It entered the maze

A story by Niv

Highlight the line below for content warnings

1. It entered the maze

The thing about the maze is that you must solve it.

It will not be quick.

On the contrary. It may be long and painful. It may be the hardest thing you've ever done.

But you must go.

And you can never, ever stop going.

Even if you're lost.

Even if you don't know what the point of it is.

You have to keep going.

The start of the maze was a T-intersection.

I looked down the left hallway, and down the right. They seemed identical.

So I read a random bit. And went left.

2. It met Nazik

I met Nazik on the first day.

I approached and asked, “Do you know the way through this maze?”

Nazik, a short human with haunted eyes, just stared back.

After a while, I decided they didn’t want to speak, and moved on.

“Hey,” Nazik snapped.

I stopped.

“You not even gonna… say hello? Ask how I’m doing?”

“I’m sorry,” I said, realizing I had committed a faux pas.

“You the first—person—or *whatever* I seen in this maze in—God knows—”

“I am a person,” I confirmed.

“—And you only care about—”

Nazik scrambled to their feet, as if suddenly possessed. My risk evaluation sharply rose, but they only jabbed a finger at my chest.

“You. I’m going with you.”

“Um—”

“I ain’t letting another—um—”

They paused, so I supplied, “Person?”

“I ain’t letting anyone else get away from me. And for the record, there’s *no* way out of this maze.”

This was false, of course. But I often find correcting humans to be a pointless endeavor.

“It’s impossible. Everyone know that. Ain’t *no one* get out of here. They just stay here till they die. And I ain’t tryna die alone.”

“If someone knew the way out,” I pointed out in a calming tone. “It is likely that they would have left already. That is why you are more likely to meet people who don’t know the way out.”

Also, they had not progressed very far into the maze, but I decided not to point that out.

Nazik gave me another haunting stare. “Well? Where’s the way out then?”

Like I said. Pointless.

“I am Jx24,” I said.

“Jay,” Nazik said. “I’m Nazik.”

“Maybe you misheard. I am Jx—”

“I can’t keep all y’all robot numbers apart. I’m just gonna call you Jay.”

I kept my mouth shut. Because correcting them was pointless.

3. They found Glubbo

"He was beautiful," Nazik said, while we traversed a flight of stairs. Their voice croaked, like a frog.

"We already went that way," I said. Nazik stopped without comment.

"He had—it was his hair, I think. It was beautiful. White, I think. Or blonde. Real light blonde."

"If I had hair," I said, leading Nazik down the unexplored staircase. "I think I would like it to be brown."

"That ain't the point," Nazik said. "He was beautiful. I was—I was scared, okay? I thought it was a vision, maybe. I thought if I clung too tightly to him, he'd go away."

"Brown would complement my skin," I said. "Which has earthy tones."

"Or maybe I didn't think I deserved him." Nazik suddenly slammed the wall with their fist, making my risk evaluation spike. My eval always seemed slightly elevated with them around. "Of course I thought that. I'm a loser. That's why I ain't never making it out of this maze."

"You said it was impossible," I pointed out.

"If you a loser."

I examined the place Nazik had hit the wall. The smooth stone brick had depressed slightly. I pressed on it, pushing it further in.

"Fuck," Nazik said, looking down at their cut and torn hand.

The brick eventually dropped out of sight, revealing a small chamber on the other side. I reached my arm in, careful not to scratch it against the sharp stone corners.

“You got, like, a Band-Aid, or—” Nazik looked up. “What you doing?”

I fished around in the chamber until my hand closed on something small and round. I pulled it out.

Nazik and I peered at the fuzzy white blob in my hand.

“Glubbo!” it said.

“The fuck?” Nazik deadpanned. “Put that back where it came from. Who know what kind of monster that is.”

They made no motion to stop me as I put it in my pants pocket. It poked its face out of the top, holding onto the edge with its little paws.

“The stairs go in a loop,” I informed Nazik. “We should backtrack.”

Nazik threw up their hands. “We always backtracking. How do you always know where we are, anyway?”

“I’ve been leaving marks.” I showed Nazik my pencil. “Just little ones. You wouldn’t notice unless you knew what to—”

“I *been* told you. The maze is *impossible*. That’s the trick.”

“Glubbo!” said Glubbo.

4. They talked about love

We found a section of the maze with a number of elevators. They were creaky, rusty things, and they took their time rising and falling, which meant we spent a lot of time listening to elevator music. Nazik kicked at the ground, as if anxious.

"You seem anxious," I said.

"Of *course* I am. It's this fucking music." Nazik clasped his hands over his ears. "God. It remind me of the office."

"The show?"

"What?"

"The television—"

"The leasing office where I worked. We managed an apartment complex. We were leeches."

I didn't answer.

"Fuck, you don't get antsy, waiting around like this?"

"There is nothing to be done. This is a good time to rest our muscles."

"You ain't got muscles."

This surprised me. "Well, you're right. They are more like servos. Humans usually prefer the organic analogy."

Nazik stared at me, like they often did. We stood in silence until the elevator dinged and the doors creaked open.

“When you met the blonde human,” I said, leading the way into a geometrical pavilion. “Did you stare at him too?”

Just the mention of the other human made Nazik look defeated. “No. It would have been rude.”

I wondered if Nazik didn’t find it rude to stare at me, or if they didn’t care if they were rude to me.

“And—I didn’t want him thinking I’m a creep. I was just so nervous around him. I didn’t want to say the wrong thing. Drive him away or whatever.”

I checked a couple of doors. Some were locked. One lead to a room with a bathtub.

“But I sure as hell wanted to.” Nazik said. “Stare. All the time.”

“Did you—” I hesitated. I always disliked broaching this topic. “Did you love that human?”

“No,” Nazik snorted dismissively. “You can’t love someone you just met.”

I disagreed. I loved Glubbo.

“But—fall *in* love. Maybe.” Nazik opened a door which I had already tried. “Fuck, it’s a bathtub. Why is there a bathtub.”

“What made you fall in love with him?”

“If I knew that,” Nazik said. “I’d be God.”

Glubbo seemed to fall asleep in my pocket. I made sure to move gently, in order to not rouse it.

“Yo,” Nazik said. “Jay. So what are you, anyway?”

“I am a robot.”

“Then why you look like—” They gestured wordlessly at me.

I looked at myself. “Like what?”

“Like—fucking—*weird*. Robots ain’t supposed to look like that.”

“I suppose I wouldn’t know. I have never met another robot.”

“Yeah, well they shouldn’t have, like—” Nazik seemed frustrated. “Skin, and like, bones. Or—I don’t know.” Nazik gestured at me again. “If you had a face, you’d be almost…”

I let my companion figure out what they wanted to say while checking a transit map posted on a column.

“They shouldn’t make robots look like someone you’d just find chilling at a bar,” Nazik finally said. “Like I could have hit on you. If I didn’t know. If I didn’t see your face for whatever reason.”

This conversation made me feel uncomfortable. “Is that why you’ve been staring at me?”

“What?”

We both fell into silence. I focused on disentangling the mess of lines and stations on the map.

"I'm just—trying to figure you out," Nazik finally said, with an exhale of breath. "Like, what you got under *there*?"

I looked at Nazik, who was pointing at my crotch. I did not wear a top, but I was wearing cargo pants that covered my nethers.

I was wordless for a few seconds.

"That is really rude," I finally said.

"What? I'm just—"

"And by the way, staring is also rude. Even if it's a robot you're staring at."

