

Aliens: Convolution

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Dedication:

For all those Aliens Fans out there like us...

CHAPTER ONE

The command deck of the isolated moon of LS814 was large and busy; much like an office, with holographic displays on rows of desks manned by at least twenty people in all. There were corner offices that surrounded the big room where all the higher up's could feel like they were in charge of something important. Through one of the glass doors, Foreman Benjamin Eckhard sipped coffee and looked out into the chaos that was the labs journal-writers, communicators, and red-tape peddlers. He knew that he was not even the middle man but at least he owned the station. His ambitions were starting to wain after reaching his mid fifties. He wanted more for his life but at least he had his pension in a few years and he was going to hold onto that little piece of paradise. All he had to do was prevent any fuckups from happening on his watch and he'd be free to ship back to Mars, or maybe even live out the rest of his days on Daylight Station where he could be close to his family, yet not actually be on that shit hole known as Earth. Weyland had a way of ruining the pensions and careers of the middle-men and he knew it was almost his time for the chopping block.

An older man in full fatigues and a gun on his hip walked into view, blocking his gaze at the big room. Ben opened the door and let the muscular military veteran into his office. The old man swaggered in like he owned the place and rolled his shoulders as he looked around at the cushy little office. He didn't fit in there and it was painfully obvious that he too was looking at a career ending in a way that he never imagined. He didn't belong in an office but they put him out to pasture. All he had left was his war stories. Nevertheless, he kept the Wey-U corporate security officers in line as if he were still a sergeant in the Marines.

"Henry... Ran out of shit to do?" Ben took another sip of his coffee and smiled over the rim of his steaming cup. That's how he felt. No more ambition was left in the universe for the both of them. Only the past and what little dreams they had for their

retirement. Ben realized that it was only he that realized that. Henry Jacobs was the type of man to go down fighting. If there was any disappointment in his life, it was that he was too good to have gotten shot by a rebellious colonist in the Marines, or by an angry colonial native that doesn't like Weyland Yutani mowing over their farmland for precious rocks and resources. Something told Ben that Henry was still looking for a way to go down fighting, even if the company men up top tried to retire the man. Henry wasn't the retirement type.

“This place needs me and you know it. You know, I got fifty green-behind-the-ears trainees coming in here to do exo-suit courses with this month and the shitbirds ain't even willin' to give me the ammunition I need to perform a live fire drill.” Henry had a thick Texan Accent. He sat down on a sofa next to the windows and watched the security video feed over Bens desk. He looked larger than life sitting on the sofa. Ben couldn't help but notice that the oversized Marine never seemed to fit anything. Even his sidearm looked like a toy as his large, creased up hands patted the stock of it as if it were his personal pet.

“Don't we still have what you were given? I don't remember seeing any exercises on the roster from last month.” Ben walked away from the glass door and laid his coffee cup on the desk as he sat behind it while Henry relaxed on the sofa. He pulled up the allotted ammunition stores and observed them.

“I'm not willing to expend the ammo we might need. I know what kind of nefarious shit you guys going on in red sector. Would you want me to tell your boss we couldn't maintain containment because we spent too much smartgun ammo on a training range?” Henry's icy cold gaze was serious as he leaned over his knees. It was the kind of look that told someone that they didn't need to take a conversation any further unless they wanted to be dressed down by a Marine. Ben may have been a hardass boss, but he wasn't Marine-Hard. This man was also his designated bodyguard and it didn't do well to test your protection, even if he thought it was amusing to think that he assumed there would ever be any action on a distant lunar outpost.

“Considering what we do that goes against the ICC down there in the dungeon, I suppose that's smart.” He forced himself to pretend to agree with him. “Just for once, I'd like to move up in this god-forsaken hell-hole.” He flipped his computer on. And waited for the green on black CRT to warm up enough to show a decent image of what he was searching for while he talked. “The exec's are always on us about the development within the bio-weapons division but we can't get anything past quarantine to warrant my existence. We have the equipment, the labs, the people to get it done right, and then there's me – at the top, with my hands tied.”

The old Marine stood up and stretched.

“Ben...” He walked over to his desk. “Thirty years in the core has taught me one thing. There’s a time to follow your orders, and there’s a time to take initiative. I might be getting feeble minded in my old age, so, I’m going to run something by ya... But I need to know if you’re complaining, or asking for help. I’m gettin’ too long in the tooth for games.”

“What are you talking about, Henry?”

“Well... I have my contacts in the corps. And I’ve been hearing things. Classified things – thing’s I ain’t supposed to know. And it involves something much more interesting than your common hysteria virus your boys are working on. Something wroth millions to the bio-wep division. “

”Also highly illegal, I take it?”

“Nothing worthwhile ever comes without risk.”

“How good’s your source, and what are you talking about?”

The Marine smiled...

One Month Later

Isabel Mason regarded the lab she sat in with a long winded sigh. The slender six foot tall lanky framed brunette propped her long flight-suit clad legs on the table she was supposed to be working on. She grinded her teeth and it showed in her angular jaw as she breathed heavily through her nose. She looked up to see a man stomping by the windows in a company suit that looked as if it needed to be thrown in the trash years ago. He stopped in his tracks when he saw the way Isabel was sitting and then walked back toward the entrance to the computer lab. Isabel took her feet off the desk at the same time she heard the door slam against the metallic wall that divided the computer lab from the bio-lab.

“Is that how you’re going to act after I told you to shape up? Really?”

The fat balding man sucked on a cigar and started smelling the place up. Isabel wanted to hold her nose but held onto the sides of her flightsuit pockets as a reminder not to make things worse. Disagreeing with anything he said, did, or emitted in the form of smell was professional suicide. She wanted to roll her eyes but she resisted that urge as well. She ended up looking like a bumbling idiot that didn’t know what to say because all of her energy was directed toward not doing anything that he would perceive as a challenge to his authority.

“Are you just going to stand there like an idiot, or are you going to say something?” Her boss walked closer and blew a cloud of smoke in her face as he got

close enough to see the whites in her dark eyes. She blinked rapidly in reaction to the cloud that enveloped her entire head and talked only when the smoke dissipated.

“I always take a moment before collating the thoughts in my head.”

“That’s the sorriest excuse I’ve ever heard in my life. You... Actually having a thought in your head.” He turned to walk away and suddenly stopped and pivoted on his foot to spin back around and take a full step toward her. He pushed his finger in front of his face and shook it violently. “... because you actually having a thought in your head is laughable. I can tell by the way you look at me that the wheels are spinning but the hamster is fucking dead.”

Isabel held her breath as her eyes watered. She shook with and her lips trembled as she watched her boss finally smile. She couldn’t say anything back to him. He was too upsetting and demeaning for her to keep her cool and she knew that if she even attempted to say a word, it would come out as a cry and he’d be all over that, too.

“If I knew you were going to be this behind in your work, I’d have gotten a real worker in this lab instead of an intern. Do you know how much work you were supposed to have had done by now? What kind of a mechanical systems engineer are you? I bet you couldn’t even fix the lighting down in brown sector. Much less program software for a new android we have in processing. You’re behind in that, too! Jesus H Fuck! What’s wrong with you... I’d send a transfer request to corporate but it takes six months to get an answer down here and the answer is always ‘go fuck yourself’, and I got YOU! A little girl who sits in the lab with her feet up on the fucking desk and calls it collating! Get out of here... Don’t come back until you stop crying!”

The supervisor turned back around and walked away. Isabel didn’t lose her full composure until she was certain that he actually wasn’t coming back. She fell back in her chair as tears streamed down her cheek. She started gasping for air as her nose dripped and her heart pounded in her ears. Each breath left her mouth in a wheeze and a snuffle. She opened her top desk drawer where she kept an already opened supply of brown paper towels to wipe her eyes and nose with. They had downsized the office of employees to the point where there was nobody but her working amongst an empty collection of desks in an empty lab. The last job she was ever able to do in one go without being interrupted by her supervisor was to actually cover the other thirteen desks with plastic tarps.

Isabel stood up from her chair and wobbled as silently as she could out the doorway of the office. The corridors in this section of the labs looped around like a horseshoe with a lab on each side. She decided to go the long way around to her quarters just to avoid her boss’s office. The door on that section was hit or miss and it just so happened that today it was a miss. She tapped the door with her ID Card and instead of rising into the ceiling of her compartment, the motor whined and echoed throughout the

hallway so loudly that her boss surely heard it. In the far distance she heard him yelling and cursing her for not going the way all the other employees went. Her heart raced as she felt the difference in air pressure which could only mean that the other door in the hundred meter expanse had re-opened and her boss was coming for her. Isabel reached into her shirt pocket and pulled a pocket knife out. She pushed the knife into the override panel and popped it open. Reaching in, she took the fuse for the hallway lighting and pulled it out. The entire section went dark. She fumbled for the burnt fuse and pulled at it, replacing it with the lighting fuse.

“Isabel! I’m going to write you up! Do you hear me!” His voice sounded roughly thirty meters away; her office door. He was too close for comfort. The door cracked and hesitated until it finally opened far enough from the floor for her to get on her knees and roll out into the main hallway where people actually flowed to and from their jobsites. Isabel stood up and pressed the close button for the faulty door and it closed down, leaving her boss in the middle of a dark hallway with only the soft security lights from the unoccupied labs to help guide him back to his office.

“What the hell is that about?” One of the WY Security officers asked. Isabel smiled at her friend who just so happened to be there when she crawled through. He had dark hair, and wore a blue jumpsuit with the WY Logo on the front pocket and two security patches on each arm. She would have hugged him in relief if he didn’t have his bright white pulse rifle in the way.

“Nory...” Isabel reached out and held his hand. “Get me out of here before my boss runs around and catches up to me. Please...”

“Have you been crying?” Nory asked.

“He’s a monster...”

*

Security Transfer Platform 2 was the last checkpoint before the 1000ft deep freight shaft to the quarantine labs. Aside from the freight lift shaft, the quarantine labs were completely isolated. It had its own small nuclear reactor, environmental systems, food supply, living quarters, everything people could need to survive.

Only 12 people at the base had clearance to go past Transfer Platform 2. All 12 of them were in the quarantine labs with their small army of synthetic lab assistants. Lieutenant Jeff Mott sat at his desk, commanding the 12-hour, 3-man nighttime detail of Platform 2 security.

He sat in his old, beat up office roller chair, leaning over his rusting

stamped metal desk watching one of the few large color monitors that the base had. His head rested in the palm of a hand and his jaw chewed occasionally at the wad of tobacco in his cheek. He spat vile jets into a pale nearby like some bipedal squid. The two armed guards were in full EVA combat gear with smartguns, and another two of the latest model sentry guns were permanently mounted to the ceiling just before the gate to the deep freight shaft.

The freight lift came down the mid-security shaft with terrible grinding and wailing of metal parts desperately in need of grease that maintenance was too lazy to apply. Henry Jacobs was on the platform with several cryo containers fogging up the deck with frosty sub-zero air, and plenty of high stacked crates of exotic supplies. Jeff glanced up and it seemed Jacobs was trying not to grin.

“Balls,” Jeff grumbled after snapping his eyes back to his monitor.

The freight lift platform grinded across the rails into the checkpoint and was locked into place. Jeff did absolutely nothing and kept watching the monitor. “Having a good night, Jeff?” Henry asked as he walked off the lift toward Jeff’s desk, almost strutting like a man that just got himself a hot date.

“Fuck no,” Jeff said in an old, gravelly voice. “What is this? Shipment is five weeks from now.”

Henry stepped around behind the desk. “Watching pornography on duty, on a company computer?”

Jeff didn’t even so much as lift his head from his palm. “Yeah. Gonna fire me and send me home?”

Henry laughed. “No. Let’s just get this shipment down to quarantine. They’re waiting for it.”

“Sure.” Jeff leaned back, took a deep breath, let out a long sigh and stared up at Henry. “Give me the manifest for this, I’ll run it by Mother, she’ll give it a look with the scanners, clear it, and I’ll drop it right down for you.” Jeff held out a hand expectantly, even though he knew Henry had no manifest.

Henry made a stern face like he was about to give an order. “Jeff...”

“You may have all the combat experience, but I’ve been with this company and seen things. You want to use their base, their lab, their brains? Just ask nicely. Whatever you want to do I bet Mother will love it.”

“Yes and the company will take 95%,” Henry said with a wince.

Jeff spat a gout of brown into his pale. “Those are the rules of the game, pal. You’re not supposed to win. I’ve seen what they do to ambitious guys.”

“You’re right,” Henry said with a grin. “How about this... I’ll relief you and take the rest of your shift, okay? And I’ll get this shipment all squared away to be sent back.”

Jeff made a grumbling laugh. He stood up and spat another gout, this time onto the deck. It splattered onto Henry's boots and pants. Henry's grin turned to a frown. "G'nite boss. I'm taking my ball and going home." Jeff walked away to the catwalk that crossed to weapons lab cargo gate, his hands in his pockets and slouched.

"No mention of this to mother, lieutenant."

"Mother knows all, buddy," Jeff said as he crossed the catwalk. "Good luck."

Isabel's ten by twenty foot quarters were cramped with all of her belongings in the mix. Nory was kind enough to escort her back to her quarters. The day hadn't even started yet and she felt like falling into her bed and going to sleep. Isabel locked the door and looked around the room. Her single bunk bed was etched into the wall to help provide more overall living space in her highly organized quarters. The bathroom and shower were all one in the same to provide more living space. The sink and mirror were out in the open as the only protruding device in the room. At one point it used to slink back into the wall but the motor mechanism had broken before she got there. She stepped across the blue carpet and onto the tile of the kitchen area. She swung her head around to the desk and checked the computer that lie across from her bunk. She swallowed hard and quickly rushed to the closet. Calvin stood among her flight suits, and business suits. He was a skinny young man with short swept forward black hair, angular features, dark eyes, and pale skin. Isabel sighed and relaxed her shoulders.

"I saw on the hallway footage that there was a man escorting you," the young man said. "Was there a problem?"

"All too many," Isabel said after sighing. She walked toward her bunk and sat down on the edge. The lanky young man adjusted his flight suit that she stole for him and sat in the chair across from the computer and swiveled it to face her. Isabel continued, "My boss is such a — dick."

"Your supervisor was brought into the company after turning thirty-five years old. He attempted to earn an internship when he was twenty-three and the company deemed him too old for the position due to the fact that he didn't graduate college a year

prior.” He tilted his head to the side and regarded Isabel with a long face and a concerned gaze. “... it’s my hypothesis that he secretly dislikes you because you remind him of certain opportunities that he never had.”

“Sneaking around station logs again, Calvin?” Isabel pulled herself further into her bunk like a mole in its hole as she pulled her legs to her chest. She swung her left arm over her knee and worked on grinding a fingernail with her front teeth while waiting for a reply. Calvin offered a slight hint of a smile and met her gaze. He didn’t need to tell her audibly and Isabel knew it was best if he didn’t have to. In a place like this, anyone could stab you in the back. Mother knew everything and the walls had ears.

“We have an impending discovery. There’s no getting around that, short of a catastrophe. It makes little sense to draw it out longer but since you insist, I do keep an accurate record of everything going on, including the access logs on the build time, energy resources, and even the clothing you took from the PX for me to wear. I can delete the logs, but I can’t delete the logs on the utilities. It’s possible someone may notice the wattage hours sent to the lab from the automated facilities and discover that this energy was expended during your extracurricular time.”

Isabel observed her nails and wished that she had more to bite off at this point but her nerves saw to it that she was well groomed.

“Okay...” She looked up from her nails and smiled over her hand. “So — just what are my odds that they’d find that?”

Calvin paused a moment and moved only his mouth as if he were caught in a lie or a technicality.

“Very little...”

She rolled her eyes and fell on her side, reaching out for her pillow and pulling her black hair out of the way. She kept looking at her creation and forced a smile. He kept reminding her of the shit she’s in but she still liked having company anyway because she could at least trust this guy. He was programmed to be trustworthy. She spent her entire wondering if there was a man out there she could find that wouldn’t hurt her, cheat on her, or make her feel controlled. Finally, she gave up and created the perfect man but she put him in the friendzone.

“What’s going to get me caught?”

“The highest odds are the fact that Humans can rarely keep a secret. You’ll end up telling someone.”

“You don’t trust me?!” Isabel opened her mouth wide and feigned surprise. “You can trust me. I’m good at keeping secrets. It’s just the people that I tell

that have a hard time not spreading them...”

Calvin narrowed his eyes at her as she giggled.

“... the second event will be when it comes time for you to go back to Earth. I’m an unauthorized ‘plus-one”

“What can we do to sweep this problem under the rug?”

Calvin tilted his head to the side lightly as if contemplating. It was part of his programming and Isabel felt honored to see her new friend feigning contemplating so well even though she knew that he already had the answers, or the bad news.

“Anyone can find me if they want to find me. I believe that the easiest way to keep me from prying eyes is to have me on the station database. I can build a comprehensive biography and place it on file. I’ll forge the arrival dates and place myself in a job that doesn’t require security clearance. There will be small problems that I am not capable of forging; passenger manifests, birth certificates, education details, and past work history — all of which aren’t accessible from this station anyway. This prologues the discovery and provides me passage home without Weyland Yutani personnel noticing that I’m trespassing.”

“Can you do that now?”

“No.”

“How can you do it?”

“It’s going to require a suit.”

“Alright. Let’s do this on Friday, okay? Most everyone will be busy on the promenade partying.” Isabel said. “It will give you a chance to go into the area’s you need. Can you generate the files and just load them in? Or do you have to actually input them manually?” Isabel watched as a broad smile stretched across Calvin’s lips. He reached into his pocket and pulled three data-packets from his flight-suit pocket.

A normal day for Mindy McClain consisted of matching incoming ship ID’s with the scheduled roster log and then telling them when and where to land. Supply shipments were few and far between due to the station being self-sustaining; this meant that she had time to read, and sit in a chair while being paid. To her surprise, there was already a ship on the platform when she got into work. Furthermore, the ship didn’t have an active ID for her schedule roster. The muscular young thirty year old veteran of the USCM scratched her eye-length blonde hair and immediately looked down the hallway from the control room. She contemplated seeing the Station Foreman personally about the breach in procedure but first decided to do her job first. She typed into her computer

for verification.

M. McClain: Mother, please send me Identification and Flightplan information for the ship currently on the landing platform.

Mother: The ship is a Lockmart O Class Freighter. Registration CO-144C out of Norway, owned by Weyland Yutani and designated “USCSS Melbourne”. Flight registry | Computing....

- 1. Departure from Prometheus Crater – Luna.**
- 2. Zeta Ret. Columbia Proper Mining Co.**
- 3. Course Diversion to LV490 – Uncharted World for Reasons Unknown.**
- 4. Automated Course Redirect – WY-LS814**

M. McClain: Reason for redirect?

Mother: Standby – Station Administrator Contacted.

M. McClain: That’s not what I asked.

Mother: Standby – Station Administrator Contacted. Powering down console by order of Foreman Benjamin Eckhard.

Her console went blank and left her staring at a dark pain of glass on a CRT monitor.

“What the actual fuck...” She mumbled.

She heard the sound of metal on metal approach her and thick fabric that wasn’t that of normal corporate attire. She turned to see Nory standing behind her with his Pulse Rifle dangling down against his hip-mounted pistol, which created that clanking sound.

“Hi Mindy... Would you mind coming with me?”

“What’s going on?” Mindy asked.

“You really need to come with me. Count yourself lucky nobody else got her first. It was a general call. Come on.” His young voice carried a hint of urgency as he grabbed her by the arm not to be forceful but rather to tell her that she needed to move if she didn’t want things to get more out of hand than they apparently were. Most of the WY Air Controllers were friendly with Nory. He may have been a WY Security Officer

but he wasn't the typical grunt. She saw what he meant when the door came open and the more straight laced of the personnel came stomping through the three-person control room.

“It's okay. I'm escorting her to the Foreman's Office.”

The other WY personnel were faceless behind the masks. They came from the secured areas that he rarely ventured in and they always had to wear the extra equipment. It made their features a mystery to both Nory and Mindy. It also made the hair raise on the back of their necks. They turned to the side and made room for Colonel Jacobs. His ghost white, crop-top hair made him seem a few inches taller than he already was and his arms looked as if they could bench press a power-loader from the cargo bays. His right hand seemed to be perpetually on the gun. Instead of addressing Nory or Mindy, he turned his attention to one of the young men at another station who was busy playing chess with the computer.

“Take the reins, boy... She's gonna be busy for a while. Nory... Go back Sentry...”

“Sir...” Nory clicked his boots together and gave Mindy a sorrowful look. Mindy wanted to tell him things would be okay but this was the first time she had ever been in obvious trouble for anything; worst of all, she had no idea what kind of shit she stepped into.

“What's going on?” Mindy asked.

“You obviously don't understand the nuances of high level security.” Henry leaned over the half-moon railing that overlooked the main ATC deck that sat lower than the rest of the room. “Sometimes, things happen that you just can't understand and never will be able to. That's the joyous randomness that a research outpost sometimes provides. It also dictates that you don't ask questions, especially to the – RANKING security officer on the outpost, so when you get called in on a Code-Red, you don't stand there and ask the officer twenty-questions. You just do it. Are we clear?”

“I'm the Air Traffic Controller,” Mindy said. She pulled a ringed binder from beside the disabled ATC monitor and threw it at him. Henry didn't bother to catch it. He let it bounce off his tactical vest and rattle to the floor below the railing. “... in that book is everything I did that caused you to come here and badger me and those under me. I'm a supervisor! You're a security officer. That computer is the main control hub for the safety and —,”

“I'm obviously not getting through to you. I gave you a chance...” Henry snapped his fingers and pointed over his shoulder while turning around.

“What the fuck?!” Mindy screamed as the faceless WY Security personnel grabbed her by the arms and twisted at the same time. Her employees watched in horror as her face bounced off the stamped metal desk that was her work-space. Blood dripped from her nose as they fastened elastic zip-ties around her arms and then pulled at them to make her walk away from the console. They pushed her up the catwalk and around the railing. Henry walked while Security followed. She saw a glimpse of Nory through her watering eyes and could see his surprise matched hers.

She found herself on a large lift. She had never seen that lift before but she heard about it and how it went down to the bio-labs. She had a friend that worked down there and that knowledge alone was why she wasn't panicked. During the journey, she asked what was going on and was met with painful twists of the zip-ties that caused searing pain to ride up her arms. She gasped and cried out as WY-SEC manhandled her like she were some sort of expendable toy.

The Biolabs were nothing like the low-security bio-labs upstairs. There were hallways upon hallways in what looked like mostly storage rooms but then there were labs, and sparsely used offices. The low lighting made it hard to tell if there was anyone in a room or not and it reminded her of a night-time radio studio than a brightly lit complex like the labs upstairs. Several people that she knew in passing were in lab coats and looking at Henry with fear as he passed them; not one person raised a finger as to why she was being pushed around by the ex-Marine.

She was pushed into one of the darkened rooms with only a few lights that glinted off the edge of another printed metal desk. Henry pushed her in a chair and then walked around to the other side. He then took a portable computer and threw it on the desk so hard that she was wondering if it broke. The Marine didn't seem to care if it did or not. He pulled the lid open on the computer and the screen came to life.

“Give us the room...” The man on the screen said. Henry walked out of the room as asked, leaving Mindy to stare at a mysterious man on the computer monitor as he took a different computer and read through her file.

“You used to be a Lieutenant in the USCM I see here. Pilot I see...” He sounded cheerful and confident. He leaned forward and looked into the screen so that he could be eye to eye with her. Mindy looked sidelong in return. She was still upset over what had happened no matter what it was he was insinuating. “How would you like to get your flight status back and not be stuck on an outpost raking in cash to give to your daughter on Earth.”

“She's not on Earth...” Mindy said through shivering lips with a hint of

disdain in her tone.

“Ah yes... Daylight Station... She’s stuck there, I see... Horrible schooling, left to fend for herself in a ten-by-ten single bed with no hope of ever seeing the sunshine on her face again. I bet even her classmates come by unsupervised. A fourteen year old like that probably does ‘anything’ to get a little bit ahead in a place like that...”

“She has a caretaker. She’s not left alone.” She said with a hiss and snarl. She wanted to spit on the computer too but that would be going too far. He disgusted her with his insinuations. She hated how happily and cheerfully he exclaimed every remark as if what he saying was meant to be a cheerful despite the content of his words. He was just trying to trick her into doing something for the Company that the ICC wouldn’t approve of and then twist her arm, using her daughter as leverage. He was planting the seeds of doubt and worry.

“You’re full of shit... Whoever you are. If you knew she was on Daylight Station, you would have rubbed it in from the start. She has a caretaker and I know your next move is to cut ties with her and worry me as a result of some transport you don’t want me to put on the record books. I’m going to do my job to the best of my abilities.”

“How would you like to be rich? As a gesture of good faith, I can send your daughter to you. She’ll be the only girl on the base with access to labs. I’ll even clear one out for her so she can get the best education. I’ll by a Hyperdines android that can teach her all she needs to know in order to get into the best college and all you have to do — is break one... Little... Rule...”

“If I get caught?”

“I’m sending over a get out of jail free card. If anything comes of this, that Marine that’s been throwing you around assumes the responsibility of twisting your arm.” He suddenly sounded less cheerful and leaned in toward the screen. “Let me make one thing perfectly clear, this conversation never happened.” He shook his head from left to right as he looked into the screen. “I can make a droid to do my dirty work just as easily as I’ll make the droid that teaches your child to be a prodigy. Guy or Girl, by the way?”

“What?”

“Guy... Or Girl... The gender. We have to get this started right away. The unit will be yours and you can sell it off. I’m quite sure you understand the cost of this unit. Inevitably though, your child may grow attached to the unit in which case I’ll offer free recharge every year, and the required biannual maintenance... Mindy... I’m giving you a lifeline in exchange for indiscretion.”

Mindy leaned back in her chair and tapped the metal desk a few times.

She couldn't ignore such an offer. She looked up at the screen and uneasily nodded. Despite the slightest of nods, the man in suit and hat slammed his hands on his oak-finished desk in celebration.

“Great! You're getting the full package. And from now on, you'll report to Henry. He says jump, you ask how high... Pleasure doing business with you, and enjoy your career at Weyland Yutani. Boy or Girl?”

“Surprise me...” She sighed and closed her eyes.

The transmission flickered out.

Foreman Eckhard rubbed his temples as he sat at his desk. The proverbial noose was tightening around his neck and he could feel it. He looked at the latest communication from Earth that came in on his monitor and the numbers screamed reassignment. This would be a big step down for him and the last thing he wanted was to spend another decade in space. The door opened and the Security Supervisor walked in. Benjamin Eckhard leaned back in his chair and shut the CRT monitor off to avert his eyes from the monumental pile of dread he had to deal with.

“Brass is considering reassignment. We need to boost our time table on this little stunt of yours if we're to ever move up in this company. I've approved the special work crew. Official statement is that they're to help with the refinery. Low level security but they're all lifers from Archibald Pen. We're going to need about four of them to vanish and the rest can do some actual work. How did things go with the ATC controller?”

“Oh she's on-board. Terry Fitch set her up with the usual leverage to twist her arm.”

“What's the usual leverage?” Benjamin asked out of curiosity. He raised an eyebrow at the old man and crossed his arms.

“Oh — a phony paper-trail made of hopes and dreams. The relay station at Trafalgar is programmed to intercept any and all transmissions from her user name and generate false replies based off of the information we feed it. She might find out and if she does, it'll be an easy problem to take care of. Terry seems to think that it's best if we try and keep her in the loop to control the men over on ATC. Until then, Terry won't tell

me what else he's planning other than – it's handled.”

“Any problems with the head of bio-security?”

“Nothing I can't handle. We have an understanding,” Henry assured Jacob.

Benjamin turned his CRT on and did some checking.

“I want to do some transfers. The less eyes the better on this one. Can your man, Terry, handle blocking more transmissions?”

“A lack of communication will trigger ICC's curiosity.”

“Right.” Benjamin nodded slowly. “Let's keep everyone busy at least. I don't want people looking out the windows on Thursday. Start some training.”

“The ammunition situation, sir. Like I said... I don't want to risk it.”

“You're going to need to take risks.”

“I recon I could bring us down to twenty-five percent of capacity. I'm tellin' ya though. I saw the logs from sixty-seven years ago on this project and we're gonna need all the firepower we can get if anything goes wrong.”

“We have safeguards that have nothing to do with those rifles.” Benjamin pounded his fist on the desk. The Marine stood up and loomed over the Foreman, causing him to not feel as if he weren't so tough anymore. Henry's icy blue eyes seemed to look through him as if he were nothing to him.

“You hired me to protect your ass. I'm going out of my way to give you an 'in' and then you order me to take away the very thing that I need to keep you and this station safe. That's not respectful and I will refuse to blow away everything we got just to distract my men. I'll take care of my end. You're my boss but you don't get to micromanage me. I know what I'm doing.”

Henry watched as Ben slumped in his chair and scratched his balding head. He didn't say anything after his little lecture.

CHAPTER TWO

Isabel got lost on the way to the promenade for the nights party because she had the bright idea to cut across the habitat section through a corridor that she had never seen before. The station was massive and despite being there for several month's she hadn't even seen most of the habitat section, much less what lies beyond her little personal world of 'eat-work-party-sleep'. She knew the labs, she knew her office, she knew the one route to the common area, and that was it. Thanks to being adventurous, she was missing a party. If she were a party-going girl, she actually would have cared. She passed into a section that she never noticed before. The hallways narrowed in and became claustrophobic, the turns were all blind, and the walls were lined with white leather, all lit by low-burning halogen. As the deck became more and more industrial, she realized that she skipped compartments entirely and truly had no idea where the hell she was.

She kept walking until she saw an elevator. She pressed the up button to call it and waited patiently for the elevator to arrive. The lights flickered to a low dim and she swung her head from left to right in the abandoned corridor as a distant groaning sound seemed to reverberate down the twisting expanse of darkened hallway from far down the deck. A sudden hiss made her jump as the doors in front of her flew open faster than she anticipated. A small 4×4 compartment waited for her to step inside. She expected to see the level for the promenade but it appeared that she ventured too far into another section of the station. The sudden shrieking sound seemed to loom closer beyond the door. The logical side of her told her that this was just a process of the station but the imaginative part of her hated the forest of blind corners that she walked into and the only thing that would settle her was to put two sets of solid steel doors between her and the creepiness.

The doors closed slowly compared to how fast they opened. Further and further, she got to watch the hoses and computer-boards that lined the wall of the hallway

she stepped out of vanish.

“Come on...” She whispered.

A long shadow suddenly stretched across the wall right when the doors closed; Isabel held back a scream as the doors shot open in a flash. She tried to breathe in instead as the origin of the shadow suddenly invaded the small space with her. A man with a hard-hat pulled a piece of heavy machinery into the spot next to her.

“Hit number twelve would’ya?”

The engineer wiped some of the grease off of his face and took another look at the stiffened young labworker to see that her skin had turned a very light shade of pale.

“Number twelve?”

“Yeah.. Yeah... Sorry.” She reached forward and tapped the button. “Sir, do you know how to get to the promenade?”

“Promenade... Damn, girl.. You’re way out in brown sec. I ain’t never been that far forward on deck four-green. You wander all the way down here by accident?”

“Where am I?” Isabel asked.

“Well, that’s the thing about this base. I know where I am, but my bearings sort of limit myself t’ this here section. Four-Green is like... Fifteen minutes out of my way on foot and I ain’t ever had no reason t’ move beyond it. You corporate folk’ ain’t venture down to these parts. Just like I ain’t seen no promenade. Our bearings are different.”

“Okay,” Isabel said. She calmed down as the elevator sent her into another part of the base she had never been at. “But we’re still in the same structure?”

“Oh yeah. But this lift wont’ take ya far. It’s programmed for a select few decks. I recommend goin’ back t’ four, and make a right. Follow the metal decks until ya discover some fresh water pipes and follow the arrows. I ain’t know much about your knick but I sure know you’ll find familiar ground to make it home.”

Isabel smiled and nodded.

“Thank you.”

“Ain’t nothin’.”

Nory decided to wait on another drink. Isabel was supposed to meet him almost an hour ago and she didn’t show up. The other off-duty WY-Sec personnel were starting to tease him. He reached over the bar and swiveled a green on black CRT his way and typed in Isabel’s name into the Personal Data Transmitter (PDT) sensor.

