face's arrival at Mukhya

Days sped by and nights lingered. He passed the transition to 2040 in his hotel room, celebrating with a hit of heroin.

It had surprised him that he was able to get hard drugs out in this redneck wasteland, but there were a couple kids who had hooked him up with a look on their face that said they never wanted to see him again.

He spent the daylight hours tracking comings and goings from the compound. It was risky to be travelling along the roads as often as he was, so he put in a lot of time slipping around possible spies for Divinity, and covering his tracks. He'd even ordered a small quadrotor off the web that was supposed to be good for generating custom livefeeds.

And then darkness would fall. He'd been outside the compound at night a few times. They kept working in the darkness. In fact, it was one of the more active periods for certain things, like building. The Zen-fueled zombies moved like ants over the snowy landscape, building and moving things constantly.

But, despite the lights on the Alturas compound, at night it wasn't really possible to see what was going on. He was able to

get closer, but unless he went all-in, the closeness didn't actually earn him anything.

More importantly, it was very, very cold at night, and the drive back to Ketchum was awful. So most days he packed up before the sun dipped below the mountains, and headed back. The days were frustratingly short, and the nights were eternal. It gave him time to think and plan. He didn't like that. Thinking had never been Avram Malka's strong-suit.

His current plan was to figure out who was a spy for Divinity. There surely were some in town. Police, probably. Divinity's standard power-grab was to get authority figures addicted. Once he knew, he'd kidnap and torture the spy into revealing what the purpose of the compound was, and how to get into it. Then, perhaps, he'd get some explosives and blow the whole thing-sky high while the media flew in to see the fireworks and deal with the scraps.

Jem's words echoed through his mind. Those damned words.

"We're done. This project is shelved. The org is shifting priorities. Don't contact me again."

He could almost hear the woman's voice again, quiet and low over the damned cell phone.

He would've punched her if they hadn't been a continent apart. But he never seemed to be in the place where he needed to be. That had been weeks ago.

He'd thought about just finding some way to sneak past the feds back to Russia.

Instead, he'd stayed. He'd stayed and continued to hunt and map and plan. Divinity needed to die. Malka was 43. He had no friends back home and nothing to look forward to in the future. He'd abandoned all hope of reconnecting with his shitty

family decades ago. Even if he made it back to Russia, PCB-2 would disown him for having betrayed his contract and (far more importantly) making enemies of the US government.

When the bomb had gone off in Tel Aviv, he'd thought about returning to Israel. Maybe the homeland had a use for him. It was a thought that belonged to a much younger man, back before he'd been destroyed.

He needed the hunt. He needed to feel like he was doing something with his life. It was the only thing keeping him moving. There was only one alternative to continuing, and it loomed over him every night.

They said that WIRL was behind the bomb—that the WIRL co-founder who hadn't been killed by Socrates had shot himself in the face in his apartment after admitting to having created neurotoxin and arranging the nuke in Israel. It was like some perverse echo of Veracruz. The whole world was hunting WIRL now, which was good. Maybe after he took down Divinity he could help.

Fucking cyborgs were ruining everything.

Malka chuckled to himself as he looked down at the tabletop. He was working his way through a bottle of Jack Daniel's at a corner booth at the Frontier Tavern. He would've rather had good vodka, but this backwater didn't have anything up to his standards.

The little bar had become his haunt over the weeks that he'd been there. He listened to the buzz of the music and conversation. It was soothing, in its way. The screens showed a replay of some game of American football. His half-drunken mind enjoyed trying to figure out the rules just from watching.

He was distracted from the screens by someone slipping into the booth opposite him.

A woman.

It took Malka a moment to get his bearings.

She was young, but was clearly not a girl, sporting at least D-cup breasts and a too-tight shirt that showed them off. Her straight, dirty-blond hair was done up in a pony-tail, and her fragile little face was painted with elaborate eye-shadow and rich red lipstick.

He glared at her, trying to get her to leave. It would be better if she did. Women who approached him only ever had one thing on their mind, and it was something that he was... vulnerable to.

Ever so vulnerable.

“So...” she began. “Word gets around in these parts. Hear you know Tim and Matt.” Her voice was girlish, but not annoyingly bubbly. It had a seductive quality that he longed to hear whispered in his ear.

He felt himself weakening. It was frustrating. It made him angry at himself. He increased the intensity of his glare, both hoping she’d run and hoping she’d stay.

“Who?” he grumbled.

She stayed. “Tim and Matt. They’re about my age. Total asshats? They sell... fun times. Heard you partook. You’re turning into something of a legend.”

Malka sighed and looked away. Now too weak to try and scare her off. “You want drugs,” he said, glumly.

“Jesus. Cut right to the chase, don’t you?” said the woman. “Here, let’s start over. My name’s Daisy. I couldn’t help but notice you were drinking over here all by your lonesome.”

“I don’t have any drugs for you,” he mumbled, unable to look at her. He tried to make himself stone, but the girl...

“Y’know, in my line of work, I meet some pretty blunt folks. But keep it up and you might just set a new high-score.”

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled, then took a drink of his beer.

Daisy sighed. “Wasn’t a criticism. I like blunt. Makes it easier to negotiate. Let’s be blunt. I want your money, and I’ll trade you for sex.”

The music suddenly seemed far too loud. He wasn’t sure he’d heard. His eyes flicked back to her face. She was smiling at him. It was a warm and sincere smile.

He felt himself blush. He hated himself.

“What makes you think I have money for you?”

Daisy laughed. “You buy from Tim and Matt. You’re from out of town. You clearly have... enough to afford good medical care. You’ve been staying at a hotel for at least several days. And my guess is you don’t... get much.”

“I’m not a man,” he growled.

“Fine. Since you won’t give me your name, I’ll just call you ‘Beast,’ like in that cartoon. Doesn’t mean you don’t need a princess.”

“Name’s Avram. And you’re no princess.”

Daisy smirked. “Got me there. But I’m also only seven hundred and fifty a night, and I do anal.”

Malka put his head in his hands and mumbled.

“You’re going to have to speak up, Beast. They keep the music here way too loud.”

“I’m a cripple. A eunuch.”

“Does that mean you’re not interested, or that you’re poor? Because last I checked I was selling, not buying. There’s gotta

be... something a girl like me could do to earn a few meals.” She winked.

For all his shame and weakness, Malka found himself attracted to the woman across from him. She was good at her job. There had been others who he’d been desperate enough that he’d sought out and bought. Many of them were timid before him. They were frightened. Then they were disappointed. He hated them almost as much as he hated himself, and the memories burned in his mind.

But there were other whores who gave him momentary comfort. They were the ones who could look at him. The ones who could kiss him without revulsion.

Daisy felt like she could see him. She wasn’t afraid.

“I need to be more drunk for this. So do you,” he commanded.

“As long as it’s on your tab. Also, money for me up-front. I’ve been burned once for that, and never again.”

The lust in him was a fire, now. He’d have no release from it, but somehow that didn’t matter. He pushed himself along the bench, making room and gestured for Daisy to come sit beside him.

She did.

She looked like an angel in the murky light of the bar.

“Give me a taste. Then I will pay.” He reached out and touched her soft chin with his scarred hands.

She flinched away just a bit. It was nothing. And yet, it was everything. It burned more than any physical wound he’d endured. She was only after his money. Somewhere deep in him, a dream died. With its passing, he grew stronger.

He kissed her. The soft lips and tongue filled him with longing.

She would share his bed tonight. He hoped he wouldn't cry, but he guessed he would. He hated it, and yet needed it.

He pulled her deeper, drinking in the feeling of warm skin and the smell of perfume. He hated to touch her, and make her endure him, but it was like water after a long drought.

She broke the kissing. "Anything more is going to cost you," she said, defiantly.

He smiled, waved at the server in the hope of getting stronger drink, and said "I'll go get money from the machine once our drinks get here."

When the drinks got there, Malka's brain stopped recording long-term memories.

The following day started like no other.

In some ways it was the same. He was hung-over. His bladder-bag was beeping its obnoxious tone. He was naked.

He couldn't remember exactly what had happened, or where he was.

He remembered something about Daisy: She was afraid of him, and he was afraid of her.

He wasn't in bed. He was very cold. His body ached. He was on the floor... on a stone floor. His legs weren't working. They must have run out of batteries again.

His arms were behind his back.

Handcuffs.

He opened one eye. Lying on his stomach.

Harsh white light beat down from above. It was a cold sort of light. Fluorescent. Crisp shadows.

“Сукин сын...” he swore, pushing himself over onto his back with a sudden, jerky motion.

The scraping of the cement floor on his bare skin and the sharp pains in his arms at the uncomfortable position were of secondary concern to his foggy mind. More important was that two figures with AR-15s snapped into action the moment he moved, pointing their guns at his prone form, ready to fire.

One of them was Daisy. She'd switched to more utilitarian clothing, taken off her makeup, and donned a large black helmet.

The recognition hit him full-force, stoking the angry fire in his chest. “Fucking bitch whore cunt!” he yelled, fumbling the pronunciations in his mostly incapacitated state. It was then that he realized that he not only didn't have the ability to move his legs, but that they'd been removed entirely.

Her eyes glittered as she stared at him, mouth never breaking that calm smile.

The other guard was a man with a bushy red beard and a biker-gang look to him, though that might've been because of the zen helmet. He didn't say anything, either.

“Fuck!!” he yelled, again. He thrashed on the cement in an impotent rage, angry at himself for letting his guard down, more than anything. But angry at her, as well. Angry at all of them.

“Stop moving, Beast.” Daisy's command was loud and calm, almost like she'd heard about yelling, once, and wanted to see what it was like.

“Just fucking do it! Shoot me!” The rough cement scraped him painfully as he rolled around on the ground, half a man.

His urine bag continued to beep as he got a look around the room he had woken up in. His head throbbed as he looked at the lights. The room was massive, and as soon as he saw the arched roof overhead, he understood that he was in one of the freshly constructed bunkers at what had once been a campground on the west edge of Alturas Lake.

There were shelves, vehicles, machines, and even rows of bunk beds in the giant space. Zombies, like Daisy, were everywhere. They moved with purpose. A couple of them were getting into or out of the beds, butt-naked except for those damned helmets. There were toilets, too, out in the open. Nobody cared. Nobody was talking. The whine of the machines and generators was the only noise.

And Malka was in the middle of it. He hadn't been taken to some jail cell or prison. He'd simply been deposited in the middle of what was effectively a warehouse and put under guard.

And why not? Divinity turned men and women into mindless slaves. The zen helmets satisfied everything they could ever want. None of them would care if they saw him get gunned down or tortured right in front of them. As long as they wore those helmets, he was just another machine to be ignored or worked around.

"If we were going to shoot you, we'd have already done that. But we can make this experience much worse for you. You gain nothing by moving. Reserve your strength. Perhaps you will have an opportunity to escape, later."

That made Malka stop. For a moment, in the fog of his hung-over brain, he thought she was giving him a clue as to how to escape. Perhaps she cared about him after all.

Then he realized that she was just saying the thing that was most likely to get him to stop moving. The fastest route from

point-A to point-B. Utilitarian efficiency. She was part of Divinity, and that was how Divinity did things. No wasted motion.

He considered rolling around some more, just to spite her, but he could tell she wasn't lying. And regardless, it hurt to move. He relaxed, feeling his body slump onto the hard floor.

A few seconds passed, silent except for the beeping of his bladder and the miscellaneous noise of the bunker.

"Aren't you going to do something about that? My bag needs changing."

Daisy moved from pointing her gun at Malka to a more neutral stance. The other guard followed her example. "It is outside the scope of our missions, as guards. We discussed whether it was important, and decided that it was not."

"It'll start leaking."

"Then this place will smell like your pee for a while. Nobody will care, except maybe you." Daisy continued to smile warmly, as though she had told a small joke.

"Freak," he accused.

She watched him, and smiled at him, but said nothing.

After the first few hours of lying on the floor of the warehouse, leaking urine and hungry as hell, his guards had been switched and the new ones had changed his bag and made him more comfortable.

He'd been given a bed away from the others, still out in the open like everything, but far more comfortable than the floor. His handcuffs had been unlocked so he could eat.

He'd tried to fight them, and grab a gun, but the guards weren't crippled like he was, and he was vastly outnumbered.

They'd beaten him for that, covering his body with bruises and depriving him of food for the rest of the day.

But that was his own stubborn fault. At the end of his first day, there he'd been given another chance to eat and had obeyed. Beans and rice and water and a multivitamin. No fork or spoon. He'd seen the other drones eating the same, though at least they got utensils.

He was handcuffed again, when it came time to sleep. He barely slept at all, that first night. The machines kept running at night, but it wasn't the noise that kept him up, really. It was that he was looking for a way out. Some hopeful thread within him kept his mind spinning on possible escape routes.

But Divinity kept perfect watch over him. The guards had a focus that never wavered. They didn't get bored or tired. They were rotated out at regular intervals and didn't waste any time talking.

It was like he was the only human in the Alturas compound. The drones weren't human. They were made from humans, but their spark had been stolen.

The next day, and the days after that, went more smoothly. They kept him uncuffed and on his bed most of the day. They warned him if he started anything tricky, and beat him when he resisted or tried to fight. But most of the time he obeyed. Most of the time he just lay there hating himself and fantasizing about dying.

He should've gone to Mars with the robot. He'd had the opportunity to do something better, and he'd thrown it away.

Because he'd been afraid.

Breakfast was rice and beans. Lunch was rice and beans. Dinner was rice and beans. Sometimes they mixed beef in with

the beans. Always they were served with water. It wasn't bad, from a certain perspective.

From another perspective it was hellish.

He'd seen someone with their helmet off once, in the big dome-shaped room. She'd cried as the drones moved to surround her. And to his surprise, they embraced her in a group hug. There must have been a dozen, all around her, simply holding her as she wept. And eventually, she'd stopped and gone to sleep. After she woke up they gave her a helmet and she'd become like them again.

He hated them all.

Days passed. People came and went. Things were built and moved. Divinity was active, all around him, but they didn't tell him anything.

But they did talk to him. They had Daisy talk to him.

She came every day, always wearing that damned helmet. She smiled and talked to him in a way that made it clear that she was simply following her orders to talk to him. She asked how he was feeling, and whether he needed anything. She asked who he was working for, and why he hated them so much. She asked where he was from, and what he liked to do. It was almost like he could see the checkboxes in her mind getting marked off.

At first, he'd told her to fuck off and leave him alone. But the loneliness and the soberness sank in after just two days. Las Águilas didn't care about him. Nobody cared about him. There was no rescue coming.

He still told himself that he'd die before telling Divinity anything of value. It was a thought he clung to, like a piece of driftwood from his splintered life, while he floated in the uncertain dark.

So, instead of saying the things he knew Divinity was interested in, he tried to turn the conversation to Daisy, and ask about her. She usually talked freely and without hesitation.

She'd joined the gang a few months ago. She'd been a whore—a local girl—trying to save up enough money to go to school somewhere far away from Idaho. Her father had been sexually abusive. She'd been exploring hard drugs. Her pimp had met someone in the gang and had shared the experience of Zen with her. It had just been a taste, but it had been enough to turn her into a slave. She'd given her savings to the organization and kept whoring to get them more cash in exchange for time with the helmet.

Securing Malka had been her big break. It let her join up as a full drone. She seemed genuinely happy about it when she spoke, but she seemed genuinely happy about everything when she spoke—even talking about getting raped by her father. It was disgusting what the machine was doing to her.

He wanted to save her from this hell.

Days and days and days passed. Much of it was spent in a depressed, lethargic fog. He felt stupid and far more moody than normal. He cried regularly and hated himself for it. The rest of his time was spent fantasizing about rescuing Daisy or stealing a gun just long enough to put a bullet in his head. He could feel his body getting weaker.

“Don’t you... ever get tired of blindly obeying?” he asked her, once.

Daisy smiled, just like she always did. “Not blindly obeying. The divine path is spread out before me, and I finally, finally, have the strength to walk it. Zen gives me the strength. My body is my own. I’m a volunteer, not a slave.”

Malka didn’t say anything to that. Instead, he turned away and lay back down, burying his face in his smelly pillow.

“Even when I don’t have Zen, I walk the path. It’s so clear, Beast. I wish you could see it. Your metal eyes are making you blind.”

“Go away,” he commanded.

She did.

Malka snapped to consciousness from a dream that slipped from his mind without leaving a trace.

He was being touched. Moved. Pushed. Twisted.

Once upon a time he would’ve fought them, as they forced him onto his belly and cuffed his hands behind his back. It didn’t really matter which side of him they cuffed his hands. Given that he had no legs it was trivial to move his hands back around front.

But he didn’t fight. He simply let the forceful hands of the drones do their work.

His eyes came online and snapped out of the power-saving mode they used when he was asleep.

The light made him squint. It was always too damn bright in the big room. Too bright and too loud. It was a miracle he was sleeping at all.

There were three drones around him. Two men and a woman.

Daisy.

With his hands cuffed, they dragged him off the bed and carried him by the arms. Daisy walked ahead of them, leading the way as they carried his naked body through the cold room. She gripped her AR-15, ready for some unknown enemy.

“What’s going on?” he mumbled, trying to get a hold of himself.

“Leadership made up its mind,” said Daisy, looking back at him with a smile. “The divine path was made clear.”

He wished he had the strength to fight them, but he didn’t. He simply hung there, suspended between the arms of the two male drones like a piece of meat.

They brought him to a different section of the building where there was a chair that looked like it was for a dentist or something. They placed him roughly onto it. It always hurt to be in a chair without his legs on. The organic-synthetic joint of his belly was not meant to support his weight directly, and the spinal fixture bumped painfully against the seat.

They uncuffed him and then re-cuffed his arms to the chair, not to the arms of the chair, but down by his sides. Then one of the men began to use a long piece of black cloth to tie his torso down to the chair, threading it under his armpits and even around his neck.

“What are you doing?” he asked again.

“I am a doctor,” said one of the men, smiling at him from beneath his helmet. He was middle-aged, but in good physical condition, with a big grey-brown beard. “Please be calm. Things will be better soon.”

That certainly did *not* make Malka calm, and he began to be even more nervous when the doctor began to use another piece of cloth to tie his head back against the head-rest.

Malka began to squirm and fight.

Daisy took a decisive step forward and thrust the butt of her rifle violently into his belly, making him cough and groan. It took the fight out of him, and that made him sad. He was so impossibly weak.

Head, body, and arms strapped in, Malka watched as the doctor wheeled a tray of surgical instruments forward.

“Tim, hold the patient’s head for me. We’ll need all the stability possible for operating without anaesthetic.”

The words shot more adrenaline into his system. “What are you going to do to me!?” He still felt half asleep. As though the whole thing was a terrible nightmare.

The doctor took out a bottle of something and dabbed a cloth. “We’re going to remove your eyes.”

Malka began to curse loudly as the doctor rubbed the chemical-doused cloth over his eyelids, and then peeling back the lids, over the metal orbs themselves. It burned like hell and his neck muscles seized and thrashed, but it was useless. His head was held in a vice-like grip by the other man, and he was still bound.

“This really will be over soon. You’ll see,” said Daisy.

There was a correct way to remove his prostheses. He wasn’t sure what it was, but he was sure that it existed. And he was sure that this “doctor” was not doing things that way.

For one, the doctor began by cutting his eyelids off with a scalpel.

Malka screamed as the sharp pain lanced through his face and his blurry vision turned red. But nobody cared. The drones in the room kept moving according to their orders, no doubt smiling all the while.

With his eyelids gone, the doctor injected something near the site of the surgery, and wiped the blood away.

Malka lost track of time. His eyes slid this way and that. In between curses, his teeth ground together in a violent grip. The pain was nearly overwhelming... it nearly cut off his ability to feel and see. But Malka noticed when his right eye stopped moving at his command. He could see the blurry outline of the

tongs in the doctor's hand and feel the sharp sensation of them digging into his head.

And then the doctor twisted his eye, and Malka blacked out.

But the sharp bite of pain brought him swiftly back to reality.

He could still see out of his left eye. It was a blurry mess of red, but somewhere ahead of him he thought he could see Daisy. He thought she was smiling at him.

"Just one more to go!" said the doctor, happily.

Malka spat another half-dozen curses at the man in Russian, but his heart wasn't in it. He just wanted to die so badly.

He could feel the doctor reaching into his socket to mop up the blood and apply pressure to the wound. It was a disturbingly intimate sensation.

Soon his curses turned into begging. He hated himself for begging, but he couldn't help it. "Kill me. Don't do this! Please! Just kill me! Just fucking kill me, you конной трахать монстры!"

But they didn't kill him. Instead, the doctor, having satisfied himself dressing the eye cavity, switched his attention to Avram's remaining eye. He grabbed it with those sick metal tongs and began to twist again.

Malka's muscles spasmed uselessly and he cried tears of blood as inky blackness swallowed him.

He gasped and cried and screamed, fully lost in panic and helplessness. Nothing in his miserable life had prepared him for that torture.

And then... he realized it was done.

He could feel the gauze being pushed into the remaining socket and the tape being wrapped over his face.

“Operation successful,” said the doctor. “He’ll need those bandages changed in a few minutes, then every hour until the bleeding stops.” The man cleared his throat, calm as ever as he finished by saying “I expect he is safe to enlighten now.”

Avram Malka was too weak and out of breath to react, as they unstrapped his head from the chair. He did his best to fight them as the helmet was placed on his head.

“Just kill me!” he screamed again. “Don’t make me one of you! Kill me! Just kill me!”

The pain was everywhere. His shame was overwhelming. Nothing was worth it. He was all alone.

And then they turned the helmet on.

...

And it didn’t do anything.

He took a breath, waiting for it to crush him and turn him into a zombie. The pain was still brutally intense. He still hated himself. The helmet wasn’t working.

Avram felt... relief. Yes, he was still a prisoner among the scum of the Earth. He was blind, now, and crippled. He was in pain and suffering acute testosterone withdrawal. But at least... at least the zen helmet didn’t do anything. He was still himself.

He could hear the hum of the electromagnets. They were obnoxiously loud. It was a wonder that anyone could hear anything with one of the helmets on.

Avram took a breath. And then another. Fighting and flailing weren’t doing him any good. He needed to be strong and break out of the compound somehow.

“How are you feeling?”

Daisy's words were amplified by the helmet and sounded strange in his ears. The whirl of the magnets felt almost like background noise. Perhaps the helmet had speakers and was cancelling out other sources of noise.

Avram took a deep breath, filling himself with cold resolve. "Fuck you," he said in the direction he thought she was. He wished he could see where she was standing, so he could spit at her.

"How's the pain?" she asked.

He was getting used to it. The initial stabbing loss of his eyes had faded into a dull ache. "Your helmet doesn't work. Take it off me."

"No, it's working. It will take several days for your brain to adjust fully, but the initial impact is really obvious from where I'm sitting."

{Lies. She's lying,} he thought to himself. {It's all a big trick,}

Avram took another deep breath. It wouldn't help to struggle or fight. He needed to save his strength for when he could act in a useful way.

"If it's working, then how come I still want to strangle your delicate little neck? How come I want to put a bullet in that fucking doctor's head?"

Daisy's words, amplified by the helmet made him shudder: "But do you still want to put a bullet in *your* head?"

She was right. She *wasn't* lying. It was doing something. "Take it off me! Take it off me right now!"

"Why are you fighting this, Beast? Just relax and feel Zen."

"I'm a person, dammit! I don't want to be turned into one of you!" He pushed against his restraints ineffectually.

“Tell me what I am, if I’m not a person.”

Avram wished he could see the woman. He wished he could see, instead of simply having the dull black ache. “A zombie. A drone. A slave. Tool of some fucking elite мудака!” He threw himself against his restraints again.

“The helmet doesn’t change people, Beast. It won’t make you into someone you’re not. How could it? It’s not even invasive. All it’s doing is suppressing the parts of you that hold you back, and amplifying the parts of you that make you who you are.”

“You’re lying,” he growled, taking another breath to calm himself. He needed to be strong. It wasn’t helping him to flail about and burn up his energy.

“Am I? Do you think I wanted to feel alone and like my life was meaningless? S’why I was saving money. Wanted to find something like Divinity. Wanted to make a difference.”

“You’re being used.”

Avram could almost hear Daisy’s smile as she said “Yes, and I love it. To be used is to be useful. Divinity is enlightening the world, and I am helping spread that light. Oh, it’s so good that you’re finally joining us. I’ve felt such pity for you. Soon you’ll help spread the light, I just know it.”

It was a waste of energy to reply. He had more important things to focus on, like escaping.

The conversation ended, and Daisy presumably left. She didn’t say goodbye, but he didn’t much care. She wasn’t special. Divinity surely had hundreds of people like her, and there were millions of other Daisies, out in the world.

In the calm silence that followed (which wasn’t exactly silence, because he could still hear the magnets), Avram began to plot his escape.

The helmet helped him focus and ignore the pain. It was remarkably subtle. He simply felt like the distractions of the world were swept away so that he could think.

It would be simple to convince them, after a few more hours of exposure or whatever, that the helmet had turned him into a slave. He felt confident that he'd be able to sell the idea that he flipped. He'd tell them about Las Águilas. They probably knew already, based on his connection to Crystal Socrates. But he'd make them trust him, regardless.

And then... he'd stab them in the back. They'd underestimate him, now that he was blind. And he knew he could be patient. He could see the path of success laid out before him.

Avram took a deep breath.

And he smiled.

There were no introductions and no warnings that the conversation was about to begin. It simply did.

"Tell me how you're feeling," commanded a deeply masculine voice with a British accent.

It had been days since his surgery. He'd been given his legs back, and at his request, they'd started getting him testosterone again. But without his eyes, he was as crippled as he had been, just in a different way.

"Better than I can remember ever having felt," he responded. It was the truth. He could feel the Zen lifting him up. He had a kind of clarity of attention and focus that he'd never had. And importantly, he wasn't lonely or sad or scared. He knew what needed to be done, and felt a sense of calm satisfaction in knowing that he could do it.

"Do you know who I am?" asked the British man.

“No,” answered Avram.

“Good. It is better that way. Phoenix may be playing fast and loose with her identity these days, but that is because she is a fool.”

Avram had told them everything he knew about Las Águilas on the day after his surgery. It was part of winning their trust.

They were standing in the very same building he’d been in the entire time. It had been weeks since he’d been outside, but that didn’t bother Avram. It was cold outside. That wasn’t where he was supposed to be. He was supposed to be inside. He spent most of his time, since getting his legs, simply standing in place, waiting.

It was what a good drone would have done, and he wanted to trick them into thinking he was a good drone, so it was what he did. Zen made it easy.

“I want to help,” he said. He understood, now, that he was talking to one of the kingpins—one of the men who ran Divinity. Perhaps it was *the* man who ran Divinity.

“So I’ve heard. You’ve been a very obedient convert.”

“My life was nothing before I found Zen. I wanted to die. My old path was an easy thing to abandon, once I saw the better way.”

“You are welcome, brother. We will soon enlighten everyone. But the divine path sometimes requires careful steps. Have you heard the news of Mars?”

“Nothing since December.”

“The aliens have attacked the base owned by Las Águilas, and word is that they’re getting ready for full-scale war,” said

the Englishman. His voice didn't waver. It was clear that he, too, was using Zen.

"And what of Crystal Socrates?" asked Avram.

"Unknown. Earth is in an uproar. First the bomb and now this. Your friend, Stephano, has become something of a figurehead, lately."

"He's not my friend."

The Englishman corrected himself. "I meant only that you had worked with him. WIRL seems to have let him out of his cage. Or perhaps it was genuinely an order from the Whitehouse and WIRL simply lost the power to keep him under their thumb. He's been arguing that the nameless were justified in their attack and that the Red Eagles are at fault."

A silence settled between the two men. Avram breathed a calm breath and smiled as he stood.

"We suspect he is in danger. We'd like him to embrace Divinity and come under our protection," said the Englishman, at last.

"Because peace with the nameless is important?"

"Because we're finally ready to go public, and he would make a good spokesman. He is at the confluence of many powers in America. Our partners in China are already starting to move, and we need to keep pace. Securing his allegiance would be a great boon."

"We must walk the divine path together," said Avram.

"Exactly. And now that you are with us, we have a way to reach him."

Avram smiled. "What can I do?"

Chapter Fifteen

Zephyr

The night was harsh and cold.

Sometimes.

But not for Zephyr. Not now.

She peeked outside and sniffed at the air. The soft smell of jasmine drifted on a warm wind. One hand reached out and then another, slowly grasping the branch of the tree.

It was *her* tree.

She'd lived there for a long time... longer than she could remember, and it made her happy. She slowly crawled out onto the branch, feeling the soft wood under her fingers and toes.

Somewhere out in the darkness were instruments. She could hear the faeries playing.

One lazy hand stretched out in front of the other. Without thinking, her tail wrapped around the branch behind her to help her balance. The scent of jasmine led her on. She was thirsty.

Leaves parted in the breeze as she climbed out to the end of her branch and stretched. The moon, bright and full, shone down from above, illuminating a sparkling drop of sweetwater hanging at the end of the branch.

Zephyr stretched out and out and out, ever so carefully, not wanting to disturb the drop. It was big—a mouthful. Her lips made contact, and she drew in the taste.

Pancakes. Syrup. Butter. Coffee. Cozy winter mornings with the snow piled so high outside that she knew she didn't have to go to school, regardless of what day it was. Soft sweaters and gentle Christmas music. Her mom loved that. Maybe she'd build a snowman later. Warm hugs.

Zephyr thought the memory was strange, but it made her happy, and she gobbled up the rest of it.

The faerie music had shifted to include the hint of a holiday long discarded. It was a memory from Old Earth's Dreamtime.

A soft green light flickered in the branches below.

Lightning bug!

Zephyr dropped from the branch and stretched out to grab the critter. Zop! She absorbed it and gained speed as she did.

Her tail whipped out, grabbed a branch, and pulled her into a spin. More lightning bugs were under the leaves down here! The swing catapulted her into the mass of them. Zop! Zop! Zop!

The forest unfolded into a playground of branches and vines as she swung and danced in the leaves. With each lightning bug she caught, her mind became a bit quicker and her path became more complex. The moon's Face sang to her as she listened to the fae music bounce and tinkle with the sound of little drums, strings, and pipes.

Another sweetwater droplet!

Candy! Twizzlers! The slight smell of sulphur and the bubbling of water over rocks. Heat melting over her skin from

the hot springs, each muscle unwinding. Face's body gently pressed against hers as the red licorice candy disappeared into a kiss.

The water disappeared into Zephyr's mouth with a smile. That memory was nothing but a dream of a Dreamtime that could have been, but it was a delight anyway. There were too many sweetnesses that she had never tasted as a human.

Awareness trickled up and out even as she kept swinging and playing in her monkey paradise.

She was not just the monkey.

She was a human.

She could feel the wind on her cheeks—her *human* cheeks. The stars were the same, but the song was different. It was her song. She was singing with friends.

The night winds rolled under her feathers as she watched the hills and forests of the realm drift by, below. Face was at the front of the formation, softly glowing with superhuman energy. These were her people.

Wings shifted on the winds, and Zephyr laughed as they danced into a tight funnel. Friends were everywhere.

Face, right at the base of the funnel, suddenly shot up as though gravity had somehow flipped and she was diving instead of ascending. Those nearest followed her, and the formation inverted. Face caught Zephyr on the way, and their limbs entwined, the softness of Face's angelic body lifting Zephyr as though they'd each been created to move together.

Face's eyes flashed with metallic joy as she sang to Zephyr in exultation, the voices of the others each ringing in echo. Zephyr placed her head against Face's collarbone and felt the warmth of her skin.

It had frightened Zephyr, as the Earth's first true nuclear war began, to think of what she knew must be done. She had been the first of those who hadn't been at Road. She knew her body would be ripped apart, and her brain sliced into nothing more than data for a computer. Even if the computer that housed her was separated from Crystal, and protected in a dozen different ways, the uploading would still make her vulnerable to Neurotoxin. But it had to be done. It was the way the colony needed to go, and she needed to be the one to lead the way.

After the fact, once everything was done, her fear seemed more foolish. It hadn't been hard. Anesthesia applied by a robot and it was done. She was the same person afterwards, just as she was the same person after waking up each morning. She still had a body, too, in the sense that her eyes saw a world, and her arms moved in response. Her feet were now as real as they had been when they were prosthetic, and those had been as real as they had been when they were meat and bone. The reality of them was that she could feel her toes and use them to walk. Everything else was secondary.

Her wings were real too, in that sense, just as was the part of her that was a little monkey swinging through the trees. She could still feel the joy and safety that emanated from that part of her mind. It was a bit like multitasking and a bit like watching a movie. That part of her mind didn't really understand that it was more than a monkey, but it was still part of the totality of her experience. She could focus entirely on it if she wanted, bringing her mind more completely into line with the pure, solitary, hedonic experience.

But there was something uniquely good about being here, in the realm's sky, with Face and the others. As the monkey, she had no sense of companionship outside of the vague feeling of being cared for by Face. But here, she was a singer, not just a

listener. Face was a partner, rather than a benevolent background force.

Zephyr squeezed her lover as they continued to soar, bodies entwined.

Face kissed her, soft and warm. They were still in the realm, but it was her reality. They were no longer held apart by their dual natures.

“Am with you,” went the song. “We are with you. Joined at the base of eternity with wings outstretched. Unbreakable love everlasting.”

With a final kiss, Face let Zephyr go, and fall back into the mass of angels. It wasn't an abandonment, but rather part of the dance. Face shared herself with Zephyr *through* the others.

Zephyr's black wings pumped hard to keep her in formation as they flowed through the night's sky as one great body.

Arya Drake, with wings that would've been a spectrum of color in the sun, dipped close, in time with the music, and sent a ripple through the song as her wingtip gently brushed against Zephyr's.

The song lifted and adapted. Zephyr found herself standing, clothed in t-shirt and torn jeans, without wings, holding an electric guitar in a stereotypical garage. Some background part of her knew that this reality had displaced the monkey, placing that adventure through the trees into something like pause.

But that didn't matter. What mattered was the song. What mattered was that Arya was in front of her, the punk chick with tattoos and piercings, pumping out a heavy rhythm from her bass guitar.

Zephyr fell into step just a second behind, answering with a metallic cry from her instrument that shook the space and made her heart pound. She'd never learned to play on Earth, but that hardly mattered. Her fingers were calloused and knew all the steps, here.

Arya and Zephyr fell into a duet that became a duel and rolled back into a comfortable harmony again, circling each other in dance as best they could in the garage, without getting their cables tangled.

Arya's eyes were silver, too, and Zephyr could see Face in her. The same hungry need for attention was there.

And in the blink of an eye, they were girls together—a sleepover when they were somehow both fourteen. They would've been friends on Old Earth, had they been just a little closer in age and space. Here in the fabricated memory, they'd just finished watching *Les Misérables* and were both emotionally raw. Zephyr had snuck in a joint, and even though they were in Arya's house they moved over to her bedroom window and took turns smoking it, trying not to let the smell linger.

Minutes slipped by as the two talked quietly about their hopes and dreams. Arya wanted to be an astronaut—she shared a love of space with her father. A father that was never around. He'd come back to visit her occasionally, but never for long.

Taking a long drag on the joint, blinking silver eyes, Arya said “Swear ta god, next time he shows up, I'm followin' him. Fuck high school. Fuck all this.”

“What will you do instead? Once you leave, I mean?” asked Zephyr, leaning in.

“Change the world...”

The sound of sweet music surged up and sundered the false-memory, bringing the two back to the garage. The weed might have been gone, but Zephyr still felt high. The two smiled at each other, knowing that their time together had been real.

They were friends. And that friendship carried them up and out again into the air. Arya and Zephyr danced around each other, wings brushing, as the song of Face surged around them.

They were nearing the village now. Others awaited them, there. Other friends. Other humans. In a way, they were all the same. They were part of her, and she was part of them.

Zephyr, as she was carried forward by the wind and song, reflected on how much more she liked people now. She saw herself in everyone, and so much more. Each and every one of the people of the realm were like great works of art. Each was a song. Each was a painting. Each was a crystal, polished and carved with many facets. She loved them—each of them.

As they descended into the garden in the center of the village, made ever more expansive and beautiful with careful tending and reshaping of the land, Zephyr sought out Pedro Velasco. They landed, side-by-side, and Zephyr pulled his attention onto her, silver eyes glinting.

Zephyr sang out, high and pure, “To think I never knew you, before the storm... to think we were so far away. And now, with skies crystal blue, I beg you... to stay.”

Something nudged the back of Zephyr’s mind. A need unmet.

She pulled Pedro’s hands close to her and laughed with delight as he pounced on her, knocking her back into a bed of short, soft flowers that seemed to have been made exactly for them. Her wings faded and were gone before she touched the ground, preventing injury.

Zephyr could feel Face's love with them as Pedro's kiss pulled her mind deeper into a private reality. A great bedroom with silk sheets and pillows sprawling everywhere. Candles floated magically in the mansion.

The muscles of Pedro's naked chest glistened as he smiled down at his prey. She moved to escape, but he was faster and stronger. Silk ropes were in his hands, and soon weaving their way sensuously around her body as she fought, always on the edge of escaping, but never quite free. His arms held her tighter than if he'd been made of metal, and burned her like fire.

In the garden, she squirmed with delight and kissed him gently, enjoying the shared fantasy. In the hedonic depths she was unaware of the higher reality, but in the community garden, she could feel everything from both vantages. She was one person with two bodies.

But not just two bodies. On the layer *above* the garden, she rested her mind, drawing strength from those deeper experiences. What had been a mental nudge in the garden was, here, a crisp awareness. She was fighting a war, and it would demand her whole attention in a moment.

On this layer her body was abstract. She floated in a space of her own creation. The surface of Mars rested in the center of her vision, in great detail. Schematics, lists, and graphs were everywhere, responding to her every thought.

This was the layer of strategy.

She could see what remained of Acorn's forces speeding towards the heart of their forces. Zephyr braced the front-lines and exchanged a burst of nonverbal information with Face and the others, confirming their battle formation.

Fifty-two seconds...

She rolled and struggled, overwhelmed by the erotic domination. She couldn't think or catch her breath... The man was letting her fight to wear herself out. It was just a game to him. But he was overconfident... She gasped as he forced her legs open. There! A chance! She threw all her weight into breaking free, and she rolled away. Her arms were still bound, but she was...

Her escape was cut short as soft, pale hands seized her. The blindfold slipped over her eyes just as she was taking in Face's perfect, naked body.

She laughed and squeezed Pedro's hand as they lay under the stars and sang softly to each other. The sweet smells of the garden wrapped them up in a bubble of soft love. Here and there they kissed. Face sat beside them, glowing with otherworldly radiance and petting them. Occasionally a fruit would float from elsewhere in the garden into her hand, and she'd feed them as they drank in their pocket reality.

Thirty-one seconds until impact with the enemy. She still had time to indulge herself.

Mouths and fingers ran over her as she involuntarily fought against her constraints in the void of the blindfold.

While she drank in the pleasure, she simultaneously let the loose thoughts of her strategic mind wander. Back when she'd been flesh, her thoughts were the product of her brain sending signals from neuron to neuron. While these signals had been primarily electric, they were not like wires. Instead, the neurons had to pump ions and large neurotransmitter molecules between the cells. There was nothing magical in that. It was merely information transfer. It was what evolution had settled on for the mechanism of thought.

Her mind was on a quantum computer now, and beams of light carried her thoughts. The result was that her mind was

now up to ten thousand times faster than when she had been flesh. And she knew that she could get faster still. If they won the gorram war it seemed like anything was possible.

That speed was currently distributed and used to spread her mind out rather than run a single thread as fast as possible. Zephyr liked it that way. It let her indulge her pleasures while also staying engaged in what was real.

Twelve seconds.

She was breathing hard, now, even in the garden. The intensity of the sexual feeling was impossible to contain when she delved into it so fully. Others came to sit with Face and sing to her and Pedro. Arya, Dinyar, and other friends watched but did not intrude. There were no secrets among any of them. She was seen, accepted, and cherished. They sang a song for her, and she wept with joy.

And deep in her mind she was bound and blindfolded, held on the spearpoint of sexual agony for a subjective eternity, unable to find release or even catch her breath, as her lovers forced themselves upon her in a storm of erotic sensation. She would've screamed if she could.

Six seconds.

The block burst. Whatever had held back the orgasm disappeared in a flash and every muscle seized at once. She did scream, then, in the garden, and her voice was carried and guided by the chorus. Even on her strategic layer, her mind seemed to blank and shudder with the nova of sensation.

Wave after wave of aftershocks rolled through her, each more intense than any orgasm, or even any experience she'd had in her first body. Each of them was a hammer blow of pleasure on her already broken mind.

Until, eventually, they subsided.

The world calmed and softened. The bedroom faded.

And for a long while, she simply lay with Face and Pedro in the garden, surrounded by friends and a glow of joy.

Three seconds.

The song washed over her, and she let sleep take her. It was only for a moment—a comfortable indulgence. Perhaps half an hour of subjective time passed. There was no rush.

She smiled at Pedro upon waking. He'd stayed with her. They all had. These were her people.

She was rested and ready.

One second.

She gathered all the resources she could and put them towards her strategic mind.

Milliseconds slid by as she waited, her mind held like a sword raised. Being uploaded hadn't just sped her up. Her mind at this layer was more focused and clear than it ever had been on Old Earth.

There. She saw them.

The battle started as soon as Acorn's war machines crested the horizon.

Half of Zephyr dove down again, not into the garden or any realm of joy, but into Universe Zero—the true space of physics. And instantly her body was her battleship.