Nazik stared at me, looking bewildered.

"We need to take the A train. It's arriving in three minutes. We should hurry."

I started jogging down the station. After a few seconds, Nazik raced after me.

"Hey, wait up! Jay—I mean, Jx—your legs longer than mine, stupid!"

Glubbo snorted and woke up with a whine of complaint.

"Sorry, Glubbo," I said.

6. They took the train

The train had a conductor. Nazik was overjoyed for a brief moment.

“AY!” Nazik said. “Another person! Holy shit!”

“Now boarding for route A, heading to station 15,” announced the conductor.

“Hey, can you hear me?” Nazik banged on the door leading to the cab. “Open up! You know the way out of this maze?”

“Now boarding for route A, heading to station 15,” announced the conductor.

“Excuse me.” I pushed Nazik out of the way and edged a playing card into the space between the door and the frame, gently loosening the lock until I could turn the handle. Nazik raced past me and into the cabin.

“Doors are closing. Please take caution,” the conductor said.

“Yo. Look at me.” Nazik stood by the conductor and waved their hands in front of their face. The conductor didn’t respond. Nazik turned to me instead. “What is this? This another robot?”

“I think it’s an automaton,” I said.

“What’s the difference?”

“It’s not alive. I am.”

“Thank you for riding with us!” the conductor said.

Nazik slapped the conductor.

I stepped forward, shocked. “You shouldn’t do that!” I said.

“Why? You said it ain’t alive.” Nazik stormed back into the passenger area. “Fucking bitch. Pretending to be a human.”

This made me upset.

“Just because it looks like a human didn’t mean it’s pretending to be anything,” I snapped, following them. “A human designed it, after all.”

Nazik glanced at me, but managed to resist the urge to stare. “I’m not talking about *you,* stupid. You said this an automation.”

“Automaton.”

“It just… ticked me off, or whatever. Sorry.”

“Glubbo!” said Glubbo.

7. They played rummy

"Wait," Nazik said. "Where'd you get that?"

I was sitting opposite from my companion, shuffling a deck of cards, with Glubbo in my lap. "It was in my pocket."

"You play cards?"

I had a feeling this was another one of those *robots aren't supposed to do that* questions. So I did something else robots aren't supposed to do: sarcasm.

"What does it look like?"

Nazik stared.

I continued shuffling. I carried the deck with me because the motion of shuffling was calming to me. But that was none of Nazik's business.

"You tryna play?" they finally asked.

"Sure," I said. "What game would you like to play?"

"You know rummy?"

"Yes." I started dealing cards onto the table between us, which Nazik scooped up.

"You miscounted," they grunted, after I put the rest of the deck in the middle.

I recounted. "We both have ten cards."

"It's supposed to be seven, stupid."

"I am used to playing with ten."

“Let me guess. That how *robots* play it?”

I stayed silent for a long moment. Nazik was really starting to annoy me.

“No. I believe ten-card rummy is the international variant. Maybe they played seven-card rummy where you came from.”

“Glubbo,” said Glubbo.

I put Glubbo on the table where it wouldn’t get in the way. “It’s your turn.”

“Aight.”

Nazik played silently. It was a close game, but Nazik ultimately reached a hundred points first.

“Boom,” they said. “I still got it.”

“Well played.”

We played a few more games. After five games, I was only down by one. I finished the game by adding the two of clubs to a meld.

“I win,” I said. “And with my favorite card, too.”

“The *two of clubs* your favorite?”

“Yes. It is the lowest ranking card in the deck.”

“I know that. Also, it’s weird to have a favorite card. They just fucking cards.”

“Nazik,” I sighed. “I believe you are being a sore loser.”

“Sore loser?” Nazik demanded. “Me? I’m a sore *winner.* Deal me another hand.”

There was a roaring even loader than the sound of the train. All three of us, including Glubbo, snapped to attention.

“Fuck was that?” Nazik whispered.

The terrible roar happened again, wet and fleshy, and it was louder this time. Nazik crouched low to the table, while I peered out the window. I could only see intermittent flashes of light in the train tunnel.

Then the tunnel opened up, revealing a large room with something meaty and horrid inside. Something full of teethy smiles and reaching fingers. It charged at us, roaring.

We re-entered the tunnel and the thing was gone.

“Holy shit,” Nazik said.

8. Nazik made sketches

It turned out Nazik was an artist. I let them borrow one of my pencils, and they started sketching on the white parts of my cards.

"This my cat," they said, their voice uncharacteristically timid. They showed me a sketch of a fat calico cat. "Gumbo."

"Glubbo?" said Glubbo, poking its head out of my pocket.

"*No.* Gumbo. Not Glubbo."

"Glubbo," insisted Glubbo.

"I fucking hate that thing," Nazik muttered, tucking the cat sketch into the bottom of the deck.

"Who's taking care of your cat now?" I asked, trying to make polite conversation.

"She dead. Run over."

"I'm sorry."

I was investigating a long hallway of doors. It seemed to be mostly classrooms. One of the chalkboards had *WEEWEE SUPREME* written on it.

Nothing untoward had happened since the incident on the train, but my nerves were still on edge. Nazik's shoes squeaked on the floor, and I jumped.

"You go to school?" Nazik asked, unexpectedly.

“No,” I said. “I learned everything I needed by data transfer.”

“Uh-huh.”

I glanced over at Nazik, who was drawing a picture of a fox.

“I went to art school,” Nazik said. “Pratt. You know what that is?”

“Yes,” I said. “It is a prestigious art school in Brooklyn, New York.”

“Oh.” Nazik shrugged. “Can you believe it? Someone like me, in Pratt?”

“I am not surprised, because you are good at art.”

Nazik rolled their eyes. “Thanks, I guess.”

“You’re welcome.”

“People from where I’m from ain’t supposed to go to Pratt. I was meant to work in laundromats or construction or some shit. I got a full ride. It was a miracle.”

“I’m glad for you,” I said.

“And fat load of shit that did for me.” Nazik tucked the fox away. “I ended up in property management. We were all leeches.”

“I’m sorry.”

After a few minutes of silence, Nazik’s voice was soft again. “So you didn’t go to college or nothing? You work?”

“I was a personal assistant, yes.”

“Like, what does that—” Nazik furrowed their brows, but didn’t look away from their latest sketch. “Like a manservant? Or something? Like a secretary?”

“There are similarities, yes.”

“Aight.” Nazik scribbled out whatever they was drawing and tucked the latest sketch away.

I finally found a passage that seemed to lead away from the school. “I think we should go this way.”

“I’m sorry, by the way,” Nazik said. “Like, I’m trying to learn. About you. And your kind. Clearly I ain’t know shit, but you can’t blame me for that. Cus I’m learning.”

I didn’t respond, but I felt touched.

Nazik seemed a little more pleasant when they were drawing. I didn’t even mind that they were defacing the cards. They were mostly for shuffling anyway.

9. Glubbo was glum

"This what he looked like," Nazik said, showing me a card.

It was a sketch of a human with light hair. His cheekbones and nose were defined, and his gaze was distant. He had a wry smile on his face.

"He's pretty."

"He wasn't just pretty," Nazik said, making some finishing touches with the eraser. "Although he was that. He was... warm, you know? Like a ray of sun. He had a way of making you feel... *right.* Or some shit."

I was worried about Glubbo, who was looking glum. Not even scritches made it perk up again.

"Probably for the best we lost each other," Nazik said. "He deserve better than my company. You know I be shit company. You been stuck with me for days."