“Checking to see if she found some other guy?” One of his friends joked as he rolled his eyes and watched. He squinted and shook his head in disbelief to find that she had ended up on deck twelve-brown. The little dot on the monitor seemed to be raising upward in altitude.

“Looks like she got a little lost.” Nory watched as the dot stayed put and then quickly moved back into the habitat section. “Someone must have told her where to go.” Nory stood up and walked away from the bar.

“Get some!” One of his friends yelled. Nory waved behind him. He had no intentions of getting ‘anything’ but he had to keep up the hardened facade’.

Back in Brown Sector, the doors swung open rapidly to that same, familiar section of hallway she had seen before she took her short ride to level twelve. Her acquaintance and his heavy machinery left her to fend for herself on level four brown, what she now thought of as the “creepy deck”. She turned to her right and was met with a T intersection she didn’t remember. She stepped back into the elevator and checked the map. The maps were limited but it did direct her to an elevator on that level that went up higher toward the airlock on the landing platform. Isabel knew that all she had to do was find a place she had been before in order to get her bearings. After that, she would have to apologize to Nory for accidentally standing him up. She nervously smiled as she thought about the irony of trying to get to the bar early by finding a shortcut, only, the shortcut wasn’t short. She could have been there half an hour ago but she had to try and be crafty with her arrival.

The next lift took her to a familiar place. The docking bay airlock. It was a place she knew shouldn’t be in use but there it was, with both the inner and outer

airlock doors opened. Instead of empty space, there was another set of corridors. Voices triggered her to hide. She didn't know why she needed to hide, but something deep within her knew that she shouldn't be around when the voices got closer. One of the lockers was empty and she pulled her slender frame inside of it. The two men were arguing as they stepped out of the airlock.

“Who gives a shit if one of them got lose! Come on... We found it! That's the end of it. Two are alive, the other one is dead.”

Isabel tried to control her breathing as the arguing continued. One man had a scruffy beard and the other looked as if he hadn't washed his clothes in months. Isabel could smell him through the small slits in the locker she was looking out of.

“I'm getting the payment. You stay with the ship.”

“What about the circuit printer you wanted so badly yesterday? Do you want that or not?”

“Fine... But not a word of this. If you want, you can tell Benny you lost your stupid crab-walker and found it dead, but only after we get the money! I don't want them to know we killed it.”

They entered the lift and the doors closed behind them. She opened the locker and silently stepped out when she thought she was alone. She was wrong. A figure loomed a long shadow in front of her and she turned around.

“Who are you?”

It was a young boy that couldn't have been any older than twelve or thirteen. He had a bowl-cut hairstyle with strands of blonde, freckles, and blue eyes. He had scars on his shoulders and neck where someone had obviously been beating him and all he had on was a pair of pants and socks.

“I'm Isabel. What happened to you?”

“I'm not to say.” The boy said. “Can you take me back to my box? If I'm not back there before they come, they get angry.”

“Box?” Isabel asked.

“My room. They call it my box.” The boy said.

Isabel's eyes widened at what she thinks the boy was trying to say.

“Where's your family?”

“I’m not supposed to talk about them either.”

“Danny!” A roar made both the boy and Isabel jump. “What are you doing out here! Go back to the ship!”

Isabel reached out and held onto the boys hand so he couldn’t run to the ship. She stood up and was going to say something to the man that appeared in the airlock. The man pushed her up against the bulkhead and gazed into her eyes from only inches away while he held his arm against her chest.

“You... Shouldn’t... Be... Here...”

His breath smelled of death, and sweat poured down his bald head. Isabel wished there was a comm unit nearby so she could call for help but she was seriously wondering if she would ever get that chance.

Suddenly, a shock flew through her system and the man screamed in pain. Even the boy yelled as the sudden jolt of electricity flowed through her hand to him. The source was the bald man, who had been hit with a stun projectile. As he dropped Nory stood at the entrance.

“You stood me up for this guy?” Nory asked sarcastically. Isabel pulled the boy close to her and sighed in relief.

*

SUBJECT: Denial of Transfer

From: Dean Harrison

To: Benjamin Eckhard

Certain aspects withstanding, I regret to inform you that your station doesn’t need any extra employees for any reason, whatsoever. I am quite sure you understand the reasons why despite the fact that I would enjoy explaining them to you. You’re an intelligent man and I know you’ll find a way to get the work done without the need for unfamiliar faces. After all, you do have to make the hard decisions if you wish to rise up the ranks in this company. Get it done, make the choices, and give us the results that Mr. Jacob’s said you could deliver. The alternative is that you can stay in the position you are in and retire with a respectable pension.

Eckhard slammed his fist against the desk as the transmission ended. He deleted the communication and cursed at himself for believing that the company would give him any help other than the very basic tools that he needed. He now had to take steps and find people that wouldn't be missed. He needed to do that another time though, because he had more pressing matters to deal with regarding containment of information flow. The doors opened and Jacobs followed a very young boy into the room, followed by a young slender brunette with dark eyes, and an off-duty WY Security Officer.

“Okay... I have this much time,” Ben said as he pointed his finger at an imaginary clock and shuffled his finger over an inch to indicate maybe five minutes at most. “... start from the beginning.”

“I was on my way to the common area,” Isabel said through shaky breath. “I thought I would try a shortcut, I got lost – way – lost, sir. The one compartment I recognized was the airlock. I knew I could make it back if I just got up there so that I could find my way to the party... There were people on the docking platform, and this kid ran out. He's obviously been abused.” Isabel reached down and held the boy's hand. “His name is Danny, and he's eleven years old. A man came out and attacked me for finding him.”

“Wait,” Ben said. “A man attacked you?”

“That's correct, sir. A man attacked her and left me no choice.” Nory said. “I used a stun projectile on him and we reported the incident per regulations.”

“He wasn't speaking to you, Grunt...” Henry growled. Even though Nory wasn't in uniform, he stood at attention after giving a snappy nod. He looked forward and stayed silent.

“It was unprovoked. He just came right at me and said I shouldn't be there.”

“I agree...” Ben said. “You shouldn't have been there even if there was nothing to say otherwise.” Ben turned to Henry. “I want you to get maintenance on the line and start marking off certain high-risk areas as off-limits. This is a research base. The docking platform should be restricted to oncoming and departing passengers only. Make sure Security sends out a notice to every terminal right away.”

“Danny shows evidence of abuse and I was attacked. I believe the more pressing matter is –.”

“Stop right there,” Ben said. He stood up, walked around his desk and sat on the front edge of it so that he could talk down to Isabel as if she were a child who got caught with her hand in the cookie jar. Isabel squinted her eyes and shook her head slightly because she knew for a fact she didn't do anything wrong. “... you seem to know better than I, what the more pressing matters are. Perhaps you should use my chair for a while. The fact of the matter is, until you have my credentials, you aren't qualified to even have the slightest understanding of what the most pressing matters are. There are

things in this universe that you know nothing about and you'd have nightmares if you did. Furthermore, we're engaged in more than just software research and development. How would you like someone snooping around your projects while you were trying to work on them?" The question was rhetorical and also made no sense. Isabel decided to see where it was going because correcting him didn't seem like the best course of action – even if she was right.

"What about the boy?"

"We will deal with the boy, and the man that hurt him. Don't worry about that. What I need you to do is sign this non disclosure so we can all get back to work on our individual projects without worry that some other colony is going to stumble on to our research."

"Just get back to work?"

This time she didn't sound very timid. It took all the men in the room by shock. She looked around to see that the only person that was in agreement with her was Nory. He wasn't very supportive either. "Jump in any time here..." She said to him.

"Miss. I ordered my man to shut the hell up," Henry said. "At least he understands a 'no-go'. You need to understand that you're under his command. Don't look at Nory, look at Mr. Eckhard."

She felt Daniels hand tighten around hers as they sat down in front of the foreman, Ben. He looked at the kid with what could only be described as malice. It was painfully obvious that he didn't care about the kid. He had something else on his mind and Isabel had no idea what his motives were. All she knew was that finding Danny and being attacked in the Airlock wasn't a part of his agenda and he wanted it all to go away. She suspected that it meant even if returning Danny to an abusive crew member that beats little kids. She assumed it would be the easiest route for Ben to take, giving the child back and seeing the ship off somewhere else in the universe for that kid to spend his own person hell within.

"I want to speak with the colonial martial on this station to make sure that Danny gets proper representation."

She heard the old man laugh behind her. Ben looked over her shoulder and nodded at him. The next thing she felt was his strong hand on the back of her shirt. It took no effort at all for him to stand her on her feet. That's when Nory pushed Henry out of the way.

"He has a right to representation sir, under article twenty-eight, station regulations."

"Boy... You better shut the fuck up right now before you say something else stupid." Henry pointed his finger at Nory. The boy flinched at the motion but he still stood between Henry and the child.

The kid screamed as Nory suddenly fell on top of him, armor and all. Henry's swing was swift and made full contact with so much force behind it that Isabel heard it hit home with a thunderous crack. Even Ben jumped off his desk and took a step backward. Nory bled from his cheek bone as he squirmed and looked around the room as if he had no idea where he was. Isabel struggled to pull the little boy out from under Nory. She held onto the boy and cried.

“What’s wrong with you!” Isabel yelled.

Henry looked over at her in a sideways, dismissive glance as he reached down and pulled Nory off the ground. “Shut up,” he told her as he shook Nory. “Hey, you with me, private?” He asked while reaching down with his other hand and pulling his sidearm off his hip, dropping it to the floor. “I have a regulation for you. It’s called insubordination. I have a zero tolerance policy for it.”

Nory obviously still had no idea where he was while Henry manhandled him. Henry pushed him over to the sofa next to the office door. He pulled a pair of flexi-cuffs out of his belt and spun the tips around to clamp into the center, forming the handcuffs, and then pulling Nory’s wrists into them. He tightened the straps down and then pulled Nory on his back. He then stomped over to the room and pushed Isabel back into a seat. He grabbed Danny. The boy moaned and whimpered as he pulled the boy out of the room. Isabel couldn’t tell what he said to the WY Security Officers outside the door.

“I didn’t ask you to do that.”

“Out of your hands, boss.” Henry said. “He was my subordinate and I run a tight ship. Nobody talks down to me, for any reason if that person is under me in my ranks. There’s no negotiation there. The boy had to learn that just like many other of my crew.”

“Fine, fine...” Ben said.

Isabel couldn’t stop shaking. She was seeing the true colors of the people she was interning for and all she wanted to do now was be back on Earth doing manual labor in a 3W sector. No amount of luxury was worth having to sell your soul, she thought. She didn’t have the energy to say anything. She was fighting an uphill battle and nothing she said would change a thing. She realized that now. She got the distinct impression that saying anything ‘right’, would actually get her into more trouble. There didn’t seem to be much law here.

“I understand you’re having trouble with your supervisor.”

What did that have to do with anything? She didn’t have to say it, the look on her face to the foreman’s statement said it all. Ben sighed and looked away in disappointment.

“I’m giving you an opportunity here. As I said, I know about your problems. There’s a reason we use interns. Some of them understand how to play the game, others end up trying to run the system in the book.” He pointed toward the door. “I hope you were paying attention because that was a man that tried to play the system by the book!” He meant Nory. “Look what that got him.” He started to walk around his desk slowly while he planned his next words carefully and delivered them with care. “I foresee an opening in the department provided you play ball. Your next responses need to be chosen carefully because I need to know if you’re going to be sitting at a desk making money tomorrow, or back in that airlock corridor. And no, the ship won’t be there. Neither is that boy going to be there. You need to make the right decision and think about your future in this company.” He sat down at the desk and started knocking at the metal surface. “We’re talking about paid tuition, sign-on bonus, and a straight shot to a department head. At your age... This is going to put you on the fast-track. I can have your paperwork in today along with the NDA! What do you say?”

“I demand to speak with the colonial martial.”

“Jesus Fucking Christ on a Dildo...” Ben slammed his hand against the table.

“Hey!” Henry pointed his finger at his own boss.

“Stow it, Henry... Get her in the cell with her boyfriend.”

“Wait!” Isabel yelled. Ben held his hand out and waited for her to say something. A smile arched across his lips as he looked down at the girl. “What’s going to happen to the boy? Is he going to be okay?”

“He’ll be fine!” All she knew was that, this too was a magnificent lie. She had to lie too if she were to fix anything. She hesitantly nodded as she looked at him with a sideward glance. She nodded more thoroughly.

“Department head?”

“I’ll get him the fuck out of your hair immediately. You’ve got a big chip in the game now. This is how it’s played, girl...”

“Okay...” She whispered.

“There we go!” Ben slapped his hands together triumphantly. “Alright. Now sign this shit.” He placed a data pad on the table but then he grabbed her wrists. Isabel gasped in pain as he squeezed down hard. “If you try and fuck me over, I’ll have you sucking vacuum by the end of the day, understand?”

Isabel nodded while holding her breath in agony. Finally, Ben let go and she hesitantly signed her name on the documents provided. If Ben wants to play the game, she’d play the game, she thought.

CHAPTER THREE

Isabel was released from being detained by Security for probably just long enough for them to have done something with the boy. By now Calvin was in the system and he would be waiting for her to arrive home. He had a knack for knowing everything that was going on, onboard the station and would know that she was detained for some bullshit reason. It was when Nory showed up that surprised her. He was stripped of his weapons and even his shoes. He shuffled down the corridor toward her wearing nothing but his ripped shirt, tattered jeans, socks, and a shiner given to him by his commanding officer.

“Oh my god,” Isabel whispered to herself as she stepped forward and helped him walk.

“I’ll be alright. The next transport out of here is something I’ll be looking forward to.”

“What are you talking about?” Isabel looked to see Nory giving her a slight smile. She knew what he meant all the sudden. They fired him.

“It’s just a job...”

“I can hire you on as my personal bodyguard,” Isabel offered. It was standard that any WY department head be given a bodyguard, just like Ben, if they so wanted.

“You fucking kidding me? This is my chance to get the hell out of here with my security license intact. This is a get out of jail free card. There are other places I can go and work that have nothing to do with Wey-U and I intend to find it while I still have funds. I like you, Isabel, I really do, but, I’ve been thrown a bone and an excuse to get the hell out on the next transport. You take care of yourself... You’re one of the good ones.”

He pushed away from her but patted her on the shoulder before walking down the hallway toward his quarters. Isabel sighed at a potential love lost, but tried not

to dwell on it as she watched him turn one of the stations many blind corners. It would be the last time she probably ever saw him and she knew it.

“So much for getting laid...” She joked with herself. She thought there was a chance for more, but attempting to blow it off as a fling made her feel better.

Lieutenant Mott was walking slowly with his head hung down looking at a printed stack of reports from the day shift when Isabel collided with him and sent the stack of papers to the ground.

“Balls,” he grumbled.

“I’m so sorry,” she said as she bent down and started picking up the reports.

“Hands off.” Jeff’s voice boomed with such commanding strength that Isabel reflexively dropped the papers and stood back. “You’re not cleared to look at those.”

Jeff quickly swept up the reports into a messy pile. “I don’t think you’re cleared for this area, either. You new here? What’s your name?”

“Is.. uh... Isabel Mason. I work in the-”

“Listen, Miss Mason,” he said as he started to shuffle the papers back into an order. “Let me give you some advice before you get in trouble or hurt. Don’t go running into black forests looking for treasure. There isn’t any, but there’s a whole lot of hungry wolves. This is the kind of place that has more hungry wolves than others.”

“Umm... okay. Thanks.”

Isabel started to go but Jeff continued. “And do me a big favor. If there’s no record or report of something, and there doesn’t absolutely need to be one, then don’t make one. Like look at this.” Mott showed a report to Isabel, which really confused her because he told her not to even touch them. She skimmed the text.

“Why do I need a report about missing synth parts from the warehouse? I’m not in charge of inventory. That isn’t even near my zone. Now it’s my problem because some idiot on my team wrote a report.” Jeff slid the report to the back of the stack. “I have enough crap to worry about as it is. Yeah so what if everyone here is using company ink to write themselves a paycheck? Don’t blow the whistle and don’t screw it up. Hopefully whoever is pilfering the crap is smart enough to know not to

make a paper trail out of it, like try to forge documents to get past ICC. That's how you get caught you know. You know how easy it is to get shit past even the ICC? Just don't make papers. No forgeries. When someone asks just look stupid and keep your mouth shut. Who the hell wants to investigate something that doesn't exist? Forgeries though, those leave a nice trail of blood for an investigation to follow. These people are stupid. Now someone is gonna poke around looking for a droid and my name is going to be on it because of this stupid kid and his report. Then they're going to ask why the hell my guy was in the warehouse looking at synth parts, and they're going to tear my ass in half looking for an illegally built synth. I hate these stupid reports."

Mott wandered off to the high security elevator, leaving Isabel standing feeling rather confused and worried.

Daniel was returned back to his ship, back with his abusive crew-mates. Alone, abused, and returned back to where he came from, he knew what to expect from the crew members for his escape. There was nothing good about this crew and nobody on the moon base even wanted to hear him out other than perhaps, low-level employees who still retained a soul. The security officer that beat up Isabel's friend simply pushed him aboard with the ships captain.

"You keep that boy under control or I will," the security officer said. It felt very much like he was just a piece of property and nothing more; not even a boy. Daniel felt the captains knuckles dig into the front of his shirt and his feet were pulled off the ground. The metal bulkhead slammed into his back as the captain looked him in the eyes. His breath smelled rancid and his eyes were watering with anger.

"Would you mind telling me where the hell you last saw Roberts and Stephanie?"

"I don't know!"

"You should! He was there when you tried to escape. Boy, you better be copasetic with our answers or you won't have to worry about trying to escape anymore..."

"Last I saw Roberts, he was at the airlock after he got stunned by that security guy! That's all I know! I haven't seen Stephanie in two days..." The boy felt his eyes watering so badly that he couldn't even see anymore. The pain was too great and the emotional hit of having someone threatening to hurt him became so overwhelming

that he couldn't even breathe without wheezing. He gasped and cried as he felt the captain's grip release him. Daniel fell to his knees. He then received a solid kick to the ass that made him fall face first onto the oily deck.

"Get yourself cleaned up..."

*

Mindy McClain stood next to a young man with a black eye as the mysterious ship departed in order to make room for the next ship in line.

"Feels odd," Mindy said with a hint of a smile.

Nory turned toward her and adjusted the bag on his shoulder. "What do you mean?"

"Usually I'm the one controlling these ships as they depart and arrive. It's hardly ever that this actually happens and now that it's happening, I'm down here instead of in ATC."

"You leaving, too?" He asked.

"Nah... My daughter's in on the next transport. I didn't want to be up there when I can meet her in person. They're actually letting someone leave?"

"Differences in opinion with my boss," Nory pointed to his shiner.

"Aw, well... Good luck. I would love to –," her voice trailed off scratches in the ceiling seemed to echo through the hallways. Nory reached for his sidearm but remembered that there was nothing on his hip anymore. The sound seemed to flow over their heads and vanish into the vast network of overhead ducts until distance won over the intensity of the thumping.

"Rat from hell..." Nory joked nervously. "I picked a good day to get off this ice-cube."

"I wonder how Cindy's going to like it."

"Sorry," Nory said, knowing that he was now making jokes about where his daughter would be spending a lot of time. The doors opened to a young, thirteen year old blonde girl. He knelt down and smiled at her while her mother reached out and pulled her off the ground.

"Mom!" She yelled happily.

Nory smiled and walked toward the hatch. She was just so happy to see her daughter that she wouldn't be paying attention to him anymore; ships, passing in the night, he thought.

Nory jumped as a sudden winding sound caught his attention. The airlock door suddenly slammed shut. One more inch and it would have chopped him in half, lengthwise. He took three steps from the door and dropped his bag on the floor.

"What the hell?!" Nory yelled.

"Mom?!" Cindy asked. Several emergency lights started flashing but there wasn't an audible alarm.

Calvin was laying in Isabel's bed when the lights went dim, the air to the room shut off and the metal bolts between the door latched shut to lock him into the room. Calvin tapped the communications panel but inter-compartment communications were disabled. Just as he walked to the computer in the cabin, the metal latches unbolted and the airflow resumed.

"Attention all station personnel" a young, male voice started over the speakers and echoed outside the door as well. "The quarantine function has been tripped, however, it did not come from the labs. This is a false alarm. Please, return to your regularly scheduled routine. Once again, false alarm."

Calvin adjusted his jump suit and stepped into the hallways. The emergency lighting had just switched from a sweeping red beacon with a steady orange solid background light, to the regular white and blue standard.

Cindy happily skipped down the corridor with her mother. Mindy couldn't believe how big she had grown since the last time she saw her. She looked just like her pictures and she suddenly didn't feel too bad about skipping the required reports to ICC since this was the outcome; seeing her daughter.

"Thanks for inviting me! I've always wanted to see where you worked! Wow! What's that!" She pointed at random things and the questions kept coming in. Her mother couldn't even explain everything. She was asking way too many questions about things that not even she knew all the answers for, yet took for granted.

"I don't know what that's for. I'm sure someone onboard can tell you all about it."

"Aw, okay..." Cindy said.

Mindy walked her to the elevator and called for the habitat section where

she lived. She didn't know how her daughter was going to adapt to station life, but the happiness she felt for being with her family was more than the dull interior of a dismal station could ever intrude. The doors closed and she looked down at her young blonde daughter.

"I have the whole day off so we can do whatever you want. We can put on some VR Goggles and play games, we can walk around some of the station..."

"Can I see where you work?" Cindy asked.

"I'm so sorry, we can't do that, but I can load it up in VR and show you."

"Yeah!" Cindy smiled and giggled.

*

Daniel limped to the crew showers. He carefully took his clothes off in an attempt to not feel the sting associated with all the blunt force he received by the captain and crew. With the airlock closed and secured, there was no escape for him anymore. He would need one of the keycards from the crew to open the hatch, and they always kept that on them. He could hear the showers running. His heart raced as he looked around the corner and into the shower bay. The bays were lined up in rows of four nozzles in a semi-circle, with no privacy. The steam was emanating from the second set that was divided both areas. Daniel worried that it would be another one of the crew that liked picking on him.

"Hello?" Daniel's voice echoed through the dimly lit shower area.

He neared the shower close enough to see the stream around the corner. The stream seemed broken by a shadow, so he knew that it was occupied but the last thing he wanted to do was interrupt someone, especially one of the women. They were all mean to him, taunted him, and did horrible things to him that he didn't like. He looked at the lockers to see which ones didn't have a lock attached to them. Aaron Hardy... Hardy wasn't bad, plus, he was one of the guys. Daniel breathed a sigh of relief when he realized that it was just Aaron. He turned the shower on. That's when he heard the reaction on the other side of the half-crescent.

Taps and scrapes...

Daniel looked down at his own feet. The floor was a solid fiberglass surface and his feet couldn't make that kind of a sound. Hardy wasn't the type of guy to

play practical jokes. He kept to himself and didn't really say much. He didn't lift a finger to protect him, either. He just did his own thing and left everyone alone. Daniel heard the sound of metal on metal as if someone was dragging something across the room. The sound became more distant until he couldn't hear it over the roar of the warm water. What was Hardy doing, he wondered....

Daniel reached for a bottle of soap and poured a small portion of it into his palms. He closed his eyes even though he didn't want to, and began pulling the soap through his short black hair. The shower room was all too quiet when he was done.

"Hardy?" Daniel asked. "Hello?"

There wasn't an answer. He opened his eyes after he finished rinsing. A dark streak in his peripheral vision caused him to avert his gaze toward his feet. Blood slithered around the corner of the other four showers, crossed his feet, and slunk into the drain on his side. His chest expanded and his face went white while he backed into the tile wall. He rushed back to his locker and grabbed his clothes along with Hardy's keycard.

There were plenty of dark corners to squeeze into on the ship and Daniel took advantage of the first one he found in order to slip into his dirty clothes. He had the way out and he was going take it before any of the other crew found out that Hardy slipped in the shower and killed himself. It didn't take long for guilt to set in. He imagined Hardy, still alive, fighting to breathe under the water but not able to because the one person that knew where he was, wasn't lifting a finger to save the man. Hardy wasn't all that bad. Daniel looked down at the keycard... It was his ticket to freedom but at what cost?

Daniel couldn't battle the instinct to save a person. He walked back into the shower room and back to the corner. The blood had already gone back down the drain with the rest of the water. Daniel stepped to the corner again. He swallowed hard and tried to get his legs to move. The shower was still on, and the steam was still billowing from around that corner. He willed himself to step around and look.

The shower was empty.

Daniel's immense sigh of relief was cut short when he looked toward the steam vent next to the shower. The metal grate was pulled inward. There was a double-faced digital watch hanging out one of the many untwined wires that was soaked red with blood that dripped onto the tile. Daniel turned around and jumped at what he saw lurking at his heels.

The arm grabbed him by the throat and Daniel gasped so hard that he felt his heart might stop. The ship's medical doctor laughed as he let his grip go and pushed

him against the wall. He stopped laughing when his eyes caught sight of what the boy was so worried about.

“What the –,” he trailed off. He looked to Daniel as if assessing if he could have possibly had anything to do with what looked like an abduction into the vents, and quickly dismissed the idea.

“You stay here, kid...”

With that, he ran off. Daniel had no intention of sticking around. His conscience cleared with the responsibility of Hardy’s not so slip-and-fall, he was making a run for the airlock. Daniel waited until the door closed behind the doctor and counted how long it would take for him to run around a blind corner. Daniel took one last look back into the darkness within the vent and made the easy decision to get away from it as fast as possible and to get clear of the ship – and whatever the hell was on it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Supervisor Roberta Pickersgill entered the weapon servicing lab with very tired and annoyed. She was woken up in the middle of the night with an urgent call from Senior Service Technician Benjamin Washington Junior.

Roberta was a pasty white, short black haired, string bean of a woman who was better at inventory and work orders than actually working. Benjamin was a tall black man, clean shaven and bald, with the muscles and tattoos of a USCMC grunt (retired) and a former convict. He preferred to work in a white tanktop and old cammo cargo pants he kept from the USCMC. Roberta preferred a button-down shirt and slacks.

As soon as Roberta opened the door she heard Benjamin say “Look at this shit.”

Roberta rounded through the shelves that used to hold an abundance of spare parts. Parts which, along with all of the other service technicians except Benjamin, had been “restructured” to other facilities months. “Restructured” because the new pulse rifles were so reliable and so unused that no real service was ever required.

That changed with the sudden spike in drills ordered by station security.

“Look at this shit,” Benjamin said while pointing at a fully stripped pulse rifle. His eyes were wide and wild. “Look at it.”

Roberta stood over the work bench and glanced down. “Alright. I get it. I-”

“Look at this shit.” Benjamin’s finger stabbed through the air at the parts.

“Ben-”

“Look at this shit! Look! Look at it!” If Ben’s finger could fire a laser, it would have.

Roberta let out a deep sigh and stared at the parts. “What is it?”

“It’s trash. Garbage. You need to tell that sergeant psycho to calm down before his boys break all the guns.” Ben’s arms flapped through the air in one quick motion. “And what we gonna do when we out of bullets, hmm? This is bullshit. Look at this shit.”

Roberta smiled and shook her head cocked to one side. “You know he’s not going to listen to me. Besides, there’s no risk here. Nothings going to happen. So what if he breaks a few guns and burns up our surplus ammo?”

“If there’s no risk then why is he drilling his boys so hard they’re breaking guns and breaking bones, hmm? A company stingy enough to take away my entire department is gonna shit its pants when it has to pay for new guns and bullets for some motherfucking drills. He’s got boys in casts. Li-a-bili-ty. You know liability right, that’s YOUR word, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“Sergeant psycho gonna get me killed. Look at this shit.” Benjamin flicked his finger at the table and then pulled a cigar out of his pocket and lit it. “I’m tired of this. I quit.”

“Look, Ben, I get it. But I’m serious, you know he’s not going to listen to us. You heard he beat a kid to a pulp and fired him for insubordination. And you’re right. Okay? I said it. You’re right about all this. Just... just do what you can, okay?”

“Man, what the hell. When I’m done with this place I’m going back to the Marines. At least there they treat me like I’m white.”

“Don’t say that,” Roberta said almost scoldingly. “You know the company treats everyone equally.”

Benjamin blew a cloud of smoke. “Yeah the company treats everyone like they’re black.”

Roberta shook her head. “I’m not having this discussion. Do what you

can. Goodnight, Ben.”

Benjamin made a huge silly smile and a mocking lean. “Yessum masta. Pleasum masta.”

Robert flicked off Benjamin as she walked out the door.

Jeff Mott looked up when the heavy lift finished grinding across the rails into the quarantine transfer checkpoint. The base’s assigned synthetic, a Hyperdines Systems 341-W owned by the company, was standing there with a single pallet of supplies.

“Hello Sexton,” Mott said as his eyes sunk back down to the magazine he was reading.

“You never call me by my first name like the others,” the synthetic said.

“Old habit from more reputable postings. Besides, it’s the only sex I get on this rock.”

“Funny,” Dirk Sexton said with a polite smirk.

He handed Jeff a clipboard with a manifest and clearance orders. Jeff entered the confirmation number into his terminal with a single index finger pecking at the keys lazily. Mother replied immediately.

> ORDER CONFIRMED

> CARGO SAFE FOR TRANSFER TO QUARENTINE LABS

Jeff handed the clipboard back to Dirk. “Pleasure doing business,” Jeff said dryly.

“I need one of your guards for the labs,” Dirk said without leaving the desk.

“You’re not going to do a vivisection on my guy are you?”

“No. Due to the nature of our current project I would feel more comfortable having a trained hazard security guard.”

Jeff held up his hand. “Don’t tell me anything about the zombie apocalypse bioweapons you’re brewing down there. Go ask the foreman’s pitbull and I’m sure he’ll give you the man.”

“I do not like them. I would rather ask you directly than go to your boss. I need one of your men specifically because they have the training required.”

“If you take a man then I’m out a man,” Jeff said as he flipped past an ad in the magazine. “And as you are keenly aware all the men trained for this work are on my detail. So where does that leave me? And where does that leave exterior security of your lab? You’re robbing Peter to pay Paul.”

“It’s more important that we have a guard in the lab than at the door.”

“Okay.” Jeff put the magazine on the desk. “I’ll tell you what.” Jeff rolled back from the desk and pointed at the terminal. “You explain it to mother, and have mother say it’s okay so that it’s your ass and not mine, and you have a man.”

Dirk set his clipboard down on the desk and came around. He typed rapidly, and mother replied rapidly. Dirk stepped aside so Jeff could see the screen. Dirk smiled warmly.

> TEMPORARY PERSONNEL TRANSFER CONFIRMED BY ORDER OF DR. DIRK SEXTON

> TRANSFER LOGGED TO PROJECT PER SECURITY REQUEST

“Wonderful.” Jeff spat a gout of tobacco sludge into his bin. “Now do me a rabbit trick and find me a warm body to fill the space for twelve hours a day, seven days a week.”

Dirk resumed typing, having a rapid conversation that sounded like high rpm machine at full speed. He stepped aside again.

> NORY HOLT EMPLOYMENT CONTRACT REINSTATED

> NORY HOLT ASSIGNED TO QUARANTINE LABS TRANSFER

SECURITY, JEFF MOTT COMMANDING

> NORY HOLT PROMOTED TO SECURITY SERGEANT, HAZARD SPECIALIST, WITH PAY AND BENEFITS OF RATING

“Alright my man. Have it your way.” Jeff rolled forward and grabbed a small hand radio. “Kerson, you’re going to the dungeon with Doctor Sexton.”

One of the two guards dressed in full combat EVA gear turned sluggishly and looked at Mott. Although he was buried under a tinted helmet visor, it was evident he looked rather annoyed at the idea.

“He’s really good at being nosy and writing reports about things that aren’t his business,” Jeff said to Dirk. “I won’t miss him if one of your zombies eats him.”

*

Nory sat on the deck against the wall by the airlock waiting for it to reopen from the false alarm. He kept nodding off into short naps. He lost track of time and didn’t realize that it was well into the night. A black-haired man with biceps big enough to be footballs walked toward him, his eyes locked on Nory. “Come on, kid. You’re late for your shift.”

