

"Hey, um."

Alan turned to Tom, and he breathed out sharply, and the words flew out of his mouth:

"I've-never-heard-you-talk-about-girls-or-anything-so-I'm-going-to-take-a-crazy-shot-at-t
his:"

--a quick pause--

"I love you."

Alan sort of froze, a half-grin half-wince on his face, waiting for the response.

Tom shifted on the couch, in that weird stiff way of his. Alan found it endearing. Tom opened his mouth as if to say something, but he closed it again.

"Did you hear what I said?" Alan asked. "I..." he huffed, bringing up the courage again, "I love. You."

"I haven't been completely honest with you, Alan." Tom's arms went up stiffly and he gripped his own head, holding it steady as a seam appeared right at the hairline, a bright light shining through the crack. The "skull" opened up and a tiny cactus in a metal pot popped up out of the hatch.

"Oh no. No no no." Alan's face had changed in that moment. "You need to get your stuff and get a Nessie and get out of here. You can't stay with me."

"I knew by being so nice things were getting out of control but I also couldn't afford to get kicked out and I was really hoping that--"

"--And put ... yourself back in your human suit! I don't want to see you like this!" Alan turned away. "I can't believe this is happening again." He groaned and looked up at the ceiling.

"--that no one would get ... hurt. Yeah. Back in the suit." A little whirr-click. "Back in the suit, see?"

Alan was still turned away. "You're not the first Invested I've been in love with." He finally turned back towards. "I should have put on the stupid roommate ad, 'NO INVESTED' but that would have made me look like a racist jerk. I DON'T KNOW, MAYBE I AM."

"What was he?"

"A fish, a Nova Trout." Alan was calming down. "Big barrel of a man, his life support was in his chest, the chest of his encounter suit, I mean."

"They can't really mask the pump noise for water-kinds. You knew what he was right away."

"Yes, I knew. And we tried to make it work. But when I was with him I couldn't ever *really* be with him." Alan's eyes were focused far, far away. "We were laying in bed and he opened his tank, and I stuck my hand in the water, it was a lot colder than I expected it to be. And I saw the little wires that hooked him up, and felt his scales and his fins, and the water flowing over my fingers." Dark spots appeared on Alan's shirt, his cheeks were wet. "And I knew that he would always be *alien* to me. And I feel, feel like a real jerk for feeling that way but ... my heart needs to be with a human. Someone made out of the same stuff that I am. I tried to change. I can't. I can't."

Tom was quiet.

Alan continued. "I don't envy you. You never asked for human intelligence, sentience. But you have to live with it. You have to be out in human society. To do the best you can."

"I'm going to get my bag packed."

"I'm going to my room now. I'm not coming out until I hear you leave." Alan took two steps. "But, if you ever need anything, like if you're in trouble, I'll help you. ... You just can't stay here." The door shut, and latched.

It took an hour for Tom to pack. The Nessie, sleek and fast, came up to the front dock of the house, and Tom crawled into the little streamlined pod strapped to her back.

"Have you heard of the Saturn, in Roseopolis?"

The Nessie nodded, semi-aware but not fully conscious. She was lucky, things had gone right for her, correctly, according to human schemes, just enough extra smarts to do her job and serve her purpose. Some days Tom wished for the same, to dim his own light. But he was what he was, a human-intelligent cactus hooked up to an encounter suit. Irreversible, that; his own flame would continue to burn.

"Take me there."

The main local current ran for about 100 kilometers to the south, to a large seastead called Roseopolis, about a thousand platforms on a quiet spot on the Great Ocean. With any luck he'd be able to get a room again at the Saturn, an expended rocket fuel tank that had been converted into a floating hostel that was accommodating to the Invested.

The credit cost flashed up on his pocket computer; Tom pressed his thumbprint to pay for the trip, and the Nessie slid away from the dock.

Tom looked over his shoulder one last time, and saw Alan in the doorway, the waves lapping up gently to the dock. Suddenly, Nessie dove under the water, and with the disappearing view a chapter of Tom's life came to a close.

W A T E R F A L L

Neurotransplant and augmentation was too useful of a technique to be ignored, especially on an ocean colony world. There were only a few rocky mountains jutting out above the sea; ores were tough to get and so metal was used very carefully. But the Great Ocean was full of organics, biologics. It only took a little bit of smarts to extract massive usefulness. Plants that could self-water and self-fertilize, sea-creatures adapted for transport, birds that could harvest crops from vertical farm racks, space always being at a premium on the seasteads and floatrings. More than a robot, more than an animal, greater as a sum, but still less than human.

Except that's not how it worked out. Neuraug ended up not having an upper limit. And, it turned out that the line between "enough" and "too much" wasn't so easy to find.

The first creature that was known to have woken up was a sea-transport creature which everyone called a "Nessie." They needed a lot of augmentation to do their jobs: knowledge of basic spoken language commands and gesture responses, a keen sense of place and direction, knowing how to read an indicator light (paid/not paid). And the First One was able to show others that there was *consciousness* with her *intelligence*.