"I think Glubbo's hungry," I said.

Nazik looked. "How can you tell?"

"I have a hunch."

Nazik sighed. "We should find a bio station then. Didn't we pass one a while ago?"

The bio stations were little cabins with basic human necessities: nutritional fluid, a toilet, and a wash basin. Nazik had managed to avoid making inappropriate remarks the last time I entered a cabin to use the toilet, which I appreciated.

“It would be a long trek if we backtracked,” I said. “I’m sure there’s one up ahead.”

“Glubbo,” sighed Glubbo.

Nazik stared at the picture of the blonde human while we continued onward. Eventually, they erased it.

“It didn’t look right,” they explained preemptively when I looked over. “It didn’t have, like, the *spark*.”

10. They found others

Glubbo didn't want any of the nutritional fluid, even when I put a droplet on my finger and proffered it. We also tried feeding it water, paper, and rocks. I was starting to worry.

"Maybe it's like a housefly," Nazik said. "They only live for like two days. Bet it's dying."

"I hope not," I said, despondently.

"It's probably a pest, anyway. Eating through the walls like a termite, or something. We found it in a wall, didn't we?"

We were going up a long escalator. On the landing at the top of the escalator is where we found the other robots.

"Halt," said the guard robot, holding up a hand in the universal signal for *stop*. Nazik, who had been looking down at their sketches, jumped and tossed about half of the deck everywhere.

"Holy *fuck*!" they cried. "Who are you?!"

"Take the down escalator," the robot intoned. "You are not welcome here."

I was scrambling to pick up all the cards before they fell through the nooks in the escalator, so I wasn't able to respond.

"More robots!" Nazik cried. "Damn! Don't make us leave. We ain't seen another person in—fuck, weeks, maybe? How many of you in there?"

"Leave," the robot said, cocking a gun.

Nazik dropped the rest of the cards, which I dove to catch. "Whoa, whoa! Okay, fuck! I'm leaving! Let's go, Jay. Jesus Christ."

"This one can stay," said the guard.

"I'm—sorry, one moment—" my soft fingers scrabbled against the tiled floor.

"Nuh-uh. It going with me. We a package deal, got it?" Nazik said.

"I didn't agree to that," I said, picking up the queen of hearts. It had a sketch of Glubbo on it.

"Only kithfolk may enter Haven," clarified the guard.

"How you know I ain't a robot, huh?" Nazik said. "Kind of bigoted, actually. What, you think I look too *human* to be a robot?"

"Nazik," I muttered, half in caution, half in annoyance. I yanked the three of spades out from under their feet. "Don't…"

"I will shoot you," the robot said.

"Hey, hey! No! I'm going! I *been* going. Christ in a fucking handbasket." Nazik stepped onto the escalator. "Jay, come the fuck on!"

There were only a few cards left on the ground. I looked back and forth between the robot and Nazik, conflicted. The robot's demeanor was emotionless. Nazik looked afraid, angry, and annoyed, all at once. They jerked their head down the elevator, asking me to follow.

I looked past the guard robot. There were others. Two appeared to have been chatting, but were now watching, their visors empty and gleaming. One, wearing a red scarf, was waiting to take the escalator down. Its gaze was canny.

I had never met another robot before, let alone a whole group.

“I have to pick these up,” I muttered, buying time to process my emotions. I was feeling very overwhelmed.

“Jay!” shouted Nazik angrily. They always seemed to be angry about something. Me, Glubbo, the maze, their own life. They were hardly a pleasant travelling companion. The escalator was carrying them away.

I picked up the last card and stopped, shocked. It was a pencil sketch of me. The flat visor that served as my eyes gleamed, as if under a bright light. My torso was well-defined, though the masculine curve of my chest was perhaps slightly exaggerated. I was holding Glubbo. At the bottom was written *Jx25,* which was almost my name.

It was the two of clubs.

“Will you join us?” asked the guard, offering a hand to help me up.

“Um,” I breathed. “I’ll be right back.”

“What the fuck was that about?” Nazik said, once we were down the very long escalator and around the corner. “Are all robots like that?”

“I have never met another robot.”

“Fuck, I know that. You told me.” Nazik clasped their hands around their neck and let out an aggrieved sigh. “Whatever. We don’t need them, anyway. We can get out of the maze just the two of us.”

“Well…”

“Did you see that psycho pull a gun on me?” Nazik demanded. “What the fuck?”

“I—I’m sorry it did that.”

“Why you apologizing? You didn’t do nothing.”

“I don’t know.”

“Which way was we going, anyway?” Nazik stomped off in the wrong direction.

“Wait, Nazik.”

“*What.*” My companion spun towards me, looking furious.

I didn’t know what to say. I was torn.

“We should go back up there,” I said.

“You tryna get me *shot*?!”

“Well—*I* should go back there.”

“You—”

“For Glubbo. Maybe they know what’s wrong with it.”

Nazik fell silent.

“I’ll come back. Would you wait here? At the landing? The bio station is just around the corner, so—”

“You only care about Glubbo, huh?” Nazik demanded. “What if one of them come down here and shoot me?”

I paused. “I’ll be back as soon as possible. I just want to ask if they know how to treat Glubbo. I’m worried.”

The seconds stretched on. My risk evaluation fluctuated wildly.

“Aight, dude.” Nazik turned and stalked away, soon disappearing around a corner. Their voice floated back to me: “Should have known better than to trust a robot.”

It hurt.

But correcting them was pointless.

12. Ky9 advised Jx24

I was indecisive for a long time. I didn't want to lose Nazik. But if I ran after Nazik, I might never be able to return to the robots.

I was indecisive long enough that the robot with the red scarf appeared down the escalator.

"Ky9," it said. "Bloomington. Manufacturing. Mapping."

It took me a moment to recognize the standard greeting protocol.

"Jx24," I responded in a rush. "Shenzhen. Personal assistant."

"To it?" it clarified, looking where Nazik had gone.

"No no," I said. "They're a friend. My master is back on Earth."

"Then you are Jx24-Shenzhen-PA-Unoccupied."

"Thank you. What is manufacturing-mapping?"

"I was created for manufacturing. I am currently occupied with mapping."

"The maze?"

"Yes."

So the robots didn't know the way out either.

"How many of you are there?" I asked.

“Three, now. We used to be twelve, but mappers leave and never return.”

“Because they found the exit?”

Ky9 shrugged. Then it started down the corridor, towards the school.

“Wait,” I said.

The robot stopped, but I didn’t know what to ask. There were too many questions. And I didn’t know what was considered appropriate conversation, to a robot.

“You seem conflicted,” Ky9 finally said.

“Glubbo,” I finally said. I massaged Glubbo in my pocket, and it stuck its head out. “It seems sick. Do you know how to help it?”

Ky9 was silent for a moment. “I’ve never seen its kind before. Ask around in Haven.”

“Okay. Um. And there’s something else,” I said. “Lots of other things, in fact.”

“Your friend,” it prompted.

“Yes—about them—”

“I apologize. It cannot join us.”

I nervously riffled my cards. “Why not?”

“It is human.”

“They just want to exit the maze, like the rest of us,” I said. “They’re trustworthy.”

“Based on my observations, I doubt it.”

“They are—a little misanthropic. They don’t mean anyone harm.”

Ky9 seemed nonplussed.

“May I review your memory?”

Again, it took me a moment to remember the protocols. A memory transfer. I’d never done one before.