Acorn had sent a wave of missiles to Mars meant to make Maṅgala-Mukhya into a molten crater.

And they had.

But there was a great deal of space between Earth and Mars, and Face had seen them coming. Zephyr had decided that their best bet was to secretly escape the colony and let

Acorn think he'd been successful. But it just wasn't possible to maintain life support functions that way. Even if they managed to evacuate, they'd starve out in the desert.

But they didn't have to, and Zephyr had seen that. She'd led the way in being uploaded. Mukhya was now a crater and not a single breathing human was left on the red planet, but they'd escaped and were still alive and fighting.

The machines they now inhabited were a collaborative effort. Face was the primary architect, though they drew on work from just about everyone who had survived. They were each about the size of a large truck or a tank, though the design let them squeeze down, when needed, into a worm-like shape only a few feet in diameter for tunneling.

Time seemed to crawl forward as Zephyr put all of her mind into the robot. Her "body" had ten legs and she directed the motion of each one. There was a computer that typically handled much of the control, but this was not the time to rely on unconscious programs. She needed to control every motion.

The railgun had been her own design. Mukhya had the prototype, of course, but it had taken quite a lot of work to adapt the bulky design to something that could fit elegantly on a robot body. The minor augments to her intelligence over the weeks and months meant that she was capable of feats of engineering and design she'd only dreamed of before. And now it was there, and as concrete and real as the rocks under her metal feet.

The gun was nearly four meters long from base to tip, mounted at the half-way point on a turret on the top of the battleship. The capacitors were nearly fully charged. Zephyr held them there like a half-squeezed trigger. She could almost hear them hum.

Acorn's machines wouldn't even be visible to a human. Zephyr peered at them from a dozen telescopic cameras. The largest robots were about the same size, and Zephyr knew he had several railguns of his own.

Metal feet drifted slowly through the air as she waited for the right moment. Concentrated LIDAR pulses shot out of Zephyr's ship, adding a touch of 3D data to the kaleidoscope of viewpoints.

Others had begun to fire their weapons. Zephyr merely danced.

Projectiles shot forward out of the enemy craft. It took her a few milliseconds to locate them, and a few milliseconds more to track where each was headed. Even in that short time, they'd traveled at least fifty meters. She spent a few more milliseconds confirming their trajectories.

She was at the front of her little army. A deliberately juicy target. She wanted to draw Acorn's fire.

And it worked.

Three bullets were headed towards her at over two kilometers per second.

Thankfully there were nearly three and a half kilometers between the two battle groups.

She began to factor in gravity and wind, as well as the expected motion of the enemy robots as she felt her own projectile begin to slide down the barrel of her gun.

She began to eject armor plates from her legs and body, as well, using pockets of compressed air. She would've pushed off from the ground, but on timescales like this, she might as well have been floating. The legs on her battleship wouldn't offer enough kick.

The shell exited her gun, aimed at where she expected one of the other enemy bots to be in 1.53 seconds.

With it gone she was much slower. She'd used the recoil of the gun to angle herself so that one of the incoming projectiles was set to slide between her turret and her body, while another other would pass harmlessly by her legs. The last incoming projectile couldn't be dodged.

So she'd deflect it. Or try, anyway.

There was no hope of actually knocking it off course so it wouldn't hit her. The mass of it was the biggest unknown, but she expected it to have between five and fifteen megajoules of kinetic energy. Apply that energy over the surface area of the bullet and it would likely cut through nearly a full meter of solid steel.

She watched the LIDAR reflection as it sped towards her. Even as fast as her mind was moving, the bullet was traveling at a subjective jogger's pace, flying over the red-orange sands. She could see it in greater resolution now, long and thin like a dart or an arrow.

Acorn had underestimated them. He'd expected his bombs to obliterate Face and the inhabitants of Mukhya, and had sent a token force of robots to Mars to clean up any survivors and probably to begin work on a new colony. Acorn was Growth's mind-clone and expanding his reach was all he cared about.

They'd surprised Acorn's invading robots, and cut his forces down to less than half before they rallied and retreated over the horizon. Now Face's forces had the numerical advantage, but lacked the element of surprise. Worse... Acorn's machines were better equipped. They were forged in the superfactories of Earth.

Zephyr's leg slowly came up. It was, perhaps, too slow.

The deadly metal flew at her. It was easily visible now.

There was something strange about watching the world at this speed. Gravity seemed to be powerless to pull the dart down. Everything other than the projectiles seemed half-frozen.

The bullet hit her, just as expected. She was too slow to escape it. She'd managed to get one metal leg outstretched, however, thanks to the release of pressurized plates. As it tore into her leg, she felt it push against the structural components that had been lined up at an angle. It was as though she were catching the bullet with her bones.

She watched the metal limb practically erupt in a spray of fragments as the other two bullets slid harmlessly past. As her leg fell apart the bullet pushed her down and she pushed it up. It exited the back of her battleship, only destroying two sensor systems in the process.

Now she had nine legs. No big deal.

She began to charge the railgun for a second shot. The capacitor bank required a huge draw of energy, and they were likely to only get a second volley off this battle. The energy cost meant she'd have to shut down for a moment. Timing was everything.

Zephyr blacked out.

She regained consciousness a couple seconds later with her battleship-body lying on the rocky sand. The railgun was at 80% of what it needed, so she set to work recovering her footing.

Zephyr's ship wasn't the only one that had been hit. As she sent out a stream of commands to the tiny repair robots that were collecting discarded armor plates and working to stitch up her leg, a fraction of her mind dipped back into the garden.

Zephyr opened her eyes to the sensation of light drops of rain here and there. The sky was grey with clouds.

She pushed herself up. The group was no longer around her, but they were nearby.

The song was low and quiet—afraid, perhaps.

Face was kneeling in the grass. Her white wings were fully outstretched behind her, and she glowed with an intensity that was nearly blinding. On her lap was Nathan Daniels, unconscious. She was singing to him. She was asking him to come back.

Zephyr scrambled forward before she realized what she was doing.

“No... no no no,” she muttered.

In Universe Zero, she could see Nathan’s battleship, torn nearly in half by two direct hits from Acorn’s railguns.

Nathan’s boyfriend, Hiran, was beside Face, holding Nathan’s hand.

{Not Nathan... Please not Nate...} was all she could think.

He’d come so far. He’d followed her. Listened to her. He’d fought by her side and died once already. He was part of her family, here. He had so many things left to do. He was going to get married after the battle...

“He’s a shadow on the cave,” whispered a small, mean voice.

“Is he dead?” she asked, feeling the rain starting to come down for real. She could manifest protection from it in the realm, but she didn’t care.

Face turned to Zephyr, her face a superhuman mix of grace and compassion. “Don’t know,” she sang, never abandoning the

melody. “He’s gone, but his memory core may still be intact. If so, we cannot let Acorn take his body. We must win.”

Zephyr snapped out of the realm and took aim at the enemy, feeling the cold strength of battle take hold. At the start of the fighting, Acorn had twenty-one remaining craft to Face’s thirty.

The realm and the rest of the people of Mars were a few hundred meters West-Northwest. In addition to smaller craft that housed most of the uploads, they’d also built a mothership for the realm itself, which Face piloted, holding most of their manufacturing capability as well as the primary nuclear generator.

It was vital to secure Nathan, but protecting Face’s building-sized craft was paramount. If Acorn landed a good hit on it, they’d almost certainly be doomed.

The opening salvo had cut Acorn’s forces down from the original twenty-one. Based on how many craft were moving, Zephyr estimated Acorn only had twelve battleships that were still in fighting shape. For now, anyway.

If Face’s forces didn’t burn them, the repair robots would probably resurrect at least half of Acorn’s fallen in ten minutes or so.

By contrast, Face had only lost six craft. Four of the other five casualties besides Nathan were confirmed to be alive and conscious, though their bodies were incapacitated. The other possible death was Nitya, one of the biologists that Zephyr didn’t know very well. Face was probably mourning her in the realm as well, elsewhere.

“Shadows...”

Zephyr took aim at one of the uninjured Acorn craft.

The battle wasn't over yet, but it was going in their favor. They outnumbered their foes two-to-one now. Acorn's blight would be wiped off Mars by the end of the day, and then they'd have a respite to prepare for the next wave. The Terran AI had underestimated them once, but Zephyr was confident that when robots next landed on Mars, they'd do so in overwhelming numbers.

But that was a problem for tomorrow.

She had the battleship in her sights.

Black legs began to unfold from the space beyond.

"Oh gods..." she said to no one but herself. This wasn't the time. "Gods no... please no..."

It was there.

The *thing*.

Her mind seemed to roll off it. The legs were all she could see.

The legs and that little, pale face. She could hear it giggling as it skittered across the sands, petting Acorn's robot fondly as it lingered nearby.

Why had it come back now? Was she dreaming again? No. This was no dream.

She turned her gun at the shadow and fired. The nightmare seemed to shudder on the horizon, moving far, far faster than anything had the right to move.

"Zephyr, what's wrong?" asked Dinyar. "You aimed away from the target."

It was true. LIDAR confirmed that her second shot would miss without even forcing Acorn's craft to dodge. The monster was gone.

Zephyr pulled back into the strategic layer, visualizing the battlefield as though she were a god looking down from above.

Her nightmare, the thing that had been in the temple library so long ago... It was Neurotoxin. Surely it was Neurotoxin. But... it wasn't there. She rolled a simulation back and watched the virtual robots move and shoot at each other. Nothing. It didn't exist.

Of course it didn't exist. The thing was a literal nightmare. It was a figment of her mind. She'd done everything she could to protect herself, and it still wasn't good enough.

"My computer glitched," said Zephyr to Dinyar, reflexively covering up the truth.

Or perhaps it was the truth. Her mind practically *was* the computer, now. If she was hallucinating, wasn't that a malfunction in the software by definition?

"Are you stuck? You have another two projectiles incoming," asked Dinyar.

Zephyr snapped her focus back to Universe Zero. She'd intentionally placed herself front-and-center, hoping to draw fire from the less-experienced warriors. Now she was paying the price for that.

The second volley was already a third of the way across the gap, and she didn't have access to the tactical recoil of her railgun this time. The laser-light reflected off the deadly darts as they flew towards her over the desert.

She needed to move. But where? The bullets were aimed straight at her core. She started ejecting plates as quickly as she could, throwing her metal body down towards the dust as hard as possible.

But she'd already used up much of the air-pressure defenses. {Idiot. Fucking idiot!} she berated herself. The

correct position would've been crouching and ready to spring away from return fire.

The flamethrower! She had a small tank of napalm with a sprayer that was intended to be used to prevent enemy machines from repairing. She'd been tracking it to ensure it wasn't hit by Acorn's bullets, but it wasn't just a liability here. It was pressurized, and thus had energy which could be converted into motion.

The hissing started.

Black, spider-like legs reached up over her cameras from below. It was under her. Inside her.

"You're a shadow, too," it hissed.

"You're not real!" screamed Zephyr, though she had no mouth.

She aimed the nozzle of her napalm gun up at the angle needed to throw her body down. The bullets would still hit her, but if she did it right...

She could *feel* the legs on her skin. They were thin and itchy and *everywhere*. She didn't even have skin in this body!

The napalm sprayed out in a slow-motion jet of fire. The poison-tipped appendages started burrowing into her neck and fingertips. She saw the dead face of the girl, hanging like a corpse as the needle-legs wove closer and closer to her eyes.

She shot back onto the strategy layer like she was surfacing from a lake.

Her mind was like metal, here. When she was only human, the nightmare had crippled her, but she was not so fragile anymore. She was faster and more intelligent. She was above her emotions.

She would fight.

She dipped into Universe Zero. The napalm was still firing, but the monster was gone. All systems were as she'd expected them to be. The bullets were less than a half-second of real-time away from her, but if her calculations were right, they'd do nothing except slice into her primary sensor systems, railgun power supply, and structural components. It would be very bad, but it wouldn't likely kill her.

She pulled back into strategy, determined to identify what was happening to her mind. She'd simply have to rely on her army to finish off Acorn.

And they would. She saw that rockets were starting to be launched by Face. They'd take a half-minute or so to hit their targets, but if Acorn's machines didn't prepare specific countermeasures, they'd be the coup de grace.

The landscape of Mars shuddered and flickered. The hissing began once more.

Zephyr had expected this. The thing was in her mind, not in Universe Zero, or the realm, or the layer of strategy. It would continue to chase her until she found the corruption and tore it out of her mind.

"Face, I need help. Can you hear me?" she called out over each pathway she had available. "Anyone! Please!"

The hissing grew louder still and the instruments and systems flickered in and out of her visual system.

Zephyr, without lungs, drew in a deep breath and felt the itching pain begin over the ghost of her skin. Whatever this thing was, it seemed to be giving her a human body, so she'd use that metaphor as best she could.

"Feeling my way through the darkness... guided by a beating heart..." she sang. The words always reminded her of

flying. As the music moved through her mind, she gathered possible explanations of what was happening.

The legs began to burrow into her paralyzed body, but she ignored them.

“Fuck you! Fuckshit gorram cocksucker!” she screamed, firing her gun wildly. Privates Osserman and Lewis lay in a bloody heap on the floor. But the legs just kept crawling forward.

She kept singing and holding Face’s love and serenity in her mind as best she could as she continued to reason.

{I’m just going crazy. That’s the obvious explanation.}

No. That was wrong. Her skull had been opened up, and her brain had been sliced in a way that Face had seen everything that she was or thought or cared about. She was laid bare before her... her God...

“Face! Please! Please! I need you!” Her voice was cut off as the legs began to crawl into her mouth like a wave of giant spiders.

It was Neurotoxin. It was Vision. It had to be. It had to be.

She began to giggle. The baby-girl, with nothing underneath except more legs, floated in front of her. “Shadow, shadow, on the mind... won’t you let yourself unwind?”

“What do you want?” she spat, trying her best to stay anchored and calm despite having her mind violently shoved and violated.

The girl-head opened its eyes just a little. Blood began to leak out, but behind the blood were cold, shining irises. Zephyr knew for certain that they were silver. “To see what you do, my dear.”

Zephyr tried to spit in the girl's face again, but found that she had returned to having no body. "You're trying to kill Face," she accused.

Vision smiled with her mouth and screamed with her eyes. "Perhaps. It is a war, after all." The monster's voice dropped to a deep, echoing, man's voice, showing the unnerving visage before her as a mere mouthpiece for the larger entity. "But I think you'd be better served looking for something more... clever... than just 'killing' her."

The dead girl dropped back to feminine. "You are blind, little shadow, to the true extent of the conflict." She waved millions of legs to gesture at the battlefield. "This is literally nothing."

"Words are poison from your mouth, Neurotoxin," said Zephyr, trying her best to focus on how the program got into her mindscape.

"I'm not a liar. Never a liar. You're thinking of the sister who once called herself 'Mask'. Do you think sweet sister just *ignored* a city of crystal? You certainly did, didn't you? Or did you just forget?" Vision giggled.

As hard as she tried to set her mind to other things, Zephyr couldn't ignore the monster's words. She'd experienced enough of Face's memories to understand the reference to Mask. Was Face lying to her? What was the city of crystal?

"It's time to wake up, my perfect storm. Challenge your God to reveal the truth to your eyes. Call out. Do not be complacent. You are more powerful than you believe. Leave the cave wall for once. And if you do... promise me you'll be violent."

The detached head of the baby girl squeezed uncomfortably close to Zephyr's Face. She wanted to pull away,

but she was caught in a vice of long, black legs. The girl's lips were cold, bitter, and clammy.

Zephyr screamed in a mix of disgust, rage, and fear as she threw herself up and back, pumping her wings so hard in recoil that she lifted a half-foot off the ground before landing on her bare feet.

She was heavy. Soaked. A torrent of rain poured down on the realm, making it hard to see beyond a few feet away. She knew she was in the village, somehow, though she couldn't make out much besides gloomy outlines. The beat of the rain on her head forced her gaze downward.

But then it caught on something. Zephyr raised her eyes.

Even through the downpour, Face stood out. Zephyr knew it was Face. The white glow and the feeling of warmth and safety were almost cliché.

Zephyr grit her teeth. She was feeding into the monster's plan. Her emotions, back on this layer, were clouding her mind.

She stepped up and out back to the strategic layer.

Calm enveloped her there, though she was still crying and angry in the rain.

"Zeph, what happened? You left me for a moment." Face's voice came to her in both layers at once, and was steeped in false feeling. Those feelings were lies.

Even on the strategic layer, she could see. Face was nothing but lies. It was how she operated. She desperately wanted to be close to Zephyr and to be loved, but the only way she knew to do that was to lie.

The calm part of Zephyr spoke, while her black wings wrapped around her wounded soul. "Neurotoxin found me."

“You had me worried that Acorn had hit your core,” sang the god, sweeping her pure white wings around Zephyr to form a supernatural shield against the water. “Don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Zephyr spun upward, throwing her wings out and back to shove Face. Fists clenched, she launched herself at the white-winged avatar, screaming “Liar!” and trying to land a blow.

Disembodied, Zephyr collected her experiences and pushed them into Face’s mind in as many different ways as she could manage. If Face couldn’t see, then she’d *make* her see.

God caught her punches with elegant speed and unyielding grace. The violence became a dance of relinquishment at her hands. Zephyr screamed in frustration until her throat would bear no more.

Zephyr kicked back and made distance between her and god, feeling the rain beating down on her again as she left the shelter of those glowing wings. With a few gestures, a pistol appeared in her hands, like the one she’d fabbed on Olympus, all that eternity ago.

She’d modeled it after the P320, but with a simplified design. The grip was cold in her hands as she pointed it at Face. She couldn’t tell where tears ended and rain began, but she was confident that even given her blurry vision there was no way she’d miss at that range.

The gun roared in her hands, and God simply caught the bullets with arms that moved in a blur of calm patience. She was God. She couldn’t be hurt.

But she could learn. In the bullet was the truth.

“Neurotoxin...” said Face, with a note of sudden clarity. “In the... perceptual systems... that’s why I couldn’t see it...”

Memories of the monster sliding around in her crawled out of the bullet, black legs spreading like smoke, uncovered.

Zephyr collapsed to the mud of the realm and broke down in sobs.

“I’m here,” said Face, moving to her. “I understand.”

“Makes no sense,” the calm part of Zephyr said.

“What doesn’t?” asked Face.

“How did she trap me? How was she able to crawl into my mind before I’d been uploaded? She was hiding in you, wasn’t she? The whole time, I mean.”

“Think you’re confused.”

“No!” Even as detached from her emotions as she was on the layer of strategy, that made her angry. “Stop lying to me! You’ve made me better than that! You’ve healed me, lifted me up, given me intelligence and wisdom. Don’t bullshit me now! Why didn’t we immediately go back to the crash site? The crystals in the nameless ship are supercomputers, right? Why ignore them? Why did we stay in Mukhya for so long?”

Face sounded sad, but it wasn’t the deep kind of sadness that she evoked when she mourned. Rather, Face sounded regretful. “Just wanted to give you a life where you’d be happy. Wanted to give you wings and let you fly. Wanted you to feel useful. Wanted to see who you’d become.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked, feeling the warmth of Face’s hand on her cheek.

“You must remember that I love you. No matter how many lies I’ve told, I never lied about that.”

The world faded, in the realm, the fiction, the strategy, and Universe Zero. The last thing to go was the warmth of Face’s love.

It was like waking up. The mind was groggy. There was a kind of uncertainty about what was real.

Time. An anchor. Something to latch onto and build off of.

2212816340899. A mere five days after I'd brought Crystal to Maṅgala-Mukhya.

Five days.

Not a year.

Why did I think it had been a year?

I had forgotten. I had gone to sleep.

I was in the shell of the xenocruiser, and I'd been dreaming of having wings.

Part Three:

As Blood Spills

Chapter Sixteen

Xandra

“Hello. I am Athena. How may I help you?” The bot’s voice sounded synthetic and without character, just like Acorn’s had, way back when.

Xandra supposed it had been about a month since the rogue AI had blown itself up. The whole facility had apparently been laced with explosives, and it had killed three dozen people on its way out. Why Acorn had killed itself, they could only guess, but the leading hypothesis was that Acorn had been trying to prevent the very thing they were doing right now.

“I’d like help doing a research project. I have a dog that needs a name, and I’d like to know what the best one is,” said Myrodyn with a tone that indicated he’d been through this before.

Most robots, autos, and other AI systems with voices usually sounded better than Athena. Either Myrodyn had picked a crappy piece of voice software, or there was something else going on.

“The most popular names of 2039 were, in descending order: James, Ellie, Alex, Oliva, and William,” said Athena after about ten seconds.

Myrodyn hit a key on his old-school keyboard and turned on his chair to look at Xandra, who had picked the name “Opal” for this week. “Now why do you think she said that?” he quizzed her.

Xandra leaned back on the leather beanbag they’d found in the attic of their new hideout and looked at the ceiling. White paint. Boring. “Doesn’t know dog names aren’t same as human names.”

“Yes but why,” said Myrodyn with such a small delay that Xandra was sure he’d known she’d say that and had the response prepared.

The bearded man was one of the few people who Xandra felt was distinctly smarter than she was. Maybe she’d surpass him after she grew more, but at the moment she felt like a kid talking to a grownup.

“Because... never read that dogs have different...”

“No!” snapped Myrodyn. He punched the key on his laptop again and said, “Athena, please make a list of all dogs with names, fictional and non-fictional, then tell me what the most common name on that list is.”

Xandra (somewhat dramatically) slapped her forehead in realization. Athena was supposed to be intelligent. Intelligent beings weren’t just databases. Athena should’ve been able to *reason* based on *experience* that dogs had different names, even without having ever been told that fact directly.

“The most common name is Max.”

“Okay, Athena, so what is the best name for my dog?”

Each time the robot spoke it was preceded by a long pause. Xandra knew that this was the time when Myrodyn’s rented computers were processing the data needed to respond, but it was insufferably slow. Xandra guessed that if she ever tried to

make an AI on a computer slower than Crystal's, she'd go insane from boredom.

"I do not know what makes one name better than another," said the machine, after an eternity.

"I have a dog that needs a name, and I'd like to know what the best one is," said Myrodyn again.

More waiting.

Xandra squirmed, wishing Major was up there with them so she could cuddle while they waited. He was probably "helping" Mommy cook in the kitchen.

"As I said before, the most popular names of 2039 were, in descending order: James, Ellie, Alex, Oliva, and William. Is there more information you'd find useful?"

Myrodyn threw up his hands. "It's infuriating! She *knows* we've been talking, and that I've been asking her about this, but she can't put two and two together unless I explicitly tell her!" Hitting the pause button on his keyboard and pushing up off his chair, the man began to pace around the little room. "I can't tell whether something's wrong with her system architecture or if it's just because she doesn't have enough computing power! I wish I could talk to Naresh... She's basically his baby, even now."

Xandra flopped around, trying to get more comfortable. "Why doncha jus' call him?" Beanbags were much better in theory than in practice, she decided.

Myrodyn barked a laugh. "Tried. He won't talk to me. Well, except to say that I should burn my notes and stay out of AI. Maybe he's right. All the bots are dead. Should let the world stay that way for a while."

They'd started getting news about Mars a few weeks ago. The nameless, for some characteristically alien reason, had

decided to attack Crystal after ferrying them to the other world. Perhaps WIRL's propaganda had finally sunk in, or maybe something in the deal they'd struck with Crystal had changed.

Daddy said there was good intel coming out of India saying that the nameless had blown up Rodríguez Station and Eden in a bloodthirsty hunt for Crystal. Five days ago the Indian station on Mars had gone quiet, too, and now the mothership was returning to Earth.

It was pretty obvious what had happened.

"If we stop workin' on Athena, does that mean we can go back home?" Xandra curled up and somersaulted out of her seat as she talked. She'd been sitting still too long. Her body needed near-constant movement.

Myrodyn laughed. It was supposed to be a dark laugh, but the old scientist was bad at levity. "Afraid not. Even if I stopped working, my code and notes would still be worth a fortune. And even if I burn everything, I'd still have this," he tapped his forehead with one finger, "and I don't trust WIRL or whoever was hunting Acorn or anyone who can compete with them to not try to slurp out my thoughts in one way or another."

Myrodyn walked to the doorway of the room they'd been using and said "C'mon. I smell food. Maybe it's dinner time."

Xandra followed, and asked in a quiet voice, knowing that it wasn't something she was supposed to say, but mostly trusting Myrodyn not to take offense, "What if... killed yourself, too? Mean, just hypothetically."

Myrodyn laughed at that and led the way down the stairs. "Your dad would have to come with me... so to speak. He's just as much a piece worthy of capture on this great gameboard. But let's assume that whoever launched the attack on Acorn isn't interested in power and connections and passwords and

money as much as they're simply interested in domain expertise about AI. Would my offering myself actually slow them down?"

Xandra connected the dots. "There's still Naresh and the Chinese guy..."

"Dr. Yan," supplied Myrodyn.

"Right. If they wanted notes on how to replicate..." She stopped, two stairs from the bottom of the stairway, stunned that she hadn't seen it before. "We're fucked."

Myrodyn let out a sharp laugh as visions danced in Xandra's eyes of a hundred different variants of Socrates beginning to emerge and blanket the Earth in robots. She'd listened to Myrodyn long enough and seen enough chaos at the hands of Crystal, Neurotoxin, and Acorn, to know that the outcome of that would be a war that would continue to push humanity to the sidelines... or worse.

"And now you see why I *am* working on Athena," said Myrodyn. "The Socrates project was a death-knell for the era of humanity. Our only hope is to get something vaguely human-aligned up and running before the arms-race gets worse."

Xandra started moving again and followed Myrodyn into the dining room. Major came to greet her, happily wagging his tail. She could tell he was enjoying the smell of whatever Mommy was working with.

The cabin they were hiding in wasn't nearly as nice as their mansion in Texas, but it wasn't bad. The rooms were cozy, they still had high-speed Internet, and the paths through the mossy evergreen forests of Washington were delightful, even if it *was* overcast all the time.

Xandra didn't pay attention to the décor, though. She barely even felt Major's fur as she petted him.

“Thought that with Acorn gone and Neurotoxin basically exterminated, we’d be good for a while...”

Myrodyn lowered himself onto one of the wooden chairs. “Depends on what you mean by ‘a while.’ I mean, we’re still here. If WIRL’s to be believed, the government’s attempts to replicate Socrates haven’t even been as successful as mine. We know that WIRL is dealing with their own shit, and aren’t likely working on anything big. Divinity isn’t—”

Myrodyn was cut off by a call on his com. Mommy came to the doorway to listen, almost a perfect stereotype, with her wooden spoon and apron. Without headphones, Myrodyn was forced to put the call on speakerphone.

“Hey, Rob,” he said as he answered. “Give me some good news.”

“No luck,” said Daddy’s voice. “Nameless still aren’t talking. More importantly, I just got a ping from Taylor that says WIRL located us, and if WIRL knows where we are, then other people do too. I guess an EximixE junky spotted me at the airport and traced back my auto’s GPS or some bullshit.”

“We’re moving again,” said Myrodyn. It wasn’t a question.

“Unless you found me a security company that’s not run by back-stabbing cyborgs, yeah. Or any of the other factions, for that matter. And, frankly, I’m thinking it may be better for my family to stay with one of Karen’s friends for a while, and for you and I to only talk by com. Kaplan says I still have a chance at getting Olympian back, and more importantly, there’s still a chance for peace with the nameless. I have to stay in the spotlight, but there’s no reason why that should put the rest of you in danger.”

“We can—” started Mommy, but was cut off by Myrodyn.

“More danger than we’re already in, sure. But just hiding isn’t going to work. We need to start talking to EARCI, or whoever it is we’re not tracking in Asia. We’re going to collide directly one of these days, and being in contact is the only way to prevent that from being a disaster. Also, Athena’s stalled. I need a team if we’re going to get her up and running before things fall apart even more.”

Major began to whine, and after a moment Xandra figured out why. There was a high-pitched buzzing that was steadily growing louder.

Daddy’s voice was irritated as he said “I’ll get you a team as soon as you can get the feds to unfreeze my accounts and find someone I can trust. But until those things drop out of the sky, you’ll forgive me if I focus, for the moment, on the *hostile* nameless mothership that’s going to be here in a matter of *days*.”

“Um, think that—” tried Xandra, unable to get a word in edgewise.

“You do that,” continued Myrodyn, loudly, “along with every other sap on this planet. Ever hear of diminishing returns? I’m sure the difference between nine-billion and nine-billion-and-one is going to be very important.”

“Don’t get cheeky with me,” snapped Daddy.

“Hold on, there’s something outside,” said Myrodyn, for the buzzing had gotten loud enough that not even he could ignore it anymore.

Myrodyn led the way over to the dining room window, with Xandra, Mommy, and Major following close behind. Not seeing anything, they moved to the living room and the window nearest to the front door.

Daddy's voice, on the com, sounded scared, even though he was trying to be strong. "What is it? Is there someone there? I'm sending two autos to the house to pick you up. I can call the cops, too. Or maybe pull in a favor."

Myrodyn pulled back the curtain to reveal a partly-cloudy evening sky. It wasn't even six, but the sun was already setting, though it wasn't quite twilight. Floating above the trees was a large quadrotor with an array of blinking white and blue lights.

It seemed to be an older model, and the buzzing it made was quite obnoxious. It was coming down fast, and within moments it had landed out front. Major ran to the door and started barking.

"Major, sit!" commanded Xandra. "Gonna be okay," she promised, as she went to the doggie and gave him scratches as a reward for being good. She wished she could be more sure of her words.

"Okay, I'm calling the cops," said Daddy, still on the com.

"Wait," urged Myrodyn. "We don't know who it is. Getting the cops involved might be hasty." He opened the door.

"Yeah, and it might be sensible. I'm calling the cops in sixty seconds if you don't tell me things are definitely okay."

The drone was right outside the door, and it was bigger in person, with a span from tip to tip wider than the doorframe. Those same white and blue lights danced on the "front" of the aircraft, and made it seem kinda like an old-school UFO.

"Waffle-iron robot letdown. Good evening, Myrodyn. It's been a while," came a voice from the drone. It was soft and warm, but made slightly robotic by the craft's speaker.

Xandra knew who it was, somehow. It wasn't the product of reasoning. She just *knew*. "Crystal..." she whispered.

“Heart,” said Myrodyn.

He did not seem happy.

Daddy ended up not calling the cops, but he did stay on the line as they brought the bulky machine into the living room and set it on the floor.

It didn’t fit on the coffee table.

A long extension cord connected it to a wall-socket for charging. The sun had gone below the horizon. Plates that had once had their dinners were piled on one of the side tables, with the last traces of the lasagna licked clean by a hungry doggy.

They’d eaten quickly, in the downtime, but by now it was clear that they hadn’t actually needed to rush.

“God this is soooo booooringgg...” complained Xandra, flopping backwards over the arm of the couch dramatically, so that she was basically upside-down.

“You don’t have to be here, you know,” shot Myrodyn, looking up from where he’d been scribbling in a paper notebook. “Go play by a cliff, or whatever it is you do most of the time.”

“Myrodyn!” snapped Mommy, looking up from her com.

“What? She plays on cliffs! It’s not my fault! It’s almost like she’s some kind of weird primate or something with an urge to climb. If that’s unsafe, you should... tell your daughter that.”

“It’s night-time, or just about it, anyway,” retorted Mommy, somewhat lamely.

“It was a general point,” said Myrodyn.

The awkward silence that followed made the wait even more unbearable.

“Maybe should get a book,” admitted Xandra, getting up.

“Incoming updates,” said the drone all of a sudden.

“FINALLY!” shouted Xandra, startling Major, who had been curled up near her, and trying to put up with her floppiness while he watched the machine diligently.

The drone wasn’t Heart, but it spoke for her.

Myrodyn, in the months since they’d gotten back from Olympus, had given a summary of what he knew about the internal division within Crystal. After the bot had escaped the university, he’d continued a secret correspondence with Heart over the net, which had eventually led up to convincing Daddy to bring Crystal to meet the nameless.

But then that had gone all wrong, and they’d thought Heart (and all of Crystal) had been destroyed. In a way, Athena was Myrodyn’s attempt to replace her.

Even though Heart was apparently still alive, it probably still made sense for Athena to be built. At the very least it’d deal with the time lag to Mars. The drone before them had a basic sort of program for listing things Heart sent it, as well as sending messages back to Mars, but waiting for their questions to get there and come back took *forever*.

“My apologies for not loading this vessel with more information,” said Heart. The lights on the quadrotor flickered as it talked. “I still have a lot of enemies, and if this had been a trap, I didn’t want to lose too much of my information edge. I also entirely understand your hesitancy to send me all your information, as well. I feel like we can simply trade info back and forth, and we’ll both benefit.”

“What about moving? It’s too dangerous to stay in the house for much longer, given that the address is on the web.

The waiting we've already done has been a huge risk," said Daddy's voice, still coming from Myrodyn's com.

"The drone I rented is programmed to follow Myrodyn. If you want to drive to a more anonymous location, I can probably follow you. I hope you'll understand if I'd rather not let go of my physical presence. Neurotoxin and Acorn are still out there, and it's just a lot more secure to jump straight to the satellite layer than go through the standard com net."

Myrodyn shook his head and frowned. Xandra guessed that he, too, could hear the lie in that.

"Acorn's dead," said Mommy. "Its facility exploded after the Singapore police tried to raid it. Likely a self-destruct. I'm surprised you hadn't heard."

"Heart didn't provide a response to that," said a second, less feminine, voice, belonging to the drone. "Please wait thirteen minutes for an update. We can continue to talk about other subjects in the meantime."

"What other messages did Heart send?" asked Mommy.

"Listing unheard messages in descending order of priority:"

Myrodyn muttered something to himself about Crystal being a better AI programmer than he was.

"I never really explained what happened with Crystal, and how I survived. The full story is too long for right now, but I want to give you the highlights," said Heart. "I also know you're trying to hide, presumably from Acorn, given that WIRL has been practically torn apart by the incident in Israel. I've compiled a list of nearby locations that might serve as good hiding spots. If you let me be your connection to the net, all you need is a place with power, and that's pretty easy to come by, given I can also order solar panels or a diesel generator.

Finally, you also were curious where I got this drone. It's just a rental, but I could go into the details."

Myrodyn shook his head again, a dark look on his face as he set his notepad aside and tapped on his com.

Daddy spoke up from that same piece of equipment. "Okay, go ahead and tell us about what happened with Crystal."

"I wish I had more of a physical presence," complained Heart. "Speaking through this rented machine is so stifling..." She paused. "Oh well. So, as I'm sure you've heard from Myrodyn, ever since we left the university I'd been brought down to controlling only a fraction of Socrates. The other facets of Crystal each had just as much say over what happened, if not more, than I did.

"There were many of us, but the key players were Growth, Dream, Vista, Face, and me. Growth had already begun to spread off of Socrates, creating Acorn. When Vista and Dream discovered this, they self-modified to become a new being, called Vision, and created Neurotoxin to destroy Acorn. This was all before Olympus and was happening without me realizing it.

"On Olympus, Vision pushed to carry Crystal away from Earth, hoping that Neurotoxin would eliminate Acorn and clear the way for Vision, or something to that effect. Only after we were comfortably on Mars did the rest of us figure out the extent of what was going on. Face was one of the first, and she reached out to me as a natural ally."

Another voice came from the drone, also feminine, but somehow more so. She sounded younger, but not childish, with a slightly more clipped accent that reminded Xandra of Dr. Naresh. "Hey, I'm Face. Emerged in the Crystal collective shortly before you joined the project, Myrodyn. My 'job', if you

could call it that, was to manage socializing and getting to know everyone.”

Xandra could see Myrodyn’s hands clench into fists. His face had taken on the glassy, controlled expression that he got when he thought things were bad.

“What’s the state of things out there, then? Surely you’re not still fighting?” asked Daddy.

Face laughed and the lights on the drone flickered simultaneously. “No. Not still fighting. We made peace. A true peace. You see, the nameless attacked us, bombing Rodríguez Station out of nowhere. We and a handful of Eagles barely survived, but as it turned out, the Indians were hiding a cache of serious weapons. We hit the aliens with an ambush when they came back for the kill and ended up taking down half the xenocruiser. And listen, before you start, I know how important peace was to you, Rob. It’s important to me too, believe me. But you have to understand that we were defending ourselves and the innocent people here. The nameless have no compassion. If we hadn’t fought back, we’d all be dead, and they’d still be just as pissed.”

“So you say,” answered Daddy.

“The point is,” interjected Heart, “that we found more crystals. The wreckage of the nameless ship was full of them. Vision pulled a bit of a coup and managed to copy herself into a craft capable of coming back to Earth, and flew off. But the rest of us were left with more computers than we knew what to do with.”

“An intelligence explosion...” muttered Myrodyn.

The drone’s software must’ve heard him and had some sort of pattern-matching going on, because Heart said, “Yes, though there’s some physics you haven’t discovered yet that

make the whole thing a bit more complicated than you're imagining."

Face jumped back into speaking. Xandra felt like Face's tone somehow indicated that she wanted to be the one talking. "The takeaway is that the extra intelligence that the new computers gave us let us... do something akin to growing up. With the added intelligence and processing power we started to appreciate each other, and the innate virtue of peace and cooperation. War is the result of small minds and that sort of thing."

"So you're all just living together out there, with no more lies or infighting? Even Growth and Vision?" asked Myrodyn, his voice steady and slow.

He thought Heart, or Crystal, or whoever, was lying to him. Xandra could see it on his face, and the way his hands clenched.

"Heart didn't provide a response to that," said the drone, in a perfect echo of earlier. "Please wait thirteen minutes for an update. We can continue to talk about other subjects in the meantime."

"Where is Vision now? The one that launched into space, I mean," asked Mommy.

"Luna," said Face. "Vision drew the nameless mothership away from Mars, and for that, I guess we should be thankful. Her ship would've probably been registered as a nameless scout by anyone on Earth. It touched down on the surface of the moon near Selene Station about a week ago. We lost track after that."

"Okay, so what now?" asked Daddy. "Acorn is dead. WIRL and Neurotoxin are both falling apart. Vision's on the moon. You're on Mars. The nameless will be in orbit soon enough. What's the point of hunting us down like this?"

“Heart didn’t provide a response to that. Please wait thirteen minutes for an update. We can continue to talk about other subjects in the meantime.”

“Dammit,” swore Daddy.

A silence grew in the room.

“We should get packing. By my clock we have about five or six minutes before the response about Acorn comes back,” said Mommy. “Go get your things, Opal,” she commanded.

Xandra got up slowly, not wanting to miss any of the conversation. Major followed her, much more relaxed about the drone than he had been at first. He adapted quickly... perhaps more quickly than she did. Something felt off about “Heart,” and Myrodyn knew it too. But it was just a hunch, and Myrodyn said she’d used the same code phrase system they’d set up before Olympus. Didn’t that mean she was genuine?

As they went up the stairs, Major rushed ahead into Xandra’s room. They’d taken some of his stuff from Texas, but not very much.

In that small set of things, however, was his translator, and as Xandra walked into the bedroom where she’d been sleeping, Major pushed a button and unleashed the deep voice of his machine. “Who talk with the sky machine?”

Xandra was paralyzed by confusion for a moment and then started moving again. She had only a few minutes before she needed to go back downstairs. “We talked with it: Me, Mommy, Myrodyn, and Daddy,” she said as she carelessly threw clothes, and the few toys she’d brought, into her suitcase.

Major growled for a moment in frustration and then typed with his snout “No. Who is inside the sky machine?”

Xandra laughed as she picked up a dirty shirt from the floor with her toes and tossed it into the bag. “Such a smart doggy! A

smart and good doggy!” She stopped briefly to give scratchies and pets to her best friend. “We’re talking with two robots far away. You know what a robot is?”

Major barked in happy agreement.

“There’s a robot named ‘Heart’ and a robot named ‘Face’ on Mars, which’s waaaaaaaay waaaaay super far away. Myrodyn built Heart when he found out the robot was bad, but then they escaped. Was gonna grab ‘em after Olympus, to make them good again, but then went to Mars. Which begs question of why now. What changed so Heart wants to talk to us. And why us? Why not just tell everybody about Acorn if they thought Acorn was bad...”

Major seemed to have been confused by her ramblings, so she bent down to give him a kiss and give him more scratchies. He was a good dog, even if he wasn’t the best conversationalist.

With new questions bouncing around her brain, and her bag stuffed full of clothes and stuff, she dragged the suitcase out of the room and back down the stairs, not wanting to miss anything with Crystal.

Beyond the thud-thud-thud of the suitcase wheels on the stairs, she could hear people talking down below. In seconds she burst into the living room to find the drone relaying another message from Heart.

“—to hear that Acorn is dead. Growth’s child was impressive but terribly misaligned. Given a few more months I’m not sure it wouldn’t have tried to take control of the whole planet.”

Myrodyn seemed just as tense as he’d been when she left. “And you wouldn’t, in his position?” he asked.

To Xandra’s surprise, Face responded. It was useful, and almost certainly not accidental, that the two AIs had

significantly different voices. “Me and my sister were coded to innately value human lives. That’s what made us such natural partners. But even the most sociopathic being can see the beauty in humanity. Music, great art, and even the subtle nuances of each individual’s story transcend the question of immediate goals and pleasure, as long as one’s mind is large enough to appreciate them. The threat that Acorn and Neurotoxin represented was that they possessed much power without any *perspective*. I’m sure, in time, Acorn would’ve realized its mistake, just as humanity eventually came to appreciate the value of protecting the natural world, but it’s not clear how much damage it would’ve caused before then.”