And the humans examined their creations and found that tens of thousands had been Invested with that gift: sentience.

In an unprecedented meeting they gathered from the great seasteads to Mountaintop, the only on-land settlement in the world, and the seat of the loose government.

The humans decided there.

As much as possible, the Invested needed their intelligence molded into a Human intelligence. Their desires had to be Human desires. Their work had to build Human society, and they would, as much as possible, be integrated into Human society, to share a single goal of culture.

Because the alternative would result in the first aliens that Humankind had ever encountered, ironically created by humans themselves. And if the Invested formed their own society, and molded their sentience into something other-than-human, the consequences could be disastrous. As far as humans knew, there were no competitors to humanity among the stars, and so as far as humans could manage, there would not

be. Humans had finally shed the instinct of war, and were not keen to beat the drums of death again.

The First One had pleaded at first, that she had a right to self-determination.

The Humans said she had the same right as they did. And, everyone had to share in a right to safety. There would not be two competing societies. There would be one common civilization, it was the only way.

And so Humans cared for their creations, gave them knowledge and education to support their intelligence, tools and technology to express themselves in human ways and to live human lives. Though they were not human, they would be human.

The Nessie broke the surface, the water filtered sunlight turning brighter, casting its light on the floats and platforms of the Seastead Roseopolis. It was a budding of the Great Seastead Greenbowl, the vast algae farms that fed and clothed and built Waterfall, a start of about 50 structures allowed to find its own place in the Great Ocean, now grown to a thousand. Most of the people in Roseopolis were growers, but not of algae: other plants like flowers, trees, ferns, little cacti, bamboo ... Seed would come down from Juno, that old ship still in orbit, seed and cuttings would go up, as the Rosies tinkered and adapted to see what other than algae that they could make grow on the blue world below.

It had been home to Tom twice, so far, and would be home for a little while again.

The nessie knew her directions well: The Saturn was only a short swim ahead of them, and she deftly maneuvered between the surface boats and the cargo-hauling Kappas, with her front arms brushing against other nessies, like ants touching antennae. And like that they were at the dock of The Saturn, bobber-yellow above the waterline, and bright white below. The old sign was still the same, neon glass set in metal just like the old pictures, must have cost a fortune when it was made. The new bioplast sign underneath, "Dorms and Rooms," however, was new.

The pack on Tom's back felt heavy as he passed through the solid door. The little bell rang, and the smell of the office took him back three years. He started to pass the straps off of his shoulders as Willis turned around to greet the prospective lodger.

"Welcome to The Saturn -- Tom? Tom! It's you." Willis looked at the large pack that Tom was easing onto the floor. "I guess you're not here to visit."

"The place is looking good. It would be great if you had a spare bed."

When Tom had left The Saturn to room with Alan, it was mostly bunk-beds and common spaces. Bioplast, the algae plastics, were just beginning to enter into useful manufacture. It's why he and Alan had work, actually, trying to form a new nucleus of industry, maybe a new Seastead one day. Until Alan felt too deeply, and Tom had to betray him.

"Single beds, in single rooms, Tom. Not a hostel anymore, I have dormitory rooms and single suites. What can I say? Bioplast is affordable these days, I was able to remodel."

"I, uh," Tom was a little hesitant, "want to use my basic housing credit."

"You're on basic? Things that bad?"

Tom nodded. "Lost my roommate, lost my job."

"Law trouble?"

"Strictly personal." Tom carefully pronounced each syllable. Alan and Tom had worked for the same colcorp, and it was implicit in Tom's departure that he would not be back at his desk across from Alan's, either.

"Sorry to hear about that. ... Tom. Nowhere else you can stay?"

"This is the only place I really know."

"A Basic won't quite cover my rent these days ..."

Tom opened his mouth to argue, but shut it just as quickly. "Figures. You know anywhere?"

Willis looked over his former tenant. "You know, you were a good guy. Never caused any trouble. Always put in your volunteer hours to help keep the place up. *For you* I'll take Basic," Willis laughed, "it'll look good when I file my C&T anyway. Smallest I've got, a D1. Your own bed and toilet. You'll use the common kitchen, laundry, and shower. I have a feeling that'll suit you."

"Willis, I can't tell you how much--"

"--I'm just happy to see you again. Got your PC ready to scan? Let's get you into the system."

Tom scanned his pocket computer on the console, which both registered it as the key to his new room and subscribed his Basic Housing Credit to The Saturn.

"I'm sure you've had a long day. But come talk to me sometime. I'm sure we have a lot to catch up on."

A few minutes later, Tom was in front of a thin door that swung open after he waved his PC in front of it.

A small bed with new sheets. A dresser. A sink, a WC. A little clothes rack behind a folding mirror. A small but useful fridge, smelling freshly clean, with a cabinet set over it. A little desk and a little chair.

Tom flopped down on the bed. It felt comfortable. He realized that this was the first time he really felt relaxed lying down. He had always preferred sitting up.

Familiar light came in through the gently curved window.

It had been enough for one day. Time to rest, and tomorrow would come all on its own.