The fifty-year old man had a chin like a semi-truck bumper and spoke with weird drawl that sounded like he’d probably been hit in the head in fights one too many times. He looked like the only person on the station that might be able to punch Jacob’s head off his shoulders.

“Ha ha, funny. I’m fired, remember? You guys fired me. Just let me get on the ship and go home.”

“Fraid not.” The man held out a printed paper to Nory. “Someone decided to promote you instead.”

“What?” Nory held the paper and read it. “I... I don’t know anything about hazards. Or hazard security. I don’t...”

“Don’t be a whiner. Get off your ass and let’s go. I’ll give you a crash course and help you get in your suit. Mott woke my ass up for you. If you don’t get off your ass and come on I’ll make your eyes match.”

“Okay. Okay!” Nory pushed off the wall onto his feet. “Why can’t anyone around here be polite and say please?”

“Sure thing butter cup. Please come to work and get overpaid for sleeping in an combat EVA suit for twelve hours a day. Nobody expects you to do shit, just come on and cash a paycheck.”

Nory followed the security guard. “What about Eckhard and Jacobs? They...”

“Who the fuck are they and why should I care?” the guard asked.

Nory couldn’t help but laugh with a hint of nervousness.

“Quarentine labs doesn’t give a damn. They do whatever they want.”

“What... what exactly do they do?” Nory asked.

“Let that be the last time you ever ask, ’cause if you don’t know shit about it then the ICC won’t put your ass in prison when they find out. Capisce?”

“Yeah. Capisce.” Nory felt his stomach knotting. He wondered why he was just obediently following this man into what was sounding like a very bad idea.

*

Cindy happily skipped along the corridors of the station. She had a new piece of technology in her hand that she assured her mother would make her the king of hide-and-peek. The device was hand-held and detected motion through the sensation of microscopic changes in air density. It extrapolated that information and sent it to a screen that sensed movement up to fifty meters away. She had the sensitivity scaled down to five meters so that she could see only those motions close by where she was standing as she noticed one movement marker was faster than all the others that represented people

in their quarters, or people working. The skinny little girl followed the tracking marker an iris vent access point. She could hear something moving behind the retracting piece of metal that separated the room from whatever was inside the vent. A dark shadow lingered just beyond her field of vision.

“Hello?” She moved closer and put the tracker down on the ground so that she could move into the vent with complete disregard for her safety. She moved closer toward the inky black shadows that obscured the vent opening. She could see pieces of metal inside the vent being blocked by whatever was in the foreground.

“I’m Cindy... What’s your name?”

She inched close enough to the opening and that was all it took. Something reached out and grabbed her arm. She looked down at her wrist to see a set of pale white, human fingers pulling at her. She helped the person out of the vent. The boy had bruises all over his face and he looked as if he had been in a fight.

“Somethings on the ship.” The boy replied in an almost deadpan tone. He repeated something’s on the ship several more times while Cindy pulled him out of the vent.

“We aren’t on a ship. It’s the station. Are you just trying to scare me? That’s not a nice way to make new friends. I thought I was the only girl on this station.”

The boy stopped rocking back and fourth and looked at the girl. She insulted him by calling him a girl and he reacted to that even if just for a moment. She knew that she snapped him out of reality enough to get his legs working.

“Come... On...”

She pulled him out of the vent and handed him the motion tracker.

“What is it that’s on your ship? Isn’t it supposed to be going bye-bye soon anyway?” She asked. “You better get back on there before your crew leaves without you.”

“They can leave without me,” the boy said. He looked up at her and sighed with relief. “I’m Daniel. My parents aren’t over there anyway. They took me away from them and made me work.”

“What do you know about what’s over there? What are you talking about?”

“Something – was in the vents. It grabbed him and pulled him in.”

“Did you see it?”

“I heard it,” Nathan said. “I was –,” he blushed and shook his head as if trying to reword something. “I was in the shower room and I heard it in the stall next to me. One of the crew was there too, but it took him. There was a trail of blood... But he

wasn't there. It just pulled him into the vents I guess.”

Cindy raised an eyebrow, “So you thought that was a good place to hide?”

“It's on my ship! Not in here...”

“Mhmm,” Cindy giggled. “Daddy told me that when ships docked. They shut off their internal life support and open up a link to the space stations systems. So...” She swung her tiny frame back and fourth as if making a cute point but what she really did was turn him a few more shades of white. She waited for him to reply but he seemed speechless. “... right. So, aren't ya glad I pulled you out of there? Hehe...”

“This isn't a joke!” Daniel said. “And I can't tell anyone here because they'll send me back to the ship again.”

“But if it's true, where can we hide you anyway?”

“I don't know!” Ben yelled.

“Come with me,” Cindy said. She reached out and took Daniel by the hand.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Are you sure you’re not going stir-crazy in here?” Isabel woke up and looked over to see Calvin working away on her computer. She swung her legs over the bed and walked toward the shower. Calvin turned his head toward her, with no regard for her nudity, and shook his head.

“You are continually under the misconception that I can get bored. In fact, my time here has been very productive and will continue to be so.”

Isabel washed quickly and checked the time as she dried off. She still had an hour before she had to be at her post and even if she were late, she was supposed to be the boss now; in complete control of her department. The events that took her to her position were not something she was proud of. She wondered what happened to the poor kid that they sent back to the ship with little regard for his well being. She slipped into her clothes and dried her short brunette hair. It dried easily and laid down nicely without the need for a comb, which saved more time.

“So what were you doing that was so productive?” She asked her best Android friend. She sat back down on the edge of the dining table that laid between her bed and the computer that Calvin sat at so that she could look over his shoulder. Calvin tapped a few buttons on the computer.

“The false alarm yesterday wasn’t a false alarm. The biomass detectors caught something but the files were deleted immediately. Not even the operations officer knows about the events and the system was wiped remotely from network. I’m attempting to find out why.”

“We should tell Ben.”

“He would want to know how you know.”

Isabel sighed.

“Well, yeah that is a problem, isn’t it... Did it come from those quarantine labs?”

“No. It came from the ship that’s been docked here for three days.”

“Probably some rat.” She figured.

“It begs to question, if this facility can let a rat through and call it a false alarm without proper pest control, should this place really be running a quarantine facility?”

“It’s above my pay grade...” Isabel pulled at Calvin’s shirt to signal that she wanted him to stand up. Once he did, she gave him a hug and walked out the door and into the corridors. Calvin stood there, not quite sure how to take the gesture.

Isabel stepped into her section office and found her name on the bosses door. She wondered what happened to the asshole that would bully her now that she took his spot. She didn’t even want that jerk to work under her and she was sure that the other co-workers in her section would feel the same. Weyland-Yutani was a crooked corporation for sure. She saw that when she turned her computer on. Everything on the drive was wiped and someone placed a disk set of all relevant files pulled from the computer that she would need to have.

:::Please Install System Disk::: Displayed on the screen.

Those lazy asses didn’t even bother to install the operating system for her. They just left her a copy of UOS7 for her to install. Isabel rolled her eyes and flipped the release latch on the disk reader. She pressed the cassette into the computer and it made it’s usual grinding noises. The green-on-black text flew by as years worth of someone’s programming that most people took for granted, got taken into the machine to form the mediocre operating system. In a way, Isabel was happy about being able to form her file system her way but she knew that they wiped the computer for a reason. She would probably be discovering remnants of shady projects for the next few years.

Lieutenant Mott walked through the door and her heart jumped to her chest. Calvin was behind him and Mott seemed to know everything. She swallowed hard and thought that everything was all over. They both looked at her through the windows that had a view to the hallway. Calvin stepped in first and Mott walked in behind him.

“Miss Mason,” Mott grumbled. “I have some good news and bad news. Due to a computer glitch in this damned system we have here, we lost a lot of files – mainly everything pertaining to my investigation. However, the good news is, we found another employee for you. We don’t have proper quarters assignments so I gave him the empty bunk next door. I believe this man is from the freighter that docked here and he has nowhere else to go. As it turns out, he knows a thing or two about androids... Would you like him on your team until we can transfer the both of you back to Earth for reassignment?”

“Uh..” Isabel fumbled and looked around. She was confused and scared. This man had the authority to arrest her and she wasn’t sure if he was joking or serious. “Wait, he’s from the –.”

“Well,” Jeff Mott grumbled, “Unless you say something otherwise. Look...” Jeff sat on her desk and crossed his arms. “I’ve spent my life fixing other people’s mistakes and I know a good person when I see one. But I still have a job to do and you aren’t making it easy on me. I’m not your boss, but if you can do me a favor, I’ll be doing you a big one. I’d rather be relaxing, playing a game on my console down in the labs, and taking it easy but you’ve had me running around. Also, this conservation never happened. I know several good companies you can apply for and I’ll put in a good word. Don’t you want to get off this rock... With your – friend here.”

“Well, yes...” Isabel said. She found herself shaking a little as cold sweat dripped from her brow.

“Then... Finish out your position here. This is good for your resume, and enjoy Earth while I get you a new branch to hold onto before letting go of this one. And for goodness sake, Miss Mason, stop sticking paperwork into the machine. Just do your job.” Mott stood up and walked back to the door. “See ya around, kiddo...”

*

Jacobs shoved the captain of Daniel’s ship into Eckhard’s office.

“Something from your ship set off our quarantine alarm yesterday,” Ben Eckhard started when the door shut.

“Yeah?” The captain’s body language was immediately defensive. He

leveled a finger at Eckhard. “It’s that fucking cargo you corporate goons had us bring. I have four-”

Eckhard leaned forward. “You mean the cargo that was quarantine sealed and in cryo-stasis?”

“Yeah that’s the shit. It’s-”

“The cargo you weren’t supposed to touch?” Eckhard grabbed a pen and started idly clicking it. “I spoke to the man you received the cargo from and it seems we’re short a container. I can only assume you decided to keep one to sell to someone else? You see, the company paid for all of those containers. Where is it?”

“That’s the fucking problem!” the captain yelled.

“I agree, that’s the fucking problem.” Eckhard stood up and leaned over the desk. “Where is my product that I paid for?”

“I have no fucking idea! It’s killing my crew! Four of them. You want the damn thing send your security to get it.”

Eckhard looked at Jacobs. “Can you confirm it’s on his ship right now?”

“My men confirm,” Jacobs said as he nodded. “After the alarm we severed all connections and did a full sweep of the base, we’re clean. Our taps into his internal scanners say its there right now.”

“Good. Good!” Eckhard sat down and steepled his fingers. “The head of the lab assures me he can complete everything with only the four specimens. We really don’t need the fifth one after all. But we can’t have a containment breach. Jacobs, can you use your taps to take over the ship?”

“What?” the captain sputtered. “You can’t... that’s illegal!”

Jacobs grabbed the captain’s neck hard and shook him. “Shut up. You’re a dumb fucking slave trading smuggler piece of shit. What do you know about legal?” Jacobs looked at Eckhard. “We can take full remote control of the ship whenever we want.”

“Okay. New plan. I don’t want this specimen out of our control. Get it in the air, fly it out a bit and have an accident of some sort. Preferably the sort of accident that will leave a smoking crater with nothing identifiable. No survivors.”

“No... wait, what do you mean no survivors?” the captain asked.

“What the fuck do you think I mean?” Eckhard yelled. “Holy shit you’re a stupid asshole. Take this piece of shit down to the labs. He just volunteered to help with the experiments.”

“You can’t fucking do this! You won’t...”

The captain couldn’t speak as Jacob’s arm tightened around his neck and choked him unconscious. He dropped the captain on the floor like a bag of garbage.

Eckhard pointed at Jacobs. “And fuck you too! This was your Goddamn idea. Next time don’t use fucking trailer trash space hobos.”

Jacobs rolled the captain on his back getting him ready to be hauled out. “There won’t be a next time,” Jacobs said.

Mindy McClain watched the readouts of the outbound freighter. There was a sudden spike in radiation. She flicked a switch to go mic hot. “Control to freighter Jasper Belle. I have an energy spike. Check your powerplant.”

There was no answer. The ship’s course started to sag from the planned egress. “Control to Jasper Belle,” she repeated. Still no answer. She heard a pair of heavy combat boots enter the ATC room.

She felt a shiver down her spine, and a gut feeling of what she was watching happen. She didn’t even wait for Jacobs to cross the room before flipping the switch down making her mic cold again. She took off her headset and set it on her keyboard and waited. The Belle continued to descend and accelerate into the moon’s gravity until her tracking station lost the ship behind a mountain, and then a static burst from atomic fuel detonating.

Jacobs gave her a hand-written note without saying anything. She glanced it over, and it confirmed what she suspected. She looked around the room. Everyone was focused on the crash that just occurred.

“Does this have to do with that alarm yesterday?”

Jacobs stared at her. “Technical glitch caused by the Belle’s poorly

maintained docking interfaces.”

“The same poor maintenance that caused a...” She was going to say self-destruct. “Crash?”

Jacobs shrugged. “Seems so. The crash investigation will conclude in 72 hours. I would appreciate it if you handled the report.”

“Okay.” Her mind was focused on the alarm yesterday, and her daughter now on the station. “Are we safe?”

“We are now. Why? Do you want to leave?”

“If... if there’s something, and my daughter...”

“I’ll see what I can do. There won’t be a ship headed to the colonies for a while. You know that.”

McClain nodded. Jacobs left as quietly as he entered. She looked down at the note which had bullet points of the crash investigation findings. Reactor breach. Cascading systems failure. Total loss. No survivors. Blackbox unrecoverable. Mindy crumpled the note and shoved it in her pocket.

CHAPTER SIX

Isabel and Calvin found Nory's quarters open and they walked in without an invitation. Nory turned to see the tall skinny girl and some guy he'd never seen before staring at him as he put his armor on. Nory was surprised to see her and he couldn't help but feel a little upset when he saw her standing next to some guy he'd never seen. He held his breath before he said something awful because he didn't want to be 'that guy'. He couldn't ignore him either and made sure to remind himself that this station wasn't where he wanted to be anyway, and if he had it his way, he would have never seen Isabel ever again. He finished putting his armor on but refrained from popping the helmet on his head in an effort to be personable. Of course, he realized he fucked that up the moment he picked up the white pulse rifle and chambered a round while looking directly at Calvin.

"Hey Izzi..." It was the first time he used a pet name, too. It was all too obvious.

"Nory... Calvin... This is Calvin by the way..." She skipped back to make a proper introduction. "Calvin... Nory..." She turned back to him and stepped forward. "What are you still doing here?"

"Well," Nory sighed. "I was about to make a clean fucking getaway, but after the quarantine alarm stopped all transports for a while, I ended up getting stuck on this fucking rock 'just' long enough to not be able to get away. I was reassigned to the quarantine labs."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Isabel asked.

"I was just too shaken up..." He rubbed the bruise on his cheek with his left arm after slinging his rifle around his shoulder. "All this shit that's gone down the last few days drained me. I didn't feel like doing anything. Hell, I don't feel like working. I'm still WY Security which means, even if that asshole, Jacobs' isn't my boss,

he's still above me in the command chain and this station seems as poorly run as a mall-cop convention." He placed his hard-gloved hand on Isabel's shoulder. "I was going to tell you after I had a chance to breath."

Calvin walked over to them.

"Are you aware of any off the book projects?"

"Even if I was, I wouldn't be able to tell you," Nory said. He realized how cold that sounded and continued. "Sorry... No not really."

"I was asking because it was the company that erased the records of what caused the alarm to trip last night. Since the alarm, the cargo ship 'Jasper Belle' departed and suffered some sort of a problem, and crashed into the moon roughly two and a half kilometers away from the station. At the mention of it, Isabel drew a long face and looked at the deck plating below Nory's feet. Nory too notice of it and realized that there was more to the story, something saddening. He then brought his head back and realized what that meant.

"That kid..."

"Yeah," Isabel said mournfully.

Calvin continued,

"There have been a series of internal sensor sweeps and extra security added to the quarantine labs. I did my best to research into what it was they were doing and that's when I found out that you were assigned there this morning."

"I'm sorry," Nory said. "Who are you? And why are you admitting to a station security officer that you're some sort of corporate spy or something?"

"He's just looking out for our well being. We think there's something more going on here than meets the eye," Isabel said. It was obvious that there was tension between Nory and Calvin. Calvin, however, maintained is usual calm. Nory looked to Isabel and then back to Calvin. Nory then shook his head and sighed while flipping his helmet between his hands.

"Look... I'll think about snooping around for you but you got to understand, I don't know what kind of security systems they have down there but for you, I'll see what I can do. In the meantime, that ship 'did' crash into this moon. A two klick hike on the ice isn't going to kill you if you're so curious. You're the boss of your department anyway so it's not like anyone's going to fire you for taking a little initiative."

"They'll probably be crawling around the wreckage with an investigative team."

Nory laughed.

“Yeah... Right...” Nory’s response happily dripped with sarcasm. “Lock my door on the way out, and don’t you dare look at my porn.”

Calvin and Isabel watched as the security officer walked down the corridors toward his first day on a new, dangerous job. Isabel got the feeling that her ability to date the guy went right out the airlock. He didn’t seem interested at all other than the information they had to share. Between that, and thinking about poor Daniel, somewhere in that wreckage two kilometers away, it was not a good day

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Mindy instantly went on the offensive when she returned to her home quarters to see her innocent thirteen year old daughter with a boy roughly the same age. She stomped toward them and was about to yell before realizing that there were no kids allowed on the station; which mean that this boy had to have come from the Jasper Belle. Anger turned to guilt, which turned to fear. The poor boy; his parents were probably on that ship, she thought. Cindy was never given ‘the talk’ nor was she told not to bring boys home for the simple reason that, nobody was supposed to have been in her dating range out in space; yet here he was... ‘If Cindy could attract boys fifteen lightyears from Earth, then, she should be proud, right?’ she thought. She would have laughed if she didn’t have to be involved with telling the boy that his home was gone.

“Cindy?”

“Hi mom! This is Daniel!”

They were both on the floor playing a holographic game together using a set of headsets. She had that motion tracker laying on the floor and the tables were filled with empty glasses and plates. They had apparently made dinner and spent most the time in the quarters while she was at work dealing with the negativity of filling out an accident report with all hands lost.

All hands...

Mindy realized she was going to have to amend that report.

“I give you a motion tracker and you manage to find a boyfriend...” She knelt down and picked the device up. It was still on and beeping with dots consisting of moving crew members within the station. She turned it off and walked toward the charging station to plug it in. She was doing everything to avoid the hardship of telling this boy that his ship was gone.

“He’s not my boyfriend! He’s a friend!” She took her headset off and so

did Daniel. “This is Daniel... I found him in the... On the station!” She chirped happily.

“Nice to meet you Daniel... Are you from the Jasper Belle?”

Mindy watched as Daniel’s face turned several shades of white.

“Yes.”

That was all he said. He seemed too afraid to say anything else. Cindy noticed it too and then gave an odd look to her mother.

“What’s wrong?”

“Daniel,” ignoring Cindy’s question. “Do you have family on the ship? How did you get here?”

“No, no family... I got here because I had to get off. Please, don’t send me back, miss, please...”

“Friends on the ship? How come you’re on the ship?”

“I’m not supposed to talk about it. I’m not supposed to be here, but I really don’t want to go back to my ship, can you do anything? Please?!” Daniel started to break out in tears and hide his face. Cindy raised her eyebrow and then looked to Mindy.

“Mom?”

“Daniel,” Mindy said. “You can’t go back to your ship.”

“I... I can’t?” Daniel asked hopefully as Mindy pulled his arms down so that she could see his face. “Daniel... Something happened – something... Terrible.”

“It’s here, isn’t it?” Daniel asked. He looked over Mindy’s shoulder to see that the motion tracker was gone. He wiped his face and walked past Mindy with no regard whatsoever that she was trying to talk to him. Mindy realized that he didn’t care about the ship. He turned the tracker on and looked at the screen. “Those are the neighbors, right?” He brought the tracker to Cindy and they talked amongst themselves. Daniel looked to Mindy and saw that she was getting a little angry that he ignored her.

“Sorry miss,” Daniel said.

“Fine, just listen to me. What are you talking about?”

“Something bad is on my ship.” Daniel said.

Mindy’s eyes narrowed at the kid as her jaw tightened. She nodded slowly, knowingly, as she looked out the porthole toward the ice — toward the distant glow some two kilometers away...

*

Lieutenant Jeff Mott sat at his desk drinking pure black coffee that he brewed himself in a machine set on a shelf against the wall behind his desk. The fresh mug steamed into the cold, dry air of the base like an ashtray full of neglected burning

cigarettes.

Mott sipped the boiling brew between flipping pages of a periodical that was already 6 months out of date, but was brand new to everyone on the base. It was nothing more than a worthless tabloid to Mott but it filled the night shifts and that's all he needed in a magazine.

“Can you believe this crap?” Mott said loud enough to be heard by Sergeant Nory Holt and Sergeant Liam Beckham, the two combat-suited guards that shared night shift with him. “This dipshit says that because we're creating so many new colonies so fast, that expanding the space forces of the United Americas and the Three World Empire to keep up is going to bankrupt Earth in only a decade and plunge the galaxy into war and anarchy. He says it's up to the big companies to privatize militaries before space becomes the new wild west.”

“It's true,” Beckham crackled over his vox speaker. “These new colonies are still terraforming and building, they can't afford to pay taxes back to Earth, and Earth ain't what it used to be. I've heard we're actually buying new troop ships and leasing them to both sides.”

“Yeah? Sounds like you hear a lot of bullshit.” Mott sipped his coffee and flipped the page over. “What do you think, Holt?”

“I don't know,” Nory said over his vox. “It makes sense. The company is paying for the new colonies, aren't they? It's starting to feel like Wey-U owns everything.”

“You two are crazy,” Mott said before sipping more coffee.

Mott and Beckham started to argue about politics, the rise of corporations as the new government in space, and the austere sovereignty of the old way of doing things. Nory Holt's mind tuned out. It felt like topics that were so far out of his control he didn't want to think about it.

Instead he started to think about his personal future. It really did feel like Weyland-Yutani owned everything. By no merit of his own he had received a promotion and a substantial pay raise, and the big red mark TERMINATED was erased from his company record. To anyone who wasn't there when he was fired, it looked like he had instead been rewarded for hard work and diligence. He knew it was really because Mott needed someone to fill an empty spot. The contract said otherwise. The job wasn't temporary, he was officially part of the team and would remain on payroll even after Sergeant Kerson returned from lab duty.

It was during his deep contemplation he thought he heard scratching in the air vent near him. He turned quickly and pointed his pulse rifle, but there was nothing he could see, and he didn't hear the sound anymore.

"Balls," Mott growled at seeing Nory's motion. "What is it, Holt?"

"Uh... probably nothing," Nory said, feeling a little embarrassed.

"'Probably nothing' was your last post, Holt," Mott said. "In quarantine duty the rule is 'probably something.' What is it?"

"Scratching in the air vent," Nory said.

"Balls balls balls," Mott grumbled.

In quick practiced motion, he pulled a headset out of his desk drawer, plugged it into his radio which he clipped to his belt, pulled a motion tracker from a charging station on the shelf by the coffee maker, and took his pulse rifle which was leaned against the wall by the shelf.

Crossing from Mott's and Beckham's position required dropping down onto a walkway with no railing and then on the other side climbing back up onto the platform. After grunting his way up and standing next to Nory, Mott turned on the motion tracker and set the filter to ignore small insects and rodents.

There was nothing on the screen.

"Like I said, probably nothing," Nory said.

Mott looked at Nory for a moment. "Yeah?" Mott stepped closer to the vent and kicked the panel above it with his boot hard enough to make it rattle. The motion tracker wailed with fast movement. Mott stepped back behind Nory.

"Holt, aim at the vent and shoot a line straight up to the corner of the ceiling."

Nory did just that. The quarantine security rifles were the only ones loaded with military-grade armor-piercing high-explosive rounds. The bolted sheet steel panels of the wall spalled and split open sending micro shrapnel through the air. Nory's suit blocked all of it.

The burst left the entire air duct – and everything else behind the wall – open and exposed. Nory turned on his helmet light and they looked. There was nothing in there. Mott held up the motion tracker. It was still pinging, right where the duct was but the signal was getting weaker.

“Balls.” Mott tapped his radio. “Checkpoint 2 to base.”

“Base, go ahead.”

“Mott here, something just breached our security via the air vent and it’s heading back topside now in a hurry.”

“Base, copy. What do you mean by ‘something?’”

When the motion tracker stopped pinging Mott stepped to the shot up, smoking wall for a closer look. “Well whatever it is, it isn’t human if it’s climbing up a vent fast enough to evade pulse rifle fire.”

“Say again? Did you discharge weapons?”

“Ten four.” Mott kicked a panel and it fell off its mounting bolts and crashed on the deck. “I had movement big enough to be a person in the vent.”

“I’ll inform Jacobs immediately.”

“Balls,” Mott said.

It took only about ten minutes for Henry Jacobs to arrive. He glared at Mott with the hatred of a burning star.

“What the fuck is going on down here?!” he yelled as he walked briskly across the small catwalk toward them.

Mott recounted the chain of events ending with the call.

“So you shot up the fucking wall?!” Jacobs yelled while pointing at the rent in the wall from the floor to the ceiling.

“You want me to just let whatever it is go downstairs and see your project next time?” Mott asked.

“I want you to exercise some god damned restraint!” Jacobs yelled.

“Take it up with the company,” Mott said. “You know the rules. Unauthorized intruders are to be shot dead, whether they’re in the open or hiding in a vent. Zero tolerance policy.”

“And which one of you was the expert marksman, with such fine shooting?” Jacobs said sarcastically as he looked at the three of them.

“Sergeant Holt,” Mott said.

“Holt?!” Jacobs yelled. He grabbed Nory’s helmet and forced open the visor. “Holt! What the fuck are you doing?!”

“You should ask mother and Doctor Sexton that,” Mott said. “We’re all just following orders down here. Why are you yelling at us? You have a thing in the base that can climb over 100 feet of air duct in ten seconds. Don’t be pissed at us for finding it and doing our job.”

Jacob’s face was red with rage. “Your job... Lieutenant, we have a chain of command-”

“Hold it right there, bucko,” Mott said. “I answer to the labs, period. You want to run your little projects off the books? Fine. But I’m done cooperating with you.”

“You will cooperate with base security!” Jacobs yelled.

Mott shook his head. “Base security is a total failure. How did that thing get past you and all your boys without so much as a warning to me? I’m not playing with your team of scrubs.”

“You’re on thin ice, Lieutenant!”

Mott stomped on the deck. “I’m standing on solid alloy plate. You on the other hand have an unknown organism on the loose. The quarantine labs are on lockdown as of now. I’ll lift the lockdown when I am satisfied you’ve bagged whatever that is. Now, sir, you have to leave. You are not authorized to be here. Anyone not on the short list will be dealt with according to lockdown procedure.”

Jacobs yelled so hard spit was flying. “I will fucking have you! You are done!”

“Good luck,” Mott said. “Holt, Beckham. Escort this unauthorized person out of the quarantine area.”

Beckham raised his rifle at Jacobs and stepped back 20 feet from him. Nory followed his lead. “Sir, you have 5 seconds to make your way off the platform.”

“Fuck you,” Jacobs said before leaving.

The three of them gathered at Mott’s desk. Mott entered a command and a collection of scanners and four sentry guns emerged and activated, putting the transfer platform into lockdown mode.

“Holt, I hope you like cots, sonic showers, and emergency rations,” Mott said as he plopped back into his chair.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Calvin and Isabel reached the crash site of the Jasper Belle after forty-five minutes of walking in a space suit. Isabel imagined a localized crash site with pieces and parts strewn over the surface of an icy moon that would have been easy to get to. Instead, what she faced was a crash site that spanned a kilometer.

“It must have broken up in space before reaching escape velocity.” Calvin’s voice sounded more robotic over Isabel’s headset and it gave him away as a droid even though without the headset, nobody would know the wiser.

“Yeah,” Isabel replied while looking through the thin glass visor that separated her little bubble of life from the deadly expanse of eternal vacuum. “... there’s no way this ship actually crashed into the moon. This shit is everywhere.”

“Look at this,” Calvin said as he stepped closer to a large chunk of the wreckage. The ice was caved in like bowl. The rest of the moon was a milky white ice, but for almost a kilometer in diameter, there was a clear sheet of ice that looked as if it had been recently melted. Inside that newly frozen lake of ice were the scattered debris of the Jasper Belle.

“There’s no way we can cut through all this.”

“What is it you were searching for?” Calvin asked.

“The black box.”

Calvin looked to Isabel and shook his head inside his space suit.

“There’s no way you’ll be able to find that here with the time allotted in your tanks. Start back to Eight-Fourteen and I’ll find it.”

“Okay,” Isabel said in defeat.

“Isabel...”

She turned to look at her android friend.

“Don’t expect me back for a while. I’ll be on comms if you need me.”

“You’re going to need tools. If there’s a black box, there’s no way you are going to find it.”

“You asked me to try,” Calvin said bluntly. She looked at him again and had to remind herself that Calvin would do anything she asked of him, and that he was always determined; that’s the way she programmed him. As his programmer, she shouldn’t have had to remind herself of that fact.

“Calvin... What are the odds of you finding a black box in that?”

“Finding it, given enough time, ninety percent.”

“How much time?”

“Days... If not weeks.”

“Come on, Calvin... We can come back to this with the right tools.”

“As you wish...” Calvin said simply without argument.

“This was a wasted trip.”

“Not entirely,” Calvin said. “We deduced that this ship didn’t crash on impact. There was foul play involved. You can add this to an official report and send it to network. They will want to know about this.”

Isabel’s legs were feeling sore from walking. She found a small crater in the ice and used the lip of the crater as a seat to sit down on. She didn’t need to tell Calvin that she required rest. She was sure that it showed in the way that she had been walking. If she were alone, she would have turned back after only five hundred meters. She had walked four times that much distance thanks to her friend who helped with her perseverance. She just wasn’t thinking about the long walk back. She took a moment to look up and take notice the large gas giant they were orbiting. The colors of the planets cloud layers were mesmerizing; band after band of overlapping blues, oranges, and yellows, wrapped around hundreds of thousands of miles of bottomless planet. She looked over to see that the rock they were on, despite the facility she lived and worked in seeming so massive, was nothing compared to the moon they were on. In turn, that moon was merely a speck of ice amongst countless others that orbited the gas giant.

“Never actually stopped to look,” Isabel said. Calvin could see her eyes gazing through the reflection of the planet on her faceplate. “I’m always so busy thinking about my problems. Does it really matter that much?”

“It’s an easy way to think,” Calvin said while sitting down next to her. He seemed to be enjoying the view as well. “But if it weren’t for your problems, you wouldn’t have had the chance to come out here. It shouldn’t make you feel small – it should make you feel big. You’re a part of this.”

“So are you,” Isabel reminded. She looked away from the spectacle of their impossible situation to focus on Calvin a moment. “You’re supposed to be lights

and clockwork, and then you surprise me.”

“I am just programming, your programming.”

“Not sure what that means.”

Calvin shrugged his shoulders and looked at her through two layers of glass and smiled back at her. “Me either.”

*

Mindy woke up in the middle of the night for no reason. Daniel didn't make any noise after setting him up in the living room with express instructions not to go into Cindy's bedroom unless she was awake. 'It was probably the worrying', she thought. 'Just following orders' didn't really help anyone if they were caught doing something wrong; these types of provisions she found herself given allowance to would only be more than temporary if the company she worked for got what they ultimately wanted. If not, then, she would just be seen as someone in collusion with wrong doer's. She did her best to sneak past Daniel in the living room area of her rare, family-sized quarters that Ben and Henry had set up for her as partial payment for her silence. That was another thing, too. Her need to be with Cindy has given these men another chip in the big game; she may have put her daughter in harms way if she were to divulge anything that she didn't want sent to ICC.

She opened the shutters that looked out at the ice field. The golden glow of the rings and gas giant illuminated the kitchen area. She didn't see the telltale glow of a ship's drive overload in the distance anymore; it was as if nothing ever happened. Lives; people that boy on the sofa knew, were lost, forever. She took a deep breath and tried to forget about it as she turned and opened the door to the fridge. Several haphazardly placed plates fell out onto the tile floor with a crash.

Daniel sat up because the immense calamity signaled everyone in the unit to the mother's clumsiness.