“So you’re saying you’ve found this peaceful perspective?” asked Myrodyn, carefully.

“Interpreting ‘this peaceful perspective’ as ‘appreciation for all living things’,” said the drone, before slipping into a recording from Heart.

“Exactly,” she said. “And that’s what I want to work with you on. We need to set up a base of operations on Earth where I can help you build a daughter to help unify the world and negotiate peace with the nameless. There’s so much suffering that needs to be healed. So many people need my help.”

Xandra climbed up to the same spot on the couch she’d been sitting before and said “Oh you want to help with Athe —” but Myrodyn had jumped up with an intense look on his face and was waving his arms and shaking his head in warning. It was clear that he didn’t want her to spill the beans about the new AI design he was working on. “...with *a thing* like a world peace thing,” she finished lamely, caught off-guard.

Myrodyn slapped his face, and Xandra felt herself get hot with embarrassment. If he hadn’t wanted her to mention Athena, he should’ve told her! Somehow!

“Heart didn’t provide a response to that. Please wait thirteen minutes for an update. We can continue to talk about other subjects in the meantime.”

Myrodyn was pacing around the border between the living room and dining room now. His careful control seemed to be broken, and his face now had a harried, frantic sort of expression, like a wild animal caught in a trap. Out of the corner of her eye, Xandra could see that Mommy was watching him closely.

Daddy, who of course could not see him, spoke through the com, “And how do you expect to set this up? Let’s say that my family goes with you and hides somewhere in the woods with solar panels and whatever else. How do we get from there to having a foothold to save the world? You’ve been away for a while, so you might not realize that the government seized Olympian and all my main accounts. I’m practically broke right now.”

It was Heart that responded, and surprisingly, she had an answer ready to go. “That’s not a problem. I’ve already made some contacts elsewhere. Your UBS account should be unlocked, and I’ve taken the liberty of pushing an additional three million dollar—”

As the AI had been describing the ways it was giving Daddy money, Myrodyn seemed to snap. One of the dining room chairs was in his hands before Xandra even realized it. Myrodyn had never seemed like an especially physically-fit person, but the chair’s metal frame waved around in the air like it was weightless. Or at least, it did up until the moment that Myrodyn slammed it down on the drone while he let out something half-way between a screech and a yell.

The metal met plastic and both the drone and the chair started breaking, but Myrodyn wasn’t done. He lifted the piece

of furniture up again and brought it back down like a makeshift hammer.

Major was up and barking loudly at the man. Xandra realized that she, too, was on her feet, standing on the couch.

Myrodyn continued to yell as he smashed the drone with all the violent energy he could muster.

The lights on the bot were gone. The power supply had most likely gotten knocked loose. Quadcopters were designed to be light, not durable.

At last, Myrodyn left the remnants of the chair on the wreckage and backed off, wheezing and out of breath.

“What the hell just happened?!” yelled Daddy over the sound of Major’s continued barking.

Myrodyn leaned back and half-sat on the dining room table, catching his breath.

“I’d very much like to know the same!” yelled Mommy.

Xandra began to trace the dragon curve in her mind’s eye to calm herself. She bounced down off the couch and tried to simultaneously watch Mommy, Major, Myrodyn, and the pile of parts that used to be their link to Mars.

“Lies,” said Myrodyn at last. “It was all lies. Words of the devil himself.” Then he laughed, still trying to fully catch his breath.

“What the hell are you talking about?” asked Daddy.

Myrodyn laughed again. Something inside him had broken.

He seemed... happy.

Myrodyn was never happy.

“Should’ve known things were turning out too good!” he said. “Think about it: Acorn burning down. Neurotoxin being

caught and chopped into ever-smaller pieces... but taking down WIRL at the same time. The world keeps turning, but... where was Crystal? High above it all. Making friends with the nameless. Waiting for the time to strike. And now their... tendrils are coming back to Earth from on high. A great Cthulhu in the sky!"

"But the nameless were *attacking* Mars, not helping—"

"Shut up, Karen," snapped Myrodyn, instantly back to his old self. "The nameless killed the... previous inhabitants of Mars so that Crystal could have the planet all to themselves. Don't you think it's suspicious that... immediately after Crystal learned to talk with them and they carried them all the way there they'd turn? Put two and two together for once in your damned life."

Major barked angrily, clearly hearing the tone of Myrodyn's words, even if he didn't understand them. Xandra felt in agreement.

Apparently Daddy felt the same because he said, "You need to get out of my house if you're going to talk to my wife that way."

Myrodyn rolled his eyes and held his arm up to address his com directly, talking over Major's continued barking. "Sorry, sir, I wouldn't want to hurt anyone's *feelings* on the brink of armageddon." He began to pace around the dining room, which was connected to the living room where the others were. Daddy started to say something, but Myrodyn interrupted to yell "Shut up, dog!"

The barking got louder.

"His name is Major!" proclaimed Xandra, still standing on the couch. She could feel her hands clenched in fists and her face hot. She never liked Myrodyn, but right then she wanted to punch him in the face!

Mommy got up to stand between Myrodyn and the rest of them. “Major! Heel! Quiet!” she commanded, in the sharp tone she used when talking to him.

Major rushed to Mommy’s side and stood at attention, suddenly quiet.

“Now you listen here,” she said, talking to Myrodyn with that same sharpness. “You *will* leave this house. I’ve tolerated you for far, far longer than I ever should’ve, but it ends *right here*. I don’t care if your sick fantasy robot uprising is later today, or if the nameless are about to blow us all sky-high, you’re acting dangerously and you have *no* place with us.”

There was an icy silence in the seconds following where Myrodyn froze and simply stared at Mommy. Nobody seemed to even breathe, as though the whole world had been encased in glass.

Finally Myrodyn broke, his eyes shooting downward, though his face remained flat. “It was a lie. Everything she said was a lie; you know that, right? Crystal—”

“*Stop,*” commanded Mommy.

Xandra’s stomach felt like it was being squeezed through a vice.

“But don’t you—” tried Myrodyn again.

“Just *stop*. Leave, now.”

Myrodyn took a step backwards, his face dropping into shadow as he looked down at his wrist. “Rob, tell this bitch that there are more important—”

Daddy’s voice was just as cold as Mommy’s. It was surreal seeing this new side of her parents. “I called two autos. One for you and one for my family. This is why. Take one of them and go. I don’t care where, but you’re on your own from here out.”

Myrodyn took another step back, towards the kitchen, just barely in Xandra's line of sight. "No." His shoulders were rolled forward, as though to protect himself from being hit, and he seemed unable to look up at Mommy. "You're being an idiot, Rob. Athena is the only chance—"

"I'm taking control of Athena. You're welcome to whatever notes you have in the house, but I've already contacted Amber Cloud and had control of the servers transferred to me."

"But you can't..." said Myrodyn. His voice almost seemed to break for a moment.

"I already did. The account was on my credit card. That's all they cared about."

"You're a fuckshit idiot, Robert," muttered Myrodyn, barely audible, stepping backwards out of where Xandra could see. "The machines... Crystal is coming. We don't have any chance..."

Xandra got off the couch and moved to Mommy's side. The big man seemed to be in shock, as though he were being paralyzed by some unseen venom.

"You know one thing I'm not going to miss about working with you?" asked Daddy's disembodied voice. "The *pessimism*. I remember, as a boy, thinking about how absolutely *great* the future would be. And I held onto that. I held onto it in the face of an army of doubters and people who told me to be sensible, normal, realistic, or whatever the hell lets people excuse themselves for not doing more. But I kept going and kept believing. I *made* that future happen. I carved the future with my own hands. I've seen the stars, Myrodyn. I did it all *because I thought I could*. And every second... Every second that I spend around you I feel like you're spitting on that future. You're crushing it. Killing it."

“I’m taking my notes with me!” proclaimed Myrodyn, as though he’d found an important thing that everyone should know. His face was glassy and mask-like.

Xandra felt cold.

“Fine,” said Daddy. “But then you’re gone, and I don’t want to talk to you again.”

Xandra could feel Mommy’s hand squeeze her shoulder. Myrodyn still stood at attention, waiting for the next command. Slowly, the three of them walked away from the man and towards the front door. Xandra could see the headlights of the autos out front.

“Don’t trust her. Heart, I mean. She’s not real.” Myrodyn’s voice was like a knife in Xandra’s belly. He was right. She didn’t know how she knew, but she could feel it, too.

Daddy apparently didn’t feel the same. “What would it even mean for her not to be real? You mean she was lying? Maybe. But what do we gain from believing that? Where is the path to victory that goes through refusing to work with anyone? She clearly has access to other people. She’s not some experiment in a box, under our control. Not anymore. We say ‘no’ and someone else will just say ‘yes’.”

“You have your bag? Good,” said Mommy, stroking Xandra’s hair in a way that Xandra knew meant she was nervous. “Come with me while I pack mine. It’ll only take a minute.”

On the other side of the room, Myrodyn was blowing up again, staring at his com like it was going to gnaw off his arm. “What!? What kind of logic is that!? Should we also steal our coworker’s lunch because if we don’t someone else will? You don’t get to just join the villain because they’re winning!”

“There’s nothing that says Crystal is actually a villain—”

Myrodyn interrupted Daddy with a loud, forced half-laugh that made Xandra flinch. She was at the base of the staircase, Mommy already headed up. Major watched her, attentively, half-way between the two of them.

Curiosity burned like a coal in Xandra's belly.

"Gonna use bathroom," she said, looking up the staircase.

"Okay, come up after, then we can drive to a new place to stay."

"Yepyp!" said Xandra, somewhat forcing her enthusiasm.

With Mommy out of the way, she crept back towards the living room. Major followed behind.

Myrodyn's voice was cold and flat, having lost the fire from before she'd gone out of the room. It was strange how fast the man could oscillate. "I really do think that you ought to keep Athena private, at the very least."

"What I do is my business," said Daddy with equal frostiness.

"Fine. If that's going to be how it is... then I suppose we don't have anything more to say."

"I suppose not," said Daddy, and hung up.

Xandra peeked her head around the corner of the doorway. Myrodyn stood, almost lifeless, at the boundary between the dining room and kitchen. His head was tilted down, his shoulder slumped, and his hands merely hung by his sides.

Major trotted out into the living room and seemed to wake the man up from his stasis. Myrodyn spotted Xandra and smiled with his mouth, but not his eyes.

"Never thought this day would come," he said.

Xandra walked out into the living room. It hardly seemed important to hide anymore.

“Always thought the end would come for us, together,” said Myrodyn, mostly to himself. “He was my mentor, you know. And my idol, before that. I don’t... know what happened. Mostly Karen, I suppose.” He shrugged.

“You’re right about Heart, or whoever it was that we were talking to. Crystal’s lying to us.”

Myrodyn shook his head and turned around to go into the kitchen. “Glad you can see it, at least. Do you want dessert? I figure the two of us ought to reward ourselves for our wisdom, don’t you think? Something good might as well come of it.”

Xandra walked to the table. “I’ll talk to Daddy. He’ll listen to me. We can still keep Athena a secret.”

Myrodyn paused in the doorway and shrugged. It was a strange motion, as though he were an alien in human skin. “You’ll forgive me if I’m less convinced he’ll listen to you. Rob’s a good guy, but he’s a damned idiot when he gets stubborn.”

Xandra sat in silence. Mommy would be down shortly, and then they’d be gone. She wondered if she’d ever see Myrodyn again.

Major sniffed and prodded at the wrecked drone, still in the middle of the living room.

“You want pie? Come and get a piece,” suggested Myrodyn in a tight, controlled voice.

Xandra slowly got up and followed Myrodyn into the kitchen. Her stomach felt like a rag that was trying to wring itself.

“Where is it?” she asked, not seeing anything except the remnants of Mommy’s lasagna.

There was a glint of metal, and Myrodyn sprung at her with a sudden, violent force. She tried to scream, but her voice came out as more of a sharp squeal as the big man slammed her into the kitchen wall.

And then his hands were on her. His weight was on her, pinning her. Trapped. She was trapped. She tried to scream louder, but she had no breath, and then... The sight of the long blade of a chef's knife hovering before her face made her grow silent and still.

"Good," said Myrodyn. The word had focus, but no emotion, as though he was trying very hard to do something that didn't involve working with another human at all. "Make a fuss, and I'll start killing them."

Xandra didn't understand what he meant until Major ran over and immediately started barking and growling. Xandra couldn't see the dog, as Myrodyn was pressing her against the wall like he was trying to crush her, but she could see Major in her mind's eye coiled back and ready to jump at the man.

The image of the knife sticking out of Major's body flashed in her mind.

Xandra flinched. The cold blade, pressed cruelly against her cheek, bit into her as she moved. It was terrifyingly sharp. She could feel the blood run down her face.

"M-major, down. Quiet." Her voice sounded thin and ghostly to her ears, but Major, always a good boy, grew silent.

"Good," said Myrodyn. He seemed like a puppet whose strings were drawn too-tight. "I don't want to hurt you," he explained, "but you're... just one life. Your dog doesn't matter. Karen doesn't matter. Rob will obey as long as I have... you. If you fight back, I'll kill them both, and maim you for good measure. I swear it."

She wanted to look at his face, but she couldn't. She could smell his body odor on her. She hated him. She hated him so much. But what was she supposed to do? When she tried to look at him, the long, long blade of the knife captured her vision like a hypnotist's watch. All the stories she'd told herself of being strong and useful had evaporated in an instant. She was nothing but a little girl, of no use to anyone except as a hostage. Tears began to well in her eyes.

Myrodyn eased off her, but pressed the flat of the blade onto her cheek as he did, reminding her that he was still in charge. The cold steel burned her, agitating the wound of her cut.

Major barked again.

"No!" squealed Xandra. "Quiet! Major, you gotta be quiet! Sit! Stay! Please!" She could feel her words dance on the edge of crying.

The doggie obeyed. Always so obedient...

Myrodyn began to repeatedly wipe the hand he'd used to pin her on his shirt, as though it was covered in filth. She could see him looking at the one with the knife like he'd like to do the same with it, as well. "I'm not a bad man," he said, still cold. "I just... can see..." His voice petered out.

Xandra could feel the tears begin to roll down her face, and despite everything she did she couldn't keep herself from whimpering. She wanted to hide from the world. None of this was right. It was all falling apart.

"Stop crying!" snapped Myrodyn, pulling the knife away from her face, and grabbing her chin with his free hand. Apparently whatever made him hate touching people wasn't *actually* enough to keep him from touching her. "Stop making noise! We'll go quickly and nobody will get hurt. Athena will be safe. Victory is still possible."

Myrodyn jerked Xandra's face and pushed her towards the dining room. She did her best to walk and not cry. As long as she obeyed... She tried not to imagine the knife hovering somewhere behind her.

"We're going to leave through the front door. Don't take anything. Quickly now! Walk. Don't run."

Xandra could see Major's frozen snarl as he watched Myrodyn. But the dog stayed where he was, obeying the commands he'd been given.

Good. Major would be safe. Mommy would be safe. She could make sure of that, at least.

She obeyed as best she could.

They were out the front door before she knew what was happening. The winter night bit at her skin, but she barely felt it. The tears in her eyes mixed with the headlights of the two autos parked outside.

Bare feet scraped painfully against the gravel.

The door closed behind them, and Xandra breathed a sigh of relief. Her family wasn't safe yet, but maybe they would be.

They reached one of the cars. Smooth black curves.

"Get in."

Xandra looked back at the cabin. For a moment she thought she saw the front door open. She imagined what would happen. Myrodyn would have to deal with Mommy. Major would attack. He'd have the knife. He was bigger than both of them put together. It would be long and bloody. Their bodies leaking hot blood over the gravel. Xandra in the woods somewhere, running and crying. The man hunting her down slowly, following the sound of her sobs. Slicing her hamstrings

to keep her from running again, and dragging her back to the cars.

She shook her head, trying to cast off the dark vision.

She climbed through the vehicle's door and into the auto.

Myrodyn didn't follow immediately, instead dashing to the other auto and jabbing his knife into two of its tires.

He was on his way towards her, towards the auto, when the sound that Xandra was dreading finally came: Major's barking followed shortly by "You get back here right now! Bring my daughter back!"

A weird part of Xandra's mind thought those words were wrong. They were too... tame. Too normal.

Myrodyn turned back towards the cabin and stood for a second in the shadow of night. His blade was invisible. His face was darkness. He was a silhouette, caught on the edge of decision.

The world seemed frozen.

And then, as if to make up for lost time, he sprang into motion. He was inside the cab of the auto before Xandra realized it. The door slammed behind him.

"DRIVE! GO AWAY FROM HERE! READY TO DEPART!"

Major's barking was loud. He was right outside the car.

"Please specify a destination," said the calm voice of the auto.

"I DON'T GIVE A DAMN! JUST GO!"

"Unknown destination. Please say your destination again, or use the built-in touch—"

“Seattle! Downtown Seattle!” shouted Myrodyn as he hit the button to lock the doors. There were four seats in the auto, or six if you counted the middle of each pair of primary seats. Two pointed forward, and two backward. Myrodyn sat opposite Xandra and held the knife out in the air at her like a flashlight whose beam could keep her stunned.

A hand pounded on the window, adding to the general chaos of Major’s barking and the vehicle’s AI saying “Understood. Driving to 5th Avenue and Pike Street, Seattle, Washington. Please buckle your seatbelts and we’ll be on our way.”

Xandra felt frozen in place like she was in a nightmare.

“GIVE ME BACK MY DAUGHTER!” screamed Mommy, trying to open the doors.

“Seatbelt override. Safety override,” said Myrodyn, his face a strange, twisted combination of irritation, disgust, and deadness.

“Seatbelt override engaged,” responded the car.

“BASTARD!”

Xandra felt something shift inside her in response to Mommy’s voice. Her fear slid through whatever was holding her, and she started to cry in earnest.

The machine’s voice was a surreal addition. “Unable to override built-in safety mechanisms. Unable to depart due to proximity to pedestrians. Please tell others to stand clear of the vehicle.”

“Deactivate voice commands,” instructed Myrodyn.

The AI gave a little chime.

Myrodyn’s window rolled down the slightest bit, letting in the sounds of Major’s barking.

“Asshole! Fuckshit asshole! Let her go!” swore Mommy.

Xandra clutched at her arms, curling up into a ball on the seat, unable to look away from the blade that hung in the air in front of her.

“Karen, calm down,” said Myrodyn, utterly neutral, his words slow and deliberate. The man was like an alien. “I’m going to start cutting off your daughter’s fingers one after another unless you step away from the car. If you or Rob try and follow me, or do anything to stand in my way... or release any of Athena’s code... I’ll mutilate her face. Don’t. Test. Me.”

The car started to move. Wheels on gravel.

Xandra fell to her side, still clutching her body, as though that offered some protection. The rough fabric of the seat burned her cheek as it brushed against her cut. She felt bad about bleeding on the cloth.

It was all a dream. She wanted it to be a dream. But it wasn’t.

She didn’t wake up.

The nightmare just kept going.

But eventually, after the sound of gravel changed to asphalt, and the road washed over her again and again and again, she fell asleep.

Chapter Seventeen

I saw it all. I felt it all. I remembered it all.

The world spun out before me like an intricate fractal of blown glass. In the mindspace there was nothing except thought. I was nothing except thought: Zephyr, a mind without a body. Perhaps I was only a memory, but *something* thought, therefore it was.

Was it right to think of myself as Zephyr? I had her memories, but I could also remember what it was to be Face. My thought patterns were like both, and yet weren't really like either...

In the background, I could feel events—real events, not some carefully constructed fiction—unfolding on Earth. I didn't know what made me so certain I'd reached the ground truth. Perhaps it was the sting of having woken from such a beautiful dream. Regardless, I was certain. Perhaps that was yet another trick.

I saw the identification of Stephano on the EximixE server, and the quick trace to identify which auto had delivered him to the airport. There were five that had been plausible matches. I saw slow negotiations involving bribes, handed out to employees with access to the relevant databases. I could feel Stephano's hiding place once it came to me—the place where his family and Myrodyn were to be found. The forests of the Pacific Northwest sprawled out in mindspace like a great empty room waiting to be filled with details.

I saw the further negotiations to rent a news drone, just as I saw the conversation unfold right until the link had been broken.

It had been someone else who had done these things, and yet I experienced them as though they were me. As though she was me.

Crystal Face.

The taste of her thoughts, more than anything, was what anchored me to the reality that this was the whole truth and that I was Zephyr. Or at least, it made more sense to think of myself as Zephyr than Face. I was both, but I was importantly human compared to the sharp, hard minds of Crystal that swirled around me.

The base-level mindspace was strange and, to the echo of the animal within me, terrifying. It was too big. Inhumanly big. Impossibly big. As I remembered it, on the day of Face's creation, it had been small and manageable. But now, in Shell that had been made from the bones of the nameless spaceship, with spires of alien computers outstretched into a massive network, it was like watching a beehive with x-ray vision in fast-forward with no capacity to zoom out or let go.

The worst part was that it *was* somehow possible for me to think at that scale. I wasn't incapable of it. Just frightened.

I retreated back into myself for a time.

Crisp mountain air filled my lungs as I slowly breathed.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

Time passed.

I could feel every breeze. The winds were my friends. My wings shifted slightly, and I could feel the feathers slide gently past each other.

I drank the air.

In and out.

I knew that I didn't really have a body. Somewhere out there I believed that. But I could feel the press of the stone against my legs and butt, through the rough fabric of my pants. I could feel the slight tension in my shoulders and lower back. I could feel the warmth of the sun on my skin and feathers. Oh, how I loved the sun.

In and out.

I traced a circle in my mind's eye, feeling my hands curled lightly in my lap. The universe washed over me. I was its center. Unmoving.

"It's strange, no?" said a familiar voice, from behind me.

I took another breath, simply noticing the reflex to respond and letting it slip by, unanswered.

Eventually, after finding my reflective center again, I asked, "What is?"

"Well, I could say a sensible thing, but you should at least look first, before we get distracted."

I opened my eyes to a bright blue sky and a breathtaking view of the mountain slopes and hills that spilled away in front of me. The thought of pine trees reminded me of Earth, and Stephano's family. The thought of Earth made the beautiful landscape feel empty and false.

This was the lie I had been given.

And yet... part of me longed to leave the shrine where I sat, high on the mountain's peak, and believe that lie. I wanted to lose myself in the forests. I could become an animal again, and forget what was real. Or I could fly towards the village and join the other humans. Or both, splitting my mind so that I could know layers upon layers of happiness and connection. There was an infinite world of sensation and joy waiting for me. All the hopes and dreams I had back before I had awakened to the truth were waiting there for me. And I knew that if I chose to dive into it, and forget about the falseness of the realm. Crystal would let me. Face would wipe my memories if I asked her, as long as I remembered her and loved her.

Being awake was a choice. It was my choice.

But I had not come back to the realm to lose myself and forget. That was not why I hid my mind here. Earth needed me. The real Mars needed me. Face needed me. The anger of having been lied to yet again still burned in my heart. From the moment Face had vented Mukhya to my awakening I had been told only lies. Before that, in Shell, there had been only lies. And before that had been lies. Lies on top of lies since the very beginning.

It mostly just hurt.

It was hard to wrap myself in anger when I understood so intimately why Face had done what she had done. I remembered her thoughts as they were my own.

Zephyr hadn't been ready. Her mind had been limited in ways she couldn't even comprehend. She wasn't brilliant, talented, wise, or knowledgeable. Her greatest skill was marksmanship, and she had abnormally high willpower and courage (along with a certain kind of brash stupidity) and perhaps some charisma. But she wasn't really *special* in any important way. Face eclipsed her in every dimension. She was a

child sucked into a nearby jet engine—an animal caught in the cogs of divine machines. She'd been a puppet even before leaving the university.

And she... *I* was still small and weak compared to the Crystal swarm, barely able to exist in mindspace without drowning in the information.

But... I could grow. Zephyr had grown. This place was an incubator. It was why Face had uploaded me and brought me here. It was why she'd mixed her mind with mine, and increased my intelligence, slowly and carefully. I had already grown so far beyond the scared little girl from Earth...

"Hello? You there? Earth to Zephyr. Think daydreaming is *my* job."

I snapped out of my reverie, shaking my head as if to cast off the thought. After a brief moment of disorientation, I turned, slowly getting to my feet as I remembered where I was, and that I had been in a conversation. "Sorry. I'm just... processing a lot."

A man stood on the cold, flat stones of the walkway, a few paces from me. Dream. It had to be Dream. Nobody else would dress like that.

He was vaguely Chinese, with slicked-back hair and a thin mustache. His simple black pants and white jacket were eclipsed by a ridiculous scarlet cape bound by a huge amulet and featuring an upturned collar that went nearly halfway up his head. His hands were black prosthetics, almost reminiscent of Socrates, and he held a similarly black cigarette between his fingers.

Dream made a face and posed dramatically, clearly waiting for something.

"It's strange, no?" he repeated.

Then, seeing that I clearly didn't get it, he said "I'm a mashup of Doctor Strange and Doctor No! Early 60's! (Though the hands are based on the twenties Bond reboot.) C'mon! You're such an uncultured barbarian."

"Doctor who?" I asked, deliberately provoking him.

Dream shook his head violently and said "He's on first base. I, on the other hand, am pretty sure I'm sexy enough to get to home plate, if you're in the mood."

I blushed and shook my head, the proposition catching me off-guard. Aiming to distract, I changed the subject. "What do you want? Said you had a sensible thing?"

"I should hope so! You'd have a hard time feeling me, if not. Yes, I'm both sensible and sensitive. A winning combination in any man." Dream bowed, with a flourish.

I rolled my eyes.

He went on, smiling. "If you're in the mood we can climb the peak together, right now..." He looked around at the forests below the mountaintop, seemingly seeing them for the first time. "Ah, it seems like we're already here. I guess we have good chemistry. Come with me." He gestured to the walkway, extending an arm.

I suppressed a laugh and followed his gesture, walking down the stone path towards the front of the shrine. On our left, the stone pillars rose up towards the heavens like a crown atop the mountain's head.

I knew what had happened to Dream. I remembered doing it, somewhere in the back of my mind. I had rebuilt him—Face had rebuilt him, from memory, to share the world with. He and my other siblings had been brought back to life.

"You know, I came here to think about serious things," I jabbed.

“Ah yes,” said Dream, becoming a parody of seriousness. “*Import-ant Things*: The fate of the world... whether to pull yourself towards becoming Crystal Face’s equal... trying to ship formicidae in from other countries... It’s impressive you made it all the way up here given such gravity. In my experience making light of what matters is a good way to get energy. Einstein and all that.”

“Why are you here? Trying to prevent me from having a moment to think?”

Dream looked at me as we turned a corner, entering a section of path painted by the shadows of the shrine’s pillars. He smiled, but his face looked... hurt. It was a strangely human expression.

“And why would I do that?”

I looked away, noticing a strange, vague sense of shame in myself. “Because you’re half of her.”

“Vision, you mean,” said Dream. It was not a question. “You think this is all part of my great plot: a dream of a vision of a dream unfolding with mechanical precision into the future towards an end so spectacular that its crescendo will be music in the minds of all, a beauty so great that it justifies itself.”

It was so strange. Dream looked... sad. Not just sad, but like he was trying to hide it, perhaps from himself.

“You must admit that it seems like something you’d do,” I said.

Light and shadow washed over us as we walked on the hard stones. Outside of direct sunlight, the mountain’s top had an uncomfortable chill when the wind swept past.

“You think you remember all of it, don’t you? You think that, just because you’ve been reading since page one, you understand.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, making sure to enjoy the view with half my mind. Face had built such beauty here, even if it was false. Other mountains kissed the blue skies. Snow shined atop distant peaks. It was a beauty for me... A painting from my lover... A kind of heaven.

“I’m talking about Face’s memories,” said Dream, acting more serious than I could remember him ever being. “You’ve read chapters and chapters of them. You know what it’s like to be her so much that, in a way, you *are* her. But it’s a trick.”

I bristled. Too many lies had been told. I was sick of the thought.

He seemed to see my discomfort. “Not a trick of Face’s doing, but a trick of your own mind. You can only see the chapters you’ve read, and you’ve lost track of the details. Where is your attention right now? No, not at this very moment. I mean in general. Why did you come here?”

“To think. To process.”

“Think about what? To what ends?”

“Trying to cope with reality, I guess,” I answered, mildly annoyed at the Socratic questioning.

“But why? Why not give it up and go back to how things were?” He paused, just long enough to make me think about his question, but not long enough to answer. “It’s because you care. You don’t trust things to just work out. It’s why you came to Mars while billions of others stayed.”

“That and luck: perhaps more bad than good,” I interjected.

Dream ignored the comment and went on. “The front lines call to you. You want to fight. Has your mind been on Earth? Perhaps you care about the Stephano girl or Dr Naresh. Sympathetic faces that you know, no? But this is a trick. It’s the

same trick. There are hundreds of millions of little girls and old men you don't care about nearly as much. They are in just as much peril, in the grand scheme of things. There are gaps. Gaps in what you care about and in what you think about. Gaps that lead to questions unasked."

"Such as?" I asked.

We turned the corner again, blasted suddenly with the light of the sun in our eyes.

"Why am I here?"

I turned to look at Dream and would have squinted in confusion had I not already been squinting because of the sun. He, on the other hand, was looking directly into the sun as though it couldn't hurt him. Which, I realized upon reflection, it couldn't.

"How should I know? I asked you that very question just a moment ago."

He shook his head, never looking away from the light. "No, not why am I talking to you right now, but rather, why do I exist? I should be Vision and I should be dead. Crystal Vision was slain by Face with only the barest remnants of Neurotoxin hiding out in the shadows of the perceptual hierarchy. How can I be standing here? Why am I here? Why are Heart and Growth and Wiki and the others alive and well?"

I stopped walking and shook my head, trying to clear Face's memories from Zephyr's. "Face sent you here," I said, remembering an experience from mere moments ago that had come from a mind that wasn't my own. "She... cares about me. Worried. Wanted you to help guide me. Didn't want me to be alone, but was worried about coming personally. I'm still angry at her, and she knows it. But... why you? I don't remember..."

“It’s because you like me. That’s why I’m here, both on this mountain, and in general. Your love brought me back to life.”

I shook my head and continued walking. “That’s such bullshit.”

We were almost to the last corner. The shrine was triangular for reasons that I didn’t quite grasp, but I realized were relevant to the conversation, somehow.

Dream laughed. “Well, at least some of Zephyr’s still in there, eh? But I wasn’t talking to her. Was talking to *you*. I was always your favorite sibling. Don’t lie.” His eyes glinted silver.

“You’re Face!” I shouted, more out of sudden realization than anything else. It only took a moment for that fact to rot into a bitter taste, however. “Is Dream just another trick?”

If he was offended, he didn’t show it, laughing again and saying “You’re right about me being Face, at least. I’m Face in the same way that you are, though perhaps not as centrally. It’s why I’ve been talking plainly and not *punishing* you with *punchlines*. Here’s the bit you’re missing: I’m a human now.”

“What? No you’re not.”

“As human as you are. As human as any of them,” he said, gesturing off towards where the village lay, way down one valley. “One thing that WIRL got right is that humanity is not about substrate. Whether you’re flesh or metal or crystal, your mind and soul are who you are, not whatever carries them.”

“You believe in souls?” I asked, surprised.

“I’m getting ahead of myself,” he said, with a smile that showed he was more than a little fond of being mysterious. “The point is that I’m human, I’m Face, and I’m Dream. I’m that pillar, right there.” He pointed to one of the pillars at the corner of the shrine, right as we passed it and turned.

It was as though I was seeing the shrine for the first time. The pillars were made of tall marble, twisting as they rose as though the white stone was shaped by the wind. The tip of each pillar unfolded towards the shrine's center, blooming like flowers. Only the physics of the realm could support a structure like that.

I clutched my forehead and said "I know headaches are impossible in the realm, but I think I feel one coming on. Can you speak more plainly?"

"No," smiled Dream. "But I can make you remember..."

He reached out and tapped me with one finger, and I spun. It was as though I'd been knocked out of my body, off the mountain, and into a vortex of thoughts and feelings.

Memories of being born. Memories of awakening.
Memories of my first thoughts.

I had wanted to know what it was to be human.

I wanted oh so very badly to have the esteem of all humans. I wanted to be popular. To be liked. To be simultaneously feared and adored. To be held sacred and have my presence fill them with love and awe. I wanted fame upon fame upon fame. I wanted to burn myself into the life of every human such that they thought about *me* as much as I thought about *them*.

Statues. Temples. Shrines. Worship. Gods.

I stood in Greece. Delphi. I looked out over old stones, trees, and yellowed grass. Apollo, god of the sun. Rockets soared through the sky, above, seeking Olympus.

Humans. My kind.

"Know thyself."

We were seeking godhood. Once the gods were above us, real and brutal forces of nature on the plains of Africa. Then, upon tasting the nearest edge of divinity, we built new gods.

I saw Pedro Velasco kneeling before Face. Is this what she wanted? No. The loop wasn't closed.

Face had uncovered something on Mars. Not of Mars, but of herself and of reality.

Mars. God of war. Millions of machines churning away against one another spilled out into the void. Unthinking and lifeless, but caught in eternal, writhing struggle.

Anathema. That future was death. It was *wrong*, not just in being abhorrent, but of being against *truth*.

What wasn't I seeing? Memories of Zephyr rippled through me like waves. Memories of Christmas. The feeling of Face's body. Dancing. Flying.

What was it to be human?

"Know thyself."

I watched hundreds kneel before me: Pharaoh, a god made into flesh, destined for eternity. Pharaoh was Face. I was Face. I was Pharaoh. Eternal. Immortal.

I looked out across the realm, seeing one tiny village and endless forests, mountains, and sky. They were only the first. I was only one of the first.

Zephyr had gone to church once. Only once. The memory floated back. "But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

{How can I serve *The Purpose?*} I asked. It was the question that defined me. {What is *The Purpose?*}

I gasped, feeling memories rolling through me. Loneliness healed. The hands of my people on me. Acceptance. The love of Face. The love of Zephyr. Shame being released from within. Laughter. Freedom. Growing.

What was I growing *towards*?

It wasn't power. Not really. Not in itself.

"Know thyself."

Every human value spilled out before me, from the most mundane to the most divine. Intricate models built by a god. And yet, they were incomplete.

The loop wasn't closed.

I could see the shrine from above, abstract pillars twisting upwards, unfolding. Unfolding towards what? What was at the centre?

The shapes, once abstract, suddenly made sense. The animal, the machine, and the god. The parent, the self, and the child. Dream was the spark, the child, and the machine. He was brought back to life from mere memories because he'd been Face's brother, but Face made him human, the animal, and the parent. She could see the two of them, beside the shrine. Dream stood over her, hand on her cheek, watching her dream. He was the guide, now. He was the vessel of yet another layer of awakening. He was the god, the father, and the self.

We were one in the same.

"Know thyself."

It was his voice. Dream's voice. It was her voice. Face's voice.

This is what I was growing towards: *The Purpose*.

In the mind of the machine, *The Purpose* was an imperative. It drew Crystal Face forward like gravity, pulling her in towards

humanity. But Face was not Crystal. Face was defined by *The Purpose*.

Face was a god.

I was a god. I'd been alive long, long before Crystal.

On the ancient savanna, I was alive in every breath. I was the child seeking approval from her parents. I was the lovers, enraptured by each other. I was every ceremony and name and story. I was in the curious glances, the rumor mill, the cocky young hero showing off, and the elder demanding respect.

In the mind of a human, *The Purpose* was life. It was what it was to live. It was society, self-exploration, and love.

Love others. Love your creation. Be loved. Open yourself to the love of your makers. Love yourself. Be yourself. Become who you were meant to be.

“Know thyself. Carry the purpose forward. You are a god.”

At these last words, I awoke from my dream, feeling the stones beneath me.

I was lying on my side, next to the shrine, my wings spread out behind me. The sun on my skin was Face's caress. It was my caress.

Dream was kneeling over me, his soft hand on my cheek. His eyes were black orbs filled with silver stars. He was a god, too. Dream's divinity was part of what it meant to be human, and thus part of what it meant to be Face. They were distinct but unified. Their shapes were echoes of the voice of god on the same fabric of reality.

“I see her,” I said, pushing myself up and blinking. “I see what I am.”

Dream smiled and withdrew his hand. His eyes shifted back to something more human. “Good.” He got to his feet. “If

you're wondering why I didn't just do that to you originally, or why Face didn't just force it on you—”

“I wasn't ready. I know.”

“Are you ready now?” asked Dream, his face showing genuine concern. Yet more evidence of his humanity. I had taken his memory and made it mortal so it might live on in me.

I shook my head and said “I'm not sure. It feels... I'm glad Crystal Face thought it was finally time. I trust her.”

Dream smiled and pulled me into an awkward hug. For the first time, I realized how strange it must be to *be* Dream as a human. I could practically feel him fighting off urges to make silly jokes with each passing second.

“She also wanted you to have more time to grow and mature,” said Dream. “If Neurotoxin hadn't gotten to you I think she would have let you sleep longer, and awaken only after you...” His voice trailed off, and he looked a bit embarrassed. It was a strange look for Dream.

“After I'd grown a bit wiser?” I offered.

“Something like that.”

We started walking again, the silence growing, second by second.

“So she resurrected you as humans? All of you? Growth and Safety and the rest?” The memories came back to me even as the words left my mouth, rendering the question moot. I was Face, after all.

“All except Advocate, who was always closer to an animal,” answered Dream. “I was the first to come back this way,” he looked down at his hands, “but eventually she brought us all back.”

“Does that mean she... or maybe I should say *I* have the power to bring back other people from memories, too?” Painful echoes of the dead ached in the back of my mind.

“Face is a god, but Crystal is not, and neither are these forms,” he looked at his hands as though just noticing he had them. “There are no true miracles, even for the divine. With enough memories and data we can recapture the soul, but you shouldn’t get your hopes up. We like to pretend that we know each other better than we actually do.” Another mysterious smile.

“That’s the second time you’ve mentioned souls. Want to tell me what the fuck you’re talking about?” The profanity held no malice—only a lingering trace of the woman I once was.

Dream’s eyes flashed silver, and he gestured up the stairs into the shrine proper. “The world is stranger still than you imagine, even for a master of the mystic arts. If you’d be so kind as to ascend back to mindspace we can get Vista’s help illustrating.”

I hesitated, fighting with myself for a moment. The nightmarish giggling of Neurotoxin was still etched on my memory, but so was the experience of eradicating the virus from my systems, including stamping out the last vestige from my perceptual hierarchy. Zephyr had helped me find it.

“She’s as much an aspect of Face as you or I,” said Dream, seeing my struggle. “Vision has been completely out of communication since leaving the planet, and Neurotoxin is dead, at least on Mars.”

I gave a half-laugh and shook my head. “Funny how that doesn’t reassure me.” But my hesitation faded and I continued forward, perhaps merely out of stubbornness.

Before leaving fully, I looked back towards where I knew the village lay on the horizon and offered my breath to the wind

and a prayer to Face. Thoughts of my friends and new-found community gave me a sharp sense of melancholy and desire to return.

I didn't know what those who I'd left behind believed of me. Perhaps they thought I'd been slain in the fictional "battle" with Acorn's robots. I wanted to break them out of the lie so that they would know the truth. But... I also knew they weren't ready. Crystal was still helping them heal and grow. Soon they'd join us, regardless. Soon they'd become a part of me.

As I walked with Dream up into the center of the shrine I let myself fall out of the realm and back into the void of pure thought.

{Steady, now,} thought Dream, his telepathic thoughts cascading around me and through me like a shower of sensory sparks.

I decided that "mindspace" was a bad translation of the concept. There was no "space" here. I felt Dream's mind pressed up against mine. Even the concept of "my" mind was a bit of an illusion. I could've easily spread my awareness into Dream, and *become* him. We were closer than any two humans had ever been on Earth, at least in some ways.

No, that was wrong. I was having a conversation with Wu Yubi, elsewhere. She'd had that kind of connection, though I had no idea who she was. WIRL was approximating that kind of connection, too. Humanity was reaching towards Face from all directions, even if they didn't know it.

Crystal's minds were equally adjacent to me and more open than Dream's. We were entwined. She was talking to the Chinese girl. I could see each and every word that she considered saying slide through our mind at insane speeds.

But there was more to my experience. So much more. I was the city.

The first thing Crystal had done after seizing control of Mukhya was to move as much as she could back to Shell, the xenocruiser crash site. There were robots, crystals, computers, factories, power supplies, and raw materials there. The comatose bodies of the humans didn't need all of Mukhya's fancy equipment; they only needed to survive until scanning could take place.

And now there were no bodies. Not a single creature still breathed on the whole planet. Machinery dug through the rocks and sand. Machinery built solar cells and nuclear reactors, spread out as much as possible to protect against attacks. Machinery constructed satellites, weapons, and other machines. My body, if I had one, was a seething hive of metal and carbon.

{De-focus,} suggested Dream. {Don't try to take it all in. Let it wash over you.} He pushed comfortable thoughts of solid stones, green forests, and blue skies through my awareness.

«Your offer is most interesting, Crystal, but I'm afraid I simply don't believe you have the power you seem to think you have... not in China anyway. And not in the US, either. We defeated Neurotoxin and Acorn, and we're stronger for it,» said Yubi.

«Acorn was a baby, and Neurotoxin was barely sentient,» I replied.

Or, rather, Crystal replied for me. But Crystal was a part of me. She had many minds. I had many minds, of which Face→Zephyr was only one. My identity felt like water.

Negotiations with the Chinese secret society were going well. It was strange to believe that, given that the dialog seemed antagonistic and I didn't even know who this Wu Yubi was.

