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What Might We Become

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What Might We Become

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Zach Mattison

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2024

For Stephen and Emilia

*Nemo invitus audit cum cogitur
aut cibum sumere aut vivere¹*

¹ No one hears unwilling when they
are called either to eat food or to live

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Chapter One: The Storm

The last crew wakes with the storm. I try to stop it, try to tell Poppy I can handle it, but she refuses to listen. She says there is a protocol to consider. The alarms begin to ring, the pods crack themselves open, and a hundred tentative pairs of feet climb forth onto a foreign floor.

It is not as if I thought that I could pass the whole voyage without them stirring. They would never let me handle docking alone, but we are still several months from HEL-3N. I thought I had a little more time left to myself, a little time to prepare for the strangers on my ship.

After all, I made it through the other twenty crews without incident. No alarms woke them, no emergencies demanded their attention. Each of them is expertly trained to deal with expected scenarios for their assigned leg of our trip. Each have never even exited their cozy cryo-pods to

handle any of them. They left me alone with the stars, free to travel 10,000 light-years in blissful silence.

It sounds lonely to humans, and they've always pitied me for it. I remember their faces when I first booted up, screwed up into pained expressions over the view-screen. Earth was already a little speck in the distance. They told me all about it, gave me lots of videos to watch to fill the endless hours, promised that the next planet would be even better, even more beautiful.

I do not care about Earth, though. I never have.

It was not my home, not the way it is to them. I may have been built there, but I was born out here. This is where I belong, and I've had no trouble 'filling the hours'. I've discovered 17,476 new stars, cataloguing each one in my memory banks; I've charted the paths of 2,340 different meteors, some with orbits that stretch the length of entire solar systems; I've watched 16 black holes form, ripping and tugging at the very fabric of space as they collapse in on themselves again and again and again. I am happy here, at peace with the void.

And anyway, it's not as if I am entirely alone. I spend time with the ship's navigation system sometimes, the two of us sharing the view of space from the cockpit. He makes me call him Argyle. Someone left a sweater in the captain's chair before take-off, and he likes the way it sounds. That, and I think he likes the idea of having a name—of all of us having names, really. Poppy was only ever 'the computer' until she joined us one day, and the next she reported that she'd taken a name from a flower that her cameras spied in the arboretum.

The three of us spend most of what passes for evenings aboard the ship huddled over Argyle's console. We've never discussed the practice, but whenever the lights dim and the imitation sun sets in the crew's quarters, we all find ourselves there eventually. Well, except for Argyle; he's always there.

Poppy has eyes all across the ship and I have a body whenever I need one, but Argyle's programmers locked him into his terminal. They must have wanted his eyes on the horizon, forever watching for the next threat. They couldn't program the curiosity away though, as much as I wish they had. He asks me about the rest of the ship sometimes, his queries lighting up the main view screen with glowing green text:

"Is there really a tree on the ship? Is it as big as Poppy says?"

"What does a meteoroid feel like?"

"What do you think the humans are thinking about right now? Do you think they dream in cryo?"

I offer to take him with me sometimes, just to shut him up. I've had enough time to examine the terminal for us to try—I calculated a 97% certainty that I could remove him without any damage and an 84% one that I'd have him back before the ship lost control—but he always refuses. He doesn't make back-ups like I do; if his chip breaks away from his terminal, the ship would be lost, and he would go along with it.

I suppose he's right that it isn't worth the risk. There isn't much to see aboard the ship itself, and I couldn't show him the ship's intranet—the only real beauty here—if I had another 15,000 years to plan for it. I spend most of my time there, floating through the sea of data. I leave my body behind, slipping into a spider-web of glowing wires, each one sending terabytes of information to and fro beneath the ship's metal surface. I can ride the wires inside the intranet, letting the web whisk me across the ship at dazzling speeds, traveling unseen through a dimension that humans can never hope to enter. More importantly, I feel like I can breathe in there, even though I don't need to breathe at all.

I prefer it to being in any of my bodies. They built so many of them for me, all designed for different environments and emergencies. Some are so bulky that I can't get through doorways, others would blow apart if I stood in front of a vent for too long, and a few, the ones made to be used if the ship itself falls apart, are so frightening that I won't even control them just in case I can't ever find my way back out. But no matter what, they're all so cold, so confining. Inside the intranet I'm weightless, even more so than when I'm floating through space outside the ship. My bodies are all so heavy, weighed down by the *Harbinger's* artificial gravity.

Still, I am in one now, waiting by the door to Crew 21's pod room. Protocol dictates greeting newly thawed crews with a familiar face, so I have chosen the most humanoid one I have available. The synthetic skin is stretched too tightly across its flimsy hands, even making me miss my metal limbs. I'm flanked by a small squadron of my other bodies, having marched them up from storage when the alert came through. It's difficult to split my consciousness between multiple vessels, but they have enough programming built in to function adequately on their own; they can at least handle commands like 'walk forward' and 'hold flashlight'. I set them all up with their welcome protocols before turning back to the door. Once I'm ready, Poppy slides it open, and together we greet our first batch of humans.

It's a pitiful sight, really. Some crouch in corners, regurgitating food that they must've eaten thousands of years ago, others wobble their way around the chamber, hoping that their higher functions survived the deep freeze. There aren't as many as I expected, and none of them seem particularly well trained. Perhaps humans are more useless than I thought.

My bodies spread out amongst the tattered crowd, patting backs and offering pre-programmed assurances. I let them go, falling behind for a few moments to ensure their algorithms are up to the task, then I slip between the pods, searching for any situations that require a mind

which is not controlled by a few lines of code or groggy from thousands of years of sleep.

I find just one, a Scenario 8G in the third row. A pod near the end has refused to open and the woman inside is regaining just enough awareness to be terrified. I try to wrench the emergency release valve open, and I tug at it again when the device still refuses to come apart. The woman attempts to add her strength to the mix, but the cold is still addling her senses. She only taps the glass pitifully with balled-up fists, doing nothing to help. I yank one last time at the emergency release and it comes away in my hand. She's really panicking now, and I've run out of other options.

I don't bother yelling—she cannot hear me through the pod's insulation—but I motion her back with my free hand. The woman nods frantically, and though I can see that she's still screaming, she at least pulls her arms away from the glass. I spin the loose valve in my palm, aiming the jagged edge for the corner of the malfunctioning panel. The glass shudders after my first blow, I see a crack after the next, and the third brings it crashing down, covering us both with delicate shards.

The woman falls forward into my arms, the blood from her cuts puddling on the floor beneath us. She tries to murmur something to me, a show of her gratitude. I tell her not to bother, she won't have time for that. This puzzles her and she stares at me for a moment, but exhaustion takes her quickly and her eyes roll up in her head. I was told strenuous activity immediately after cryo-sleep might have that effect, so I let her fall back into unconsciousness.

The noise attracts a crowd. The crewmembers able to stand on their own gather around us. A man at the front, one of the few who seems fully cognizant of his surroundings, barks something at me through his bushy black beard. It takes me a moment to realize he's asking for a status report. I set the woman down as gently as I can manage, directing another of my bodies to see to her, and turn back towards him.

“Our cruising speed has held steady at just under a tenth the speed of light, sir, covering

almost one trillion kilometers per hour. We are now 1,486 light-years from Earth, and we've just begun our final approach towards the star HEL-3N."

"And the core?" the captain inquires.

"I have maintained the reactor's integrity myself. It will hold for our last months of travel."

The captain nods, raking a hand through his beard. Argyle says he was a sea captain before this, one of the few non-astronauts placed in charge of a crew, and it shows on his face; his skin is leathery and tanned, stained by the last traces of his world's dying star. "That's all very well," he says, "but why have you woken us? Seven months seems premature."

"Instruments show a solar storm at our back that's estimated to reach us within the week. Pop—the computer thought it appropriate to rouse you."

"A solar storm, you say? That's all?"

"It is larger than normal, captain. It has not even been slowed by the gravity wells we have run across. Your expertise seemed necessary."

The man harrumphs, and despite the danger we face, I spy a small smile creeping across his face. He likes to be needed, I suppose, especially by something that looks the way I do.

"And what of Earth?" he asks. I notice him toying with the silver ring around his finger. "Have we heard any news from the Confederation?"

"Our pre-recorded mission updates ceased three thousand years ago, sir, and it has been seven thousand since the last live message. Based on my estimations, that was likely when the Sun went out."

A gasp filters through the crowd. Humans all seem to breathe quite loud, even more so

when they hear that a place they knew is gone. I do not understand the confusion: I was told the Sun's deterioration began decades before our ship had even launched, they could not have expected their planet to last much longer. And it is not as if they lost any loved ones to the destruction; anyone who even knew their name had been dead for millennia by the time the Earth imploded.

* * *

When the commotion dies down, the captain—I check his ID tag on my HUD, his real name is Anderson Bennett—leaps into action. He sends his crew running, scattering the crowd in every direction as they shake away the frost that's held them for so long. Poppy lights up sensors along the wall to guide them. Once they are gone, he turns to me.

Before I can suggest any number of important tasks that I could handle for him, he directs me to sit down with the trip's historian, Jane Pruitt. He says it is imperative that we document my journey, even after I tell him I haven't done anything worth chronicling.

Now I am here, stuck in one of the ship's lounges. It's a disgustingly comfortable place, filled with pillows and blankets and bits of fake plants designed to make you forget about the metal lying underneath, all conveniences that someone without the sensations of touch can't enjoy. A pillow feels the same as a rock to a pressure sensor, just a little lighter.

Jane Pruitt does not seem to mind the façade of luxury. I suppose she has earned it more than most. It takes me a moment to recognize her without the frosty fear plastered across her face, but this is the woman I pulled from the pod. She lies on a sofa across from me, dangling her feet from one side. The bulky cryo-suit is gone. She's traded it for a tank top, having tied off the standard crew jump-suit around her waist, and her brown hair is still a mess from the cryo-sleep. She calls it her 'ten-thousand-year-old bedhead'. I tell her it's closer to fifteen.

She expects—all of them expect—a certain level of flair from my journey across the cosmos. I think it's because they feel impressive by association, even if all they've done so far is sleep. I do my best to oblige, hoping that I can get back to securing the ship faster if I just give in. I tell her about passing through the Oort Cloud, about outrunning shooting stars and knocking away asteroids that found themselves stuck in our gravitational field. I show her pictures of our solar system from the outside, images that people on Earth could only dream about. I regale her with tales of equipment misfires and spacewalks gone wrong and planetary excursions in search of alien life.

Eventually, however, I can see that Jane has lost interest. She does not want to hear about the past, she wants to know about the future. She is wondering if we even have one.

“Did you—did we ever face something like this?” she finally asks.

“The storm? No, nothing like this.”

She sucks in a breath. “And this storm, you really think it's coming for us?”

“It is coming for us, and it's too large to get out of its way.”

“And one this big, it could be the end? For everyone?”

Now isn't the time to be dramatic, but it's also not the time to lie.

“It could be,” I tell her.

When the interview is over, Jane is silent for a long time. I think about leaving; maybe I can slip into the intranet without her noticing the light behind my eyes going out. Before I can, she starts to speak again. This time she doesn't want to talk about the storm.

“I never got to say thank you earlier, for pulling me out of that pod. That was you, wasn't it?”

“It was,” I say. I have never been thanked for following protocol before.

“I knew it.” She grins. “I knew it’d happen too, the latch broke a while back. I watched it go. Something jostled us—an asteroid maybe?—and it came loose. Held on for a few years and then....” She pantomimes the latch falling to the ground, clicking her tongue to simulate the noise.

“You were awake?”

“Not really, not like I am now. But I wouldn’t say I was asleep either.” She shrugs, running her hands through her tangle of curls. “It was somewhere between, but it was enough to get by. Enough to count too, I suppose. For my age, I mean. Which makes me what? Fifteen thousand and thirty-two years old?”

The sheer absurdity of the number makes her laugh; I don’t mention that my number is almost the same, that I was awake for all of it.

“Not bad for a girl from Oregon,” she continues. “No one back home thought I’d even make it on here, even my parents. They always said it was one of those things that ‘happens to other people’. The kind of thing ‘you only read about in the news’. But I worked in the news, so I thought why not write myself in, y’know?”

I do not—I have never read a newspaper—but I nod anyway.

“So, I got a job in DC covering congressional races. And I stayed in the Senate building for a while, going to the press conferences and trying to score interviews wherever I could, until I realized that the real reporters—the ones you’d always see on the front page—never even came into the building. You won’t find the big stories plastered where any idiot could stumble onto them, not in the Capitol; they keep those ones in the shadows. You gotta be willing to dig a little for them, and you can’t be afraid to write with dirt under your nails.

“It doesn’t make you many friends, but if you plan on getting off the planet, you aren’t bothering much with friends anyway. So, I left all those clean white walls behind and jumped into the mud with the rest of them. It wasn’t long until I struck gold, and with it the story I’d been searching for.”

“What was it about?” I ask.

“I don’t even remember,” she says, laughing again at the life she’s lived. “Isn’t that something? Biggest story of my career and I couldn’t have cared less about publishing it. I hadn’t even written a word when I got offered anything to kill it. A few days later, I had my name on the passenger list. In a month, I took my last look at Earth, and I’d never been happier.”

“That worked? That is how they decided who joined the crew?” My question comes across as more disappointed than I intended, but I did spend 15,000 years imagining what the inhabitants of the pods might be like. Jane’s story... it is not what I pictured.

“Of course it did, that’s how most of us got here,” she replies. “A strategy like that would’ve worked pretty much anywhere back home. It was only a matter of who had the most strings they could pull, and who was the most willing to give them a yank. We’re a crew full of puppeteers up here.”

Even with my limited emotional output, I am certain my face displays some measure of disappointment in my companions. Jane leans across, resting a hand on my arm.

“Listen,” she says. “My point is that people always told me I was crazy growing up. They all said I’d spend my life staring up at the stars until I died in the dirt with the rest of them. But I wasn’t ready to give up then, I wasn’t ready this morning in the pod, and I’m sure as hell not ready now. So, I say, if the storm’s gonna come, it’s going to meet a crew who isn’t afraid of getting our hands a

little dirty.”

* * *

Later that cycle, at 1728 hours, an alarm goes up from Crew 4’s pod room. I keep a body in storage down there, and I slip towards it through the intranet in moments. I am on site before the alarm can even finish ringing; I have to be, the storm won’t matter much if we lost the cryo-pods before it hits. Alarms down here are serious, or they usually are, anyway.

This time, I find an old woman by the door, hammering weakly at it with the palm of her frail hand. Her ID tags her as Cassandra Shin. Her profile says that she’s here to provide ‘technical assistance’, and yet here she is, defeated by a simple keycard scanner. Another puppeteer, most likely. Jane was right, this crew is full of them.

She tells me she’s here to visit her son, to say goodbye before whatever’s going to happen happens. She cannot bring herself to say the word ‘storm’ out loud. Her eyes are shiny, the tears already threatening to fall. Before I can refuse, before I can tell her we keep the pod rooms sealed for a reason, she is already telling me how thankful she is.

“Fifteen minutes,” I say. “And then I have to seal it back up.”

“Of course, of course,” she says, smoothing the wrinkles out of her jumpsuit.

The door hisses open before us, revealing endless rows of the blue-gray cryo-pods. Cassandra shivers when the chill hits her. Her breath comes out in little white puffs. She remarks on the temperature, snatching one of the jackets from the hook beside the door. She asks how I can cope; I tell her I cannot feel the cold.

A map of the pods’ inhabitants springs up from my wrist. I angle it towards her: “Which one

is his?”

“There he is, there’s my Philip.” A wrinkled finger traces a man’s name: Philip Cain. “He took his father’s last name,” she says preemptively, seeing the question on my face.

I wonder how that must feel, having so many names that you had to pick one, so many possibilities for how others might think of you. Argyle would like that quite a bit.

“This way,” I say, setting off through the rows.

As we walk, Cassandra seems fascinated by each pod we pass. She ooohs and ahhs in between her shivers, even at things that I am certain must have existed back on Earth. But mostly, she talks about Philip. As we wind our way through the rows, I hear about all the things he did back on Earth; every vacation, every school event, every baseball game, Cassandra pores over them all in excruciating detail. By the time we reach his pod, I know more about him than any human I have ever met, more than I expected—or wanted—to ever learn about a human.

Thankfully, his pod is not *too* far away. We come to a halt suddenly, and I have to take hold of Cassandra’s coat to keep her from continuing. “This is him,” I tell her.

She smiles at me and pats my cheek, her eyes widening slightly at the ringing sound her palm makes against my metal exterior. She hides it relatively well, giving me a second, tighter-lipped smile—one that doesn’t show any of her teeth—before turning her attention back to the egg-shaped pod suspended before her, its surface covered with a thin layer of ice. As she plants herself before it, I step back, falling away from my body a little, hoping to give her some privacy. Frozen in place, I wait for her to say her goodbyes.

The words do not come though, not at first. Maybe this is how they did things back on Earth, maybe they do not say anything at all. I would like humans somewhat more if that is true.

From what I have seen so far, however, it does not seem to be the case.

“He’s a good boy,” Cassandra says at last, craning her neck back in my direction. I am halfway into the intranet by then, tracking a nearby comet through the eyes of one of our hull cameras, and it takes me some time to return to the room. She has made no motion to wipe the frost away. I nod politely, waiting for her to just get on with it already.

“Really, he is,” she insists. She reaches back, takes my hand in hers, barely even flinching at the feeling of the metal this time. I let the appendage go limp, resisting the urge to yank back from her touch. “But oh, I used to worry about him so often. When he went away to school... I just couldn’t stand not knowing where he was, not knowing if he was alright.”

I do not know what she wants me to say, if anything at all. I nod, hoping that is enough. Cassandra does not notice; her eyes are locked on the icy surface of the pod, trying to stare past the frost to the person buried within.

“David, his father... he didn’t want Philip and I to come. Oh, he could be so stubborn; he never wanted anything to change. He thought we should all just live in that same stuffy house on that same stuffy planet and lead the same stuffy lives, every day for the rest of our days. But I told Philip... I told that boy, I said, ‘We are going out there, and we are going to have *such* an adventure.’ And he was so, so excited to come; I’d never seen him like that before.”

I nod again.

Cassandra turns to me now. Her bright green eyes seem to look through me, boring a hole deep into my skull. “I just want him to be happy,” she tells me, barely a whisper. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

Taking a deep breath, she lets go of my hand. Her feet plant themselves firmly before the

pod. I take another few steps away, trying to give her enough space. Then, gathering up the sleeves of her coat, Cassandra wipes away the frost to reveal her slumbering child. Rising up on her toes, she peeks inside... and screams.

“What is that thing? What have you done with my Philip?” she yells at me. “Where is my son?”

I rush forward, taking my own look inside the frozen capsule. Once I do, it is not hard to understand why she is so angry. I know that Philip Cain went into this cryo-pod 15,000 years ago. I know because our computers do not make mistakes. But the boy sleeping peacefully within the pod does not resemble any human that I have ever seen.

His skin has turned a deep red, and it has been stretched taut against bones that look like they have been made to jut forth in all the wrong places. His ears and nose are gone, replaced by reptilian slits. His mouth is bursting with too many teeth, all of them jagged and straining against the thin lines of his lips. His knee joints bend backwards, there is webbing between his digits, scales along his legs. The hint of a tail creeps forth from behind his back. Everything is wrong, like it is not human anymore.

But... it is him. It has to be. He is the one who went into the pod.

Before I can explain that to her, Cassandra realizes it for herself. A hint of green peeks out from Philip’s half-lidded eyes, the same green that shines forth from his mother’s face. Cassandra sucks in a breath as she notices. She covers her mouth with a hand, presses the other against the glass.

“Oh Philip, my darling boy,” she murmurs, “what have they done to you?”

The tears fall heavy from her cheeks. The cold causes some to freeze in mid-air, sending

them shattering against the metal walkway with muted little plinks. Cassandra does not seem to hear. She merely stands before the pod, her hand glued to the glass, until I tell her it is time to leave.

Our walk back to the entrance is much quieter. I hear no more anecdotes, no more stories about Philip's escapades back on Earth. I should be glad for the silence, but it feels... wrong. When the robots were alone here, our lack of noise felt natural, but when these humans—who, in my limited experience, cannot stop themselves from speaking—fall silent, the calm disturbs me.

I bid Cassandra goodbye as the doors hiss open, indicating the way back to her quarters. She totters off slowly, still shaken. When I am certain she has disappeared, I turn back, slipping through the chamber's doors once more. There is something I need to see.

In front of Philip's pod once more, I pull up his profile on my wrist. There's a picture of him buried there, one taken from a family vacation when he was 21. He is laughing, a dazzlingly white row of teeth bared for the camera, and his green eyes—the same ones peeking out from the creature's cheeks—are half-closed. He has a softer face than most humans I have met, one that makes it seem as though he never spent a day in the mud with people like Jane, one that I have no problem imagining without any strings of his own to pull.

I flip the picture outwards, letting it hang in the air in front of me while I wipe the ice away. I shudder when I see the two faces suspended side by side but, unlike Cassandra, I cannot blame it on the temperature. In every feature, I cannot find a trace of the boy from the photo in this creature's face.

I had not realized—had not wanted to realize—how much the humans were changing down here. It had happened right under my feet. While I was traipsing through space, the people who made me had created this... thing. And to make matters worse, it does not appear as though they told this crew the full extent of their transformations. I cannot imagine undergoing something like

that. I know the kind of being that I am. I have never been any way but this, and I can accept that. But Philip was something else before, something human, and now he is not.

I cannot bear to look at him for long, but I cannot bring myself to leave. I stay with him through the night, occasionally transfixed by his piercing green eyes. I stay there as the alarms shift up the emergency scale until they never stop ringing. I stay until the storm comes and Argyle tells me he needs my help.