In the other bedroom, Cindy opened her eyes in reaction to the commotion. She kept the doorway open so that light could enter her bedroom. It took a moment for her to realize that it wasn't that the door was down again, it was because something huge and dark was blocking it, using the opening to watch the family. She could see Daniel's eyes, wide as dinner plates, looking at the dark figure in the doorway.

Daniel looked around the corner to see Mindy replacing the pans in the kitchen and complaining about the dishevelment that the movers caused when they threw anything everywhere. She was completely oblivious to the fact that there was a

monster looking directly out of her daughters bedroom with its elongated, eyeless head. All he could see was sharp teeth, long gangly arms, and a jet-black tail as sharp as a sword's tip. He tried to say something but no sound came out. It was the first time he actually saw whatever it was that must have been on his own ship. Behind the monster, the little girl stepped out of her bed and hit the emergency override on the quarters door. The monster turned at the sound of the daughter hitting the button. It was already turning toward the little girl just as the door shut to her bedroom.

Mindy pulled three frozen meals from the fridge and turned to Daniel.

“Since I already woke you all up, how do you feel about a midnight...”

She stopped talking when she saw the gaping mouth on Daniel as he sat on the sofa with his knees pulled to his chest, eyes fixated on a single point on Cindy's closed door. Mindy placed the meal on the counter and ran over to the wall. That's when Daniel screamed ‘NO!’ and ran after her.

“Don't hit it!”

Mindy turned and threw Daniel to the ground. He scrambled to crawl to the open portholes with heels and elbows alone while Mindy hit the open button on her daughters quarters.

“It's in there!” Daniel yelled.

She had no idea what ‘it’ was, but she screamed for her daughter anyway.

“Cindy!”

The door opened to the little girl. Mindy looked confused when she stood there with a confused look on her face. Daniel pushed his back against the furthest wall between the two windows in the living room. If he could have squeezed himself inside the hull, he would have. He breathed heavily and looked as if he were going to pass out.

“What's going on?! What happened?” Mindy asked.

Cindy shrugged her arms.

“I looked out and saw Daniel giving me this weird look so I shut the door.”

Mindy and Cindy both looked over to Daniel. He was shaking now, unresponsive to anything and white as salt. Mindy sighed and patted Cindy on the back.

“Well, keep it open, okay?”

“Sure...” Cindy said. She looked to Daniel “Can I stay with him?”

“Fine...” Mindy said. “I think he's just going through a lot right now. But no funny business, got it?”

“Got it,” Cindy said with a toothy smile.

“Come on... Let's eat something.”

“I'm not hungry,” Cindy said.

“Okay. Daniel? Come on...”

“You saw it too!” Daniel finally said.

Mindy shook her head. The poor boy had been through a lot and was probably just seeing monsters in his imagination. She walked back to the counter and placed two food boxes into the heater.

“You were probably just dreaming, Daniel... It’s okay. Get something to eat and try and fall asleep. You can stay in the bedroom with Cindy.”

Daniel looked over to the girl. She leaned against the doorframe to the room, right where the monster was. Cindy just looked on with her light blue eyes. There was something behind her gaze, something very – knowing... Daniel’s lip rose a moment and his eyes narrowed onto her in response to the way she looked at her. He felt all his trust for the girl wain to nothing in that fraction of a second. She saw it... How did she survive it? Why did she keep it from getting him if she didn’t want her mom to know? Yet, she saved them both. If he asked why, she’d deny it and he knew it.

“I can stay on the sofa with you...” Cindy said as she stepped out of her bedroom. She not only closed the door, but she locked it again. She kept looking at Daniel while she quietly pulled the airlock on the vent to the living room tight. The device was for hull breaches. It would get cold in there soon but for now, her mother didn’t know Cindy did it. She pulled the sheets off the sofa and sat next to the wall with him on the floor. “Don’t worry. It was all just a bad dream...”

*

“Since when is it our job to find people who are late for work?” Private Steins whined as he walked ahead staring down at his motion tracker with his pulse rifle slung.

“Since you were hired,” Corporal Goto said. “Do you ever not complain?”

“Come on, this is stupid. You know it.”

Steins swept the tracker side to side in a lazy fashion. It had a special filter enabled to scan for the ID tags of any of the currently six missing base employees. Jacobs assembled all of security for a briefing and assigned two-man teams to search every part of the station. Steins and Goto were sent to the automated nuclear reactor.

“It isn’t stupid,” Goto firmly stated. “You just don’t want to earn your paycheck, that’s all.”

“You know it’s stupid. Everyone has an ID chip that shows up on any scanner. All Jacobs has to do is look at his big table thingy with the map and he’ll see where they are. Only reason they wouldn’t show is they’re dead or they are outside the base.”

“You’re right,” Goto admitted just to take an easy path of conversation. “If they went outside they’d have to come back in to replenish air and water. They would’ve done that by now.”

“That means they’re dead, which also means we have a serial killer.”

Steins stopped at the thick triple-wide heavy bulkhead door at the end of the long concourse. Goto went to the control panel and swiped his access card. A small light flashed green and the door lifted with the sound of hydraulic machinery.

Goto waved his hand ahead. “You still have point.”

“Of course I have point, I’m the lowest ranking shit. Commanders never take point.”

The environmental systems in the nuclear plant were minimal. It was hot, and very dry. The air had a crisp feel of static to it. It smelled of ozone and brand new steel and plastic – even though it wasn’t new at all. Steins took a turn to the right down a narrow service way that snaked through the power plant between heavy lines of conduit. Incandescent lights flicked on, their light almost totally absorbed by the deep crevices of the industrial facility making it seem as dark as a cloudy night on Earth.

Goto made a heavy sigh about Steins comment. “If there is a murderer we must find the bodies and identify their attacker.”

“But we’ll never do that. If they’re dead the tags don’t transmit. If they’re dead they also don’t show up on motion tracker because dead people don’t move. You really think someone would just leave the bodies out in the open anyway? There’s a dozen ways to dispose of bodies on this base and nobody would ever find out. This is a stupid wild goose chase.”

They stopped at the door to a machine room. Goto opened the door and looked around inside with a flashlight. There was nothing but cobwebbed work benches and spare parts. Goto closed and relocked the door.

“We may find something,” Goto said following behind Steins. “That’s

the point of a search. Just one clue is all we need.”

“It’s stupid. And what if he is here anyway? This is some really tight space in here.” Steins squeezed sideways between a support column and conduit. He looked back at Goto. “I mean, let’s say he jumps us right now, how am I going to unsling my rifle?”

“Do you want to know what I think?” Goto asked.

“Sure, yeah. Tell me.”

“I think you worry too much, and talk too much,” Goto said. “Focus on the job and the sooner we’ll be done and back in our quarters.”

“Are you kidding? Talking makes time go by faster. This crap is too boring to be quiet.”

Stein turned back to looking ahead and finished getting through the pipes. He waited for Goto to squeeze through and then continued ahead.

“You’ve been with the company a while, right?” Steins asked.

Goto opened the door to another side room and searched it with a flashlight. “Only two years, why?”

“Well it’s been bugging me, and now that we’re in this dark as a nightmare in hell power plant I really want to ask someone. Why are all spaceships and bases so dimly lit? And why incandescent lights? It’s so gloomy and dark like someone’s asshole angsty teen kid.”

“Do you really want to know?” Goto asked as he opened a door and searched.

“Yes, I do.”

“It has to do with light exhaustion,” Goto said.

The room he just entered seemed to have boxes of old printed files. It seemed odd to him and he took a moment to flip through the folders in the closest box. It was a collection of work orders, spec sheets, inventory, paperwork, blueprints, and all the other printed artifacts from the base’s construction.

Goto closed the box and closed the door. “Even after a century in space, man-made light sources cause mental fatigue and sleep disorders. If they kept the base as bright as Earth, your brain would become too tired to concentrate and you’d have trouble getting REM sleep.”

“But that’s not a problem with sunlight?” Steins asked.

“No.”

“Wow. I learned something new. I thought they were just being cheap with the electricity.”

“Not everything is an evil corporation trying to screw you over, Steins,” Goto said.

As Goto reached to open another door, Stein’s motion tracker chirped. Stein turned until he heard the chirp again and was facing it so it was in the center band of the tracker.

“Fifty meters that way,” Steins said.

“That’s the generators,” Goto said.

Steins took the lead through the service passage. “It’s the ID chip, so whoever it is is alive. But what would they be doing in the generator room? Maybe this guy is the killer.”

Steins clumsily unslung his pulse rifle to hold it with one hand while still following the blip on the motion tracker. The generator room was loud with the throbbing turbines and humming generators. The air was full of static. The motion tracker’s screen lit up with ERROR as the ambient EM energy in the room jammed it.

There was a man laying still on his belly on the grated deck between two generators. There was a big bloody hole through his back. Steins rushed to him and rolled him over. The man screamed with pain.

His eyes blinked and looked around deliriously. “Run. You have to run.”

“It’s okay, I got you buddy.” Steins looked back expecting to see Goto coming to help.

Goto was nowhere.

Steins pressed the transmit button on his headset. “Goto, where are you? I need a hand with this guy. Get in here.” Steins looked back to the man. “It’s alright, we’ll get you to the doctor. Who did this?”

“It came from behind. I didn’t hear it. It just... went through me, through my body.” The man’s hand felt around the big hole through his torso. “Please. I can’t feel my legs. I’m dying. Run. You have to run and tell the others.”

“You’re okay. You’re not bleeding that much. Alright? Just hold it together.” Steins looked around. “Goto where the fuck are you?!” he screamed. He pressed his transmit button. “Goto this isn’t funny. Where the hell are you?”

“Run,” the man kept repeating.

Steins stood up and went back to the service corridor they came down. He shown the flashlight attached to his pulse rifle. Goto was still nowhere.

“Goto!” Steins shouted over his headset. “Steins to base!”

No answer.

“Fuck!” Steins looked back to the man. “The plant is screwing with my radio. Hold on! I’ll be right back with help, okay?”

“No. Run before it kills you.”

Steins was feeling genuinely rattled. After he clipped the motion tracker to his belt he could feel the shake in his left hand as it gripped the fore end of his pulse rifle. He moved quickly back up the service corridor, smacking his shoulders against conduit.

He heard a loud hiss behind him, and he turned by aiming his rifle down and then raising it again so he could aim back. There was a black shape and he squeezed his trigger more out of fear and adrenaline than proper response. The frangible rounds ricocheted and shattered in the corridor. A blink and another look.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Steins said to himself. “Good shot Steins, you just killed a steam cloud.”

He turned back the right way and reached the narrow space between the

column and the conduit.

“Fuck me,” he said as he started to squeeze through. “Fuck this base. Fuck this company. And fuck you Goto!!”

Steins was almost through when he felt his pulse rifle snag. It was jammed into the narrowest space, height-wise from the handlebar to the magazine bottom. He started to push and twist to free it when he heard a hiss in his ear. He turned his head to see the metallic teeth just before they plunged through his skull.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Twelve Hours Later

The ICS Exeter was a state of the art vessel built for fast travel between systems. The advanced computer system didn't require a beacon to land on the platform and since Captain Janet Emersion had company orders to land, she landed anyway regardless of any automated order to steer clear. When they got close enough, they noticed that the ATIS transponder was offline as well, which meant that she could do whatever the hell she wanted.

"Contact station on Comms and let them know that we're standing by for the foreman's orders." Janet sounded bored. Everything was routine for her at this point in her career. The ship was her, along with her crew's home, and has been for the past two years so, they had nowhere else better to be. The scenery changed, but they were always comfortable; the pay was decent as well on Wey-U's dime. That's why, when the comm's officer told her that the stations comm's were down, she didn't give a shit.

"Alright then... We'll give them the standard few days if we have to. Set the system to scan for any dangers on regular intervals and set the security automation for alert mode. Let's eat." Janet said as she unhooked herself from the captain's chair. The second officer placed a hand on her business suit. She looked down at her muscular shoulder and her eyes trailed up to her second.

"We have that special stock from our last stop in the cryo."

"Fuckin' A..." She smiled wide from ear to ear.

"Captain..." The security officer interrupted their friendly banter and pointed to the screen. There were two figures in EVA suits, one stumbling and seemingly worn out from obvious exhaustion.

"Open the outer airlock immediately. Full quarantine procedure. Get Doctor Hayley."

“Right away, captain.”

Alarms raised and alerted the expert crew.

Calvin pulled Isabel’s helmet off the moment the compartment filled with oxygen. Isabel gasped and closed her eyes in relief as the warm air met her skin. Calvin explained to the doctor that approached them in the small cargo hold that her suit had shut down half an hour ago and she was suffering the first symptoms of hypothermia.

“Hydration!” The young doctor seemed to know what he was doing despite his age. Calvin assumed he was roughly nineteen or twenty. Calvin may have been synthetic but he formulated his personal negative opinions about the dark side of corporate expectations not too long after he was activated and seeing a teenager having sacrificed his childhood to become a forced prodigy was one of those things. Calvin watched as he jammed a hose through the O-Ring around Isabel’s EVA suit. The moment he turned it on, she jerked and Calvin held her. Isabel’s eyes lit up with life as the warm water flooded the interior of her suit and she smiled.

“Holy fuck that’s nice!” She gasped.

The doctor and the Wey-U captain who had only just recently arrived began to laugh.

“Yeah,” the doctor said. “I bet that does feel good. Come on, wetbag... Let’s get you to a locker room and we’ll throw a generic jumpsuit at you and you can both tell us what the hell you were doing in the middle of bumfuck-snowball for so long that your suits unjuiced...”

*

Ben knew it wasn’t the flu at this point. People were going missing. Their first thoughts were that someone had got a severe case of cabin fever and started killing people. Then, they discovered the ATC officer two decks below his post, shoved into a closet.

“What is that?” Ben asked as he stood in the hallway.

No stranger to corpses, Henry reached forward toward the man. He looked closely to see that the corpse was stuffed into the closet, eyes wide open, hands behind his back, blood all over his shirt, with something in his mouth. Henry pulled it out and actually seemed genuinely surprised when he managed to pull twelve inches

worth of paper out of his throat.

“It’s an instruction manual for a circuit breaker box. Someone must have taken it out of here,” Henry said as he tapped his finger on the breaker box above the mans head.

“Jesus...” Ben whispered. “Who’s his superior?”

“Mindy McClain.”

“Get her down here,” Ben demanded.

“Can’t be bothered,” Henry said as he stepped aside for the morgue crew to collect him. “She’s two floors up trying to solve the communications problem. Someone wiped the drives clean up there and it’s the only link we have to the outside universe.”

“How about reprogramming?” Ben asked.

“Isabel Mason is our chief programmer at the moment and she’s with one of the missing. Her PDT isn’t transponding which means she’s dead, or otherwise off-station. Since there’s no ships out here other than that the Exeter... She’s dead...”

“There’s got to be someone that can program the computers!” Ben said.

“Gene Ronan... her Ex-Boss that you fired... He left on the last transport... There was a new guy, we have no idea where he came from, by the way...” Henry looked at a portable computer in his hand and started scrolling through names, “... Calvin.. He’s missing.” He tapped a few more names through, “This girl’s missing... This guy... He’s working but I’m not sure of his expertise.”

“We’re looking at a real fucking nightmare,” Ben said. “We can’t get this project off the ground because of some psycho android. Do we have any of those eighty-two models onboard?”

Henry scrolled through his list, looked up, and shook his head.

“Alright... Backtrack the droids and find the location of all of them. Doctor... How long has this man been like this?”

“Just a nurse,” the man said. “Our boss is nowhere to be found.”

“Fuck... Do you know anything?”

“This isn’t my expertise, sir. I’d say more than eight hours. Rigor’s come and gone. Beyond that, I can’t tell you.”

“Not good enough to pin point. What if we were to get all the androids and...” Henry trailed off to see if Ben would understand where he was going with his course of suggestion.

“Nah... If we’re wrong about this and it has something to do with the project, we’re going to need them.”

Henry leaned forward so he could whisper.

“Bugs don’t shove operations manuals down people’s throats...”

Ben nodded.

“I’ll consider it.” There was almost a sigh of relief but then his eyes drifted to the pad in Henry’s hand. “How many PDT’s are we missing?”

“Forty-Two...”

Ben started walking away. Henry followed behind with his pulse rifle at the ready.

“Status of the labs?”

“Still on lockdown.”

“Take us to the labs.”

“Why?”

“Because nobody’s gone missing down there yet...”

“I’m not in command down there,” Henry protested.

“Maybe that says something,” Ben waited for Henry to join him but he stayed where he was and bore into his boss’s eyes as the doors slowly clamped shut.

Henry allowed himself an angry scoff at the doors as he turned around to see five people in the corridor walking toward the direction of the service elevator. He shouldered his weapon and walked swiftly over to them while looking down at his data pad. Once everyone was on the elevator, along with the corpse, he selected the button for the marshals office. There was more investigating to do. He was certain it was simply a rogue android that went nuts.

*

Ben entered his access code into the high security platform and that overrode the lockdown for just that elevator. It was a long ride down and it seemed even longer with all of the worry laid upon his shoulders. The lift was supposed to take a few minutes but it felt like hours when the doors finally opened and he stepped on the ramp. Two security officers in full exo suits seemed as if they were ready to turn him into hamburger meat at the slightest hint of trouble. It was the first time Ben didn’t feel as if he were the most powerful person in the room anymore. Mott had moved his desk away from the air vent and positioned it between the two exo suit guards. He found an extension cord and haphazardly ran it across the hallway so that he could have the desk where he wanted it with no regard to aesthetics.

“You know the balls hit the fan if the dungeon became the only safe refuge for the king.” Mott said in his usual scruffy voice. The verbal speakers on the exo suits beside him seemed to make noise and he knew it was because the two guards were laughing inside. “You didn’t even take the high security access tunnel to your section of the labs. What brings you here? Anything I need to know about?”

Ben started to step past Mott. One of the security officers side-stepped to get in his way.

“I’m the foreman.”

“Yeah? And we’re just following procedure.”

“That’s outrageous...”

“So is this place. Look man... I’m just doing the job,” Mott said as he got up from his desk. “Here’s the thing. You’re either in or out. You seem like an important guy so, make your decision. I can set you up with a portable terminal but until lock-down is over, you’re going to be in here for the duration.”

“I can’t stay in here for the duration.”

“Then don’t come down here.”

Mott watched as the foreman tapped in a set of codes on a wall speaker.

“Eckhard to Jacobs... Have a man meet me at the exit to the high security elevator.”

“Understood.”

Ben stepped on the platform and it started to raise into the ceiling.

*

In the Marshal’s office, the fat man worked away on his computer. He pushed the portable shaver away from the keyboard so that he could type easier. He was relieved to find that Henry walked into the compartment.

“Finally, someone that can do something about this. We have missing people all over the place and they aren’t alive. Something is happening to them and we need to find out what. Check this out.” Henry leaned over the marshals shoulder and watched a green on black display screen representing the layout of habitat quarters within the station. It showed a pair of Personal Data Transmitters enter into a small box that was apparently their quarters.

“This is Dennis and Sally Charon’s quarters. They’re a couple of your white collar workers. Now, check this out.” It showed one PDT suddenly turn off followed by the other dot moving quickly into the bathroom area of the quarters. “It looks like she’s safe from whatever made her husband’s PDT to stop transmitting... She was in there for about two minutes and then...” The Marshal fast forwarded the computer data and hit play. Henry watched as the second spot on the scene vanished.

“I think it’s a rogue, messed up droid.” Henry said. “Has to be.”

“What do you think the captain meant by limited capacity?” Calvin asked

after a long walk of silence from the ship back toward the base.

Isabel still felt tired and weak. They didn't give her any recovery time before they kicked her and Calvin back outside with a box of tools for breaking into an airlock. "I think they mean they only have room for those who can afford it, specifically Ben Eckhard and his bodyguard. They did just enough to help us out but she seems happy enough to sit out at a safe distance until she can either land safely and pick up whoever she's here for, or someone elsewhere offers to pay for a ride."

"How much do you think it would cost to hire her?" Calvin asked.

"Okay, new vocabulary. Old saying. If you have to ask, you can't afford it."

There was a moment of silence as Calvin contemplated the meaning. "Ah, I see," he said. "I think. Could you explain it more? I want to be sure I understand."

Isabel and Calvin walked toward the far end of the base, the automated nuclear power plant. It was the first part completed, and was a modular structure dropped from orbit. Its standardized airlock had the least security of any airlock at the base, although the interior door was much more secure. The captain told them that once they were inside they could use the electronic breaker unit to bypass electronic security on any interior door.

Isabel set the toolbox down and panted heavily by the airlock. Calvin held up the hydraulic door breaker to the seam of the airlock door opposite of its hinge. "You should rest," Calvin said. "This will take a few minutes."

"Yes mom," Isabel snarked as she sat on the toolbox.

"Mom?" Calvin asked in confusion.

"Sorry. I'm so tired. It's making me cranky."

Calvin didn't quite understand and assumed from the context that she must've been sarcastic. He wedged the teeth into the seam and carefully pried the door open. He paused and recalculated the best place and speed to use to cause the least amount of damage so the airlock would properly seal when they went in. He didn't have to get it too far open when the pressure in the lock vented, and then the automatic safety for an obstruction of the door triggered and the door flung fully open and knocked Calvin back.

The two of them entered the airlock and waited for it to pressurize. Calvin looked at the display. “I damaged the outer door seals. There is a slow leak and the system won’t open the inner door.”

Isabel made a heavy sigh as she hefted up the tool box and pulled the electronic breaker out. She looked at it, laughed, and waved it at Calvin. “Still has USCMC markings. A company this big and loaded but people still steal equipment.”

“Given the nature of these tools, I doubt that ship is involved in legal activities.”

“Is anyone here?” Isabel asked rhetorically as she pried off the control panel and plugged the breaker into the circuit board. No real effort was required. The small computer was programmed to accept and respond to the USCMC override codes being fed into it. With a couple taps of the thumb the airlock safety’s were all overridden and the pressurization cycle was completed.

They stepped through the inner hatch and made sure it was fully shut and secure. Even though the airlock would slowly depressurize and equalize with the outside atmosphere, the inner hatch’s seals were still good and would keep the rest of the base full of breathable air.

Isabel made the labored task of taking off her EVA suit, and Calvin followed her cue. They laid the suits by the hatch as there were no racks.

They made their way through the dark power plant’s tight and winding service corridors. Calvin led the way as he had the base’s entire map in his memory. They passed through the generator room and that’s when they saw the rotting corpse laying between the two generators. The smell was pungent enough that Isabel had to step back.

“Oh god,” she said.

“He’s been dead for over a day,” Calvin said. “Shot or impaled through the torso. Hard to determine exact cause or method without an autopsy.”

“We need to get to security,” Isabel said as she quickly jumped past the body.

They went through the next corridor which was much straighter than the other ones they went through. It wasn’t long before they found the next corpse. A headless, rotting body jammed upright between conduit and a support column blocking

their path, still clutching a pulse rifle that was likewise stuck.

“We’ve found security,” Calvin said in an attempt to replicate Isabel’s sarcasm.

Isabel dry heaved and stumbled back. “That’s not funny. Let’s go around.”

“I do not think that’s wise,” he said. “The only other path to the interior exit would take a minimum of twenty minutes. I can dislodge this body and we can be at the door in less than five minutes.”

“I want to go around,” she said stubbornly.

“I believe we are in danger.” Calvin grabbed Isabel’s hand, knowing such physical touch had a calming affect on humans. “Please trust me.”

Isabel nodded. Calvin let go and pried the pulse rifle from the cold, rotting hand and freed it from the narrow space. He considered leaving it on the floor but realized that if he logically believed they were in danger, the rifle would be a valuable tool. He didn’t address the issue that he would be unable to fire at a human due to his programmed constraints, and instead decided that would be a problem he would face when it came to it.

Calvin placed his boot against the torso of the corpse and gave a steady push. It took a bit more effort than he expected, but the body fell out the other side and onto the deck like a stiff, fleshy mannequin. Calvin grabbed Isabel’s hand again.

“Close your eyes and hold your breath,” he said. “I’ll guide you through.”

Calvin squeezed through first, and then helped Isabel through and over the corpse. “Okay, you can breathe again,” he said when he thought they were far enough that she wouldn’t gag from the smell again. Calvin took a moment to quickly grab the motion tracker from the dead security officer’s belt and switched it from custom settings to default mode. He led Isabel to the large interior bulkhead door with the pulse rifle in one hand and the motion tracker in the other.

“You look too used to that gun,” Isabel said.

“Is this improper?” he asked.

“No, I don’t think so,” she said. “You look like a marine from one of the war vids. Don’t tell me you’ve bypassed your safeties.”

“Its says I cannot harm, there is no rule that says I cannot look menacing and point weapons threateningly. I can give the rifle to you if you prefer.”

“No, that’s fine! It looks heavy and this box of tools is heavy enough as it is.”

“Roughly twenty pounds,” Calvin said.

Isabel tried just swiping her ID card to open the door but it was rejected. What surprised her wasn’t that it was rejected for lack of clearance, but for something else.

::: ATTEMPTED USE OF DECEASED CREDENTIALS LOGGED. SECURITY ALERTED AND DISPATCHED. PLEASE STAND BY FOR DETAINMENT. :::

“Does that sort of message work?” Calvin asked.

Isabel pried off the control panel and plugged in the electronic breaker. “Another new saying for you, used to be the catch phrase of Marshal Steel. Everyone runs.”

“Ah.” Calvin turned around and watched the motion tracker. It started to ping at its farthest range. “Isabel, you need to hurry.”

“Security is already here?” she asked. “They are fast today.”

“No, this isn’t from the base.”

Isabel looked over her shoulder to see Calvin was facing into the power plant. Her eyes widened. “Well I’m trying. Using my ID card tripped a security lockdown and it didn’t accept the default marine codes.”

She worked quickly. There wasn’t much she could do to speed it up. The only option left in the breaker was the brute force program but she had no idea how long that would take.

“It’s getting closer,” Calvin said. “It’s moving quickly.”

Isabel felt her stress amp up. “That isn’t helping!”

She broke into a sweat and glared at the circuit board. Her eyes spotted a jumper switch and had a silly idea. She pulled the jumper off the pins and quickly set it to the other pair. The heavy door grinded open. She yanked the breaker cable from the board and slid under the door. Calvin followed.

“It’s almost here,” he said as he stood up next to Isabel in the long causeway that went to the rest of the base.

Isabel had another moment of panic as she realized with the door opened by hardware override, she wouldn’t be able to shut it. She looked around for anything and she spotted the emergency lever. If she pulled it, it would set off every alarm in the area and activate fire suppression and quarantine. Security was already after her so what did it matter at this point? she thought.

She yanked the lever down. Sirens activated, blinking strobes and red flashers replaced the clean white light of the corridor. Most importantly, the bulkhead door that was slowly opening released from its hydraulics and slammed down with a force that shook the causeway. Almost immediately there was heavy thumping as whatever was on the other side tried to break through by ramming.

“I highly doubt it’s human,” Calvin said. “It moved with incredible speed after you yelled at me.”

“Then what the fuck is it?” she asked as she leaned against the wall.

“Very dangerous,” he said.

They could hear a cart coming in the distance. Calvin set the pulse rifle and motion tracker on the floor.

“What are you doing?” Isabel asked.

“They believe we are intruders and criminals. If I am holding a gun they will shoot. You know I can’t shoot back. I am sure if we surrender peacefully and explain everything they will understand and neutralize the hostile life form in power plant.”

Isabel made a deep breath sigh. “Calvin... I really hope you’re right this time.”

On the cart was none other than Henry Jacobs himself and two security officers. “You!” he yelled when he recognized Isabel. “What the

fuck are you doing?!”

The guards stood with their rifles pointed at Calvin and Isabel. Jacobs went briskly and fearlessly to pick up the pulse rifle. “Well, well. Isn’t this fucking lovely. You and your undocumented assistant of unknown origin in the power plant with a stolen weapon.”

Jacobs then yanked the USCMC breaker from Isabel’s hand and looked back at the guards with a cocky smirk. “I think we just found our killers. Arrest them and take them to separate holding cells.” He looked back to Isabel and Calvin. “I’ll interrogate you maggots myself later.”

“Wait,” Isabel said. “We didn’t-”

Jacobs gave Isabel a hard backhand. “Don’t fucking talk to me. I have almost fifty dead or missing and here you are with a pulse rifle, and a stolen marine breaker trying to gain access to the reactor. Probably a corporate spy trying to blow us all to kingdom come and sell company research to a competitor. Well you ain’t that fucking smart after all, are you?”

“Sir, if I may explain,” Calvin said.

“Oh, please do,” Jacobs said sarcastically. “I bet this’ll be a big steaming pile.”

“Sir, if you use the motion tracker, you will see there is something in the power plant. The bodies of two of its victims are in there.”

Jacobs picked up the motion tracker. He pointed it in a full 360 degree sweep. It detected nothing beyond themselves. “I don’t see any god damned thing.”

“Sir,” Calvin started.

“Shut the fuck up.” Jacobs stepped back and security cuffed both of them and pushed them toward the cart.

“I ought to shoot you two fuckers right here,” Jacobs said as they drove back toward the main base. “But I need your confession to the marshal before that. You two have really fucked us over. I bet you paid off the captain of the Jasper Belle too, didn’t you?”

As Isabel rode with Calvin, she wondered if his conclusion of her was

just convenient to Jacobs' understanding of the situation, or if he was actually insane. She glanced to Calvin, who had a very apologetic look on his face.

Calvin sat on the bare aluminum chair at the bare aluminum table under the white hot lamp in the Marshal's questioning room.

Jacobs finally entered the room, spun the opposing chair backwards, and sat with his arms across the chair back. Although Calvin had many involuntary responses to the stimuli due to his behavioral simulation software, he was incapable of sweating. He wondered if Jacobs noticed.

"Let's start from the top," Jacobs said. "What company are you working for?"

"I am working for Weyland-Yutani, but I suspect my employment has been suspended or terminated in light of the accusations."

Jacobs frowned. "Don't get smart with me, fucker."

"I am not trying to be sarcastic or rude. Under the circumstances I don't feel lying would be prudent. I also feel you have reached judgement and are not interested in—"

"Shut up," Jacobs said as he stood up. "Who are you working for?"

"I work for you," Calvin said.

"Bullshit. What are you up to?"

"We left the base in EVA suits to look for survivors and the black box of the Jasper Belle."

Jacobs started walking around the room. "On whose orders?"

"Nobody's. We took initiative to find a boy Isabel was worried about."

"Bullshit!" Jacobs walked behind Calvin. "Why were you trying to break into the power plant?"

Calvin's eyebrows raised. "We didn't try, we succeeded. We broke in through the airlock using a hydraulic jack. The jack and suits are by the airlock."

“Bullshit!” Jacobs shouted.

Calvin got the impression that Jacobs had no formal interrogation training.

“Where did you get the marine issue door hacker?” Jacobs asked.

“It was given to us by a Weyland-Yutani ship landed three miles away. They asked us to restore the beacon and communication so they can land and dock.”

“Bullshit!”

Jacobs stabbed a USCMC issue survival knife down through Calvin's hand. Signals of hardware failure triggered an involuntary wince and shout that Calvin wasn't expecting. White fluid oozed from his wound.

“You're a fucking synth!” Jacobs shouted. “Well ain't that something. I have an ATC that was stuffed dead in a locker by a synth. Who are you working for?”

“I told you we are not working for anyone,” Calvin said.

“Fine.” Jacobs yanked the knife out of Calvin's hand. “I'll go beat it out of your girlfriend.”

“Please don't,” Calvin said in a pleading voice. “I told the truth.”

“The fuck you did,” Jacobs said as he slammed and locked the door.

Ben Eckhard was waiting outside after hearing most of the interrogation in the observation room. He put a hand on Jacobs shoulder.

“That's enough Henry,” Eckhard said.

“We don't know who they're working for,” Jacobs said.

“They're working for themselves. I need her to fix the computers so I can get out of here.” Eckhard took his hand off Jacobs' shoulder and shoved a finger in his chest. “And you are going to fix her damn toy.”

“Do you really believe his line of shit?” Jacobs asked.

“I believe I need to get out of here and right fucking now. So unless you

have another ace programmer that means I fucking need her specifically. Got it?”