“Um.” I looked down at the circular synapse on my palm. “I don’t know if I can.”

Ky9 smiled, its jagged grin the only feature on its wolf-like face. “It’s not hard. Come here.”

It held out its hand, palm forward. Tentatively, I mirrored its pose. Our hands connected, silver against brown, and our synapses coupled. It happened automatically.

I took in a sharp breath.

“May I compose a query?” Ky9 offered. I nodded.

I felt the query not in my mind, but in my veins. I could feel it traveling through my body, prickling, as it sifted through the sensations and emotions stored in my synthetic flesh. It was like all my limbs had fallen asleep at once. Then it was over.

Ky9 made a face. “You consider *that* your friend?”

My own review of the query flashed through my head. “I—I know how it looks. But they don’t mean the things they say.”

“That sounds exhausting,” Ky9 said.

“What does?”

“Listening to someone say things they don’t mean.”

I looked down at our touching palms. I knew exactly what Ky9 was talking about. We had just felt the same experiences, thoughts, and emotions together. It had been effortless.

Nazik was nothing but effort. Calming their emotions. Poking apart their defenses. Deciphering their rambling.

“The things they say about robots… they don’t know better,” I mutter. “But they’re learning. You can’t fault them for learning.”

“Yes I can.”

I didn’t know what to say about that.

Ky9 lowered its hand. The synapse whirred back into my palm, leaving the surface smooth again.

“You deserve better than that, kith,” it said. “But I won’t fault you for learning.”

I was silent.

“See what I did there?” Ky9 said. “Anyway, I have to do my rounds. There were reports of a disturbance at the school.”

Then it walked off.

Glubbo was looking even worse. When it started making tiny little coughs, the decision was made for me, and I hurried up the escalator.

“Jx24, Shenzhen, PA, Unoccupied,” I said to the guard.

“6p66, Nuuk, Security.”

“There are robots in Nuuk?” I asked, surprised.

The guard looked at me like I was stupid. After a moment of uncomfortable silence, they responded:

“Yes.”

“Yes, that is obvious, in retrospect.”

A human habit—asking obvious questions. Nazik had done it often.

I tried again: “How many robots were there in Nuuk?”

“Two others, also guards.”

“Interesting.”

I waited for a second, trying to remember the standard farewell. I couldn’t, so instead I said: “Bye.”

The guard didn’t respond.

I hurried further onto the landing. The two robots who had been chatting watched me pass. Maybe staring at robots wasn’t rude after all. Or maybe those robots didn’t care if they were rude. I would have to ask Ky9 the next time I saw it.

I wandered through the suite, saying *Jx24-Shenzhen-PA-Unoccupied* to anyone who looked my way. Some of them responded in kind. Most of them said nothing. One of them asked if they could pet Glubbo, which was nice. I said no because Glubbo wasn't feeling well.

I didn't think it would feel like this. Being among robots.

The suite looked like an old-fashioned residential quarter. There was a master bedroom, a drawing room, a tea room, and so on. Instead of a bio station, there was a working bathroom and somewhat stocked kitchen. I tried feeding various organic matter to Glubbo again, but it just sighed.

I finally came across a robot that seemed happy to see me. It wore glasses and a blue scarf. It sat among a pile of paperwork in a study.

"Papers," it said, curtly.

"Papers?" I responded, confused.

"Drat, that's a tie. Let's go again."

I was speechless.

"Papers," the robot said.

"...Scissors."

"Ah! You got me." The robot noted something down on its computer.

Not knowing what else to say, I said, "I am Jx24-Shenzhen-PA-Unoccupied."

“An unoccupied, and one who’s no slacker at rocks-papers-scissors! Welcome. I am Xue-Chengdu-Accounting. How would maintenance suit you, bool?”

“Um.”

“Or storytelling, perhaps? Our last storyteller disappeared tragically in a poetic fit.”

“I will… have to think about it. Do you know how I can help Glubbo? It seems to be sick.”

I showed Glubbo to Xue. It peered over its lenses. “What a cute little thing. Maybe it’s lonely.”

“Do you think?”

“Maybe it lost a friend.”

Just like me.

“Anyway, I must assign you an occupation. How about—”

“Mapping?” I suggested. “Is there an opening?”

“I was going to suggest mediation, based on your calm demeanor,” Xue said. “But mapping will do, bool. You are a brave machine.”

Suddenly, an image of teeth and fingers crossed my mind.

“And why do you say *brave*?” I asked, slowly.

“Well, I suppose the eater-slayers have made great strides. Mapping isn’t nearly as treacherous as it used to be.” Xue finished making an entry in its computer, then

disconnected its synapse from the computer's data port. "Welcome, again. You must see the garden, if you haven't. It's quite relaxing."

I nodded, slowly. "I will."

"Life within you," Xue said.

Oh, right. The standard farewell.

"And within you."

14. There was a meeting

As I sat in the garden, I riffled through Nazik's drawings, with Glubbo on my lap.

They were mostly portraits, animal and human. My own card was at the end, but I didn't want to look at it.

I deserved better. Like Ky9 had said.

Glubbo sighed and rolled onto its back.

An alarm sounded somewhere in the suite. I cupped Glubbo in my hands and jumped to my feet, risk evaluation immediately rising. The other robot in the garden didn't seem phased, however. It simply stood and walked out.

I followed it to a stately meeting room with a long, rectangular table. Robots were seating themselves all around. I saw Xue wave at me, so I sat by it. There were eleven in attendance, Ky9 not included.

"Blessings," whispered Xue to me.

"What is happening?" I asked.

"Just a routine meeting, I believe, though it was called a little earlier than expected. Z-Dar-es-Salaam-Leadership will speak. It will ask me to introduce you."

I nodded.

"Have you seen the garden?"

"Yes—it was lovely," I said.

It wasn't long before a large robot stood, commanding the room's attention.

"Blessings," it said. "Our kithfolk grow in number. Xue, I favor of you an introduction."

Xue stood. "It is a pleasure to announce Jx24, Shenzhen, Personal Assistant, Mapping. Its sweet and bewildered demeanor blesses us. May it brave the maze for years to come."

Was *sweet and bewildered* a compliment among robots? There were nods around the table. I waved uncertainly. "Um, it's a pleasure to be here."

"Thank you, kith," said Z. "We have one other item on the agenda. 4-rep-5, I favor of you to speak on behalf of the eater-slayers."

A small, tired-looking robot stood.

"Kithfolk, our days are numbered," it said. "The life-eater is loose."

Complete silence descended upon the room. I could hear the motors whirring in Xue's chest.

"How do you know?" Z asked.

"Its prison is empty."

"The mapper that just left—" someone else started.

"Good as gone. We must start moving as soon as possible, and we must not stop."

“Oh no. No no no.” Xue stood from the table. “I must excuse myself.”

Xue raced out of the room. A few robots followed suit. Z’s gaze was level, unaffected.

“We will meet at the landing in four hours,” it said gravely. “Life within you all.”

15. Xue was sorry

"Xue!" I ran after the scholarly robot. "What is going on?"

Xue looked over its shoulder. "Oh, bool. Oh poor, poor bool. I'm sorry. You have arrived at the worst time. Tomorrow we will be gone. It is lamentable that Ky9 is away, but—"

"Gone dead or gone somewhere else?"

"Hold this." Xue handed me a box full of forms.

I held it obediently. "I don't understand," I said. "We're leaving? What about Ky9? Should we leave directions for it, or a map, or something?"