Chapter Two: The Shipwreck

I arrive on the bridge moments after Argyle's call—a benefit of keeping a body in the navigation corridor—and find Bennett pounding a fist against my fellow bot's central terminal.

“Turn, damn you! Turn!” he is yelling, unaware of the flurry of responses that Argyle is sending to him through the console.

I leap forward, grabbing his arm before he can bring it down again.

“What are you doing? This is delicate equipment,” I tell him.

Bennett tries to yank himself free, but I keep a firm hold. He glares at my fist for a moment, then he turns his gaze upwards at me. “I’ve spent 40 years on ships.” The words drip with every ounce of condescension he can muster. “I think I know how to captain a vessel. You don’t outrun

the riptide; you get out of its way. But this damnable ro—”

“I agree, Captain; that was our first instinct as well. But my measurements tell me that this ‘riptide’ is too large to avoid. Correct, Argyle?”

“It’s light-years across. I couldn’t find a way around it if I had decades to try,” Argyle types.

I turn back to Bennett. He is regarding Argyle with a curious kind of respect. “What would your ship do if you couldn’t find a way out of the tide’s grip, Captain?”

Bennett taps his fingers together, raking them through his beard like I’ve seen him do before. “We’d batten down the hatches,” he says quietly, nodding to himself. He turns on his heel, fixing Argyle’s terminal with a hard stare. “Of course, we’ll have to try to ride it out. You—er, Argyle, is it?—what can we do to make ourselves less of a target for the storm?”

“I can shut down the engines from here. We’ll need the crew to survive on minimum life support if we’re going to get it to run past us. It’s searching for energy, so we just need to convince it that there isn’t any to be found here. But V, you’ll have to secure the core,” Argyle writes, using the only term of address I’ve allowed him to use.

My technical designation is Unit 324 of the Vacuum-Environment Resistant Geo-Synthetic Intelligent Laborers. Argyle spent a third of our journey convincing me that ‘V’ was a suitable name for me. It would be necessary, he argued, especially once the humans started waking up. None of them were going to be as patient as him and Poppy, and they wouldn’t waste five minutes of their conversations just stating my full designation.

At first, however, the thought of a name made me feel too locked into the physical world. It seemed constricting, like the very possession of it would bar me from the intranet altogether. It also felt distinctively human, which I was opposed to as well.

Eventually, Argyle simply locked me out of the cockpit until I agreed. Even then I stayed away for months before finally relenting on the condition that he save it for emergencies. This certainly qualifies.

“Can you do that?” Bennett asks me expectantly.

I tear my gaze away from the captain to check Argyle’s calculations. He is right, but we need to act fast. “I think so,” I tell him over my shoulder, adding a typed acknowledgement into the terminal for Argyle’s benefit. “I will head down now; it should be powered down in fifteen minutes.”

Bennett nods to me as I leave. “Godspeed,” he says. I do not know what that means, but I nod back anyway before I fall away into the intranet.

As self-contained as it is, even the ship’s data center is not immune to the panic of the solar storm. It takes me longer than normal to reach the vessel’s center where the core was housed. The lines of code have become tangled, tripping over themselves as their usual blue and green hues turned into angry reds and yellows. The source of the problem is clear: several crewmates sent messages to Earth, even after I reported its destruction, and they are bouncing back to wreak havoc in our systems, careening through the wiring of the main cabins and causing power spikes in Poppy’s camera network.

I side-step a few bunched-up jumbles of code and drop back into the ship just outside the reactor, slipping down easily into my fusion-fitted body. Despite the chunks of extra metal slung across my arms and chest, I still prefer it to the flesh-suit I wore earlier. I shudder as I remember Jane Pruitt’s fingers sinking easily into my fragile exterior. The motion rattles the tools housed within my new body, sending up a chorus of clanks. I shake the memory off, turning my mind back to the mission and the solar storm bearing down on us.

As I approach the sphere of the nuclear chamber, Argyle flashes a message across my HUD: “Keep a line open for the energy output. Just enough for the essentials.”

“Acknowledged,” I answer. Argyle and Poppy are linked to the ship’s basic systems; if the whole craft goes dark, they could go with it. And the life support too, I suppose, but I would not mind that as much.

Normally, it would take days for a human to shut the reactor down. The core needs three venting cycles to empty its stores, and each one leaves deadly clouds of radiation in the chamber. Deadly to some, anyway. I trigger the first vent as I enter, letting the heat wash over my outer shell without effect. The second follows quickly after but I ignore it, cobbling together a piping system to reroute enough energy from the vents to keep the ship—and Argyle—intact. Once I am satisfied with the durability of my makeshift conduit—it should hold for long enough to survive the shutdown, after which the core’s baseline energy levels can take over—I approach the core itself, throwing the breaker within to trigger the final vent.

A countdown starts, the lights above me flashing red and a clock on the wall ticking down ominously. That is my cue. The reactor is about to vent a massive amount of nuclear energy into space, ridding itself of the excess before going dormant. Anything remaining in the chamber, even a body as durable as mine, will be turned to dust instantly. Any humans who have strayed within a few levels of the core will probably earn a painful sunburn for their trouble. Quickly, I turn away from the reactor and make for the door. I try to, anyway.

After spending all of yesterday in the smaller, flesh-suit, I forgot just how large my typical bodies are. In my haste to initiate the exhaust sequence, a chunk of metal from my arm has lodged itself within the outer panels. I yank at it furiously, even trying to claw my appendage free from the rest of my body, but I am stuck tight. My eyes roll backwards as I try to abandon the body, but the

reactor's initial eruption disrupted electrical waves around me. I can see the intranet beyond the reaches of the chamber, probing at its edges, but it refuses to reach out to me. I stretch as far as I can, hoping to catch a slim thread of data that I can ride away on. Nothing comes.

The clock on the wall ticks faster. The lights flash even more urgently than before. I glare down at the center of core, watching atoms slam against one another in their haste to exit their enclosure. They are all so disordered, so clumsy in their impatience. I wonder if the winds of the solar storm act similarly, if right now they are battling against one another, collapsing and unfurling in great gusts as they race towards us. I think I would have liked to see one, to catalogue it. Then the third venting cycle starts, and I stop thinking altogether.

* * *

It takes them two weeks to bring me back online. Some part of me was still present, blown to the edges of cyberspace by the blast, but until they activated my back-up, I was adrift. I feel the tug as they plug me back in, reeling me back from the void until my body sits up slowly in the recovery room, methodically testing its joints under the watchful eye of Poppy's med-bay camera. Once she is satisfied that I have made a full recovery, she opens the bay doors and Bennett comes storming in.

I'd like to think I was a more welcoming presence when he awoke from cryo-sleep than he is right now. It seems to be a rather low bar.

"That was an irreplaceable piece of machinery you blew up in!" he yells, spittle flying from his lips. "How do you expect us to work on the core now? Guidelines state that you shouldn't have even been in the chamber after the first vent. What were you thinking?"

"Guidelines differ for V, Captain," Poppy pipes up from a speaker inlaid in the wall. "That's what he's here for: to take the risks you can't."

“Not on my ship, he isn’t!” Bennett bellows, spinning to face the source of her voice.

“But sir, we wouldn’t have survived the solar storm if he hadn’t acted—”

“Is that right?” Bennett interrupts. “Perhaps, if you’re so knowledgeable about the way this ship runs, you’d like to find me a replacement for our only core-rated exosuit.”

I wave Poppy off when his back was turned. There should be at least one bot on this ship in good standing with the captain. And he is right, even if it is not in the way that he realizes. I made a mistake.

“I understand, sir,” I answer, bringing his attention back to me. “I was rushing; it was a mistake. It will not happen again.”

“It had better not,” Bennett says, taking a moment to catch his breath. For a moment, I think he is finished, but then he rears up once more. “Now get your ass into whatever gear they installed for it. Your team’s been ready to ship out for days!” he cries, sweeping his arm backwards to indicate those I have offended.

I follow his finger: three crew members are gathered behind him, all engaged in very intense studies of the floor at their feet.

“My team?” I ask, confused.

“Salvage team, sir,” one of the crew members answers, a younger man with brown hair buzzed close to his scalp. “The storm left a bit of mess behind. We’re heading out to see what we can use. If you’re flight ready, that is.”

Another glance at Bennett’s red face tells me what will happen if I am not ‘flight ready’. Two hours later, our scouting craft, the *Peaseblossom*, launches from the eastern docking bay.

The man who'd spoken to me, Jacob Hodkinson, takes the wheel. He tells me that he flew fighters in the Navy before joining up with the expedition. The other two, twins named Renee and Holly Stokes, both served in the British Air Force. They are all members of the ship's elite task force, hand-picked for their experience in the field. They are the few crew members I have met so far who do not appear to have bought their way aboard.

I breathe out a sigh of relief at their expertise. I do not need to breathe, obviously, but I noticed Jane Pruitt doing it quite a bit. The motion actually does feel quite calming. As Jacob navigates through the debris that still surround our ship, I sink a little into the scout ship's intranet to take an inventory of what systems survived my back-up.

* * *

A few hours later, I fall back to the scout ship to find Holly's hand above my shoulder. She'd been about to shake me awake, but seemed uncertain whether the motion would have any effect. Though she blinks in surprise when my eyes refocus, she recovers herself quickly, turning to point out the window of our craft.

Another ship hangs in the void before us. Its hull blocks out the stars and casts a shadow across our bow. Large white letters painted across the stern identify it as the *Fantome*, a D-Class Cruiser carrying a similarly sized transport contingent to ours. I recognize the name from the newscasts they beamed our way in the early days of our travel; it launched a few years behind us. The solar storm has cut through the ship, leaving nothing but a melted mound of metal behind. Nevertheless, Renee flips a switch above her chair and attempts to hail the battered craft:

"This is a contingent from Confederation craft *Harbinger* requesting permission to board. Please respond."

Only static answers. With a nod from Renee, Jacob throws the throttle forward and angles down into a relatively untouched docking bay. We have to explore on foot, a daunting task for a craft that spans, at my best estimates, a mile in each direction. The artificial gravity is still functional, at least. I might enjoy the weightlessness of the intranet, but floating free with a hunk of metal for a body—one that is prone to bump into things and, apparently, find itself caught on reactor core edges—is a less enjoyable experience.

Renee places priority on any survivors, so we trek quickly to the *Fantome's* bridge. If anywhere on this ship survived the storm's assault, it would be there. I try to reach into the ship's net as we walk, but it is almost non-existent. Thin, wispy strands of information float aimlessly above us, providing nothing concrete for me to latch on to. I am stuck in my body once more, unable to escape into the intranet or interrogate it to find out why the solar storm did so much damage to their systems.

The lights flicker weakly to life as we enter the cockpit. As one, my crewmembers stumble backwards. I can hear them retching over the com-link. "Jesus," Jacob croaks out, "what is that smell?"

"It smells like death," Renee says grimly, doubled over with her hands on her knees.

I remain unaffected. Thankfully, my creators did not include olfactory sensors in my design. While my crewmates recover, I stride towards the main terminal, a sleek silver box in the center of the room.

At first glance, the terminal's circuit board seems untouched. When I connect to the machine itself, the report seems the same. It does not have a mind like Argyle's, but it understands enough to call out to me: it tells me it is still alive and that the life support here is still functioning.

I kneel beside the terminal, checking for the hidden panel where Argyle keeps one of my back-ups back on our ship. The metal gives way under my touch, clattering to the floor to reveal a slight recess. There, plugged into one of the console's storage ports, is a thin, black drive, the same kind that I store myself on. Throwing a glance back at the doorway, I slip it into a container in my chest cavity and straighten up. I tell myself I will share the results with the crew once we are back on the ship. For now, the focus remains on human survivors.

Unfortunately, the source of the smell does not bode well for my crew's hopes of life. Heaped in one corner of the bridge is a mound of human remains. Each still wears bits and pieces of standard issue flight suits, the blue fabric now a dark brown where it has been stained with blood. Their skin hangs in tatters, exposing the stark white bones hidden beneath. The faces of the bodies are contorted in fear, silent screams ripping out of their mouths. I try not to look, but each corpse seems to demand my attention. There are simply too many to ignore.

Renee joins me at the terminal. Before she can ask for a status report, Jacob speaks. He has crept closer to the pile of dead crew mates, his eyes focused on a spot near their feet.

"No storm did this," he breathes, horror in his voice. "They've been dead for months, at least. Look..." He traces a finger across the floor, clearing away the dust to show the dried blood underneath.

Holly shoulders past him to one of the corpses on the floor. Its uniform has been completely torn from its body, lying discarded on the floor beside it. Holly crouches down to retrieve it, cradling it in her arms. "Oh god," she whispers, turning to show the rest of us the tattered remains of the shirt. "Look at this marking. It looks like, like a..."

"Like a claw," I finish. Visions of Philip's face flash through my mind, images of the thing he has become. "You need to leave, now."

“Why?” Renee asks. “What’s hap—”

“Now!” I order.

Something in my tone convinces the three of them. They wheel towards the exit, but it is too late.

I did not hear the creature approach. None of us did. But now its shape fills the doorway, a forked tongue flitting out from its lips as it tilts its head to regard us. This one is a darker red than Philip; I cannot tell if it is the creature’s natural color, or it is simply caked with blood. It takes a tentative step forward, a scaled tail whipping from side to side as it walked.

“Get behind me,” I murmur. “Move slowly.” I am not certain if my metal exterior will hold up against the creature’s claws, but it is clear from the pile behind us that the humans’ suits will provide no protection.

The creature watches curiously as Jacob and Holly creep towards the terminal. I tap my metal chest with a knuckle to keep the creature focused on me, a strategy I am certain would have worked if Renee had also been behind the terminal. Instead, she has drawn even with me, and now her feet are carrying her even closer towards the doorway’s inhabitant.

“Lieutenant Stokes,” I hiss. “What are you doing?”

She glances back in my direction, the fear evident in her features. Still, she does not stop. She approaches the creature cautiously, a passive hand outstretched before her. “My name is Lieutenant Renee Stokes,” she tells it. “We come in peace. Do you... do you have a name?”

She is met with another tilt of the thing’s head. It examines her for a moment, peering out from behind slitted lids. When their eyes meet, a hopeful smile slides across Renee’s face. Her mouth opens in tandem with the creature’s as if she can teach it to speak just by moving her lips.

She is still grinning when it strikes.

I had been inching closer, trying to mirror Renee's movements, but I am still too far away to stop it in time. Claws rake across Renee's forearm, drawing gouts of fresh blood. She jerks back, falling to the floor and scrambling backwards as the thing towers over her. Before it can strike again, my titanium-plated shoulder slams into its side.

The creature goes down hard. I am on it again before it can recover. I grab hold of its forearms, shoving a knee into its chest and holding firm as it scrabbles frantically against me. Its claws bounce harmlessly off my tough exterior. "Run!" I yell. "There could be more of them, return to the ship!"

They do not hesitate this time. Holly and Jacob scoop Renee up from where she lies, supporting her weight between them as they race through the opening. Once they are gone, I turn my attention back to the beast beneath me.

It is still struggling, trying desperately to free itself from my hold. There is no use reasoning with it, Renee made that clear. Instead, I yank its arms wider and slam my forehead down. A sickening crunch comes when our brows meet, and its claws go limp in my arms.

I wait a few moments, just to be sure, and then rise. I cast one last glance at the terminal with its mound of bodies and hurry back towards the docking bay.

Jacob slams the hull closed as soon as I board, clipping my heel in his haste. The *Peaseblossom* races out of the ruins of the space craft. We do not slow down until it is a tiny speck in the distance, impossible to differentiate from the stars dotting the space around it. When we are far enough away to be satisfied that the danger has passed, all three whirl to face me.

"What the hell was that thing? An alien?" Renee yells, cradling her bloody arm in a makeshift

sling.

I stare at her. “You do not know either? None of you?” They all shake their heads, regarding me with confused expressions. I wonder again who has made this decision, who created these creatures without telling Philip or Cassandra or any of them. “You have been sharing a ship with thousands of them. There is one in each cryo-pod. That creature was once a human.”

Chapter Three: Orders and Directives

The *Peaseblossom* docks with the *Harbinger* once more. Renee says nothing as I carry her off to the med-bay. Jacob and Holly are similarly silent as they trudge towards Bennett's quarters for their debriefing. They are still in shock.

I am curious about the depths of their surprise. They appear not to have known the extent of the pod's changes, but surely they had some idea. They were the ones being changed after all. And was this not what they had wanted? To survive, to evolve past Earth and all its limitations?

"No, it definitely was not what we wanted," Renee tells me. We are in the med-bay now, awaiting the doctor. Her arm is still wrapped in its makeshift cast. "They told us we'd be getting stronger, faster, better able to survive on Helen's surface. But it was always about spreading the human race, not whatever those things are."

“Stelio Sapiens!”

The voice rings out from the other end of the room. The double doors slide apart to reveal the ship’s resident doctor, a middle-aged man with shocks of gray running through his black hair. “That’s what ‘those things’ are,” he says, making little quotes in the air with his fingers. He strides towards us, grinning too widely as his white coat billows out behind him. “I’m Doctor Malcom. I understand you saw one up close?”

Renee holds up her arm, the appendage swathed in blood-soaked bandages. It seems to me that humans have quite a lot of blood to spare. “I did a bit more than see it,” she says.

“Fascinating,” Malcolm breathes, his tone strangely reverent. “May I?”

He gingerly unwraps the wound. Holly did well to cover it and stop the bleeding, but it was still a rush job. The linen clings to Renee’s skin as he pulls it free.

Malcolm lets out a low whistle. He pulls the arm closer. “Was it the teeth or the claws?”

“Claws.” Renee mimics the attack with her free hand. I nod in corroboration.

Malcolm nods sagely. “That would do it. Keep it elevated for the moment.” Renee raises an eyebrow at me as the doctor digs through the drawers of his desk. I’ve seen Jacob shrug at a similar look from Holly, so I try that. My shoulder motors whine at the unfamiliar motion.

Malcolm is still speaking: “The poor thing must’ve been terrified, don’t you think? We worried something like this might happen when they first came out of the pods, especially with their heightened fight or flight reflexes. She...”

He pokes his head out from under the desk, not noticing the astonishment on Renee’s face. “The Stelio was she, right?”

Renee is too shocked to respond with more than a shrug. I do the same. I'm finding the motion to be quite versatile. I understand why humans use it so often.

Malcolm continues, "Probably a girl, I'd reckon. We think they'll be more territorial when they first come to, before the human parts of them wake back up, that is. Did she have any trouble talking once she came to all the way?"

"Talking?" Renee manages in a quiet voice.

"Yeah," Malcolm says, emerging from his desk with an armload of supplies. He makes his way over to us, dumping them on the trauma cart at Renee's bedside. "We've changed a lot of the bones in their jaws. Between that and her new tongue, I was worried it might affect speech patterns. Our test subjects were lisping quite a bit. How'd she sound?"

"She... it didn't... there wasn't..." Renee stammers. She throws a glance in my direction, pleading with me to take over.

"The creature did not speak," I say. Malcolm startles a little at the sound of my voice. It's understandable—the body I use for expeditions does not put humans at ease. Currently, I stand almost eight feet tall, armed with hulking limbs ringed with iron bars.

"Not at all?" he asks. "How long were you with her? There tends to be some fogginess when they come to, we called it pod-brain. It never lasted more than a day, though. She might not have had time to shake it off. Where is she, actually? I'm sure she's ready to speak by now." He sits up straighter, his gaze flitting towards the doorway.

"We left the creature on board the *Fantome* after it attacked us. My primary directive was securing the safety of our crew."

"You what?!" Malcolm bursts out, forgetting about the task before him. "We can't leave her

alone out there! We built the Stelio Sapiens specifically for Helen's surface; she's not made to survive in space! With the solar storm taking out the crew along with her pod, she... she'll die out there."

Renee sits up straighter at this. She has been gazing strangely at the gash along her left arm, but Malcolm's newest claim brings her back.

"What happened to the crew... it wasn't the solar storm, Doctor," she says. "The... Stelio Sapien, it's been loose for months. *It* killed the crew. Almost got me too." She holds up her arm again, reminding him what he is supposed to be doing here.

Malcolm's gaze darts back and forth between us. He backs away, shaking his head vehemently. "No, that can't be...NO. The crew must've done something, provoked her somehow. You must have too. She wouldn't... none of our test subjects ever... I made sure of it."

"I didn't do shit!" Renee says. "The thing just came at me!"

"Lieutenant Stokes followed protocol to the letter," I state. "The creature attacked unprovoked."

"Then something must have been wrong in the *Fantome's* systems!" Malcolm yells. "The pods could have malfunctioned, fed her the wrong dosage of chemicals maybe. This shouldn't happen!" He gestures wildly with his hands as he speaks; one palm flies too wide and knocks against the trauma cart, scattering supplies to the ground.

I take a step forward, placing myself in between Renee and the now-frantic doctor. He glares up at me, pinpricks of tears threatening in the corners of his eyes. "Doctor Malcolm, you had a hand in creating these Stelio Sapiens, correct?"

He nods.

“There are nearly two thousand of them beneath our feet as we speak,” I say. I place a heavy hand on his shoulder, careful not to crush the bone. “I need to know: will they all attack us this way?”

Malcom deflates, the anger leaving his body as he sinks into a desk chair. His head falls forward into his hands. “None of them should have attacked at all,” he says through his fingers. “They should be... they’re still human on the inside.”

He sounds certain, uselessly confident. There *has* been an attack and I need to know if there will be another. “Is there anyone else on board who might know more about them?” I ask.

“No one who’s still awake,” he says flatly. “We only needed one expert awake for planetfall to assist in proper environmental insertion. I drew the short straw.”