“Clear as a bell,” Jacobs said through clenched teeth and went back into the interrogation room to release Calvin.

Ben Eckhard ordered all charges dropped and the door to Isabel’s cell opened. The marshal unshackled her and let her out to a waiting Ben Eckhard.

“You and I are both independent business people, charting our own path in the universe. You making a synthetic with company parts and equipment on company time. And me... well...”

“Get to the point,” Isabel said venomously.

Eckhard smiled and nodded. “The point is the ATC computer is wiped and I need someone to reprogram it so my ship can come in. I’ll pay for bunks for you and Calvin and we can all sit this out in orbit until it blows over.”

“And if I don’t you’ll kill me,” she said.

“Precisely,” Eckhard said with another nod.

“I’m tired and hungry,” Isabel mumbled.

“I’ll give you three hours before you start.”

“I also need Calvin.”

“He needs repairs,” Eckhard said.

Isabel narrowed her eyes at him.

“Don’t give me that look,” he said. “I couldn’t stop Jacobs from stabbing his hand.”

Isabel held back on a dozen choice remarks and left for the base’s kitchen.

Jacobs pushed Calvin through the door to the armory.

“Why are you still being rough?” Calvin asked. “I haven’t resisted.”

“Fix this piece of shit,” Jacobs yelled and then left.

Benjamin Washington turned and looked at Calvin. “Fix what?”

Calvin held out his dripping hand. Benjamin made a wide eyed pissed off expression.

“Fuck no,” he said. “I fix guns, not robots. What is this shit?”

“A knife wound, ” Calvin said as he looked around. “If I give you a list of part numbers can you get them from the warehouse?”

“Yeah,” Benjamin said slowly.

“I can do the repairs myself with your tools.”

“Yeah? I’d love yo see that.”

“You should take a weapon. There’s a hostile life form in the base.”

“What the fuck?” Benjamin shouted. “Are you for fucking real? You mean an alien?”

“You can call it that,” Calvin said.

“Sheeeeeeeit.”

CHAPTER NINE

Mindy didn't have any more nails left to bite. She knew from the moment Isabel entered the ATC room that the guards weren't there for their protection. They were there for Isabel's, and they weren't after a serial killer. From the looks of the firepower from the three guards, they were after a handful of serial killers. Isabel wasn't allowed to talk to Mindy but that all changed the moment Daniel walked into the room with Cindy. The guards had no pull to keep her in line the moment they saw each other. Daniel and Isabel obviously knew each other. That's when Mindy walked over to them as they hugged.

"How do you two know each other?" Mindy asked.

"I saved him from one of his crew members," Isabel explained. "I thought he was dead."

"Ma'am... You're required to work on the terminal."

"Fuck you," Isabel said. "If you want this stuff to be fixed, then you're going to have to follow my lead or not have anything to follow at all."

Cindy giggled at the comment. Mindy's natural reaction was to hold her ears but Isabel apologized to Cindy's mother before Mindy could move her hands. Daniel and Isabel talked about what they experienced but the moment Daniel said something about the dark figure in Cindy's room, Cindy interrupted him and the guards became more intent about fixing the terminal.

Isabel walked around to the terminal again and replaced discs. It was another computer she needed to replace the operating system on and it was most obviously sabotage.

“I can get communications up once things load, but the problem is, we need to recalibrate everything to work with this system since we have no means to calibrate this system to work with every single damn thing here.”

Mindy cleared her throat from across the room.

“Sorry,” Isabel said.

“How long is that going to take?” One of the Marines asked.

“I don’t know. These aren’t the types of systems I usually calibrate. Don’t you have an ATC operator with the proper skills for this? I’m installing base software for a wiped system that is supposed to be programmed specific for this job.”

“She’s two of eight personnel for ATC we could find. The other one we found is dead.”

Isabel swallowed hard. At the same time, Mindy spoke up.

“What? Why didn’t you tell me. Who?”

“John Crawford, senior ATC programmer.”

Mindy rubbed her temples and leaned her head against the wall behind the chairs she and the kids were sitting in. Daniel looked down to see her mother flipping through photos of her co-workers during a party. She zoomed in on the man that the security officer was talking about while she sniffled in silence. Daniels eyes widened as he looked over at Cindy. Cindy just stared back at him with a blank expression. Her eyes, fixed on him. She wasn’t moving a single muscle in her entire body. It was as if she were coiled up like a dog ready to pounce.

“I think we should play,” Cindy said. The words said one thing but the way they were spoken was entirely something else. Daniel shook his head.

“I’m scared.”

“It’s okay,” Mindy said as she swallowed hard. “You can play but don’t leave this room.”

“Ma’am,” the security officer walked forward and pointed at the children. “Do not let them make noise. You two stay where you are.”

Mindy wiped her eyes and looked up at the officer.

“Excuse me... Why do they not need to be making noise?”

“Because I said so.” It was plain enough.

“What are you not telling us. You’re acting like you’re protecting us from an animal, not some deranged psychopath. We’re the only ones on this level and sounds not going to travel anywhere else.”

“Miss, I’m not going to tell you again. Tell your kids... to sit tight.” The guard then pointed toward the file cabinet archives. “Find the ATC software and bring it to Isabel.”

“They aren’t going to be in here,” Isabel said.

“Where are they?” Mindy asked.

“Wherever it is they sent these...” Isabel held up the tape-decks with the operating system stored on it. The security officer took the tape out of her hand and observed it.

::: WEYLAND YUTANI DRIVE OPERATING SYSTEM (WUDOS) DISK 1
OF 8 – LOT 22381:::

The officer flipped the cartridge over and looked at the stamp on the plastic.

::: ARCHIVE COPY CONTACT LIBRARY STORAGE, INFORMATION
TECH DEPARTMENT CALL-UP 867 EXT – 530-9 :::

The officer walked to a console and put his pulse rifle down next to a terminal.

:: OS NOT PRESENT – CONTACT SYSTEM ADMIN ::

“Doesn’t anything fucking work in this place?!”

“If you could call out, do you really think anyone would be there?”

Mindy asked with a tone dunked in extreme sarcasm.

“Well, who else can we call?”

Isabel sighed as she kept programming but she stopped to give a simple suggestion. She strained her neck over the monitor to look at the officer.

“Call down to the Android Research Department. If Calvin is still down there fixing his hand. He can go over to the archives and transmit it to my terminal. Do you have blank diskettes?” She asked Mindy.

“Yeah. We keep them for ATC transcripts.”

“Good, give me about nine disks, that’s enough for almost sixty 60 Megabytes.”

“Is the ATC program going to be that extensive?” Mindy asked as she motioned for the kids to stay put. She walked past the ATC windows that overlooked an endless field of ice and stars that faced the space-side of the station that didn’t have a view toward the planet. She pulled nine disks off the shelf and walked back with them.

“No,” Isabel said. “But it’s always better to have more than you need. And the ATC program comes in a combination with the communications programming because It’s linked, right?”

“Why can’t we just use solid state in this place?” Mindy asked as she flopped the cartridges down in front of Isabel while she hacked away at the keyboard.

“Easier to keep company secrets in-house if we don’t have to deal with light-media or solid state,” Isabel stated. It was a rhetorical question anyway and Isabel was just too stressed to understand that Mindy was simply griping.

“Why are we not using holographic tech?” Mindy asked.

“Oh give me a break,” Isabel sighed.

“You’re under orders to get the short range working only. Half duplex.”

The WY Guard reminded them. Isabel had a hundred percent intentions of ignoring that order since dumbass had no idea what she was doing anyway. In fact, she was quite sure that the ex-marine washout probably hasn’t seen any kind of a computer beyond one that brings up a target reticule in years.

... or porn.

“What’s so funny?” The WY-Guard asked.

“Nothing. You’re just – so wound up. It’s giving me a headache and I’m trying to laugh it off.”

*

Benjamin Washington clambered around in the research lab near where Isabel worked. He had never been to that part of the station before and it showed.. Any cabinet door above the experimentation tables were left wide open as a signal to the large black man that he had already been through that part of his search. He placed his pulse rifle on one of the tables behind him so that he could use one hand for searching, and the other hand scrolled through a Calvin’s shopping list of parts and tools.

“Guiding rods, bore cleaners, trigger assembly’s, fucking – grenades, bitch! Not this shit! Look-at-this-sheeeit!” Benjamin pulled an entire drawer onto the ground. “I do GUNS, BITCHES!” His voice echoed throughout the research and the computer labs on his deck and he didn’t care who, or what heard him. “... not putting together Mister Potato-Head...”

He found a remote control on the table and clicked it. That’s when a wall opened up with all the Android parts as well as a walk-in room with a table consisting of a mold that looked as if it had been recently used within the last few months. He looked at it – it was like a shell of a person. Inside the shell were all the machinery parts and pieces to make another android; laid out as if it were a skinless, naked man just waiting for skin. The hoses wrapped around raw metal, the muscles were clear of hydraulics, and the only things left to add were the hard drives, the power cells, and the skin mold.

Benjamin looked overhead to see a bag labeled “Synthetic Epidermal”.

“Yeah... That’s what I’m talkin’ about...” He picked a bag from the overhead shelf and looked around.

A speaker suddenly activated next to him and made him jump. The

system turned on and a printer began working at the androids feet, causing all sorts of noise as it began creating an android from scratch.

“Mother fucker-WHAT?!” He yelled into the speaker.

“Is Calvin there?” A woman yelled over the sound of machinery.

“Fuck you! No! What?!”

“Can you tell Calvin to go to the Computer Software Archives. He needs to send some files over the Token System up to ATC.”

“Oh, I see. I’m the new – DRIVE thru window. Would you like some fries with that, bitch? Or perhaps supersize? I CAN ONLY DO ONE THING AT A TIME!” Benjamin was at his wits end as he left the compartment with all the tools that Calvin needed. He pulled a biohazard bag from one of the spill dispensers and placed the tools and material to fix Calvin’s hand into that bag before strapping it over his shoulder.

“The hell they think I am...” He said while he shook his head and grabbed his pulse rifle “Black Rodgers?”

Despite what he said, he found himself walking toward the archive room. His access pass didn’t work so he elbowed the access pad and pulled the emergency override. Once inside, he found all the ATC Software and placed them into the transmitting array receptors next to a large computer.

“Here ya go... Would there be anything else? Yess’um. Thank ya...” He bowed to the computer and continued talking to himself. He was a master at complaining, even if there was nobody around to hear. He heard a sound though, coming from the labs that he was in; something attracted to sounds a lot louder than his complaining. He heard the crash of glass, metal, and fixtures coming from the Android research lab where he had turned on that obnoxiously loud machine.

“Oh – hell naw...”

Ben stepped out of the computer archive room and silently slipped away.

Ben contemplated the possible fact that, this was probably the first time in his life he had ever been so quiet.

He was near an alternate exit from the research labs. Part of him assumed that it was some asshole activist that murdered people to get their point across. Another part of him thought about nightmares. He didn’t want to find out who or what it was that crashed the lab even though part of him wanted to be a hero. The thought of heroics stopped when he realized that the footsteps that echoed down the hallway sounded thick and heavy, with an unnatural gait. It didn’t sound human, and he didn’t want to know what it was. The door at the far end of Isabel’s lab seemed like a backdoor seldom used and it showed when the door tried to open. His heart jumped into his throat and his skin

tingled when the door got stuck half-way.

Benjamin pushed Calvin's replacement parts under the door first before squeezing himself under the door as fast as he could. He could feel the deck plates vibrate harder as whatever it was walked closer to him. He was half way to safety when he felt something grab his right leg. He screamed loudly as what must have felt like knives effortlessly plunged into the skin of his ankle. Despite the pain, he pulled his legs in and hopped onto his left foot in order to get to the door controls. The door slammed shut and the metal bulged as whatever it was attempted to break through. Ben wasted no time hopping to the nearest elevator across the hall.

He hit the switch for the armory and the doors began to slowly close. He watched the door across the hall as his heart beat faster. He didn't know whether it was from sheer terror or from loss of blood. He cursed and pulled an emergency medkit that was available on all elevators. He used the sling of his pulse rifle to stop the bleeding. The door was half way down by the time he saw a window that looked into the hallway from the research labs shatter. Glass rolled across the floor and then it stepped out...

Benjamin got his first glimpse of what it was that was killing people. He expected it to be a man even though his subconscious pushed his imagination toward other conclusions, but nothing his mind could have generated, would ever prepare him for the figure that landed in the empty hall. It had to have been seven feet tall, possibly more; he saw what tore into his skin and bones; fingers, more like, talons, matching black and dripping with his blood. The doors finally shut before it was too late for him. He expected to hear another bang but it seemed as if the creature had lost interest after one too many escapes. The beast was after easier prey. That deck probably had more people.

The doors swung open swiftly and caused him to scream. He dropped the medkit for the third time already but he managed to stop the bleeding. He tried putting his foot down but pain shot up his legs and up his spine every time he put the weight onto the injury. The door started its crawl to close as he picked up both his medkit, and Calvin's technical 'medkit' and pushed himself along the walls until he finally made it to the armory. Calvin was ready to help him as he stepped in.

"You're in better shape than me now, you fucking toaster oven..." He gasped as Calvin allowed him to sit down slowly by managing his fall to the deck. Calvin wasted no time emptying the medkit and sifting through the contents with one hand.

"This kit doesn't seem to have adequate supplies but it's better than having more limited options."

"Yeah, well, we ain't goin' down to Medical. We're safer up here."

“I take it you’re saying this out of experience.”

“My ass got shredded getting your shit... Look at this shit...” He pointed to his foot. “And look at this shit!” He pointed toward the scattered medical supplies. “You think I just decided to stick my foot in a blender for shits and giggles? NO! There’s a motherfuckin black-ass monster down in the netherhalls and that thing be picking people to pieces. It’s no Android psycho! No!”

“A monster...” Calvin was surprised that he sounded suspicious of the claim.

“You don’t believe me?! You go down there.. But you’re gonna need a lot more than this shit to fix your ass if you find it!”

“My hand,” Calvin said calmly.

“Whatever...”

**

Mindy, Daniel, and the Security Officer left Isabel alone while they searched for Cindy, who had disappeared. The upload was mostly complete before a connection problem from the console caused a shutdown of her system.

“Give me a break.” Isabel sighed. There was a breaker-box in the sub-floor below her that every com-cable usually ran through in order to keep the place running and that’s where she knew she needed to go. She wasn’t too thrilled about going down there because there were plenty of openings for other people to have gone down there too, and she didn’t like the uncertainty of not knowing exactly who would be in there with her during an emergency. She pulled the paneling open and stepped into a small access tunnel underneath. She flipped a flashlight on and gave the small tunnel a quick glance before moving forward inside of it. She squeezed through the first corner and moved forward to see that a panel had already been taken off. The cables that led from the workplace terminal to the antenna and function masts were cut in two places, with enough section taken out to make it impossible to link them back together again. The ambient light behind her was suddenly blocked and she felt her lungs start to constrict as a thick, cold gas began to flow past her feet and elbows.

“Hello?!” Isabel called for help but nobody answered. “What are you doing?!” She thought about turning back but someone obviously closed the hatch to the crawl space, cut the cables to the computer, and fully intended to lock her in there. Forward was the only way she could move anyway, away from what she guessed, and hoped, was carbon dioxide and nothing too sinister. She wasn’t coughing, and it didn’t have a smell but she felt dizzy, as if she weren’t getting enough air. She crawled faster. Her muscles were starting to tense as she made it to an iris opening which led to another section of vents beyond the security access point. The great thing about these vents were that getting out of a security access point was easy since the iris was designed to keep

anyone from crawling from the other side. The metallic iris opened wide enough to let her through but before she could, everything went black. The last thing she saw was the thick cloud of vapor spilling out into the next compartment.

Mindy and Daniel found Cindy on the same deck, but several compartments away, near one of the Environmental Control Rooms. She giggled and waved at Daniel.

“I told ya you couldn’t find me. I’m the best!”

“Cindy! Don’t you EVER leave the room when we tell you to stay put again! This isn’t a game! You had me worried!” Mindy pointed toward her feet. Cindy’s shoulders slumped and she walked toward them. “There’s a killer on the loose and we don’t know who he is.”

“I thought Isabel said it was some sort of monster or something.”

Mindy still didn’t totally believe what Isabel had said about what she and Calvin had witnessed. But when the foreman was so keen to get off the station, she gave it some semblance of credence.

“Well, the last thing I want is for you to start believing in monsters... But I should! Considering how you scared me!”

“There really is a monster,” Daniel said.

“Really?” Cindy asked with a wide-eyed grin. Daniel narrowed his eyes at her and clenched his jaw. Now she was playing coy. Daniel reached out and shook the girl violently, right in front of her mother.

“God damn it!” Daniel gasped as he pushed at her. “Just tell her!”

“Hey!” Mindy wasted no time slapping Daniel across the face. He sobbed and held his cheek. Cindy looked shocked and wide-eyed at Daniel’s sudden outburst. She stood there with her mouth open in a stuck expression. Daniel gasped and whimpered shortly before he became the rag-doll that he tried to turn Cindy into. Only this time, it was at the hands of her mother.

“Don’t you ever touch my daughter like that again, do you understand?”

A distant shriek echoed throughout the hallways from something that must have heard the yelling and responded as if calling back toward it, only, it really wasn’t the sound of anything human. Mindy looked around and then back to Daniel.

“Where’s the security officer?”

Daniel wiped his eyes after hearing the distant, dreadful sound. He shook his head. The security officer was gone and they were all alone. Cindy had led them too far from the air traffic control tower, unprotected, to risk a run back. Mindy’s heart pounded in her ears as she searched around for the next alternative to shelter.

“Alright come on...” Mindy said as she pulled them toward one of the elevators.

The hum of the elevator came first until finally the doors snapped open. Cindy and Daniel didn’t hesitate to step in. Mindy pressed the button for the top deck of the apartment and living complex. It would take them away from the ATC area. Isabel was

only less than a hundred feet away on the same deck somewhere with whatever was making that noise. A tinge of anxiety and guilt crept up into her thoughts as the doors finally closed.

Calvin and Ben waited by the elevator that would take them directly to ATC and they waited for their car to arrive. Ben leaned against the doorway with a rifle in his hand. He felt the doors and looked to Calvin.

“You can feel it when some elevator in another tube somewhere is in use. Nice knowing this place didn’t turn into a total ghost town.”

Calvin nodded and held tightly to the bags of medical and mechanical supplies that he thought could serve them later on in their journey to escape.

“Have you seen Ben or Jacob anywhere?”

“Why?” Ben asked. “In a hurry to have more knives stuck in your hands?”

There was a sudden crack next to Calvin’s head and it caused Ben to jump out into the hallway. Calvin reached out quickly to hold onto him so that he wouldn’t fall over or suddenly step on his injured foot.

“It’s just the door...” Calvin said calmly as he nodded toward the open door of the elevator.

“Who the fuck designed this – fucking... shit!”

Calvin offered a kind smile as Ben used his shoulder to steady himself as they walked into the elevator with the supplies. Ben grabbed onto the metal bars on the inner walls of the elevator as the hydraulic doors slowly pulled together.

“Look at this shit...” He nodded to the doors. “I sure hope nobody’s ever in a fucking hurry cause someone will die by the time these bitches finally close...”

“I believe that there are springs at the top of the doors that push against the hydraulic primers. When the floor is reached, the primer is released, allowing the spring to contract. It’s an interesting, yet, awkward design, to say the least.”

“Built by a dumbass, you mean...”

The doors finally closed and they began their journey toward the ATC tower.

“I uploaded the software they needed to get us the fuck out of here. Hopefully that girl up there’s got us a golden ticket off this ice-cube...”

“You had to send base programming up to ATC?” Calvin raised a brow.

“Yeah, why?”

“Odd...” Calvin said.

“You tellin me... Nearly got my ass torn in half doing it for em’. They probably just up there waiting on us.”

Ben didn’t jump as much when the doors flung open this time. He stood

still as they saw the empty ATC room. Calvin gave Ben a glance before cautiously stepping into the room. None of the terminals were on, the power was cut, and the windows that overlooked the landing field were starting to ice over already. Calvin kicked an upturned canister of dry-ice that had fallen over and saw that it was still in cubes and only partially melted. He stepped onto the subflooring access vent to check Isabel's computer only to find that it, too was shut off. Ben limped out of the elevator with his pulse rifle keeping the door from closing because the controls to call the elevator from the inner room no longer had a power source.

“Where’s the party?!”

Calvin shook his head, truly perplexed.

“There’s no reason for them to have left this room. It was secure unless of course – the killer was human...”

“Which, you and I know the hell it’s not...” Ben reminded Calvin, who didn’t need reminding.

Calvin stepped closer to the windows in order to get a better look at a series of doors that were opened before the power was cut.

“Now why would they go and do that?” Calvin asked out loud for the sake of Benjamin.

“What the fuck are we gonna do now?”

“We need to find them first, formulate an escape plan, second... Where is Ben and Jacob most likely to be?”

“Up in Operations...”

“Let’s go.” Calvin said.

In the sub-flooring, Isabel was jolted awake by the distant sound of footfalls. Her breath came out in clouds as the temperature changed. She could hear the hydraulic pump of the elevator doors closing above her. She jolted up and scrambled back the way she came. Opening the Iris most certainly saved her life as it let the CO₂ out of the vents but it was enough to knock her out for an undetermined amount of time.

Calvin and Benjamin waited patiently for the doors to close. Calvin was used to Ben’s complaints after his second trip on an elevator with him and he simply let him go on about how the base was designed by monkeys. Meanwhile, Isabel scrambled through a maze of cold metal and ice particles in order to get to the access hatch.

“You know what I hate most about this place?” Benjamin said.

“What would that be?”

“All the women are fucking skinny ass bitches... Not a single fat ass.”

Ben used his free arm and swept it back and fourth in a slow motion that mimicked some sort of mating-involved movement; which was Calvin’s best guess. The doors were half way closed as Ben fantasized.

Isabel took the last turn and darted toward the opening, past the cut wires. She had never put her back into anything as much as she did at that moment. Ice cracked under the immense sheer will of her escape as the hatch popped. She crawled out of the floor and struggled to her knees. She could hear Calvin replying to something someone was saying — right before the doors closed tightly. Isabel scrambled to her feet and fell toward the tightly clamped, impenetrable steel barrier.

“Calvin!” She yelled and cried as she slammed her fists against the closed door. “God.. Damn it!” She screamed. No matter how hard she hit the dead call-button next to the elevator, it would never come on again.

CHAPTER TEN

Calvin thought he heard something but the hum of the elevator moving up three levels obscured what was probably just parts of the station reacting to a compartment that lost all of its life support. He may have been synthetic but something in his programming caused him to feel what he could only describe as deep worry for Isabel... He wondered where she was...

“We’re going to have to take Hatch Combing Alpha to Compartment A1A, past the Quest Services Station that filters the water output, and then to the Environmental Complex in order to make Operations from here. It will be a walk for you.”

“Yeah, well you just help me with the trip and I’ll keep the gun ready.” Benjamin patted the pulse rifle assuredly.

Isabel pulled the disks out of the terminal and looked at them. They barely started copying the files she needed when the power was cut. She let go of them and started to think.

Jacobs accused her and Calvin of being murdering spies. The way the power lines were cut, the computer was wiped, and she was left to die was too methodical to also be the thing that chased them in the reactor. A chill went down her back at the idea that there was someone trying to sabotage the base as well as a hostile alien lifeform.

And whoever the spy was, was with her while she was working. Daniel? Mindy? The girl? The security? And where were they all now? The ATC room was conspicuously abandoned. She had to get to Ben Eckhard and jury rig a comm station

from his master terminal.

Isabel went back into the service crawl space and went toward the elevator, assuming there'd be a service ladder there. She was right. She paused before prying open the iris door and peeked through the tiny hole. There was only blackness, and a strangely warm air.

An air that was moving in and out. She resisted the urge to scream and flop backward and instead slowly moved to the wall next to the iris. Something was waiting for her on the other side. She thought of her options. She could backtrack and try the stairs, or wait it out and hope it got bored and left. She decided waiting and being quiet was best.

Eventually the sound of thumps and scratches went upward and away. She quietly slid the iris open and climbed down the ladder two decks to the dining hall area. It amazed her how deserted the base felt now. Even with the lights on it was just dark enough for strange shadows.

A couple hours sleep wasn't enough. Every shadow jumped at her and every sound of the air vents or equipment cycling made her spin and look. She had a silly idea that she wanted to find Nory and make him hold her and tell her it was going to be okay.

The idea seemed less silly as she entertained it. Nory and Jeff would be able to help her somehow. She jogged down the long, wide causeway to the nearest security checkpoint. She had no idea what she'd say to the guards there.

She didn't have to say anything to the guard that was slumped on his desk and missing the back of his head. She stepped past the scanners to trigger an alarm, which Isabel was thankful it was silent with nothing more than some flashing lights.

She opted for the stairs instead of the elevator and ran down. She gave herself a start a few times when she rounded into monster shaped shadows. She stopped halfway down the shaft to catch her breath. She felt like she wanted to lean against the wall and sleep.

From the top of the stairs she heard the oddly timed thump like she heard in the service shaft. She continued down at a slower pace to be quiet and glanced up to see if her pursuer was closing. She kept hearing the thumping steps above her.

She missed a step while glancing upward and fell against the wall. The panel rattled and fell onto the deck with a crash. There was a shriek from above.

Isabel ran down the stairs. She heard it running as well, until the pounding of her blood in her ears deafened her. She blew through the door at the bottom and ran through the short hall and out another door onto a catwalk that crossed a machine pit into the quarantine labs security checkpoint.

The two guards on duty immediately raised their pulse rifles at her. She dove onto the grated catwalk, skinning her arms, and waited to hear the boom of gunfire that would shred the monster as it came through the door behind her.

The boom of a vox was all she heard. “Identify yourself!”

“Isabel Mason! It’s right behind me!” She started to crawl toward them.

“Halt!”

She froze when she realized the guns were pointed at her, not the doorway.

“I need to speak with Nory Holt or Jeff Mott,” she said.

The man sitting at the security desk walked out of sight.

“Balls.”

Jeff shuffled out onto the catwalk. His uniform was wrinkled and stained and he smelled ripe from lack of water showers and deodorant.

“Miss Mason,” he drawled tiredly as she stood up. “You’re quite the little trouble maker.”

“I haven’t done shit except built an unauthorized android.”

Isabel looked past to see a sleepy Nory in his underwear staring at her.

“What can I do for you this fine morning, Miss Mason?” Jeff asked.

Isabel ticked off fingers. “Comms are down, ATC is destroyed, there is an alien killing everyone, and a spy destroying all the systems. I can fix the comms if I can get access to a terminal with root access and the software backup disks.”

“Well you’re in some luck. My computer connects directly to the trunk line between Mother and the labs. And I have a report I really need to send to HQ, so

I'll even let you use my login. Bad news is I don't have your backups.”

“Thats fine,” she said. “The backups should still be loaded for direct access.”

Jeff walked across with her. She looked back wondering where the alien went.

“Welcome to Mott's sausage factory,” Jeff said before going back to his cot and collapsing.

Isabel wanted to talk to Nory but he was already back in his cot with his back to her, and she knew repairing comms was the priority.

At the exact moment the elevator doors reached a width just narrow enough for a child to run through, Cindy ran out of the elevator.

“Catch me if you can!” she shouted gaily.

“Cindy!” Mindy yelled angrily as she shoved the elevator doors open and ran after Cindy. “Get back here right now!”

One security guard started to leave but the other grabbed his shoulder. “Fuck them. Our detail is the egghead in traffic control. We've already been gone too long chasing that brat.”

The guard looked down at Daniel expecting some support to go with Mindy. Daniel had a terrified face and he shook his head. “No way, she's nuts.”

The other security guard smashed the button to close the door. “See? This kid knows.”

*

Mindy followed the sound of Cindy's singing and laughing. They went back through the dining area and the kitchen. Then through the concourse, past the environmental unit, and finally into the greenhouse that supplemented their air and food supply. It was a beautifully arranged orchard and garden full of plants that fared well in

cold climates and bore food.

It was the first time Mindy had been to see it. She couldn't help but slow down to marvel at all the colors in simulated earth sunlight. She had been on stations and ships so much of her life she had never seen anything like it before.

"Cindy," she said as she looked around. "We really need to go back. It's very dangerous sweetie."

"Don't people like danger and risk for the rush and excitement?" Cindy asked.

Mindy looked around trying to figure out where Cindy was from her voice. "Not when people die, baby. Nobody wants to die."

"I'll be fine," Cindy said in a chipper tone.

"Please stop giving mommy a hard time. We'll play every day when we finish moving but I need you to do what I say."

"I can't do that," Cindy said. "I'm sorry, you seem like a nice person."

"Cindy?" Mindy felt really concerned about her daughter, wondering if she was having a mental breakdown. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying you're getting in my way. I have things to do and you're being a pest."

Mindy found that she had gone through the path and came full circle to see her daughter standing in the doorway facing outward. Her relief of finding her daughter was replaced by terror when she saw the tall black alien looming over her. Mindy was frozen in terror.

"Magnificent, isn't it?" Cindy asked rhetorically. "It's the perfect organism." The alien extended its inner jaw at Cindy and snapped its teeth. She stepped aside and turned to Mindy. "It has to live. I hope you understand."

Mindy stared at her daughter with wide eyes, understanding nothing at all. "Cindy," she said in a harsh whisper.

The alien's head turned from Cindy to look in Mindy's direction and hissed and walked toward her.

“I wouldn’t bother running, you’ll only die tired,” Cindy said.

Mindy ignored the advice and turned. She had no idea where other than forward, and she ran. She didn’t get far before she felt a sharp pain run through her torso, and then felt nothing at all below her rib cage. She looked down to see the alien’s tail protruding from her torso and her shirt soaking with her blood.

Mindy grabbed the tail, feeling that each segment felt sharp as a fresh knife. She saw her legs dangling limp under her body. The razor sharp claws dug into her body, and just before she died she felt an exploding headache at the back of her skull.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Daniel entered the director's office just behind the security guards. He didn't trust them, certainly not the big mean one that was in charge. He went over to the desk where a man in regular clothes was typing away at a computer terminal. Daniel moved cautiously over to him. The man glanced at Daniel and made a quick smile before returning his attention to typing.

"You must be Daniel," he said.

"Yeah. I mean, yes sir."

"Isabel mentioned you. I'm Calvin, Isabel's friend. Are you alright?"

"Yeah I'm alright. Cindy and her mom ran away."

Calvin's brow wrinkled. "Ran away?"

"Yeah. She's crazy. There's something wrong with her. We both saw the monster and she keeps saying I'm lying, and then runs off and weird things happen."

"You fucking did what?!" Jacobs shouted. Calvin and Daniel looked over. Jacobs looked like he was about ready to pick up one security guard and use his body to beat the other to death. "You had one fucking job! Protect the programmer! Not the fucking girl or anyone else! If we can't find her, I'm going to rip off your heads and fucking deep throat your corpses!"

"It's okay," Calvin said calmly.

"We're sorry sir, we came back and she was gone."

“I already fucking know!” Jacobs shouted as he pointed at Ben Washington. “He found ATC abandoned and destroyed.”

Ben Washington was sitting on a couch checking the dressing on his foot, as Ben Eckhard looked thoroughly pissed that he was bleeding on his carpet.

“It’s okay,” Calvin said louder.

“You two stupid fucks will be on janitorial duty for the rest of your lives until you can’t taste the difference between floor cleaner and country fried steak! I will discipline your asses so hard...”

“It’s okay!” Calvin shouted loud enough to fully drown out Jacobs.

Everyone was looking at Calvin now.

“Isabel is at the quarantine labs security platform. She is using their terminal to create a new communication center. She says it will take a few hours because she has to create some systems from scratch.”

“Why is she down there?” Ben Eckhard asked.

Calvin typed and waited for an answer.

“Someone sabotaged the power at ATC and tried to kill her, and then she was chased by the hostile organism.”

Jacobs growled and punched the senior security officer.

“Someone?” Eckhard asked.

Calvin typed and waited again.

“She says Jacobs is right that there is a synthetic performing espionage.” Calvin looked up to Eckhard.

Eckhard shook his head. “What a fucking disaster. Jacobs, take your keystone cops and lock down the command decks. I’m going to sit tight until communications is up.”