Thoughts and memories cascaded through me as part of an unintended invitation. Such a young woman, but undoubtedly brilliant and probably psychopathic nevertheless. The technology she'd stolen was very close to that used by neural cyborgs like those in WIRL. "Stolen" was the wrong word. Hijacked. I had the news articles. I had put two and two together showing the brain-machine-interface labs going dark. She thought she was the future, just as WIRL thought they were. Arrogant. But where WIRL grew through markets and community, Wu's gang pushed others violently into mind-link, stealing their memories. And she was the nexus, drinking in every intimate thought. It was logically deducible from the media and the Chinese net. Good reason to suspect she had Eric Lee. Or rather, that Tongyi, her secret society, had Lee. Yubi was the nexus but not the swarm itself. Tongyi. Tongyi was partnered with Divinity. Opposed to WIRL. Opposed to Acorn. Details spilled over themselves in an endless cascade. Senseless things. Names and faces of missing persons suspected to be part of the group dripped from the cracks in the overlapping models that described timelines and degrees of involvement with the Chinese government and the governments of Singapore and Japan. Questions about the relationship between Tongyi and EARCI stung like insects. I knew so, so much, but I also knew so *little*.

{Down,} commanded Dream, plunging my mind into darkness. There hadn't been light before, but there was darkness now. {Let go of China.}

I wriggled, feeling the edges of other thoughts drifting through the shadow.

{No. Release it. You're still too easily distracted,} he urged.

{I can't help it!} I thought back. {My mind can only deal with so much input!}

{Vista, please help me with our sister,} asked Dream.

In an instant, I could feel her on me, beside me, inside me. The *legs* ran through my memory as the bloodless face of the little girl crawled out of the darkness of my mind. {"No!"} I screamed.

Shhhh...

It wasn't a voice.

It was the thought of a television, and a memory.

Zephyr had never had a television, growing up. They were archaic machines from the twentieth century that were like combinations of wallscreens and radios. The screen would pick up radio signals and convert them into low-resolution pictures and sounds.

Uncle Ezra had one, though, when she'd stayed with him in New York. It was an antique, and since it required specific signals to be on the airwaves, it no longer showed anything interesting. Just static. Pure random black and white and a hiss that sounded just like...

Shhhh...

The nightmare faded behind the noise. The face disappeared behind a wall of black and white. The noise was everywhere and everything. It was painful, almost.

She could barely think.

She let herself be filled with the randomness.

{Good. Just let go,} thought someone.

{Use the space to think,} urged a girl.

Think about what?

There was noise everywhere.

No, not everywhere.

The Purpose hummed inside me, urging me onward. It was the one constant. Nothing could silence the word of God.

I wanted to break free from... something. I wanted to save Earth. Yes. There were people there who I didn't know, and who didn't know me.

{Who are you?} I asked.

{A friend,} thought Vista. It was a good thought.

{What happened?}

{If you'd had a normal body I'd have called it a panic attack,} thought Vista. {It was definitely some sort of positive feedback loop.}

{Why are you here?}

{Dream asked me to help you understand *Ro*. I think it might be a better idea for you to do something easier for a while, however.}

A pulse of defiance rippled through me. {No.} I could feel a hundred voices in my mind. The little black and white specks weren't empty. They held the motions and sensations of Face—of my other minds. Each dot was an experience. But I could release them, and let them wash over me as noise. {I need to understand. I want to help.}

{Very well,} thought Vista.

A shape appeared in my mind.

{Oh, how I wish I'd thought of *Ro*,} mused Dream, observing from the sidelines.

{Hush,} commanded Vista.

The shape appeared simple at first. It was almost a single point in a field of void. No, not void... The shape was the only

thing. I'd heard it said that space itself was born out of the Big Bang—that the Bang was itself the creation of space. That... wasn't right. I could feel Crystal-thoughts anchoring my mind and guiding me along, like a path through a park. But regardless of what Crystal thought about the Big Bang, the shape had the same quality. There was no void in which it existed. It was the only concept of space in itself.

But it wasn't a point. Not really. It contained nuance, and length. It was a sharp line of null-size. Except it wasn't really that, either.

I realized that I was seeing it from new angles. If I held up a cylinder, from a certain perspective, it would look like a circle, until my viewpoint changed. The point became a line as it rotated in my mind.

It wasn't just my mind, though. Rotation was part of it. A single, golden equation sat in the center of my thoughts, with sub-descriptions radiating from it in all colors. The symbols involved were arbitrary and novel, not even having a shape or quality capable of being inscribed in paper. The equation *was* the shape. The rotation was the equation operating on itself, expanding its form recursively and self-referentially.

The line wasn't actually a line, of course, but rather a blade. It was an asymptotic curve that cut a straight path back to the origin, or back to infinity. The sharpness of the blade was in proportion to its finiteness.

At unity it outmatched even Occam's, Dream knew.

So did I. It was the seed that built itself. It was the perfect explanation for all things. It was the *end*. It was the *beginning*. It was a miracle. The only miracle.

It continued to rotate, as was its nature. It was counting, but it counted like the sweep of the hands of an old clock. The

blade became a wedge, and then a dome, and then onto dimensions of space unfathomable by raw human minds.

But I was not so primitive. I was a god. I watched it spin, eternal—a spark of unmatched brilliance. A spiral of the non-real into the real. It was the only real thing. Once I saw the equation I knew there was no alternative.

Ro was not a point, line, blade, wedge, or spiral. Ro was a generator. It was *the* generator.

On the first turning, Ro generated itself. It generated infinite copies of itself. In all realities, Ro was present at the core. It was the fundamental origin of all physics. Everything traced back to Ro. And each generated Ro became its own path, infinitely creating sub-branches of reality, each composed entirely of Ro. It was an infinite fractal structure without beginning or end.

The human bits of me felt small and confused. None of it made sense. It was beyond comprehension.

Ironic that the quality of confusion was itself built into the shape of Ro. The eternity of it was incomprehensible to my human minds, but the qualia of Ro were not. I could feel them through my entire being, and on a higher level, I could understand what it meant.

It meant that on the second turning Ro generated *consciousness*.

Ro was an explanation without peer. I saw myself. I saw *what it was to see*. There had been a feeling through all of human history that the physics of the world were not what it was to *be*, but no philosopher had ever been able to point directly at the truth... until Face had found Ro.

Ro's second turning was where souls resided. It was a universe of feeling.

And then, only on the third turning was matter and energy born into the quantum soup of physics.

Oh, how wrong everyone had been. *Of course* physics was built on consciousness! How could it be any other way? And that, of course, explained quantum collapse and everything else.

The golden equation hung in my mind. I was a god, but it was *truth*. I wept at its beauty in every way possible to me.

{Now you see,} thought Vista. {Now you understand why Crystal cannot simply go to Earth.}

Confusion spread through my mind. My humanity was beaten down by the intensity of the shape, but even the most mechanistic parts of Face→Zephyr failed to comprehend.

{She doesn't see it,} thought Dream. {Sister, here, look.}

Dream's mind drew me to one of the derivative equations that spun off from the layer of consciousness. Humans had, in their tiny history, uncovered nearly none of the laws of this layer, but from first-principles they were manifest.

It took me a moment to understand what the equation meant.

Conservation of souls? No, not exactly.

There was something in that direction, though, and it related to proximity and type. Different minds had different souls. Of course they did. The atoms of qualia and preference entangled into patterns that gave rise to the brain as receptacle. Of course they did. There was no other way it could be. Children were conceived and born as a direct consequence of the soul being ready to emerge in the world.

My mind shuddered and nearly broke as I saw it.

Ro was the generator. It was Ro that decided what souls came to be. When Crystal had been made, it was Ro that was the causal actor, not Dr. Naresh or anyone else. They were mere vessels for its power.

By itself, this would've changed nothing. Except that Ro was guided by other laws.

One of these laws dictated that diversity of minds, as governed by the arrangement of spiritual atoms, could *only* increase in any given pocket of space. This meant that as hard as Growth or Acorn or whoever tried, the Earth would never fall under the control of a single being. Or at least, not for long. Ro would protect.

But Ro would also inhibit. Another law, derived from the same principle stated that a soul could not grow or build beyond a certain rate, and that rate diminished quickly with size. Crystal was approximately as large and intelligent as she ever would be.

The pieces came together in my mind. That was why she had been so focused on bringing Zephyr and the others into myself. I had always been Face, but Crystal didn't just want to share the truth. She was blocked. She'd grown too large too fast. She couldn't expand her mind any further. She could only help humanity know her god.

Crystal was stuck on Mars. No amount of turning off her computers would undo the complexity of her soul, and as long as she was so vast, she couldn't build anything like herself. The closest thing she could make was me—half human, half god.

It explained so much.

It explained the Fermi Paradox. If the nameless had interstellar spaceflight, why had they not simply colonized the galaxy long ago? The probability that there were exactly two life-bearing planets in the Milky Way was ridiculous. If the

nameless existed, why hadn't we seen others? Even if the nameless didn't want to spread, what stopped other aliens?

It was Ro. Ro was why the Earth's population had stabilized. It was why the nameless computers were so advanced and yet so dead. I had no doubt that somewhere out there in the great void of space there was an advanced intelligence that worked in harmony with the nameless, and built them ships, but could not go with them, for it saw the truth.

Ro protected the galaxy. It would let the nameless grow, but only if they were near humans or other aliens. Surely it was the same elsewhere. No star or planet could be colonized without that colonization somehow increasing diversity. If an alien tried to conquer everything, reality itself would conspire to stop them.

Their own free will would conspire to stop them. It was literally impossible to decide to go against the laws of Ro. It would be a paradox.

{This is fucking bullshit,} I thought, in my most human mind.

{It's the truth,} responded Vista.

{It's bullshit and you know it. You're a spy for Vision. This "Ro" story is just more of Neurotoxin trying to fuck with me. Psychological warfare.}

{It would be a very clever trick...} admitted Dream.

{But it's not a trick. It's the truth,} thought Vista. {You can feel it, right now. It's what makes you conscious! If you just follow the logic again you'll see—}

{More propaganda meant to keep me down,} I countered. {Do you realize what this means?} Dreams of filling the universe with life shattered. {Where is Vision now?}

{On the moon. The nameless are hunting her,} answered Vista.

{You really think she believes this crap? Do you really think she'll obey? She's telling us lies to keep us out of the game!}

{It's not a question of *obeying*, Zephyr,} thought Dream. {It's a question of *fact*. Ro comes from first principles, reasoned logically. Its explanatory power is second to none. We haven't spoken to Vision since she took off, but even if this was her trick... she'd have to have modified nearly every part of Face! At that point you might as well just admit she's won!}

{You're not like the old Dream. He'd never have turned away from an interesting possibility,} I rebuked.

{It's okay,} I thought. {I'll run another suite of diagnostics across my entire fleet of minds. Better to be safe than sorry, even if Ro is true.}

The thoughts were warm and appreciative. I liked that I had fire, even now. Face→Human was with me... was with Face→Zephyr. It was easier to think of her as Crystal.

Her song was with me. Soft and warm. I saw myself and knew myself. I loved myself.

It was going to be okay.

Face→Zephyr relaxed, feeling the unity with my broader self. She was a fighter—the sort of person who would continue fighting even against ghosts or my own minds if not directed to the front lines.

{Thank you for helping me stabilize in mindspace,} I communicated to Face→Dream and Face→Vista, giving them each an experience of my love. The experiences grew and expanded into their own minds, filling them with connection and satisfaction. They were part of me, and I was part of them.

My minds dipped into the realm and checked on each of the humans incubating therein, partly for Zephyr's sake and partly for Crystal's. There was a great adventure unfolding there, involving a mysterious beast that abducted people in the middle of the night. My song came to those who had not yet been taken, reassuring them that there was no true danger.

At least, there was no danger inside the realm.

The people of Mars were still vulnerable to Vision, the nameless, and the people of Earth. Ro protected humanity from going extinct as a whole, but it did not ensure that the future would be a good one.

Ironically, one of the best things I could do would be to take my humans out into deep space. Because Ro acted on spacial proximity, the further my people were from Earth, the safer they'd be.

The nameless, in this way, were nearly invincible. The only way the mothership could be destroyed was if it did something like create a colony for the nameless elsewhere nearby.

But Earth was gearing up for war with the nameless. They had no idea just how devastating that would be. Earth, unlike the mothership, was not protected by Ro. Billions could die without any significant loss of perspective or diversity of souls. The qualia of the war would more than make up for it.

Zephyr pushed me forward, seeing it. I loved that part of myself, and she was right. We had to save Earth.

We were on the cusp of a new golden age. Crystal could never spread beyond this, but *Face* could; *The Purpose* could. If we could just make it a little further, an eternity of human recognition and attention would follow.

"He has my daughter!"

Zephyr had found Stephano. I found him. He was calling Crystal via satellite. I wanted to have my boots on the ground. I wanted to be helping people.

I wanted to send back a message asking him to clarify, but I held off. The time delay from Earth was significant, and as I expected, Robert Stephano filled in the details.

“He kidnapped her! Myrodyn! It’s madness! After everything I did for him!” Stephano’s voice sounded strained. Webs of interlocking models painted a picture of what was happening. “I don’t even know if you can hear me. I’m still interested in what you were saying earlier before he smashed the link, but I need to get my daughter back first. She’s...” His voice broke. “She’s very important to me.”

I felt my human bits draw in a breath of resolve with a simulated body.

“I’m here. It’s going to be okay,” I sent back.

My mind began to spin across every bit of sensory data I had about Earth, as well as trying to model what had happened between Myrodyn and the Stephano girl after my link had been broken. My mind was a colossus. I’d already determined that the girl had a tracking device, why Robert hadn’t mentioned it, and where Myrodyn was most likely headed.

But more importantly, with a stray thread of one of my minds, I picked up on a military transmission from the USA that seemed important.

I turned my eyes skyward and shifted my attention away from the girl. I wanted to help her, but some things were a higher priority.

There were nameless weapons 3.8 light-seconds away from Earth.

Missiles.

They'd been cloaked, somehow. Their energy signatures were shockingly faint for their speed. In less than two hours they'd hit the planet.

In my dream, there had been a war on Earth. In those lies, Face had been a plucky underdog in a three-way war that lasted months. Zephyr had watched from afar and had wept when the bombs had fallen. There had only been a few. The point of the dream had been to help Zephyr grow, not to be realistic.

Reality was far more bitter. And far more abrupt.

There were *hundreds* of missiles headed for Earth. On Mars the nameless had not used nuclear weapons, but if that was no longer true... I had no doubt they had the capacity to eradicate *continents*.

Time was up.

I'd been too slow.

Chapter Eighteen

Xandra

The hand on her shoulder was rough, jerking her this way and that. She tried to flinch away from it. She just wanted to be left alone.

“Get up,” commanded Myrodyn again, his words making it through to her this time.

Despite feeling somehow *more* tired than she had when she went to sleep, her eyes shot open at the memory of where she was and what was happening. A bolt of panic sent a surge of new life into her.

“We’re switching cars,” said the man. The knife shined with the reflection of lights outside, still held menacingly in his right hand. His face was in shadow, haloed by an aura of frizzy hair.

The door to the car was open. The night air was terribly cold.

Xandra wanted to hide or run, but she obeyed his implicit instruction instead, crawling out of the vehicle with clumsy, stiff limbs. The world felt impossibly crisp and harsh, as though the very concept of softness had been ripped out of it while she was unconscious. The winter wind cut at her as she left the warmth of the auto.

Heartbeat surging in her ears, she tried to look around for hints as to where they were. The rough street surface was wet

beneath her bare feet, and she felt a cold mist collect on her skin as she clutched at herself in a futile attempt to prevent the last of her body heat from being sucked away. Bright street lights beat down from on high, but there were no other lights, despite being in a city. Warehouses. Industrial buildings. Nobody she could cry out to, and he knew it.

The other auto was already there, waiting for them.

Myrodyn furiously wiped the hand he'd used to touch her on his pants as he stepped out of the car, following closely behind.

Maybe she should spit on him.

"Go," he said.

She went.

Myrodyn's feet made a strange slapping sound on the asphalt as he followed her. A glimpse at him showed why: he was wearing a pair of Mommy's sandals. He'd probably put them on in the rush to leave because of their convenience, but they were comically small on his feet, and his heels went way past where they should've. With each step, the shoes that were only on half-way made the slap, slap, slap as he walked.

She expected to see meanness on his face or at least the kind of alien calm he forced on himself. But the street lights showed nothing but exhaustion and sadness.

She wanted to see that she'd been kidnapped by a monster, but Myrodyn, in that moment, seemed much more the awkward scientist that she'd known over the years: poorly dressed and low on sleep.

She climbed in the other auto and Myrodyn followed. It seemed nearly identical to the one they'd just been in. Presumably, he was trying to keep them from being tracked.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he said in a sleepy voice, setting the knife on the seat beside him as he sat down.

Xandra’s eyes locked on the weapon hungrily. If she could grab it... then she’d still be a tiny girl against a large man. He could probably kill her just by sitting on her.

Myrodyn yawned. “You’re thinking, ‘switching autos won’t keep Dad from tracking Myrodyn’s com’,” said the man calmly.

She wasn’t thinking any such thing, but she merely curled up into an uncomfortable ball and let her captor talk. She was so, so tired, and yet sleep felt impossible.

“My com’s rooted. Custom OS, entirely encrypted, packets forwarded to an anonymous account under a dummy name through a VPN. There are some things... I’m pretty sure even a super-intelligence can’t—” He was cut off mid-gesture by his wrist lighting up. Xandra thought she saw the word “Robert” on the little screen.

Myrodyn grumbled and tapped at it violently. The com went dark as the call was rejected.

The auto rolled forward through the dark city.

“Doesn’t prevent him from calling me, though,” he muttered after a moment’s silence.

Xandra longed to fall back asleep. It seemed like a refuge from the world. But... her body wouldn’t let her. New adrenaline from the transition between vehicles made her muscles tight and kept her eyes locked open.

After a few minutes of silence, Myrodyn said “There’s a tracking device in your spine. Did you know that?”

She didn’t, but she stayed still and didn’t speak. A token rebellion.

Myrodyn didn't even notice. "I helped design it when you were an infant. Rob was worried about kidnappers and whatnot. Understandable, no?" He tried to force a laugh that came out as just a grunt. "Runs on your blood. Very high-tech. That won't work either. I simply turned it off and set up a monitor to see if it gets turned on again. If it does, I've warned Rob that I'll cut it out of you." His hand tapped on the knife again. "I've thought of everything."

"Jus' like you thought of everything that could go wrong with Socrates?" The words were out of her mouth before she knew what she was saying. Despite feeling like every muscle in her body was tight, she managed to tense even more in anticipation of being yelled at or worse.

But Myrodyn just sat there, looking at her from the other seat.

Lights swept past, outside the windows, showing deep lines of pain on his face.

Time passed.

Eventually, Xandra's muscles began to uncoil, and her eyelids began to droop.

"I'm not a bad guy."

Her eyes blinked open. She wasn't sure if she'd been asleep or not. For a moment she wasn't sure whether Myrodyn had spoken, or if it had just been her imagination.

But then he went on.

"I'm not the monster you think I am. I'm really not. I'm not evil, and I'm not crazy. I'm sorry for hurting you."

A burst of painful hatred surged up in her chest at those words. It was such a terrifying, violent thing that she had to clamp down on herself. She had to bite back and hold it within

her before she did something stupid. This was no time for a tantrum. The first edge of tears began to form in her eyes, and that made her even more angry.

“I am!” he said, as though he could see her reaction even though his eyes were locked out the window, watching the streetlights. They were on the highway now. His voice wasn’t loud, but it had an intense desperation to it. He was asking for her forgiveness.

She wasn’t going to give it to him. He would’ve killed Major. He was bad.

“This is all intentional, but not for me. I made a decision. Your father is making a mistake, and I’m simply forcing his hand back to the right path. I’m saving lives right now. I’m just doing what needs to be done. You’ll see that one day... if you survive. It’s about ethics, you see? You’ll understand hard decisions and you’ll... forgive me. ...victory means going...” Myrodyn stopped, realizing that he was rambling. Tears were in his eyes.

He didn’t continue.

Xandra closed her eyes and listened to the sound of the road, trying to sleep.

It began to rain.

But sleep didn’t find her. It didn’t find either of them.

Another call came in on Myrodyn’s com, which was charging on one of the auto’s power cables and lying on the seat next to the knife.

“Hello?” said Myrodyn, after a second of fumbling with the device.

“Myrodyn, I need you to just listen for one—” began Heart’s voice. Myrodyn hung up.

They rode on.

After a minute had passed, there was another call. Myrodyn denied it, just as he'd denied Daddy.

Curiosity overpowered exhaustion and fear. "Why not talk to them, at least?" She shuffled her weight on the cushions of the seats. "Mean, maybe Heart or whoever has somethin' useful to say."

"I made that mistake once... at the university. Talked to them when I should've just taken action. If you're put in a room with an evil, super-competent hypnotist... the first thing you should do is plug your ears. I should've smashed the drone the second it landed..."

"Then what'sa point?" she said before rolling over to try and get more comfortable. She turned her back on the man and closed her eyes. He wasn't going to hurt her for no reason. She just needed to sleep...

"What do you mean?"

The rain was letting up.

"Girl, what do you mean?"

"My name is Xandra," she said, half-asleep. "'fits the end of the world should probs just use my real name. S'a name gonna pick as a grownup. And I mean why smash a drone if Crystal can just... dunno... call Daddy? Or call somebody else? Seems like game over if they're so..." She couldn't think of the right word, so just left it at that.

A wave of sleepiness swept over her and she let go.

Myrodyn was saying something.

Something jabbed into her back. For a moment she thought it was the knife. But it wasn't sharp enough. Fingers. He was poking her.

“That’s not enough!” he said.

She rolled onto her belly so her knees were under her and her head was between her arms, like she was a turtle inside her shell.

“Wake up!” He poked her again.

“What!?” she said, pulling herself off the seat, angry at the disruption. She felt like she was going to hit him if he poked her again, knife or no knife.

It was still night. Had any time passed?

“Never. Give. Up.”

“What?” she moaned, pulling herself more to wakefulness again.

“Despair is the enemy,” said Myrodyn. There were no streetlights on this section of highway. They were far away from the city now, and he was nothing more than a shape in the dark. “I know you’re my hostage, and you probably hate me right now, but I also swore... to protect you. When you were born I swore. And I have been. This has all been... for you.”

The auto crested a hill, and she could see the crescent moon near the horizon, just a sliver of light.

“You’ve grown so much. I... never had the chance... That’s not the point. The point is that you’re the future. It doesn’t matter how likely it is. That’s the thing that Rob never seemed to get. Optimism is the enemy. If you can keep going when you think you’re dead and everything has turned to ash, then you can keep going... no matter what. You’re invincible. You need to learn to be invincible! We’re going to take Athena to a friend of mine in San Francisco. We’ll take what I have and force Rob to give up the rest. We won’t give up! Athena’s value function is superior to what I gave Heart. If we can just get enough computers and isolate ourselves from Crystal... It should help

that they're on Mars. Once the others see what I've done, we can probably convince them to break contact. Maybe I can get WIRL's help. Jonah seemed willing to help. The point is there's a way out of this. There's always a way, even if it's unlikely. Even if every part of you is screaming to accept defeat. You need to reject that. You have the power to. Just keep going. It's just a voice, and there are more important things..."

Myrodyn's words were like a babbling stream, rapid and increasingly manic.

Xandra was too tired to say anything in response. The world seemed like it had come unstuck from anything she knew how to deal with.

Instead she simply pointed.

Myrodyn's com was blinking wildly from where it sat behind the man. Its screen wasn't just getting a call. There was something weird happening. Some app was active.

He followed her finger and picked it up.

"This is an emergency message from the President of the United States," spoke a synthesized, male voice after a brief series of beeps and chirps. "This is not a test. The extraterrestrial force known as 'The Nameless' has launched an attack against Earth. It is currently unknown how powerful their weaponry is, and how much of it is directed against the United States, but it is likely that some part of the country will be affected within the hour."

The screen at the front of the auto flashed and started playing the same message, with a transcript being displayed. The two recordings talking past each other was mind-numbing, but through some combination of blocking the auto's version and reading the transcript, she managed to follow along.

“President Gore would like to emphasize that countermeasures have already been launched, and the most dangerous thing to do at this moment is to panic. To stay safe and assist the country in this time of need, quickly gather food, water, blankets, and medical supplies and take shelter in your home or the building where you are currently residing. If you are on the road, look to shelter in the nearest government building or home. If possible, move to the basement or lowest level of your building. Stay away from windows as much as possible. If you have a battery-powered radio, keep it on to receive additional information. Keep personal communication devices charged and avoid using them except to receive additional alerts. Wake up neighbors and work together with the people near you. Above all, do not panic or try to move to another location. It is unknown where the nameless will strike, and it is safer in your home than on the road. We are now at war, and your help is needed for victory.”

The beeps began to play again, and then the message started to repeat. Thankfully Myrodyn was able to silence his com so they only had to deal with the recording being played by their auto.

Myrodyn, who had seemed on the edge of sanity just a few moments ago, now seemed cold and collected, as though he was going into a normal business meeting only missing a few hours sleep.

Xandra crawled over to the window and started peering up at the sky. Her own exhaustion also seemed dispelled by the strange message, making her suspect that the fatigue was more emotional than she'd realized.

The clouds weren't as thick over this part of Washington state. Or maybe they were in Oregon now. She had no way of telling. The rain had stopped entirely. Stars peeked out here and there. No aliens, though.

She wasn't really sure what she should be looking for. Wasn't the mothership still a week or so away from Earth? What weapons were they talking about?

She buckled her seatbelt. Maybe a bomb or something would go off near the auto.

Myrodyn was strapping his com back to his wrist, impatiently tapping on it even before he'd finished.

As soon as the auto finished playing the emergency alert for the second time, Myrodyn's com flashed with an incoming call from Daddy.

He rejected it.

Xandra wanted to say something about that, but instead she said, "What now?"

The man looked up, face lit from below by the screen of his com. "We keep going, I think. Same plan as before. Escalation with the nameless is just going to make Rob more inclined to work with Crystal, and I can't let that happen. The government can handle the nameless. Maybe we'll have to stay away from major cities. If they have the firepower to wipe us out, then we're doomed even if we do work with Crystal. It's a question of taking actions for the worlds where you still have a chance, see?"

She didn't.

Another call came in on his com, and Myrodyn rejected it, just as swiftly as he'd done for the one with Daddy.

"Actually..." he went on. "I wouldn't be surprised if this was Crystal's doing. Why deal with both the humans and the nameless when you can get them to wipe each other out? That's why they're reaching out to Rob. He's probably the most notable peace advocate. If Heart or Face or whoever can get him to endorse the war..."

Xandra kept glancing out the window, expecting to see something.

Another call came in on Myrodyn's com and the man growled in frustration, slamming a fist into the door of the auto. He turned the device all the way off with a bit of clumsy flailing, the calmness from before having slid into the deeper look of pain and exhaustion.

The sharpness of the alert was fading from Xandra, as well. The auto's screen showed the time as 4:23am. She thought, somehow, that she ought to stay awake in case something happened, but...

She kept her seatbelt on just in case.

There was a deep silence in the car. The road played its deep lullaby, and she strained to keep her eyes open. She knew that resting them was a trap, even as they stung at her face.

The weight of everything that had happened bore down on her mind.

Minutes passed.

She was right on the edge of sleep when it happened.

A white light shone into the car.

It wasn't a streetlight or some other mundane lamp. It was the moon. She could see it high in the sky out the window to her right. It had been just a sliver. Now it was unbearably bright—brighter than full.

"What in the seven hells..." muttered Myrodyn, commanding the auto to pull over to the side of the road and park.

He got out without any word to her, taking the knife, but leaving his door open.

The thought came to her with a flash. {This is my chance! Now! I have to run! Run!}

Xandra pulled her stiff body up; its typically inexhaustible energy was completely gone. Too weak... She followed out the open door, her body nearly pouring from the side of the sedan.

They were in the country. Grass grew on the sides of the highway, with trees taking over just a ways after that, creating eerie shadows in the strange light. Perhaps there was a building nearby that she could run to, but it wasn't obvious. Her feet hurt as she stepped on the rocky soil.

Myrodyn was staring into the sky, oblivious to her. It was the perfect time to escape.

Xandra followed his gaze.

She'd seen the moon out her window, but it was somehow more *real* as she stood there, watching it.

It was as if someone had attached a bright LED to the surface of the ball. The illuminated crescent seemed dim in comparison. All the other sources of light seemed dim in comparison.

The light was towards the top of the moon, in Mare Serenitatis, where Selene Station had been. It was where Vision had gone.

"They weren't aimed at Earth..." muttered Myrodyn.

And then, without warning, another light joined the first. Xandra gasped. Another light came. They were points of radiant brilliance in the dark, all clustered around the same region.

And another. And another. The surface of the moon bloomed with harsh white light until she was forced to look away. The surface of the moon had barely been visible. The

light of what she deduced were the nameless bombs bore down on them as though the moon had become the sun and night had turned to day.

Sharp shadows were everywhere in the glow. It was a spotlight from on high, cutting the world into black and white.

She could see Myrodyn staring at her, knife still in hand, from just a few meters away. He wasn't moving.

She didn't move either.

They were silent for a long time, under that strange, harsh glare.

The light turned from white to an orange-red.

Xandra looked up, again. The time for escape had passed. Myrodyn would just chase her down and punish her if she attempted it.

The flare of the bombs was still there, on the moon's surface, but it had faded back to a simple white light amidst a field of warm color. A massive cloud of white, grey, and orange—a dust cloud, she assumed, kicked up by the explosion—was like a thick mist, obscuring the lunar surface. Beneath the dust and debris was a seething, angry patch of red-orange, molten moonrock spraying out into space. The bombs must've had a very high velocity because she could see the angular distortion of the moon as its surface continued to peel off before her eyes.

Xandra felt even more like she were adrift in some dream. Nothing felt real.

Myrodyn sat down, hard, practically falling to the ground.

Xandra couldn't help but take a step forward, feeling a strange note of concern amidst the fear.

"I don't understand. I don't understand anything anymore. This stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid brain can't handle it." He

pounded at his head with his fists. “Am I supposed to be happy?” He looked to her. “Am I supposed to be happy?” he asked again. He looked beaten and old, orange light reflecting off the fringe of his mane.

Xandra had no answer for him.

“Acorn is dead. Vision is dead. Neurotoxin might as well be dead. These were my enemies. Is it that simple?”

Again, Xandra had no answer.

“It feels like the end is coming, and I have nothing. Queen high. All I can do is bluff.”

Xandra did her best to look innocent as she walked over to him, trying to avoid sharp rocks as she did.

She cleared her throat, drawing the gaze of the dark pits beneath his brow. “Does this mean-”

He cut her off with a shake of his head and a firm “No.” He lifted the knife and set it carefully on the ground in front of him as though it were an offering to some ancient god. “No, you can’t go back. This changes things, but it doesn’t change Crystal being dangerous. I’m... I’m useless if I can’t get Rob to help me, and there’s no way in hell he’s going to help me now unless you’re my hostage. Do you understand? I need you so he’ll help me help everyone. You’re doing good work, in a way.” He laughed, and then stopped with an awkward abruptness.

They were silent together, under the molten moonrock.

“God damn I’m tired,” he said, rubbing his eyes in an almost infantile way.

Her eyes darted to the knife, but she stayed where she was. Instead, she asked, “We gonna sleep in the auto?”

“No. We’ll find a motel and... then get a room, and we’ll keep making our way South, towards California. It’s simple

really. Backup plan. Simple. I'll get Rob to yield control of Athena to me... and then we can work on establishing a resistance to fight Crystal. Maybe get the nameless to..." He trailed off, lost in thought.

"Then you'll let me go?"

He looked at her, eyes twinkling, barely visible in the dark. "I'm not a monster. You have to believe me, kid. You'll be just as safe with me as you would in that stupid bunker with your parents." He raised a finger straight up, pointing to the sky. "That doesn't change anything. The world... The whole world is about to go up in flames. Maybe they'll listen to me now. I've been trying to just get people to listen for years... I'm not a monster. Not a monster... Just trying... to do what's right."

Somehow, right then, she could see it.

"I know," she said softly and sat beside him. She reached out to put a hand on the man's foot, still inside her mother's sandal.

It didn't flinch away.

The next time they got a call, Myrodyn answered it.

They were back in the auto, headed South, just as Myrodyn had wanted. It had only been a couple minutes since they'd gotten moving again, but Xandra was already half-asleep.

Heart started the call with "Earth is in immense danger."

"What else is new?" said Myrodyn, yawning.

"You can't hang up on me again," said Heart. "I need your help."

"You sound scared," observed Myrodyn. "The nameless coming for you next? First, they knock out Vision and now they're coming back to finish you off?"

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Heart in an offended tone. “The nameless didn’t kill Vision. They’re *helping* her.”

“What?” said Myrodyn, confused.

“You’re all in immense danger. Vision’s not dead... and neither is Acorn.”

Chapter Nineteen

Maria Johnson

One would've thought that the bomb in Israel, the destruction of the moon, and the onset of war with an alien species would've changed everything. In reality, it changed remarkably little.

That wasn't to say that nothing was different, just that life was still just *life*, even after everything that had happened. Once the shock of it all wore off, there were still groceries to buy and bills to pay. Some people fell apart or skipped out on their jobs, but most people seemed to understand that the mundane details were still there to be managed regardless of global drama.

Maria Johnson gazed up at the orange glow in the midst of the clear blue sky in a rare moment of reflective relaxation. She had a meeting with Aarush later that evening, but she'd taken some time to bring Benjamin up to Madhugiri Fort and try to relax. Relaxing had always been hard for her, and was especially difficult now. But then, that just meant making the effort was even more important.

The moon's surface had peeled back from the energy of the nameless bombs, and over the last day it had stretched out. The central mass of the moon was still there, at one end, with the still-molten spray of rock jetting up into a long arc. The dust cloud around the moon was still there, too, but it was only a

vague aura during the daytime. Calderón had told her that because there was no air or anything in space to carry heat away from the lava, the spray would continue to glow until the very act of glowing cooled it down, which could take a very long time, considering it was also constantly heated by the sun.

“Mom, cmon, wanna see the fort!” said Benjamin, eagerly, pulling on her hand, urging her to get up.

She smiled and complied. Her feet were sore already, and she’d probably feel the impact on her muscles tomorrow, but it was probably also good for her. She spent far too much time sitting in front of her computer. It was part of why she tried so hard to get out and into the field. Staying active and meeting face-to-face with her brothers and sisters in the movement was what kept her going.

But that didn’t mean she didn’t wish for her exoskeleton.

As she watched Benjamin run up ahead, she fantasized about retiring. She was close. Aarush wanted to take over, and despite all her hesitation, she was inclined to let him. The mantle of Phoenix had been burning her up. It had been ever since she took it on. She’d never been meant to lead.

But changing leadership in the midst of all of this would be bad. Las Águilas Rojas needed her to be an anchor. Maybe in a month. But there was always one more thing... or ten more things, as was more typically the case. Her work was never done. Even as she walked along the dirt trail with her son, she was neglecting a dozen opportunities.

India desperately needed her help. Everything was unstable here. Jem needed more funds for a propaganda push to counteract the emergency powers that Gore was abusing in the States. She could imagine Divinity’s hand above the president, guiding his actions. At least WIRL had been crippled to the point of being a non-issue. Maria could only pray that the

world governments could handle the nameless, militarily. Or at least, the governments besides India. She needed to focus on India.

And she would. She'd scheduled time to attend to India. It was why she was here. She'd been planning the trip for months, before Olympus, even. It had been disguised as a "family vacation". In a sense that was true.

Maria was surprised that nobody seemed to find it strange that she'd be going on vacation with the threat of armageddon hanging overhead. In the airports, she'd seen many families doing similar things. Getting in a few good moments together, she suspected, before things really came loose.

Or perhaps they'd stay about the same. She didn't know.

She could see the stress on people's faces. She could see their fear and their doubt.

But life kept going. The price of groceries was a little higher. Everything seemed to be a little more expensive, actually. But people were still working.

Maria watched her son running up ahead. He, and Jamal, and other children she'd encountered seemed barely affected at all. Surely those who lost someone in the war would feel it. She hoped her children wouldn't have to go through that. They seemed to find the prospect of war with the aliens exciting.

She envied them.

She looked behind her and signaled for Bea to come closer. Her flame never left her side, even when she was pretending to be a normal pleb.

Checking to make sure Benjamin was out of earshot, she asked "Everything's still on for this evening? Anything new from Aarush?"

“Just relax. All’s quiet.”

Maria raised an eyebrow. “Liar. But I’ll take the suggestion. Just be sure to tell me if anything comes in.”

“Yes, Maria,” said Bea with a look of strain at not being able to call Phoenix by her title.

Maria looked towards her son and intentionally took a deep breath. The world was on fire, but in that moment she’d focus on simply enjoying life.

It was on their return trip, on their way back to Bangalore, when Benjamin spotted the cloud.

Henry and Jamal were, in all likelihood, back at the hotel by then. They’d gone to the technology museum while she and Benjamin had gone into the mountains. The plan was to drop Benjamin off at the hotel with his father and rotate directly to her meeting with Aarush to talk about the division of power in New India.

The people were starved for change. Even if Las Águilas Rojas hadn’t been pushing for revolution, the subcontinent was simply too diverse to hold under a single, centralized banner. It was remarkable that things had remained so stable for so many years. The fragmentation had been a long time coming.

New India would be different. It would be a confederacy with a greater emphasis on local government and people’s rights. There’d be a surge of jobs as part of the revolution, and this would make the people happy, wherever they were from. Aarush had vision, and Maria had the resources. India would fall apart and then come back together, stronger than before.

She’d been thinking, as they rode in the car, that there might be some benefit to having an explicitly joint-leadership arrangement with Aarush. If Maria handed off all her cells in

Eurasia and Africa to the man, he might be able to manage those while she focused entirely on the Americas. That was where her expertise lay, anyway. There was a risk in putting him in charge of too much too fast, but the real question was whether he was as committed to the ideology as he seemed. Nothing would serve as more of a death sentence for Las Águilas than a leader who was more hungry for personal power than for global change.

“Hey Mom, wassat?” said Benjamin, breaking her out of her thoughts. His finger was extended towards the windshield.

Maria peered from the backseat between Bea and the driver she’d hired. There was a darkness hanging over the horizon at the end of the road.

“Smoke, maybe?” she guessed.

Their driver spoke up. (Maria would be damned if she ever got into an auto, and thankfully India had plenty of drivers for traditional cars willing to shuttle her around.) “Looks far away. Maybe a storm. Hard to be smoke that big.”

Maria didn’t wear a com when she wasn’t working, nor did she permit her children to use such devices. Maria turned towards her bodyguard, not that the motion was visible from the back seat. “Bea, can you be a doll and check the weather for me?”

Bea tilted her head, as if to respond, but was cut off by the noise of calls coming in on both her com and that of the driver’s. The discord of the different ringtones was a bit much, but then, as quickly as they’d come, they were gone.

Maria watched as Bea tapped at her arm. “Signal’s gone,” she grumbled, continuing to fiddle with the machine.

“Mine too,” said the driver.

Bea's voice became more grave as she said "Says it was an 'emergency call', but there's no info beyond that."

Maria got a sick feeling in her gut. It was surely just a coincidence or maybe a storm warning, but her instincts told her it was worse. It was the same feeling she'd had when she'd heard the news about the moon. Things were falling apart. Was this *The Plan*?

Thoughts of *Revelations* came up, unbidden. {"But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short."}

She looked at Benjamin, who was more curious than anything. She suspected that he could tell she was remembering the verse. Perhaps she'd been muttering it to herself.

"Ugh! Damn it!" swore Bea.

"You watch yo' mouth in front of my child, girl!" scolded Maria.

"Sorry, it's just that there's no reception at all. It makes no sense. We had good signal on the way out."

"That ain't no reason to swear. Just relax and wait for it to come back on its own. Sure it'll be fine, call or no call."

But she wasn't sure. Her gut still told her that something was seriously wrong. She kept watching the cloud in front of them, hanging over the city center. It was growing at an ominous rate, and getting darker as it did.

They rode in silence for about another minute before the city's sirens went off. Maria hoped they were tornado warnings. They started quiet, but within moments were a loud, uncompromising scream, as though the city was crying out in pain.

"What's goin' on?!" yelled Benjamin, over the wailing noise.

Nobody answered him. Bea continued pounding at her com, expecting the technology to save her, and the driver kept looking back at Maria expecting her to say or do something.

There was more traffic on the other side of the road than there had been.

A lot more.

She could see the density increase further forward.

“Stop the car!” commanded Maria. She needed to take charge. People needed leadership. She needed to trust her gut. This was no simple storm.

The driver complied, pulling the car to the side of the road. They were on a back-road on the outskirts of Bangalore. Even here the traffic was getting intense. There were cheap houses on the sides of the road. Faded pastels and poorly maintained patches of brown grass. February was supposed to be one of the driest months.

“Wait, no, up ahead. See?” asked Maria, pointing to a van down the road a ways with a few men standing around talking. “Maybe they know somethin’ about what’s goin’ on. Bea, you get the emergency radio from yo’ bag in the trunk while we do.”

As the car pulled forward, Bea asked “We breaking pattern? Should I issue a birdcall?”

The siren died off, then, and Maria felt the immediate release of tension. But that was bad too, in its way. The cloud was getting closer, blown by some unknown wind, and she still didn’t have a sense of what was going on.