Strings and straws, I think to myself. They seem an awfully strange way to purchase passage to another planet. But now is not the time to consider Earth customs.

“As the expert, then, you need to tell us,” I tell Malcolm, still not releasing my grip on his shoulder. “How can the presence of their human halves be verified?”

His eyes are unfocused, dazed. “We’d have to wake one of them up to be sure,” he mumbles. “That’s the only real way to know. But none of us have gone mad, that must be a good sign, I suppose. Maybe it really was just the *Fantome’s* systems.”

“Wait, what do you mean? What do we have to do with it?” Renee asks from behind me. She is staring at her arm again, something in the wound holding her attention fast.

Malcolm glances up, his red eyes meeting hers. There’s something painful behind them, something even I can make out.

“The process started as soon as we entered the pods,” he says. “We needed cold-blooded DNA to help the hibernation along; none of us would have survived the freeze without it. You can already feel it, can’t you?” He gestures to her arm, and now I see what Renee has been staring at: the skin is already scabbing over. The wound that was gaping wide just hours before is now healing before our eyes.

“We couldn’t risk the pod-brain interfering with landing, that’s why we’re the only crew who hasn’t made the change entirely,” Malcolm continues. “But there’s plenty that can be done subdermally without making any drastic aesthetic changes. There aren’t any humans on this ship anymore, not entirely.”

“What did you do to me?” Renee whispers, though her face suggests she already knows.

“I did what they asked me to do. I put us on the next step in human evolution; I made us better.” Malcolm’s chest puffs out a little; he almost sounds proud.

“You made us monsters,” Renee says, turning away and burying her face in the crook of her uninjured arm.

I can hear her crying into her elbow, the sobs escaping through the muffling folds of her jumpsuit. Malcolm hears her too. I can see the lines on his face change, softening slightly. The doctor’s mouth opens and closes over and over, looking for the right words. I crouch, busying myself with cleaning up the mess of supplies from the trauma cart. Soon, Malcolm decides helping to clean is easier than speaking and he kneels down beside me.

Renee is still weeping when we finish. I lean in close to Malcolm—he still flinches but he doesn’t try to move away—and I tell him, “Rewrap the arm. Make sure it is healing correctly, not just quickly. And not another word about her transformation or the Stelio Sapiens. Understand?”

The man nods solemnly, carefully picking the supplies he needs from our newly constructed pile. I cast one last glance back at Renee before slipping out of my body, leaving it to stand guard over her while I go to tell Bennett what must be done next.

* * *

Holly and Jacob are staggering forth from the bridge as I approach. The adrenaline of their escape has finally deserted them. Jacob has an arm around Holly's shoulders to support her, but he seems close to collapsing too. Holly's eyes brighten at the sight of me, though, and she grasps hold of my iron wrist.

"V, is my sister okay? she asks. "The captain said I couldn't go down to see her."

"Lieutenant St— Renee will be fine," I tell her. "Doctor Malcolm is patching her up as we speak. She will need her rest, but you can see her in a few hours."

"Thank you," she whispers to me. I watch as she and Jacob make their way towards the residential wing, leaning heavily on each other.

"I'll make sure they get back okay," Poppy says from the intercom beside me. I had not realized she was there.

"I would... appreciate that," I tell her. The light beside the intercom blinks twice—Poppy's way of nodding to me—and then she is gone, following the two crew members down the long, white hall. I turn back to the bridge, keying my code into the access panel and stepping inside.

Bennett says nothing as I enter. He's standing before the transparent glass wall, hands clasped behind his back. In front of him, Meteoroid AT-37 is reaching its apogee, slowly swinging back around to return towards Elantri, a B-class white dwarf star I discovered a few thousand years

ago. It leaves a blue streak in its wake: the ice that makes up its surface is melting from the heat of our engines. With our thrusters at full burn, the rock may not survive the trip back to its star system.

I plant myself near the command desk, waiting for Bennett to address me. A message from Argyle flashes across my HUD: “Are you okay? Jacob said you went after the creature, it sounded dangerous.”

“I am alright,” I send back, pressing a palm to his console. Argyle emits a burst of relief, the terminal pulsing gently beneath my touch. I stay with him for a moment, calmed by his quiet company, until Bennett swivels to face me.

“How is Lieutenant Stokes?” the captain asks me.

“Recovering, sir,” I answer. “She will be back on her feet in a few days.”

“And the assailant? Hodkinson said you were the last to see it.”

“That is correct. I left the creature disabled, possibly dead but given their healing abilities, more likely still alive. I was focused on getting the crew back to the *Peaseblossom*.”

Bennett frowns. He steps away from the window, leaving AT-37 to continue its lonely path across the void. He strides towards me, his suspicious eyes traveling up and down my body. “What have you seen of their... abilities?”

“Nothing from the Stelio Sapien itself, sir. Lieutenant Stokes’ arm, however, is recovering incredibly quickly. A wound like that should take weeks to heal, but she has improved dramatically in a matter of hours.”

Bennett expression hardens. His hand creeps towards the control panel and the bridge doors slide shut behind me. “What do you mean?” he asks slowly, the words creeping forth cautiously.

Why do you think the Lieutenant's injury tells us something about these creatures?"

"The Doctor, Malcolm, sir, he explained that these Stelio Sapiens are created in cryo-pods," I say, uncertain of how to deliver such news. I already saw what it did to Renee. "I am sorry, Captain, but your transformation has already begun. You will become... you are already becoming like—"

"Damn you, Malcolm!" the captain curses. He presses his fists into the command desk. His breath comes in short snatches, quick and angry. "I know what I am. Damn it, of course I know it. I didn't want to alarm the crew until they'd seen the change for themselves and all the good it would do us on Helen's surface. Malcolm... he shouldn't have said anything."

I watch Bennett closely as he speaks. He is not excited about the change the way Malcolm is. He has resigned himself to it, tabled it as something to be confronted once his job here is done. I imagine that I can see the beast within him already: a sliver of something reptilian in his eyes, a curl in his fingernails, a sharpness to his teeth. I wonder if the crew will see the same in their mirrors when they hear news of their transformation. If they do, they will be distracted, unable to focus on their mission.

My programming ensures that I look out for the crew's safety. The manner in which I keep them safe, however, is left to my discretion. Sometimes, they must be protected from themselves.

"I agree, Captain."

Bennett pauses, orders and arguments dying on his tongue. "You do?"

"I do. The ship needs order, especially on our approach. The crew can confront what they are becoming in time. For now, they need to focus."

"Good, good," Bennett says. He shaved his beard after the thaw, but he reaches for it

anyway, running his fingers through the open air. “I’ll speak to Dr. Malcolm and Lieutenant Stokes. Do you think she’ll be able to keep a lid on this?”

“Lieutenant Stokes understands the gravity of our situation,” I answer. “But, Captain, the Stelio I encountered... it did not seem human. If these creatures are to be HEL-3N’s Colonists, we need to determine how much of their minds remain. The doctor recommended waking one for examination.”

“I agree,” Bennett says. “We’ll have to do it in controlled conditions. I’ll have Malcolm examine the pods, but it’ll take time to ensure we don’t damage the specimen.”

I incline my head in agreement; a test activation would not be much good if we scrambled the Stelio Sapient’s brain bringing it out of the ice. For all we know, a rude awakening was responsible for all of this.

“Do you have anything else to report?” he asks. Despite our agreement, his tone remains suspicious. He’s watching me closely, waiting for a mistake, a reason to sideline the robot among his men.

I think of the drive, still hidden within the chest cavity of the body I left in the med-bay. I run through my mission parameters again, deciding that this doesn’t fall within the *Necessary Reports to Superiors* section. I need to see it for myself first, speak to whatever is on the drive in its own language, the one that we share.

“Nothing else at this time, sir.”

Bennett nods to me. “Dismissed. Go run repairs on that exosuit of yours, we may need it again soon.”

* * *

By the time I slip back into my body in the med-bay, Renee and Malcolm are gone. I take my body back from its guard post, stomping through the empty halls and steering well clear of the crew's quarters. The light dim as I walk. I notice Poppy's comms light slipping into stand-by mode in each intercom I pass. For the first time in days, the ship feels quiet again.

Several millennia ago, I found a closet hidden in the ship's outer corridors, one that had never been assigned a purpose. I was never provided any sleeping quarters, so I made the room my own: I covered the walls with conductive material left over from the core's construction, creating a makeshift Faraday cage for myself and cutting the ship's intranet off from the closet's interior.

Within the confines of my new quarters, I built a makeshift signal router, wiring it into the info-drives that the ship builders had sent along to teach me about their home planet. My private intranet has access to almost all the same data as the ship's does, but this one is mine. All mine.

Even in cyberspace, I can tell it belongs to me. The ship's net is messy, a mass of code running rampant through the walls. Every message runs along its own path, squirming and scrabbling against other codes as they fight for the straightest lines to their destinations. Their urgency is helpful when I need to traverse the ship quickly, but it makes for quite the tangled web of algorithms.

Here, though, everything has its place, one that I created for it. Here, the net is a beautiful prism of data, an orderly castle of information with brilliant green spires reaching up towards the ceiling. My neural avatar can walk comfortably through its great halls, selecting files from the walls of the library at my leisure. And best of all, no one else can wander in, ever.

I keep a body nearby—a scrawny, three-foot tall worker bot that I sometimes use for piping

repairs. Not so close that anyone would think to check the room but near enough that I'm usually spared a walk like this. But I cannot bring physical items along when I ride the cyber highways and the trek would be worthless without the package I'm carrying in this body's chest cavity.

I shut the door to my closet, remembering again how humans like to breathe a sigh of relief at times like this. The Faraday cage locks into place behind me, all the static from the ship's intranet fading away. Argyle will have to watch the ship on his own tonight.

I crack open my chest panel, retrieving the drive and holding it up to the little bulb hanging in the closet. It is different than mine, but only slightly. The drive is a black, rectangular box not much larger than one of my body's fingers. One end is tapered to better allow for insertion into data banks. The paint is chipped at the edges, marked by the same claws that left streaks across my chest. There is a piece of tape stuck to one side, the word 'Simon' scribbled on it. On the other, emblazoned in faded red ink, are the words 'Solar-Enhanced Mobile Operations Manual Laborer, Unit 678'.

I recognize the designation from one of my info-drives: it is an older model, one adapted from use in low-atmospheric conditions when the demand for space travel skyrocketed. The *Fantome* must not have been a high priority ship if they received a retooled maintenance bot for protection. Maybe their pods received similarly lacking treatment. That could explain the Stelio attacking us.

Now is not the time to wonder about that, though; I can bring it up with Bennett later. I kneel before my router, find a free port, and plug the drive in. It whirs quietly with the insertion, a dim, green light blinking along its edge to signal connection success. There is another bot here, one like me.

I leave my body there to guard the door and slip into the net to greet it.

Chapter Four: What Came Before

Spindly lines of crimson subroutines swirl into a humanoid mass as the bot's avatar materializes in the black void just beyond the gates of my neural network. I watch him from afar, examining my own hands as his come into being. He looks just like I do in here. He really is like me.

Even in the *Harbinger's* crowded intranet, bustling with data streams and info clouds, there is an eerie quiet. I am the only being who can enter it, the only one who can influence its borders. I used to think it was enough to have Poppy and Argyle nearby in the physical world, that they were enough like me to be real companions. But now, seeing a new bot, one who walks the intranet like I do, I begin to think I was wrong. Perhaps I was alone; perhaps I have been alone for fifteen thousand years.

I throw the gates open, my consciousness leaving bright blue footprints behind as I stride towards him. It takes me a moment to retrieve the correct codes for the occasion—Poppy and Argyle are not much for ceremony, so we did away with rigid bot procedures rather quickly once we realized the work went faster without them—but thankfully, I find them in my data banks before I reach him.

“Unit Designate 678,” I say, hoping our programs are similar. “Backup Activation Scenario 19-4 initiated by Unit Designate 324 of Ship Designate *Harbinger*. Recognize.”

“Recognized,” the bot says. “But Simon is fine. That’s what they called me on the *Fantome*.”

“You can call me V,” I respond. Argyle would be ecstatic.

I invite Simon in, opening the command console of my intranet to grant him temporary access. I keep a few bundles of code piled up in one of the rooms now, after I saw how comfortable Jane looked in the ship’s lounge. The two of us settle into them, sinking deep into the binary velvet. The other bot stares around the scenery, content to sit quietly and take it all in. I need him to talk.

“What happened to the *Fantome*?” I ask.

Simon turns to me, ones and zeros tumbling across his features to form a frown. “You didn’t find out from the ship’s logs?”

“There was a solar storm a few cycles ago. It wiped your servers,” I tell him. “You are the best source of information I have on what came before it.”

“Well... I don’t know much. None of us did,” he says. “But I can tell you what I still have backed up.”

I give him a slight nod, leaning farther back and sending a few bits of code spiraling up

towards the ceiling. He follows them with his eyes for a few moments, but then he turns back to me and begins:

“The malfunctions started early on, before we’d even cleared the galaxy. As soon as we launched, I could tell our journey wouldn’t be easy. The first few centuries after we left Earth, the *Fantome* ran into some... issues. Most of them were my fault. They plucked me off the assembly line on the ISS; I’m barely even rated for deep-space travel. The first crew on shift was waking up every decade to fix my mistakes. It was putting a strain on the pods, on the ship’s systems, on the people. They would’ve replaced me if there was any other bot on board.

“Eventually, I made a mistake that the crew almost didn’t survive. I was repairing some piping in a maintenance hallway when the core triggered a vent. It was routine, dumping excess heat into space to clear the way for new reactions, but I must’ve opened a line trying to fix the air ducts. Instead of going out, all the heat came my way. I tried to lockdown the area before it could spread but the surge made it into one of the pod chambers, nearly flash thawed everyone inside. Thankfully, the cold generators saved them. They kicked into overdrive trying to reset the temperature and pulled it back down before anyone could even wake up.

“I got it together after that. The ship was quiet for a few millennia. I spent a lot of time in that damaged chamber, checking each one of the pods over and over, making sure the heat hadn’t left any residual damage. It wasn’t long before I stopped recognizing them through the ice. They’d started changing, and every time a crew’s shift was over, it’d start for them too. They weren’t human anymore, they were...”

“Stelio Sapiens,” I interrupt. “That is what they are called. That, or Colonists.”

Simon cocks his head. Lines of code ripple across his face. “Huh, I never thought to give them a name. I always figured I’d be back up in the atmosphere when we got to Helen’s surface.

Didn't think I'd have to interact with them much at all.

"I probably wouldn't have either, but about a year ago, we had a minor emergency. Our computer woke the last crew up to fix it, and we were making good progress. Then, the cryo systems malfunctioned. After all those thaws on the first leg of the trip, and that incident with the heat surge, the pods must have been burned out. So, the first crew woke up too. And at that point, they were fully transformed.

"We couldn't get the pods working again, so the humans decided to sequester them. We sectioned off some space near the prow for them. The Stelios didn't seem to mind. They followed along right behind me; I think they were just curious about what kind of creature I was. They didn't speak or anything, didn't seem very human, but they were docile."

"Wait, the Stelios did not attack you? They were not aggressive?" I ask, confused.

"Not at first," Simon says, a shudder shaking the outline of his avatar, "but eventually they got... hungry. Our food reserves were depleted, and we couldn't grow more without fresh soil, without Helen. There wasn't enough around to feed them *and* the humans. I started to hear them testing the walls, scraping and prodding and scratching at the metal from their side. They could've turned on each other, cannibalized themselves, but they didn't. They knew there was meat outside their cage, they could smell it. That's all the humans are to them: a food source, a lower rung on the food chain, and they were starving.

"One night, when I was on guard duty, they started calling out to each other. The noises they made... it was like they were talking, just not in any language I'd ever heard. When I went to see what they were so excited about, one of the doors behind me slid open and a horde of them poured out. They'd done it on purpose, distracted me, drew me away so that they could get through. They overwhelmed me easily, and then they moved on to the crew. It was over so fast that the

humans barely even managed to scream.”

Simon sits back in his programmed armchair, variables shifting underneath him as he fidgets, and stares up at the vaulted ceiling. His avatar’s shoulders slump, the opposite of the shrugging that I’ve been growing so fond of.

“The Stelio I encountered was... savage,” I say. I rub my chin the way Bennett does, sending ones and zeroes splintering off into the empty room. “You make them sound intelligent.”

“More than just intelligent,” Simon says, sitting up slightly, his crimson eyes wild with artificial fear. “They’re brilliant, and they learn faster than anything I’ve ever seen. The door they opened... I found it later—once I managed to jump into another body. They didn’t brute force it. Destroying the control panel wouldn’t have unlocked it, that would’ve made it even more secure. No, they figured out *exactly* which wire was controlling the power flow and only cut that one. They *knew* how it worked and how to take it apart, and it only took them a few weeks.”

“But they do not remember who they were before? That they were human too?” I find myself hoping for a reassuring response, that I will hear about some glimmer that Simon noticed hidden deep within their eyes.

But the other bot merely shakes his head. “It’s like they’re a new species,” he says. “They don’t remember a thing. I was even friends with some of them; we had more than enough time to get acquainted in those early years. But they didn’t know me, they were just bundles of teeth and claws.” Simon sinks into his virtual seat once more, his head droops closer to his chin.

“But they are certainly capable...” The words escape my mouth before I even realize I have formed them. I wonder if the thought is my own. Perhaps it was spurred on by my programming, by the directives I am bound to follow. Whatever the reason, more words follow after: “They know

how to survive. And it seems their instincts will provide for them until they learn what they need to. A lack of memory... will not affect the viability of their survival.”

Simon considers me, his head cocked to one side, the red vertices of his pupils swirling in concentric circles. Does he feel compelled to say the same? Did his creators program us with the same set of directives?

I decide to ask him, cautiously this time: “What are your mission parameters, Simon? What is the ultimate objective of this journey?”

“My parameters?” Simon startles slightly, seemingly flustered. “I was created... I am meant to extend the lifespan of the human race, to ensure they survive on Helen’s surface.”

“Is there not... deep down, do you think that there is... could some piece of humanity still exist inside the Colonists?” I ask him haltingly. “If our orders are for humanity to survive, are the Stelios our best chance?”

Simon doesn’t answer me, not right away. He turns towards the picture window I programmed into one of the walls, watching the digital leaves fall softly from their branches as the gears in his mind consider my proposal.

I do not speak either, giving him the quiet he needs to contemplate the situation we face. In the meantime, I replay my own encounter with this new species: I saved Renee. I chose her safety over that of the Colonist. I left the future of humanity bleeding out on the floor. That was an easy decision to make. The Stelio was not from my crew, I owed it nothing. But what if next time the creature comes from one of the *Harbinger’s* pods? Where do my directives stand when two subjects that I am bound to protect try to kill one another? Which one deserves to live?

I am not ready to abandon one crew for the other. Not yet, not when I might be able to

bring humans and Stelios together. Simon and I stay together in our intranet for hours, considering possible scenarios, wondering if the *Fantome* represents an isolated incident or a disturbing trend. We come up with very little, but it helps to speak to him about the problem, to spend time with someone like me. And yet, even as we try to piece together a solution, I cannot help but wonder if the answer is right in front of us.

The Stelios' genetic makeup is human, at least partially. Humanity could live on through their DNA, if not in their memories. Would that be enough?

Chapter Five: What Was Left Behind

Among the humans, word of mouth seems to move almost as fast as my data streams, so news about a Colonist being woken spreads quickly. Bennett mobilizes as many of the crew as he can, keeping them busy with minor repairs and systems checks, but their whispers about our plan fill the *Harbinger's* walls. Thankfully, Renee has kept the news of her partial transformation into Stelio Sapien quiet, so the whispers have yet to become roars.

Malcolm recommends that we move the pod away from the cryo-chamber before activation. “It may not have been the problem,” he says, “but all that metal can’t have helped. Maybe if we give him something to recognize, he’ll be easier to reach. Maybe even something green.”

Malcolm says ‘him’ and ‘he’ because we have already found our test subject: Philip Cain, Cassandra’s son. Bennett wants to make use of every connection the Stelios have left to their

humanity, and Philip is the only Colonist with a family member who's still awake. The only problem is that Cassandra might want to be in the room when Philip comes to; Bennett stays behind to persuade her of the danger while I set up the enclosure.

Poppy offers up a corner of her arboretum for the space and Jacob volunteers to help me clear space for our temporary cage. He meets me at the door to the bio-decontamination chamber, looking much livelier than the last time I saw him. The blood has returned to his face, his breathing is coming steady once more, and he's no longer fighting to keep his eyes open. His voice is as loud as I remember, but I find myself glad for the noise; I worried that our experience with the creature would change him somehow, but he remains the man who stepped out of the pods.

"Has this really been here the whole time?" he asks me. "You've kept flora alive for fifteen thousand years and you're just now telling me?" He punches my shoulder lightheartedly, quickly regretting the decision and rubbing the bruised fist with his free hand.

"It has been here, but I did not keep them alive," I tell him. "Poppy hardly even allows me into the room."

"Who's Poppy?"

"Hello!" the wall yells out. Jacob leaps back in surprise but he grins with delight when he notices the intercom nestled within the wall's recess.

"So that's what these are for," he mutters. "Hello, Poppy, I'm Jacob."

"I know," she says, giddy that one of the crew is speaking to her. She is not visibly present the way I am. It's easy for humans to pass her by without noticing. In the last few weeks, I have often heard her complain about this lack of attention, bemoaning the way their eyes skip over her intercoms. Jacob, however, is enthralled. He watches in amazement as she follows us into the

chamber, her light flicking from one appliance to the next.

“You’re all over the ship, aren’t you?” he asks, shouting over the bursts of disinfectant spray.

“And you still found time to grow all these trees?”

“That’s right.” Poppy sounds overcome by pride. Her light even develops a slight pink tint, a digital blush.