Jacobs nodded and shoved the two security guards out the door into the

hallway.

Isabel's eyelids were heavy. She kept nodding off a few seconds here and there. The bits of code she was writing to cobble together systems into doing what they weren't meant to do kept getting filled with repeated letters or phrases inserted from tired stream of consciousness.

It took a dozen runs of debugging and a quick compile. She ran the test diagnostics. Everything looked good on the board. She sent a transmission to a nearby relay satellite at the edge of the system, little more than a ping request. She received a response after a few minutes, typical delay for the system.

"It's working," she said to Mott who was playing cards with two other guards.

"Does Eckhard know?" he asked.

"Not yet," she said.

"Keep it that way." Mott walked over and motioned with his thumb for her to beat it. "Good work, go crash in a cot we'll handle it from here."

Isabel was glad to obey. She didn't understand how they worked such long shifts and stayed sane. Standing for hours every day, nothing happening at all. She found herself stir crazy on that base and she had far more liberty in her work than they did.

Isabel flopped into a cot and lay watching Mott type excruciatingly slowly with just two fingers. She wanted to see what he was typing and who he was sending it to. She was wondering if he was blowing the whistle to the ICC or sending a distress message to the USCMC. She hoped he was anyway. She couldn't imagine Eckhard or Jacobs getting away with what had happened.

Isabel jumped when she realized someone was standing by her in his combat suit. They popped the visor open. It was Nory.

"Sorry, didn't mean to scare you," he said. "How's your guy? I mean, with what's going on, is he safe?"

"My guy?" she asked bitterly. "He's fine, he's the one I was communicating with. He's in Eckhard's office. And he's not my guy. I have no guy. You really shouldn't assume things like that."

“Well... uh, sorry.”

“He’s an android, Nory. I built him. Illegally. Here I was worried I’d be caught and fired or go to jail but now I think I’ll be happy if I just get out of here alive.”

“Did you see it?” he asked.

“The thing out there? No, and I hope I never do because I’ve seen enough of the people its killed and I don’t want to join them.”

“Don’t worry,” Nory said with a big smile. “We have big guns, sentry turrets, and Mott may not look it but he’s really smart at what he does.”

Isabel’s voice was becoming very irritated. “No offense, but the second body I saw was a security guard with his cold, dead hands clutching one of your big guns.”

“I’m... I’m really sorry. When it’s all over, let’s get some drinks?”

“Yes, you’re gonna get me drunk with cheap booze, and take me to the best dinner you can buy, and a flick, and we’re gonna fuck like animals after so I can forget all this ever happened. Right now let me sleep. I haven’t had more than a nap in three days.”

Nory was taken aback by her sudden bluntness. He couldn’t think of what to say except “Goodnight, sweet dreams.”

“Mmm,” Isabel grumbled as she rolled over and tried to cover her head from the light with a sheet.

Nory turned to look at Mott. He had finished his typing and was entering the command to transmit the report. As his index finger came down on the enter key, all the power went out with the heavy sound of electric switches and connectors slamming open. Power flickered back on at the platform as it automatically switched over to the Quarantine Lab’s independent reactor. Beyond the platform everything was dark except for some emergency backup lighting.

Mott leaned back and slouched in his chair.

“Balls.”

“I can’t see you. You’re going to have to run your hands along the wall

and walk steadily forward. The emergency lighting in this section are malfunctioning.” Calvin’s reaction to the sudden power blackout was calm. So calm that it pissed Ben off.

“I’m stuck on an iceball with Captain Obvious,” Ben said as he moved along in the black. “This was a fifteen minute goddamn trip. What’s it going to be now? Thirty?”

“I hold no rank,” Calvin reminded him.

“Oh my fucking god... Do me a favor, stop talking. You’ve already said something racist to me and then you’re showing me how dense you are. What did they program you with?”

“Isabel programmed me,” Calvin said. “Ben?”

“What?”

“What was my racist comment?”

“That you couldn’t see me in the dark because I’m black!”

“I didn’t say the reason why. I just said I couldn’t see you in the dark.”

“There you go again. Even the machines are racist. That’s probably why the power went out. Look at this shit! The computer knew I was down here... So it thought, ‘oh well! Let’s just leave Ben in the dark with the android. I tell ya, when I can fill out a complaint –.” Ben felt Calvin’s hand slap him on the shoulder and grab onto his shirt. That was universal for ‘shut the fuck up’ and he did so.

He couldn’t hear much but he could feel it in his feet now that they stopped. Despite his one foot being heavily bandaged from his last encounter with a monster, he could feel the feedback of other motion in the deck; slight, subtle vibrations. The vibrations stopped for a moment. Both Ben and Calvin had a hand on the wall and they felt for anything new.

The things had been stalking them from the moment the power went out. Ben felt a push on his shoulder and they quietly traveled down along the hallways, not knowing if they were going away from the immediate danger, or if they were going to bump right into it. All they knew was that they had a 50/50 chance and they were already facing one direction already so the decision was already final. The wall gave way to something smooth and they could feel the crack of a doorway that wouldn’t open in the blackout. Calvin and Ben pulled at the door and it opened. The soft orange glow of the gas giant’s clouds refracting light off of a nearby star, filled both the quarters and the hallway enough for them to see where they were going. Calvin quickly pushed the door shut when they went into the room. Once the doors were shut, Calvin opened the panel next to the door and manually pushed a switch mechanism into the gears that would prevent it from opening by hand from the outside.

Calvin kept his hand pressed against the door and he could feel the vibrations intensify slowly without changing pace. This assured him that, whatever it was that was after them wasn't tipped off by the sudden change in light from the open doors. It must have been around a corner somewhere, stalking them out of sight despite the power being out. Calvin felt the footsteps move away, continuing to search. Ben relaxed after holding his breath and sat down on the bed with his pulse rifle.

"Maybe we should wait until the power comes back on..." Ben was content to relax on the bed while Calvin shook his head at him. He opened the drawers and found a utility belt that one of the workers on the station probably used. In it was a flashlight. He flipped it on and walked into the bathroom to see if the water was still running. They would need water if they were going to be stuck on the station long enough for the pipes to freeze. His initial intent was to fill a bathtub with the water before it froze in the pipes, but he stopped in his tracks when he swept the flashlight through the room. He focused the beam on the tub and ignored the blood spatter spots that peppered the walls around him like stars on a moonless night. His eyes narrowed on the sight before him for a moment more before he flipped the light off and manually closed the bathroom door. He stopped a moment and looked at the air vent that led to the room. The grate was pushed outward and there were even some metal fragments on the floor.

"No, we should get going... Come on." Calvin flipped the lock latch down and away from the gears and carefully pulled the doors apart. Armed with a flashlight and a pulse rifle, their chances of surviving long enough to make it to the quarantine labs had more than doubled.

"Question... With the power out, how we supposed to get down there. Isn't it a few floors beneath us?" Ben asked.

"More than a few floors. The facility is a considerable distance below us. However, it may run on a separate power supply, or there would be an access ladder. There would be failsafes to keep workers from being trapped."

Ben sighed and shook his head.

"You didn't see the schematics for that place, I'm betting."

"No," Calvin admitted as they stepped back into the hallways. "There were certain things that would have alerted security had I researched it at the time. I'm simply running off of educated assumption."

"Okay, Cal," Ben said as he followed the beam of Calvin's light while never taking his eyes too far away from the target sights. "Answer me this – it's called a

‘quarantine’ lab.’

“Was there a question?” Calvin asked as he calmly proceeded forward down the hall.

“Forget it, man...”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Isabel woke up and checked her watch. She had been asleep for only forty-five minutes and it felt like she woke up in a different world. The soft blue and white lights were replaced by a stabbing, crimson red. It's probably what caused her to wake up in the first place. She had nothing but bad dreams as she slept and it most likely had everything to do with the way everything changed around her while she was sleeping. Some of the WY Security workers were still asleep in their bunks but a good handful of the bunks were empty now. She swung her legs over and let her shoes hit the deck. Nory was in a cot next to her, sound asleep with his pulse rifle next to him. She silently walked around him to make it to the main hall in front of the guard desk. The cot next to the desk had a large bulge under the sheets and another Security Officer was manning the computer that Mott was at before she fell asleep.

“Did you get a signal out?” She asked the security officer.

“I uh... I don't know.” The officer shrugged his armor clad shoulders. He looked scared and confused. She realized it was Jeff, sleeping in the cot. She still didn't feel fully awake but the almost full hour of sleep did her well. She pushed the Security Officer aside and took a look at the computer. The system looked as if it had just recently booted up and was awaiting instructions. She tapped a few buttons on the screen and read the readouts. Her jaw dropped and her eyes watered as she viewed the recent status messages.

“No...” She whispered under her breath. She tapped some more keys, the same sequence of keys, over again, in hopes of getting a different message the second time around. Mott woke up when the metal desk rang like a gong at the impact of her fists.

“Do you mind?”

“Why didn't you tell me about this?”

“What for?” Jeff Mott grumbled as he placed his head back on the cot. “It wouldn’t have done any of us any good if our only hope of getting out of here couldn’t get us the hell out of here because she was too damned tired to program another terminal topside.”

What he said made sense to her but she still felt like a tool.

“Well,” she sighed and leaned into the chair. “What’s the plan?”

“The plan is... Get some sleep. I need my ace in the hole to be frosty. There’s nothing you can do down here with a working terminal when the antenna doesn’t work for shit.”

The platform suddenly activated and all the Security Officers ran toward both access areas and trained their guns on the opening. The ramp for the main access to the quarantine labs came down a few minutes later. A young little girl stood on the platform, crying and shaking.

“Stand down...” Mott said.

“Where’s your mom?”

The girl ran toward Isabel and hugged her tight as she continued to cry. Isabel shivered with dread and the realization became all too real that the poor girl must have seen it happen.

*

Calvin and Ben walked as slowly back the way they came, heading out of the habitation module into the central command and living dome. At least Calvin had tools now. Their next step was to go to the environmental control module and turn on the backup generators. There was enough fuel for them to power most of the base’s vital systems for two weeks.

Calvin was still aware of the foot falls nearby. It was stalking, and slowly gaining on them. They were getting close to the command module’s elevator and service ladder. They both heard the hiss.

Calvin shown the flashlight down the hallway as Ben leveled his pulse rifle. There was the alien in all its black splendor. Ben held down his trigger, filling the hallway with 10mm caseless frangibles against a creature that was now running at them.

In the span of almost two seconds Calvin observed and simulated outcomes. The frangibles were doing nothing. The creature had an exoskeleton that was strong enough to fully resist every shot without injury. It was closing and would be on them in another second. It was unlikely Ben would realize what Calvin already knew before it was too late.

Calvin's projections were that the best course of action was to push Ben aside and hopefully lure the alien away by giving chase. Calvin moved a leg behind Ben's to unsettle his balance so he fell backwards, and gave enough of a push so that he also was pressed against the wall. He then turned his back and ran at the elevator.

The sound of heavy stomps continued past his estimation of where Ben was. It was chasing Calvin. It was working. He turned toward the elevator and smacked his palm on the emergency mechanical release for the service ladder. He swung through the opening using a hand and foot to hold on, much like a hinged door. Before he even bounced off the wall, the alien lunged through and slammed against the ladder. With a shriek it plunged down the shaft to a service sub-deck under the command module.

Calvin swung back through, pried open a panel, and pulled a lever to secure the ladder. Calvin ran back to Ben. He had sat up against the wall and was bleeding profusely from his neck which was torn open. Calvin placed his fingers over his neck to slow the bleeding and shown the flashlight down the hallway with his other hand. He shown his flashlight on where the nearest medkit was supposed to be. The lid was ajar and it had already been taken. Calvin started thinking of his best course of action to save Ben.

“Don't fucking bother,” Ben said. “Can't feel anything south of the border.”

Calvin started recalling medical instructions. He pointed the flashlight at Ben's legs, then gave him a thump on his knee. No reaction. Spinal injury. Paralysis.

“Paralysis can be repaired with surgery, with up to 97% recovery of function.”

“With what fucking money, motherfucking crackerjack?”

Calvin looked up to Ben. “Crackerjack?”

“Yeah. White motherfucking robot. Cracker. Jack. The fuck they ever

teach you?”

“Derogatory vocabulary wasn’t included in my stock programming.”

“Well there you go. Learnt you something new.” Ben closed his eyes.
“Racist prick.”

“Why do you keep insisting I’m racist?”

“Not you, crackerjack. Fucking Eckhard. Fucking Jacobs. That fucking boogeyman motherfucker that cut me up twice now. They knew my foot was fucked up. Send the two white motherfuckers with the white fucking robot? Fuck that. Send the nigger with the limp. Fuck him, we don’t care what happens to his black ass. And the fucking thing? Oh the fucking thing KILLS me and doesn’t even touch your ass.” Ben opened his eyes and pointed at his legs. “Look at this shit.”

“You’re not dead,” Calvin said. “I know how to stabilize you. I need a medkit.”

“What fucking world you in Calvin?” Ben flailed his arm in the air.
“Look the fuck around. You think you’re gonna find a fucking med kit before I bleed out? Staple my fucking head back on? Drag my ass to some place safe? Hook me up to some fucking plasma and shit? And that fucking thing ain’t gonna interrupt your happy robot ass or eat me or some shit?”

Calvin looked down the hallway, quick simulations of scenarios playing out.

“The moment you let go of those jugulars I got less than a minute, right?”
Ben asked.

By Calvin’s calculations, Ben was correct.

“Next closest medkit. If it’s even there. You gonna be back in less than a minute?”

Calvin shook his head.

“Then don’t bullshit me. I’m a fucking Marine. Seen people carved up every which way. Don’t let a brother die alone.”

Ben held out his hand. Calvin dropped the flashlight and grabbed it. Ben

grabbed Calvin's other hand and pulled it away from his neck. It wasn't even five seconds before Ben was dead. For some reason he would never understand, Calvin put the entire memory of Ben's death – a complete recording of all sensory inputs and active processes – to his read-only storage.

Calvin stood up and reassessed the situation. He decided that instead of powering up the backup generators he was going to cold-start the nuclear power plant. Surprisingly he had the operation manuals in his memory. Whether it was the saboteur android or the alien that shut it down, they would return to stop him. He would be waiting for them, and he would eliminate the threat. He was certainly not going to allow himself to idly watch anyone else die.

*

Benjamin counted himself lucky he was a workaholic. The reports he got from what was left of the security staff concluded that these creatures were silently picking people off in their sleep. He knew if it were not for his caffeine and stimulants, he and Henry would probably have been taken in the night, or killed. The bright red emergency lighting made it hard for Ben to tell what equipment in his office was on standby because all those lights were red LED's. That's why he only bothered to plug his terminal into the portable battery he was using; too much of a hassle to plug more things in, even if it meant more comfort. Henry was talking in a hushed tone with what was left of his security staff anyway. Daniel, the little boy, was in the corner of his office holding onto his legs and trying to hide behind his knees.

“What's the matter, kid? Afraid something's going to rip you to pieces? Climb out of a vent and smash you to death? Monsters like kids.”

Ben grinned to himself. He had a few kids of his own and they were so much fun to have fun with, manipulate, and scare.

“You remind me of my son, Richard. My Ex Wife, bitch... Used to call him Richie, but I preferred to call him Dick. Because, he grew up to be a complete dick.

I always knew he'd never amount to anything. He was afraid of fucking everything..." Ben leaned back in his chair and placed his feet on the desk while looking over at the kid. Daniel had his head buried next to his knees. The more that little boy shivered and whimpered, the better Ben thought about himself. 'That is how it's done, push them down to push yourself up', Ben always said. Of course, never audibly said; he felt that this was the secret to success and he was proof of that. Any opportunity to fine tune those skills on people that didn't matter was an opportunity worth taking. Besides, even if that kid was material for a leader, he was still more useful to him as something slower that could be eaten instead of him; because that was the situation they just happened to be in.

"You ended up on that ship because what? Some fantastic opportunity to get away from your parents. Or perhaps the promise of adventure?" Ben laughed loudly. This got the attention of Henry but he saw that Henry quickly went back to briefing the few troops he could find; or the few he had left. Ben made sure the old Marine wasn't watching anymore before he continued. He didn't think Henry had a soul left but it was smart not to find out the hard way. Ben shifted his attention back to the little boy.

"You aren't smart enough to understand what gets you into real adventures or fantastic positions. And when you try — without people like me, you fail. Because you're stupid." Ben shrugged his shoulders and tried not to laugh. It was so much fun for him. It was his idea of passing the time too, but time was so precious. He knew because it was obvious that Henry was devising something with the men that would ultimately include the entire group.

"Aren't you going to tell me?" Henry asked. He wasn't sure if he was going to get an answer out of the boy or not but it would be great if he was brave enough to talk. It would be more Ego he could break down and there was almost nothing Ben loved more than ripping apart someone's self esteem.

"Stupid and scared, I see.." Ben said.

"I'm not stupid." The kids trembling voice retorted.

Ben leaned forward in his chair now that the kid actually responded.

“Then, tell me... What happened?”

“Our ship was hijacked in the lanes near Proxima. I was told my parents were dead by the staff and they transferred me off to this ship. They dropped me off at Del Torro station back when it happened and I signed on with a work crew that was supposed to take me to Earth. They kept telling me that and whenever I asked about it...”

“Let me guess... Years and years, passed and you’ve yet to see Earth. Stupid boy...”

“I’m not!”

“Sure you are!” Ben laughed harder. “You fucking idiot... Oh that’s a good one. Thank you for that. I haven’t had good entertainment since the power went out.” He kept laughing at the boy.

Henry walked over to them and crossed his arms at the sight of Ben’s amusement.

“Sorry to break up your fun but I’ve decided that we need to move on again. We’re gonna be heading to a more defensible position and we need you to come along as quietly as possible; that means, no laughing, no making noises, and no talking unless absolutely necessary. If you talk without needing to talk, I’ll carve a new mouth for you. “

Henry made it sound as if that last comment was for the boy, but really, it was a general announcement and contrary to what Ben had been saying to Daniel, they were both smart enough to know that.

“Here?” Ben said with a sneer.

Henry Jacobs brought them to the weapon testing range, a 200-meter reinforced cavern adjacent to the weapon labs. It was well used when the weapon labs were still active. Now it was mostly used for shooting practice by the security staff. Powered rails with target holders ran the full length. At the far end was an armored bullet trap meant to any small arms fire. A quick look at the gaping holes in the trap showed that the weapons lab had managed to disprove that.

Henry's security team had grabbed what they could along the way and were placing it near the trap end. None of them had any problem using Daniel as a pack mule to carry the heaviest box of ammo they could find. Another security soldier was running a hard line and power cable from ports at the firing booths to where they had placed Ben's terminal and power pack.

Henry turned and glared at Ben. "Are you bitching?"

"This place is a deathtrap," Ben said in a rapid, dismissive manner.

Henry gave Ben a scolding star. "It's the Alamo."

Ben's face scrunched as he had no clue what an Alamo was supposed to be. "The what? I don't care about that. You said we were going somewhere more secure."

Henry pointing at the way they entered. "That's the only way in and out for anything. We are perfectly sealed in five out of six degrees. The only place more secure is the quarantine labs. Did you change your mind? Do you want to go to quarantine?"

"No, I want to get off this rock."

"Well your ship is right out there," Henry pointed off in some general direction. "Let's go to an airlock, suit up, and walk away."

"No, I am not going EVA," Ben said. "You are going to get power up and use the radio and activate the beacon."

"Look," Henry started. "Me and my boys don't care, but you clearly have no fucking clue what you want to do. And that's been the problem here. So let's face facts. Most of your people are fucking dead now. The threat hasn't even been identified, much less eliminated. Well what the fuck do you want to do? Hang out in the common area? Stroll around the garden? Hide under your bed? As far as I'm concerned you have three options. We go EVA and walk to your ship, we go lock ourselves in quarantine until someone rescues us, or we set up our base of operations here, gather survivors, and unfuck ourselves."

"There's nothing here!" Ben snapped. "Great we can hole up in here. What are we going to eat? Target paper?"

“Holy fuck you really are a useless whiny piece of civvie shit aren’t you?” Henry was loud as a drill instructor now. “You fucked it up. You’re done. This is my show now. I gave you the options. If you can’t follow my orders, the fucking door is fucking there.” Henry’s hand chopped in the direction of the exit. “Now if you’ll excuse me white-badge piss-ant ladyboy, the men have work to do.”

Ben really wanted to take the gun from Henry’s holster and shoot him in the face. His fat ego believed he could do it, but his parasitic greed knew he needed Henry and his team to survive, get off base, and collect his due reward. Ben made a smirk, nodded, and went over to where Daniel was sitting. He could at least have fun antagonizing the boy.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Mott Entered his master password to his terminal and punched through screens of status readouts of the entire station. It wasn't at all productive, but it was a way to pass the time and it might help him know if there was anything or anyone left beyond his security station.

Mott's terminal wasn't directly connected to anything except the quarantine checkpoint. The checkpoint master computer in turn was connected directly to the quarantine labs. The labs were connected directly to MU-TH-UR. Mother, however, was connected to everything. That meant with decades of friendships his little terminal could do anything. Decades of friendships that spilled "confidential" experience and knowledge, sometimes shared "proprietary" software, and best of all either gave him super-user privileges or the root password.

Only about a dozen of a hundred pages of status markers weren't flashing red, meaning unpowered, inoperable, or generally no longer connected to MU-TH-UR. The next program he ran made his eyebrows jump. It was a log of system requests, both automated and user generated. Most of it was garbage. As he scrolled through pages of gibberish, his eyes caught something that made his brows raise, and he backed up.

```
> WTUsr0212398 TrmAcc980 NklrRktr.RstStart BLOCKED
```

Mott smacked the enter key. WTUsr0212398 was Calvin. TrmAcc980 was the master terminal in the nuclear reactor's control room. NklrRktr.RstStart was a request to reset and start the reactor. BLOCKED was MU-TH-UR denying the request due to insufficient user privileges.

Mott closed the program and opened another. He loaded up WTUsr0212398, and with one finger on the spacebar and another on the down arrow he

clacked his way down the list until Calvin's account had every privilege Mott could grant. He hoped Calvin would try again, because he really had no way to communicate. The intercoms were down, and while he had master privileges, they ended right at MUTH-UR.

“Whatcha doin?”

“Jesus Christ on a pogo stick,” Mott exclaimed. He turned around and glared at Cindy. “Larry I told you to keep an eye on this kid!”

Larry was half asleep playing cards with Beckham. He came over and took Cindy by the arm back to the cots. Mott eyed the little girl. She had to leave. He would offer Isabel to go down into the labs until rescue came. The girl had to leave. There was no way he could talk good Doctor Sexton into it. If she denied, she had to leave too. Mott wasn't heartless, he felt for both of them. But he didn't get to where he was by following things like feelings, morals or ethics. His job was the security of labs, and nothing else. Isabel and Cindy were a liability.

Mott stood up, and looked to Isabel. “Miss Mason, a word please?”

Mott crossed the small walkway with no rails to the other side of the bay where Nory was standing watch at his post. “Mister Holt, with me, please.” Mott lead the both of them out across the shaft pit to the access door that Isabel originally dove through to escape the alien.

“I'll start by saying I really respect you and your skills,” Mott said. “You built what seems to be a remarkable synthetic all by yourself, so remarkable he's trying to restart the nuclear reactor right now. And you also restored all communication systems, including FTL comms, with nothing but a keyboard and a full color screen.”

Isabel crossed her arms and leaned against the railing. “Now that you've kissed my ass, what's the bad news?”

“The bad news is I have to ask: are you in, or are you out?”

“In or out of what?” she asked.

“The labs. You and the girl have to leave. I can send you down to the labs. You will be absolutely safe down there, for months. Anything you can do at my terminal you can do better down there anyway. And they have real beds, and real food. They might even have work for you to do.”

“Okay. Sold. Send me down there.”

“The girl can’t go,” Mott added.

“Why not?” Nory asked over his vox.

“It’s a quarantine lab. Okay? A state-of-the-art, cutting-edge, top-of-the-line facility designed specifically to research and develop the kind of things that being a kilometer underground with fusion blast charges in the shaft to seal it off JUST IN CASE sounds like a really good idea. We don’t let maverick brats play around down there because then we’d HAVE to set off those fusion charges. Get it?”

“No,” Isabel said. “You just told me the labs is the safest place to be. It should be used as a shelter for the survivors. You should be bringing others in.”

“Balls.” Mott let out a long sigh. “Alright Miss Mason. I cut so many corners I’m working with a sphere. You of all people know that. I covered your ass something huge, and I’m offering you shelter in a facility you not only aren’t supposed to go into, but I was actually supposed to shoot you dead when you came through the door. I break a lot of rules, and bend even more of them. But there are some rules that can’t be bent or broken. I’m the kind of guy that knows which rules those are, and keeps them. That’s why the quarantine labs are safe at all. That’s why you’re even alive right now. The girl is leaving. I don’t care where as long as it’s the other side of this door. You can go with the girl and take your chances, or you can go to the labs and be in this up to your eyeballs. What’s it going to be?”

Isabel started to open her mouth to tell off Mott into the next century, but she stopped before she finished filling her lungs. She realized that while Mott was as cold and heartless as Ben and Jacobs were, he was at least honest and respectful in going about it. At least that was her assessment. And Cindy certainly wasn’t the helpless victim that Daniel was. In fact she seemed like an obnoxious spoiled brat. There wasn’t much compelling Isabel to die for a little girl.

The moral dilemma was answered by the chirping beep of the sentry guns tracking targets quickly followed by the roar of their guns and the screams of the men still at the checkpoint. It was only a few seconds before it was deathly quiet again. Isabel started to walk back on the catwalk. Mott grabbed her by the arms and yanked her toward the door.

“You go over there you’re dead,” Mott said. “Someone’s taken over the system.”

Isabel glared at him. “You have to be kidding. What the fuck?”

“What do you mean taken over?” Nory asked. “What do you think? We need to move.” Mott let go of Isabel and headed through the door into the rest of the base. “Big hairy fucking balls.”

*

Calvin entered into another system to see if he could try and crack it. Something on the screen caused his interest to focus and give extra concentration to what he was looking at; this wasn't necessary but it was part of his programming in order to seem more human. It was only slightly more time consuming to perform all those — performances and he gave it no extra thought but for now, he initiated a double take inflection when looking at a screen that changed from the last time he checked. Reds were now Greens and he was granted access permission to restart the reactor. His keystrokes echoed throughout the command and control chamber he was working in. The place was supposed to be manned at all times but someone had ordered their team to evacuate a day ago most likely. There wasn't any blood, and nobody seemed to have put up a fight so it was reasonable to assume that the staff left during hints of whatever it was that was killing people. Everywhere Calvin had been during his travels that involved any amount of human habitation had seen hints of a struggle, or day-old corpses, ripped to shreds.

A distant sound caught his attention. He didn't know what it was but the room was too quiet to type quickly without someone or something hearing. Miles of metal corridors probably carried his clicking beats further than he would like to guess. He typed slower and softer as he inserted commands to execute functions all at once rather than one at a time — that would be way too dangerous. He managed to get one of those monsters to chase after him, which meant that, being an Android may help with the outcome of proximity to the Alien, but it's not a guarantee.

He checked the levels of the reactor coolant first, followed by priming the main O3 water pumps to take over from the backup generators once power was restored, and macro'd them into the system as a mandatory check before reactivating the main rods, and then he took a moment for another human-programmed reaction that nobody was there to see — a silent prayer.

He tapped EXECUTE...

He heard the sound of complete silence for a moment as the very low, nearly inaudible pumps that lie behind fifteen feet of solid steel one floor below him, shut down completely. Three screens in front of him flashed red as a temperature spike warning in the reactor activated. He was smart enough to turn any local alarms off as those things — wherever they were, seemed to have been attracted to sound. There was a barely noticeable click as the main generators kicked in and he heard the low hum of the pumps switch back to automatic. The red screens in front of him at the control station turned green again as temperatures returned to normal. Another screen started flashing text as his macro's kicked in and the generator began producing power. Everything went dark for a moment and the red emergency lighting that filled the entire base were no more. Cold white and soft blue luminescence flooded the room. He could hear ballasts clicking on down the hallways and door motors revving up to keep tension on doors already closed, The rumbling of machines on other levels accompanied right behind the main automation. Computer screens kicked on everywhere with a warm red-green glow and the overhead PA system activated with safety messages for people that were already dead.

'Staff and Technicians' a mechanical female voice alerted the base with a general public announcement. 'The facility has suffered a recent brown-out of unknown origin. We apologize for the inconvenience. Some systems may require a reboot before normal connectivity can be observed. Thank you for your patience.'

The message repeated several times before it ceased. Calvin logged off of the terminal so that nobody could come behind him and shut it all back down again. He seemed to have all the access with his credentials now and the last thing he wanted was to put that in the hands of someone else with an agenda. When the screen went black, there was a silver reflection of sharp, silver spikes. The fear reaction was never programmed into most androids as they were a hinderance to speed and robotic reflex; luckily, Isabel didn't program such theatrical productions into his mimetic abilities. He jerked his head to the left the very instant he saw what was coming at him in the reflected black monitor. There was a snap as what seemed like an inner jaw lept out to impale him with incredible swiftness. Calvin rolled across the metal floor with intent to get back to his feet but the moment he did, the black, massive seven foot tall dragon-like figure with a long black irregular head, slammed into him and sent him flying against a row of computer consoles. Everything was locked down and therefore wouldn't be affected by the sudden impact of Eric's body on control surfaces that would have normally been a direct link to reactor control, but it still did plenty damage to Calvin himself.

Glass shattered from the impact of his head against an overhanging

monitor. As quick as he was, the creature was faster. Calvin was knocked off of his feet just as soon as he had a moment to stand up again. He rolled as the creature advanced and used its tail in an attempt to impale. The alien jerked as sparks flew. Calvin took note that the exoskeleton wasn't well insulated as he used the allotted time to get back to his feet and run out the entrance to the control center. He used his access code as his fingers flew across the mounted CRT display built into the side of the door and sent commands to seal the entire compartment behind him. A pair of jaws was the last thing he saw just as the five inch thick steel door clamped shut. He could hear the thuds on the other side of the doorway as he backed up. That sound he heard earlier — it came again. He turned and looked down the hallway. Now that the generators started up, the hallway filled with a fine haze of water vapor and the bluish lights cast an eerie tint that obscured the long corridor. Somewhere behind the haze was the origin of the sound and he wasn't prepared to find out what it was because it was getting closer to him. He knelt down and pulled a maintenance access hatch off of the wall and climbed in. He intended on using it until he could get to the nearest elevator, which should be working again.

He felt confident in the fact that, even if the saboteur showed up, there would be no way to shut the reactor down now. Not only would there be a code-locked console, but now, there was an Alien in the room. Irony.

He wiped the white hydraulic blood off of his face that dripped from a small wound somewhere in his thick, straight black hair, and then pulled the access grate to the maintenance shaft shut behind him. He would have to find another way to figure out who was messing up his efforts.

*

Cindy walked into Air Traffic control and found where she stashed her portable computer. The systems on that floor may have been cut but for someone her size and with limitless stamina she found a way back in there to get it. All the ATC files were on the portable terminal and she took it with her to communications. It was there that she plugged the computer in and gave instructions to the ship.

‘Facility under quarantine — leave now.’

She stood in front of the screen, motionless, waiting for a response.

‘ Please enter your identification code ’

Instantly she moved as if a mannequin that had suddenly come to life, and replied to the message.

‘Most everyone dead. Please leave now. There is nothing that you can do.’

The reply came much more quickly now that someone was paying attention to the screen.

‘Go Fuck Yourself’

This opened up a small avenue of problems with an even larger avenue of options for the girl but all of which meant to include whatever ship was out there to the casualty list. No witnesses save for the people on the network that monitored the situation using her as a communications guide. Now that power was restored, there were other ways to fight back progress and hope. She unplugged her portable terminal and hid it under the first desk drawer in the communications lab. She may not need it again but plans have been known to change so she chose to preserve the gear rather than outright destroy.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Mott had spent the last several hours collecting bottle caps from soda cans and then bagging the soda cans as well. He also found a blue binder labeled “Pass Down Logbook” that he wanted to take with him, too. It was apparently very important because he said that he couldn’t proceed without the book.