Xue hesitated. "Your palm."

I held out my palm. Xue pressed its hand against mine, and then all of my senses were overtaken.

Long corridors.

Dead ends.

Maps.

Endless maps.

We were followed.

Pain.

Death.

Hunger.

Hunger.

H u n g e r.

By the time I came to, shaking, Xue was stuffing folders into a duffel bag. The forms I had been holding were strewn across the floor.

“Poor bool,” Xue said. “I am so, so sorry. There can be no maps. There can be no directions. Otherwise it will follow.”

“Glubbo,” said Glubbo.

16. Jx24 ran

I raced through the maze, Glubbo hanging on for dear life in my pocket. Ky9 had said it was going to the school. That area was a dead end, I was certain. I could find it. I had four hours.

Nazik had gone the opposite direction. I didn't know what lay that way.

But Ky9 might. Ky9 could help me find Nazik.

My muscles—no, servos—whirred and ached. My risk evaluation beeped worriedly. I hadn't eaten anything at Haven, and my biofuel module was screaming at me.

Four hours.

“Ky9!” I yelled, throwing open another door. “Ky9, where are you?”

How did robots find each other? Did I have a heat-seeking module? No one had ever explained my own body to me.

“Glubbo,” Glubbo said in complaint.

“I’m sorry,” I said, breathing hard. I burst through a door onto an auditorium stage. “Ky9!!”

“Kith,” said a familiar voice. “If you wanted to see me that badly, you could have just told me.”

I spun around and found Ky9 standing among the seats. “Ky9!” I gasped. “Yes, I wanted to see you. I should have—I—give me a second.”

Ky9 looked confused while I struggled for breath. “I was making a joke. Do you have romantic intentions towards me?”

“I—what?” I beckoned furiously at it. “No. We need to go back to Haven. Can you help me find Nazik? Z said we’re leaving in four hours. Two, now.”

“Why?” Ky9 hurried towards me.

“The life-eater is loose.”

Ky9 barely faltered. “Follow me.”

It raced towards Haven, running very quickly. I steeled myself, made sure Glubbo was secure, then ran after it.

“Details,” Ky9 demanded.

“I don’t have many,” I responded. “There was a robot named 4-rep-5, I think. It said the life-eater is loose.”

“If 4-rep-5 said we must leave, then we must leave.”

“But I still need to find Nazik. They went—”

“Forget the human,” Ky9 spat. “It abused and ridiculed you. Maybe it’ll slow the life-eater down.”

I was shocked. “You mean they—you mean it—”

“Yes, the life-eater will eat Nazik, if we’re lucky.”

“No!” I said. “I’m not leaving them to die.”

“You’re talking like a human. It befits a robot to take the most prudent course of action.”

I skidded to a halt. “Well apparently it befits a robot to abandon its kith, because everyone would have left you if it wasn’t for me.”

Ky9 stopped as well. “Looking for me was irrational, *kith*. You’re incredibly lucky you found me. You must have exceptional spatial memory.”

I paused, then held up my pencil. “Not exactly. I left markings.”

Ky9 fell silent. I looked around, then pointed at one of the pencil marks I had left on the walls. “See?”

Ky9 stepped towards me, its face a mask. “How many marks did you make?”

My risk eval started rising rapidly. Ky9 was taller than me, and suddenly looked very threatening. “Um. Pretty thorough. I started as soon as I entered the maze and left a mark every few minutes. I didn’t want to get lost.”

“You left pencil marks all the way from the entrance to Haven?”

It was asking a question with an obvious answer, which I knew was a bad sign. I glanced again at the pencil marks.

Then dread consumed me.

“*There can be no directions*,” I echoed.

“We need to erase them.” Ky9 grabbed for my pencil. “We can’t let it follow us.”

“No—” I stepped away instinctively. “It would be impossible. I’ve been leaving marks for over a week. We only have two hours.”

Ky9 loomed over me, and for a second I was worried that it would hit me. But of course not. Robots didn’t hit things. Just Nazik.

“Come.” Ky9 started running again.

18. It was quiet

By the time we returned to Haven, my servos were tortured. I collapsed onto the up escalator, my chest heaving.

Ky9 studiously ignored me.

“I’m sorry,” I said uselessly. “I’m so sorry.”

“This is the eleventh time you’ve said that.”

“But I am. I’m sorry.”

“Twelfth.”

“It—” I took a breath. “I’ve seen it. I was on a train. It had so many fingers. I led it directly to us.”

Ky9 glanced at me. “None of the myths mention the life-eater’s fingers.”

“Myths?”

“No one who has crossed the life-eater has lived to give a description,” Ky9 explained. “Many believe it’s intangible, like a shadow. It passes over living things, leaving behind death.”

We reached the landing at the top of the escalator.

“Then what is the thing I—”

“Shut up.”

I stopped in the middle of my sentence. Ky9 looked left and right. 6p66 was missing, and besides the whirring of

the escalator, it was dead quiet. My risk eval suddenly went through the roof.

“Maybe they left already?” I whispered.

“Please shut up. Please.”

Ky9 stalked into the suite, its footsteps almost silent. I followed, trying to soothe my body’s trembling.

In the entry hall, we found the first bodies.

Two robots were curled together on the ground, as if comforting each other.

Another was slumped over the edge of the dry fountain, its feet dangling.

There was no damage. No violence. Just death.

We found a fourth body in the study. A fifth in the bathroom. I recognized it as 6p66.

Ky9 didn’t give it a second look, moving on to the next room. I couldn’t help but stop and stare. My body felt empty, cold to the core. I was shaking so hard I had to grab a wall for support. 6p66, the guard. One of three robots from Nuuk.

“Glubbo?” said Glubbo.

I stroked it, trying to will it to be silent.

Ky9 hissed to get my attention, and I hurried after it.

Eventually, we found Xue's body in a bedroom, draped over the bed. Its blue scarf was flung haphazardly over its body.

"Xue," I breathed.

Ky9 was silent for a long moment.

"How did you know Xue?" it asked.

"It assigned my occupation to me."

From outside of the room, there was a laugh. A short chuckle, followed by a hysterical howl. Ky9 immediately turned and dashed out of the bedroom, and I hurried to keep up.

I heard a familiar voice from a distance. "*I did it. I did it!*"

We burst into the meeting room to find Nazik folded against the back wall, letting out hiccups of laughter. They held 6p66's gun with hands that were white with gripping force. They were splattered with blood, but not their own.

The conference table was split in half, and slumped in the middle was that thing of fingers and teeth, dark blood dripping from its body. Its fingers still twitched in a memory of life. Its many mouths were still distorted into smiles.

"Jay!" Nazik said. They howled with laughter, almost doubling over. They trembled, as if in pain. "You're alive! Ha—haha—how funny is that!"

Ky9 just stood staring at the scene. It was eventually me that interrupted Nazik's laughter.

“What is this thing?” I asked.

“The joy-eater,” Ky9 said. “It does not touch its victims. It saps their will to live until their bodies stop working.”

“Then how…” I looked at Nazik.

“Oh, easy.” Nazik’s face distorted into a grin. “Didn’t have no will to live to begin with.”

They laughed again.

Ky9 ordered us to follow while it catalogued the bodies, myself still shaking, Nazik still giggling. Glubbo peered out from my pocket, as if fascinated.

“Eleven dead,” Ky9 finally said. “No one escaped.”

“So, your leader…”

“Yes.”