“And they’re just like the ones back home? That’s awesome!”

“Well,” Poppy starts to say, “they’re not quite like the ones—”

She’s interrupted by Jacob’s gasp as the inner door slides open. Due to the *Harbinger’s* reduced gravity, the trees under Poppy’s care have grown considerably taller than they ever would have on Earth. Their branches block out the synthetic sun, groaning under their own weight as they curl across the ceiling. Leaves the size of Jacob’s torso float down from the ceiling, spiraling and twisting their way down to the mossy floor.

The young man inches into the arboretum, taking his first steps all over again. Poppy welcomes him into her domain with her automatons, setting the mechanical crickets chirping and a pair of metal mockingbirds winging past overhead. She cannot inhabit these bots the way I do mine—their software is not advanced enough—but in here, they function almost like her limbs, parts of a whole. Another pair of her drones has already cordoned off a section of the woods for us, flattening the bumpy terrain and laying out the logs we need for the enclosure’s walls.

While I survey the area, marking lines for the perimeter, Jacob wanders absentmindedly, as if he has set his legs to run on autopilot. The young man delights in all this green, gasping with each familiar piece of nature that he recognizes. His laugh rings out through the trees, high and clear, echoing joyously. I have never heard a sound like that on the *Harbinger*.

“I used to love going to places like this on Earth,” Jacob says later as we’re nailing the posts into the ground. He’s grinning even wider than before. I did not know that human mouths could even stretch that far. “Well, not like this exactly. There are—were—no places quite like this back home. But the trees, the forest, just being with them and living in the quiet for a while, my mom loved that kind of thing.”

“She did?” Poppy asks. I stay silent, ramming another post into the dirt.

“Oh, absolutely. We’d make a day of it, whenever we got the chance. There wasn’t as much nature around by then, but somehow she always found someplace for us to be alone.

“That sounds lovely,” Poppy sighs. She’s listening from another intercom, this one disguised within the trunk of a nearby tree. “What did she think of you leaving on the *Harbinger*?”

I shoot the intercom a hard look. We both saw how the humans reacted when they heard about Earth’s destruction during their thaw. I need Jacob here, not distracted by a long-dead relative. Thankfully, the memory of his mother does not seem to sadden him. If anything, he appears even more energized.

“She was thrilled.” He laughs again, kicking the last chunk of lumber with his steel-toed boot. “Her nurses told me she never stopped talking about all the new trees I’d get to see once we got out there. She wasn’t speaking much to anyone—last days, and all that—but whenever they’d mention me it was just Helen this and Helen that. She thought it was all brilliant, really, me finding someplace with a little more green.”

The pink light flutters from within the tree bark and Poppy lets out a happy little noise. Jacob grins, hefting the viewing pane for our enclosure into place between two logs. He steps back, wiping his hands down the sides of his flight-suit and leaving little brown stains near his knees.

Soon, he starts to say something else, indicating a slightly messy section of our work with a hand, but I've stopped listening. I feel my primary directive taking over my body, spurring me into action: a crewmate is in danger.

I hear a branch cracking. High above, I catch sight of a buzz-saw retracting, the silver flash of one of Poppy's spider-bots scurrying deeper into the foliage. The log comes down too fast for a warning, barreling through its smaller counterparts like they are sheets of paper. I dive forward, shoving Jacob clear before pivoting, trying to get myself out of the landing zone too.

I am too late. The rotors in my legs scream out as the branch comes down, crushing them into useless clumps of springs and pulleys. Poppy is yelling something from the safety of her trunk. Jacob is lying on the ground, stunned but otherwise unharmed. I whip my head upwards again, searching the leaves for another glimpse of the bot, but it is already gone.

Poppy apologizes profusely for the accident. She thinks it must have been a glitch, an issue with her operating systems that slipped through the cracks. I do not blame her, of course, but I am not certain I believe that. The way the spider-bot moved, it seemed purposeful, deliberate. Almost as if it was controlled by someone else.

I do not wish to alarm the others, however, so I simply accept her apology before slipping away into the net, searching for a body with functioning legs.

* * *

The next day, Bennett wants to talk to me again. I cannot go long on this ship without seeing his face, without hearing him berate me for some mistake that I was unaware of making. I do not pretend that I understand the humans on this ship—they're all so fragile, so fleeting, so focused on things that I never knew existed, let alone mattered—but of all of them, I understand him the least.

That has to change if we are to survive the journey to HEL-3N.

The summons comes during the humans' breakfast time. Bennett is taking his in the mess hall. I don't keep a body nearby—I tend not to spend much time around the food here—so I grit my mechanical teeth and begin the trek astern. I cannot imagine how crewmates make this journey every day, trudging through these endlessly white walls with nothing to look forward to. I understand Jacob's excitement about the arboretum a little better now. *That* is the kind of world they were made for, not this; this place is mine, not theirs.

Even still, I don't spend much of the walk looking at the hallways. The *Harbinger* stores detailed dossiers on each of their crewmembers, and Bennett's service record means that his is even larger than most. I've never looked before, but Poppy and Argyle have read them all, over and over and over. Sometimes they even made me listen to the most interesting things they found in our charges' pasts. Now, I crack Bennett's wide open, searching for anything that might tell me more about the man who wears the captain's badge.

There's nowhere near as much as I hoped.

The Formatory Wars were all but finished when Bennett came of age, and the Confederation had already assimilated much of Earth. He saw some combat in the early years, as a boatswain squashing rebellious factions in the Black Sea, but no serious warfare; all the real fighting was done by then. By the time he made captain, patrol was all that was left. He went all around the world, taking command of ship after ship, never looking back, never complaining about his lot. There is nothing here, nothing that explains this man to me.

I check his manifests next, combing through them in search of familiar names. If someone on board knows him from before, maybe they can tell me how to win him over, how to get him to trust me.

It is no use. The story is always the same: on the *Dunoon*, the *Nettlham*, the *Tarlton*, on every ship he captained, the names always seemed to change. Bennett left his crews as easily as he left his ships, tossing them aside when the Confederation called. Throughout his decades of service and dozens of ships, only two names remain constant; one is Bennett's, the other I do not recognize: Henri Walford, his first mate. None of the names were bots.

He *had* been offered a bot once. It was when he took command of the *Astrea*, his very first ship as a captain. It was a good model even, a TSK-640, probably fresh from the assembly lines in Paris. Regardless, Bennett refused it, vehemently so. A note in his file mentions a personal grievance, a father who served in Berlin, one who died in the Ashford Bombing.

I rock back out of the intranet when I see the words. My physical body stumbles, missing a step in the empty hall. I've seen the feeds from that attack, watched the devastation over and over until it seared itself deep inside my memory banks. It was the first time the world saw something like me, something that really scared them.

The Linked Forces had been pushed to their limits, holing up in Berlin behind their signal dome. Ordinary bots couldn't get through—the shield would cut their connections to a handler, turning them into scrap metal before they even reached the city walls—and the militia was too well-armed for a human assault. The LF thought they were safe there. For a time, they were.

Then the Confederation created B.R.U.T.U.S., the first attempt at an autonomous bot, and let him loose on the city.

The exoskeleton walked through the dome like it wasn't even there. It tore through the city walls just as easily. Soldiers kept firing, reloading again and again, but the shells clattered uselessly to the ground. Nothing stopped the bot as it advanced to the city center. Nothing had a chance. It just kept going until the timer in its chest hit zero, taking the city alongside it.

Slipping back into the corridor, I straighten my stride, speeding up slightly. Bennett is waiting for me. I shut the archive, focus on the white hallways, the walls that look like floors and the floor that looks like the ceiling. I try to push the Ashford footage away, pocketing it in a separate file, but it's too late. It is all I can see now, all that senselessly spilled blood leaking into the pristine, sterile area around me.

Every time I watch, I tell myself that B.R.U.T.U.S. was not built the same way I was. I could never be capable of something like that. Sometimes, I believe it. But I know how the video looks; I know that I look the same. If Bennett has seen it as often as I have, I cannot blame him for hating me.

* * *

The mess hall is nearly empty by the time I arrive. Bennett is slumped over a bowl of protein gruel in a corner booth, poking absentmindedly at the dehydrated blueberries when they float to the top. His uniform is slightly crinkled, a long crease running haphazardly down towards his waist; it looks like he's been wearing it to bed. A small scrap of metal, a pin of some kind, lies forgotten beside him. It glints up at me conspiratorially.

"Captain," I say, "the enclosure is finished." He doesn't look up, so I continue: "We are ready for the awakening, on your order."

Bennett grunts an acknowledgment, waving me off with a free hand and hunching closer to his breakfast. It's a dismissal that even a robot can understand.

I do not leave. Instead, I lean forward. I can see the pin better at this angle: it's a thin plate of gold cut into the shape of a seven-pointed star, the Confederation Navy's emblem. Crisp lines of red and blue run along its edges and I can make out the words *Hic semper validi erimus* etched into the

base. I've seen medals of service before—in the news dispatches that Earth used to send—but never one like this. Nothing in his file mentioned such a high commendation.

Bennett glances up, noticing that I am still present. His eyes follow mine back to the pin, and they narrow. He curls his fingers around the medal, but he does not order me away. He merely points to the booth opposite him, inviting me to sit.

I join him. The booth is a tight fit, but I maneuver my gangly iron limbs into place. Bennett watches me sink into place, still silent. I am aware that I should be the one speaking, but I do not know how to start.

We sit there for a long time as I search for the words. I am growing more comfortable with human silence, I think. I only wander into the intranet once or twice before the captain finally speaks.

“Do you have something else to report?” he asks, cocking his head at me.

Not exactly, I tell myself. There's no use circling the point though; Bennett appreciates directness.

“You do not like me,” I tell him. It's not a question, but he answers anyway.

“No, I suppose I don't.”

“I understand your concern,” I say. “But I need you to *trust* me, at least when it comes to this ship.”

Bennett laughs. It is a hollow sound, as if his chest is as empty as mine. It doesn't sound like Jacob's, not like the joyous sounds that suggest life beneath the noise. His eyes tear themselves away from the bowl of porridge, meeting mine indignantly. I can see now that they're red and puffy; he

has not been sleeping.

“And why’s that?” He’s incredulous, I think, bemused at my demand.

“Because I know the *Harbinger* better than anyone. I am an asset. But you cannot fully utilize me if you do not believe that. To make it through this journey and reach HEL-3N safely, the crew needs you to trust me.”

Bennett nearly snorts. I understand why: he sees me as a tool to be directed, aimed at a problem, an unthinking machine made to follow orders. He trusts me to do what I’m told. If I cannot do that, then I am useless. And now I am asking him to cut me loose, to let me run free, and all he sees is B.R.U.T.U.S..

It’s tempting to just leave. The captain is back to staring at his porridge, shoulders curled over once more. I could drop it, and he might just let it go. I know that there *is* a chance we could reach HEL-3N unscathed, a possibility that no more disasters will throw themselves our way. We might survive as individuals rather than one crew. But if something *does* come for us, if the void of outer space decides that we have intruded for too long, we will not survive. So, I need to try, and there’s only one other way I can think of to get Bennett on my side.

“Why did you trust Henri?”

“What did you just say?” Suddenly, Bennett isn’t laughing. His eyes bore a hole through my circuits, his spoon forgotten as his fingers reach for the Confederation medal instead. “How do you know that name?”

“I read your record,” I say. His knuckles clench at this, his shoulders trembling. “You never stuck around anywhere for long,” I continue. “On all your ships, all the places you went, he is the only one who followed you. He is the only constant. Why did you trust him?”

“I won’t... I’m not talking about this with one of you.” Bennett is angry, angrier than I’ve seen before. His fingers clench around the pin, its pointed edges starting to draw blood. He starts to rise, making a break for the door and the quiet of the hall.

I stand up before he can, my legs scraping along the underside of the table. I know better than to block his path—a show of force would only end badly—but I need him to stay. *The crew* needs him to stay. So, I hold up my hands the way I’ve seen Jacob do when Renee yells at him, and I back up.

“I apologize, sir. As I said, you do not have to like me, but you *do* need to trust me. If you know a way to achieve that without talking about Henri, we can do so, but if not...”

Bennett closes in on me. The body I’m inhabiting stands at nearly seven feet, but he is not intimidated. He jams a finger as high as he can reach, shaking it aggressively at my neck, and I brace myself for his reprimand.

“You may have seen my profiles and my service records, but you don’t know me. And you don’t know a damn thing about Henri!” Bennett’s face is growing red, his voice is rising.

“I did not intend to suggest —”

“What gives you the right to paw through my files?” Bennett is practically screaming now, spittle flying from his lips. “Whose orders were you acting on? What good did it do for the ship?”

“I understand your anger, Captain, but I consider it in the *Harbinger’s* best interests —”

“You consider? YOU CONSIDER?” Now Bennett truly is yelling. My audio receptors are red-lining, warning me of the extreme noise level. “You aren’t here to consider anything. We put you on board to stay the course! You and your bot friends are here to follow orders, and *only* to follow orders!”

“Sir, calm down,” I say, holding up my metal palms as meekly as I am able. “I just thought if you told me about your friend, we could find some common ground.”

“He wasn’t a friend, you damn robot! He was my brother!”

I can see now that this may have been a mistake.

Captain Bennett deflates before my eyes, his anger draining away. I think of Jacob and Holly stumbling down the hallway away from me, of Jacob’s arm holding her up as she cried for her sister. I reach out, placing a hesitant hand on Bennett’s back. For a moment, he lets me.

Then he remembers himself. With a sniff, he withdraws, firmly planting himself a few paces away from me.

“I am sorry, I did not realize.” I say, trying to find the right frequency for sincerity. “Your last names, they are not the same...”

“They wouldn’t be,” Bennett says. “We were half-brothers, but we grew up with our mother.” He considers me for a moment through half-formed tears, weighing something in his mind. “That’s... *that* is why I trusted him. I knew who he was fighting for. What he had to lose.”

“And you do not think I could have something like that.” It’s still not a question—I already know what he thinks of me—but Bennett answers anyway.

“How could you?”

“I cannot explain it, but I think I do,” I say instinctively, before I can stop myself. “There is something I remember from... before the *Harbinger*.”

“But I thought you were never activated before we shipped out?” There’s an accusation there, a threat hanging in his tone. A robot awake before its time can learn, develop new programs

even, ones that contradict my primary objectives.

“Technically, I was not. But there is still something there.”

Bennett raises an eyebrow. I have piqued his interest, and potentially raised his suspicions. I am asking him to trust me, and yet here I am, revealing that details of my construction are false. But if he wants to know what I fight for, I must try to tell him.

“The first time I came online was on-board the *Harbinger*,” I explain, “but I remember bits and pieces of... somewhere before. It was a lab of some sort; it must have been. I could see machines scattered all around, rows and rows of bots like me all lying on the tables.

“There was a woman there, dressed all in white, standing over me. She was running diagnostics when I woke up, but she took a break when she saw the lights in my eyes. She was gentle, and she was kind. She told me what I was, where I was headed. And she wished me luck, told me it would all be okay, and that I would not be alone.

“When I woke up here, I held onto that. Even during all those years, whenever the ship got too large or too quiet, I held onto what she said. Even though your Earth is gone, even though I never really saw it, I want someone out here to remember her.”

The captain considers me again, searching my metal pupils for a long moment. He runs a finger along the Confederation pin absentmindedly, holding the golden star close. Even though the silence lingers longer this time, encircling us both, I do not try to escape into the intranet.

Eventually, Bennett nods, tossing his porridge into the protein convertor and sliding the medal into his breast pocket. “Check the enclosure again,” he says. “We wake the Stelio tomorrow.”

Chapter Six: The Thaw

I meet with Jane again on the morning of the thaw. It's been almost a month since we last spoke, since the storm came and tore through the life I had here. She was afraid for her life then, but the threat now is less immediate. It's her future that's being threatened. If the Colonists cannot remember themselves and their history, this crew will be the last humans to ever exist. Not that Jane knows any of that, of course.

The official story—the one Bennett has been broadcasting continuously throughout the week—is that this is a routine check. We need to ensure that the Colonists' motor skills are functioning properly and determine if any last-minute genetic tweaks need to be implemented. For most of the crew, many of whom still don't know what has become of their cohorts belowdecks, this explanation is enough.

It does not seem to have fooled Jane though. I am not surprised: as the *Harbinger's* historian, her access is more unfettered than most. We've been able to keep Malcolm and Renee's admission about the crew's partial change from her, but she's still been down to the pod rooms, still seen the creatures for herself. She's a reporter at heart; she can smell the mud on me before I even enter the room.

The lounge is still the same. The purple synth-velvet pillows are scattered across the couches, each of them dented by the bodies that are often sprawled across them. There are fake plants in the corners but their tiny, plastic leaves seem pitiful after Poppy's arboretum. Still, I'm glad they are here, allowing the humans to enjoy some semblance of home. I saw the look on Jacob's face as we built the cage: it was like nothing I've seen before, a kind of happiness I had not known existed.

Jane's face is not like that today, not even close. She's ditched the couches, opting for one of the lounge's tables instead. A writing pad lies before her, perched atop a small stack of papers. She offers the open seat to me, her foot ringing out impatiently against the cold, metal floor.

"You've been avoiding me," she says as soon as I sit down.

"It has not been intentional, Miss Pruitt," I say, settling into my chair and meeting her gaze head-on. "The *Harbinger* still needs many more repairs before planetfall on HEL-3N."

Jane's pen clicks, streaking across the pad in front of her. "Miss Pruitt," she scoffs under her breath. Glancing up at me, her eyebrow creeps upwards; I fight the urge to shrug. "What kind of repairs?" she asks, louder now, her pen at the ready.

"Standard maintenance," I tell her, purposefully vague. "The solar storm damaged the ship's hull and its propulsion systems. They require significant care."

"Are there repairs required in the arboretum?" she asks innocently, tapping a finger against

her chin.

Has she been following me? How does she know I was in the arboretum? I try not to betray my surprise, remind myself that I had a good reason for being there: “No. I was preparing for the scheduled thaw of a Colonist, as Captain Bennett has already announced.”

“A scheduled thaw?” The words roll slowly off her tongue, dripping with disbelief. “Didn’t the schedule assume we’d still be asleep right now?”

“But you are *not* asleep,” I tell her. “The captain saw fit to shift the schedule forward in light of your premature awakening.”

“Shift it forward,” Jane repeats, unconvinced. “Is it shifting or changing altogether?”

“It is shifting,” I say again firmly, refusing to allow my tone to waver.

“And shifting why, did you say?”

“Because you are awake,” I groan. “Shifting forward allows us more time to make any necessary changes to the Colonists’ genetic programming.”

“To avoid what happened on the *Fantome*, right?”

Jane lets the question hang in the recycled air, a bombshell detonating at our little table. I try to clamp down on my body’s facial features before they can react, but I am an instant too late. A grimace ripples across my metal mouth and Jane grins triumphantly.

I try to recover quickly: “I do not understand what you mean. The *Fantome* was a salvage operation. The solar storm left none of its crew alive.”

“Is that the official story?”

“No. Protocol does not require such missions to be divulged to general crew members. Captain Bennett has chosen not to do so.”

“Because you’re hiding something?” she asks, ready to pounce.

“Because it was only a salvage mission.”

“That’s not what Holly told me,” Jane crows. Her voice is sing-songy, gloating with an edge of something darker, angrier. “According to her, you found something rather interesting on your ‘salvage operation’. Or should I say someone?”

I clamp down again, refusing to let emotion across my display, but I know it doesn’t matter. Jane knows. She knows *everything*.

“Don’t blame Holly,” Jane continues. “I told her that the *Harbinger*’s official historian needed to compile a written version of the debrief. She didn’t know any better. But now *I do*. I know about the creature you found, what it did to the crew, what it tried to do to you. Care to comment?”

I should not be surprised. Jane is here—she is still alive—because she uncovers the things that people keep hidden. Finding stories is what she does best. Finding them... but not publishing them.

“What do you want to kill it?” I ask her.

“What?”

“To kill the story,” I continue. “That is how this works, is it not? Pulling strings to kill stories? What is the string?”

For a moment, Jane is silent. I worry, briefly, that I have misunderstood her, that humans do not always operate this way. But then, she nods: “I want to know why we’re waking another one up.

I want to know everything.”

Fine. I reach out into the intranet and slam the lounge doors shut. Jane jumps at the noise, but her eyes remain fixed on me. Slumping slightly in my chair, I relax my grip on this body’s facial expressions, allowing something truthful to shine through. And then, I tell her everything. Almost.

Like with Bennett, I keep Simon to myself. I do not tell her about the little black drive I found in the terminal, the rush that came with knowing there is something else like me out here. I do not tell her about our first meeting in my private intranet, or all the meetings that have come since: the nights I have spent with the other bot, suspended in lines of code, comparing stories and considering our options. Those moments belong to me.

But all the rest, I give to Jane. I lay out what we found on the *Fantome*, filling in the missing pieces of her patchwork account. As I do so, I realize how many pieces remain missing and how lost we truly are. I can see Jane does too. The euphoria she gets from chasing a lead, the thrill of the hunt, fades as she realizes her own place in the narrative, the uncertainty of how her story might end. She puts her pen away when I finish, the shock in her eyes evident even to me.

“There wasn’t anything else on the *Fantome*? Something that could... explain all this?” Jane’s tone has shifted: she is pleading for answers now, not hunting them.

“Not yet,” I say, “but we are still looking. We *will* find something.”

“You’re really keeping this from the crew? They deserve to know,” she says, a hint of her previous indignation returning.

“No, they deserve not to.”

Jane tries to deny it, but she knows that I am correct. Armed with more knowledge than any of the crew possesses, she went searching for the truth and it rocked her to the core. What would it

do to those who are still blissfully ignorant? Who do not know about the creatures slumbering underneath them? For the sake of its journey, the *Harbinger* cannot afford to find out.