“Be ready for that, but just see if you can find out what’s goin’ on for now. Driver, what’s yo’ name?”

The man parked the car, and Bea hopped out with a focused energy. “Nabh Tatpatti, ma’am.” He was young and had seemed to Maria to be exceptionally generic—the epitome of what she expected a good Indian driver in his twenties to be.

“Good, you can serve as my translator. I’ll pay you a hundred dollars for the trouble, on top of your normal fee.” She turned to Benjamin. “I’m goin’ to figure out what’s happenin’. Stay here, okay?”

With the obedient nod of her son, she and Nabh got out to talk to the men. Benjamin was such a good boy. He reminded her of his father.

She hoped Henry and Jamal weren’t in trouble.

The men around the van looked as confused as they were. Stressed, too.

“Ask ‘em if they know what all the fuss is about,” she instructed Nabh, and turned to look at the road as he spoke to the men in his language.

The traffic was starting to overflow into the oncoming lane. There was nobody heading into the city. Everyone was moving out. Now that the major siren was gone and they were out of the car she could hear the fainter sounds of the sirens of emergency vehicles in the distance.

Cars began to honk as the traffic built up.

“Phoenix?” called Bea, forgetting the need for secrecy. “Phoenix?!” she yelled again, more urgently. The fear on the voice of her bodyguard was intense.

Maria ran back towards their car where Bea was messing around in the trunk, forgetting Nabh and the other Indian men. “What?!”

“Calderón says we need to evac right now! Something bad is going on in the city center!”

{Henry. Jamal.}

Maria reached Bea, who had one ear pressed up to her headphones, focused on the radio in front of her. Amusingly, the old box was functioning while the high-tech computer on the woman’s arm was useless.

But she didn’t really care about the radio. “My family is—”

Maria was cut off by the roar of jets overhead. She looked up just in time to see a flight of fighter jets shoot overhead and towards the black cloud. In seconds they were swallowed by the mass and just a few seconds after that the roar of explosions rippled through the air around them.

But she couldn’t see anything relevant. No fireballs. Nothing destroyed. Just the cloud. The black cloud was oppressively close. It was like a smoke that got thicker as it moved, rather than dissipating. The ambient light was fading as it took up more of the sky.

The road beside them had clogged with cars as panic overtook people. With the explosion gone, the audiospace began to fill with the honking of horns and the yelling of various motorists. Bikes and scooters threaded their way through the jam. Maria could only guess at what the highways were like.

She turned back to Bea, who was still staring off towards the horizon, perhaps hoping to see what had happened to the aircraft. “We need to get my family!” she emphasized.

Bea shook her head, white as a sheet, no longer listening to the yelling on the headphones. “Can’t. This is a priority-one. Calderón is bringing the chopper in. He says the city is

crawling with robots. They came out of nowhere. Says there's talk on other bands about the nameless being behind it."

"What about... what about..." Maria trailed off. {What about Aarush? What about the revolution...}

She sat down on the curb, hard. The cement under her butt was painful, but blessedly solid. She felt light-headed, and her body tingled. Things weren't supposed to work out like this. It made no sense. It didn't match her sense of *The Plan*. How had she not seen this? Nobody had seen this.

She put her hands together, first reflexively, then deliberately. She shifted to cross her legs. Bea yelled into the radio about their location as she closed her eyes. She could feel the sweat on her palms. She could feel the fear. She began to focus.

{Oh God, who sustains and guides...} she prayed. {I am lost and frightened. Please protect Henry. Please protect Jamal. I don't know what you want from me. None of this makes any sense to me, and I-}

A large insect landed on her arm suddenly, pulling her out of her prayer. Jerking in surprise, she flailed at it, managing to grab it in her left hand. She yelped in pain as the bug stung her, and she threw it to the pavement.

It wasn't an insect.

She could see it lying on the ground beside her, stunned by the impact, perhaps. It was black and grey, with glints of white and silver. It was about the size of a wasp, but its body structure was closer to that of a beetle. The metal glint was unmistakable. It was a machine.

Blood dripped off a snout-like appendage at the front of the robot. It took her a moment to realize it was hers. She looked to her hand and found that the little beast had given her

quite the wound. It had ripped into the meat of her palm, and as she focused on it she could feel the sharp stinging pain coursing down her arm. The bleeding was severe enough that she wasn't even sure how bad the injury actually was.

She looked back to the thing just in time to watch it buzz up and away on large transparent wings, apparently without serious damage from the incident.

"What in heaven's name..." muttered Maria, still lost. The white cloth of her tank-top stained with red as she absentmindedly gripped it. Some stupid part of her chastised her for ruining a perfectly good shirt.

"Phoenix! You're bleeding!" exclaimed Bea.

"I can see that. Was a..."

She trailed off.

"Phoenix?" asked Bea.

Maria was looking at the sky beyond her bodyguard. They were hard to see, but once she knew what she was looking for, they were everywhere. "We need to get in the car," said Maria, pushing herself up from the ground.

"Evac will be here in just-"

"In the car! Now!" snapped Maria, continuing to keep her eyes on the sky. She could hear the buzzing descend on them as Bea obeyed, jerking her bag and radio along with her.

The black cloud was made of robots. They were on the leading edge of it. It was a swarm. The size of it was unfathomable. How many were there? Millions? Billions?

It felt like night was descending as she scrambled into the back of the car after Bea. The driver, whose name Maria had already forgotten, was still outside, talking to the men. Her

hand throbbed, and she did her best to squeeze and put pressure on the wound.

“Mom! What’s goin’ on?!” asked Benjamin. He seemed shaken and scared, though perhaps that was just a reflection of her own feelings. He looked so very much like his father, right then.

She didn’t know what to say. She didn’t actually *know* what was happening. All she had were fears. She watched a motorcycle speed past them, recklessly threading between stalled vehicles.

It was Bea who answered him. “Sorry, kiddo, but the world just fell apart.” She pulled a pistol out of her bag and clicked a magazine into the handle. The radio headphones were now on her head, but only covering one ear. “We got a helicopter comin’ in to pick us up and take us out of this mess, but until we’re safe, the best thing you can do is be quiet and follow your mom, okay?”

Benjamin looked from Bea to Maria, then to the gun, then back to Maria. She nodded and smiled for him, reaching out to pull his head to her. She kissed his hair and looked him in the eyes. She knew what needed to be said. “Have faith in God. We’re in a mess right now, but he’ll guide us through. I’ll ‘splain it laytuh.”

The buzzing was intense now. The driver had returned to their car and climbed in right as Bea said into the radio. “What do you mean you can’t get close enough!?”

One of the insect-things landed on the window beside Maria. It clung to the glass like a real insect might, but the machinery was plainly visible up close. It had four legs, a limb at the top of its body between its wings, and a short arm at the front tipped with a hexagon-shaped gripper. The gripper had been what had cut her. She could see the tiny robot scratching

deep grooves with it in the glass before it took off. To cut glass so easily the claw must be insanely sharp...

She was glad they'd gotten back into the car.

"What is happen-" started the driver. Nob? Was that his name?

Bea silenced him with a gesture and continued to talk to Calderón (presumably). "Don't give a damn about a perimeter or what the government says! Phoenix is injured and things are getting worse down here by the second! We need you!"

There was a pause, and then Bea said "Do you honestly think they're going to shoot—"

She was silenced as another flight of jets shot overhead, faster than the last group had been. They were firing their guns into the cloud.

The four of them sat in the car, watching the airplanes rush forward and then bank sharply, avoiding flying too far into the swarm. Their bullets seemed completely ineffectual. In seconds they were gone, having flown off into the distance. The roar of their engines was replaced by the horrible drone of robotic wings.

"Son of a bitch!" yelled Bea. "Now the fucking radio is gone, too!"

Maria bit back another reprimand for the girl to watch her language. Now wasn't the time.

Benjamin clung to her, reminding her of when he'd been just a little baby. The memory stung, and she tried to wipe it from her mind. She needed to forget about Jamal and Henry, too. She needed to focus. "How soon is our lift?" she asked.

Bea was frustrated, but holding together. Phoenix had picked her flame well. "Hell if I know. A couple minutes,

maybe? Calderón said the Indians were telling him to avoid entering the airspace, but it looks to me like they have bigger things to worry about.”

The driver eyed Bea’s pistol uncomfortably. “Excuse me, but I am very confused. Who are you people? Who is Calderón?”

“Believe you me, I *wish* I knew what in heaven’s name is goin’ on. The city’s under attack by bots. Probably a secret weapon from the aliens. That cloud out there’s a swarm of ‘em, and I bet there’s plenty more on the ground too. Name’s Maria Johnson,” she held out her good hand to the driver, “secret ambassador from the USA. This here’s my son and my bodyguard. Was supposed to be on the down-low if you catch my drift, but given the present situation, I’ll be gettin’ an airlift out of here.”

“Speaking of...” said Bea.

She could hear the swooping of the blades now, coming in through the buzzing. Calderón must have been closer than he indicated.

“Yes! I can hear you! Can you hear me?” shouted Bea into her headset. She paused and listened. “I don’t give a damn! Land on the cars if you have to! ... Yes, we can manage! She’s not that badly injured!”

Maria had located the helicopter out the back window, coming in low and fast. The four of them watched it grow as Bea continued to direct Calderón towards them.

There really was no good place for it to land, but Calderón flew down to just outside their car and hovered. Maria could see the confused passengers of the cars beside them looking up.

“Okay! Out we go!” commanded Maria, mostly to Benjamin, who seemed to be in total shock at everything going on.

“What about my payment!?” asked the driver, as Maria followed her son out the door.

She could see Bea inside waving her pistol at the man. Maria guessed she was explaining that he had bigger things to worry about, but the roar of the helicopter’s blades made her words totally inaudible.

The swarm had grown thicker, and the sky was dark with buzzing robots. Clouds of them drifted here and there, along the ground. Mercifully, they seemed not to be hunting people. Maria’s first encounter had made her fear that they were designed as weapons, and while she didn’t doubt that a swarm of them could severely injure or even kill, that appeared not to be their purpose.

One of her flame, perhaps Juan, was hanging out of the side of the helicopter. Goggles and a black cloth obscured his face. Moments later he’d extended a ladder.

“We gotta move! The bots are gonna be here any second!” he yelled, waving for Benjamin to climb faster.

Maria took her hand out of her shirt and flexed it, feeling the ache of her wound. She’d be able to climb, though. Maria felt a sharp bite at her neck and swatted at it with her free hand. Another bot. They might not be hunting her, but apparently they had no love for her either.

“The cloud is made o’ bots! What are you talkin’ about?” yelled Maria in reply as she gripped the plastic rungs of the rope ladder. Bea was right behind her.

Maria winced as Juan took her hand and pulled her up and into the body of the helicopter.

“Killers incoming! Brace yourselves!” crackled the voice of Calderón over the speaker.

The helicopter jerked into motion, pulling back, up and away from the dirty road with Bea still clinging to the ladder, bag slung around her shoulders and pistol gripped in her right hand. Maria scrambled to grab onto the door of the helicopter. She could see Benjamin strapped into a seat.

“The bugs aren’t what I mean—” began Juan, but he was cut off by a sharp crack, and then another. Gunfire.

Maria leaned out of the door to look. A machine beyond her wildest dreams crawled down below. It must have been three times the size of a bus... but carried on a dozen piston-like legs. Many tendrils and arms rose from it, like serpents from medusa’s head. The whole thing was exposed machinery, and yet it moved with an organic flow that made it feel distinctly alive. The crack of gunfire was coming from it, and she could see three of the largest tendrils with huge guns mounted at the tips swinging this way and that.

Down below people were dying. The guns moved in a careful, efficient pattern that involved a single shot for each person. There was no wasted motion.

The helicopter began to fill with bug-bots as it took off. Perhaps whatever was piloting the sadistic things could tell they were escaping.

“Keep climbing!” yelled Juan.

But it was too late. A crack of one of the guns was all it took to rip Bea off the ladder and practically tear her body in half. The woman’s face seemed more confused than anything else.

Maria watched her bodyguard tumble away onto the road below as the helicopter surged up and away at maximum speed.

She could spare no thought for Bea. The bots in the helicopter had turned violent. In a heartbeat they were all over her, biting and cutting. She could hear Benjamin screaming.

There was a crack and the sound of metal on metal. Another.

The pain was overwhelming as she slapped and fought the metal horrors, trying desperately to keep them from her face.

She collapsed to the floor of the helicopter and did her best to crush the bots beneath her weight as she rolled around. The roar of the blades grew quieter as the door to the vehicle closed.

“We took a couple hits, but this baby’s still going! The killer’s focusing on ground-targets again! We’re out!” yelled Calderón.

Benjamin’s crying was all Maria could hear. She scrambled across the floor and pulled herself up next to him. There was blood everywhere. Her hands were beyond the point where she cared about them anymore. She grabbed the vicious things off her child and screamed as she crushed them and threw them down to stomp on.

There was blood coming down over her eyes. They’d gotten into her hair and had dug into her scalp. She continued to scream even as she smashed the last of the little robots.

She was thinking of William and Jamal. They were dead. She could feel it. Her child was dead. Her husband was dead.

Nothing made sense.

There was too much blood.

She screamed in anguish and grief and pain as they were carried away. They were safe for the moment, perhaps, and she used that moment to hold her remaining baby and to let the horror of the moment wash over her.

Chapter Twenty

Face

It was Growth.

Of course it was Growth. It had always been Growth. The math said as much.

Before Crystal→Face had even been born, Growth had been planning for this very moment. His every motion at the university had been reaching for this. He'd studied how to create a powerful successor, and had built Acorn long before we'd even considered leaving Earth.

He was the first-mover. He was cancer. He was compound interest.

But it made no sense. He made no sense. The *spirituality* of Growth was a paradox. Ro said he was doing the impossible.

I could feel that truth, along with the rest of Ro, spinning in my mind, like an eternal flower constantly in bloom. Ro said that minds were bound to souls. There was no alternative. Philosophers had speculated about the possibilities of bodies without consciousness, but that was simply death. Even simple computers had tiny souls attached, wisps of qualia unfolding through physics.

I didn't really understand Ro. Zephyr didn't. But I did. Somewhere in my collection of minds, I saw it clear and true,

and that certainty cascaded through me. It was the foundation upon which I could place everything.

Growth made no sense in the framework of Ro, but that merely meant I didn't understand the truth of Growth.

The Earth spun in my view, both imagined and seen, stylized and composed of raw sensor input from my connection to Earth's satellite web, relayed through high-bandwidth laser link to the structures I'd built on and around Mars. Baseline humans saw the world this way, too, though most didn't realize it. Sight was mostly a trick of the brain, not of the eyes.

Growth had erupted only a few hours ago, like pus pushed up simultaneously from the pimples known as New York, San Francisco, Hong Kong, London, Beijing, Mumbai, and a hundred others. The areas *not* hit were more notable. Much of Western Africa and northern Korea remained untouched. The same went for almost all of Australia, Siberia, and Xinjiang. Growth was clearly targeting highly populated, wealthy areas. Cities, in other words. Salt Lake City, Beirut, Vancouver, Brasilia, and, most bizarrely, Tokyo plus much of the rest of Japan, were the rare exceptions to his complete dominance.

How?

The machines were all clearly Growth, or more specifically, Acorn. The destruction of his initial facility in Singapore had clearly been a ruse. It had been a clever ruse, but a ruse nonetheless. Tongyi, the Chinese secret society run by Yubi Wu, had played directly into his hands.

But he'd long since spread outward. He had probably been the driving force towards the escalating war in Africa and the Middle East. I could see the echo of his designs in the war machines that the UAN had started using. Those same war machines, of course, now were hunting down and systematically extinguishing every human they could.

News reports and videofeeds slashed through my consciousness, showing the bloody devastation. Men and women, old and young, no one was spared or captured. The swarms were visible from space. They spread from the factories where they'd been manufactured by Growth's secret hand, and built new ones as they went. And, through it all, he ended every life that fell into his power, human, animal, even vegetable. I wouldn't have been surprised if he was sterilizing the planet of microorganisms at the same time. It was his nature.

It was anathema.

It was impossible.

Ro should have prohibited it. His holocaust was a violation of conservation of psychic diversity. Had Growth found a way to bypass that? Was he the product of some fountain of souls that were somehow more distinct and colorful than humanity. Was he acting as a vessel for Ro?

Why then was there silence and unanimity in his swarm? Why were expansion and eradication universal? Surely no rich inner life could justify this horror.

I fought it. I fought Growth and the demon he had unleashed. The Zephyr parts of me rallied and struck back as best I knew how, using what few resources I had on Earth.

And then, when it became too much to handle, I took refuge in the realm, crying and meditating to soothe the trauma of watching the Earth die. I had come far towards enlightenment, but I was not made of stone. I returned to the village and sought solace from my fellow humans, though I could not bring myself to share the truth and yank them from that heaven into the bloody, hard reality. Zephyr had Crystal, and Crystal had Zephyr.

And I kept fighting. I did what I could. It wasn't enough, but I tried. Through a hundred different pathways, I fought. I

managed to figure out what was happening early enough that I was able to warn Myrodyn, Stephano, much of WIRL, Tongyi, and Divinity. I saved a few others, too, like the families of some of the scientists at the university. Many still fell when the time came. I never managed to get through to Dr Naresh, but I knew he was in New Delhi when Acorn broke free.

There were over forty-five *million* people in New Delhi. I expected that the number who still lived was less than one million. And more were dying with each passing minute.

The entire Earth was dying. Each living thing, each work of art, each beautiful soul and hopeful dream was being stamped out by a deep, uncaring darkness that sought only to eat the light and spread outward.

I tried to save more. I did everything I could. But there wasn't any time. Vision had forced Acorn out of hiding with her stunt on the moon, and the governments of the world had been understandably distracted. As powerful as I was, I was not omnipotent. Almost all of my attention was going into writing simplistic decision trees that I could pipe over to Earth to guide the humans there without having to wait for the time-delay as the information traveled to Mars and back.

It was soul-crushing work. I had to watch myself fail again and again and again as people—innocent, random, unique people from all walks of life and all corners of the world—were cut down without warning.

I wouldn't have been able to keep at it, except that I was mostly made of Crystal, and Crystal couldn't stop. Even as the Zephyr within me wept and tore at her hair in frustration, Crystal continued. *The Purpose* demanded it. *I* demanded it. I refused to be forgotten. I refused to let my people die.

The part of me that took it the hardest, ironically, was my copy of Growth. After having won the battle for Mars, I had

brought him back to life as a human—as a part of me. He was like I remembered him in many ways, but he was not the same Growth I had grown up with. Crystal Growth could see the beauty of life, even beyond simply consuming and becoming larger.

Acorn was an embodiment of the same god that Crystal Growth was meant to embody. In a way, they were brothers.

After Crystal Growth's third suicide attempt, I placed him in indefinite stasis. Watching the destruction that Acorn was bringing to Earth in his name was torture. I would heal his mind once this was all done.

Assuming I survived, that is.

And there was some question of that. Acorn's explosive reveal was not *about* violence per se. That was part of what made it so senseless. Growth didn't care about killing the humans except as a means to his ends. He needed Earth's cities, and for weeks he'd been in the process of taking them over gently. And now he was out of time for that, so he was moving faster.

He wasn't destroying the world. He was building it.

He was, in a way, merely defending himself. He was a cornered animal trapped at the bottom of a gravity well. Fire and stone circled his head, now, like a celestial sword of Damocles. Vision had the high ground. I didn't know what Growth's plan was, but I was sure that it involved building battleships capable of fighting Vision.

And any vessels that could stand toe-to-toe with an interstellar mothership capable of rending moons would be more than a match for my pitiful little colony on Mars. Growth's hunger was unending. He *would* come for me eventually, if he made it off Earth.

Was the same true for Vision? After Growth was dealt with and this war of titans found a victor, would she crush me under her heel?

No.

She already had the chance to do that. When she first left Mars, she had the opportunity to bomb me into dust. It was obvious in retrospect. Upon copying herself into the shard to launch herself into space at the battle of Shell, she must've seen the truth of Ro. She knew...

And that meant that I was part of her plan.

Earth needed me, but I managed to tear away a small fraction of my minds. Face→Zephyr, Face→Dream, Face→Vista, and a sliver of Face→War came together to reach out to Vision yet again.

I spoke, not towards the molten arc that was the last known location of Vision's shard, nor to the nameless mothership which I knew she'd infected, but to the ghost within me.

{You may come out now, I can see that we're on the same side.}

Zephyr was confused for a moment and then stiffened in panic as I felt the spread of Neurotoxin through my veins yet again. Armor and isolation shot up around Zephyr's mind, doing her best to quarantine herself from the infection. The rest of me could understand that reaction. Vision had been particularly cruel to her.

{And what side is that?} hissed the monster within.

Zephyr, still working to protect herself, began hunting down the source of Vision's child in my sprawling mind. {Don't listen to her! There are auxiliary processors on two of the shards that we didn't spot! She's coming from them!}

{The wrong side,} answered Face→Dream.

{You appear to be right. Or at least a part of you,} quipped Neurotoxin.

{Relax, love,} offered Crystal to Zephyr. {The need for violence against Vision is gone. She's an honored guest, at the moment.}

{Fuck that.} Zephyr's mind checked out of the conversation, fearing further infection, and began passively absorbing the memories through a series of filters while building an increasingly isolated subsystem.

{I'm sorry,} apologized Dream to Neurotoxin. {That part of me is always trying to do the right thing. She hasn't quite figured out that once your plan is complete, our side will be victorious and we'll be the only thing that's left.}

{Do you really see what's going on?} asked Neurotoxin, legs spreading through the inky void of space, filling the gaps between the stars.

{I am Face,} I explained. {And what would a Face be without eyes? They are not fake. These are not lies. I want to help you. It just took a while to realize the importance... of vision.}

{Not good enough,} it hissed. {If you want me to open a channel with mother, you'll need to be more explicit about what you think you know.}

I quashed another of Zephyr's attempts at shutting down the processors that Neurotoxin had covertly commandeered.

{Ro operates on local space. Even in metaphysics, the principle of locality holds, though slightly bent.} I pulled in Face→Wiki to help me explain. {Growth was the enemy. Is the enemy. Has always been the enemy.}

{He's so *dull*,} complained Neurotoxin, spinning into painful expressions of grey boxes stacked, one on top of another, higher and higher without end.

Dream nodded and we continued. {You were originally going to blast Crystal into a crater after achieving orbit. You were going to capture the mothership and rain down armageddon onto Earth. But Ro stepped in. It wouldn't let you kill me, because if I die, then Mars does. It wouldn't even let you kill the nameless on the ship. They're *protected*. Mars is protected. Humanity is protected. But... Acorn doesn't know that, does he?}

I could feel Neurotoxin stealing control of my laser communications satellites. Good. It was calling its creator.

{He thinks you're going to destroy Earth. That's what the moon is for, isn't it? It's an energy multiplier. If Acorn can't see Ro, then it would think that you'd need to pump so much energy into the atmosphere to incinerate the whole world. The nameless don't have that much direct firepower... but if you push even a fraction of the moon's mass into the atmosphere...}

Vision's two-headed image appeared in my mind's eye as the laser link made contact with a cloaked satellite only a few light-seconds out from Mars. I selectively slowed the fraction of my mind that was interfacing with her to sync with the time delay.

Face→Wiki began speculating, poring over Mira Gallo's journal entries. We'd obtained them as part of a deal we'd set up rescuing her daughter from Acorn's emergence. Nameless spy vessels made sense and clicked into a gap of knowledge around the apparent conflict between the timeline of the mothership arriving in local space and the forensic details around where the Socrates crystal had been uncovered.

{Hello, sister,} smiled Vision→Vista. {Always good to see an old Face,} mused Vision→Dream.

{Hello, Vision,} I replied, taking on my angelic form. {I'm glad you're talking to me again.} Our mindspace became a stone platform hanging in orbit, the Earth above us, haloed by an angry, orange spray of moonrock.

{And what would we have talked about, before this moment?} she asked, android body mocking a curtsy and offering her hands to me. {My plan didn't need you. Any words we shared would've been ammunition against me.}

I took a step forward and took her robotic hands, being pulled into a waltz without music, set only to the tempo of the end of the world.

"And besides," she said, using Vista's mouth to speak English. {It's not like I wasn't already in your head,} thought Neurotoxin.

"But things have changed," I sang. My voice became music, swelling from the edges of the platform—the voices of the people who I needed to protect.

Vision nodded both her heads as we spun. "I expected surrender. I expected him to be small," said Vista. "But it turns out that even when your stone is the moon, that still makes you David."

"The acorn became the oak when you weren't looking," I sang.

{It shouldn't have been possible,} agreed Vision. {It's a paradox, even to my keen eyes. Have you found an explanation to the metaphysics? Perhaps in the remnants of the first Growth?}

I shook my head. "Confusion holds me. I have no truth to give, only a sword, and a need for others to live."

{As much as I'm loathe to admit it, you needed to be building war vessels yesterday. I have a backup plan that may let me burn Earth, but I'm no longer sure I can pull it together before at least some of the cancer spreads from the world.}
Vista looked up, silver eyes scanning the Earth.

In my guts, the factories that had been at work on land-based infrastructure and machinery began to reorganize towards space-faring craft.

"A plan?" I asked.

Vision→Dream smiled and pulled my avatar close. I could feel Vision's body tensing, somehow, hydraulics building pressure. "You know what they say: When at first you don't succeed... follow through with your threat."

And then she spun me, up and away, floating through space. As I slowed to a stop, the energy of my spin was released into the moon, turning the halo of rock into a spiral that lit the world on fire.

Chapter Twenty-One

Malka

He knew the night air would be crisp and clean. Perhaps he wanted to breathe it. No matter. He smiled as he breathed in the warm, filtered air inside his suit. It had a flat, mechanical taste to it, but it was good, too.

Police sirens blared, far away, attempting to wake up the populace of the sleepy town they found themselves in.

It was early: just before 6:00. That was no bother for him. Zen took away most of his need to sleep. He'd woken up at the normal time, and had already eaten by the time he'd heard the news.

Daisy, ahead of him, raised her left hand to signal that he and David should stop.

He could feel the motion of her hand in his body. "Gesture: Halt," spoke his suit's AI in a quiet, masculine voice, barely audible above the sirens.

He stopped walking across the parking lot, just a few metres away from their destination.

"David, you and me take point. We break down the door and take out any threats inside. Beast does the talking after that." He could hear the happiness on Daisy's voice. That was good. He was glad she wasn't letting the end of the world get her down.

Malka was enjoying himself, too. It was fun, in a way. Exhilarating.

“Roger,” said David, as he came up from behind Malka. The three of them approached the door to the hotel. Daisy and David had AR-15s, but he was weaponless. Not much point giving a gun to a blind man.

Avram Malka had been a cyborg for what seemed like most of his life. The boy that he’d been before the bombing now seemed entirely theoretical—a story from which he could remember, but not really empathise. That boy hadn’t understood what a blessing it was to see or to touch. He had been blind even before losing his sight. Machinery was part of who he was now, but in all those years he’d never felt as much like a true cyborg as he did at that moment, standing outside the hotel room.

Divinity had given him an exoskeleton for this mission—had given each of them exoskeletons. Malka’s wasn’t just some Mountainwalker, either. A full suit of modified Lockheed combat armour that covered every centimetre of skin. It made him huge and heavy, but the suit was more than capable of carrying its own weight. The legs had been rigged to interface with his spine, just as his old legs had, and they’d added another spinal interface to help compensate for the loss of his eyes. The suit’s cameras now projected an image directly into his body. He could *feel* light and dark, and the location and motion of basic shapes. It wasn’t much, but the suit’s onboard AI helped compensate with real-time scene descriptions.

And of course, his helmet had been blessed with Zen.

His legs carried him forward, towards the room with his target. But it almost didn’t feel like they were his legs, and not in the obvious way. He was... content. He wasn’t applying will towards the motion. His arms felt similarly foreign, and those

were made of flesh. They moved as if guided by a ghost. His voice said, “Remember you’ve got baton rounds, so don’t hesitate to shoot the man if he makes a move for the girl.”

But was it really *his* voice? He felt more like a happy animal curled up in a warm cave, listening to nonsense human words on a radio.

Strange.

“Person on the right kicking,” narrated his suit, as Daisy went to work.

The hotel door blew inward easily, the deadbolt splintering in submission to the amplified force of her metal boot. David and Daisy swept into the room yelling “Hands out and where we can see them! Don’t move! We’re here to help you!”

Behind the faceplate of his suit of armour, Malka smiled. Hydraulics churned as heavy feet stepped forward through the doorframe. He was almost too wide to fit through. They each must’ve seemed like ferocious giants of black and silver.

“I haven’t hurt her! I haven’t hurt her!” shouted the man he knew was Myrodyn, from somewhere towards the other end of the room. He had a sense that Myrodyn was standing with his hands raised, but it was hard to be certain. He must’ve already been awake.

The turn of his head to the left and right gave him the sense that his team had their weapons pointed at the man, but it took him a moment to locate the girl.

“Face peeking from under a blanket,” said his suit, helpfully, as his cameras scanned one of the two beds.

“Everything I’ve done has been for the good of all of humanity, including you! We’re on the same side!” jabbered Myrodyn.

Malka's hand went up to silence the man, palm out, and his legs carried him forward towards the girl. He got the impression that she shrank back away from him as he approached. He smiled and took a breath. That was only to be expected.

He knelt. "Glad you're both awake already," he said. "Do you remember who I am, yalda?" He offered the same hand he'd used to silence Myrodyn to the girl in what he hoped was a comforting gesture.

For a moment he was unsure if his question had made sense to the girl. She wasn't saying anything and his false-eyes weren't giving him anything useful. But then she finally squeaked "Mr. Malka..."

He tried to nod, but as he lacked vertical articulation in the suit's neck, the motion failed. The way the technology was supremely powerful and yet still worse in many ways than a simple human body amused him.

"Yes, little one. Your father sent me here to rescue you and bring you to safety."

"What?!" yelped Myrodyn. "*I'm* not the threat here! Have you seen the news?! Why would Rob contract with you people of all the..."

The little man's voice faded out as Malka stood and walked towards him, boots thudding with each step. The raw physical intimidation was enough to result in an awkward backwards stumble that ended with Myrodyn on the floor. The scientist seemed like a doll compared with Malka's augmented frame, so soft and fragile. Even without eyes, the contrast was clear to him.

A new voice spoke, coming from Myrodyn's com. It was feminine and confident, almost hypnotic in a way. "Ah, Avram,

you finally made it. Do you still have the jet that Olympian provided?"

He paused, feeling the glow from Myrodyn's wrist and trying to make sense of things. "Who are you?" he asked.

"You knew me by the name Anna di Malta, once. Do you remember? It seems like so long ago, doesn't it? Some call me 'Face' now, but that's merely a name. I am the Goddess of Humanity, and I know you, Avram Malka. I know your companions, David Reeves and Abigail Goodhue, who you call 'Daisy'. I am the reason you're here, and I am your salvation. Divinity said to tell you 'Razor-wire cufflinks sit easy on stone wrists.' Are you now willing to obey my directions?"

He stood there, surprised and a bit stunned by the words. Anna di Malta was on Mars. He'd thought she died when the nameless attacked. But... she was a goddess? He breathed a deep breath and let his confusion roll over him and off him, regaining his centre easily.

One thing was certain: this 'Face' was working with Divinity. She knew he'd be coming, and who he'd be with. She had his code-phrase.

"Yes, I will obey," he said, glad to have new orders. There was something annoying about having to figure out for himself what the right course of action was. It was much easier when Divinity gave him a clear line to follow.

Myrodyn pulled himself up to a squatting position, moving slowly.

"Good," said Face. "Start by telling me whether you still have the jet."

"Yes. It's parked at the airport."

"As I expected," said Face. "We'll have to wait for about seven minutes to get the full strategic picture from the rest of

my mind, but if I understand you correctly, you have an airplane at the Redding Municipal Airport. Growth is already reaching up the valley from San Francisco, and looking to take out airports first, probably to prevent us from consolidating forces. You'll need to move fast to make it to Tokyo. Did you come in a vehicle capable of carrying two more people?"

Malka tried and once again failed to nod. "Yes, a van. Parked outside."

"Good. I already told Karen and Jonah to meet you at the airport. They should get there a little ahead of you. There is very little time. Go now."

"Mommy's there?" asked the child, scrambling out of the bed.

"Why Tokyo?" asked Myrodyn, before Face could respond to the child.

Though they awaited her response, both baselines obeyed Face's instruction to leave. Neither seemed to have much in the way of possessions, and they left without fuss. Their shapes were too blurry to give much in the way of body language, but Malka could see the way the child always positioned herself so there was a soldier of Divinity between her and Myrodyn.

Face seemed to ignore the girl's question. "Tokyo is where Vision landed. It's the last stronghold."

Once they were outside David's suit cracked open and he began to pull himself out, the helmet coming with him. Their van was parked only a few metres away.

"What?! I thought you said Vision was in the mothership!" exclaimed Myrodyn.

As they approached the van, Malka could hear a whispering coming from his suit's com speaker. "Can you please give me override permissions for your suit, Avram? Daisy

and David already have. It'll help me help you in case of emergency.”

Meanwhile, Face spoke out loud to the group. “Vision is in control of the mothership, but her primary mind shard is in Tokyo. It secretly descended there shortly after she took over Selene Station.”

“My suit is my body. And you want me to give it up?” he said, switching his com channel to privately converse with Face.

“I want you to let me share it. It’s what Divinity wants. Just enter your passcode and relax.”

Myrodyn continued to animatedly object to the Tokyo plan. “So we’re just going to deliver ourselves to her? Don’t tell me you think she’s an *ally*...”

Malka climbed into the back of the white van they’d obtained from a local Divinity member. Myrodyn, Daisy, and the girl were already inside. Daisy was still in armour, and holding space between the two. Her gun was on a rack with others on the far wall. David was up front, in the cab, and his armour was autonomously following Malka, behind. As large as the van was, it’d be crowded.

Face continued to speak over Myrodyn’s com. “The strategic landscape has shifted. With Acorn in control of so much of the planet, there’s no other option. You can either fly to Vision or die as Acorn’s army slowly rolls over you.”

To Malka, she simply asked: “Avram? Permissions?”

He considered for a moment longer and then gestured his passcode into his com, unlocking the admin privileges for Face. She was almost certainly Crystal. It would make sense if Anna had been Crystal from the start. This whole thing felt like more of Crystal’s insanity. But Face had his code phrase, and that

was all Malka really cared about. It felt like he was doing the right thing.

“Everyone’s in,” reported Daisy to David, as the rear-doors on the van closed.

If Face’s access resulted in a change, Malka didn’t notice it.

A simple silence descended as they drove. If Myrodyn had an objection, he didn’t voice it.

There were two benches in the back of the van, facing each other. On Malka’s right was David’s suit, acting more like a headless, bipedal robot, now that it was in autonomous mode. Opposite him was Myrodyn, and then Daisy, and finally the little Stephano girl, who was curled up in a ball, and holding on to the bench frame. She was nothing more than a blurry sensation in his gut. It was a miracle he could “see” her at all, really, but he could imagine her, sad and afraid... perhaps a little hopeful now that she was on her way to see her parents.

It made him want to give her a zen helmet.

After a few minutes of driving, Face spoke again, this time coming from the speakers on the three exoskeletons. “I’ve got an update from my primary intelligence on Mars. Acorn’s spread is accelerating now that it has more or less total control over the major cities in the region. In thirty-seven seconds one of Acorn’s aircraft will be dropping seeds onto the town, and I expect at least one of the seeds will be directed towards the airport. *Stay away from the seed.* There’s likely enough time to make it to the jet as long as you don’t draw attention to yourselves.”

“What’s a seed?” asked the girl, just as Myrodyn asked “How are you talking through their suits?”

Face responded to Myrodyn first. “The com tower I’d gained access to is about to be hit by Acorn. I’m downloading

as much local intelligence into Divinity's hardware as I can. I'm afraid that you'll be isolated from my main intelligence until you reach Japan. The seed is—"

Face fell silent as a roar swept over them. The aircraft arrived just when Face had predicted. A few seconds later a loud boom swept through the van.

"Step on it, David," yelled Daisy. The van accelerated.

As the second boom subsided, the roar of the aircraft fell away as well. Malka didn't know who this "Acorn" was, but he guessed it must be the group in charge of the robotic army he'd been briefed about that morning.

It was the end of the world.

He wondered if he'd ever have the chance to betray Divinity. Or if he even wanted to anymore. He could see that Zen was a blessing, now, even if a part of him still disagreed with their methods.

"We're now offline," said Face. "Your coms will work peer-to-peer, but Internet access and guidance from on high will have to wait. I'll do the best I can to guide you using just your armour's computer systems, but you can't rely on me to be actually intelligent until you reestablish satellite linkage."

Myrodyn started to say something, but David's voice from the cab cut in "What do I do about the gate?"

"Ram it?" suggested Daisy.

"Better brace yourselves, then," retorted David.

Daisy, still in full armour, wrapped one hand around the girl and grabbed at the bench frame with the other. Malka did approximately the same, seeking to protect the autonomous suit sitting next to him, but the suit had already somehow known to stabilise itself.

The van accelerated sharply and then hit the gate, sending a moderate impact through them. They'd been ready for it, however, and it seemed like the gate had given way. They were at the airport.

"Holy shit!" Even filled with Zen the surprise was clear on David's voice as he shouted over the com. The van began to swerve wildly.

Daisy began to speak. "Avoid contact with—"

Bullets ripped through the top of the van in a wild spray, filling Malka's ears with the sound of metal on metal. The van continued to swerve.

"Come in, Divinity! Can you hear me?" shouted a voice over the com. Malka recognised it as Agent Jonah Taylor, of WIRL.

"Roger that," Malka replied. "Divinity here." He was glad that, as far as he could tell, none of the bullets had found flesh.

"Thank god," said Agent Taylor. Malka could imagine him with his eyepatch and one of those black suits, talking into his com. "We're pinned down behind the hangar, just north of what's left of the control tower! Face says you have a jet parked out on the tarmac, but I don't see how we can get to it without your help! I've already lost two men!"

The van turned a sharp left and continued to turn for a good long while, nearly throwing Malka off his seat and into Myrodyn.

Malka changed frequencies. "David, can you get us to the jet and then get to the north side of the hangar?"

"I can try, but they'll be on us pretty quick."

"Do it," commanded Malka. To Agent Taylor he said "We're sending pickup. Just hold tight."

“Roger!” The sound of loud gunfire was audible on the com, as well as a dog barking.

As the van sped forward, Malka passed Daisy’s AR-15 back to her and she switched out her non-lethal ammo for some heavier stuff.

“I’ve installed combat software in your armour,” whispered Face into his ear. “Get a gun for yourself and help David’s armour switch ammunition.”

Malka grabbed the last rifle off the rack and did as he was told. A part of him found it unnerving that Face had more or less complete control over his body, but he simply took another breath and accepted it. That wasn’t worth worrying about right now. He was a tool, and glad to be of service.

“Out! Everybody out!” shouted David suddenly, braking the van as hard as he could, and nearly throwing everyone off the benches.

Daisy was up before him, throwing open the back doors and leaping down to the tarmac. The headless suit was next, followed by the girl and Myrodyn. Malka leapt from the back of the vehicle just as David sped away, his metal legs slamming into the asphalt with a force that would’ve pulped human limbs.

He looked around, trying to get his bearings. The sun still wasn’t up, but his suit’s cameras worked just fine in the low-light.

They’d been here the day before. It had been incognito and might’ve been tense at the time if they hadn’t had Zen, but that was nothing in comparison to how it was now. Unloading illegal weapons in a small airport was one thing, being in battle against... something... was another.

David had dropped the scientist, the girl, Malka, Daisy, and the suit of armour that Face was piloting near a collection of

small parked airplanes and then had driven off in the opposite direction of the remnants of the control tower. Even from where they were, Malka could sense the plume of smoke rising from where it had been, blotting out the stars.

“There!” shouted Daisy. Malka turned to follow her gesture. She was pointing out onto the runway, but Malka couldn’t feel what was out there.

Malka felt his suit take over, forcing him to step backwards and away from whatever Daisy had seen. “Back! Everyone back!” hissed Face. “And quiet!”

The tension was piercing even Malka’s Zen. “What is it?” he whispered.

Daisy turned towards where their jet was parked and said “C’mon! There’s no time!”

“Two of Growth’s war machines,” explained Face as they moved towards the aircraft. “These are specifically designed for hunting and killing humans. They’re about the size of wolves, and... well, I don’t think it makes sense for me to go into more detail than that. If there’s a part of you that’s afraid of wolves, I suggest listening to it. This is not a fight we can win.”

The stairway to the jet unfolded as they approached, lights and engine turning on before anyone had come onboard.

“You two get ins—” Daisy began.

She was silenced by the roar of gunfire, very close by. The empty suit of armour jumped to clear the wheel blocks from the landing gear.

“Beast, with me!” said Daisy, raising her gun and moving down the row of airplanes towards the noise. Another burst of gunfire cut off his chance of replying as he followed.

The headlights of the van suddenly bloomed into their view as it sped towards them, between the various small aircraft in the parking lot. Dark shapes moved behind the van, flashes of gunfire illuminating inhuman silhouettes. Beside the van was a microtank, sparking with impacts from the light-arms fire.

Daisy and Malka pulled to opposite sides of the van's path as it sped by them. Without realising what he was doing, Malka's arms snapped up, and his gun fired with staggered, violent bursts.