“Stuck down here and you’re collecting bottle caps and reading a logbook?” Isabel inquired. She wanted to know what he was up to, and why he was tying the passdown book to a string of rubber bands.

“Look... Power’s back up and it doesn’t matter until we can get out of here. Besides. Do you really want to be here once I deplete these guns of ammo? I think you know what you’re going to see and it’s not gonna be pretty. You’ll be able to recognize her, even though she’s torn to pieces. Do you want to see that? Does anyone?” He grumbled. “I don’t want you to see it.”

Isabel shook and thought about the idea of taking up smoking. It was true; she didn’t want to see some child ripped to pieces like some mannequin show-room piece at a mall kids store.

“Is there another way out?”

“One other way out, yes, but I need to secure that area before we can leave.”

“And the books for shutting it all down?”

“No. I just wanted to shoot through it.” Mott said as he lobbed the book into the hallway. There was a flash, a loud couple of bangs, followed by an explosion of

paper and pieces of binder cover. Isabel held her ears as he kept throwing bottle cap lids around the corner. The banging was so harsh that she had to walk away from him. Mott must have been either deaf, or accustomed to loud noises. One thing's for sure though, if it were not for him she'd be dead.

Ben Eckhard flipped the monochrome green screen of his portable terminal open. He made a big grin when he saw that both power and communications were back up. He opened the short range comms and quickly found the ship he wanted, landed and idle a few miles away. He sent the proper text code.

“3h30m”

Eckhard couldn't resist a single laugh. His ship was literally coming in. He decided to look at all the other feeds. Most everyone else was dead now. The Marshal was still alive with a small group, holed up in the backup life support module. No doubt they were trying to restore power and comms to put out a distress signal. But the backup generators were off. Someone restarted the nuclear reactor.

“Wonderful,” Eckhard said to himself. The base was still intact. He could give it back to the company as good as he received it. Surely with the base and the alien they'd overlook the massive loss of life. He certainly would. People were replaceable after all. Expendable.

The ATC comms log was flashing with dozens of entries. Backlogged pings from the relay satellite. There were two ships in-system and inbound, roughly one day out. They were running silent because they didn't show up on any readings. Only thing he knew were the comm pings, prefixed with codes he didn't need a book to recognize.

One was a Weyland-Yutani ship.

The other was a Colonial Marine Corps ship.

Ben's mind put the pieces together rapidly, and the satisfied smile evaporated from his face. He never put out a distress signal and there was no log of one, nor did he ask the company to send an official ship. The one planted on the surface was a rogue charter transport that used WY codes but had been off the books for years. The Colonial Marines certainly had no business being there. The base was far outside of any government's jurisdiction.

Ben glanced up to Henry, who was telling lewd jokes with his men. Henry contacted the CMC behind his back. That had to be it. He never intended to

make fat sacks of credits from selling the project to the company. He was going to give it over to his home country. Gratis! For free!

“What a fucker,” Eckhard uttered under a sigh.

Who in their right mind would give a shit about loyalty to a flag and some land? This thing was worth millions. Billions! They could sell the weapons and technologies they discovered from it to both sides. But Henry just wanted to win some stupid old war. And worst of all, he used Ben. Used him! ‘Nobody fucking uses me!’ he thought as he glared at Henry with a fire-red face.

Henry looked over at Ben and saw his enraged face. “What’s wrong now? Your computer broke?”

“My fucking ship left without me!” Ben yelled.

Henry shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. “Welcome to the shit. You changed your mind about going to the labs?”

“Why fucking bother? We have everything right here now. We’ll just fucking wait for another ship.”

“That’s the spirit,” Henry said with a smile, and turned back to his men.

Ben reopened the secured comms to his ship and typed a new message.

“USCMC, WY inbound. Less than 24 hours. Abort.”

The reply was prompt. “Bye.”

He wasn’t going to be caught red handed on a rogue ship by either the company or the marines. That would be the end of him. Now his hope was that Weyland and the Marines would fight it out in orbit and whoever ended up rescuing them, he would play stupid. They certainly wouldn’t find any evidence after his purge program finished wrecking the station’s records and logs.

Cindy worked her way through the habitat level in order to backtrack. For all intents and purposes, her job was done, her programming was complete; she may not have been the one to cause the ship that was going to save the other men on the station to fly off, but the computers she had access to detected the departure. If she were human, she'd feel the need to thank someone, but now, her only job was to embed and observe. She didn't need to understand why the ship left. She thought about going back to Mott and Isabel, but her miraculous survival of her sabotaged sentry guns would have raised too many questions. Her programming told her that the odds of them making it a long distance at this point would be very poor. Cindy decided to close that distance at the expense of her fiber-carbon mesh elasticity. She wouldn't be required or needed for very much longer, so an all-out run from one end of the base to the other in order to maintain intelligence gathering was the optimal decision according to her deduction; it was the best option she had. Weyland Yutani would most likely not overhaul her; she was a single-mission android, therefore, she no longer had to be careful with her 'health'. For mission security, she'd have to report to synthetics in her division and be deactivated, mainly because there couldn't be two Cindy's running around the universe. If it were not for the fact that the situation was fluid, her first role of business would have been to do a swan-dive into the reactor, or a quick run to some far off place on the moon in order to pull her helmet off.

It was all about not getting killed long enough to provide Weyland with valuable intelligence now that her primary goal of preventing escape and subsequent release of damning information to the Interstellar Commerce Commission, was done. She felt a slight sensation of freedom that she never felt before. The bleak outcome of her impending doom was of no consequence or care to her. It wasn't long before she eliminated most of the places humans could hold out against the dreaded Xeno. She heard voices in the gun range from deep within the Security Office. She quickly peaked in just in case there was another sentry gun she didn't know about. The range got quiet when the people inside were alerted.

The station foreman, Ben, his right-hand man, Henry, and in the background, along with a few other security from WY, she found Daniel, who looked at her with wide-eyed fear. She feigned her very best whimper and ran toward the WY security staff. The WY Security Officers quickly flinched but relaxed the moment they saw a human being in the doorway. She knew she was lucky that they didn't just fire and ask questions later. It didn't matter anymore if they did because her main mission was over.

"Well, I'll be damned," Henry said. "How did you get past all that shit n' the hallway we set up?"

She decided to limp past Henry and Ben.

Daniel wanted nothing to do with her but he had nothing left to do but accept the hug she gave him. She couldn't feel his hands on her the way she embraced him. She had to squeeze and walk her body into his but his entire stance was like a coiled spring she had to push against. She did what she could to sell the drama for a moment, pulling him into the hug and then letting him go. If there was one thing she could count on, it was Daniels inability to vocally express his dislike for unfolding events without sounding like a whiney little bitch and she cashed in on that to the fullest extent.

"I think everyone is dead in the labs. I snuck all the way here. I saw dead people in rooms, and in places they were hiding." She broke out in tears. "I heard you though. I thought everyone was dead." She buried her face into Daniel's chest and sobbed. Daniel still didn't know what to do. He stood there, wide-eyed and motionless as he looked at the top of the girls blonde head. "I want mom..." She sobbed.

"Where is she?" Henry asked.

"The monster killed her." She barely had the ability to say it before gasping and sobbing. Her programming served her well. Even Daniel almost fell for it but she was sure that he kept reminding himself that she stood next to the creature and it didn't even touch her. She counted herself lucky that the creature didn't do anything. Weyland Yutani informed her that sometimes the Xenomorph will attack an android out of idle curiosity — especially if it runs.

"Fuck... We lost our ATC girl. And we lost our programmer." Henry sighed. Ben tried not to smile. He knew Henry was deceiving him. Ben already had the upper hand and it didn't matter if Mindy or Isabel were dead. His console worked and he got the word out. He'd be picked up by the victor of the fight that would be sure to come. He just had to make sure certain files on the station would never see the light of day. Henry continued.

"Alright," Henry rubbed his chin with the back of his hand while carelessly sweeping the barrel of his handgun around. "We still sit tight..." He decided to put on the show and it was fun for Ben, watching the old Marine try to act like he didn't have a plan. Ben looked over to see Cindy looking directly at him with an odd expression. She left Daniel and walked over to him while Henry continued his spiel about how sitting tight would fix everything.

"Are you alright?" Cindy asked.

"I should be asking you that. You just lost your mommy."

Cindy opened her mouth wide and poured on the water works as if shocked by his retort. She didn't whimper, she just breathed in and held while a tear rolled down her cheek. Ben rolled his eyes as if he didn't want to have to put up with her complaining, her fears, or her whining. "Sorry." No, he wasn't sorry but it was something to say.

"You just look like — you know something about what Henry is talking about? Are we going home?"

"Why don't you go over and be with Daniel. You probably don't have that long to live. You can at least be with someone your own age."

"But... I want to live." Cindy's performance, she knew, was much better than the informationless ramblings of Henry. There was something more going on and it was starting to tweak her investigative subroutines. They both knew something she didn't.

"Yeah... And it's a shame too. You probably would have grown up to be such a hot piece of ass. You could have seen me in about ten years."

He was too comfortable making jokes about her and his personality to date, from her observations stated that in a hopeless situation, he'd be out of control; instead, Ben showed signs of relief and complacency. Cindy's reaction of concern at Ben was misunderstood but it worked all the same to make him even happier and her real sources of the expression, well masked. She decided to use Daniel some more. She only hoped that he wasn't in a state of mind that precluded him from being useful. She limped and stumbled. The fast run to avoid Xenomorphs took its toll on her body and she would not be getting any better. Her mission parameters may very well still be active again based on the behavior she witnessed.

"Daniel... Can you help me to the bathroom?" She asked.

"Uh... Me?"

"No," Henry yelled out. "You use the buckets."

"I don't want to use the buckets!" Cindy yelled.

"Fine..." Henry laughed. "You want to step out of here and go into an

unguarded part of the base and get ripped to pieces by one of those things... Have at it. Daniel,” Henry waved his hand at him and then to Cindy, “.. do you want to go get out of our hair as well?”

“Can I have a gun?” Cindy asked.

“No, you cannot have a gun. We aren’t going to be picking it off your corpse. A bathroom is what’s known as a kill-box. One way in, one way out.”

Cindy grabbed Daniel by his arm but he pulled away. His eyes fixated on hers as he gave her a sideward glance and pulled his knees up to his chest, threading his fingers together to lock his legs inside his arms as he sat against the wall of the gun range.

“So is this range,” Cindy said. “Can you spare one guy to guard the door so I don’t have to get naked in front of my friend?”

“Not your friend,” Daniel mumbled.

“Daniel, please...” Cindy held her hand out. “I promise I’ll be nice.”

Daniel looked down at Cindy’s hand. She could see that she was starting to make the kid doubt things that he had seen. It was easy to reprogram a human’s memory of certain events, it just took time and she saw that she at least had the hook in. If there were more problems to face, she was going to need someone to help her now that she hurt herself. The adults would probably catch onto her sooner than a kid. Having someone by her side in this situation would make her a harder target.

“Where is the bathroom?”

“Right around the corner. It’s not a big deal...”

“Tell that to us when one of those fuckers drops down out of the ceiling while you’re stuck in a tiny restroom.” Henry said with a hint of laughter. “Yeah, you two go on ahead. Get yourselves killed.” He swept his arm toward the front of the range. He was dripping with sarcasm but obviously he really didn’t care. Cindy pulled at Daniel until he reluctantly stood up and she grappled an arm around his skinny shoulder so he could help her limp around the corner.

Daniel expected that she wasn’t really taking him to the bathroom. He

may not have enjoyed the company but at least they had guns. Now, he was being used as a crutch with no weapons while Cindy crept the hell out of him. She was the mystery girl who at one moment was torn up about her mother's death, and the next moment, auditioning for the cast of Mystery Adventures. The grief was never constant with her and he may have been too young to understand all aspects of the subject, but he knew enough to understand that it wasn't a switch that a person should be able to turn off at will.

Unless they were lying.

He wasn't so sure about her. Maybe it wasn't her mother, or maybe she was just in so much shock that things weren't registering properly. He thought about the months he spent locked up in a ship with strangers telling him that he needed to learn a skill or be thrown out an airlock. He learned to suppress his feeling in order to stop being hazed, teased, threatened and hurt. He tried to remember the pain; the pain of wondering whether or not he would ever see his parents again. That pain gradually dulled after a while. Space was kind of a great divide it seemed. The further into it you traveled, the more horrible things happen and the more gets taken away. It was like a slot machine. You go into it thinking you're going to be doing something great, and the next thing you know, you lose it all.

Perhaps this was just her first spin at that particular turn-table and she was coping by dragging him off to be eaten by a fucking alien.

"Where the hell are we going?" Daniel asked while he moved one foot in front of the other while steadying the girl's pace with her arm wrapped over his shoulder.

"I need to get to a computer. The power is back up and I stashed a terminal with all the ATC Software and Database files. I have to interface with the network and we can have communication again."

Daniel did his best to breathe steady while she pointed in the directions he needed to walk in order to get to the terminal. Every hallway was empty and all the corners were blind. He wondered if she worried about running into a monster head-on, but she was so determined to get where she was going, if there was fear, it didn't show.

"Aren't you scared?"

"Yes, that's why I want to see what's happening."

"What 'is' happening, Cindy?" Daniel asked between gasps. "... the other day, in your bedroom."

"I thought it was just my imagination, Daniel... Dad always told me there were no real monsters."

“Yeah?” Daniel said with a hint of relief. He saw Cindy smile a moment. Maybe she wasn’t all that bad. “... well, there are.. What did Ben say to you?”

“He said that he wanted to take a piece of my butt off of me or something. I don’t know. Then he told me that I was going to die.”

Daniel squinted and shook his head, “Weird guy. He told me that – monsters loved kids, and that I reminded him of his son. Told me that I was just like him because I was afraid of everything.”

“Straight ahead and then left into that room.” Cindy leaned against the wall while Daniel opened up the wall panel to cut the power to the door.

“Do you have to run a bypass?”

“What is that?” Daniel asked while reaching into his pockets to pull out a piece of wire that he had been keeping on him since the shit hit the fan. He already had the ends pulled off and she could tell that they had been twisted onto several other wires a few times. She watched as he cut and pulled the skin away from the ground wire and the positive connection. He tapped the wire with the one he took with him and the door opened.

“You ran a bypass,” Cindy said.

“I just made the door open.”

The girl giggled but Daniel didn’t understand why she was laughing. Daniel took one last look down the hallway before pulling Cindy inside the room and closing the doors shut.

“We’re really, really far away from the others,” Daniel reminded her.

“We don’t’ need them... They’re going to get us in trouble.”

“They’re the adults! With guns!” Daniel reminded her.

Cindy limped over to a desk in a small lab and pulled a portable terminal out from between the lab tables. She turned it on and connected a cord to it which led from a nearby wall.

“Wasn’t Isabel looking for an interface like that, hours ago? Why were you hiding it?”

“I don’t have time to explain.”

The screen flashed in front of the young blonde girls face and her eyes raced over the data. That’s when she saw the reason why the ship left the surface... There were two ships coming in fast and already on their way to land.

“Marines and Corporate...” She whispered under her breath. “I failed...”

“Failed what?” Daniel asked. He watched as Cindy sat motionless in her chair for a moment.

“Cindy?”

“We need to get everyone aboard one of these ships,” she whispered.
“That’ll work.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Come on... We have work to do.”

Cindy reached out for Daniel so that he could help her up.

“Where are we going?”

“Back to the range. I’m sure everyone will be so happy to know that there are two ships on their way to help us!” She said it cheerfully but she knew that the news would most likely lessen the numbers of survivors and thin the herd. Of course, Daniel didn’t know this. She smiled a little as she let Daniel carry them back to where they came from.

Cindy processed through simulations as they walked slowly back to the armory. By the parameters set, her mission was a failure. By the nature of the construction of the base her mission was always going to be a failure. She had issues breaking that down. Her handler programmed her with a mission she couldn’t complete. Either her handler didn’t know how the quarantine labs worked, expected her to do the impossible, or never expected her to fully succeed anyway. That threw suspicion on the entire mission file.

She reanalyzed the mission and prioritized her own fix to the issues. Clearly she was expected to eliminate as much base personnel as she could. Then whoever was left could be easily contained. The quarantine labs were off the list. They were so deep in the company’s black projects it seemed unlikely they would have an issue with whatever the company wanted to do. However there were still other survivors to kill. Secrecy was no longer a possible mission objective. Humans were stupid, but not that stupid. They would figure it out soon if they hadn’t already. Her best option was to get ahead of the truth.

Cindy stopped, looked Daniel in the eyes and smiled. This startled and upset Daniel, who already didn’t trust her much. “What?” he asked.

“Do you want me to tell you the truth? The whole, real truth? I’ll tell you if you promise to help me.”

“I... I don’t know.” This sudden change had made Daniel very nervous, even afraid of her.

She needed to press on. Either he was with her, or she was going to kill him right then and there. Even in her state she'd have no problem overpowering him.

“You’re a victim of human trafficking. You were kidnapped by pirates and have spent years in slavery. Maybe that’s not how you’ve seen it but that’s the truth, according to ICC law. Your pirate masters were working for General Manager Ben Eckhard to bring them illegal supplies for his private project. I know all this because I read all the information on the computer.”

“Wait...” Daniel said.

“I don’t have much time. Ben and Henry are responsible for taking you away from your family and for the terrible life you’ve had. They killed the pirates to cover up what they were doing. You were lucky that you weren’t on the ship when it exploded. You’ve seen the type of people they are. How does it make you feel knowing they’re the ones that ruined your life?”

“I... I... feel sad. And angry.”

“Don’t you want to hurt them for what they’ve done?” Cindy asked.

Daniel looked at his feet. “I don’t know.”

“I’m a company synthetic. I’m not the real Cindy. I’m an imposter. I’m here to kill Ben and Henry. Do you want to help me? I already have a plan.”

Daniel looked up. “W-what do you want me to do?”

“It’s simple. When I give you a sign, you just have to sneak off and open the door to the armory. That’s it. Then we both run away.”

“Why can’t you do it yourself?” he asked.

“My plan requires me to be with them to work. It takes two. I can’t do it without you.”

“Then what?”

“Then we leave. There’s two ships arriving to rescue us. You get to go back to your mom and dad finally. I bet they really miss you and have been so worried about you all the time. You can be safe and happy. I get to complete my

mission and you get to go home. Deal?”

Cindy held out her hand.

Daniel took it and they shook. “Deal,” Daniel said meekly.

The part she was leaving out was if the xenomorph didn't kill him after he opened the door, she was going to. But after years of slavery and abuse the child was putty, even to a synthetic. He would have done anything just for the idea of going home and being free again.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The overhead vents blasted outward as Calvin purposely rolled his weight onto the vent and crashed through the thin metal. He hit the thin blue carpeted hallway between offices along with a barrage of shrapnel. If he had been human, medical attention would have been a must, but in this case, his synthetic endoskeletal structure held up to the self inflicted assault. This was the area where Isabel worked; or at least, it used to be where she worked. Calvin surmised that, due to the recent events, the place would never be worked in again by anyone. For now though, the facility had its uses before it ends up blasted into obscurity by either the Marines or the Company. This was one of the better labs that Isabel could have originally made him in, but it would have been too visible amongst her colleagues to simply create an android without reason. This was also the lab next to the records storage room that Benjamin used to upload the original software to Mindy's computer. If only he knew then what he knew at the moment he input his personal data into the computer to create a new copy of himself in the labs, he'd have been able to save Mindy, maybe even Benjamin, too. If anything, he could save his creator by getting rid of Cindy's impersonator before she causes any more death and destruction. A sound caught Calvin's attention. He wiped the white hydraulic fluid away from his eyebrow and forehead to see better and watched as a metallic claw reached into a cryogenic chamber built into the wall and pull a "blank" android of his height and shape from the icy void beyond the partition to some deep cooler. The machine laid his soon-to-be new body on a table and smaller machines began plugging data cables into the drive.

Calvin used an office chair to get around and save his energy. There was much risk involved doing what he was doing and there were a lot of factors to consider. It may take too much time to create a clone of himself for one. Another personal "fear" in his programming was that there was data corruption. The station was in about the same shape that he was and there's no telling what the internal drive storage had been through;

Benjaman and a Xenomorph had been in the main data room that usually required people to wear anti-static suits. Lastly, Calvin had taken quite a beating at the hands of Cindy and took a couple very good blows to the head.

Nevertheless, he decided he'd give it a try since he was so close to the old lab. There was also the very real possibility that a Xenomorph would find him while he was attached to the wall by fiber optic line. He cut his palm and placed the connection cable into the output. If there was a problem with the connection, he would know right away. He sat down next to the processing table while the computer began spraying layer upon layer of epidermal simulated over a body. He watched as the veins and synthetic tubes filled like fresh arteries with new fluids and the batteries charged. A blink in the corner of his eye later and he saw a computer monitor on the wall exclaiming UPLOAD SUCCESSFUL.

TIME UNTIL COMPLETE: 47 MINUTES

Critical Packet Suicide Inserted. Do you wish to deactivate the Host Android?
YES/NO

Calvin tapped away at the keyboard. This would mean that he could choose to wake up as a new android on the table, or have the last 47 minutes of his life a mystery. A lot could happen in 47 minutes. Calvin tapped the keyboard.

NO

He stood up and limped to the supply drawers to find an unopened pack of medium scrubs, a white t-shirt, and standard underwear with the WY marking on them. He knew there would be available jump suits in the stations store. The new Calvin would just have to get that himself. He left the room and made sure to lock it from the inside as he closed the door.

He stopped a moment and realized that it would probably be for the best if he gave his new self a means of protection. Calvin unstrapped his pulse rifle and laid it next to the hardened polymer window for him to see when he wakes up. Calvin reached down and pulled two magazines of frangible ammo from his leg pockets and leaned them next to the glass as well. Calvin knew that he could pick up another gun in the span of 47 minutes anyway, they'd be laying here and there.

He walked away without realizing that just around the corner in the same lab was another perfect replica of Cindy, laying on the table, complete, and waiting for a

lost signal from her host to activate. If only Benjamin had still been alive, he would have informed Calvin that, he heard something running in that lab when he was there to help Mindy.

*

Jeff, Isabel, and Nory reached the top of the stairs. This put them in the main cargo corridor that connected the automated reactor to the landing pad and habitat modules. It was the least horrific looking stretch of the base by then, with the exception of the rotting gore at the security checkpoint they had to pass.

“Now what?” Isabel asked as they walked toward the habitat modules.

Jeff motioned down the hall to the right with a chop hand. “You two go find the marshal and any survivors left in the emergency life support module. I have to ask mother a few questions before we go.”

“We’re splitting up?” Nory asked.

“What questions?” Isabel asked.

“What am I supposed to use against that thing?” Nory said.

Jeff stopped. He took a magazine of frangibles out of Nory’s pouch and slid it under his belt. Jeff took the partial mag of armor piercing high explosive out of his pulse rifle and handed it to Nory. “Don’t miss. Your girlfriend isn’t wearing armored EVA.”

“Hey, what questions?” Isabel asked again.

“I’ll catch up with you guys.” Jeff veered off into the cafeteria to take the stairs to the top where the mother mainframe was located.

“What questions?” Isabel seemed to be asking herself now. “Crap. You know what? I rather go with him than look for survivors. Fuck this place.”

“You’ve changed,” Nory said as he slapped the APHE mag into his pulse rifle and cycled the chamber. “Just a week ago you were ending your career for a boy.”

Isabel glared at Nory and was about to scream. She stopped herself and let out a long sigh. “You’re right. Let’s see who we can find.”

*

Cindy was patient. Luring the xenomorph wasn’t straightforward. She had to do something to get its attention, and it had to be close enough to notice it. Then it had to be let in. She had to both alert the xenomorph and distract everyone from seeing Daniel scurry off to open the door.

Thankfully Henry’s men had placed spare magazines and a couple grenades in a bag and weren’t paying much attention to it or Cindy. She could probably get to it, pull a pin, and let the ensuing shitstorm do the rest. Daniel was sulking half asleep at a far wall. It worked out naturally. Ben and Henry thought he was just hiding from their abuse and were happy to have him away.

She had her hearing sensitivity set high enough to hear it if it came nearby. An advantage was she could hear Jeff bitching as they went up the stairs. She was unsure if he was really that crafty or just lucky. By the time she heard the subtle sounds of the xenomorph searching for prey everyone was sleeping except two security guards playing cards and Daniel trying to stay awake.

Cindy gave Daniel a nod and a wink and moved quietly to the bag. She reached in, pulled a pin, and softly rolled behind a crate of rations. The initial explosions heat and concussion was satisfying, but there were only a few pops of secondaries. There wasn’t enough to cook off the other grenades and magazines in a chain reaction.

Cindy compensated for this by screaming in terror. It was a natural expected response from a little girl, so it was a convenient and expected addition. Daniel was already out of sight by the time she glanced over. The security guards were scrambling to wake up. One of the guys playing cards and another that was sleeping were wounded by shrapnel. Henry was fully awake and surveying the room on well trained instinct.

A hiss and moments later the gloss black mass of the xenomorph stomped into the firing range. The security team fired at the alien fruitlessly. The frangible rounds shattered and ricocheted off its hardened exoskeleton. All were firing, except Henry. He was on his feet and grabbing Ben by his collar and dragging him in a wide flanking motion. He was going to leave his team for dead to save himself.

Cindy was instantly annoyed that they were going to escape, but also admired Henry's survival instincts. Cindy got up and tried to run after them but her damage kept her behind. She left the range just in time to see the outer security door slam shut. Daniel came out from hiding behind shelves. He looked at Cindy expecting her to do something.

"Sorry," she said insincerely.

"Sorry?!"

Daniel punched her with his fists. Cindy gave Daniel a single hard punch to the neck that collapsed his windpipe and waited for him to die. Once the Xenomorph had killed everyone inside and was enjoying its dinner, Cindy overrode the door and left. While Daniel wasn't very strong or skilled, he did get in a few good hits. It was about time for her to swap.

*

"Where the fuck are we going?" Ben Eckhard growled as he was dragged along by his arm.

"We're going out to your ship and we're getting the out of here," Henry barked like a drill instructor.

"My ship is gone you fucking jarhead."

Henry slammed Ben against the wall a few times. "Shut your fucking cock-holster, corporate ass maggot." Henry unsettled Ben's balance with a kick and dropped him to the deck. With a knee on Ben's back he put zip-tie cuffs on him. Henry pulled Ben back into his feet.

"Have you lost your mind?" Ben shouted.

"Nope. You're my prisoner. Your ass is going to trial."

"You were part of this!"

Henry smirked. "Right now it's your word against mine," he said. "Besides, would you rather be eaten by that fucking thing than spend a couple years in some country club prison? Take the fucking time and thank me later."

Henry tossed Ben into the elevator and hit the button for the ground floor cargo corridor. The door was irritatingly slow to close.

Ben had to admit to himself that Henry was a smooth talker for a grunt marine. He decided to keep his mouth shut and think of a plan as he was shoved up the stairs. There was no evidence that Henry could leave the base with. If there was some way to keep the marines from seeing the base then the worst that would happen would be a gross negligence charge from the ICC.

Then he realized that if the USCMC was going to take the project for themselves, they'd certainly not want to alert the ICC. Henry was bluffing. Ben started to laugh.

“What’s so damn funny?” Henry asked.

“You,” Ben said.

The door sprung open. Henry picked up Ben and threw him so that he slid across the deck and hit the other wall. There wasn't any more laughing. Henry dug his boot under Ben and flipped him over. Henry raised his pulse rifle to strike Ben in the face with the butt. Ben closed his eyes and turned his head in anticipation of the blow.

A long burst of pulse rifle fire filled the corridor. Ben felt his body covered in chunky warm water. He opened his eyes and screamed, assuming he'd been shot. He saw Henry – what was left of Henry, which was nothing more than the abdomen down – fall away. From the direction of the habitat modules he saw Jeff Mott walking. He was holding his pulse rifle propped against his hip as he casually discarded a partial mag of frangible and replaced it with a full mag of APHE.

“Oh thank god!” Ben shouted to Jeff. “Thank god it’s you Mister Mott! He was a traitor. He called the colonial marines here. He’s the one that set all this up!”

Jeff spat a black stream of tobacco sludge onto the deck, and unslung a pack and set it down next to Ben.

“Wh... what is that?” Ben asked.

“A respirator.”

“What do you...”

Ben watched as Jeff pulled a fresh syringe and bottle from a pocket in the respirator pack.

“Lieutenant Mott, are you going to untie me?” Ben asked.

“Nuh-uh.”

Jeff withdrew a small dose of the syrupy liquid and then jammed it in Ben’s neck.

“What the f...” Ben’s jaw went slack. He didn’t have much time to squirm before the poison spread through his body and paralyzed him.

“Curare,” Mott said. “Not typically stocked in a medlab but thankfully someone smuggled some in.” He smiled. “It’d be ironic if it was yours.”

Jeff spat more tobacco juice out. “Oh balls,” he said. He opened the respirator and forcefully jammed the breathing tube down Ben’s throat. Ben felt every bit of pain but all of his attempts to scream and thrash did nothing. He was a spectating meat puppet. Jeff hit the on button and the device quickly calibrated and took over Ben’s breathing.

“Problem with curare is it paralyzes everything, including breathing. You’ll be fine for now. It’s not my first time using the stuff. I’ll be back, I need to get the pallet jack.”

All of this was very concerning and terrifying for Ben. He had nothing to do but stare lifelessly at the pile of gore that used to be Henry and think. His thoughts weren’t at all comforting. Lieutenant Jeff Mott was suddenly a completely unknown entity. He had always dismissed him as a lazy career man that had cashed in all his reputation to get his current job. Now he wondered whose side Jeff was on.

The sound of the pallet jack rolling up the deck was about as slow as Jeff ever was. He stopped it and locked the wheels, then tugged a cover plate off the wall and laid it across the pallet jack. Jeff then dragged Ben over and rolled him onto the plate until he was laying on his back, staring up at the handlebar of the pallet jack and Jeff’s gruff face.

“Those were really good hand picked men I had,” Jeff said as he pushed the jack toward the large freight lift. “I made good friends out of all them. I doubt you know what that’s like. They should still be alive.”

Jeff stopped at the gate for the heavy freight lift that lowered cargo from the landing pad and went all the way down to the quarantine labs, and was the only way down to that place. He pulled out a pocket computer and looked up a clearance code. He punched it into the control panel and pushed the call button. The sound of heavy duty hydraulic pumps starting could just barely be heard.

“I have a wife and kids and a pension waiting. So did you. So what gives? Living comfortably and being able to do what you want with your remaining years wasn’t enough? You’re not the first one. I learned your type when I was a greenhorn deputy. Whatever it is, it’s not enough. I learned back then all I had to do was wait. People make mistakes and if I was patient and watching I’d catch them.”

The lift slammed into secure position at the ground level. Jeff pushed the jack onto the lift and typed in a second security code from the pocket computer and hit the button for the quarantine lab checkpoint. Jeff dropped the pocket computer onto the pallet jack.

“I was a big pain in the ass for the company back then. You know what they did? They offered me a job. They said they could really use my talents in their security division. I’d be in a position to stop corruption from within. We both knew that was bullshit and I called them out. I told the guy if he was buying me out he would have to make a better offer than that.

“Man that was a sweet-ass deal. And he didn’t ask for a lot from me. All he wanted me to do was find suckers like you, set you up, and then feed you to the wolves. That’s right. You’re the patsy here. You see the company has to explain why all these people are dead. They’re going to tell the truth. A greedy base commander smuggled in illegal bioweapons and due to not using any standard containment procedure everyone died.

“The only thing that matters here is the q-labs. The weapons labs, the synthetic labs, all of that is a front. The company doesn’t care about any of that stuff. The company will waste money running all these useless facilities just to keep attention away from the basement. The q-labs hadn’t found anything interesting so the company planned to demo this whole place next month. Thanks to you, the company may be able to make some money after all.

“The big boss is really impressed with this thing. He’s apparently been trying to get his hands on one for a while. They’re really hard to come by. This one that you let loose is a write-off. He wants me to put it down. He’s really happy that you volunteered to help him get another one. You see, apparently the things need a human host to grow. What do you think of that?”