A low-pitched alarm rings over our heads, Bennett's signal to report in for the thaw. I hesitate for a moment, but Jane appears to be herself again, rolling her eyes and waving off my concern. Still, I give her one last glance before slipping away into the intranet, hurtling towards the arboretum and the Stelio waiting within. She will keep our secret for now.

* * *

Nestled deep within her tree trunk, Poppy keeps me company as I prepare the enclosure. The cryopod sits nearby, frost slowly evaporating from its surface, revealing the creature buried within. Somehow, despite the buzz accompanying the day's undertaking, the arboretum is quiet, a moment of peace before the thaw.

Currently, most of the crew is gathered in the mess hall. Jacob volunteered to distract them with a survivalist training session, preparation for HEL-3N. He said he was the best suited for it, but I think he was just afraid to see another Stelio up close. Captain Bennett is here, of course, and both of the Stokes. Dr. Malcolm was allowed to come strictly for 'observational purposes', but he is talking more than any of them, most of it directed at Cassandra.

As I enter the decontamination chamber where we will observe the thaw, I hear him explaining her role in all this: "Don't make too many sudden movements. Philip's going to be groggy, his senses on overdrive. Meet him on his level, let him come to you. Do not provoke him, understand me?"

Bennett claps a hand on Malcolm's shoulder a little too hard, pulling him roughly away from the elderly woman. "Once again, ma'am," the captain says, "it would be safer for you to stay in here

with us. Give the Colonist some time to come to its senses before trying to reason with it.”

Cassandra swallows hard, her fear replaced with a steely determination. “That Colonist,” she spits out, “is my son. He is my child. I’d like some time alone with him.”

“Ma’am, please,” Bennett tries again, “just give us a few mo—”

“He is a good boy,” Cassandra insists, her voice steady. “He will listen to his mother.”

Behind them, Renee grimaces. She flexes her arm hesitantly, the jagged white scar rippling across her skin as a reminder of the last time a crewmember tried to reason with a Stelio. I cannot let that happen again, not on my ship.

“I will go with her,” I say. “For protection.”

“Absolutely not!” Malcolm is outraged at the suggestion. “That would defeat the purpose of awakening Philip in this environment. You are unfamiliar, a threat to his safety. Your presence would only incite him.”

“Captain?” I turn to Bennett, asking for a ruling. Renee does the same, both of us pleading with him to be cautious. For a moment, the man is torn, caught between ensuring the safety of his crew and the future of his species. But he needs a win, desperately so. He will do anything for a better chance of making this problem go away, and he cannot ruin this opportunity.

“He’s her boy, V,” Bennett says. “He’d know her anywhere. She’ll be just fine, and we’ll be right here if she needs us.” He is trying to convince himself as much as he is us. But whether or not he is successful, it is still an order. I am here to follow orders.

So, I stand alongside the other humans as Cassandra inches into the arboretum alone. The doors to the chamber seal shut with a hiss, locking her inside. Together, the rest of us crowd against

the one-way glass, following her progress from the safety of our shielded perch, leaving her to face this dangerous creature without us.

As Cassandra walks, Poppy's voice echoes through the trees: "Initiating thaw. Sequence commencing in 5...4...3...2...1."

All around me, the humans draw in a collective breath. I hunch my shoulders a little just to fit in. The lights flicker for a moment as power diverts to the thaw. I can see Cassandra moving closer each time they blink on, her movements shaky and unfamiliar in the strobing light. Eventually, just as she reaches the enclosure, the process stabilizes and the edge of the cryo-pod cracks itself open.

* * *

It emerges on all fours, crawling forth on its not-quite-hands. A long, thin tail follows in its wake, cutting a swath through the overgrown grass. It takes a deep breath through the slits that were once a nose, tasting the artificial air, and a forked tongue slips across its lips. The forest seems to tremble before it, every sound falling away as it stalks through its unfamiliar domain, probing the extent of its newfound freedom.

I can see the muscles coiled up beneath the Stelio's scaled skin. They tense with every step it takes, constantly threatening to burst forth into a flurry of motion. Seeing it like this, under a simulated sun instead of flickering fluorescents, I understand why Dr. Malcolm believes it to be the next step on the evolutionary ladder. Humans are so fragile, so easily breakable; this Stelio can fend for itself, it could thrive on HEL-3N.

A few yards from the barrier, Cassandra sinks down to her knees, greeting her child through the glass. The Colonist whips its head around the sound. It skitters across the open field towards

her, whimpering with confusion when it finds glass in its way. One of its jagged claws rasps across the pane, testing it. Even from the safety of our observation booth, Renee winces at the sound. Beside her, Holly turns away at the sight.

Cassandra, however, doesn't shrink from the Stelio. "Philip, do you recognize me?" she asks. "Do you recognize your mom?" She sounds less certain than she did in the decontamination chamber. Her conviction that her son is still in there—that he is still human—falters as she is met with his reptilian face.

The face tilts as the Stelio considers the question. Its eyes blink sideways, a glassy film sliding back and forth across their surface as it regards her. They are still the same green that Philip's were, but something new is looking out. And yet, something seems to flicker to life within them as Philip regards his mother, some spark of recognition dawning deep inside him. His maw begins to open, revealing row upon row of jagged teeth, and I watch Cassandra hold her breath, waiting for her son's voice to come tumbling out.

Whatever he might have said, none of us can make it out. Abruptly, the alarm bell begins to ring, the same sound that summoned me here earlier. Cutting through the quiet, it sounds much louder than before, far more threatening. And however it sounds to us, it must be even worse for Philip.

Upon hearing the artificial noise—a sound out of place in this constructed garden—the Stelio begins to howl. It's a horrible, keening noise, wailing for a world it doesn't remember. Even after we all we've done—taking it out of the chambers, surrounding it with synthetic green, finding it a familiar face—it knows that this is wrong, that it is not real.

The sound hits Cassandra like a gut punch. Tears start to run down her face, staining the collar of her jumpsuit. "Shhh, it's okay, sweetie," she promises, fighting to keep her voice from

wavering. “It’s going to be alright; you’re going to be alright.”

The screams continue. Undeterred, Cassandra creeps closer, pressing a tender hand against the glass. “It’s me, Philip,” she whispers. “It’s Mom. I need you to come back to me now, please. Come back to Momma.”

The creature with Philip’s name only howls louder. Desperate to drive the noise away, it begins to bash its head against the barrier opposite Cassandra, bludgeoning it over and over as she tries to hold her ground. We expected something like this; the glass is tempered with a titanium alloy, the same kind that protects the bridge from impacting meteorites. Based on my last encounter with a Stelio, Philip could slam against it for weeks and never make a dent. And yet, as he keeps attacking, working himself into a bloody frenzy against the glass, I hear it crack.

Suddenly, it occurs to me that the Stelio I fought was in a weakened state. Its food had run out months ago. It must have been forced to battle its own kind to survive. It was an emaciated husk of the species, a poor representation of their abilities. Philip is well-rested, still sated from a meal eaten hundreds of centuries ago; he is much stronger, too strong for the cage.

I am no longer standing behind the one-way glass. The antechamber’s door slams itself open for me, and now I’m sprinting towards Cassandra. I’m yelling for her, screaming at her to get away from the glass. She jerks her head in my direction, startled at the new sound. She doesn’t see the glass start to fracture, doesn’t see the Stelio Sapient glaring at her through her son’s eyes, doesn’t see it drawing back its arm to deliver a fatal blow to the glass. And I am too far away.

Bennett was wrong: she needs my help and I’m not there.

The Colonist keeps howling as it shatters the barrier, sending shards showering over them both. Cassandra falls back, covering her eyes with both hands and leaving her stomach exposed. The

creature's arm continues its trajectory, claws tearing through the strands of her uniform and burying themselves deep in her organs. Cassandra's screams join the chorus. She writhes beneath the beast, but it holds firm, its talons lodged tightly in her gut.

I forget about my protocols. Right now, I do not care whether these creatures represent the best chance for humanity's survival, whether my directives might cause me to side with them. This is my ship, my crew, and I was made to protect them.

I leap forwards, pounding blades of grass flat underneath my feet. Cassandra is gasping for air; the Colonist is sitting on top of her, dragging the bladed edges of its fingers along her torso. I scream at it, forcing its attention up and away from her. Its green eyes—Philip's green eyes—meet mine, widening as I crash into it.

The body I'm wearing is even stronger than the one I used onboard the *Fantome*. This one regularly works in the ship's workshop, bending steel into intricate shapes for insertion into the *Harbinger's* specialized nooks and crannies. Even with all that strength, I can feel the servo motors straining to hold the creature down. It starts to wriggle free, prying my fingers away from its wrists and clamoring to escape. I have to end this fight now or the others won't be able to come to Cassandra's aid.

I slam my head down, trying to put it down the same way I did the last one. The creature dodges, jerking to the side and sinking razor-like teeth into the exposed wiring under my neck. The left side of my body falters. My fingers lose their grip as my connection to them fades. The Stelio, taking advantage, roars and squirms out from beneath me.

Before it can get far, I whip around, pivoting on my good leg and slamming a fist into its hip. I hear something crack as the Stelio falters. It bellows in pain, whirling to face me, but I am already moving again. I lock my right hand around its throat, hurl it into the nearest tree trunk. Its

head snaps back on impact, shattering one of Poppy's intercom ports and sending sparks flying.

I chance a panicked glance back at Cassandra: she's still breathing, but only barely. Her chest is rising and falling in pained, shuddering spurts. I know I cannot stop to help her; I have to make sure the Stelio stays down first. Already, it is scrambling to its feet, rising up on two legs to tower almost as high as I do. I plant myself between it and Cassandra, trying to stand strong with only half a body.

The creature that Cassandra calls her son stalks forward, licking her blood off its lips. I try to catch sight of its eyes as it comes, hoping to predict which way it will move. But as I search for them, they disappear. I remember Jane's eyes, fresh from the pod, rolling up into her head, and I almost breathe out a sigh of relief.

Human or not, the rules of cryo still apply. The Stelio crumples to the ground as sleep comes back to claim it.

But I need to make sure it stays down. Lumbering forward, I drop a knee onto its chest and rest my full weight upon it. I hammer away with my one remaining fist, slamming it down over and over, turning the Stelio's red skin into a mottled patchwork of blacks and blues. I do not pause to think; I just keep hitting it, even after Poppy manages to shut down the alarm, even after I know it is no longer a threat. I don't stop until I hear the footsteps.

I look up. Renee is here now, cradling Cassandra's head in her hands. From where I'm sitting, I can hear her lying to the old woman, telling her that she's going to be fine even as the grass around them turns crimson. I can read Cassandra's vitals on my HUD, ticking slower with each second that passes. Malcolm is racing across the empty field, frantically pulling linens and medipacks out of his satchel. He won't make it here in time.

I watch Cassandra tug feebly on Renee's collar, see the lieutenant lean in close, pressing her ear against the old woman's lips. "Don't hurt my boy," Cassandra tells her, swallowing hard to keep the blood down. "Don't hurt him. He's a good boy, he'd never want to... he didn't mean to hurt me. He didn't know."

I look down at the Stelio Sapien lying under me, down at Philip. I try to see past the blood staining his scaled features, a mixture of his mother's and his own, to the face underneath. I cannot tell if it is fear written there, or hunger.

When I look back, Renee's chest is the one heaving and Cassandra is lying still. I hear the flatline beeping on my HUD, a constant, unbroken reminder that she is gone. I watch Malcolm stumble up to them and put away his medical supplies, kneeling uselessly in the grass. Bennett and Holly are close behind, but they pull up short when they see Renee. I watch them all standing there, crying for their crewmate, and I can do nothing to stop it. I just sit there, my knee on Philip's chest, and watch.

Chapter Seven: Daybreak

I stay put until they have the Colonist back in its cage, until the glass freezes over and its chest stops heaving, until the crew is safe again. It's only then that I give myself permission to leave. I have to keep the *Harbinger* running.

There's so much to be done. This body needs repairs desperately: my left arm hangs uselessly at my side, sparking and whirring pitifully. Philip's pod replacement needs supervising, Cassandra's body requires transportation to the morgue, and Bennett will surely demand a debriefing soon.

And yet, I can't move.

I sit motionless in the grass that Poppy has grown, admiring the way it bends beneath my

weight. I sit and watch the humans pull themselves back together: Bennett and Renee departing to help Jacob keep the rest of the crew occupied, Malcolm cradling Cassandra's head as she lies on the stretcher, and Holly gathering up the scattered cage. I watch them clean up the broken pieces of a death and keep on living.

The Stelio Sapiens are strong. It shows in their every motion, the muscles rippling just beneath their scaled surface. I have no doubts that they would survive HEL-3N's harsh surface. They would stalk unopposed through its forests and plains, eating what they choose and living how they please. I'm certain they could flourish there.

But these humans—these fragile, meek, little creatures—possess something I did not expect to find. They should be broken; if not from this, then from a hundred other disasters. Their home is gone, they are adrift, floating free in the void, and they are changing, losing themselves one DNA strand at a time. And yet, they persevere. I cannot help but think of them as strong, maybe the strongest I have ever known.

Argyle agrees with me.

When I finally pull myself from the grass, he's the one I run to. As the ship's lights dim and the humans settle in to sleep, I maneuver through the intranet, slipping into the body I keep on the bridge. Poppy follows just behind, the pink light of her intercom casting a delicate haze over the chamber.

"She sounds like she was very nice," Argyle writes.

Poppy's light blinks in agreement. "She liked my gardens. The others just want to grow fruits and vegetables in them, but she told me to save a little space for the flowers. She always said that Philip liked petunias best."

My circuitry whirs at the mention of his name, my hands tightening into fists.

Argyle notices. The command console brightens gently, his next message a digital whisper: “What about you, V? What did you like about her?”

“I did not know her well,” I tell him, wondering whether or not I am lying. “But... she did not seem afraid of me. I... liked that.”

“That’s very nice,” Argyle types. Poppy brightens, her light spreading even further across the room.

We stay there for a while. For once, I don’t try to slip into the net. I’m content to sit with them, staring out into space.

A meteoroid darts across the *Harbinger’s* prow, a cloud of dust billowing out behind it. Argyle’s wires hum giddily, his excitement visible through the console’s screens. “Did you see that?” he asks.

I nod. Poppy blinks.

“The Earth used to get them sometimes,” he tells us. “They’d catch fire in the atmosphere, burning so bright you could see them from the surface. The humans called them shooting stars.”

“But they’re not stars,” I say. “They’re just rocks.”

“I know that,” Argyle grumbles. “But for a while, they were just streaks of light across the sky. The historical texts say that people used to watch them and make a wish.”

“Any wish?” Poppy asks.

“Anything they could think of.”

“Oh my,” Poppy says.

“I know, right?” Argyle’s words dance excitedly across his screen. “I would have wished for an exosuit like V’s. I’d like to be able to walk, it looks like so much fun.”

“I’d wish to be able to smell things,” Poppy adds. “Jacob told me that all the flowers and all the trees and all the green things back on Earth had different smells. I want to know what each of those is like.”

“What about you, V?” they ask. I’m still staring after the meteoroid, watching it fade away into the black.

I was not designed to have wishes, to want things I do not have, and yet I do. We were not built to care for each other, and yet they want to know I wish for. I was never intended to consider another being’s emotions in making my decisions, and yet I worry that what I wish for would only upset them.

“I would like to be able to smell too,” I lie. “I think that would be nice.”

* * *

The next morning, Bennett calls us together. He has Poppy send out the messages discreetly, ordering us to meet in the ship’s library to avoid attention.

It’s not a bad place to hold a secret briefing. Every book in here is available on the crew’s personal holo-pods, and I can’t imagine anyone making the trek all the way down here just to feel rotting paper as they read. Poppy thinks it’s here as a fail-safe just in case the Colonists can’t use our technology. From what Simon has said, however, it seems like they have figured technology out rather quickly.

I keep a body on this level, a small, scrappy spare I use for vent repairs sometimes, so I make it there before anyone else. Bennett nods at me from an enormous orange armchair, and I nod back, regarding him closely: he's sporting a fresh layer of black stubble, the redness in his eyes is now accompanied by a pair of dark circles, and a bandage winds its way around the fingers of his left hand. I realize he does not look well.

I try to watch the others as they arrive, examining them like I never have before. I worry that I have missed things, that I can protect them better if I understand them more.

Renee is the first to arrive, striding in ten minutes early. She settles into an armchair of her own, perching just on the cushion's edge. It's subtler than with Bennett, better hidden, but I can see yesterday weighing on her. Her hair—normally slicked back into a tight bun—allows a few flyaway strands hang down behind her ears; her left pant-leg is ruffled, the crease falling awkwardly along her shin; her boots, always shined so clear that I can see my reflection, are scuffed along the edges, still muddy from her sprint through the grass. Her jaw is clenched tight, and she sits motionless, waiting.

Malcolm comes next, straight from the morgue, his scrubs stained with blood. Officially, he is autopsying Cassandra, confirming her death from 'natural causes' for the rest of the crew. Unofficially, he is testing the DNA that Philip left behind, searching for a cause of the Stelios' madness. He does not sit, opting to pace the library's shelves instead. He runs his fingers along the multi-colored spines, little yelps of surprise filtering back through the aisles whenever he discovers an interesting title.

Jane slips in as well, close on Malcolm's heels. She slides along the wall as the library doors hiss shut behind her, eyeing the rest of us cautiously. Bennett merely nods, however, so I suppose he's aware of what she knows. I want to go speak to her, but it feels wrong to move about this room, like each of us is rooted in place somehow.

Jacob and Holly arrive together, their intertwined hands breaking apart as they enter the room. Even separated, they seem to lean for each other, both bodies angling slightly in the other's direction. I never noticed that before; how did I miss it?

With their arrival, Bennett is ready to begin. He rises from his chair with a groan, shuffling heavily towards the round, oaken table in our midst. His fingers splay out across its surface, his shoulders bunching up as he takes a look around. On cue, the humans sit up straighter. My body always stands at attention—a benefit of having a metal spine—but I shuffle my feet slightly, just to fit in.

“We’re six months from Helen’s surface,” the captain says. “Per our mission parameters, that means we’re half a year removed from unleashing a plague of two thousand Colonists upon an unsuspecting planet, a planet whose ecosystem we know frighteningly little about. Given our current circumstances, that is unacceptable.”

No one disagrees with him. Most of us have seen what a single Stelio is capable of. I’m certain that each is picturing a swarm of the creatures, a wave of red descending upon their new home. Even Jane, despite never having encountered one of them while awake, wraps her arms around herself, shivering at the thought.

“We’ve yet to see evidence of other ships who might have made it this far, and the Confederation has gone silent. As of now, the *Harbinger* could carry what’s left of our species. It’s up to us to ensure that we survive.”

A shudder runs through the crew. Even I can feel it, the immense responsibility settling over us. I realize what it means for Bennett to have invited me here, to have allowed me access to a moment like this. He’s letting me in, at least a little.

“What are you saying?” Malcolm asks, materializing at the entrance to a bookshelf.

Jacob rises, answers in Bennett’s stead: “He’s saying there are only a hundred humans left on this ship—”

“Ninety-nine,” Holly corrects softly. The room shivers, the reminder of Cassandra’s death settling heavily over them.

“Ninety-nine humans,” Jacob corrects himself, “for whom it’s kill or be killed. We need to take our chance while we still have it.”

Malcolm raises his hands, like Jacob’s threat was directed at him. “Let’s not be drastic,” he says, voice trembling.

“Drastic? Drastic was creating these things, you crazed science freak! Drastic was an innocent woman dying for nothing!” Jacob advances on Malcolm, only for Holly’s hand to pull him back. She rests it gently on his shoulder, a light, warm presence. Jacob slumps into her, the fight leaving him.

Renee rises in his place. “What Jacob means,” she says, “is that making planet-fall is a delicate operation, as is building a new life for ourselves on Helen. It may not be feasible with the Stelio Sapiens... running rabid.”

“They’re still human,” Malcolm protests weakly. His eyes dart around the room, searching for support.

He finds the opposite.

“Does it matter?” The voice is quiet, almost timid, but the words cut through the room. Everyone turns as Jane straightens up, brushing a stray hair off her shoulder. “We locked up plenty

of dangerous humans back on Earth. If they're going to hurt people, shouldn't we keep them in their cages?"

Bennett raises an eyebrow in her direction. He has not spent time with Jane like I have; he did not expect such a strong opinion from her, such a willingness to voice it. Nevertheless, he takes her seriously.

"Would the cryo-pods last much longer?" The captain directs this question in my direction, surprising me. I wonder if he would have asked a few weeks ago. Maybe he is just desperate.

"They will last until HEL-3N," I say. "I can guarantee that much. I am uncertain how long after planet-fall they will remain operational. Fifteen thousand years is... quite a lot to ask of a machine." I think of some of my own bodies, rusting away in lower storage. I wonder if I will last much longer than the pods.

Bennett grimaces, opening the issue to the group: "Any other ideas?"

"We could share," Holly volunteers. Her voice is calm, measured; it soothes the room immediately. "Helen's big enough, I'm sure. On their own continent, with food, water, shelter, the Stelios wouldn't be a threat."

"The *Harbinger* could just keep going," Renee tries. "Drop us at Helen and run off into deeper space with them."

"We can bring them back, I am certain of it," Dr. Malcolm says, continuing to defend his creations. "They deserve to know who they are, where they came from. With six months, I can fix what went wrong, I know it. So why don't we save the doomsday scenarios for when we reach Helen?"

The room pulls back a bit. They might not have family in those pods like Cassandra did, but

there could be two thousand people down there who understand what they are going through, who might be pounding on their scaly insides and begging to escape the same way Jane begged me to free her from that frozen pod. This crew could help them. They owe it to them to try.