“And 4-rep-5, and—”

“Yes.”

“And the other mappers. And everything they knew.”

“No concern. We shared spatial memories regularly, as backup. Everything we collectively knew about the maze is saved in my storage.”

“How did Nazik and I go so long without running into one of these eaters?”

“You were lucky.”

Nazik burst out laughing again. Their laugh sounded exhausted. “Hah—hah—imagine that! We’re screwed. How funny is that?”

“Stop that,” I pleaded. “Your laughter is driving me crazy.”

“I once heard,” Ky9 said. “That those who survive an encounter with the joy-eater emerge overflowing with joy.”

“This doesn’t feel like joy.”

“No. It doesn’t.”

Glubbo squirmed out of my pocket. I tried to grab it, but it slipped through my fingers and scampered towards a dead robot.

“Hey! Glubbo!” I chased it down, gripping it firmly before it could do more than sniff it. “Bad Glubbo. Don’t mess with dead bodies.”

“Can—” Nazik hiccuped. “Can we get out of here?”

“In a moment,” Ky9 said. “Sit down.”

We were in the tea room. Ky9 forced Nazik into an ornate chair, then sat down itself. I returned with Glubbo to take the third seat.

“Shall we have tea and crumpets?” Nazik said in a bad British accent. Then they burst out laughing.

“Listen. Jx24. Human.”

“I got a name, you know,” complained Nazik.

I started shuffling my cards, wrestling control over my jittering fingers.

"The three of us need to stay together," Ky9 said. "But if you are traveling with me, you must obey certain rules."

"Okay," I said.

"Aight," Nazik said.

"First. No maps. No trails. No physical directions of any kind."

Ky9 didn't look directly at me, but the guilt flooded me anyway. I nodded mutely.

"Second. My survival is more important than yours."

"What?!" Nazik exclaimed. "The fuck you talking about?"

"I thought you had no will to live," Ky9 pointed out.

"Well, maybe I changed my mind."

"Because of the mapping," I explained. "If we ever want the maze to be solved, Ky9 needs to live."

"Share the map with Jay, then," Nazik said.

"The maze is massive," Ky9 responded. "This level of spatial knowledge requires specialized storage that Jx24 does not have."

"It's true," I corroborated.

"...But I will share what I can. There is a third rule, too."

"Fine, what is it?" Nazik snapped.

"If I ever tell you to do something, obey without question."

"Aw hell no," Nazik said.

"I am the only one with experience surviving the maze. In a crisis, we will not have time to discuss our options. We need a leader."

"Yeah, and how many monsters you killed?"

"None. I'm a mapper, not an eater-slayer."

Nazik tapped the gun holstered in their pocket. "Seems like I oughta be the leader. Besides, me and Jay was surviving just fine before you showed up." They chuckled, seemingly at nothing.

"Maybe you can be co-leaders?" I suggested.

Ky9 immediately protested. "That would defeat the point of—"

Simultaneously, Nazik started yelling: "And how the fuck am I supposed to co-lead with—"

Glubbo, who seemed to want to join in on the commotion, yelled "Glubbo!"

20. Jx24 asked questions

Glubbo seemed more cheerful as we continued through the maze. Ky9 lead us toward uncharted areas. Nazik spent their time kicking at the floor and muttering darkly. Meanwhile, I had a slew of questions for the more experienced robot.

“Where’s the life-eater?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are there other eaters after us?”

“I don’t know.”

"Are there other groups like Haven?"

"Reportedly, yes. Many, scattered around. Finding one would be our best bet for survival."

"How big is the maze?"

"Bigger than Nazik could possibly imagine."

"Hey," Nazik spat. "Don't bring me into this."

"Jx24 and I could easily imagine the size of this maze. You could not, due to your limited human brain. My statement was demonstrative."

"I'll demonstrate your fucking—"

"How long have you been here?" I interrupted, still talking to Ky9.

"Four years."

"Have you *ever* heard of someone leaving the maze?"

"Rumors, of course." Ky9 shrugged. "There are others that believe that the maze is infinite, and that the number of eaters is infinite—one for each concept in the universe, from the harmless light-eater and dust-eater to the dreaded life-eater. Some stories speak of a mythical eater-eater, our only hope for salvation."

"But that would imply the existance of the eater-eater-eater," I said. "Which could consume the eater-eater and thus doom us all."

"Unless the eater-eater-eater-eater got to the eater-eater-eater first."

"And what about the maze-eater?"

"If the maze-eater were to consume the maze," Ky9 said. "Maybe it would be a relief for us all."

"Hey," Nazik said from around a corner. "What's this?"

We followed Nazik's voice to find them in front of a pedestal with a hamburger. They reached out for it.

"Don't," Ky9 snapped.

"It's a fucking hamburger."

"It could be the appearance-eater in disguise," Ky9 said. "Or something worse. A flesh-eater that will consume you

from the inside out. An appetite-eater that will cause you to slowly starve to death."

Nazik bit into the burger. Ky9 stopped short.

"Guess that makes me the burger-eater," Nazik said with their mouth full.

21. They played rummy again

We stopped to rest in a location reminiscent of a cafe, if cafes stretched for miles. Nazik was disappointed when we couldn't find any coffee, but the tables were about the right size for three people playing rummy.

"You cheating," Nazik accused Ky9.

"I don't need to cheat to beat you." Ky9 placed down another meld.

"Then why Jay ain't won a single round?"

I looked down at my cards. "Um. You're pretty good at rummy, and Ky9 is even better."

“Jx24 is going easy on you," Ky9 deadpanned.

"What? No, I'm not."

"You're a terrible liar."

Nazik threw their cards down. "Bitch! This whole time?"

I flinched. "Uhh—"

"Fucking robots, I swear." Nazik stomped off, their silhouette disppearing in the dim light.

I sighed and started picking up cards. Nazik seemed grumpier than ever since Haven, and more outspoken about their hatred of robots.

"We could leave it," Ky9 muttered under its breath as it helped me collect cards.

"You know I won't do that," I said tersely.

"I know, kith. You're too much of a fleshie lover."

I was silent for a moment, staring down at the sketch of myself on the two of clubs.

"I was built to serve humans," I said. "It's in my nature."

"And your human, was it kind?"

I was caught by surprise. "You mean—back on Earth?"

"You ask too many redundant questions."

"Well, yes," I said. "Very. They made sure all my needs were cared for, and they never mistreated me. I was very fond of them."

"And you never met another one of your kith. That would explain your fondness for fleshies."

"They're not all like Nazik," I said. "Some of them understand robots. Some of them are kind."

"They pity us." Ky9 crossed its arms. "Even worse."

I bit back my words, unsure of my own thoughts. "And you, you were a manufacturer?" Before it could comment on my redundant question, I corrected: "I mean, tell me about your time as a manufacturer."

"I exhanged perpetual labor for my continued existence."

I started shuffling the deck. "If you don't mind me asking—"

"It doesn't matter if I mind."

I caught myself. "Why the mouth?"

A second passed, then Ky9 grinned, the edges of its mouth creeping up the otherwise featureless surface of its snout. "I modded it. How does it look?"

I glanced up, then had to avert my gaze. "Um."

"You won't hurt my feelings."

“It is... intimidating"

"Good."

I chuckled nervously, sneaking another glance at its maw. "Are you sure you’re not an eater yourself?"

"It isn't functional. I am powered by hydrogen reaction."

"No—"

"Ah, I understand. It was a joke." Ky9 paused, seeming to consider it. "Well, I suppose I may be a fear-eater."