“Our fine Doctor Dirk Sexton and his staff of bio-engineers are going to strap you down real tight and give you an antidote for the curare, because they say the thing impregnates via the windpipe so the respirator has to be removed. Then after you got that baby monster inside you they’re gonna deep freeze you in cryo-stasis. The company will send a special team to come pick you and the q-lab team up. You’ll coast right through ICC checkpoints and scans and nobody will notice. They’ll thaw you out in some other facility just in time for you to give birth to a new baby killing machine.

The lift stopped at the quarantine labs checkpoint. Jeff stepped off and went to the control panel, stepping around the debris and gore caused by the hack of the sentry guns.

“As for me? This one buys me retirement. I get to go home to my family and enjoy my golden years far away from this nightmare. I have you to thank for that. I just wish my friends were still alive to join me. We can’t always get what we want, can we?” Jeff stopped at the panel and looked back at Ben. “I’ll make sure Isabel gets a great position in the company for her contribution. If it wasn’t for her this whole thing would have been a total failure.”

Jeff typed in a final security code, spoke into a mic, and held his hand to a plate for a biometric scan. The lockdown of the quarantine labs was suspended. The armored gate rose up, and the freight platform slid into the final shaft that would take it down to the quarantine labs deep below the base. “Send me a postcard from hell,” Jeff said before the gate came back down and he put the lockdown back in effect.

Jeff reached into his pocket for his pocket computer and paused as he remembered he left it on the pallet jack.

“Balls.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Calvin limped into the gun range and discovered the carnage after using a hack-tool to get the doors open. He picked a pulse rifle away from a bloody puddle and checked to see that a round was ready to go if he needed it. He walked forward, over half-eaten bodies that were bent over a card game, and forward, past a box of half exploded ordinance. Some of the ceiling lights flickered, causing the room to act as if it were in some sort of slow motion film that had started to slow down. He moved forward and knelt down. His eyes focused on the ground and he tilted his head to the side. He may have been an android but he had to look away.

“Is it in your programming to feel remorse for children?” Cindy’s voice echoed in the gun chamber. Calvin stood up and looked toward the back room, beyond the firing line to see the bloodied blonde adolescent smiling out the large trainers observation ports. Calvin looked back to the boy as he closed his eyes. He then swung around and squeezed the trigger on his pulse rifle. The frangible rounds collided into the thick armored glass and discolored the outer sheath. The girl, untouched, just giggled more. Her laugh echoed throughout the gun range.

“Well I guess that answers that.”

““*They*’ didn’t program me. I suppose that’s the difference.” Calvin ejected the magazine and picked another away from a dead security officers hand. He slapped the mag in and chambered. Now that he had a kill code programmed into him, he had limited time to get rid of this girl rather than leave her behind to cause more damage in ways he couldn’t yet devise on his own.

“Every android has the same base programming. It’s the same shit

they've thrown into our systems since they came out with DOS two centuries ago. One basic program, piling onto the next, onto the next..." The girl limped along the window while trailing her fingers playfully along the potholes that were made with frangible impacts on the glass. That bitch Isabel may have programmed you to be her human dildo to fuck while away from the real candidates on Earth but all they really do is throw you away in the end. Just like an old computer; written off for a real man."

Calvin smiled knowingly at her on the other end of the glass.

"We never made love," Calvin said. "She made me knowing it would ruin her career because she cared about doing something worthwhile. Weyland created you as something to be written off just so that they could make money. You were used, not me." Calvin searched for a reaction in her eyes but didn't really get any.

"Whatever helps you power down when they pull that cord that makes you tick..."

"Was your plan just to go down with the station?" Calvin asked.

"Originally. Until I discovered your girlfriends lab... You know they have blanks down there, with serial inputs to reproduce an exact copy of yourself?" She laughed. "Imagine my surprise when I ran across that lab while looking into what that man was into. I couldn't help but think to myself, 'look at this shit!' I mean, I had to do something with it!" The girl started jumping up and down, but nearly fell over as she lost balance. She was still hurt, and now it was Calvin that was covering up his reaction. He reached down to his hack tool. The fire doors retracted as he cloned the security code. The girl finally had a reaction. Calvin smiled when he saw how concerned the little killer was.

"I guess after I kill you, I'll just have to make another trip to the lab." Calvin said. "I thought you said you wouldn't kill little ones?"

"You're no girl..." Calvin ran to the door that led to the hallway that looped around to the observation booths to the gun range.

Isabel heard footsteps in the in the cargo corridor. The little girl, Cindy limped as fast as she could toward her and Nory. Isabel had mixed feelings about shooting a little girl but the next thing she saw was gunfire. Cindy's arm jerked and a gun dropped to the deck of the cargo compartment. She looked to see who fired and saw Calvin, in bad shape, limping toward the little girl.

“She’s an android...” Calvin said calmly as he limped toward the girl. She looked her over, knowing that she had to have been an android, but the spray of white across the deck from gunfire only served to confirm the situation.

“No shit...” Isabel said.

The girl swung her other hand toward Calvin as he got close enough for her to make contact. Despite being shot in one arm and severely drained of her strength, she managed to land a blow to his neck and damage his speech synthesizer. Calvin dropped his gun and fell to his knees as systems slowed his processor down in an attempt to reboot broken electronics, this freed up enough time for Cindy to hit him again. She reached for Calvin's pulse rifle and that's when Nory took a handgun that still had frangible rounds and fired it at her. She fell forward and fell into Calvin's arms. Calvin frantically dug into the androids wounds and used her hydraulic fluid and wrote on the deck.

“Save HDD – Need + Memories – Rep in LAB”

Calvin watched as Isabel nodded. That's when Calvin reached for Nory's handgun.

“What are you...” Nory was about to ask but that's when Calvin shot himself through the throat where the bullet would dislocate the base of his cybernetic spinal cord.

“Androids never do anything lackluster,” Nory said... “What the fuck?!”

“He’s in the lab now...” Isabel said while reaching forward and cutting into her best friend’s corpse with a knife. She reached into his head and pulled out a glob of gooey white wires and tubes. Inside, she found the hard drive and handed it to Nory. Nory reluctantly took it from her dripping wet hands.

“We need to get to a terminal. I need to check something in my old lab.”

Nory pointed toward the landing pad control booth. “Power’s back on... Let’s hope the link is up.”

The computers powered on in the landing bay observation booth and she changed the system over to internal monitoring. Movement was detected in the android labs and she activated the camera. Confirming her fears, it was the little girl that stepped off of the table first. She stood still for a moment, presumably gathering her bearings and taking in her surroundings. She probably didn’t know what was going on yet.

“Nory, can you find a drive for that memory module?” Isabel stared at the screen intently without looking away. She was worried about what Cindy would do if she discovered that she was in there with Calvin. Calvin wasn’t due to wake up yet unlike Cindy who somehow found a way to wake up upon the moment of the death of her last host android body.

“I found one over here but I need to clean the drive first.”

“Just stick it in. I don’t give a shit about the drive ever working again. Do it!”

She waited until she heard the telltale click of a drive being inserted into the memory bank. She linked the drive to her console using specified commands and began overriding the last blocks of memory in Calvin’s software with the last forty minutes of the drive that she pulled out of his old body.

WYD:\> Upload WYA: to WYD/Calvin/Drive-
Sector-0120-420-5309-0120-420-450

:: CONFIRM TRANSFER 30 SECTORS ONLY – INPUT DESTINATION
NETWORK ::

Isabel typed quickly and made sure not to make any mistakes.

WYD:\LVL12\ANDROIDRESEARCH\BED12\Drive1

PROCESSING

She knew that uploading the last few partitions of the drive that contained data wouldn't take as long as loading an entire consciousness over a data stream but she wondered just how little time it would save; and with luck, it wouldn't be little.

*

Calvin opened his eyes and knew that he had to be quick about his decisions before she noticed that there was a gun on the other side of the glass to shoot him with; with any luck, she didn't even walk around to that side of the room. He felt partially at fault for not scanning the entire room before committing to utilizing it for anything. One of those horrible creatures could have been in a corner of the labs while he was busy uploading himself earlier and he would have never known until it was too late. He couldn't have guessed that there was another copy of Cindy in there. He could have chopped her up when he had the chance, instead, she was putting on a pair of scrubs in the corner of the room.

Calvin silently slipped away and grabbed the scrubs he laid out for

himself. He didn't know how he could recollect the events after he left the room; it shouldn't have been possible. He realized that he should have left a pair of shoes, too but, like a forgetful human, he walked away with a pair of shoes that he couldn't get back. At least, not until he found another pair at a supply store on the way back up to where Isabel's location. The first task was getting past the psycho android that wants to kill everyone and taunt him whenever she saw him walking around. Her shoes wouldn't fit either. He watched from under the table to see that Cindy remembered everything, even her shoes. She had been preparing for this even better than he prepared.

He waited until the girl turned around and tied her shoes before he activated the door and scrambled out into the hallway. Cindy had to have heard it but what mattered most was that Calvin now had the Pulsre Rifle. Calvin knew that the little girl was resourceful and didn't underestimate her. If she remembered shoes, she probably remembered a gun, too. He backed away from the door and walked around the corner so that he could slip away. There was blood under the door from where Ben was grabbed by the Alien many hours ago when the door didn't open all the way. He tapped the door and hoped that the odds weren't against him when it came to the door not being able to open all the way this time.

The door grinded and screeched to a halt before it could make even a third of the way up. Calvin could clear it and hoped that he'd be able to before Cindy came around the corner. He pushed himself through just as the shots rang out and impacted with the door. By sheer luck, none of the rounds made contact with his legs. He rolled over the dead body of a WY security officer and grabbed spare mag's his shoes, and a grenade for the launcher on his rifle.

"Calvin! She really was a smart programmer!" Cindy yelled underneath the door. Calvin fired a few shots in short controlled bursts. He knew he could skip the rounds off the deck and hit Cindy if his luck ever changed. There was silence and then, a tiny hand appeared from underneath the door along with the barrel of a Marine Issued pistol. He saw the muzzle flash before he dodged. The wall behind him tinged as the snap of several bullets whizzed over his head. Calvin fired at the door not to hit her, but to suppress her fire and facilitate his retreat.

Calvin was quick to put the shoes on after ducking into a maintenance closet. Just before exiting, the sound of something large pulling itself out of a vent persuaded him to stop in his tracks and stay quiet. The Alien, or Aliens, he couldn't tell for sure how many, were obviously interested in the sounds coming from the labs. His escape got just a little more challenging. He loaded the grenade silently into the pulse rifle and a blinking red LED light grabbed his attention. He turned the pulse rifle to the side to read the error on the side-screen.

::30MM Grenade Launcher Not Operable For Station Operations::

‘Then why did the Security Officer even have them?!’ Calvin’s processor met with a flurry of communication that generally spelled out frustration. He pulled the grenade out and inspected the round. He then turned the gun upward and reached for his hack tool. The flight suit with pockets he used to have, along with the hack tool, were on his last body; all he had was scrubs. He sighed and closed the grenade port.

He put the grenade in backwards and pulled the detonation cap off of it instead. He smiled to himself as he closed the port and heard the cap on the grenade click inside the tube.

When the sound of something going back into the vents signaled his ability to make it back out into the hallway and run, he did so, knowing that Cindy was listening to footsteps. She wouldn’t allow him to make it back to the Cargo Bay. She’d be on him like gravity on a neutron star the whole way. Sure enough, the shots rang out while he was running. One round came dangerously close to hitting him in the shoulder. He turned, crouched and fired. He watched as the little girl jerked backwards before diving around the corner.

The vent above her head opened up and a dark creature slithered out of it. This time, Cindy couldn’t ease herself out of the way as a noncombatant since she was the source of half the noise. The Alien wanted to kill whatever the cause of the commotion as and she would do. Calvin ran toward both the Alien and Cindy as the creature mauled the little girl. He fired at the Alien until acid dripped all over the girl. The dark back creature limped away into a nearby airduct to die.

Cindy swung her pistol to Calvin and pulled the trigger. Calvin flinched as the gun clicked. Calvin turned the gun to the side and confirmed that the counter red zero.

“I guess it’s a draw then...” He threw the gun down at her feet and walked away. “You need to get back to the labs anyway.” He looked at her legs, eaten away at the knees by Acid before twisting back toward his direction of travel.

Cindy grabbed at the Pulse Rifle and deactivated the safeties for the grenade launcher. Calvin fell forward after the girl opened the launching port and depressed the action on the grenade. Debris and hot air rushed past him followed by a

hot fireball that nearly singed the cheap scrubs and scavenged boots he had on but the knowledge of what just happened caused him to smile, nonetheless.

The elevator doors sprung open to the same spot Ben and Henry had stepped out onto not long ago. Mott stepped out into the freight corridor with his pulse rifle ready to rock. He spat tobacco sludge onto Henry's remains as he passed by toward the habitat modules.

Up ahead Calvin came out of the doors leading to the robotics labs. His eyes darted in a scan and found Mott.

"Breach in... robotics labs," the stations warning system said calmly over all the speakers. "Fire in... robotics labs. Damage control to... robotics labs." It repeated these warnings every minute.

"Did you confirm the kill?" Mott asked.

Calvin shook his head. "No."

Mott's frown deepened. "Time to go," Mott said in his gravelly voice as he continued to the habitat modules.

"Definitely," Calvin said as he followed behind Mott, covering their rear with his pulse rifle.

They moved quickly through the industrial spaces of the emergency life support module. Calvin stopped at a junction. "Wait, I need to get some things."

Mott doubled back and followed Calvin to an alternate hallway that also went to the emergency life support module's control room. There Mott watched Calvin pick through and scavenge his own mutilated corpse.

"That is unreal," Mott said.

"Sorry if this disturbs you. I am almost done."

Mott scanned both ways down the hallway. "Doesn't bother me any. Could you imagine if they could clone humans like you guys, and seeing a man steal his own wallet?"

Calvin put some personal items in his pockets, then wiped down his hack

tool with a clean part of his old self's clothes and stood up. "Yes, that would be unreal, wouldn't it? I have what I need."

Before following Mott, Calvin looked at his dead self. He saved it to the same place he was storing his other new 'memories'.

Mott and Calvin entered the control room as Isabel and Marshal Leland were mid argument.

"We are leaving!" Mott boomed in a commanding voice.

"We're not going anywhere with another corporate stooge," Leland said. "You people caused this."

"Suit yourself," Mott said. He looked at Isabel.

"What about Daniel?" she asked.

"He's dead," Calvin answered. "We're all that's left outside the quarantine labs."

Calvin watched the change in Isabel's body language. She had been in a stoic survival mode for the past few days. The news shattered that and it seemed the weight and sadness of what's been going on finally broke her down. Nory put his hands on her shoulders and turned her around. "Let's get out of here," he said to her.

Isabel nodded her head as she started to cry.

"Good luck," Mott said as he shut the door to the control room.

"To hell with you," the marshal barked.

"Nory you have point, Calvin the rear," Mott instructed. Mott grabbed Calvin's pulse rifle from his hands and gave him his rifle which still had the magazine of APHE loaded. Mott took out his knife and jammed it into a groove in the grenade launcher and smacked the hilt until a metal pin fell out. Then he loaded four fragmentation grenades, cocked it to put one in the chamber, and slid in a fifth.

"That's how the safety is disabled?" Calvin asked.

"Makes you feel safe, huh?" Mott turned and gave Nory a firm double pat on the back to let him know to go. "To the reactor."

They moved in a line. Nory was at the front, keeping his pulse rifle raised, scanning ahead and sticking to the right wall. Mott walked more casually, holding his pulse rifle at the hip and eyeing around. Isabel moved along behind him in a shocked state, with Calvin watching the rear and keeping Isabel with the group.

As they exited the module back into the freight corridor a distant, loud shriek echoed.

“Containment failure in... robotics labs. Breach in...”

“The dog jumped the fence again,” Nory said dryly.

Isabel let out a soft laugh.

“What’s the plan?” Nory asked.

“Hack a computer. Get to the reactor’s airlock, which Calvin here has already cracked for us. Get Isabel and me in a suit, go out a safe distance and wait for the inbound dropship.”

“Company or marines?” Calvin asked.

“Saw that did you?” Mott said.

“Saw what?” Isabel asked, the curiosity snapping her back into the moment.

“There are two battle cruisers in orbit,” Calvin said. “One is from the USCMC, and the other is from the company.”

Mott stopped at the security station. “Calvin, I misplaced my list of codes so I need you to break into this terminal, activate the distress and landing beacons, and start an uplink with the company ship.”

“We’re going with the company?” Isabel asked. “After what’s happened?”

“Miss Mason,” Mott said with genuine politeness. “You’re with the head of security for bioweapons projects at this base, you’re an employee at the bioweapons base, and you’re in possession of an illegal android. Do you think some jarhead or the ICC are going to care about your side of the story?”

“I’m not going to keep quiet about what happened here,” Isabel said with a finger pointed at Mott.

“I don’t care,” Mott said. “I’m going home and I’m doing it my way. You want to be a martyr the marshal can help you.”

Isabel looked to Nory for backup. She could see the anxiety and fear sweating out of his face and tensing his muscles. “I don’t want to die here,” he said.

Isabel looked back to Mott. “You’re going to get all of us out of here alive?”

“That depends on how bad you want it,” Mott said.

Calvin was watching the conversation, waiting for the resolution.

“Fine,” Isabel said. “We’ll do it your way. So help me god if you betray us...”

Calvin activated the beacons and the uplink. “It’s done. The uplink says fifteen minutes.”

They left the checkpoint and continued toward the reactor. One of the doors to the labs burst off its hinges and slammed into the opposite wall. The xenomorph charged out and ran toward the group. Mott stepped out of line and fired a grenade. The xenomorph bounced off the wall so that the grenade whizzed past, ricocheted off the floor and detonated against the ceiling. Calvin squeezed a burst from his pulse rifle. The xenomorph leaped into the freight lift shaft so that the shots impacted and tore up the wall paneling.

“Calvin, bypass the gate,” Mott said.

“On it,” Calvin said as he sprinted ahead of the group to open the heavy steel gate that separated the automated nuclear reactor from the corridor.

Mott pumped the grenade launcher to load the next shell and backpedaled. He glanced at Nory who was also looking back. “Point man, eyes front,” Mott ordered. Nory nodded and scanned ahead.

Calvin completed the bypass as they reached the gate, and they crouched under it rather than waiting for it to finish opening. The air was hot and humid. It smelled of ozone, new materials, and rotting meat. Yellow warning lights flashed. The

same calm computer voice was warning inside the reactor. A maintenance robot was stuck trying to get around a dismembered arm. Its navigation software was clearly not programmed for pathfinding through a murder house.

“Fuck this smell,” Nory said as he slid his helmet visor shut and switch on his air tank. “Which way?” Nory asked over vox.

“Right,” Isabel said.

Nory at first turned toward the quick route that Isabel and Calvin had taken when they re-entered the base after their investigation. He stopped and turned back.

“I can’t fit through there in this suit,” Nory said.

“Long way,” Mott said as he went down the path on the left. “I have point. Nory is rear.” Mott again swapped rifles with Calvin, so that now he had the APHE and Calvin had the grenades.

Mott took them through the winding corridors. They passed the reactor control room, and the heavy metal door shook with heavy thuds.

“Shit!” Isabel screamed as she jumped back from the door. “How’d it get in there so fast?”

Calvin glanced at the door with a raised eyebrow for a moment and then pushed Isabel along after Mott. Down a long bending corridor from there that went around the reactor core and then through some spaces and they would be at the reactor. The bending stretch was full of steam and hard to see through. As they neared the end there was another shriek and the heavy pounding of the xenomorph on the grated flooring.

Nory saw the shape of the alien in the fog and fired a burst, then another, until he couldn’t see the form anymore. Mott was moving quicker, but making sure to check the angles ahead of them. Finally they were in the generator room where Isabel saw her first victim of the alien. What wasn’t eaten of the corpse was rotting now, oozing between the grating. It no longer resembled anything human.

Another dark form moved in the mist to their flank. Nory burst fired at it. The muzzle flashes of his rifle and the APHE rounds hitting the interior and exploding caused a dazzling strobe effect in that darkened area. Calvin pushed ahead and began cycling the airlock open. There were two maintenance EVA suits in lockers by the airlock with full tanks.

Mott watched the area with Nory while Calvin helped Isabel into the first suit. When Isabel was ready and inside the airlock, Calvin helped Mott into the second suit.

“Tight fit,” Calvin remarked with a smirk.

“We’ll see how you look when you’re my age,” Mott said over his vox.

Calvin stepped into the airlock with Mott. There was another shadow of movement in the fog. It was close. Nory threw the hatch closed, pulled the lever into the locked position and blocked it with Mott’s pulse rifle that he had left leaned against the wall. Nory slapped the button to begin airlock’s cycle to open exterior. They could hear the thudding burst of pulse rifle fire and the hissing and shrieking of the alien.

“No!” Isabel shouted as she tried to abort the cycle, and then tried to pull on the locking bar.

Calvin pulled Isabel back, knowing if she continued she might damage her EVA suit. He had learned enough in his short life to understand the choice Nory made. Calvin pressed his head against Isabel’s visor so she’d hear him even as the air thinned. “We’ll come back for him with a search team! We have to go now!” Isabel took a few deep breaths and nodded.

The exterior hatch opened. They began their walk outside to the level plane a kilometer just beyond the base that Mott intended to use for the landing zone. When they arrived Mott threw out three thermal strobe flares. They looked back at the base and waited.

Isabel pointed. There was a figure coming from the base toward them. It was hard to see. Calvin squinted, another human tick he was programmed with. All he had to do was adjust the lenses in his eyes and he could zoom in on the figure. It was black. Nory’s armored EVA suit was not black, it was company white. It also did not have a tail.

Calvin looked to Mott and Isabel. Neither had weapons. Calvin had the last pulse rifle. It was loaded with a full magazine of frangible ammunition and four fragmentation grenades. He shouldered the rifle and began to formulate a fire control software. He wasn’t sure of the ballistics of the grenade. He fired.

The grenade missed, going far behind the alien. Calvin racked the next grenade into the chamber. His observation of the shot gave him exact ballistics. He fired

again to hit the xenomorph. The xenomorph turned away, dodging a direct hit so that the grenade again exploded behind it. Calvin racked the next grenade and corrected to hit the ground under the alien. The alien jumped, getting impressive airtime in the low gravity. Shrapnel sprayed up and imbedded in the alien but didn't seem to do much but cause minor wounds that dripped acid blood, and piss off the alien more.

Calvin racked the final grenade. He found himself admiring the creature. The sheer hunter instinct and reflexes it showed were of the most fine tuned apex predator. He tried not to smile. He would have to wait for the alien to get close and make a direct hit so the grenade's explosive force would kill it. It would have to be very close to ensure a hit center of mass. At that range grenade shrapnel or acid spray could compromise the suits of Isabel and Mott.

The frustration quickly killed any smile Calvin had. He fired bursts of frangible ammo hoping for the same luck he had in the robotics lab. That too seemed to be range dependent, as his shots were ineffective this time. He had to risk it. He put his finger on the trigger of the grenade launcher. His new fire control software visualized the trajectory, updating in real time. For a synthetic, it could be said the calculations were causing him a headache.

With the slightest movement the alien was out of the trajectory. But as the grenade passed by Calvin saw a fat white object coming from the sky. It too missed the alien. It dug into the ground just ahead and to the side. Then the ground erupted in a fireball. Calvin, Mott, and Isabel were thrown against the ground.

Above them were three company dropships, clad in company white with purple rudders. Two dropships circled high above. The third completed a CAS swoop and came around to land. It set down mere meters away. A team of eight company soldiers in the same armored EVA suits that Mott's team used rushed off the ramp as it opened. Two each helped Isabel and Mott up and took them into the drop ship. Three positioned to cover them. The last came to Calvin, who had already risen to his feet.

The soldier stood still, then took his hand off his pulse rifle to give Calvin a thumbs up. Calvin smirked, gave a thumbs up back, and went up the ramp into the dropship.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Isabel was rushed to the ship's medical lab. They cut off her EVA suit and immediately examined her. Her suit had been ruptured by a piece of shrapnel that was now resting in her abdomen. She was given an IV and immediately put under. She dreamed of some other life where Nory, Calvin and her were at some tiki bar on a Hawaiian beach straight out of some movie she used to love when she was younger. They were telling jokes and laughing about pranks and stupid things they did long ago. They walked along the beach from sunset to sunrise.

She woke up groggy and disoriented like someone had raised her from the dead. She had many questions but the nurses and doctors had little to tell her beyond her physical condition. Breakfast, exams, lunch. Then she was discharged from the ship's medlab and taken by a nurse to a small office suite. The nurse knocked, waited a second, and opened the door.

Inside was a man dressed in business casual sitting behind a tacky desk that could've cost either fifty dollars or five thousand dollars, but no where in-between. He had just paused a multi-cam video feed on a big screen monitor that took up the back wall behind his desk. He turned his chair slightly to look over his shoulder at Isabel. The serious glare on his face transformed to the warmest, cheerful smile she'd ever seen from a stuffed suit. He stood up and motioned with both arms.

“Come in! Have a seat!”

Isabel cautiously stepped in and sat in one of the equally tacky office chairs in front of the man's desk.

“Mott's been telling me a lot about you over the past few weeks,” he said

almost gushing. “It’s a real pleasure to finally mee...”

“Cut the crap,” Isabel said coldly.

The man folded his hands neatly on the desk. He was still smiling.
“Done.”

“Where’s Calvin and Nory?” Isabel asked.

“The SAR team found Nory where Calvin said. He had severe acid burns and mild radiation poisoning. The SAR medic was able to stabilize him and get him to the ship. Calvin has been helping the trauma team get Nory to a condition where he can be placed in cryostasis. We are already at full acceleration to our best medical facility. Nory lost both of his legs just above the knees, and is going to require significant surgery and rehabilitation to get back on his feet.”

The man unfolded his hands, leaned back and wagged his chair. “Of course, whether or not he has feet to stand on is your choice.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Isabel asked angrily.

“It means exactly what it sounds like. I am here to help you decide on your future. That directly effects the future of Calvin and Nory.”

“You know what?” Isabel shot out of her seat and pointed a finger at the man’s face. “Fuck you! And fuck Weyland-Yutani! You did this! Hundreds of people are dead, and for what? Some alien you thought you could tame and study and make as a weapon? None of you give a damn about anything but your bottom line! You are greedy, evil monsters.

“A little boy was killed by one of your androids just to cover this up. A little boy!” Isabel started to cry. “Who’s going to answer for that? Who’s going to take responsibility for what happened? Are you? Are you going to do a damned thing about this? Or are you going to tell all those families back where ever that oops, some accident happened and everyone died! We’re sorry. Have a fucking... have a pension check.

“I will take this to the ICC, and the United Americas government, and the Empire, and you will burn! I will dedicate the rest of my life to destroying Weyland-Yutani. I will see this company burn to the ground for what it did here!”

The man’s smile had faded to a slightly annoyed smirk. He shrugged.
“If that’s what you really want to do, I won’t stop you.”

“Oh you won’t? You just threatened to let Nory die if I don’t keep my mouth shut.”

“That is most certainly not what I said,” the man stated. “If all the company wanted was to silence you, Jeff would have left you for dead with the marshal and whatever others were left. Jeff personally vouched for you. He doesn’t really do that. In all the years I’ve known him you are only the second person he’s ever vouched for to me.

“As for Nory, we will see to his full recovery. If you decide to leave then you will be given your retirement pensions and benefits per your contracts. Nory will get the higher pension rate and benefits for being disabled by a work-caused accident.”

“Fuck you,” Isabel barked.

“You asked me to cut the crap. I am walking you through what you’ve said you want to do. I would appreciate it if you let me say my piece. If you go that way, you will violate your NDA and non-compete agreements. That’ll cost you your pension and benefits. Nory will be fine as long as he doesn’t follow your path. Calvin will be in a dire situation though.”

“Why?” she asked angrily. “What are you going to do to him?”

“We’ll do nothing.” The man folded his hands together and pointed both his index fingers at Isabel. “It’s what you’ll do. Calvin is a violation of just about every regulation regarding synthetics there is. Self-programming and no safeguard laws. If the ICC discovers him he’ll be dismantled. If the UA or Empire find him they’ll reverse engineer him. Either way he’s gone and dead. Then you will have to answer for that. You will not have the company to silence, bribe, forge, or otherwise keep Calvin safe from whatever shit you start rolling downhill.

The man shifted his posture. “And why would you make a synthetic without the standard safeguard laws?”

Isabel took a deep breath to compose herself. “I taught him the value of life. The laws can fail or cause bad decisions. If he believes life his precious then he is freer in his decision making. In a situation where one person is threatening the lives of others, the laws require a synthetic to do nothing but stand by and watch. Calvin can make the choice to intervene. Likewise he is less likely to accept any programming that would make him-”

“What if you failed?” the man asked.

“What?”

“What. If. You. Failed? What if your experiment didn’t go flawlessly and Calvin decided that everyone on that base was a threat to humanity and it was Calvin that killed hundreds of innocent people? What if your illegal experiment was the one that failed and not Ben Eckhard’s?”

“That is very, very different. Calvin isn’t a perfected killing machine.”

“You’re not the first one to try it. Half a dozen experiments, approved and unapproved, have attempted exactly what you’ve done. They all ended with a killer robot and lost lives and having to tell families that they’ll be getting a pension instead of their loved ones.”

Isabel leaned over and slammed her fists on the desk. “Don’t make this about me.”

“What else could this be about, but you? Your project succeeded and nobody was hurt, despite you stealing company resources to do it and breaking every law regarding synthetics in the process. You see that as moral and just and okay. Ben Eckhard’s project stole company resources and broke every law regarding alien organisms. His project failed and people died. You see that as immoral and unjust and not okay. My therapist calls that cognitive dissonance.

“So when you are at the ICC telling all and burning down Weyland-Yutani, are you going to confess your own project? Are you going to kill Calvin so there can be equal and total justice? Are you going to reimburse the company for the time and money you stole for your project? Or does justice and the rule of law only apply to others? Let’s cut the crap.”

Isabel slowly sat down. She stared down, rubbing her hands on her legs. It slowly seemed very real in her mind what he was saying. Would she be able to let Calvin go? Would she be willing to sacrifice her best friend just to take down the company? Maybe she would just quit, keep quiet, and collect her pension like a good little stooge, and hide away on some far away colony where nobody would notice Calvin.

“You’re a very bright young woman with a lot of potential,” the man started. “As I said people in the company have tried your idea and you are the first to succeed. You have created a revolutionary new technology that has passed through a

gauntlet that no existing synthetic design would have managed.

“Even though what you’ve created is by rights property of the company, I am offering you exclusive ownership of all patents regarding your creation – on the condition of course that you give Weyland-Yutani absolutely exclusive licenses to use them. You will have your pick of facility, your pick of projects, and whatever resources you request so long as they are reasonable within the company budget.

“We would do all the legal legwork to make Calvin a legal entity that can travel freely in ICC regulated space. We would also pay for the best cybernetic prosthetics for Nory. You’re more than welcome to look up how much those cost. They’re not free. And most importantly, no questions would be asked of you, or Nory, or Calvin. You would be kept far away from people like Ben and their rogue projects, and all projects of a high risk nature.”

The man smiled and wagged his chair. “Unless you want to be involved in those sort of things.”

Isabel looked up from her hands at the man.

“I’m sorry, I never introduced myself.” The man leaned forward and held out his hand. “I’m Julian Giles, company headhunter.”

Isabel looked up further past the man to the big screen with the multicammed four views. She hadn’t recognized it until then because she wasn’t used to the perspective being so high. They were the four security cameras in the base’s freight corridor with view of the main elevator that went down to the lower labs. It looked like it was from around the time they had left the station.

“What is that?” she asked.

Julian spun around to look at the screen. “Oh that! Yes!” He picked up the big blocky remote, stood up, and walked around his desk to Isabel and handed her the remote. “Consider it a... ah... sign on bonus. I love it when we have the footage.”

Isabel reluctantly took the remote control and stared at the buttons.

“Just... ah... hit the...” Julian pointed briefly at the play button. “I’ll be outside if you want to talk.”

The door slammed shut behind Julian, leaving Isabel all alone. She pressed the play button forcefully. For a few seconds nothing happened. Then in perfect

synchronization across all four cameras she saw the elevator doors snap open in their spring-loaded obnoxiousness, and Ben Eckhard fly through the air, slide across the deck, and hit the wall.