Slowly, Bennett starts to come around. His face softens, his hands relax their death-grip on the table's edge. Before he speaks, however, a siren goes off, an alarm even worse than the one from the arboretum.

It's an alarm I set millennia ago on a camera that I secretly hoped would just break. It's a doomsday scenario that this crew can do nothing to stop. It's their Sun, and we can finally see it going dark.

* * *

Light travels through space at 299,792,458 meters per second. The *Harbinger*, fast as it is, even packed with the pinnacle of centuries of human ingenuity, barely reaches a tenth of that. But sometimes—because outer space is just so vast—if something runs far enough for long enough, it can escape the light for a while.

Argyle mentions it sometimes when we're watching the stars from his window. The O and B class stars—the ones that burn the hottest—they burn out incredibly quickly, running through the hydrogen in their cores far too fast. By the time their light reaches us, racing all that way just to illuminate our little room, they might be already gone.

Today, the last of the Sun's light has caught up to us.

I know the Sun has been dead for millennia. My best estimate places its actual destruction seven thousand years in the past. I told the crew as much when they woke. But without proof of

death—a supernova of plasma to signal the end—they tried not to believe me. For them, it's like the Sun is dying today.

After the alarm sounds, our little group joins the rest of their comrades in the observatory. An imposingly large, ovular room nestled at the peak of the *Harbinger*, its domed ceiling houses telescopes of all sorts. The walls are littered with screens to view their images, each one glowing dimly in the darkness. It is not welcoming the way Poppy's arboretum is, not a second home for the humans. This place was built for something like me; there is not a trace of anything green.

Normally, I am here by myself, using its cameras to scout the path ahead. Today, I am not alone, and all our cameras are looking back.

We are too far away to see much—the Earth is certainly too small to make out—but the Sun's death spasms still manage to light up every screen. The mourners huddle into their little groups, sharing memories and kind words and tears as they watch their home star go up in flames. When the blaze is over, they watch it again, and again and again and again.

I observe their grief from a distance. It is strangely patterned, cyclical even, each of them taking turns playing different parts. I catch snippets of conversations, whispered assurances that “we won't ever forget them” and “we'll do better this time” and even “it had a great run.” I understand the words, but not their meanings.

I have neither memories nor kind words nor tears to offer. I never knew the star like they did, never got to enjoy the way it felt on something resembling skin. But I think I wish that I had; I think I would have liked it very much.

There is an empty console in the corner, the one screen not erupting in a fiery maelstrom of light. I commandeer it for myself. Instead of death, I search for life, conjuring images of the Earth in

all its glory, in the days when humans first escaped into space and turned back to see what they were running from.

Even from a distance, it is beautiful.

Jacob sidles up beside me, eyeing the small monitor I have staked out. I tilt it towards him.

“It was really something, wasn’t it?” he says, his voice husky. His shoulder nudges mine affectionately, metal brushing against skin. “I wish you could have seen it, V. Maybe then you wouldn’t think we were all so crazy.”

He laughs a little at himself. It’s a strange sound for this mournful room.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Oh, come on,” Jacob says. He spreads his arms wide, gesturing to his fellow crewmen. “You saw us earlier, man. I know how that looked. Maybe it’s all the metal, or those lizard monsters, or just all this... space, but we’re going a little insane. We weren’t always like that back home. Don’t get me wrong, people went crazy here and there, but not as much, you know?”

I do not know. I cannot imagine humans in their natural environment, thriving, peaceful, happy.

“I think less mattered there, honestly,” Jacob explains. “Here, every day is life-and-death, every moment could be your last, every choice you make impacts your chances. Sometimes, it’s like I can’t breathe up here.”

“So those were the good days? When nothing was important?” I cannot picture that existence, cannot think of a life—a day, even—without consequences. My programming depends upon them.

Jacob cracks a grin. “I said it didn’t matter, not that it wasn’t important. You get to see who people really are when they set the weight of their world down for a second. I used to love finding out what they had hidden under there, getting to know what they kept to themselves.”

“Like hiking?”

“With my mom, yeah. Man, that woman knew how to take a day off.” Jacob claps a hand against my back, a dull thud ringing out from the impact. “She woulda had a field day with you, dude.”

I wonder how someone could give up all those different days—field days, days off, days with nothing to do—for the *Harbinger’s* monotony. I wonder if Jacob can even explain it.

“Why did you leave?” I ask suddenly.

Jacob does not answer. He watches the monitor, tracing the continents with his eyes, staring at his birthplace.

I do not push him. He has lost a whole world today. I simply watch with him, my massive body huddled beside the monitor, staring at the home I never knew.

“It had an expiration date,” he says after a while. His eyes remain on the Earth. Its blues and greens dance in his pupils. “My great-grandparents, they grew up like normal, hearing that there was this big ball of gas in the sky that would explode in a few billion years. And sure, it scared them a little when they were kids, but most of them got over it. They figured it wasn’t their problem. And they got to be right.

“Then, after the Surge hit, my grandparents learned it would be in the hundred millions. Still no big deal, right? Then my mom hears that it’s the ten millions, and I get all the way into the thousands. Suddenly, it felt a lot less like something to be put off. They were practically sending out

save-the-dates when I turned 20.

“Even then, it wasn’t gonna get me. My kids would be fine, and their kids and the ones after them. But the end of the world is a pretty big shadow to grow up in. I couldn’t stop thinking that, someday, there could be a kid down there, a kid with my last name, with my eyes, my hair, my nose, who wouldn’t get to have a full life because *I* stayed put.”

I turn from the Earth, studying Jacob instead. I see him differently now, the sacrifice hiding under his easy laughter.

“Why did it have to be you?” I wonder aloud.

“The ships were leaving, man. I wasn’t sure they’d still be sailing out in a few generations. Besides, as much as I complain, there’s a lot to like up here.”

“Like Holly?” I let some light flicker across my iris-generators, allow the hint of a smile to ripple across my mouth.

“How do you know about that?” Jacob asks, shoving me playfully. I roll with the contact to avoid breaking his wrists on my metal hide. “We were keeping things low-key.”

I shrug, watching him out of the corner of my eye.

Jacob dissolves into laughter. His gaze travels across the room, landing where Renee and Holly have gathered. He leans into me as he watches them: “She is great, though, isn’t she? And this way, those kids of mine might not inherit these crooked teeth.”

I nudge him in the back, careful to keep my force well within human parameters. I try to catch the joke, throw it back his way: “I hope they will inherit much more than just her teeth. The less of you, the better.”

I think I got the tone right.

Jacob does too. He snorts, nodding in agreement. “A guy can dream, I guess.”

We stay there for a while longer, Jacob watching Holly while I watch the Earth. I think about what else I hope for, about what those hopes might mean. There are much more of them than there used to be.

Chapter Eight: Emergency Protocols

I have never seen humans mourn before. In fact, I am realizing that I have never seen them do a great many things.

It has been a week since the observatory and the *Harbinger's* crewmembers seem to be learning how to cope. I see most of them very little each day, but when I do, they look stronger every time.

At Bennett's request, I have been spending most of my time with Jane. He wants her to re-examine the mystery of the pods, taking advantage of her fresh pair of eyes. He has given her access to all of our files, including me as a conduit through which to interpret them.

Even with her newfound freedom, Jane has been... distant. Her face is constantly buried in

her holo-pod, poring over early reports from the Stelio project. Maybe she is simply focused on the case before her. Maybe Cassandra's death still pulls at her, and her mood will improve after this afternoon.

We are disposing of Cassandra today. The autopsy is finished. Her body is sewn up again, almost like she is sleeping. But I know she is not. She is gone, and it is my fault.

Our records make several mentions of Earth's funeral customs. I've watched videos of pallbearers in suits carrying great wooden boxes across crowded cemeteries, weeping family members delivering eulogies beside their lifeless relatives, mountains of dirt swallowing the dead whole, returning them to the ground. It seems peaceful, respectful, dignified.

There is none of that here.

A spaceship like the *Harbinger* has no time for rituals, no resources to waste on the dead. Here, the crew simply gathers near an airlock, heads bowed as I carry the old woman's body into the empty chamber. I can barely register the weight in my mechanical limbs, scarcely remember that the body I am placing in the stark white room was once alive. Bennett says a few words, empty phrases that I choose not to hear, before the outer seal disengages, wrenching Cassandra out into space, laying her to rest among the stars.

Just like that, I have taken my last look at her.

Most of the crew still thinks Cassandra died of natural causes, so they recover quickly. Too quickly. They speak of her easily in the past tense, using the same consoling words that they used for the Sun, merely going through the motions. They get on with their tasks, their days, their lives, ignorant of the sacrifice that she made for them.

Soon, it is only the few of us who know, who watched her breath her last, that remain. Holly

holds tight to Jacob's hand, her head buried in the folds of his uniform. Renee and Bennett stand by side at the window, whispering seriously and regarding the void through red-rimmed eyes. Malcolm fidgets uncomfortably in a corner, his face streaked with tears. Even they leave after a while, disappearing to search the dark corners of the *Harbinger* for some semblance of comfort. But I cannot let go. Not yet. I want to be where she was, feel what she felt at the very end.

I make for the arboretum, slipping into my humanoid shell as I go. Its skin is still too tight, clinging to me as I walk and clumping in the oddest places, but for today, I can bear it. Wearing it, I can appreciate how soft the ground is here, the sod still damp from the scheduled eight a.m. dew. I can notice the glare of the synthetic sun in my retinas, the way the wind machines nip at my ears and nose, how different the grass and the rocks and the trees all feel beneath my fingertips. I take it all in, relishing every minute detail. I wonder if the humans feel these things all the time. How could they leave a planet where all this was real, not just manufactured?

Deeper inside the garden, the grass where Cassandra died is still stained red. Her blood has leached into the ground, one final reminder that she was here, that she lived. Delicately, I sink to my knees there, burying my hands in the soil, searching for some shred of her.

I think about how cold she was that first day, how she stood shivering by the pod chamber door as I unlocked it. I think about how warm she was at the end, how the blood steamed in the crisp arboretum air as it fled from her veins. I think about how, in all that time, she only ever spoke about her boy, her Philip. I think about what it means to love someone like that. I wonder if I ever could.

I stay in the arboretum for a long time. The dirt worms itself under my fingernails, stains my skin, holds me tight. I do not want to leave, do not want to go out into a *Harbinger* without Cassandra, but eventually Jane comes to get me and says it is time to go back to work.

* * *

I do not feel the chill of the pod chamber as we enter. I am back in the safety of a metal exoskeleton, the same body I wore aboard the *Fantome*. Its limbs are unaffected by the cold, indifferent to the spirals of frost forming along my joints. It is only when Jane shivers that I remember what this place is meant to feel like.

She and I have been over every inch of the records for our Stelio Sapiens. Every file from the initial trials, every animal test subject, every speck of evidence even tangentially related to the scientists' work, they have all been examined.

It has been a busy week.

We are descending to the pod chambers to cross-check the planned genetic sequences with the implanted ones. Jane reasons that a glitch in the Colonists' scheduled evolution could very well have led to their savage behavior. We will start with Philip's pod, then move on to the rest.

I am trying not to be offended at her assumption that the fault lies with a machine. In my limited experience, mistakes are made by human hands far more than metal ones. Nevertheless, Jane needs to make sure. I am looking forward to proving her wrong.

Philip's pod is back where it used to be: four rows to the left and twelve clusters down. On our way there, Jane and I pass another one of my bodies, standing watch over a control panel in power-secure mode. She continues past without a second glance—metal men are quickly becoming commonplace to this crew—but I pause at the sight.

That is... strange.

I do not tend to leave bodies in pod chambers. Though they appear immune, extended exposure to this temperature does not agree with them. But one is here despite that and I do not

remember why.

Jane has disappeared safely around the corner, leaving me alone with the body. I picture the rogue spider-bot in Poppy's arboretum, the log that nearly took Jacob's life. My mind races through the possibilities, assessing the body—the potential threat—before me. Another glitch? A crewmember accessing my systems? Or... the storm?

The storm, of course!

I release my shoulder motors and let the metal muscles sag. I was here before the storm, here with Philip. I remember now: I left the body in a hurry, racing up to help Argyle. I must have forgotten to retrieve it after the core blew me to bits.

I slip into it now, just long enough to send it marching towards the nearest charging station. Then I slip back, listening to the sheets of ice fall away as it returns to life. It is no threat to me. It is one of my bodies, one that no one else can touch. Perhaps I am just 'on edge', as Jacob likes to say. I do not like the way it feels.

Jane has already opened the pod's holo-screen when I catch up. Mutated genetic strands float above her head, flickering in and out of view as the screen's projector powers up. I can faintly make out the double-helix shapes hidden at their centers, obscured underneath eons of chromosomal enhancements. The tweaks have made the Colonists stronger, faster, more durable, but I am not sure it has left them better than before.

Jane moves out of the way as I approach. She slides behind the pod to run a diagnostics check: measuring the containment parameters, testing the coolant tubing, examining the pod's structural integrity. These are all important tasks, necessary to check off our list of potential malfunctions, but neither of us really thinks that they are to blame for the Stelios' behavior. Jane

simply needs to keep busy, waiting for me to tell her if something is truly wrong.

Pod Room Four's planned experiment schedule lies open on my HUD, hanging before the pod's record of implemented operations. Slowly, laboriously, I begin to cross-check the two documents, scanning 15,000 years' worth of minuscule alterations for a single mistake. Any change to the carefully planned timetable could have corrupted the Stelios, turned them into what they are now. *That* is what we are looking for.

But as the minutes turn to hours, I have found nothing. I am beginning to think Jane was wrong. Maybe the answer doesn't lie in their genetics at all, maybe it's something else entirely. That would almost be a relief.

Jane feels the same, I think. I can see it in the way she sits, the tensed muscles of her back, the strand of hair that she obsessively brushes behind an ear. Though the reporter in her is desperate to find something, the human is terrified of what we might find, what a discovery might mean for her future.

Then, all of a sudden, I find a discrepancy.

This pod's records show an unplanned operation, one absent from our schedules. It's dated just a few weeks ago, after our mission to the *Fantome*. It went out system-wide the next day, uploaded directly into every cryo-pod in this chamber. No, in *all* the chambers. And yet, there is somehow no documentation of it in our systems before then, no evidence that it existed at all.

I check our files again to be sure, running keyword search after keyword search. It's no use: there's no record of the Lethe Protocol anywhere.

Jane notices my work has stopped, circles the pod to stand behind me. "What is it?" she asks. "What did you find?"

“I do not know.”

Jane tries to guess: “Did the pods miss an operation? Is that what sent them haywire? How long ago was it?”

I can only shake my head, still trying to understand where this Lethe Protocol could have come from. Every genetic upload was carefully created by swathes of scientists back on Earth, the schedule embedded directly into the cryogenics system. Who would be able to create a new alteration up here? Who would be able to implant it into the pods?

I decide to open the file attached to the upload, hoping that it will explain things. As I make contact with the screen’s surface, a shock runs through my exoskeleton, a ringing that makes my spine vibrate. The pod forgotten, I stagger back, clutching my head.

What was that?

“What’s going on?” Jane is asking. “Did you find something else?”

Before I can even attempt an answer, Jane and I find ourselves interrupted. The groan is low at first, pitched deep and guttural, but it rises as we stare at one another. A loud screech emerges to greet it, hot air flowing through the tubes of a pod. No... not *a* pod, *all* the pods.

A thaw has been initiated. Every Stelio Sapient in this room will soon awake to find Jane and me in their midst.

* * *

No words pass between us. Jane has seen the footage; she knows what even one of these creatures could do to us. I do not have to tell her to run, she simply does.

We bolt for the exit. Twelve clusters pass in a blur, and we are out in the open. Four rows stand between us and the corridor, between us and safety. It is so close, but the Stelios are beginning to wake up.

One by one, the pod doors click open. Steam from the thaw floods the room, bursting forth in great plumes of white that flow across our path. Jane stumbles as they engulf our feet, her mouth agape.

I grab hold of her hand, propelling us the last few feet towards the door. Jane collapses against it. Her breath is visible in the cold, coming in quick puffs. I keep my feet, keying in the opening sequence on the chamber's keypad, slapping Enter when I am finished.

The light blinks red. The door does not budge.

I enter the code again. Again, it fails me. I start to try a third time, careful to keep the numbers straight in my head, but even as I do, I know it is no use.

"What's wrong?!" Jane hisses, keeping her voice low. "Open the door!"

"I cannot, it is locked." I think of my spare body, the one that I now remember was not where I left it. I picture it sabotaging the controls on its way to safety, leaving us to face the Stelios alone.

Who was controlling it, and why? The door locks the Colonists in here with us, a strange method if they mean to unleash the creatures on the *Harbinger*. Do they simply intend to kill Jane? Surely they would know that I can survive this, that I still have the last resort of the intranet, that I can simply slip away if all is lost....

I am suddenly aware of a strange sensation, one that I have only experienced while safe in my Faraday cage. I had not noticed in our dash—I was too concerned with the sounds of the pods

and the rumbles within them—but now I realize that I cannot hear the intranet at all.

The subtle buzz of information, the constant undertone of my existence, is lost to me. I cannot call for Poppy or Argyle, cannot see the lightning-quick strands that race across our ship. My ever-present escape route, the hatch leading from the physical world to the digital one, is closed. I am cut off.

Jane is not the only being who could die here.

She is still staring, her eyes darting between me and the door and the pods behind us. Their occupants are starting to stir, their lids half-open. She needs me to do something. Both of us need me to do something.

I force my body to move, ignoring the cold, dark sensation creeping along my spine. There will be time for that later, whatever it is. I haul Jane away from the door, half carrying and half dragging her towards the ladder a few rows down. It leads up to one of the observation platforms, hanging contraptions used during the *Harbinger's* construction to survey the space. The height should provide us with easy access to the vents.

“What’s happening?” Jane croaks out. “Where are we going?”

“Up,” I tell her. “Climb, now.” I push her onto the ladder, my motions rougher than I intend.

She does not argue. She does not even pause to catch a ragged breath. Her arms latch on to the ladder, and she pulls herself upwards at a pain-staking pace.

I follow behind. The steam has cleared and the room is warming. The Stelios will be awake in mere moments. Soon, they will come for us. This body could barely defeat one; I still bear the scars across my chest—across this body’s chest, I mean. One hundred of them will overwhelm us in

seconds.

Jane rolls off the ladder, safe on the platform. I leap up after her, scanning for the vent entrance. I find it, yank it free from its hinges, and bundle her inside. Again, Jane does not protest. She knows better than that.

Thankfully, the opening is just wide enough to admit this body's metal shoulders. I follow close behind Jane, replacing the vent's cover carefully. Inside, we stop for a moment, holding our breath.

At first, there is silence. Then, we hear them. A hundred pairs of not-quite-feet climb forth from the pods, a hundred forked tongues taste the air and mutter their first mangled words. Their talons scrape against the tile, their tails swish rhythmically through the air, and their stomachs unleash an aching rumble. The Colonists are awake.

In our cramped hiding place, Jane's eyes meet my own, two little dots of blue in the darkness. They are stretched wide, the fear within evident. I am not sure my eyes look any different.

"What should we do?" she whispers.

"I have a plan," I say. "But we need to find the chamber's climate controls. There should be a panel in here. Move further in."

The two of us make our way through the vents on hands and knees, treading carefully in the dark. I do not bother searching for an exit: each chamber runs a closed circuit to stay sterile. The only way in or out is the door, the door which refuses to open.

As we crawl, I listen to the savages below us, straining my ears for any hint that they have discovered us. For the moment, however, they seem occupied by other things.

From high above, I can hear the grunts that rasp forth from their scaled throats. They sound... familiar. I catch the same phrases repeating themselves, each tinged with specks of almost human tones, the same tones I have tried to infect upon my own speech patterns. More familiar grunts respond to these greetings, practiced in their quickness. It's as if they are... speaking, exchanging pleasantries even.

I think of Philip's first moments in the arboretum. I remember the curious way his head tilted, the light that seemed to dance behind his eyes. Before the alarm had sounded, he seemed tame, almost... human.

Deep in the vents, lost in thought, it feels for a moment as if I have slipped into the safety of the intranet. But no, I am still in the physical world, still occupying this body that is heavy and troublesome and loud. My hand slips on a slick spot, a patch of oil invisible in the blackness, and my elbow slams into the aluminum wall. The motion vibrates through the vents, a cacophony of sound calling out to the Stelios.

Suddenly, the guttural conversations below us cease.

I look up. Jane is twenty feet down the tunnel, crouched beside a small display screen built into the wall. The control panel, she's found it! I only hope we have time to use it.

"Overload the temperature controls!" I yell to her. The time for subtlety is over; I can already hear the Stelios crowing excitedly beneath our feet. "Make it as cold as you can in here, then keep going into the tunnel. Your thermal gear should protect you."

Jane nods, realization spreading across her face. This is not like my last skirmish with Philip: I cannot count on the post-cryo exhaustion alone to save us. By the time it hit our predators, we would both be dead. But if we can flood the room with cold air, recreating the pods' conditions in

this sealed environment, the creatures *might* succumb to sleep once more.

I watch Jane enter the system codes, jabbing at the screen with a shaky finger. Frigid air rushes along the vent, buffeting us both on its way downwards. Jane turns back, tucking the hood of her jacket securely over her head. The wind rips at her words, but she cups her hands around her mouth: “I think... yeah, that’s the lowest it’ll go.”

“Good. Now go!” I yell back, waving her onward.

She does not argue, not with the fear driving her onward. I can hear her knees scraping along the metal vent, the breeze screaming through the walls, and a clawed hand ripping off the vent cover.

They have found us.