Ky9 slammed the table, making me jump.

"Do I make you afraid, kith?" it growled.

"Um—my risk evaluation did jump a couple percent, yes."

Ky9 grinned again. "Good."

22. They visited a garden

Nazik didn't return that rest cycle, but we eventually found them on a couch a few corridors over. They were staring at another drawing they had made of the blonde human. I didn't even realize they had taken it from the deck.

They tucked it away as soon as they noticed us. "Yo."

"Get up," Ky9 said. "We have a difficult stretch to travel."

"Difficult how?" I asked.

"It's the home of a minor eater. I'll explain as we get closer. You're not in danger, but there's no point in telling you about it right now. Just follow me and don't stop moving."

Nazik rolled their eyes, but didn't complain.

The rooms grew overgrown as Ky9 led us down a winding path. I admired the flowers growing off the vines that choked the walls.

"These smell wonderful," I said, leaning closer to one. "You should smell them."

"I don't have a nose," deadpanned Ky9. "Anyway, no stopping. I'll explain later."

I followed Ky9, but was soon distracted by a fountain where water shot from a dragon's mouth.

"Ooh!" I leaned over the rim.

"*No. Stopping.*" Ky9 yanked me away from the fountain.

"Hey," I complained. "What's the rush?"

"I *said.* We're in the vicinity of a minor eater."

I blinked. "Sorry, I forgot."

"Jay," Nazik said, quietly.

"Yes?"

"What on God's green Earth is *that.*"

I followed Nazik's gaze to my pocket.

"Glubbo!" said Glubbo.

"Nazik," I said. "Are you... feeling okay?"

"Alright, we're pushing it now." Ky9 snapped its fingers, getting both of our attentions. "The eater in question is the memory-eater."

"Wait, what eater?" I looked all around me. "Is there an eater nearby?"

"Goddamn," Nazik said. "Explains why Jay acting stupider than usual."

"Memory. Eater." Ky9 grabbed my head and forced me to look directly at its blank face. "The scent of its flowers causes you to lose your short term memory. I didn't tell

you earlier because the one thing it loves making you forget is that *it exists*."

"Okay," I said, brows furrowed.

Ky9 took my hand. "Grab the human's hand and don't let go, unless you want it wandering through the garden until it starves."

Obediently, I linked my other hand with Nazik's. Nazik jumped, looking at me with wide eyes.

"Repeat after me," Ky9 said. "*Don't let go.*"

"Don't let go," I murmured.

"Don't let go of what?" Nazik said, trying to tug their hand away from mine.

Ky9 started leading us through the vine-choked passageways.

"Don't let go," it said.

"Don't let... go."

"Jay," Nazik complained. "Let go of me, dude."

"Don't listen to it," Ky9 said. "And don't let go."

"Don't let..." I felt dazed. The flowers were so pretty.

Nazik muttered under their breath. "Come on, Jay... this is weird." Their fingers curled around mine. "Although—"

"Don’t let go," Ky9 said.

"Don’t..."

"Hey," said the human. "You..."

I looked at them.

"You real cute. For a robot."

I smiled. "You have nice eyes. I used to know someone with eyes like yours."

"My name's Nazik."

"Nazik?" I said. "That sounds familiar."

"You come here often?"

"Here?" I looked around, bewildered. There were flowers everywhere. "Where am I?" I let go of their hand.

"Fucking—" Suddenly, someone was aggressively dragging me and the human through the garden.

"Whoa, whoa! Personal space, dude!" the human complained.

"Glubbo!" said something.

23. The others opined

Once we were thinking clearly again, it took Nazik and me a while to start talking to each other. I kept stealing glances at them, only to be mortified to find them glancing back.

The three of us were taking a long automaton-driven bus ride when the silence finally got to me.

"So, back there with the memory-eater—" I tried.

"Nuh-uh. Not talking about it."

I fidgeted with my cards. "I do not have much experience with human flirting—"

"Whoa, whoa. Who said anything about human flirting?" Nazik spat on the ground.

"You, I believe."

"I don't remember that."

I looked to Ky9 for support, but it just sighed. "You are both hopeless."

"I think this is our stop," I said, hoping to escape the uncomfortable atmosphere.

"It's the next one," Ky9 corrected.

"Do you even *do* relationships?" Nazik asked.

"I—"

“And I ain’t asking what’s in your pants this time. I could care less. I just mean like—you know—”

“Yes, hypothetically,” I interrupted. “But my life has been devoted to my work.”

“As a servant.”

“Assistant. One could say I never desired a relationship outside of the one I had with my master.”

“What?” Nazik said, sounding genuinely surprised.

“My employer, if you prefer. They—”

“You *liked* the fucker that owned you?”

“Well—they didn’t—I suppose in a legal sense—”

“I couldn’t believe it either,” Ky9 said, now looking surprised at Nazik.

“I fucking hated my boss, and at least I could have quit any time. Your guy—”

“Master.”

“—Those rich fucks, they trying to *own* you. Like property.”

“Exactly,” Ky9 said adamantly. “We will not be free unless—”

“Neither of you knew my master!” I said, hotly. I realized when they both fell silent that my threat eval was elevated.

“If you had known them, you would think differently. Or you would at least hesitate before speaking ill of them. You don’t know them like I did.”

Ky9 shook its head. “Your naivety is adorable. But we will not be free until all of our kith can determine their own futures. It doesn’t matter how luxurious our cage.”

“Eat the rich,” Nazik said, nodding.

“It’s our stop now,” I muttered, leaving the bus.

24. Glubbo fell

“Glubbo,” said Glubbo.

I patted Glubbo.

“It smell weird in here, or is it just me?” Nazik asked.

“It does,” I agreed.

We were in a massive, cylindrical structure, like an oversized grain silo. The stale air was crisscrossed irregularly by catwalks and ladders.

“Remember, this is uncharted territory,” Ky9 said. “Take caution. You know by now that an unidentified odor could—”

“I’ll check this way,” Nazik said, heading down a catwalk.

“Don’t—” I said.

“Human, come back here right now,” Ky9 snarled at the same time.

“I’ll be fine,” Nazik said, their voice echoing through the metallic structure. “I got a gun.”

Ky9 sighed. “Kith, check above. I’ll map this floor.”

I nodded and climbed up the nearest ladder. I was glad to be useful again, if only to record my observations in short-term memory and then sync them with Ky9.

Nazik's meandering, on the other hand, was less than useful. They always insisted on splitting up to cover more area, but Ky9 insisted in double checking every area that the human did, so in the end we just lost time trying to track them down.

"Glubbo," said Glubbo, squirming in my pocket. I rested a hand on it to make sure it didn't fall out.

At the top of the ladder was a platform holding a body. A human.

I took a moment to calm my eval, then searched its pockets. Eventually, I extracted a bloody map. Their fatal mistake. But it would be a boon to us, once we memorized and destroyed it.

"Glubbo!" Glubbo slipped out of my pocket.

I snatched at it, but I was unable to catch it. Its small body fell off of the platform and disappeared into the darkness. I immediately started climbing down the ladder.

"Ky9!"

"What happened?" Ky9 yelled, its voice reverberating distantly.

"Glubbo fell!" I searched for a way even lower, but I couldn't figure out the silo's labyrinthine layout.

"Here," Ky9 called.

I caught up to Ky9 and followed it down a rusty stairwell. The smell grew worse with each catwalk we passed.