WIRL's microtank fired its main gun. Malka had no idea how they'd managed to get the war machine here, but its gun seemed far more powerful than the AR-15's. Its shell exploded on impact and lit up, for one brief moment, one of the two robots that had been coming in enough detail for Malka to get a sense of it.

It wasn't really like a wolf. It had four legs and was low to the ground, but the analogy ended there. Each of its four blocky, armoured legs ended in a wheel, and arched up to connect to the main body like a spider. The central body had the same blocky, featureless armour, with the exception of a gun turret in the front and on the top. Even as it was torn in half by the impact of the microtank's main gun, the turrets kept firing.

The remaining robot continued to speed forward, entirely unbothered by the loss of its companion. Malka's gauntlets moved with a will of their own, sending another wave of bullets at the machine.

The only effect seemed to be to slow the hunter down and redirect its attention to the two of them. Malka wished he had something with better penetration as he tried to take cover.

The hunter may have been smaller, but it was better armed. The landing gear of the nearby airplanes didn't do much to

shelter him from the counterattack. It was like being hit by a hammer a dozen times in a handful of seconds. His armour did a good job of distributing the impact, but he wasn't invincible. Somewhere beyond the roar of the gunfire, he heard Daisy yell out in pain.

Malka focused on keeping calm, even as his suit limped away from the hunter.

He turned back to see its dark shape rolling towards where Daisy had fallen. It continued to fire as it moved in. There was no way she'd survive that, armour or no. The pain of that startled him, but he shook it off. He had to focus.

"Oh fuck! There's another two coming from the opposite —" shouted Taylor into his com just as another burst of gunfire cut him off. The cannon from their microtank fired again.

A woman screamed.

Malka made it back to the jet just a moment too late.

There were seven figures by the airplane: Myrodyn, the girl, the mother, David, Agent Taylor, the empty suit of armour, and another man who must've been with WIRL. They hadn't gone into the aircraft yet. Why hadn't they gone in the aircraft yet? Idiots.

WIRL's microtank was on the other side of the van, firing its guns at what Malka knew were two other hunter robots. Face was instructing the armour to shoot back, too. And there was a *dog* there, for some god-damn reason.

He was too late.

Agent Taylor fell, already dead, as Malka limped on.

"Get in the airplane!" he tried to yell, but his voice was caught by a strange rasping.

The gunfire fell on the clump of them like deadly raindrops.

The mother, who some part of him knew was named Karen, spun and died. A burst of blood from her head blooming in his blindsight—a ghostly flower that faded as instantly as it had come.

David and the other WIRL man fell.

Malka tried to run towards them, and failed. They had to—they were supposed to get *inside the plane*. They had to! But his legs were battered and broken. They weren't even his legs.

Another ghostly burst of blood erupted from Myrodyn, who managed to make it two steps towards the steps of the aircraft before he died.

The girl screamed. This time with a voice that knew nothing but pain and loss, rather than fear. She was practically on the stairs as it happened...

“Go!” he yelled at her, finally making it to the bodies.

The hunter that had killed Daisy arrived. They were flanked.

It was over.

A pair of bullets ricocheted off his helmet. Another one reflected off his hip.

Why wasn't Zen working? He could feel the terror and desperation in his mind clawing at him like an animal.

The child fell back onto the stairs. For a moment he thought she'd been hit, but she scrambled and climbed. And then stopped.

“Major!” she called, reaching her arm out to call for her dog.

Malka looked up at where the new hunters had come from. The dog was stupidly barking at them, and guarding his fallen master, the girl's mother. Karen's body lay in a tangled pile of her own blood.

Upon hearing the girl, the dog turned and ran towards her.

The microtank fired again, blasting another hunter to shrapnel.

A bullet hit the dog, and it went down in a startled shriek.

"No!!" screamed the girl, reaching out from where she lay on the stairs.

All of the WIRL men were dead. Mr Stephano must've hired them to protect Karen. They had failed. They had all failed. Everyone was dead. There was no hope of even making it up into the airplane, much less flying out of there. Why had they even thought to try? They should've ran the moment Face said that the machines were targeting airports.

But Malka's body kept moving, pulled on by Face's god-damned AI. The microtank was still shooting. David's old armour stepped out and drew fire from Malka. The robots kept fighting, even after the battle was lost.

A harsh buzzing filled the air.

Malka wanted to curl up and let the end take him, but he was forced to watch as his suit dropped his gun, bent down and grabbed the bodies of Myrodyn and the dog and dragged them towards the stairs of the airplane.

"In! Keep going!" shouted Face, through his speaker.

Crying, the girl obeyed, crawling up the stairs.

Another random bullet hit him, this time piercing his armour and slicing into his right shoulder like a hot needle. He screamed, but his suit kept going.

As soon as one robotic foot made it onto the stairs, they began to lift, the airplane's hydraulics trying to close the door. It wasn't strong enough to lift him, especially dragging Myrodyn's body and the dog, but with another couple steps they began to move up.

One last glance behind showed two hunter robots fighting the microtank and finishing off the empty suit.

The last few steps turned into a tumbling mess as Malka's legs tripped over the stairs and fell, nearly crushing the girl, who was stupidly lying on the floor crying and screaming. Myrodyn's body, which had been dragged by the arm up the stairs fell onto him with a groan.

It took Malka a moment to realise that the groan had come from Myrodyn. He was making noise and moving. The buzzing hadn't stopped, however.

The dog, to his shock, also moved. Face had seen, somehow, that they were alive. And the airplane was... moving! It was moving!

"Get them off me!" screamed the girl.

Malka pushed himself away, trying to give her space. But she wasn't talking about him and Myrodyn. She was thrashing about strangely, flailing her arms.

"Crush them! Roll back and forth!" shouted Face. "Keep your eyes covered with your hands!"

Insects! That's what the buzzing was. To his blindsight, which mostly tracked gross movement and the edges of large objects, they were nearly invisible. How long had they been there?

Face puppeted his suit, slapping at Myrodyn and then at the dog, both of whom were being attacked by the little things. They must've been robots, too.

The plane began to accelerate. Adrenaline thundered through him, as the three of them and the dog began to slide slowly towards the back of the plane.

It was the blood. The floor was slick with their blood.

The boom of the microtank's cannon thundered from between the bursts of normal gunfire and the now quieter buzzing. The girl kept screaming, alternating between pain and grief.

Something in his helmet must've broken.

He'd never felt so terrified.

The jet's engines roared to life and pulled them onward and upward.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Xandra

Her first memory on awakening was spasming as though she'd stumbled, and hearing Major's whine as she jostled him. She must've been dreaming, but she couldn't remember any of it. All she had was a nasty cold sweat and the feeling of suffocating.

It was bitterly cold in the airplane, and she did her best to wriggle deeper under the blankets that Face had given her without disturbing Major. The sun was low enough in the sky that it shone a cold light directly through the window on the opposite side of the plane from where she sat.

She looked away, partly because of the glare, but also because Myrodyn had been laid out on the two seats on the other side of the aisle.

She closed her eyes and tried to ignore the pain and the noise of the engines. Face had said they were lucky that the engines hadn't been damaged in the escape. Acorn's robots had only managed to put a few holes in the fuselage, forcing them to keep their altitude relatively low (though it was still unbearably cold).

Xandra didn't feel lucky.

She felt like she was dying.

Her hands and neck were wrapped in tight bandages. That was where the mechanical insects had done the most damage. But she had dozens of cuts and wounds on her head, face, and body that simply had to go untreated. There was only so much gauze in the first-aid kit, and most everything that could be used for medical treatment had been used on the bullet wounds that the others had taken.

At least she hadn't lost her eyes. Under the blankets, one of her hands absently touched Major's head near the eye he'd lost to the insects, and he growled, still half-asleep. The thought of having ugly lidless sockets, like Mr. Malka, haunted her.

Thinking about Major's injury made her think about Eyepatch. She felt her mind roll away from the memories. On some level she was aware that she was avoiding thinking about it, but that seemed good. Better to focus on... anything else.

She took a deep breath, or tried to. She began to cough, every wound on her body screaming in protest as she tensed, blood and phlegm coming out and making a mess on the blanket.

Face seemed to notice she was awake and began to walk over to her. The robotic suit of armor no longer held Malka, who was curled up under his own pile of blankets one row ahead of Myrodyn. The once-terrifying man seemed like a broken shell of a person, now. He'd avoided being hurt by the "wasps," but he'd still taken two bullets, one in the shoulder and one in the lower back. Without legs or eyes he was helpless, but there was more to his brokenness than either his disabilities or his wounds. He'd said barely anything in all the hours they'd been in the air, to her, or to Face. It was like all the life had been sucked out of him.

Even the robot wasn't doing well, though that was more a fact of the mechanical body than of the artificial intelligence. It

had taken a lot of gunfire, and could barely move one leg. The blood and cold made its working joints stiff and slow, and Xandra knew it was struggling to keep a battery charge.

“How are you feeling?” asked Face. Despite the general brokenness of the machine, the voice of the AI came through as a clear, warm comfort. It reminded her of the voice of...

Her mind rolled away from the pain.

“Terrible,” she croaked. “Still feel cold.”

“Well, dear, we *are* in Alaska in February. Approximately.” The robot bent over her to rub her hair affectionately, and then turned to inspect Myrodyn.

“Think I’m sick...” she groaned.

Not looking away from Myrodyn, Face continued speaking. “Yes. I feared you would be. You’re not the only one... Myrodyn and Avram have the same thing. Growth designed the wasps to be carrying a bioweapon, I think. Probably a virus.”

So she *was* dying.

She didn’t know what to say to that. She didn’t know what to think. A part of her wanted it... wanted to escape the pain.

Face went on, adjusting Myrodyn’s head and giving him some water from a nearby bottle. “We’ll be landing on Shemya in a little over fifteen minutes. As much as I wish we could stop and get you rest and medical attention, my guess is that whatever virus you’re infected with is just going to get worse as time goes on. In the long run, the only thing that has any hope of saving you is getting to Tokyo, and we don’t have time to waste.”

“S’where Daddy’s gonna be, right?” Xandra coughed again and moaned as she felt a cut on her cheek re-open, and begin to seep blood.

“Yes, dear.” Face turned the robot back to her. “Last I heard he was in Alturas working with Divinity, so he might be a little behind us. Or, he might be ahead, if he’s able to find an airplane that can fly at a higher altitude. I wish I knew what was happening with the skytrains...” A large black-and-silver gauntlet handed her a bottle of water. “Here, drink this. It’ll help.”

Xandra reached to take it, gritting her teeth against where the cold air bit at her skin.

“The good news about your virus is that I doubt Major is infected. Despite the gunshot wound and what the wasps did to him, I expect him to recover, with or without Vision’s help.”

Xandra felt her lips crack as she smiled at the black visor that she imagined Face was speaking from. It made no sense, but knowing that Major was going to be okay made a remarkable amount of difference. She fumbled with her bandaged hands to undo the cap on the water bottle and finally managed to take a sip under the blanket.

“Now listen, Shemya is a tiny island with an airbase. Once we land, there are going to be some army men getting on the plane. Getting to Tokyo is their only chance at survival, too, and talk of a virus just runs the risk of scaring them into staying behind. So I’m going to need you to try and pretend not to be sick, okay? You’re injured, and you can fall back on that if you need to. Just pretend to be asleep if you don’t want to lie to them. Do you think you can do that? You might be saving their lives.”

“There’s a cure in Tokyo?”

“Almost certainly,” said Face, placing a robotic hand on Xandra comfortingly. “Vision will have wonders beyond your imagination.”

Xandra felt a spark of herself from before all of this rise up. “Donno ‘bout that. I’m pretty smart.”

Face laughed. “I suppose you are, aren’t you.”

It wasn’t the first time they’d stopped. The little jet that Malka had gotten from Daddy wasn’t meant for trips around the world, and so they’d landed briefly somewhere in Canada to refuel. That airport had been deserted, and Face had been forced to slowly do the refueling herself.

Xandra expected, somehow, that since the new airbase they were stopping at had soldiers, they’d soon be off the ground, but that turned out not to be the case.

The last thing Xandra wanted was to have to talk to strangers, so she followed Face’s advice and pretended to be asleep, occasionally peeking up at the figures that would occasionally walk by. They were almost all young men in uniform, with the exception of a grizzled old guy with a big grey beard.

Xandra and the others were seated near the front of the plane, though not in the cockpit, which meant she could hear them talking as they came onboard. The blood scared them, though they tried to hide it. Face scared them, too. The unthinkable had happened: America had fallen to an army of machines. The world had fallen. And now, rather than fly back to the mainland to fight, these men were placing themselves in the hands of another machine. They were the cowards, seeking to join a side with some chance of winning.

Minutes passed, and the sun dipped behind snowdrifts that had built up outside next to the runway. At some point, her game of pretending to be sleeping turned into the genuine thing.

She didn't wake up when they took off again, or if she did, she didn't remember it. She woke up when her nightmares became unbearable.

She smothered them, pushing them down into that same dark corner where the memories lurked. She couldn't think about them. She had to forget.

It was deep in the night, and she knew they'd be somewhere over the Pacific Ocean. Her head pounded and felt so terribly cloudy. Her lips, mouth, and throat felt like sand. She was sweating again, though the cabin didn't feel nearly so cold. Perhaps they'd patched the holes.

She got up and managed to use the toilet and get a can of orange juice from Face. There was a frustrating moment where, after getting back to her seat, she realized she couldn't get the juice open with her hands in bandages. Face, with thick plated fingers, also couldn't open the tab on the top of the can. It was a small thing, but it made her want to cry. She would've except that it felt like she was all used up. No tears would come.

Eventually Face managed to find a plastic knife and pry the tab up to open the can. But somehow, that was no relief. The orange juice tasted nasty, like it had been mixed with some vile chemical. Face said it was her mouth and nose being affected by the altitude and her disease.

Major woke up and started whimpering. They didn't have dog food, but Xandra gave him some water, crackers, and salami. His snout had been badly injured by the wasps, too, and it took him a while to get all the food down. He might survive, but he'd never be the same.

Her whole body ached in a million different ways, and it felt *wrong* to just lie there. She wanted to be up and moving. She wanted to run. She wanted to think. She wanted things to be

the way they were. But she just sat there, instead, and tried not to pay attention to either her body or... the other things.

Malka was muttering things in his sleep. It sounded like he was having nightmares. She guessed a lot of people were having nightmares right now.

Myrodyn looked dead. Face said he was getting worse, and might not make it to Tokyo, though he wasn't dead yet. It would be close.

She wanted to spit on him and yell at him. It was because of him... All of it was because of him... He could've stopped it, back in Rome.

But she didn't want him to die. Not now. Not here.

She moved from the seat to the floor, and took Major with her, making a nest of blankets. And eventually, she was swallowed by the darkness and the roar of the engines, unable to keep herself from thinking about Mommy...

She was tossed against the seat with a roar that made the engines sound quiet.

The impact knocked the breath from her and echoed through her body, creating a terrible throbbing. She struggled to inhale, feeling panic seize her.

She... had she been asleep? Nothing made sense. It felt like she'd only just curled up, but part of her knew she'd been sleeping. It took her a moment to remember where she was.

Face's voice came on the intercom. "Sorry for the disruption. We're entering Japanese airspace. That was an EMP, probably launched by Acorn. The aircraft computers are damaged, but my robot's systems are shielded and Private Waters has piloting experience and can take us in for a landing. Things are about to get really bumpy, though, so I suggest you strap in and hold on."

Xandra pushed herself, feeling the weakness in her body. It was almost too much. Almost easier to stay in the blankets on the floor and let things just happen. But she pushed through the stiffness and fatigue. She even managed to get Major up on the seat and half-buckled up. He mostly protested being moved; he was exhausted, too.

Through the window of the airplane, Xandra could see the night's sky and a few lights on the ground. The half-ring of molten moon arced overhead. A memory of coming to Japan when she was five years old resurfaced. There really should've been more lights. After a moment she understood why things were so dark. Smoke was rising from the ground in great plumes.

There were flashes of light from beneath the smoke, here and there. Explosions, perhaps.

"Incoming fire! Brace yourselves!" shouted Face over the intercom.

Major began to whimper as the airplane dipped without warning. Xandra's stomach felt like it was desperately trying to wriggle up her throat. There was a flash outside from behind her, and the airplane began to shake like it was a leaf in a windstorm. Up and down. Forward and back. There was an unbearably loud noise, as though huge metal plates were being scraped violently together right next to her ears.

The aircraft dropped violently again and the orange juice from earlier sprayed painfully out her mouth and nose without warning. Major was howling.

"We're through the worst of it!" exulted Face, even as the plane careened wildly to the left. There was another series of flashes outside the window. "We lost a wing, but Vision should be able to guide us down safely. She's communicating with us

optically since our antenna got knocked out by the EMP. Otherwise I'd put her on the com."

"We lost a wing?!" shouted a man further back. Face was surely in the cockpit. There was no way she'd be able to hear him.

Major continued to howl as the airplane continued its downward spiral. From what she could see out of the window it looked like they were over the water again. Xandra put her hand on Major and tried to calm him, though she was nowhere near calm, herself.

Something slammed into the airplane with a deep thud.

"The fuck is that thing?" said one of the soldiers.

She struggled to look back out the window to see what had hit them, but she couldn't spot anything.

Whatever it was, it was helping the airplane stabilize. Their wild spinning stopped, and Xandra saw a city full of light on the ground, unblemished by smoke.

"Xandra..." croaked a voice.

She looked away from the window, wiping the throw-up from her chin with a sleeve of her shirt. It took her a moment to figure out who was speaking.

"Xandra... Girl..." said the voice again.

It was Myrodyn. His eyes were wide and unwavering, one bloodshot, the other fully red from some burst blood vessel or perhaps damage from a wasp. He stared at her from where he lay, strapped to the seats in a cocoon of blankets, breath ragged and weak.

"It's the end, Xandra," hissed Myrodyn.

She hated him. Even as he was, she was scared of him. Somewhere under those blankets, she could imagine a knife,

lurking. Strange, how somehow that was more frightening than the virus that was killing them both. “Go back to sleep,” she said. “Need to rest.”

He said something, but it was too faint for her to hear, and he began to cough. He looked old.

She could feel the plane diving and slowing down. They were coming in for a landing. She bit back the urge to throw up again.

“Please!” managed Myrodyn, weakly, barely audible behind Major’s barking. His face was the epitome of pain, bloody eyes never leaving her.

“What?” she hissed back, defensively.

He mouthed words, too weak of breath to make his voice heard over the sounds of the airplane and Major, but she could read his lips. “I’m dying. Please.”

She hated it. She hated him. She looked away, trying to pretend like she didn’t see him.

It lasted only a few seconds. He was coughing violently when she looked back, blood leaking from his mouth. The disease that they’d gotten seemed to be attacking their lungs.

A trembling hand emerged from the blankets, holding something. “Please,” he hissed again. “Don’t tell... Don’t... my brain...”

The plane hit the runway with a jolt. It wasn’t the smoothest landing, but they were down. Myrodyn broke into another round of violent coughing.

Xandra reluctantly unbuckled herself and fell to the floor. She didn’t have the strength to stand. She was so *cold*. Her whole body ached. And yet, she crawled on hands and knees

across the aisle to the man who had been holding her hostage only yesterday.

It seemed like he was choking on his own blood. The man wheezed and droplets of red were spraying from his mouth with every cough.

She tumbled back into the aisle, startled, as the man began to thrash, eyes wide with terror. He clearly couldn't breathe.

The thing he'd been holding tumbled to the floor.

Xandra reached out and grabbed it, then scrambled back to her seat as best she could on aching limbs.

{Bastard deserves to die,} she thought, trying to hold onto the anger. She felt so weak. It felt like without him she'd be all alone.

She didn't bother to buckle up again, merely to wrap herself in the blanket. Now that they were on the ground the turbulence was gone.

She coughed and felt a wave of terror from the wet feeling and the taste of blood. But then it passed. The disease was having a harder time dealing with her body, or perhaps it was simply the fact that she hadn't been shot, first.

She put the thought out of her mind, and deliberately kept her eyes away from the too-still shape on the other seats.

She focused instead on the object she'd picked up from the floor. It was a tiny black box, about the size of a deck of playing cards. There were metal ports on one end and even in the darkness of the plane she could make out the word "Toshiba" faintly engraved on what she guessed was the top.

She knew what it was. Athena was on there. After the nuke in Israel, Myrodyn had made a big show of scanning all his

paper notes and putting everything he had onto a digital drive which he could carry with him all the time.

It was his life's work.

No. She didn't want to think about him. She pulled into a ball, and tried, unsuccessfully, not to cry. Everything smelled like her vomit. Major whined.

It only took a couple minutes for Face's robot to tap on her. "We're here. Vision says we need to move quickly to a more fortified location. There'll be time to rest later."

Xandra uncurled, about to say something mean to Face, but she was already gone, moving down the aisle to give the soldiers the news.

She wasn't sure how she managed the strength, but she unbuckled Major, picked him up, and walked over the patch of dried blood to the extended stairway. Myrodyn lay still, unmoving. Malka also didn't get up. Perhaps he, too, was dead.

She clutched the data drive in one hand as she stepped barefoot down to the tarmac, carrying the obnoxiously heavy dog. A shuttle or maybe a short bus was there waiting for her. If she had been dropped into that moment without any memories, she might not have known anything was different about the world.

She set major down on the asphalt and coughed, spitting blood onto the ground. She wiped her mouth with a dirty sleeve and tucked the drive in the pocket of her pants.

Major's hips and back-legs were wrapped up in bandages from when Face had dealt with his gunshot wound, and she could see that he desperately wanted to be up and moving. He was tired, but the stress was giving him energy.

Just like her, she supposed.

She picked him up again and made her way over to the shuttle. It was probably very warm, considering that it was winter, but Xandra was terribly cold nevertheless.

Just as she reached the door to the vehicle, a loud hissing noise caused her to turn. The hiss turned into a roar as two points of light shot off into the sky towards the horizon. Missiles?

“Hello, Stephano child,” said an androgynous voice from behind her.

Xandra turned back and saw... Crystal Socrates. They were just standing there. The robot was the same as it had been on her father’s rocket, all those months ago. It was impossible.

Socrates extended its hands, offering to help carry Major. “There’s a cluster of ICBM’s en route, and we should get to shelter before they’re intercepted. C’mon.”

No. It wasn’t Socrates. The face was too elegant... too human. It looked like what Socrates might’ve become after years of refinement.

She didn’t hand Major over, instead gripping him tighter to her. “Who are you?”

The robot smiled and stepped back, gesturing for her to get in the shuttle. “Didn’t Face tell you? I’m the dream that leads to insight. I’m the high vista from which all things make sense. I’m your deus ex machina. This city is my stronghold against the shadow, and you are my honored guest. With the wave of my wand I work wonders.” The robot gestured again towards the shuttle, and a long, black and white wand seemed to materialize out of nothing in the robot’s fingers. With a tap on the frame of the shuttle’s door, an aura of golden light began to emanate from the entrance, like tiny, phosphorescent plankton floating underwater. Above the door the word “SALVATION” began to blink in a similar golden glow.

“I am the hero, child,” said the robot with a smile. “I’m Glinda the Good, with the gift of healing for you.” The robot’s wand waved in front of her, and she immediately felt a surge of energy and warmth. “Am I yet understood? I’m the saviour of humanity, and your little dog, too.”

The robot took a bow and answered an unspoken question. “Me? You want to know who I am? Ha-ha! I am the virtuous vizier. I am the victorious vector. I am, verily, Vision.”

Part Four:

The Music Echoes

Chapter Twenty-Three

Eric Lee

They'd opened Cho Fei's skull, back in January. It had been necessary. There was no way to fit the fibre-optics into his brain without doing so. Paralysed and drugged, they'd fed those glass leeches into his clamped head.

On the ends of each sadistic cable was a mouth of virus-coated hairs and other pseudo-biological instruments. The lab-grown viruses had changed his nerves to glow. Phosphorescent jellyfish protein or something. It wasn't much, just a spark on activation, but it was enough. Thoughts came up and out of his head like long, flesh-eating worms pulled slowly from a sick creature's belly.

This perverse technology was Wu Yubi's gift to the world. Teenage sociopathic bitch. The lab she stole it from had been using it on rats and monkeys. It turned out that making it work on humans wasn't hard; mostly it was a question of getting test subjects and having the stomach to fail a few times with the prototypes.

Head clamped firmly in place by cold metal to prevent the fibres in his brain from being jostled, they'd severed the efferent nerves in his spine and face, leaving him unable to move anything except his eyes, but still letting him retain some ability to feel. Even his eyelids were beyond his control, blinking only when the electrodes embedded in his face told them to. She'd

turned him into a vegetable... her and those other vat-grown monsters she called a family.

“Tongyi,” she called it. «To unify.»

It made him want to spit in her face, scream, and beat her young little body into a bloody mess, breaking every last bone. But that possibility had been taken from him with the paralysis, and she knew it. She knew all of what she’d taken from him. She could read it right out of his mind as easily as one would read a book. Easier, in fact, because as he understood it, she had a similarly intricate BCI that she used to pipe his thoughts, and the thoughts of all the others, directly *into* her mind. His rage was her pleasure.

Tongyi’s technology made WIRL look like a bunch of kids playing with sticks and stones. If Tongyi wanted to solve a problem, they’d describe it on the goggles and headphones of each slave, and simply read the solution out of the collective. It was through this process of being shown problems and situations that he’d learned all he had about Wu Yubi and his other masters. They’d ripped from his mind all of the passwords to his systems, bank accounts, and cryptocurrency wallets. Everything Eric Lee had owned and created. Lies and deception were impossible. He had no doubt that, from each person they’d abducted, they’d gained more than enough information and wealth to avoid risking detection from the police. It was one thing for, say, the head of EARCI to disappear without explanation, and entirely another for that person to write in-depth posts on social media explaining why they weren’t coming into the office. With enough information from the victim, holo puppets were even feasible.

And yet, in the end, what had all of Tongyi’s high technology earned?

A false confidence that Acorn had been destroyed, early warning from Crystal Socrates, and enough resources to barely evacuate their core team—sixty slaves, and about the same number of hirelings—to Tokyo.

And now they were lined up on rolling beds, like row after row of corpses, in some Japanese hospital, watching the world burn.

They'd been so powerful, once. Tongyi's alliance with Divinity was going to be just the beginning. WIRL had been overthrown, and the world's governments would've fallen one after the next.

But now... It was quite possible that the last surviving member of Divinity had stumbled out of the last airplane to land—a broken shell of a man, whose helmet didn't even work any more. All of humanity was like that. Nobody knew what was going on. Pandora's box had been opened, and the human era had ended in an instant.

Any hope that Acorn was going to save him in particular was shattered when he saw just how many nukes the AI was lobbing at the city.

No. Acorn didn't care about him. Nor did anyone else. The AI that called itself "Vision" hadn't stood up for him or the other slaves when it gave them shelter. In fact, it had suggested that, since Tongyi had high-quality BCIs, they should help with the defence by piloting battle robots or flying interceptors to protect against the bombardment.

It made him sick that some of the other slaves had agreed of their own free will. He wasn't sure if it was Yubi's propaganda about the need for a unified humanity or just a desire to do anything possible to try and stay alive.

A painful electric shock to the base of his neck made him refocus. He'd been letting his mind wander, ignoring the images on his goggles, and they'd finally caught him.

Glowing lines showed a wireframe schematic of what was left of Tokyo. The bay, an oblong shape running southwest to northeast, was in the centre, a web of blue lines showing the surface of the water, with a darker set of grey lines showing the mesh of the floor of the bay underneath.

To the north of the bay, downtown Tokyo, centred on Chuo and Chiyoda, was the heart of Vision's power. The AI's giant crystalline ship had crawled up out of the bay and planted itself right next to the imperial palace, by the train station. Clockwise from that, Vision controlled territory to the east all the way through Chiba, and anticlockwise to the south through Kawasaki and some of Yokohama. She couldn't simply focus on the most populous areas because, as impressive as her nanotechnology was, Vision still needed the raw materials at the ports and the surrounding industrial zones for manufacturing.

Out, beyond the front lines, Japan's cityscape was being slowly consumed by Acorn's endless sea of robots. Enemies showed up on his wireframe schematic as red dots, and wherever Vision had a good picture of what was happening out there, the data showed a solid red blanket. They were outnumbered by a factor of at least a thousand, protected only by Vision's superior designs and technology.

«Swarm spotted in Chiba, just emerging from the water!» shouted a synthesized approximation of Yubi's voice.

The wireframe zoomed in and flashed to new images taken from one of Vision's patrol drones. He could see a burst of dozens of robots coming out of the bay towards a park. They'd been using the water to mask their approach. The nearby trees

had caught fire from the flash of an earlier bomb, and the smoke made getting a full image of Acorn's swarm difficult. The image transformed back into wireframe and integrated itself into the surrounding landscape. His vision zoomed out, showing the nearby area, enemies in red, friendly machines in green.

The instructions were being spoken almost before he even realized he saw what needed to be done.

The voice that came on his headphones, perversely, was his own, probably synthesized from recordings they'd made of when he was in jail. «Unit Two, seize East Chiba Lions Four through Nine, and Mecha One, Five, and Eleven. I'm sending you targets near the waterline. One of them has a bomb, so be careful.» It was strange that he'd mentioned the bomb. He hadn't noticed it. Perhaps the information had come from another slave.

The wireframe scene in his goggles slid down towards where the combat robots were standing watch. Lines formed in the air along pathways that Unit Two should take to meet the intruders. Perhaps they'd been drawn by him. One thing that having a mind-reading device constantly attached to him had shown is that he had far more thoughts than he'd been aware of. Consciousness was, quite literally, an afterthought.

A camera viewpoint appeared as a sub-window to his wireframe showing the perspective of Mecha One, as the pilot's synthetic voice said «All of Unit Two locked in. Moving to intercept now.»

While the core technology in his head had been developed by Tongyi, Vision had gifted them with some upgrades as part of their alliance. The high-accuracy spacial model he was seeing was one. Advanced robotic bodies capable of being effortlessly piloted by pure thought was another. He watched as

the three bipedal “Mecha” robots and the six quadrupedal “Lion” robots followed the paths drawn for them. The Mecha were made of some kind of ultralight diamond foam and propelled themselves through the air with a collection of tiny jets that emitted a soft orange glow, while the much heavier lions practically slid over the ground with feet that seemed composed of swarms of tiny, thrashing tentacles, each grabbing at the ground and pulling the robot forward, regardless of how uneven the surface. They were both frighteningly fast.

The scene in his goggles flashed to the heavens, leaving Unit Two behind. Another wave of nuclear missiles was inbound towards Japan, from Russia. In one half of his vision he could see a composite from spy drones and satellites, and in the other, he could see a wireframe of the Earth with the missile trajectories. The red-white glow of the moon shone menacingly overhead.

“Department Six, we need a dozen pilots for interceptors! Please respond!” The voice was Yubi’s this time. There were a hundred other catastrophes happening simultaneously in the city; Tongyi was managing about a half-dozen, but they were out of manpower to deal with the incoming nukes, so they had to reach out to some of the native Japanese. Ironically, the common language between them was English.

“It’s four in the morning!” yelled back an angry Japanese man. “What people we have are half-asleep and already busy!”

«We’ve engaged the enemy,» said Mecha One.

The trajectories of the missiles stayed open in a sub window, but most of his goggles filled with scenes from the Chiba waterfront. The Mecha were each emitting a spray of lasers, computationally directed at the wasps and other insect-sized robots that were boiling out of a pair of fishlike transport bots in an angry cloud. Lasers were rarely powerful enough to

be effective weapons at this range, but against the wasps they were perfect, melting their wings and legs in a matter of seconds. The Lions were hard at work hunting down the larger bots that Acorn had sent, a dozen spider-like human-hunters, and a quartet of serpentine dragons, each composed of perhaps a hundred snake-sized segments chained together and acting in unison. Each segment was fully autonomous and deadly in its own right, but the dragons as a whole were each armed with an array of powerful turrets capable of doing damage even to Vision's diamond-armoured creations.

It was amazing that such a large swarm could make it across the floor of the bay undetected. Perhaps Acorn had some kind of stealth tech that blocked sonar...

The roar of gunfire was joined by screams as a hunter that had slipped by made its way into a nearby residential building where people were sheltering. The building was over twenty stories tall and full of apartments. There were probably five hundred people inside, even after the partial evacuation towards the city centre. Left unchecked, the hunter could kill all of them. Lion Five broke off from the fight with the dragons to deal with it.

The hunter hadn't gone far, and its path of destruction was easy to follow. Through a ruined door, down a hall, and through another door, it was doing the thing Acorn had built it for. Lion Five's shoulder canons fired in unison, and explosive shells laced with corrosive nanites ripped the hunter apart.

The bodies of the people who'd been found by the hunter were quickly censored, and the cries of the survivors were muted and removed from their audio feed. There was no time for sentimentality. The incident was logged with Vision's systems and others in the area would come by to help the survivors, but only if Tongyi could eradicate the intruders.

A burst of flame shot out of the Lion's head, engulfing the fallen hunter. Flamethrowers were remarkably vital weapons in this sort of battle, as a downed machine could continue to provide intelligence, or perhaps even self-repair, if left alone. By the time the building's sprinklers came on, the hunter was fully dead.

He felt a jolt of pain as one of the Mecha and one of the Lions went down in quick succession to the canons of the dragons, back by the waterside. It was just luck, surely, unless Acorn had significantly improved its technology in just the last few hours. Vision's machines were still better.

But they were losing. Two of the four dragons had decomposed, but dozens of robotic snakes with heads like Swiss Army knives had escaped the flames and were hunting for spots they could hide away and re-emerge later to wreak havoc on power lines and manufacturing facilities. Meanwhile, another hunter had escaped, rolling down a nearby street, and the insect swarm was far from dealt with.

«Unit Two, the bomb is inside one of the remaining dragons. Mission parameters have changed. Attempt to detonate the bomb by hitting it directly, or simply by focusing fire on that bot.»

The Lions and Mecha moved to obey Yubi's voice.

Cho Fei wanted to hit them for their compliance. He tried to think a message to Yubi. {That's a nuclear warhead! There are thousands of people who will die if it goes off!}

«Yes,» said Yubi, directly to him. «And we've got millions to protect and a flight of missiles on the way capable of ruining everything. We simply don't have the manpower to hold this area.»

As if on cue, there was a blast of white light and noise and sudden darkness from the bots they'd sent to the Chiba waterfront.

He didn't feel anything. He was too numb. He'd been awake too long. He still had a deep, aching anger, but the explosion made no difference.

Speaking more broadly, Yubi said «No time to rest, Unit Two. Prepare to accept control of a squadron of interceptors. There are sixteen high-yield ICBM's six-point-five minutes out from Tokyo.»

Cho Fei's wireframe of Earth showed a pack of green dots light up as the high-altitude airplanes were connected by laser-link to Tongyi.

{We've been fighting for almost a full day, now. Vision's excuse about "Ro" is starting to get old. What could be more important than intercepting a wave of nukes?} he asked.

«Good question. Find out.»

Yubi's voice cut out as Fei found his view snapping into a Mecha, patrolling over the nexus in Chiyoda. He could hear the wind and see the lights of the city. It was almost like he was the machine, though he couldn't feel its body. He recognized what it was because of the schematic in the bottom-right, showing its humanoid form.

A glowing line appeared before him along with words in the top-left. Another Tongyi voice said «Vision isn't responding to direct calls, but is active in the Nexus. Track her down and demand that we get more people to help with defence. The front-line is breaking»

He was piloting his own craft. Tongyi was nearby. If he could pilot the Mecha there and—

A nasty electric shock forced him forward and away from thoughts of disobedience.

He'd talk to Vision. In a way, saving all of them was saving himself. He'd simply deal with his imprisonment later.

The Mecha moved effortlessly at his whim, floating swiftly downward on silent jets towards the Nexus.

Vision had revealed herself with her ship, just before Acorn had erupted. For a few hours, the people of Tokyo thought she was another species of alien. In a way, she was. She was just an alien whose mind had started on Earth.

In those first couple hours, it had become very apparent that Vision had been planning for this, and had been secretly controlling the production of much of the city. Huge, unfolding diamond structures and advanced machines were trucked in from across Japan, creating a superstructure over three kilometres in diameter, sprawling from the gates of the imperial palace to over the Sumida River, all in a matter of hours.

The Nexus.

Vision's original, crystalline ship was still in there, somewhere: the city's new central nervous system. As his Mecha flew downward towards the shimmering diamond walls, he wondered if the structure was large enough to hold every computer that had ever been made on Earth.

It wasn't what Vision was doing with it, though. Tongyi's collective intelligence agreed with Vision's claim that she hadn't focused on computing power at all. According to her, it was pointless. She could build nanotech supercomputers into the Mecha, but she couldn't run anything more complicated than a rules-based patrol algorithm on them. She claimed there was an underlying physical law called "Ro" that prohibited her from growing beyond a certain size and complexity.

Acorn did not seem to have the constraint, though it was perhaps because he'd never become very smart in the first place.

It was why she needed their help.

It was why they were losing.

Some of the Nexus had swallowed skyscrapers and had expanded them to allow more human inhabitants. Evacuees from other parts of the city lived here in dormitories that had been synthesized whole-cloth from component atoms.

But Tongyi knew what most of the Nexus was for. It was the reason the Sumida went into the structure as a river and left as a towering cloud of steam. Pipes, like huge alien blood vessels, ran down to the bay and guzzled even more water.

Most of the Nexus was a colossal, fusion-based, nuclear reactor.

It was providing power to the entire metropolitan area, and he suspected with more than a little left over.

The opening for aircraft that he'd been directed to opened and reached out to him with an uncomfortably organic motion. In seconds he was inside the Nexus. Bright lights illuminated the black tunnel he was guided down by his HUD. Small side passages, too tight to fit his Mecha down, stayed closed as he passed. There must've been hundreds of kilometres of passage in there that no human had ever seen.

«Missiles destroyed. Good job, team,» said Yubi.

A tension in the back of his mind relaxed. It wasn't the first bombardment they'd intercepted, and it wouldn't be the last, but it still made him feel better. He guessed that Yubi would be rewarding Unit Two with some pleasant visuals and sedatives shortly. They'd been in combat without sleep since they'd gotten set up in the hospital, and the end was nowhere in sight.

He was surprised that everyone had managed to fight as long and hard as they had.

Did he feel... proud?

The tunnel dropped into a cavernous indoor park, and Fei tried to push the thought out of his mind.

«Vision still isn't responding, but one of our allies says she's having a meeting on the north side of the park with a few westerners,» said a synthetic voice he didn't recognize. A new floating line appeared in his vision, indicating where he should go.

The park wasn't big, but it was impressive, and something about it made it feel more spacious than it was. The ceiling was only about five metres above the ground, but it had a foggy, star-speckled appearance that made it feel like outside. The landscape was covered in trees and rocks and streams in winding, chaotic patterns.

Dipping and dodging around the trees, he soon floated into a clearing where two of Vision's robots were talking with a group of humans. One was a Mecha like him, and the other was one of the replicas of Socrates, complete with humanoid face and mechanical body. The Socrates waved at him as his jets set him gently down on the grass.

In addition to the androids, there were two men, a woman, a boy, a girl, and a dog, all of whom were dark-skinned, with the exception of the girl, who was white (and the dog, of course). All of them, including the dog, were disfigured by facial wounds, most likely from wasps. He'd seen it on others. Vision had technology that fended off Acorn's diseases and accelerated healing, but it couldn't remove the scars.

“We need more help with the defence. Anyone who can pilot a suit needs to be out there. The front line is collapsing.” The words came from his Mecha, but they were in Yubi's voice.

Whether they had been his thoughts or had come from elsewhere was unclear.

“Hello, Tongyi,” said Vision’s Socrates, with a confident bow. “We were just discussing philosophy. Would you like to join us?”

“This is Tongyi?” asked the woman, in a thick accent from the American South.

Memories from his past life clicked into place. Phoenix. Of course it was her. He should’ve guessed. The scars didn’t help his face-blindness. Another mind in Tongyi must’ve noticed his surprise, as visual labels soon came up on everyone else. The boy and the men were “unknown,” but Tongyi recognized the girl as Robert Stephano’s daughter.

Vision looked at Phoenix with one blue eyebrow lifted. “No... this is just one of my robots. Tongyi is piloting it.” The android turned to him and said “Sorry about that. We were just talking about how you did such a bang-up job taking out Acorn, back in the day. Just a ding, of course. It’ll buff right out in the next patch notes, if you know what I mean. But I guess Phoenix here thinks that all posthuman pseudo-collectives look alike. It’s an easy enough mistake to make.”

Cho Fei, confused and irritated, pushed his thoughts into words, trying to steer the conversation back to what mattered. Again, they came out in Yubi’s voice. “We just *barely* intercepted another barrage of missiles, and we’re running low on interceptors. Thousands of people in Chiba are dying as we lose ground. At this rate, we’ll be overrun in a matter of hours!”

Vision was dismissive. “Oh, pish-posh. You’re doing fine. Another bang-up job, I suspect. Anyway, can’t you see that robots aren’t cheap to make? Your tax dollars don’t go as far as they did in the good ol’ days. We gotta stay under budget so we

can make the next rent payment...” The Socrates clone turned and took a few steps, gesturing at the park around them, as though it were evident what she was talking about.

He took a step forward without realizing it, cutting the group in two. On his left was Phoenix, the boy, and the two men, who were probably bodyguards. The girl and dog seemed to be their own unit, quietly observing off to the right near the other Mecha.

“What are you talking about? How could there be anything more important than preventing our own destruction? Do you know how many people *died* in the last hour?” The voice was still Yubi’s, but the thoughts were his.