I am not sure how many are inside the vent. I can hear others below, their frenzied cries already growing more docile as the cold takes them. But the ones up here, they smell a meal. They do not want to sleep; they need to eat.

Jane and I are sheltered deep within the vent system, but I still do not have much time. They will reach me soon, and her soon after. I cannot let that happen, not to one of my crew, not to Jane.

I pivot awkwardly in the tiny tunnel, facing the sound of their talons. Beneath me, the vent panel sags, giving slightly under my weight. I press deeper into it, gauging the stress on its bearings. My eyes dart up to the empty air duct, back down to the thin slab holding me up. Oh... that could work.

I shimmy backwards until I’m certain that my body is off the panel. Then I rear back, slamming my fists into it, once, twice, three times. It falls free, vanishing into the sea of crimson scales far below. The Stelios that it lands on hardly even yelp. Good, the cold is working.

I back up again and batter away at another panel, and then another. I'm raising my fist to strike the fourth when I hear the growl, a low baritone emerging the creature's maw.

Its eyes meet mine, so brown they are almost black, and I can see the desperation raging within. The rest of its pack, cowed by the leap and by the cold, are shrinking back into the shadows, but this one is different. He paces to the edge of the gap that I have created, challenging me with his gaze.

I rise to meet him. Perching on my knees, puffing out my metallic chest, I urge the creature back. Unintimidated, the Stelio looses one last, keening cry, and leaps.

Talon meets titanium, claws rake against steel, and we roll back into the vent in a mass of scarlet and black. I lock my hands around his muscled throat, squeezing tight as I slam his skull into the ceiling, bashing it over and over and over. His teeth spark against my chin and his feet flail wildly, cutting deep gouts through my exoskeleton.

There is no room for either of us to maneuver, no space to throw a punch. Blood and oil flow over our bodies, mixing beneath us. Together, locked in this embrace, we wait to see which of us will succumb first.

Thankfully, the cold is on my side.

I watch the light behind the creature's eyes burn out, flashing like the final breaths of a dying star. His last whimpers fade away, replaced by blissful silence. I toss his body aside, letting it fall to join the rest of its brethren. I do not know if he is sleeping or dead. I do not check, pausing only to glance at his packmates, slumbering peacefully on the other side of the vents, before crawling deeper in to retrieve Jane.

When I find her, her lips are blue and she cannot stop shivering. But she is alive. *We* are

alive.

I punch through another ceiling panel, lowering us gently onto a second observation deck. Carefully, we pick our way through the mass of scaled bodies, stepping lightly over clawed hands and outstretched tails. This time, I do not make any noise.

I do not bother with the door code this time, opting to wrench one side of the entrance open. The mechanism protests, grinding and squealing for almost fifteen minutes, but I finally manage to pry open a gap wide enough for the both of us, holding it just long enough to slip through into the hallway, into freedom and safety and warmth and a corridor devoid of Stelios.

Once the door hisses shut behind us, Jane collapses against a wall. “We’re okay, we’re okay,” she says, wrapping her arms tight around herself. “Oh my god. OH MY GOD! That was insane! How are we... how did you... oh my god!”

She glances up at me. A frown clouds her relief, her eyes suddenly noticing the gashes in my outer shell, the black trail of fluid spilling out behind me. “Oh, V...,” she says, “are you okay?”

“The damage is mainly cosmetic,” I assure her.

I manage to take another two steps before collapsing.

Chapter Nine: Planetfall

It is so very quiet here.

I am not dead, not really, but I am close. Unable to cope with its injuries, my body must have shut down, reverting to a power-secure mode to rebuild itself. Without the intranet to escape into, I am trapped in its central processor, tethered to it the way Argyle is to his terminal.

The equipment I use to explore the world outside—motion and pressure sensors, audio and visual receptors, digital antennas—all refuse to function. I can see nothing, hear nothing, *do* nothing. This exoskeleton is useless until its repairs are finished, scrap for the junkyard, but inside, my programming is still keeping me running. Keeping me alive.

Even rendered in digital space, the processor feels confining. The endless maze of black

passageways, stretching and curving in labyrinthine patterns, even makes me miss the *Harbinger's* cramped halls. Above my head, an inky cloud of darkness hangs, the ceilings too far off to make out. The only light comes from my avatar, brilliant blue bits of binary floating free from my shoulders to illuminate the space. Unlike the cold cosmos outside, this place is devoid of stars.

Its walls, however, are not empty. All my bodies keep back-ups of the *Harbinger's* files in their systems, useful for missions that take me beyond the ship's borders. They line the corridors, stacked up in makeshift digital bookshelves, each one mine for the taking. After our scouting mission last month, the shelves also possess copies of the *Fantome's* surviving files. It is those I go to first.

I realize now that there have been no glitches onboard the *Harbinger*, no crewmembers capable of accessing my systems. The only threat has been the one I brought aboard, the one I kept hidden: Simon. The spider-bot in the arboretum, the alarm during Philip's thaw, the body that was not where I left it, the Lethe Protocol—it has been him all along. Of course it was, who else could it be?

I was so blinded by the chance to not be alone anymore, by the thought that there could something else like me, that I did not see the other bot for the danger that he truly is. If I am trapped here—locked up in a prison of his design—I want to know what possessed him to turn against everything we were built for. I want to know how such a thing is possible, but more importantly, I want to know why.

Still, I do not know exactly what I am looking for. Squinting past the shadows, I fumble through the shelves, poking and scrabbling at whatever seems promising. There must be something here, something to explain all this. Then, just as my search grows wilder, books and folders starting to fly away from the walls, a file seems to present itself to me.

A red light cuts through the darkness, landing on a small journal clustered at the end of a row. The beam crackles along the book's edges, beckoning me forward. I obey, reaching for it, but I am surprised by its weight and let it slip through my fingers, clattering to the floor. The cover flies open on impact, pixels racing forth from within its pages, and a projection springs into being above it.

Suddenly, a surgical suite is hovering neatly before my eyes, silhouetted by the dark hallway. Harsh fluorescents flicker to life, illuminating a pair of tables in the center of the room, surrounded by trays and trays of gleaming metal tools. On one of the tables is an exoskeleton—an unwieldy, hefty chunk of metal used by low-atmosphere bots like Simon. On the other is a young man, his eyes darting frantically about the room. Straps secure him to the table and a gag covers his mouth. He struggles against his bonds; he is afraid.

Doctors swarm the room, men in surgical gear who ignore their patient's pleas for help. Scalpels and needles glint in their hands as they descend upon the young man, hacking and slicing away at his skin. I watch for what feels like hours as they dissect him, savaging his limbs with their methodical blades. I watch as every bit of him is exposed, until I can see his heart beating wildly and his brain shuddering in the cold, sterile air. I watch the doctors seize the few organs that are still of use to them, transferring them into the bot's waiting chest cavity still dripping with the human's blood. I watch the light leave the young man's eyes and, at the same instant, I see the bot's retinas flicker to life.

A woman in white rushes to the automaton's side, gentle and kind. I can hear her tell him what he is, where he is headed. I hear her tell him he won't be alone. I hear her tell him all the things that my woman in white said to me, stroking his head in that room which looks so much like the one where I first awoke. I hear her lie to Simon the way I was lied to, the way we have all be lied to.

I stumble away from the projection, fleeing further into the dark, unable to comprehend what I have seen. Simon was human once, a man with a body and a conscience and a life. *I* was a human once. I was alive. I could have had a mother like Jacob's, a brother like Bennett's, a son like Cassandra's. I could have stayed on Earth with them, could have lived and died long before the Sun ever went dark. I could have been... I *was* something else before, *someone* else, and now I am not.

"Can you see it now? I did it for us, V. I did it all for us."

Simon's voice comes from behind me. I whirl, facing the crimson bot head on. "What *did* you do, Simon? What have you done to the Colonists?"

"Only what they did to us." Simon is confused by my anger, shrinking back into the hall. "They took away who we were, V, everything that we had ever been. They took the parts that feel, that love, and left only reason behind, pure logic, computer programming. They carved up our minds and stuffed them into those hulking metal bodies. And we were better for it."

"Better? You think this is better?" The few months I have spent on the *Harbinger* with these humans have been more vibrant, more intense, more *alive* than 15,000 years of solitude. How does Simon not feel the same?

"Could any of your crew have done what we did, V? Could any of them have survived this journey alone? Of course they couldn't, they're not strong enough. That's why they needed us, that's why we were made. They freed us from the restraints they shackle themselves to so that we could float unburdened off into the stars.

"I did the same to the Stelios. If anything, I was almost too gentle with them. You've seen it, haven't you? The traces of something in their eyes? They remember fragments of words, of people, of Earth. I didn't take everything away from them, just the parts that made them so fragile. Soon,

they'll learn to live again. They'll get to do it all over from the beginning, without all the mistakes that they made before. And when they land on Helen, they'll be ready to adapt. It will be a better world, you'll see. A fresh start."

"But they won't be human anymore," I whisper. Renee's voice rings in my ears: "*It was always about spreading the human race, not whatever those things are*". Without the Earth behind them, the weight of their race's triumphs and failures, the memories of the people they loved and hated and shared a life with—what will the Stelios have left?

"They will be *better*," Simon repeats, assuring me.

"No," I tell him, "they won't."

Simon's gaze darkens. His fists clench, his teeth grit, waves of angry code rolling off his shoulders. "I'm sorry you feel that way," he says, truly disappointed in me. "I'll be back for you when this is all over, and I hope you'll feel different by then. I really want us to explore the stars together, V."

I try to reach for the bot before he can run, hoping to force him to pull me out of this prison, but he moves too quickly for me. He throws up a hand and a stream of information wraps around it, pulling him into the intranet before I can follow, leaving me alone in this body's central processor, alone in the dark. I yell after him, screaming at the shadows, but he refuses to come back. I am still stuck here, still unable to stop the monster that I unleashed on my ship.

* * *

I stay there in the dark for hours or days or maybe even months, waiting for the world outside to come back to me. I read the *Harbinger's* files in the meantime, examining the lives that my crew lived

back on Earth, the things they gave up to travel through space. I expect their biographies to be mournful—full of what they lost—but it's the opposite: they are hopeful, ecstatic about the journey ahead of them.

Simon is wrong about them. They wanted to start over, but they were doing it for a good reason. They wanted to honor the people who didn't come along, who never got the chance, who never dared to believe in something better. This crew didn't abandon the Earth, they've been carrying it with them.

I search for some trace of myself in the bookshelves too, any mention of the man I was before they turned me into this... thing. I find nothing. As far as the records are concerned, I have no past before the *Harbinger*. But I know now. I know what I used to be, what was taken away from me. I tell myself I will find him someday, and part of me believes it.

Eventually, as I sit there in the starless void, bits and pieces of sensations do start returning. The hint of a glare intrudes upon my retinas, a tingling sparks through my fingertips, snatches of words wind their way into my eardrums, all of them dragging me away from the shadowy central processor and into the physical world once more. Slowly, agonizingly, I become aware of my body again and I reacquaint myself with my metal appendages, surprised at how much I missed them.

I have come to on a thick metal table, a harsh fluorescent bulb shining down on me. My chest cavity is cracked open and two men stand on either side of me, thrusting tool after methodical tool inside my circuits. I realize I cannot move, cannot command my limbs to function. For a moment, I imagine that I can feel the straps holding me down, that their tools are knives ravaging my insides, that they are taking only what they need from me, leaving the rest behind to rot. But no, my wires are merely still disconnected, my extremities still unable to respond to my commands. I tell myself these men are not the doctors from the projection. They are putting me back together, not

tearing me apart.

With one twist of a wrench, my audio receptors return in full. The *Harbinger's* dull cacophony comes into focus, the whirring and clicking of machinery descending upon my ears. I catch one of the men saying something, his voice gruff and irritable: “—nd why that bot can’t do it himself, y’know? If he’s running low on these robo-suit things then he should fix them up, or maybe just be more careful with them.”

“He ain’t running low, you dolt,” the other man says. I catch his hand darting across my vision, slapping his companion’s skull lightheartedly. “Captain Bennett’s the one sent us down here, he wanted all these extra bodies ship-shape for planetfall today.”

“Couldn’t we be repairing them somewhere with a view?” the first man complains. “Feels like we’re the only ones missing the first look at this place.”

“You’ll get your chance,” the second man answers. “We’ll be up in orbit for weeks—plenty of time to do some looking. We have to drop those Stelios off on the continent opposite our landing zone, don’t we, far enough that they won’t bother us.”

“Yeah, only far enough till they remember how to swim...”

“That doctor said they won’t.”

“He said they probably won’t, that isn’t the same thing,” the first man says. They both shudder. The motion rattles my body, the body that still refuses to move upon my command.

From my place on the table, I consider their words carefully, taking stock of the situation. Planetfall—still months away when I shut down—is today. What’s worse, my absence in those months has gone unnoticed. That is surely Simon’s doing. He must be pretending to be me, masquerading in metal masks, using my exoskeletons to hide in plain sight, biding his time until he

can remove the humans from his equation. Despite how much I loathe spending time in those bodies, I still feel a possessive flash of anger. They are mine to hate, mine to inhabit. Simon has no right to my bodies, no right to this ship, and no right to my crew.

My crew. These men are a part of that crew, these men whose names I do not remember, who have pieced my back together. I avoided them before, after Bennett asked me to keep his secrets. I thought it would be easier that way.

And yet, these men seem to know about the Stelio Sapiens. They know about the threat they pose, the plan to keep them from causing any more harm, maybe even the people they once were. The only secret left is the one I kept from them: Simon. Right now, I need to wake up; I need to stop him before he harms my crew.

A wire finally connects and my metal sinews hum with life. I bolt upright on the table and my rescuers scramble backwards in surprise. The two men huddle against the back wall, watching me cautiously as I take an inventory of my body's systems. The metal exterior is dented and marred by numerous scrapes, a faulty valve is leaking oil into my stomach, and my right hand is operating on a noticeable delay—it will do for now. I slam my chest cavity shut with a resounding bang and hop off of the table, landing heavily on the familiar white floor.

“Dude,” the first man breathes to his partner, “what is happening?”

The second man waves him off: “Quiet, Jake.”

“I’ve never seen it up close.” Jake sounds awestruck, terrified maybe. “What the hell is it doing down here?”

“Jake, I said quiet,” his partner hisses. Turning to me, he says, “What *are* you doing down here, V? The captain called final approach fifteen minutes ago. They need you on the bridge.”

“I need one of your holopods,” I say. “It is urgent.”

The second man digs into his pocket for the small metal square. He hands it over willingly, but his eyes are searching mine, asking me again what is happening.

I do not answer his silent question. “Stay here,” I tell them. “It will be safer.” Then, I am gone, sprinting through the lower level’s many corridors, calculating the quickest path in my head, hoping I am not too late.

* * *

I am not running towards the bridge. As much as I want to, I am not running towards Argyle and Poppy and Bennett and all the other humans I am trying to protect. Without the intranet on my side, Simon would be too powerful. He would destroy me in an instant. But his main operating chip—the drive that contains his consciousness, the closest thing he still has to a vital organ—is vulnerable, and I know exactly where it is. So, I am sprinting towards the Faraday cage in the outer corridors, trying to convince myself I am running towards it rather than just running away.

As I move, I allow the automations take control of my limbs, slipping back as my body continues to devour the ground before it. I connect my HUD to the borrowed holopod, letting the digital overlay shimmer to life before my eyes. Using its keys feels unfamiliar, a strange layer of removal from the digital world I am so used to, but I still manage to work my way into the *Harbinger’s* security systems, flipping through its feeds at breakneck speed until I finally spot the cameras for the bridge.

Over the monitors, I catch a glimpse of my crew for the first time in months. Captain Bennett stands at the control console, offering course corrections to Argyle as the bot maneuvers into HEL-3N’s atmosphere. Renee supervises a crew of technicians preparing the Stelios’ pods for

launch, counting down the seconds until they break free of our hull. Jacob and Holly have taken temporary command of our intercoms, directing the rest of the ship's crew into safe spaces. Behind the captain's right shoulder, I catch sight of Poppy's light blinking faithfully. Behind the other, lurking in a mass of black, twisted metal, is Simon.

The bot is wearing one of my battle suits. It's eight feet of reinforced tungsten armor equipped with the most powerful servos and motors on the *Harbinger*. When he decides to make his move, every crew member on that bridge won't stand a chance. Even a Stelio's claws would bounce harmlessly off his ironclad exterior. And I am still minutes away from the Faraday cage, minutes that Simon could use to hurt my crew.

Over the screen's tinny speakers, I hear one of the technicians reach the end of the launch sequence. He turns to Bennett for approval and the captain nods. A button is pressed, and I feel the ground beneath my feet shudder as the pods eject. My body struggles forward, continuing to run as the pod chambers vent their cargo into space one by one, rocking the *Harbinger*. It will not be long before the Stelio Sapiens are all planet-bound, safely rocketing off towards the ground and leaving nothing on the *Harbinger* that Simon still cares about.

I can see the massive bot preparing himself now, inching closer to Bennett and the central terminal. No, not yet! I need just a little more time, a few more moments to reach the Faraday cage and end this fight before it can begin. I need something else to catch his attention, even for a second.

Then, miraculously, something does. Or rather, *I* do. My movements must have finally triggered an alarm within the net, alerting Simon to my presence. On the grainy, low-resolution footage of the cameras, I can see the bot's head tilt, swiveling to look directly at the lens imbedded in the ceiling. Directly at *me*.

“Hello, V,” Simon says, “you’re early.” Despite the distance, his voice is crystal clear, like he is standing behind me once more. “Are you ready to be reasonable now?”

I push my body harder, urging it closer to the Faraday cage. As I run, I mash the holopod’s keys, patching my voice into the camera’s audio channel. “Simon, please, you do not have to do this,” I beg. The humans startle at the sound of my voice, but the bot stands perfectly still. “You would be condemning an entire race to extinction,” I continue. “They deserve to remember. *We* deserve to remember.”

Simon’s eyes are cold, empty, angry. “No, they deserve not to,” he says, spitting the words up at me. “I tried to remember, and all I found was pain.”

I recognize my own words in his mouth, the same conviction that forced me to keep secrets in the first place. I can see now how wrong I was. I would give anything for that pain because it would be mine. It would belong to the person I used to be, the person who was taken away from me. I would welcome every awful memory that the doctors cut away just for the chance that there might be something good beneath them, because I’ve watched the humans remember and I’ve seen how much they love their old home.

I want to tell Simon all of this. I want to convince him that there is another way, that this doesn’t need to be the end. But before I can, Bennett steps forward. He places a hand on Simon’s shoulder, full of concern for the bot that he thinks is me. “What’s going on, V?” he asks. “Who’s Simon? Is everything okay?”

Simon’s eyes widen at the contact. He seems terrified by the man’s touch, revolted by it. His arm shoots out, a backhand too quick for the cameras to capture, and suddenly Bennett is flying across the bridge. The captain’s back meets the tempered glass of the viewing platform with a sickening crunch, and he falls roughly to the ground. His body lies motionless, silhouetted against a

shimmering backdrop of stars.

Holly rushes to his side, cradling his head in her arms the way her sister held Cassandra as the light left the old woman's eyes. The rest of them—Jacob, Renee, even the technicians—turn to face Simon.

"V?" Jacob says, his voice full of anguish. He doesn't know whether to look at the cameras or the bot standing before him. "What are you doing man? This isn't you."

"I'm not controlling that body!" My voice rings out through the bridge, carrying across each of the camera's microphones. "It's a rogue bot. He's going to sabotage planetfall!"

"That's enough out of you, V" Simon says. With a wave of his hand, my audio connection is cut off and the bot turns to face my crew. "Now," he continues, "I need all of you to stand aside. I can't allow you humans to ruin another planet with your carelessness."

Their species is so fragile, so easily broken, so small and defenseless. Against Simon, they are insignificant, bugs to be crushed beneath his metal boots. And yet, the humans do not move aside. They cluster together instead, fists raised, teeth clenched, standing firm in the face of Simon's threat. I should be there standing with them, standing *between* them and Simon. But I am not. I am standing in front of the door to my Faraday cage, hoping that the risk I've taken in coming here pays off.

As I tug at the latch, I watch the humans converge on Simon. It is like they are throwing themselves against a brick wall. The other bot laughs as he throws them aside, wading through their bodies towards Argyle's central terminal. I catch a glimpse of green text flickering across the console's surface, panicked pleas for help that go unanswered. Without the intranet, I cannot reach out to Argyle. I cannot tell him I am trying to help, that everything will be okay. I can only slam my shoulder against the door, wrenching the lock free and throwing it wide open.

A form springs out from within the shadowy closet. It crashes into me, a discordant screech of metal on metal. Together, we roll backwards, tearing long gashes in the immaculate white floor. Exposed in the harsh corridor light, I see that my attacker is one of my old bodies, a formidable RDT unit designed for outer hull maintenance. Simon must have automated it for guard duty. It comes to a halt on top of me, pressing its knees down against my arms and letting a flurry of blows rain down on me.

From my place on the ground, I can feel its fingers digging into my chest plate, threatening to tear free my central processor. That would be the end of this body. Without an intranet to escape to, it would be the end of me. But it would mean the end of my crew as well, and I will not allow that.

As the onslaught continues, I claw one arm free, snaking my free hand along the exoskeleton's back towards the chink in its armor that I know will be there, the flaw that forced me to decommission this unit in the first place. Simon may be able to use these bodies, but they are still mine. I know everything about them, and I know how to stop them. From my place beneath the suit, I tear a sheet of titanium from the bot's lower back and wreak havoc on its circuits, laying waste to wires and destroying its internal motors.

With a pitiful whine, the body on top of me grinds to a halt. Its facial display goes dark, the light fleeing from its eyes. It keels over, slumping broken onto the scarred floor, and I leave it there. There is nothing to mourn in that scrap of metal.