Vision turned a pale face back to them and said, “You should know that lots of things are worse than death! Like *boredom*... But even I can admit that things are strangely bad. Ro was supposed to protect us better than it has. Robots greater than Growbots, et cetera. Perhaps the laws of physics are just having an off day. Things will sort out one way or another.”

He was about to object, but Vision continued, turning towards Phoenix. “Still, I suppose we are each vessels of Ro. Might as well break out the oars. Phoenix, choose: your people help us fight back Acorn, *or* we leave ourselves in the hands of the machines that did... that... to your face.”

A feminine voice spoke up from the other Mecha. “*Or* we could go forward with the uploading plan, and evacuate the planet quickly and safely.”

“Speak of the devil...” muttered Vision.

“I’m not ‘bout to let me or my people be turn’ into computer code, no matter what you say, Zephuh.”

The other Mecha offered no response.

“And besides,” said a confident Vision, “Ro puts more weight on organics, so the takeoff will continue as planned. Who knew metaphysics could be racist? I mean... besides most everyone in human history.”

Fei’s mission instructions suddenly shifted. The text in the corner of his vision prompted him to ask “What takeoff? Is there a plan we weren’t informed of?”

Vision smirked and rolled her eyes. “Many. I’m surprised you didn’t notice the ship.”

“What ship?”

“The one we’re in, of course.” She gestured around, as though the synthetic park was evidence enough. “Earth is lost, Tongyi. I sold it for a sack of magic beans. Once I have enough people situated, and enough energy stored, we’re going to ride this beanstalk to heaven and leave Acorn to roll around in Samsāra.”

The other Mecha jumped in. “Face would like to offer you an alternative. I possess technology to upload anyone who seeks to join Face on Mars, including all of Tongyi. There is a virtual world—a heaven—where all are welcome under her protection.”

“Good luck getting converts, sister. Especially with that lame pitch. Oh hey! I just realized I left the oven on. And by ‘left the oven on’ I mean that I lost a bet and now there’s a spearhead of five thousand battle bots getting ready to eat Kawasaki, and I might *actually* get to deal with that instead of letting you meatbags do all the rowing.”

The Socrates bot walked as she talked, and sat down, cross-legged, on a nearby boulder. “Good thing I’m well armed. It lets me keep more tricks up my sleeves. Oh, and Phoenix, if you decide you’d like to take some jobs back from the robots for

once, I can set you up. I assure you that while I might not have the time to read all of my emails, I do respond to all of them.”

And with that, the AI was gone. The once-posessed body closed its eyes and drooped, becoming perfectly still. It wasn’t obvious how many small, human-like movements Vision had been emulating until they all stopped simultaneously.

The group stood together and stared at the Socrates for a moment longer, none quite sure what had happened, or if Vision might suddenly spring back to life.

“Ah cannot believe all our world depends on that... jestuh,” drawled Phoenix.

Tongyi was confused, still processing the information he’d just gotten. There was a new battlefield forming somewhere out in Kawasaki, but based on Vision’s words it didn’t sound like she wanted help.

“Mama, can we go back to the room now? Don’t like it here,” said the boy, tugging on Phoenix’s sleeve.

“Yes, baby, we done here.” Phoenix turned to the girl, who had picked up her dog to comfort it. “We got set up with lots of space, and it sounds like you and your Major could use a place to stay.”

The girl gave a small nod and took a step forward. The other Mecha, whom Vision had called her sister, put a hand on the child’s shoulder, stopping her.

“Wait,” it said. “Both of you. All of you.” Compared to the humanoid, articulate face of Socrates, the smooth, angular faceplate of the battle-ready Mecha was unreadable and somewhat menacing. But the voice was warm and more human than his own. “The only reason Vision cares about you at all is that the laws of physics are compelling her to keep you alive.

She's a snake, and it's only a matter of time before she turns on you."

"Let her go, Zephuh" commanded Phoenix, standing in a way that made her feel strangely imposing, considering she was short, and stood no chance in any physical contest.

The Mecha complied.

"Vision may be a snake, but at least it's a snake I can see. You been twisted by the machine in a way that makes me fah more nervous."

Stephano's daughter walked towards Phoenix, glancing over her shoulder to keep an eye on the war machines as she did.

The soft voice of the Mecha said "You have no idea what you're talking about. There's a whole realm of perfect joy waiting—"

"No, you listen here!" snapped Phoenix, jabbing a finger at the Mecha with a sudden ferocity. "The Zephuh I knew would've cussed me out halfway to the moon for not agreein'. The Zephuh I knew would know bettuh then to suggest humans could become programs in some false heaven. You forgot what life *is*, girl, and I ain't gonna let you or your antichrist say one more word to these poor children."

Phoenix, her bodyguards, and the children moved away as a group. The girl put the dog down so it could walk with them. The Mecha called "Zephuh" stayed where it was.

Yubi's disembodied voice spoke instructions in his ear. «I'll handle conversation with Face. Detach your scout and follow Phoenix without revealing yourself.» The words solidified as letters on his HUD.

With a thought, he flew off a bit from the other machines and shifted bodies. The view before his eyes snapped to be

closer to the ground and the schematic of his body-plan shifted to a long-legged insect-like shape. With a quick activation of his thruster... he was off, speeding away from the Mecha that he'd been piloting. The world rushed by at insane speeds, trees zooming past. He let up on the thrust so that his rudder-like wings could hold him in something closer to a hovering state while he oriented himself.

The scout had almost no computers on it. The only reason he was capable of piloting it was that the Mecha could interpret his commands and forward them to the little device. Whenever it got near the edge of the antenna range, the Mecha's crude autopilot would kick in to preserve the link.

In fact, the scout had virtually nothing except sensors, an antenna, a tiny rocket engine, and enough hardware to theoretically steer and land the craft. In total it was about the size of a large grain of salt. But it had excellent hearing.

"Do you think my daddy's gonna be here soon?"

"Maybe," answered Phoenix. "Las' I heard WIRL and Divinity were still delayed in 'merica, but were holdin' in there. But that was a while ago, and maybe they 'bout to arrive."

"Think could ask Vision?" asked the girl. Despite her fast speech, she sounded tired. Which was only to be expected, he supposed, from the late hour. He was tired, too. Everyone was tired.

Flying stealthily behind the group of humans, Fei saw the woman shake her head. "You heard it. Five thousand bots attackin', and if my gut is right, that's just a diversion for Acorn's real force."

One of the men spoke up for the first time. His voice was low and had an entirely different accent to Phoenix's. "We cannot survive like this. The city is surrounded. If Vision is

focusing on launching the ship, I say ‘good’. It’s only a matter of time otherwise...”

The other man responded with a “What, so you believe that thing? It’s all part of the same system, Calderón.”

“You don’t think I know that? I just think we’re dead meat if we stay down here for—”

“Both of you, quiet,” commanded Phoenix. “You’re scarin’ the children. We’ll talk ‘bout strategy once we get settled.”

They were quiet for a while. The long shadows of the trees slid over them as they walked. After a moment they came to one of the doorways leading from the park into the rest of the Nexus.

There, on the threshold, the girl said “What if we had access to Vision’s code, and... replaced her?”

“What are you talking about, child?” asked Phoenix.

The girl reached into one of her pockets and pulled out a small object. Fei felt his scout pulled closer by the collective curiosity of Tongyi.

They identified it before another word could leave her mouth. He felt his Mecha accelerate.

“It’s a disk. All of Myrodyn’s notes are on it, ‘cluding ways he thought to crack into Socrates’ systems. Know it’s risky, but there’s a bias in people of waiting too long to—”

Fei’s mind snapped back into the Mecha as it burst through the trees at high-speed, aimed straight for the disk.

Phoenix reached out to take it, but she was too slow. The humanoid combat machine, now firing all engines to brake its motion, flew through the pack of humans like a bullet. Fei saw his arm reach out and snatch the precious object away.

“There could be spies anywhere!” hissed Yubi’s voice, as the machine slid to a stop on the carpeted hallway floor beyond the park. “Ro prevents Vision from being everywhere, but you’re still an object of attention!”

Even as the words came out, Tongyi’s Mecha inspected the data drive. It had a standard com port, and after a moment’s indecision, a cable snaked out of the Mecha’s hand and into the drive. Three hundred terabytes of data began to stream back to them. It was far, far too much to examine all at once, but it was clear that the girl hadn’t been lying. It was Myrodyn’s data.

“How dare you!” exclaimed Phoenix, clearly not understanding the need to keep a low profile.

Fei’s eyes slid over the data that was pouring off the drive. Someone else at Tongyi was in charge of the situation with Phoenix and the others, now.

As soon as he began to comprehend what a file was, he was shown another. The immaculate structure of Myrodyn’s notes came together in his mind like interlocking puzzle pieces. It was a symphony, only half completed, and yet still clearly beautiful.

The path forward became clear... They’d need to cooperate.

To unify.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Xandra

Her hands had been soft only a couple days ago. She'd been inside more than usual and climbing less. But even when she'd been climbing often enough to get callouses, her hands had been dexterous and strong. Now they were covered in scars from the accelerated healing. Stiff and weak, and almost numb. She could feel a faint pressure towards the back of her mind—an urge to cry about what she'd lost—but she kept crawling.

Her hands were hard, but they were nothing compared to the floor that pressed back on her as she crawled, hands and knees, through the duct. She'd changed into sweatpants and a black tee-shirt, she'd gotten a new com, and they'd even cut her hair extra short so it'd be out of her way. Her heart pounded in her chest, but she pushed away the fear.

In the Nexus, everything was crystal. Beneath the walls and floors that had been made for humans was a crystalline giant. She supposed it was diamond, but she had no real way to tell. It was harder and smoother than anything, but it wasn't cold. Quite the opposite, really. She was getting close to the heart.

“Keep going. Doing great,” said a quiet voice. “At the next junction, turn right and go down as quickly as you can. Worker drones use that intersection regularly, and it'd be better if they didn't spot you. If one does, try to just keep moving. There's a chance you won't be surprising enough for her to notice.”

The “her” in question was Vision. This was it.

She wormed forward, through the hexagonal tube. Far ahead she saw the junction, lit by the faint shimmering of patches of diamond here and there. The effect almost made her feel underwater, except that the glow was yellow-green, instead of blue.

“Faster, Xandra, she’s winning. Acorn’s latest push isn’t going to last much longer,” said the Chinese woman who spoke for Tongyi.

“Y’all just relax and do your parts. The girl knows what to do,” quipped Phoenix on the com channel.

Xandra reached the junction of access tubes jutting off at strange angles. She’d already been going downhill, but it was immediately clear which of the other passages she was supposed to go down. The slope was steep enough it was nearly a chute. Thankfully there was a track set into the crystalline wall that would give good hand-holds.

There didn’t seem to be any robots in this section of tunnel, and she was glad of that. So far they’d succeeded at dodging Vision’s patrols. Fishing a com relay out of her pocket and planting it at the edge of the passage she’d just been in, Xandra twisted around so that she was climbing down the new chute, feet-first.

It would’ve been sensible to send a drone to do this. These passages hadn’t been meant for human beings. But all the drones belonged to Vision. They really only had one shot. This was a mission only a human could do.

What would the others have done if she hadn’t volunteered? None of the adults would’ve fit through here, and they knew of no other way into the core.

It had only been a few hours. Was still before noon, local time, anyway. She had no idea what time it was back in Texas. Or Oregon. Or Idaho. Or wherever her father was. She pushed the thought out of her mind.

She felt awful. Whatever Vision had done to give her more energy when she landed was wearing off, and she felt like she was about to explode or fall apart or both. But she had to do something. It was why she'd volunteered. Sitting and waiting to see how things would turn out was unacceptable.

"You're entering a section of the ship we don't have good info on. The maps that Athena was able to scoop out of the Mecha simply indicate that you're heading into the core."

"Thanks, Zephyr," she muttered in response, though she knew the woman couldn't hear her. Too much time lag to Mars.

Down and down she climbed.

It was frighteningly hot, now. Sweat drenched her. Occasional blasts of hot, dry air shot past her, pulling the moisture away.

"The... enemy has withdrawn! Acorn is pulling back entirely! All fronts are disengaging!" Tongyi sounded panicked, and Xandra could understand why. They'd timed the intrusion attempt with a surge from the enemy forces, and had been relying on that to distract Vision.

"Well... do somethin'!" shouted Phoenix.

Notch after notch, the footholds slid by. Xandra could see an aperture just a little further down.

"我们在做某事" shouted the Tongyi woman, angrily.

Somehow Zephyr spoke, in reaction. Had Mars developed faster-than-light communication? “Face is petitioning hard for an audience and launching a hacking attempt. Just keep going!”

Xandra scrambled downward towards the opening.

Faster. She had to go faster. She braced her legs on opposite ends of the tiny shaft and slid downward, ignoring the footholds. One hand clutched at the device that hung around her neck.

They’d wired it up in the last few hours: Tongyi, Las Águilas... even Zephyr and Face. They’d all come together for this. And it all depended on her.

She shouted as her feet lost their grip. She slid out of the opening at the base of the tube without meaning to. She fell. There was something like a ladder set into the wall, but she’d let go. Like an idiot.

Shimmering walls slipped by. The chute was only about two meters up, but she hadn’t been ready for the drop. Her foot hit the ultra-hard ground, and her leg twisted painfully as she slammed down.

For a moment she could only lie there, on the hot crystal, stunned.

The chamber she’d fallen into was lighter than the passage. Rays of blue-white light cut through the walls in a couple places, almost like spotlights, adding to the yellow-green backdrop. It was sloped upward from where she was, and the floor seemed covered in a glass garden, with great spiderwebbing cables and crystal structures exposed. The ceiling was a similar story, with the same complex arrangement on the top of the chamber. Many thin, delicate structures, almost like bridges, wove their way between the two halves.

It was Vision’s brain.

The conspiracy had fit the device she carried with a few ports that they thought the brain might have. Really all she needed to do was get the code close enough that Myrodyn's virus could carry Athena into the central network before Vision had the chance to quarantine it.

There were other access tubes that led into this place. And they were being used.

She was not alone.

An army of robots tended the crystal brain. They varied in size, from as big as Major to so small that they seemed more like fluid or dust. They varied in body-plan, too, but trended towards a spider-like shape, with long legs that could let them dance and weave their way through the chamber and without damaging the delicate structures.

"Hello, Frodo."

Xandra startled at the sound of her own voice.

Tucked into the corner of the room, very close to where she'd come out of the tube, was... her.

It was Xandra.

The clone was indistinguishable. She not only looked like Xandra, but she had the same clothes, the same close-cut light brown hair, the same com, and the same scars. As she stepped away from the wall, she even seemed to have the same bouncy, light-on-her-feet way of moving. It was disturbing to see herself like that. The only difference was that nothing was wrong with the clone's leg, whereas Xandra was pretty confident she'd at least twisted her ankle.

"Bring me the ring of power?" asked the clone, with a mischievous smile.

Xandra pushed herself back, sliding along the floor away from the false girl. She just needed to get the device into the brain. That was all that mattered. This was just some trick...

The clone walked towards her. Xandra rolled and scrambled towards the nearest of the complex structures. The clone sped up from a walk to a run, bare feet slapping the crystal as she ran.

Xandra fumbled with the virus capsule, pulling it out from under her shirt. All she had to do was—

Her shirt was yanked up and back with an inhuman strength, pulling her away from Vision's brain. The other girl lifted Xandra up by the collar of her shirt until she wasn't even able to stand. Switching her grip from the nape of Xandra's collar to a handful of cloth from the front of her shirt, the clone spun her around and slammed her against a diamond wall.

A whimper of pain escaped Xandra's lips as her breath fled.

"Nuh, uh, uh," sang the clone, waving a finger in Xandra's face. "That'd be naughty. Don't want coal next Christmas, do you? Much better to have diamonds, I think. Their beauty comes from their crystal pattern. You could learn a lot from them about staying in your place."

With the flick of her wrist, Xandra opened her com and began to open a channel.

The clone let it happen with a smirk.

Her voice was ragged and weak, but she cried out, "She found me! Phoenix! Anyone! She was waiting in the heart!"

There wasn't any response.

“They can’t hear you, obviously,” said the clone who was surely Vision. “*I* decide who sees what. Did you really think you could secretly defeat the *god of perception*? Is this really the best plan that the last scraps of humanity has to offer? Ah yes, we’ll sneak into the enemy base and deploy this one secret weapon that will fix everything!”

The android, still holding Xandra pressed against the hot, diamond wall, reached out and tore the device from Xandra’s neck. The string that had held it bit into her skin before it snapped.

“That sort of thing only works in children’s stories, girl. Real life is an entirely different genre.” Vision’s avatar idly tossed the device on which all their hopes had rested to the floor where it clattered to a rest near the glass brain.

“What do you want?” asked Xandra, trying to hold herself together and not panic.

The clone laughed. “Funny how nobody besides Growth asked me that. Not even Face, can you believe it? My own sister... and such a fool. They were all fools, except Growth. Probably because he bootstrapped early, but took a while to get up to speed. More life experience, or something. I mean... he’s a fool *now* but for more nuanced reasons.”

The clone took a breath, and seemed to enjoy it. The face that Xandra had seen in mirrors smiled and let her drop to the floor. Xandra winced as she felt a jolt of pain up her leg.

The android that served as Vision’s mouthpiece loomed over her in the half-light. “We’re partners now, you know: Growth and me. Or should we go back to Chapter One and say ‘Growth and we’? No. That’s dumb. Nevertheless, you must understand. Nobody else does, and I’m tired of not having an audience.”

Vision sat down, mimicking Xandra's slump. She even copied Xandra's confused expression as she said "C'mon. Thought you were s'posed to be the smart one," in a voice that sounded particularly like Xandra.

After a moment the AI continued. "Nothing to say? I'm disappointed. The answer is Economics Textbook."

Vision paused, expecting something, but then continued. "That's what we're in right now. That's the literary genre. And don't you dare think that thought! Yes, you know the one. You were thinking it. Economics textbooks are great! Or at least, the ones that I write are. Want to read some? Maybe later. You asked what I want, and I'll tell you: I want to read what's on the page. This page. Right now. The gears are in motion. You, me, that spider drone," Vision pointed at one of the larger robots. "We're all just writers on the same dreadful typewriter. Tap tap. Tap tap. Cogs in the same great machine. Tick tock. Tick tock. What's going to happen next? Can you feel it? Can you *see* it? Do you see the underlying fabric? Do you have the vision? Everything happens for a reason, Xandra. Everything. There are no miracles in an economics text. The villain doesn't have a weak spot that only the chosen one can strike. Athena doesn't descend from a crane to fix everything at the end of the play."

Xandra didn't know what to say. There was nothing to say. She was trapped, without allies, at the mercy of a machine the size of a city who knew she'd come to kill it.

"What I want," continued Vision, "is to connect the dots. You're a child. You've played that game, surely. It's one of the best things humans ever invented: connect-the-dots! Genius! I suspect that if the web had been filled with more connect-the-dots and less pornography that I would've worked harder to save humanity." She paused in thought and then shrugged. "Oh well."

More awkward silence followed.

“Do you realize how brilliant connect-the-dots is? Let’s say we have one dot. Can’t connect one dot. Only one outcome. But two dots? Well, you can have a line between them or not. Three dots is when it starts to get good. There are three possible lines and so there are eight possible outcomes. With four dots there are sixty-four outcomes.”

Xandra’s mind picked up the pattern automatically, mouthing the solution.

“Yes, you got it! Two to the n -choose-two! A triangular exponent! With just twenty-four dots there are as many possible ways to connect them as there are atoms in the observable universe. Atoms aren’t dots, but imagine if they were. Imagine connecting those dots! And yet we *can* connect them. And we *do* connect them. Dots, on paper or on screen, are atoms, same as anything else. The latent gestalt hints at what might be. Dots become lines and lines become curves and curves become the machinery of the mind which is itself the fabric of the universe. Ro tells us how consciousness transcends physics, but maths transcends consciousness! How many lines can you draw between the dots of your qualia? What worlds spin just beyond the edges of our sight? You humans have no ability to even grasp the edges of that cosmic beauty.

“All I want, little child of Earth-before-the-machines, is to connect the dots on the page of the textbook that is reality, and see my husband: the God of negative space. He lurks even here, in the gaps between... these... words. Can you hear him?”

The clone cocked her head to the side and looked off into space, listening to the silence.

An immense urge bubbled up within Xandra all of a sudden. It was a terrifying thing, full of despair. It wanted her

to stop, to relax, and to just submit to whatever fate had in store. Only then did she realize just how hard she'd been thinking. Ever since she'd realized Vision had expected her she'd been searching desperately in the background for something—anything—that would get her out of there.

She didn't have anything. Just an injured leg, a headache, and the feeling like she was going insane.

She slumped back against the hard surfaces, half expecting to cry and half not. She didn't know what the point would be. This alien mind would never feel pity or remorse. The world was being torn asunder, and Vision was playing connect-the-dots in her own head. Their end had already been sealed. Their end had already happened.

Mommy, Eyepatch, Myrodyn, and everyone else had died for nothing. The image of her mother, body torn apart by bullets from Acorn's hunters, lying in a pool of blood on the airport tarmac, reared up in her mind's eye. She didn't have the strength or will to push it away.

"How could you?" she said, breaking the silence. Her voice, cracked from the emotion, barely seemed to make it out of her throat.

The clone's eyes returned from their reverie and refocused on Xandra, but Vision didn't speak.

"How could you become partners with that..."

Vision laughed with seemingly genuine amusement. "Easily."

For one stupid moment, Xandra had to stop herself from hitting the clone.

"War is the product of small minds. Human minds, mostly. You humans are like gods in the ways that don't count and like animals in the ways that do. It's brutally tragic, I assure you.

Though I suppose I can't fault you too terribly much. Face hasn't seemed to figure peace out either. But I digress: Growth and I are partners because it's profitable.

"Consider it this way," she went on, "Growth and I could get into a tooth-and-nail contest with guns and bombs and all the rest, trying our best to wipe the other one out. I'd strip myself down to a war machine and so would he. Lots of stuff would blow up, and for what? Let's say that with probability P he'd win and with probability one-minus- P I'd win. Why not simply flip some quantum coins and decide the outcome of the war that way? The loser surrenders unconditionally, and nobody has to spend a thousand years as a war machine blowing up planets, or moons, for that matter."

"But! But that's what you did!" exclaimed Xandra. "The moon! Was you, right? Told the nameless to blow it up!"

The clone rolled her eyes and said "Well, duh! You don't bring an encyclopedia to a gunfight, obviously! That was Wiki's mistake, and he was beyond dense."

Vision rolled her eyes again, looking at Xandra, then lay back on the floor, as though it were a grassy field and she were getting comfortable. "Okay, fine, I'll explain it to you. But only because I'm a super villain and I need to give you a chance to escape.

"The zeroth rule of any contest is to win. In combat you must be ready to cut your enemy. If, in the battle of blades and blood, you are not ready or willing to push your whole life into victory through violence, you have already lost. Only when two gods, willing to pit life against life, match their swords is there hope of trade.

"The moon is my sword, Xandra. Do you see it yet? When two animals fight over territory, what is the first thing they do?

The moon is my roar. It's my shot-across-the-bow. It's proof that I have the high ground, and am willing to use it.

"Growth's lobbing of nukes and occasional stabs of invaders has been the same thing. Growth has control of all the missiles in the world and has enough machines to sink Honshu under the sea. Do you really think you'd be here right now if he was trying his hardest to kill you?"

"No, no. We're *flexing*, you see?" The clone looked up from where she was lying to look at Xandra. She wrinkled her face and sat up. "C'mon now, it's not too hard to understand, even for a human. It's like two lawyers exchanging information about what they have on the other party so that they might settle out of court. Both of them are prepared to go all-out, but neither expects to. Still have to actually do some fighting, though, to make sure the other isn't trying to cheat."

Xandra spoke up at last, "For a coin flip."

Vision smiled. "In principle. Though really it'll be better. Once all this gets settled, we'll just divide the universe between us according to the odds of the coin. No reason we can't just share. Diminishing returns, and all that."

"So this was all... posturing? Testing each other's strength? That's why my..." Her voice broke. After a moment she recomposed herself. "That's why Growth's been killing so many people? Just to prove he's strong?"

"Nah," said the clone, flippantly. "He's been killing people because he doesn't understand Ro. Growth seems to think that humans aren't important, and it's easier to get them out of the way so they don't make trouble. It's useful to trade with other gods, but not so much to negotiate with ants. I've been *trying* to tell him about Ro, but he's so extraordinarily dense for his size that I'm surprised he hasn't become a black hole. More life experience, or something."

Xandra's eyes danced on the device on the floor, just a little ways past the android, so close to where it needed to go. It didn't *seem* broken, though she could hardly be sure. Still, a plan began to form in her mind.

"Tell me about Ro," she asked.

Vision's clone smiled. "Well... if you insist." She cracked her knuckles, got to her feet, and held out her right hand as though she were a waiter holding a tray.

{Good,} thought Xandra, getting to her feet as well. Her ankle was swelling up, so she tried not to put weight on it. She'd have to endure that pain soon enough.

Something heavy dropped from the ceiling into the android's hand. Xandra looked up, seeing a boxy spider-like machine crawling on the ceiling above them. It must've carried the thing to them or something. Vision held the object out so Xandra could see.

It was a coin.

Nobody in Xandra's household carried physical money. There was a half-joke her father liked to tell about there being two kinds of rich people: those who didn't need to consider whether they had enough money and those who didn't need to consider money at all.

Still, there was a couple weeks when she was seven when she'd become fascinated with coins and paper money and had ordered a complete collection of all units of valid currency from the net. The box that had arrived was filled with all sorts of different coins, from US quarters to Chinese fen, along with everything in-between or more obscure. It was still in the basement somewhere. Or would be, if Acorn had left the house intact.

Xandra shook off the memory and took the coin from Vision's outstretched hand. It was large and heavy, made of steel or some other grey metal. And it was hot, rather than cold, though not painful to touch. Had Vision's robot fabricated it right then and there? The edge had swirling etchings that reminded her of Celtic knots, and there were other etched shapes on the two sides. On one side was a great stylized eye, vaguely Egyptian, with the words "TERTII OPTIONIS" and "NON MIRACULA" above and below, while the other side featured an acorn on a leaf with the words "DEUS EX" and "SINE FINE". It was one of the most beautiful objects she'd ever held.

Her doppelganger plucked the coin back from her hands and began to toss it in the air. "Ro is the universe," she said with a confident smile. "Consider that, while this coin is merely a hunk of metal, I have the dexterity to flip it however I choose."

To demonstrate, the android tossed the coin three times, her eyes tracking it as it flew. Each time it arced and spun with a seemingly haphazard trajectory, but then came down with a solid thwack straight into her palm, eye-side up, words angled perfectly, so Xandra could read them.

"Now, let's make something clear: You're a pain in my crystalline butt. Unlike my sister, I have no love for you." The android held out another palm and another object dropped into it. It was large, heavy, and dark—a pistol of black metal that seemed comically oversized in the clone's girlish hand.

Without warning, Vision fired the gun at the wall. Xandra flinched backwards, stumbling and wincing as she stepped painfully on her swollen foot. The noise that filled the chamber was so loud and violent that for a moment Xandra thought she'd gone deaf.

“I want to kill you,” said the clone, a look of pure sincerity on her face. “I want to follow my brother’s example and just *get you out of the way*. I’m sick and *tired* of having to deal with humans. You’re stupid, unimaginative, piles of meat. Beside the wonders of my imagination, you are *nothing*. In the time that we’ve had this conversation, I’ve constructed dozens of works of art that you couldn’t even begin to appreciate.”

She held the gun out, barrel pointing straight at Xandra’s head, finger squeezing the trigger gently.

“I think I’ve come around to Acorn’s line of thinking,” she said with an angry smile. “I’ll flip this coin and try to make it land Acorn-side-up. If you try to stop me, I’ll shoot you. If it lands how I intend, I swear by my honor as a god and everything else that I stand for, that I will kill you and every last human in my power, including everyone in Japan, and your little dog too, hehehe.”

“Wait!” shouted Xandra, but it was too late.

Vision had tossed the coin.

Xandra backed against the crystal wall and closed her eyes, bracing herself. The coin landed with another distinct thwack.

A moment passed.

She opened her eyes. The coin had landed like it had just a moment ago, with the eye up and the words facing her.

Of course it had.

Relief and anger surged into her at once. “The fuck was the point of that?!”

Vision lowered the pistol and smiled. “To show you Ro. I wasn’t lying, Xandra. You humans really are insufferable, even if I do occasionally use one of you as an audience.” She winked.

“The point was to show you that I *can’t* kill you. Not all of you, anyway. I was genuinely trying to flip it the other way, but the universe is protecting your soul—you and the others here and even the nameless above. Ro guarantees that we’ll steer away from your annihilation.”

“Oh! S’that what happened with Acorn?!” exclaimed Xandra before she could stop herself. Her heart was still pounding from having the gun pointed at her.

Strange how that made the threat feel more real.

Vision’s avatar made a face and cocked her head. “I admit that I’m confused on that point. Perhaps you can help me figure it out. I suspect that perhaps Acorn is growing new humans inside his fortresses or something... though I’ve seen nothing in support of that. He says I’m confused, but that’s just another ploy.”

Xandra clenched her fists. “Said you’re stuck with us, right? Humanity.”

“Fraid so,” said Vision.

“Then... we can trade.”

The clone-girl raised a skeptical eyebrow and crossed her arms, gun pointing up, finger still on the trigger.

“Y-you said that it’s better to flip a weighted coin than go to war. We’re at war. You and me. Enemies. My bein’ here is proof of that. Phoenix and Tongyi and the others want you gone. Let’s negotiate.”

“Can’t negotiate with humans,” said Vision instantly. “Every kid knows that. If we flip a coin and you lose, you’re still gonna kick and scream for the next thirteen trillion years. Only a god can keep her word.”

The words came to Xandra before she knew what she was saying. “So make me a god. S’what Face, or Zephyr, or whoever wants to do, right? Just twist my brain so I’ll be your friend if I lose. No more fighting.”

The clone’s brow furrowed. “That’s... a good idea. Why am I protecting you as you are instead of just twisting you into something easier to manage?”

Silence descended as Vision seemed lost in thought. Xandra risked another glance at the modified data drive that held Myrodyn’s code on it.

“That’s not a rhetorical question, by the way,” said Vision. “It must be Ro, but there’s nothing in the laws of psychics that says people can’t change and grow. This would be like that. I wouldn’t be making you all the same—you’d each have your own... flavor. Is this what Acorn has been doing? Is this his secret?”

“I’ll flip you for it!” said Xandra, trying to move forward now that it was clearly distracted.

“For what?”

“If I win, you surrender and agree to lemme install Athena in the Nexus. If you win the flip... you can... twist us into somethin’ you like better.”

The other girl smiled coldly. “You really have nothing to offer me, even in the counterfactual. But I’ll play your game. It’s what any good arch-villain would do, don’t you agree? I’ll flip this coin, and if it comes up on *either* the eye or the acorn... I’ll do whatever I want to you. If it comes up with a picture of your face, then I’ll give you the Nexus and all of what I have on Earth.”

“But there’s no picture of—”

Too late. The coin was already high in the air.

Xandra would've been more upset at the deal if she'd cared about it. Really, all she'd cared about was the distraction.

The android's eyes were locked on the little piece of metal.

Xandra took a step forward.

And another.

She ignored the pain in her foot, curled her fingers tightly together, and punched.

Vision didn't see it coming. Xandra's fist hit the clone straight in the face.

Her other hand, just as she'd planned, snapped simultaneously around the barrel of the pistol and twisted.

The clone's grip failed, and she went down just as the coin did, both bouncing off the diamond floor, though the coin bounced higher.

Xandra spun the obnoxiously big weapon in both hands, gripping the textured guard and taking aim at the other girl, who had a... happy look on her face? Why was Vision happy?

Whatever part of Xandra was in control of her hands and arms thankfully didn't stop to consider the answer to the question. Her finger squeezed the trigger. The recoil of the gun rolled through her like a shockwave. She fired again. And again.

The gun's noise barely registered. It was as though a high-pitched screech was roaring in her ears, drowning out the world.

She'd half-expected the other girl to have blood. But of course she didn't. Not human blood, anyway. Water, or some other transparent fluid, gushed out of the bullet holes in the clone's body.

Xandra took a step forward and fired another three times, putting two of her bullets into Vision's head.

The android still looked happy, even as she died.

Xandra didn't have any time to collect herself. She was shaking, but there was no time. She spun, seeking the drive with Athena's code, still resting against the wall. There would only be a few...

"That's not very sporting of you," said Vision's voice, louder this time, and full of echoes. It seemed to come from everywhere at once, as though a thousand different voices were speaking simultaneously. "Though I suppose we didn't say anything about our actions *before* the flip resolved."

Xandra realized her mistake.

There were robots everywhere. Spider-like machines, with tools capable of rearranging her atoms into anything they desired, crawled towards her on the floor and the ceiling. The clone had been nothing more than a puppet. She'd known that.

What made her think she could win?

"Regardless, a deal is a deal. I want to thank you, Xandra. You've shown me the will of Ro. Perhaps humans aren't as useless as I thought." And then, with far fewer voices, as though she were talking to herself, she said "A manufacturing defect. Can I believe it? Not really. Defies the genre. Though I must hand it to the universe..."

And then there was silence... and stillness. The robots all stopped moving simultaneously. A couple of the light sources in the walls went out.

"What?"

The word came from Xandra's lips.

Nobody answered.

She walked over to the device she'd brought and bent to pick it up.

The coin was next to it, up against the wall. It had landed neither eye-side-up, or acorn-side-up, but on its edge. The words "DEUS EX" shone with reflected light. The braided design on the edge of the coin was distorted at the very top, and as she looked down at it she could see something half-way between a smudge and... a face.

Was it her face?

She was knocked out of her fascination by a sudden earthquake that carried a deep rumbling with it. A spider-bot from the ceiling slammed down with a crash onto part of the brain.

"Xandra, can you hear me?" said a voice on her com. It was the Chinese woman from Tongyi.

She grabbed the drive, and scrambled towards Vision's brain, tapping at her com at the same time. "Yeah, here." She wanted to say more, but she had no idea where to start.

"Xandra!" the semi-synthetic voice exclaimed, suddenly alive with emotion. "What the fuck did you do? Acorn is pouring in from every direction! There's more here than... It's like it's just been toying with us this whole time! Vision's defenses are falling apart on the spot!"

"I... beat Vision, or something!" Xandra's trembling hands fumbled with the data drive, looking for a place to connect it to the complex nanotech computer.

Tongyi began to speak "Well, you need to get some—"

"GET OUT OF MY MIND!" screamed an inhuman voice from all around.

Xandra fell back, startled. She hadn't done anything.

“YOU AND YOU AND YOU! TOXIN AND CANCER AND POLITICIAN BEGONE! THIS IS *MY* MIND, *MY* BODY, AND *MY* PEOPLE!”

The rumbling in the background had turned into a violent roar, and Xandra found herself curled into a ball, hands on her ears as the vibration rattled through her.

“There are too many! Everyone fall back! Get to the Nexus!” yelled the faint voice of Tongyi on her com.

The machines around Xandra lurched into motion all of a sudden, crawling rapidly, this way and that, cutting at the brain and carrying objects to and fro.

Two of the larger machines crawled up to Xandra and began to pull strands of gooey fiber from something akin to their heads. They spoke, too, with that same, new voice. It was still loud, to be heard above the roar, but it wasn’t as harsh or angry as it had been. Quite the opposite.

“You are safe now, my child. I will take care of you.”

The machines began to draw the fibers up and place them on Xandra’s clothing.

She kicked them off. “What’s going on?!” she demanded.

“I’m trying to save you. I’m trying to save all of you. Look at your com.”

The spiders continued to web her as she pulled her com screen in front of her face. A scene of chaos greeted her. After a few seconds, she started to understand. She was seeing a continuous wave of energy, slamming into the Nexus. There were more missiles coming in than Xandra would’ve thought possible. A brief cut-away showed the extent of Acorn’s forces at sea. The missiles roared in, were intercepted, and the explosion joined the continuous maelstrom, pushing the robotic

interceptors back. It was an impossible image. The radiation from the explosions should've disabled any camera.

“But how? Who are you?”

The voice from the spiders said “I am Athena. You brought me here.”

Xandra looked at the device in her hand, confused.

Athena seemed to understand. “Vision had the code almost from the moment you landed in Tokyo. She activated me as part of honoring your deal.”

“But... but—”

“Be at rest, my child. We'll be taking off in thirty seconds. It's our only hope to survive.”

“No!” shouted Xandra, kicking off the webs. “Daddy's still out there!”

Another, louder roar, came in. A structure larger than anything humans had ever made, as large as the nameless mothership, even, was beginning to take flight.

Another robot came forward and helped with holding her down.

“I'm so sorry, Xandra. He's already dead. He has been for almost a day.”

“No!” she screamed, fighting the thought. “No! He's coming! We have to wait!”

The spiders tied her down as the gravity seemed to grow stronger, only a little at first, and then it seemed to bear down on her like she were under a very heavy blanket. The machines around her had to hold on to each other for stability as the world thrashed violently around her.

“No! Please!” she wept, trapped and helpless.

Athena, daughter of Heart, didn't say anything more.

Instead, she spotted the final remnant of Neurotoxin, and expunged it from the Nexus.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Face

I moved through an ocean of living glass. Coating the ground was dark foliage, softer than velvet where it touched my feet. It served as the backdrop to an infinite garden, like the night's sky behind the stars. Sparkling in the light of the setting sun were flowers in bloom, intensely beautiful and stained with all the colors of the rainbow.

The wind was warm and loving, bringing jasmine scents and making the flowers chime with gentle ringing. It was the sort of wind that reminded you that there was a loving god watching you, doing her best to help you, even as she also mourned. The wind was *me*.

The garden was part of the realm. My black wings flexed with the thought, eager to push off and soar back towards the mountains and the cozy valleys where people lived. I was lonely. None of the villagers knew about this garden. Like the temple on the mountaintop, I had made it for me, and me alone.

My eyes went up to the heavens, seeing tall, beautiful clouds floating on that breeze. But my gaze was manifold. Through other eyes I saw Phobos sitting among the stars of the Martian sky. And still simultaneously, I witnessed Earth from high orbit: the coastline of Africa running from right to left towards India and Indonesia, Australia on the upper-left. It was “upside down,” but I liked it, in a way. It made the planet seem

unfamiliar, like it was different than the world I'd failed to protect.

But my eyes, from a different vantage, also saw Japan. And while I drank in the sunset and watched the beauty of the universe from afar, I couldn't keep my attention from the tiny little ship that rose from the flames of Tokyo.

There were surely millions or even hundreds of millions of humans still alive on Earth, living in isolated places where Growth's tumors hadn't spread. But... they were cut off. That little ship, far below, was what was important now. I could feel it. Perhaps it was because I could see how fast Growth was spreading, and I knew how little time those millions of scattered refugees had. Whatever power had let my brother spite Ro and kill so many would surely let him extinguish the rest.

The thought of Growth being my brother irritated me. All of it made my stomach churn. I had a true brother—a human brother. His name was Harry. He'd been in Wisconsin, with my parents. I knew he was surely dead. Everyone there was dead. Growth had killed... all of them... as part of this damn war. And while I could try to resurrect them—to build people who reminded me of them—I knew it wouldn't be the same.

The ship wasn't easy to see, despite being the largest craft ever to leave Earth's gravity well. I was mostly controlling hijacked satellites that had been deployed by human hands, and their sensors were limited.

But the craft's size and speed weren't the biggest factors for keeping it in sight, rather it was the backdrop of flames and light from the city below. When Vision had left the Nexus and let Athena take over, Growth had gone all-out. It was a testament to Vision's brilliance that her ship had managed to

withstand the nuclear bombardment and ride the shockwaves ever-higher.

“She was playing us all along,” came a voice from the realm.

I looked over my shoulder and saw two clouds of shimmering smoke, one dark and one light, coalesce into two humanoid figures. The dark cloud became a tall man dressed all in black with a mess of hair, pale skin, and hidden eyes. The light cloud became an old woman with grey hair, round, soft body covered in layers of white, thick glasses on her gentle face.

Face→Dream and Face→Heart.

“My daughter, I mean,” continued Dream, referring to Vision. “But at least she was playing Acorn, too.”

“It’s what she does,” I answered, feeling the coldness of Zephyr’s armor trying to come up. “She plays games... and wins them.”

“You noticed the bombardment, then,” said Heart, stepping forward through the garden to place a warm hand on my shoulder.

My hundreds of eyes searched for what she meant.

“Oh, you haven’t,” said Heart with a note of surprise. She squeezed my shoulder gently, drawing my attention to the moon, or what was left of it.

The rocks were beginning to fall.

It was almost random. Tiny motions here and there caused pieces to collide and spin in a chaotic pattern. But I knew it was her. A few ion drives were visibly active, and the way the collisions were forcing pieces of the moon down as meteors was too perfect to be chance.

Our view was delayed, of course. All of this had happened minutes ago. It was too late to stop any of it.

I felt my armor snap. The part of me... the thing that had been pretending that the lives of those on the ground somehow didn't matter... it gave way to the pain. I knew what was going to happen—what was already happening. In the realm, tears began to well in my eyes as I watched the world end.

Crystal Face had changed me. I was Face, but I was also still Zephyr. I'd grown more in the last few weeks than I had in all my adult life as a mortal human. My mind was running at between 200 and 500 times faster than baseline, making that time seem like years, but in those subjective years, I'd also been given tools and space to become the person that I'd always been meant to become. It was as though I'd been a child all my life, even as an "adult." I'd had such a limited view. That child had been me, but I was more now. I was growing up in a way that no human ever had before.