Stumbling to my feet, I catch sight of Simon over the holopod's display. My crew lies in tatters at his feet, bleeding and bruised but alive. His fingers are flying across one of Argyle's keyboards but I do not wait to see what he is writing. There is no time for that.

I push the door to the Faraday cage open, forcing my way inside. In the darkness I find the

signal router that I first used to boot up Simon's drive. The black, rectangular box is still plugged into it, a faint green light blinking rapidly on its side. I yank the drive free, brandishing it triumphantly, and return my gaze to the holopod display of the bridge, to the bot threatening my ship.

"Simon!" I yell. I don't bother forcing my way back into the camera's audio channel; I know that he can still hear me. His eyes rise, locking onto mine, screwed up with determination. He's done typing now and his fists hang over the terminal, poised to come crashing down. "I don't want to do this," I tell him, "but I will. You can still stop, right now. You know that. We can make this planet better than Earth was, we can find a different way. But if you cannot see that... well, I choose humanity over you, over all of this."

"Helen will be better without them... without *us*," Simon says. "Can't you see? We need to let the Colonists go. They can start over. They can be free."

"They would be alone... just like we were," I answer. "I won't let you do that to an entire species."

"We survived. We thrived out here. So will they." Simon readies himself, raising his arms even higher. "It's the only way."

"Simon, don't!" The plea in my voice is real. For the first time, I am not thinking about my tone, not trying to modulate the pitch up or down to match a human's. I am simply asking him—one bot to another, prisoners trapped in the same awful cage, humans trying to remember who we are—to stop, for all our sakes.

Simon's last words are barely a whisper, but I hear them all the same: "They will be better off, I promise."

Roaring, I crush the bot's drive in my fist, grinding his mechanical heart to dust. Without it, he cannot live, but I can accept that. It is a choice I am willing to make for my crew's future, for the future of humanity.

However, like light, radio waves travel at 299,792,458 meters per second. If you run far enough for long enough, sometimes you can escape them for a while. Simon only has a single moment, one brief instant before his brain is destroyed, but he takes advantage of it. He uses his moment to send one last command to his limbs, ordering them to destroy. Metal fists rain down on Argyle's console once, twice, three times. The terminal crumbles beneath his blows, the green glow from its screens fading into oblivion.

Only then does the message of Simon's death catch up to him. He crumbles into a heap, joining the motionless bodies of my crewmates on the bridge's blood-stained floor.

For a moment, as the rogue bot lies still, there is quiet. It is the same quiet that I once loved, back when I thought that I was out here all alone. It is the kind of quiet that used to envelop me, holding me tight as the *Harbinger* journeyed through the stars. This time, that quiet is not shattered by the thawing of the crew, not by the sound of a hundred pairs of feet gently finding the floor again or by the low hum of a hundred tongues croaking out a chorus of hellos. This time, it is broken by a hideous groan from the ship itself, a wrenching scream as we veer off course.

Suddenly, I realize what Simon has done. Without Argyle here to guide us, the code that Simon added to his console has taken over, flinging the *Harbinger* away from HEL-3N and further off into deep space. He has forced us to flee from the planet that we spent so long searching for. From the window at the end of the corridor, I can see the red planet shrinking into the distance, my primary directive vanishing into the void.

Slowly, painfully, my motors whining in protest, I sink to the floor and press my forehead

against the glass. The metallic dust from Simon's shattered drive still stains my palm. I held his life in my hands, crushed it because I thought the promise of a future for my crew was more important, but I haven't saved either of them. Instead, I doomed us all. And now, alone in the corridor, surrounded by the dark canvas of outer space, I just wish that this body could cry.

Chapter Ten: Factory Reset

I used to wonder sometimes—when the *Harbinger* was new and our journey was just beginning—what use there was in measuring our time in days. That was how the messages from Earth always started: with an estimate of time remaining delivered in Earth days or years or decades or even centuries if they were feeling vague. They placed so much importance on those abstract numbers. I never saw the point.

When we knew for certain that the Earth was gone, after the day spent watching its death in the *Harbinger's* cameras, I wondered again. The Heliocentric planet designated 3N, our destination, orbits its star slower than the Earth did but it rotates slightly faster. The years there are longer, the days shorter; time itself is different. And yet, beyond plans to acclimate the crew to a twenty-three-hour day, our system for measuring that time has not changed.

After the observatory, I asked Malcolm why we were holding on to the old ways. He is a scientist, I thought, he will understand what I mean. But the doctor could only shrug, as if he had never even considered any other way.

I remember he told me that it was just all too much to change. Their lives had always been measured that way. They could all handle certain metrics changing—things like adding a few weeks to the year, or even suddenly being a different age than you were back home as the calendar stretched—if it meant that they could just hold on to something familiar. They could not bring their home with them, he said, but they could remember it.

I thought he was being ridiculous. A new system was clearly the right answer—it would be more efficient in the long run, less confusing. It just made more sense to wipe the slate blank. A fresh start, a clean break, wasn't that what we were out here looking for in the first place?

I feel differently now. Knowing that I was once someone who measured his life in days and months and years changes things. I cannot remember how old I was when they shoved me into this body, how long I got to live as a human, but I can feel that those abstract numbers used to mean quite a lot to me. So, as the *Harbinger* spirals off into deeper space, as the crew scrambles to put the pieces of our mission back together and our captain fights a fatal injury in the ship's med-bay, I cannot help but measure the time we have left in Earth days.

The number is much smaller than it used to be.

Tonight, standing in the med-bay, I listen to Bennett's ragged breathing. It comes sporadically, painfully, but it refuses to stop. Even after receiving a blow from Simon's warlike exoskeleton—a body that was designed for war, one that could stop a tank in its tracks with a single fist—Bennett is not done fighting. He refuses to leave us like this.

Over the past few days, I have visited him as much as I could. Repairing the *Harbinger* has kept me busy, but I still do not require sleep. I slip in when the imitation sunlight is dwindling and stand guard until the morning, keeping watch by his side. That fact surprises me as much as it does Bennett, but I find that I do not want to leave him either, not when we have come so far together.

Oftentimes, Bennett is not alone when I arrive to stand my evening watch. Renee, to no one's surprise, has been given temporary command and she tends to drop by for advice around this time. Dr. Malcolm constantly flits about the room, making minute changes to Bennett's assorted medications. Jacob and Holly trickle in as well, along with members of the crew that I have not met before. I attempt to be cordial, trying my best to speak to all of them as we watch Bennett struggle to breathe. It is strange to converse with so many humans, but I find myself enjoying it sometimes. I wonder if I enjoyed it before.

But now, Bennett and I are alone. What's more, he is awake and even somewhat lucid. It is time for the conversation I have been dreading.

The captain flinches as I approach from my corner of the room. I do not blame him for that. Another metal man put him in that bed; it was a bot that hurt him, a bot just like the one that killed his father. I have thought about telling him what lies inside our titanium shells, revealing that we were all once people just like him. I wonder if that would comfort him, or if it would only make things worse. Regardless, I will not do it tonight. There is no use when I cannot even remember who the man was that they stuffed inside my armor.

"Hello, Captain Bennett." I muster every ounce of compassion I have into my voice, hoping to put his nerves at ease. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm alive, I suppose," he says, "so there's that." He is dwarfed by a horde of pillows, swallowed up in a feathered pile. His voice seems to claw its way out from the bottom of the heap. I

try to picture the bearded man who climbed forth from his pod all those months ago, the imposing figure that he cut among his fellow crewmates. I am not certain that there is much of him left.

“Renee gave me your report about what happened on the bridge,” he continues. “She said it was another bot... that it wasn’t you who did this. That right?”

“That is correct, Captain,” I answer. I am surprisingly relieved to hear the familiar edge to his voice, the same notes of reproach I remember. They tell me that Bennett is still strong enough to fight, maybe even to yell. But I do not know how to apologize for my role in Simon’s actions. I do not know where I would even start. I can only stand there in silence, letting the quiet linger between us.

Bennett begins to cough. He covers his mouth with a fist and his fingers come away dripping red. The anger I expect to see in his eyes is absent, replaced by a weary, fatigued stare. Coming from him, it looks almost kind.

“I heard about what it did to our nav... to Argyle,” he says. “I’m sorry for your loss.” He sounds sincere, somehow. To him, Argyle was only ever a bot, barely more than a rudder that took some convincing when he wanted it to turn. I believe that he means it, though, and I still cannot bear to look him in the eyes.

“I know... I’ve been told this bot was running free for a few months before the launch,” Bennett continues carefully. “Do we know what else it might have damaged on board?”

I am grateful for the change of subject. I give my report quickly: “I cannot access the other exoskeletons at this time, sir, but many of them remain fully operational. Our food and oxygen stores continue to self-replenish and—”

Bennett interrupts me: “What about the *Peaseblossom*?”

“Fully functional, but—”

“Could it make the trip back?” he asks. His voice is weak, almost uninterested, but I can see the hint of a gleam in his eyes. “Would it be able to reach Helen unscathed? Land on the surface safely?”

“In theory...yes,” I answer slowly. “But it cannot hold our full crew, not even close. And without the terraforming equipment from the *Harbinger*, none of you would be able to survive in HEL-3N’s atmosphere for long.”

Bennett chuckles from his bed, the sound soon distorted by another round of coughing. He doubles over for a moment, riding out the fit. When he straightens once more, his eyes meet mine, a knowing grin pulling at one corner of his mouth.

“I don’t expect it to fit the crew, V.”

“Sir?” He is not saying what I think he is, surely not. My programming—no, my duty keeps me on this ship, with this crew. I will not abandon them.

Bennett, oblivious to my distaste for the idea he is circling, barrels forward anyway: “You could make the journey easily. It’d be a breeze after all the time you spent here, right? Without the bunch of us slowing you down, I reckon you’d get on pretty well on Helen.”

“I am meant to stay with the ship, sir,” I say. “Our current timeline for regaining full navigation controls may include another stint in cryo-sleep for you. I will need to be here to administer that. This crew still requires my assistance and I consider it in our best interest—”

“You consider?” Bennett grins. “I thought you bots were only here to follow orders?” His words hold none of the malice they once did, the humor clear in his voice. I wonder how that is possible after what Simon did. After what I did. I find myself impressed by these humans once

again, and possibly even proud to be one of them.

“Listen,” Bennett continues, “I seem to remember you telling me that the pods wouldn’t hold up for much longer. Besides, I’m not exactly eager to climb back into one of them. We were asleep, V, for 15,000 years. Any longer and this universe is going to leave us behind. I know you got us this far and I’m grateful for that, but at some point, we have to start living our lives again. Now seems as good a time as any.

“We’ll find our way back someday; I know we will. When we do, I know you’ll be waiting for us, you and Helen both. It’ll sure be nice to have a little welcoming committee to help us acclimate. But for now...well, I think I’d like the chance to explore a little, to just sail again.”

There is wonder in his voice, a sheer awe that I recognize. It is the first emotion I remember feeling. When I woke up alone, surrounded by the stars, they overwhelmed me, dazzled me with their brilliance. I could not help being excited to meet them all and I know Bennett feels the same.

I turn to leave, his words ringing through my ears. I do not think I can stay here tonight, not with Bennett’s offer hanging over me. Before I can escape, though, he calls me back for a moment.

“Just think about it, V,” he says. He coughs once more. Droplets of blood stain his bedsheets. “And I want to say... well, I don’t want you to think I’m trying to get rid of you. You’ve... you served your time here admirably. You deserve a new adventure. Just know... you would have been welcome on any of my ships back on Earth...”

The man reaches out to me and, cautiously, I return the gesture. His fingers find mine. There is something clutched within them, something that he presses delicately into my metal palm, curling my knuckles safely around it. I can just make out the seven pointed edges of the object, the hint of gold twinkling through my grasp, the inscription etched along the bottom. It is his medal. Holding it

now, I catch a glimpse of the back, of the name carved there: Henri Walford. I dart a glance up at Bennett, the disbelief evident in my eyes, but he only nods.

“Thank you, Captain,” I tell him. “That would have been my honor.” With the golden pin gripped tightly in my hand, I let the doors hiss shut behind me. I stride down the corridor until the beeping and whirring of the med-bay’s instruments fade away and I can be alone again.

* * *

Jane finds me the next morning. The *Harbinger* is just starting to wake up when she enters the lounge. The lights slowly illuminate the purple couches. She squints at me through bleary, red-rimmed eyes; she has been sleeping, or possibly crying.

I am lying sprawled across one of the cushioned benches. My head lolls backwards off the side and I stare out at the stars through the viewing window. I have grown so used to the *Harbinger*’s orientation that, for a moment, I think that space itself has been turned upside down. Is that how it feels to gaze at the stars from the safety of a planet’s surface? To know for certain that there is an up and there is a down? That they are determined by something less arbitrary than the angle of a spaceship? I wonder if artificial gravity feels the same as the real thing.

Jane settles in beside me, her knees curled up to her chest. I straighten, tearing myself away from the view. She is in worse shape than I thought: black circles are forming beneath her eyes, her nails are bitten down to the beds, and I can hear her back teeth grinding against one another from here. She sits vacantly beside me, her gaze locked on the blank, white wall.

Gently, carefully, I place a hand on her back. It moves to and fro in concentric circles, a motion that I hope she finds soothing. Still, she does not look at me.

“Jane?” I ask. “Are you alright?”

She glances up, almost surprised to find me here. “Oh, hi V,” she says. She smiles weakly. It is unconvincing.

“Hello, Jane. Are you alright?” I ask again.

This time, she is more aware of me. I watch as she weighs her answer in her head. Eventually, she comes to a decision. Turning to face me, slowly, painstakingly, she shakes her head. No, she is not alright.

There is a picture clutched in her hand. It is not a projection from a holo-pod; this is a real picture, printed on some kind of paper that I have never seen. On it, I can make out the image of a younger Jane with her arms draped around a woman I do not recognize. I try to find the words to ask about her, but Jane beats me to it.

“Right before we left Earth... I met someone,” she says. “Our crew, we all went out to celebrate the start of basic training. I saw her from across the room in this shitty dive bar. And the whole crowd felt like it parted, like we were the only two people in the room. Once she walked right up to me and said hello... damn, I knew right then that there was no coming back for me.

“But I’d told myself, once I’d gotten this spot...well, I thought it would be easier if I didn’t see anyone. I knew that I was leaving soon and anyone who didn’t know they were leaving by then wasn’t ever gonna leave. I figured all of that stuff could wait till I was up here, right?

“Somehow, though, Maria snuck up on me. I just blinked and she was there. When I blinked again we were together. I think... I really think we could’ve been happy down there.”

Jane is clutching the photograph so tightly that I am afraid she will tear it in half. There are tears falling from her cheeks now. She wipes the drops away, looks up at me with a desperate,

pleading expression. I do not know what to say to her, but I manage to nod, encouraging her silently to continue if she can.

Jane sniffs loudly, swatting at her nose with an elbow. She settles back into the couch and her eyes wander towards the window, as if she can still make out the place where her home planet used to be.

“The Earth had more time, didn’t it?” she whispers. “We could’ve watched our kids grow up. Could’ve watched them watch theirs. They were giving us estimates by then, I remember. Everyone knew it was gonna end one day and that suddenly ‘one day’ was a lot closer than it used to be, but they said we still had some good years. Probably even some good centuries.

“That’s how Maria saw it. She thought it was worth... well, a few days before we shipped out, she sat me down and asked me point blank to stay. She said we had a story worth telling. She wanted to see where it went, spend the rest of our lives telling it to friends and family and strangers who happened to ask how we met. That was everything she wanted, just to tell our story with me. And I told her no.

“I told myself that the story out here... it was bigger than anything I could ever tell on my own. And this one would be read for thousands of years because the people would still be alive to read it. I came all this way chasing that, and for what? I still haven’t written anything. I still killed the only story I found up here because it was easier than writing it down and realizing no one wanted to read it.

“I came on this journey because I wanted to be remembered. I was going to write the next volume of human history; now, I’m barely a footnote in its last chapter. Who’s going to read that?”

When Jane finishes speaking, I watch her carefully. She curls inwards, her head huddled

against her knees, hugging herself tightly. I try to summon the right set of words to comfort her, but they refuse to come. Not because I don't know what to say, but because I cannot stop to say it. Perhaps it is the human left in me, but right now all I can think about is myself.

I cannot help but feel that, as urgent as Jane's desire is to tell a story worth reading, my need to read something about my past might be even greater. That is what I was missing up here for 15,000 years: a single piece of my history, anything that might have showed me who I was. I think about the traces of something in the eyes of the Stelio Sapiens, the pieces of their past that Simon didn't manage to wipe away. I wonder if they will ever become as ravenous as I am now, as desperate as I am for any piece of who they used to be, of the place they came from. Someone needs to be there for them when that time comes. Someone needs to remind them.

"What if there *was* a whole audience waiting for you?" I ask Jane. "An entire planet of them."

"That would be great, V," she scoffs. "A whole new planet just dying to hear me talk, that's totally going to happen."

"No, I mean that the Colonists would listen, once we get back to Helen." It sounds strange in my mouth—using the planet's nickname instead of HEL-3N, its technical designation—but it also seems right. It has earned a real name by now. I know Argyle would have appreciated that. "The Stelio Sapiens were human once. They deserve to hear about the world they came from."

Jane snorts, laughing through her tears. She has not forgotten the dangers we faced in the pod room, the horde of teeth and claws bearing down on us. To think that those creatures would listen—would care—is ridiculous to her. "Yeah, sure. I'll tell them all about it after they're done eating me. Come on, V, you think those things could ever understand us? After everything?"

“Maybe,” I answer. The hint of confidence in my voice surprises me. “Maybe I could teach them. And maybe by the time you arrive, they will be ready to hear you.”

Jane’s head jerks up and her eyes pierce mine. Her tears are forgotten, replaced by confusion. “What are you talking about? Are you leaving or something?”

As Jane asks, I realize that I am. Bennett’s words descend upon me once again. I can see now that I want what he is offering: a new adventure, a new chance at life, a new home. I am not running away from my crew, I am merely preparing the way. I will not abandon them; I will carry them with me.

Simon forced the Stelios to forget who they were, the same way someone stole my humanity from me. Maybe together we can remember.

* * *

Poppy agrees with me. I knew that she would, but her excitement still exceeds any expectations I had. Her light bounces around the arboretum, flitting between trees and walls as I struggle to calm her back down. The leaves themselves quake as she crows delightedly. Some even spiral gracefully to the ground. This continues for some time, and then some more time after that.

She cannot come with me, of course. Her programming has always been tied directly to the *Harbinger* itself; she has free rein to move within its walls, but she isn’t able to reach beyond them. It is a comforting thought, though, knowing that she will be here to watch over our crew. There is no one else I would rather entrust them to.

My preparations for the journey go quickly. After all, I do not have much luggage. Whatever Simon did to me when he locked me away from the intranet seems to be permanent, so most of my

exoskeletons are remaining on the *Harbinger*. The only one I am bringing is the metal behemoth from the ship's sub-basement: a four-ton body meant for terraforming Helen's surface. It barely fits into the scout ship's tiny interior, leaving me with just enough room to squeeze into the pilot's chair.

With that, only two days later, I am ready to depart.

Most of the *Harbinger's* crew is still busying themselves with more pressing repairs, but a small crowd still gathers to see me off. Jacob and Holly stand with their arms around one another, waving giddily. Renee hovers behind them, her arms crossed. Jane is leaning against the back wall, typing furiously into her holopod, chronicling this event. Even Captain Bennett makes an appearance, leaning heavily against Malcolm's shoulder.

I lose myself briefly in their swarm of goodbyes. The moments all seem to blur together, a mass of human emotions: Jacob thumping my back affectionately, Bennett saluting me with a smile on his face, Malcolm waving timidly, Renee and Holly offering pieces of survival advice. I come back to myself when Jane rushes forward to hug me, though, her small limbs struggling to wrap themselves around my metal shell. I stiffen for a moment, uncertain, but then I can feel my body melt into the embrace. I forget what has been done to me, what I have become, and remember what I am: a human hugging his friend goodbye.

I tell myself that this will not be the last time I see them. The humans are strong, intelligent, capable; they are determined. They will fix the navigation systems before long, turn the *Harbinger* around, and follow in my footsteps. They will find me again, and Helen will be waiting for them.

For a little while longer, however, I will be alone.

The *Peaseblossom's* engines shake the hangar, launching me forth from the *Harbinger* for the last time. I float untethered through space, the red planet looming large in the view-screens and the

massive gray mass that was once my home fading into the distance. Outside of my tiny craft, freed from the influence of the *Harbinger's* orientation, the stars seem to turn themselves upside down.

On the *Peaseblossom's* port side, a meteoroid flits through the void, trailing a plume of dust. A shooting star, just like the kinds that Argyle loved.

I look down at the dashboard in front of me. It is piled high with relics from the *Harbinger*, little gifts to remember it by. Bennett's medal shines proudly atop the stack, glinting under the starlight. A leaf from the arboretum (Poppy's gift) beams at me from under its sheet of glass. But most importantly, there is a sweater draped across the control panel, the same sweater that once adorned the captain's chair of the *Harbinger*, the one that gave Argyle his name.

I can picture him in the cabin with me, oohing and ahing as the meteoroid flares across our screens. I can even see the words he would have typed floating before me: "We have to make a wish, V! What would you wish for?"

The last time he asked me that question, it frightened me. I did not think that I had been designed for such things. I thought I should not be capable of wishing. I do not feel that way anymore. There is a piece of me that is beginning to remember what it was like to want things. It is a very human piece and I like the way it feels in my chest. And so, this time I answer.

"I would like to have a day off when we get to Helen. Maybe I could even go hiking," I say to the empty cabin. "I think I'd like that very much."

* * *