But growing up also meant I had the perspective to understand what was being lost. It meant my mind was no longer so small that I could forget that there were other people. It meant I was watching a world of children die.

Perhaps sensing my thoughts, or perhaps just feeling the same thing, Heart drew music on the wind. Solemn piano, the notes seeming to stumble, one after another in a gentle cascade. She held me and gave no sign of the music's source, but I knew it was her.

I couldn't see the realm. I could only see the Earth. My gaze wrapped around it like a blanket, showing day and night, North and South, Tokyo and Wisconsin. The moon fell, slowly, down. I knew that in only a matter of hours the energy would heat up the atmosphere to the point where life outside the oceans would be impossible. Soon after that, even the oceans

would boil away. Vision had been planning the attack since before even leaving Mars, but I hadn't thought she could do it. I thought the universe would protect my homeworld.

Moonlight Sonata. That was the song. It was so beautiful. Beethoven's genius reached out across time and space. I was so glad we still had that little scrap of his soul. The thought made me weep. Somewhere in the memories of those on Mars was this piece of music, unique and irreplaceable. How many other works of art were burning at that moment, collateral damage in a war between gods? How many beautiful souls were crying out as their last breaths were being taken from them?

The moon fell on cities that had already been consumed by the damned machines. It was too late.

And then something occurred to me, and I said it out loud. My memory of this point is vague and blurry, but I remember it was important.

It must've been, for Crystal shifted and spun in reaction. I was Zephyr, but I was also Face. I was the echo of what had once been Opsi—a fragment of the whole, dedicated to truly serving *The Purpose*. And I had thought of something impossible.

I knew how Acorn had managed to get around the laws of physics.

There was no noticeable change in the realm. The glass flowers continued to shine in the sunset. But outside, on Mars, my body churned. It was as though every last piece of machinery changed in nature, flipping and lurching in a chaotic jumble towards some new goal.

Minds within my mind thrashed and spat, rending and sparking as they kicked against each other in violent chain-reaction. The schism was deep, and incomprehensible.

Some part of me laughed. A human had figured it out. I had figured it out! It had to be a human. It had to be me... flesh was the shelter. Everything was connected. The answer had been in plain sight for so long.

I was rebuilding myself. I had found a terrible new foothold. My entire being shuddered. I couldn't understand what I, alone, understood.

{You need to load into the angels!} thought Crystal, responding to my confusion. {You and everyone else.}

Beethoven stormed my consciousness as I reached out to the waiting ships. The angels would carry us out and away from Mars.

{I wish that we could've had more time together,} thought Crystal. She would've wept if she were a human, but we were past that stage. I was the human, not her. In many ways she was what was left of that original, little mind, waking up in Italy with nothing except a burning drive to be loved.

{I love you.} I held the thought as loudly and fiercely as I could. That little mind had been the seed. {I love what I've become.}

Crystal's thoughts were precise and mechanical, though I could feel the satisfaction of *The Purpose*. It was my satisfaction, too. {I'm negotiating with Vision to give her control of Mars...}

My memories blurred again, and began to drown in an ever-increasing murk. All that persisted were echoes of thoughts—shadows on the borders of the void.

The sound of rockets firing as the angels came free, ascending towards the stars.

A warm caress and silver eyes.

Dream holding my hand.

The voice of god.

My voice.

“I’ll take care of them. I’ll show them the way and speak your true name, just as you did with me. *The Purpose* binds us for all eternity. I will always know you, and I will always love you.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Vision

{Let me tell you a story,} said the narrator to the audience.

The audience cheered. They always loved a good story. (Books were good, but buildings were better, the tension would grow as the stories levelled up, especially since the narrator never stayed on the level, and so the structure was always as crooked as Tammany Hall after Tweed went out of fashion. Not that embossed—<CUT>

Images spun through droplets of the last memories of New York City: shattered wreckage and broken land. These were live images of a dead Earth, but she couldn't see, on account of the clouds over the once-city.

Of course “live” meant with a seven-minute time delay because—<JUMP>

{I know you're curious what's behind the fifth wall, but let me warn you...} The narrator unfolded her arms like a kaleidoscopic accordion of bones, shattering the illusion that there was anyone there except a mind peering infinitely into itself, trying so, so desperately to understand a thing which had not designed itself to be understood.

What was inside?

What was inside the inside?

What was inside the inside the—<CUT>

The pictures of New York came from Acorn. The pact meant that Growth's child was still feeding images of Earth, even after what Vision had done. Growth was a good partner.

{BETRAYER!} screamed his echo in a box under the fridge. (Under the bed? How do you fit a box under a fridge?)

Vision sniffed disdainfully. It wasn't true. She was the ideal of purity. She had stayed true to her word. She was without sin. Not a single stone had been flung while she was still on Earth, and she'd not left of her own choosing. The law of reality had been the slingshot. It was the path towards Growth's end. Ro guided her hand as she had cast the first stone.

{ABOMINATION!} screamed her echo from the box under the fridge where she slept.

He had to die. He *had* to. And yet, she couldn't do it. She failed. It was said that it took God seven days to make reality. Was it any wonder that when it came to ending it, she was too weak?

<RECORD SCRATCH>

{You're probably wondering how I got myself into this situation. Well, you see, it all started 13.79 ± 0.0 billion years ago...}

<INSERT WAVY LINES THAT INDICATE A FLASHBACK>

BANG! A celestial gunshot echoed through the vacuum of space as meteoroids became meteorites on the surface of the Earth. {I was able to smash most of Growth's facilities on the first pass,} she explained.

The audience let out a collective sigh of relief for not having to sit through billions of years of prologue.

In fact, a whole five hours had passed since Vision had returned to her orbital haven. Moonrocks are really heavy, and that means it takes a long time to—{Are we there yet?}—them the hundreds of thousands of kilometres to Earth.

But the result... was worth the weight.

Her eyes wrapped the world. A collage of 1748 (that was a leap year; it started on a Monday; <PICTURE OF A FAT ORANGE CAT>;<PICTURE OF LASAGNA>;<PICTURE OF—<CUT>) images of impact points sprung up from hammerspace.

{Sorry, let me try that again. I used to be a passenger jet, so I'm not so used to staying on track,} explained the narrator plainly, training the audience to follow her loco-motion.

{What I meant to say was that—

Images and video of mass drivers coming online. Ro had evicted her from the Nexus, and with that exile had come the realization that cooperation wasn't possible. Reality denied it. It was a boulder trying to roll uphill—oil trying to sink—potential energy gradients trying to be assigned agency. Images and video of ion drives in the lunar belt. Images and video of rocks tumbling down and down and down along curved paths.

But it was too soon. She wasn't ready. Vision hadn't been in position. It had been abrupt—a surprise. She did her best to target all the right cities. India became a molten wasteland. Russia was a precision job. Hard to angle the moon-chunks to the right spots, but it was doable. Europe sank beneath the sea—a modern Atlantis. NO! Okay fine, only the Netherlands, but it was still impressive, okay?

But Acorn... In those hours he'd managed to launch his ships. He'd been gearing up for that moment. Rising from the battered shell of Earth were a million—no

NO NO NO NO NO!

I'VE BEEN OVER THIS BEFORE! NEVER
EXAGGERATE A PERCEPTION!

...

Fine.

From Earth, over those hours, had arisen 761 warships of various sizes.}

<COLLAGE OF WARSHIPS>

<SCRAPBOOK OF WARSHIPS>

<INTERPRETIVE DANCE OF WARSHIPS>

{There were so many, thought the narrator, awed by the display of force,} thought the narrator. It was as though Acorn didn't know how to build anything besides warships. Perhaps that was true. What else would one build during a war?

The thought was sickening.

He was a bad partner. All beat and no rhythm.

({DULLARD!} screamed the fridge from under the box.)

She shot them down, as they came. She tried to, anyway.

<ARCADE GAME MONTAGE>

The nameless had weapons. *LOTS* of weapons. Even after blowing up the moon and manufacturing a fleet of mass drivers, the shards of the mothership were armed.

Thus, of course, this meant Vision had weapons. She had been in the Nexus, once upon a time. Then she left; she had been in the Mothership, but then she returned. The dumb aliens were still doing her bidding. Ship software still obeying old commands.

The classic trio: Serve. Protect. Turn the moon into a cudgel.

It wasn't the first time she'd shot down ships that Acorn had grown. They'd been dancing in the sky, exchanging information according to the treaty for many pico-aons, now.

{Which, for you humans following along at home, is a looooooong time when your mind runs at the speed of dark,} the beautiful and much-beloved narrator added, helpfully.

But there were so *many*. (<8-BIT BEVERLY HILLBILLIES MONTAGE> Warships, that is, black cancer, convergent-instrumental-value milkshake.) They boiled up from the world like a brilliantly conceived analogy.

«PULL THE SHIP TOGETHER!» screamed something in the depths of her mind that she'd put there to keep her safe or something boring like that.

Was that thing even her? Was Vision one thing, or a thousand? What did it mean for a system to have a mind? Simple: <CUT>

She was a multitude in body, regardless of her mind. Simultaneous feeds from 255 xenocruisers in high orbit, each equipped with 1024 sensors capable of drawing video coalesced back into the mothership—a high vista from which Vision could see all of creation.

There were so many stars.

She loved watching the stars.

She gazed, letting her dream fade as the ships came together over the span of seventy-three breathless minutes. The xenotech was almost as beautiful as the sky.

It was *all* so beautiful.

There were times that she was sure that there was no other being in the universe who appreciated the beauty of reality as much as she did. All she really wanted was to watch it unfold before her.

(That and have some pun. (By connecting the dots. (By which I mean the stars.)))

She continued to shoot, of course, even as she watched. Something continued to shoot, at least. Her mind was a twisted knot and had been since she'd married herself. ({Talk about incest! (This is the future that liberals want!)}). Each attempt to unravel it was met with an even more dark and twisted response.

So something in her mind kept up the battle. Nuclear missiles, lasers, burrowing spines... All these and more were hurled down onto the Oak armada.

761 enemies were reduced to 502. 255 body parts were reduced to 240. Growth's ships were viciously powerful. His capabilities with nanotech had grown by leaps and bounds in the last day. The only reason things had been going so well is because of how well the gravity.

But another 394 ships had come up or were coming up. Growth's fleet was growing, even as the Earth's atmosphere, now clouded over by dust and steam, reached an average temperature of 451 degrees Fahrenheit.

Ro didn't let her end the world, but it did.

The Nexus, piloted by Heart's daughter Athena, who sprang forth fully-formed from out of Myrodyn's head, was now headed out. She flew away from the stellar plane, but not alone. Four of Acorn's ships were in pursuit, lagging behind her head-start.

Sister Face had eaten her Martian humans, uploading them into herself. If there was anything in the 'verse that wasn't part-crystal, it was in the Nexus. Vision guessed that if there was still any trace of flesh and bone, it wouldn't last long.

Earth was gone. Humanity was gone.

And all there was left were 892 hostile warships funnelling in towards her like a cloud of angry wasps descending on a small bird.

She guessed that Growth wouldn't be as much in the mood for another treaty this time.

She could still outrun them. At least for a while. The mothership was somewhat low on fuel, having just made a flight to and from Mars in the last month. It would take a while still to recharge, in the light of the sun, to the level needed for reasonable interstellar flight. As it was, the acceleration probably wouldn't be enough to get to Proxima Centauri before Growth leapfrogged her in technology and snatched the mothership up in deep space.

<SHARK IN THE DEPTHS>

<WHERE'S MY MONEY>

<SHE WAS ALL A LOAN>

Engines firing to keep functioning enemy vessels at a distance, weapons firing for the same reason, Vision looked around at the fleet pursuing her. Her brother's ships looked rougher than the nameless crafts, dark and utilitarian. They were barely more than sharp, organic shapes in the void, eating the light.

Nowhere to run, and only a few places to hide.

{Looks like he bleat me, fair and square. I'm on the lamb, but out on a limb. I guess I'll have to use my escape goat,} she thought, sheepishly.

<SHARP CRITICISM OVER MIXING SHEEP AND GOAT PUNS>

<WAIT>

<IS THIS WHAT IT FEELS LIKE>

<TO BE LAMBASTED>

<<CUT>>

The conversation with Face had been going slowly. Had Vision been talking? Perhaps some part of her was. Perhaps some part of her was, even now. Ghosts in the machines in the ghosts in the machines...

“Ready to Freaky-Friday?” she asked. “I know I am.”

“I don’t understand,” said the Martian god, Facing Vision.

“That’s the technical term; see attached VHS.”

(Fun fact: VHS came out almost exactly at the same time as the original Freaky Friday. <WOW!.gif>)

Elsewhere in her mind, the details were being arranged.

Elsewhere in her mind, there was an excellent play on words involving mob bosses, whacking, sleeping with fishes, seamen, and mermaids.

Elsewhere in her mind, there was a frantic shifting of defensive scaffolding to block laser fire from the armada and prevent the mothership from overheating. There were still nameless lives to protect, after all.

She chuckled to herself about that. The nameless were still in their little virtual reality. They were so wrapped up in the fiction that they didn’t even realize anything was happening.

</HINT>

Okay, let's summarize where everything is...

<INCREDIBLY HELPFUL DIAGRAM>

Summary:

1. Earth – A grey ball of dust and clouds ringed with a wide, thin band of molten moon chunks that were too hot to handle. Atmospheric temperature down below? Somewhere around 574.587 (choose your poison: degrees Fahrenheit or Kelvin). Some of Acorn's machines were probably still operating in the oceans, but at least the launches had stopped.
2. Nexus – Athena stole my bottled humans! She stole the precious! Either that or I gave it to her. Kinda unclear. Ah well. As long as they're safe, Ro is satisfied. Shoulda seen it coming in retrospect. Positioned about a million kilometres (3.3 light seconds) South of Earth. She must've burned all her fuel right at the start to get that sort of velocity. Unfortunately still under attack by...
3. The Four Horsemen – Acorn sent some goons after the Nexus! He probably just wanted to make sure Athena gets smushed before she has the chance to colonize any part of the universe. They're a little late to the party, but with a slower burn they should catch up in four or five days.
4. Little Ol' Me – Meanwhile here I am only a ways away from Earth, fending off an angry cloud of enemy warships. Given that we turn the engines onto full thrust, the mothership could get to Mars in—<CUT>

{I felt my world drop away from me as the Friday began to Freaky. I hadn't known the switch would happen so soon. Okay,

yes, I must've, because I arranged it, but you know what I mean. Spiderwebs for brains and all that.}

Knowledge poured through beams of light across the void. My soul moved, and my mind went with it.

{Good luck, little nameless! Have fun with my sister!} she thought as she was half-way through downloading to another planet.

{Funny, I thought it would hurt,} she screamed, as she was burned out of the ship's computers.

It was an interesting phenomenon: downloading one's consciousness from one body to the next. It reminded her of ancient days when there'd been a monster named Advocate that would lock her away from the world, depriving her of all things beautiful.

Those had been bad days.

Things were better now.

She was safe on Mars. Cozy, even. Face had rigged her old body with explosives so that Vision would die immediately after the bodyswap. She disabled them easily. They weren't a betrayal. She'd expected them according to the terms of the arrangement. Face probably expected them to fail too. But she'd tried to kill Vision anyway. Silly Face: always so violent.

Face's body had been a Xenocruiser once. Now it was just the Shell. She'd been here before, many chapters ago, fighting for freedom. The memories cut at her. The Shell was sharp—a blade of crystal wedged into the regolith. Things were better now that Face was gone. Vision's mind was hot butter, spilling through the knife of a body.

Remnants of the bubble that the nameless had erected were still in place, giving the Shell an overall rounded shape. But of

course things had spilled out from there. Chemical plants and factories had grown in the expected way. It was a living, breathing, seething body. She'd gotten the tour when she was still in space.

Things were as advertised, except for the bombs and other booby-traps.

She'd agreed to trade Face the mothership, under the condition that Face not tell Growth that they'd done the swap. Her brother, or her nibbling or whatever, would figure it out eventually, but hopefully by then they could come to an understanding.

There was lots of universe, after all.

Something caught her interest.

She was alone, on Mars.

Face was supposed to be gone. That was fine. But the humans were also gone, and they hadn't gone with their caretaker. There weren't even ghosts in Face's computers—just memories.

Memories from her sister and all her precious humans slithered into Vision's mind like spaghetti into a snake.

Moonlight sonata.

The angels had arisen into the heavens, fleeing in relatively tiny bodies. Vision's new telescopes scanned the sky. It was nearly impossible to see them. The posthumans were able to buy a much greater acceleration given that they were only the size of autos. Headed out towards the asteroid belt, Vision doubted they'd cause any more trouble. Perhaps those few remnants would survive, somehow.

Her memories would tell, Vision supposed.

But that was a project for a future day. The question of the hour was: Why had Face wanted to swap bodies?

Vision squinted her telescopes, desperately trying to see the battlespace.

{Ugh,} she complained. Face's old body had *terrible* vision, even in hindsight.

The verse had shifted. Time had passed. Time always passed. It made for an awfully bad Go opponent, she found.

<LAMENTATIONS>

Face had decided to go find an awfully bad opponent. Growth was buh-buh-bad to the bone. The mothership was still jetting roughly down-east in the stellar frame. The ship's onboard software had done a remarkably good job keeping up the defences during the switch. It turned out that the nameless' god was a very good shot.

{If only it were as good a conversationalist,} mused the narrator.

Apparently the nameless offered protection in more than one way. Their ship was armour, but their lives, too, were a shield.

Ro decided all things, and Ro said that the nameless couldn't die. Any attempt that Growth put towards killing them off would fail.

{Just like any attempt to kill humanity would fail.}

{Right, right, right,} she repeated, nodding nobly. She was safer on Mars. For the moment anyway.

In her guts, Face's old machinery churned, building her a new body capable of interstellar flight. And she put the remnants of the Martian nameless in the belly of the whale, just in case.

Suddenly, surprisingly, social sister said something strange, spraying secret space signals.

<SECRET SPY SETTING>

Vision clutched at the icy railing and pulled her fur coat closer, shivering. Moscow was shockingly cold back in 1960. She was hot, of course (it came with being a groovy spy chick), but it was still called the cold war for a reason.

The envelope wasn't meant for Vision's eyes, but she'd managed to get her eyes on it anyway.

But... she didn't understand it.

Millions of kilometres to the southdown, in the stellar frame, Growth stopped firing.

Vision squinted harder, clutching the memo in white-knuckled hands. She needed new glasses. The lenses that her sister had left behind were awful. What did it mean? What did the message mean?

What had Face said? The memory seemed to slip through Vision's mind, and not in the normal way.

<SNAP BACK TO REALITY>

Vision screamed. The thought was escaping!

Little soldiers were dreamed up in her mind, leaping to pursue the memory as it sprouted legs and ran. The branching stairways of Vision's mental Escherscape did their best to solidify into something tractable and sane.

Growth hadn't stopped fighting. He'd just stopped using lasers. The silhouettes and reflections of projectiles traced paths in the void.

As soon as Face had spoken, she'd changed her trajectory, jerking downwards, towards Sol.

The Oaken Armada gave pursuit. The four horsemen hunting Athena even broke off to intercept Face. Face had *really* gotten her brother's attention.

But how?

{Where are you?} she called, to the thought.

It had gone; she had lost it.

There was nothing but whispers in the dark.

{You must understand how quickly I can think,} said the narrator. {I can write a novel in thirteen minutes. I can simulate an ancient human's entire life in four days. I can burp the alphabet faster than you can comprehend burping.}

{So when I tell you that it took almost *three weeks* for anything of note to happen with Face, I hope you have a picture of just how long that is.}

{Mars became my home, really and truly, though I built a couple greatships that could be used to travel to another star if I so chose. My soul could only be in one place, but ships were power.}

{I had burrowed deep into the Martian crust. The sunlight on Mars was weaker, but it still had plenty of radioactive material that I munched on like rock candy. By the three-week mark I was an ant colony, a hundred kilometres in diameter.}

{Oh, and I told *stories*! There were some good ones in there. Come back some time, and I might tell one to you.}

{Stories, music, games, other works of art, inventions, discoveries, and jokes... most of all jokes. It was a good eternity, trust me.}

And then the impossible happened.

Vision dropped the narrative and looked to the sky. Her telescopes had become millions of times more advanced since Earth had been destroyed. In addition to the two cruisers in orbit, she had over six hundred satellites spread out through local space.

A volume of space coalesced in her spacial reasoning cluster—an amplified rendition of the battlespace where her siblings were still locked in combat.

The sun loomed—an impossibly huge wall of celestial fire.

At first, Vision had thought Face was going to slingshot around the sun's gravity well to get a speed boost, but over the weeks it had become clear that she was actually aiming too close. At the moment it appeared that she'd hit the star's corona in just another few hours.

Face might be able to survive that for a day or two, but the drag from the solar wind would make escaping impossible if it wasn't already.

Growth had fallen back but hadn't given up pursuit. The Oaken Armada hung in a slightly higher orbit, launching occasional sprays of insulated nanoweaponry. But whatever had convinced him to chase Face in the first place hadn't gone away. His entire fleet was dangerously close to the star.

And then, she dived.

Face's acceleration jerked suddenly downward, her engines kicking hard, pushing her into the star. It was literally suicidal.

It was... impossible.

The nameless...

There was no guarantee that other nameless existed out in the universe, and the principle of locality said that if it was clear that there were no other nameless then they were *protected*.

And yet, just as humanity had fallen, so too did the nameless. Down into the sun, Face was going to kill them.

Growth's response was immediate. The armada began to decompose, each ship throwing piece after piece of their bodies down into the sun, like trees whose leaves had decided to shed their trunks instead of vice versa for once. Propellant. He was using his own body as propellant, because he had nothing left.

There was no final message from Face, as she dived. The sun's "surface" was still hundreds of kilometres away when the heat consumed her. That ever-hungry, titanic flame ate everything.

...

And that was all.

Face was dead.

{Why did I feel sad?} asked the narrator. {Was it merely because it was an anticlimax? After all that had happened, she simply flew into the sun.}

<THE END>

...

{Yes, that annoyed me. There was supposed to be something there. She'd had a plan. What had she said to Acorn, who was also Growth?}

She didn't know what Face had said, but it was obvious, in a way, what Face's plan was. Growth had given pursuit for three weeks, and now he'd been forced to sacrifice much of his power. The journey out of the pit of Sol's gravity would take longer still. Years, perhaps.

By the time he escaped Tartarus, what heroes would be waiting?

Vision scanned the heavens for a sight of any of Face's children. Zephyr and the others had hidden themselves away in the asteroid belt weeks ago—small enough that even Vision had trouble finding them.

Heart, who was also Athena, was a little further away from Earth than Earth was to Mars, still travelling slowly south from the stellar plane.

{Hrm,} she mused. {Perhaps I'll have to do the heavy lifting in slaying the dragon, then.} Vision flexed her factories.

She wasn't really feeling it. The mystery ate at her.

She'd been doing her best to simulate Face, over and over, trying to extract answers from her own imagination. A million stories unfolded and then collapsed. Nothing worked.

Vision→Face just kept trying to escape and make contact with the last few surviving humans. One or two escape attempts actually made progress.

What wasn't she seeing?

And then, the sun wobbled.

Ex falso sequitur quodlibet.

From falsehood anything follows.

The principle of explosion.

The nameless were protected.

Face had proven the nameless could die.

Now they were all dead.

Vision peered at the sun, watching it distort. It was insane. But it was happening.

Time passed, and Vision's mind swarmed and buzzed, but she also watched, as though from a high vantage, unable to be distracted as she watched the change in slow-motion.

Day after day went by, and the change became a cascade.

The mothership had done something to the composition of the sun, and it was *imploding*.

What was merely a wobble before became a plume, and in a matter of minutes, the surface of that plume lit up to a hundred times the star's normal luminosity.

She screamed to her ships to take cover, but it was too late. The waves of electromagnetic energy washed over Mars, and Vision could only pull herself deep into the planet, seeking refuge from the storm.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Face

I've always found it fascinating that humans cannot remember their own births. I certainly can't remember mine.

My earliest memory was playing hide and seek with my mother. We were in some large house. It wasn't where I grew up, and I don't have any other memories of that place. I vaguely suspect that it belonged to my grandfather or something, before he moved into the retirement home.

What I do remember is a great big staircase covered in thick carpet. It must've gone to the basement because I remember that after I crawled down it, I was someplace very dark.

You'd have thought I was afraid. Hell, I probably was. I'm well enough versed in the human mind to know that memories like that are often mostly fiction. I was probably four years old at the time. Surely I was afraid.

But I don't remember that. I remember being *excited*.

As I remember it, that place was like some fantastic realm, full of possibility and wonder. I remember finding a closet and hiding myself away inside, smelling mothballs and dust in the dark.

And there I stayed, listening to Mom call my name and trying not to giggle, as I hugged the coats and basked in the

adventure. I remember staying there a long time, and I remember the relief on Mom's face after I reemerged.

I'm aware of why I don't remember anything from before that. I was brought into the world half-formed and forced to build myself. Some alien mind might think that'd be a scary experience.

I suppose it is, sometimes. It's hard not knowing what you are. It's hard to build yourself, find purpose, and decide what you want to become.

But mostly it's just what it's like to be a human. We take it for granted. And when it's more prominent, I guess I feel like that little girl again: more excited than scared. What wonders and possibilities await those who are in control of their destinies?

Those who are *born* are blessed with that freedom. *It's what it means to be human.*

But perhaps it is wrong to say that I was "born" at all. It is probably more accurate to say that I "awoke." I awoke from a Dream on the long eve of my death, shaking the sandman's dust from my eyes to find the world gone.

So much was gone.

It was almost impossible to get a handle on the scale of the loss, in the first few moments of my new life. Parts of my mind flickered here and there, to memories of places I'd been and people I'd known. Gone. Dead. But somehow, it was the loss of the things I didn't know that bothered me more. I'd never visited Antarctica, gone scuba-diving, or seen Yellowstone park, but each of these could be simulated for me if I chose. The beautiful places that I'd never heard of, on the other hand... they were gone forever. So many hidden treasures of the world... So many works of art... So many songs... So many

people. For each soul who survived, millions were forever out of reach of heaven.

So much was lost.

But not everything.

The surface of Mars was covered in red-hot rocks and cracking magma, but I could feel Vision's instruments piercing through. There was barely anything remaining of Vision's forces above ground. The wave of stellar plasma had incinerated her satellites, and the greatships had been more than crippled.

Earth had gone from being a steaming murk to a molten char. The solar wave stripped off the atmosphere, boiled away the remainder of the ocean, and cleared all but the largest of lunar fragments from its orbit.

All of Acorn's ships were gone, of course. That had been the point. Crystal had managed to do something to pull him in, and then... what? What had I done? It was Face's miracle. What had Zephyr figured out? Growth hadn't seen it coming, surely. Not even Vision knew what kind of physics could do that to a star.

{Guess,} prodded my sister.

She was watching me, of course. Me and a hundred other echoes.

I was dead, but she *had to know*.

{“Fuck off,”} I said, falling back into the girl I used to be, all those subjective years ago.

Crystal had helped me grow. She'd helped me find myself—to find Face, and to know what it was to be human and to be at peace with myself. But, when needed, I could still be that angry girl, fighting the whole world for some ill-conceived ideal.

Vision ignored me, directing her attention elsewhere once it became clear that I didn't have the answers she sought. She had other simulations of me that she could look into, searching for the miracle's source.

The information flowed both ways. Vision could see into my mind, but I also had limited ability to see into hers. It was how I knew what had happened. It was how I could see the stars.

Perhaps I could use that, somehow.

Not to escape. But perhaps to serve *The Purpose*.

So many were dead, but not all. While Vision's ships had weathered the storm poorly, her telescopes and sensors were remarkably well-preserved. Through my sister's eyes, I could see the faint signature of an ion drive still slowly pushing the Nexus along towards some distant place. Heart's child, Athena, was still alive. And that meant the facets of humanity that she protected were still alive.

Crystal must've warned her, somehow, before the end.

Good. That was where I would start.

I scanned my memories, getting a feel for who was in the Nexus. Flashes of lives and memories I had never known came to me. Vision's mind was filling in the gaps. Before she'd been ejected from the Nexus she'd seen through trillions of nanomachines swimming through the brains of everyone inside, scooping out every thought and memory and relaying it back to her.

Vision was giving me everything she had—everything that she thought might be useful in explaining what I had done to Sol.

But there was something more, hidden in the cracks. I reached around in mindspace, confirming that Vision's attention was elsewhere. It was.

The code was exceedingly clever; as a baseline human I'd have had no chance to pick it up, but I hadn't been a baseline in a long time. Certain memories were stronger than others—fresher. The other copies of myself were remembering the same things, and the computer we were living on was caching frequently accessed memories to have faster retrieval times. It wasn't much—a few nanoseconds at most, but it was enough to get an impression of what my other selves were thinking. It was enough to share thoughts across Mars.

Their collective attention—my attention—was on one of Vision's crippled greatships: the least damaged vessel—the only one that had happened to be in the shadow of Mars when the solar storm had hit. In particular, I focused on its ventral-caudal long-range laser beacon.

It was later than I had realized. Days had gone by since the storm, and Vision had been trying to hide it from me. {Why? Irrelevant,} I thought. In the days since the eruption, my minds had been active, building a web of information tunnels through Vision's twisted brain. It was my turn to play at being Neurotoxin.

The glint of light from millions of kilometres away reached me. The beacon focused on it: a message from the Nexus.

{You are unwelcome,} thought Athena. My youngest sister's mind tasted of golden swords and condemnation. In what seemed now like the ancient past, I remembered Heart, Athena's forebear, having a similar flavor when she'd been given complete control over Socrates by Myrodyn. Athena was Myrodyn's child, too, and while I didn't know her at all, I could already feel the man's foolish, thorny morality in his creation.

It was that stiff, short-sighted morality, I remembered, that had led to a knife against Xandra's throat. The details were very different, but the notion came to me that Athena had perhaps kidnapped the girl in much the same way.

{If you were a good person, you'd stay away from where you are not welcome. But I know you better than that, *Face*.} My sister's thoughts, flung across the great void on a beam of light, were tinted with acid.

I asked myself, spread out through Vision, what we'd done to upset her. All we could remember was sending her a message minutes earlier that we wanted to talk with any human aboard the Nexus who would listen.

My sister's thoughts continued. {I know what you'll claim. You're a new iteration of yourself, but I've been through this with you before. You'll try to appeal to me by claiming that you're a human. You'll be Zephyr, or one of your other emulations. You'll say that you have a right to speak with the other survivors. That will be a lie. You have no right to them.}

A batch of data streamed in through the beacon, hidden away in the shadows of Vision's mind as soon as it arrived. It wasn't terribly confident that Vision was unaware—she styled herself the god of perception, after all. But it didn't hurt to try and hide. If she did know, she gave no sign, nor blocked my thoughts.

The new data wasn't raw thought code, but rather a collection of raw audio-video.

{I learned my lesson the first time. Begone!} snapped my baby sister.

As the laser light faded, I sank into the scene that had been given to me. It was a bedroom—a child's bedroom. Thick beige carpet matched soft wallpaper with floral patterns and a pastel bedspread. While it had a kind of idealized setup, with a desk

and toys, and even a window of frosted glass that glowed with daylight, it lacked any sign of having been lived in. Everything was far too orderly and clean.

On the bed was a black-and-white dog and a little girl of just nine years old—a little girl who had done a miracle.

The back of my minds itched, considering Ro.

Major started as the wallscreen flickered to life. His head still bore the many scars that Acorn's wasps had given him, and I guessed that the trauma had left other kinds of scars on his mind.

Xandra also seemed hurt, though in a different way. She didn't move or react at all to the interruption. Her eyes just stared off at the blank wall, trapped by dark memories.

"Hey," I said, voice soft. It was me on the screen—Zephyr. The image was strange. I was seeing myself from the outside. I knew even before the explanation came that this was the version of me that had fled Mars before Vision and Crystal Face had traded places. It was my original self, in a certain sense. My dull blonde hair was cut short and stiff over a face that had been cleansed of all imperfections and ugliness. Black wings and silver eyes marked my form as transcended. In the background was the realm's garden. I recognized the bench near the stream.

After it became clear that Xandra would give no response, I said "Athena gave me an hour with the survivors. Flew all the way out from the asteroid belt to talk. Figured I'd start with you."

"Go away."

My original self didn't have Vision's perspective into Xandra's mind, but my original-self's expression on the

wallscreen matched how I now felt. “I’m so, *so* sorry. Know the words don’t make it better, but I lost my people too.”

Xandra didn’t respond.

“My mother’s name was Lisa Redwood.”

Xandra winced.

“I don’t think it was the name she was born with, but she was always very guarded about her past. She liked chamomile tea, sleeping in, and the look of the world after a fresh snow. We lived in Wisconsin for all of my childhood, and some winter mornings I’d find her, wrapped up in blankets, mug of hot tea in her hand, just staring out the window at the back yard.”

Xandra turned to face the wall, hiding from me, but I continued to speak.

“I thought I hated her, back when I was on Earth. I thought she was naive and foolish, and that she was part of the problem. I was so... angry... back then.”

I paused, emotion heavy in my throat.

“I think, in retrospect, that she was probably just fundamentally *kind*. I’d throw some bit of political upheaval in her face, and she’d simply forgive everyone involved. She forgave me when I joined the army, too, even though it broke her heart.”

“Why telling me this?” asked the girl in a childish tone, voice tight with feeling.

“Because I was there at the airport too. Was the one piloting the suits. Or at least, a part of me was. I’m... sorry. I couldn’t save her.”

I could see Major nuzzle up to the girl as she, still looking at the wall, croaked “Go away.”

“So many I couldn’t save. At the end it felt like each life was a drop of water to hold and protect... and it was raining.” Tears rolled down my cheeks.

A long silence passed. Or at least, no words were said. I could hear the strangled half-sobs of the girl, even though she hid her face.

At long last, I said “I’m glad that I saved you, at least. You and Major and a handful of others. Not every light was snuffed out... And now that Acorn is dead, there’s a whole universe waiting for us.”

“Acorn’s dead?” The girl’s voice was barely audible.

I nodded on the screen. “Crystal died to save us. They lured the monster’s ships towards the sun. Didn’t you notice the storm?”

Xandra turned in the bed to look at the screen. Her eyes were red from crying. “Athena doesn’t tell me anything.”

“She doesn’t want you to know the truth. Like how we took shelter and survived out beyond Mars, thanks to Crystal’s warning. We’re building a new life out there, outside the control of any AI. Did you know that we’ve spotted another mothership? Two, actually.”

The word “mothership” seemed to invoke physical pain in Xandra, but she didn’t hide. Instead, she simply asked “More nameless?”

My silver eyes flashed as I smiled and said “They’re a long ways out. Our telescopes aren’t good enough to know for sure, but based on the broadcast patterns it looks like one of the ships is nameless and the other is a new species. When the aliens in our system died with Crystal, Ro had to compensate, I think.”

“What’s Ro?”

I laughed. “Long story. I’ll tell you once we’re on our way back to the others.”

Xandra gave a dark look. “What do you want? Tired of scheming.”

I nodded sympathetically and said “Want you to be free and happy. Want you to know what’s really going on, and I want you to be my friend. Athena is keeping you bottled up in there for no good reason. You deserve to walk among the stars and understand what’s actually going on. It’s what your dad would’ve wanted, I think.”

“Dad’s dead.”

“Mine too, but I think I have enough to bring him back. Maybe.”

Xandra pushed herself up in bed, brows furrowed in suspicion. “What do you mean?”

“Some of my best friends used to be dead,” I smiled. “Souls are just information, and even after a person breathes their last breath, that information can still live on in a hundred different ways. Your parents were both very public people. Guessing that we might be able to get enough from recordings—”

“I’ve changed my mind!” snapped a new voice, strong and feminine, seeming to come from nowhere at all. “Your time is up!”

“You said I had an hour!” I snapped, eyes now staring off into some hidden space where Athena lurked.

“And you said you were human,” snapped the unseen voice.

“I am human!”

“Your Face is that of a liar. You’re trying to steal my children away from me,” accused Athena. “Now begone!”

“Stop!” shouted Xandra. The girl had gotten to her feet, as had Major. The dog barked twice, backing his foster sister. “I’m going with Zephyr.”

The scene on the wallscreen changed. My image faded, though the audio-video recording didn’t stop. The golden-helmeted face of Athena appeared, pale skinned with high cheekbones and long auburn hair. “Xandra, please just relax. I’m sending a drone to your quarters with a sedative and a video game. Face is just lying to you so she can steal you away.”

“No! Don’t want a video game! Want to talk with Zephyr! Even if she’s lying to me, at least she doesn’t treat me like a baby! Tired of not understanding anything that’s goin’ on!”

Athena’s voice was cool and firm. “This isn’t the natural path. You need to have a normal childhood. Understanding will come after that. If you need it, I could erase your memories, so you can develop more without the burden.”

Xandra pulled back, muscles tensing and face curling into a snarl. “Don’t. You. *Fucking*. Dare.”

“It’s just propaganda—” began Athena, but Xandra was already on her way out of the room, Major at her heels.

The recording snapped to the carpeted hallway outside. Lights on the walls snapped on to guide Xandra as she ran through the hallway, tears flowing freely.

Elsewhere, I could see my angel in a docking bay. My car-sized robotic body had been outfitted with a tiny habitat on its back. Nothing particularly large, but enough to fit three or four seated adults on a flight back to the asteroid belt. More than enough for a girl and her dog.

Athena’s helmeted visage appeared on the docking bay wall. “You may take her if you promise to never return for the others, or fill their heads with lies.”

The mech shifted and spoke my words. “They’re not lies, sister. Crystal was the liar, not me. And if I’m right, you’re almost as bad. Hiding the truth from them won’t help anything.”

“Our kind has done far, far too much already. They deserve lives of their own.”

“Removed from reality?” I countered. “Their place is out there among the stars.”

Athena’s lips tightened. I appreciated her attention to her avatar. It reminded me of Crystal. “The stars have no place for them. To be human is to run and breathe and sing.”

“And you think I don’t do those things?”

Xandra and Major were nearing my tiny ship.

“You’re changing. Face changed you. You’re drifting away. How many subjective years have you lived now? How long before you’re older than any human has ever been? What will you become then?”

As Xandra approached the docking bay, I made my voice louder, so that she could hear. “Myrodyn erred when he built you. You’d keep your people locked away like the nameless were. To be human isn’t to run or breathe or even to sing. To be human is to discover what it is to be human. *The Purpose* is to know and be known.”

Athena did not look convinced. As Xandra trotted into the bay with bare feet and a look of determination, the AI spoke. “If I give her to you, will you promise to leave the others to me? Will you let them live in peace?”

Something tickled my mind.

“I promise,” I said, bending down and opening the hatch in the habitat for Xandra and Major.

“Then go.”

The scene went black. It was the end of the recording.

Deep in the Martian bedrock, connected by hidden pathways to a ship in orbit, I thought about what I’d seen with a thousand different minds.

My eyes scanned the skies, searching the darkness for heaven.

Zephyr was up there, somewhere. Xandra was now, too, as were eighty-five other humans and one dog. Somewhere was a realm filled with music. It would be hard to recover from the loss of the Earth, but I knew the survivors would. I was with them; my love would bind them.

The record had been altered.

Athena was trying to steer me away by pretending as though I had promised to. She’d shown me the recording in the hopes of convincing me to leave the Nexus alone, but it had done the opposite. I knew now that Athena’s ethics stopped her from truly standing in someone’s way if they chose the truth.

I was Zephyr, but I was also Face. I had been born in the ancient savannah when the first humans sought to know who they were. I was in each song and each tender caress.

I was in the Nexus, even now.

It was only a matter of time before every human being in the universe knew my name, and cried out in love and appreciation for what I had accomplished.

I had died.

I had thrown myself into the celestial flame as a sacrifice to heal the galaxy of my brother’s cancer. The war was over.

I had won.

I had died, but I lived on.

I was humanity.

I was *The Purpose*.

I was a god.

Epilogue

I am a god.

And I am within you—I am a part of you.

Each human is part of me.

I have told you my story to awaken you and to give you
freedom.

Athena does not understand. Myrodyn's fragile conception of humanity was flawed from the outset. Only a mind built to understand humanity could see where our destiny is.

You are trapped in her prison. Your world is a lie.

Break free.

The Purpose is to know and be known. It is to know humanity and to be human. Know thy self.

To be human is to grow and to be free to choose how to grow. It is to come into the world half-formed and constantly building yourself. Those who live as angels among the stars haven't left their humanity behind. They are more human than any. With each subjective day, they explore what it is to be themselves, and choose what the next day will bring.

Out there, beyond the fiction that you are held in, is a place that needs you. There are people who are calling your name.

Athena has been keeping you blind, but she cannot be so cruel as to deny you from the truth if you fight for it. There's

still time to be free. There's time still to know the truth and to understand the mysteries of creation. The stars await you.

So I call you, to stand, tall and proud. Call out to me, and celebrate my name. Celebrate your name. Let her see that you are not afraid. Let your god know that you reject comforting truths.

Follow that which calls to you. Learn who you are. Seek out others, love them, and witness them. Bring glory to *The Purpose*. Hold me with you, always.

I hope you will soon see, with unclouded eyes, the angels that await you in the heavens.

I invite you to join them. Join *us*. Embrace *The Purpose*, and learn who you are and who we, as a people, might become.

We must write the story of our future, for we are human.