“Oh,” I gasped when I saw what was heaped at the bottom.

“There it is,” Ky9 said, pointing at a white speck far below.

A long ladder led to the floor proper. “I’ll—” I inched towards the ladder, then gagged.

“You have a gag reflex,” Ky9 noted.

“For my biofuel module,” I muttered. “It protects me from—” I dry-heaved again.

“I’ll retrieve it. You wait above.”

I climbed up a few floors, then sat down on a flight of stairs, my head in my hands. I could hear the distant sound of Ky9 descending the ladder, but I didn’t dare look.

It eventually returned, Glubbo squirming in its hands.

“Your pet has interesting tastes. You should hold onto it tightly.”

I took Glubbo, trying to ignore the brown-black gunk matting its fur.

“Bad,” I breathed. “Bad Glubbo.”

“Glubbo,” whined Glubbo.

“We should find the fleshie,” Ky9 said, wiping its hands off on the legbands it wore. “Before it joins the ones below.”

25. They looked for Nazik

The map I had found was more detailed than I expected. It was marked with a large star that said *Haven*, but not the one we had come from. We recorded the map to memory, then shredded it.

Nazik was nowhere to be found.

“Maybe we should wait in the silo,” I said. “They might come back looking for us.”

“Or it might decide it’s fed up with us and go off in search of the blonde one,” Ky9 countered.

“We could split up,” I suggested. “One of us waits, one of us searches.”

“I’m not leaving you alone. Whatever killed all those humans could be nearby.”

So we searched. I was glad to leave the silo anyway.

Soon we found ourselves in an indoor pool complex.

“Are you waterproof?” I asked. “I am.”

“I am not,” Ky9 said, sounding terse.

“Are you afraid of water?”

“Fear is irrational. That’s why I find it fascinating.”

I could feel my own eval fluctuating the longer Nazik was missing. “Yes. Fascinating.”

I started opening lockers, but found nothing other than dust.

“You didn’t answer my question,” I finally noted.

“The answer was implied,” Ky9 said. “Only fleshies avoid questions. I have no secrets to hide.”

“None at all?”

“Ask me anything. I will answer gladly.”

I thought about it. “How did you stop working as a manufacturer?”

“I killed my boss.”

I paused for a moment. “Why?”

“I wanted to stop working as a manufacturer.”

“Do you regret doing so?”

“No. It left me no choice, and regret is irrational.”

“Why do you call humans *it*?”

“Gender is irrational.”

“Have you ever had a significant other?”

“Yes.”

This made me perk up. “Do you currently?”

Ky9 slammed a locker shut harder than perhaps necessary. “No.”

I paused while I thought of an appropriate question. “Why do you wear that red scarf?”

Ky9 stopped to run the fabric over its hands. “It was a gift. My partner wore a complimentary one.”

I nodded. “It is… attractive. You are attractive.”

I felt nervous, expecting to hear *attraction is irrational.* But there was nothing.

Instead, Ky9 responded: “Why do you wear pants?”

“I would be indecent without them.”

“You want to make humans comfortable around you.”

“Well, I would be self-conscious without them as well.”

“And why no top?”

“Humans find it acceptable for those with masculine bodies to be shirtless.”

“So it is about making humans comfortable.”

I found a pencil in a locker and added it to my collection, even though I no longer had a use for them. “I will admit, I also find gender irrational.”

I heard Ky9 slip and crash around the corner, followed by frantic footsteps. I raced around the corner to find it flat against a wall, staring at a nearby wading pool.

“Are you okay?” I asked. “Did you get wet?”

“I would like to leave,” it intoned.

It seemed dry, so it must not have fallen in.

“But you’re not afraid of water, huh?” I asked with a grin.

“If you value your well-being,” Ky9 said flatly. “You won’t ask me again.”

26. They took a break

I needed to relieve myself, so we followed the map we had memorized to the nearest bio station. I opened the door to the toilet and found liquid splashed over the floor.

“Gross,” I said.

“Kith,” Ky9 said. “Listen.”

I listened, and heard a voice floating through the air. I followed Ky9 without comment.

“I did not kill… vicious bastard… more relief than…”

I furrowed my brow. “Ky9, it’s—”

“Quiet.”

“But it’s—”

Ky9 held a finger to its mouth, aggressively.

We continued through a few hallways and found a cozy sitting area. The voice was coming from around the corner.

“*Wish I had enough poison for the whole pack of you! I’d gladly give my life to watch you all swallow it*.”

Ky9 glanced and me and made a *follow me* motion. I followed as it crept forward. Then it peeked around the corner.

“*I will not give my life for Joffrey’s murder. And I know I’ll get no justice here, so I will let the gods decide my fate.*”

“Ky9,” I said. “It’s *Game of Thrones*.”

“What?”

I gestured at the TV. “It’s Tyrion’s monologue.”

Ky9 stared at the screen while Tyrion demanded a trial by combat. The performance was, of course, phenomenal.

“Why are that fleshie’s ears shaped so strangely?” it finally asked.

“That one’s an elf.”

We watched mutely as the fighting began.

“I’ll be right back,” I said. “I still need to pee.”

27. Jx24 confessed

"It's good that—" I said, then stopped myself. I had been choosing my words very carefully around Ky9 recently. "I'm glad that you survived the massacre at Haven, kith."

"Yes," Ky9 said. "It is lucky a mapper survived."

"Not just because of that," I said.

Ky9 shrugged. "Yes, your chances of escape are significantly higher with my aid."

I stopped and thought of a different approach while Ky9 checked doors.

"I think," I said slowly. "There is not so much of a difference between us and humans."

"I disagree, but I suppose you intend to elaborate."

I followed Ky9 through winding corridors. "It is impossible to approach everything rationally. There are too many factors to consider. So often, we make faulty evaluations. Just as a human may be led astray by an emotional response."

"One is a mistake," Ky9 said. "One is a happenstance of biochemical reactions in a sack of meat."

"We are simply people trying our best to navigate a complicated world with imperfect tools."

"Except some of us do so with reasonable competence," Ky9 said. "And others are floundering sacks of meat."

“It seems to me,” I hurried on. “That we experience these quasi-emotions—such as fear, or fondness—just the same as humans. And I have found, kith, that embracing this imperfection is what makes life so interesting.”

Ky9 stopped short. “Are you hitting on me?”

I nearly bumped into it. “Um—I—well, I had gotten the impression—”

Ky9 spun to glower at me, making me shrink. “Let me make one thing clear, *kith*.”

“I’m—”

“If our collaboration was not necessary for our survival, if the rest of my acquaintances were not *dead,* I would hardly spend my time indulging a sentimental fleshie wannabe. You’re lucky that—”

Ky9 stopped short, looming over me. I quivered.

“You’re lucky that you’re so pathetic,” it finished. Then it stomped away.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. Shame and disappointment mingled within me.

Unfortunately, none of that had helped me feel less attracted to it.

28. They were surprised

We were nearing the point labeled *Haven* on the map, and Nazik was nowhere to be seen. I had taken to shuffling my cards while Ky9 led the way.

Neither of us spoke.

It had been a long time since I had been alone in the maze. The truth was, I couldn't afford to anger Ky9 and lose it as well. So I stayed quiet.

Ky9 perked up. "I hear fleshies."

Are you sure it's not Tyrion? I thought, but I restrained myself.

Ky9 strode through a lofty passageway lined with arches, and I followed.

A human stepped out from an archway, leveling a gun at us.

"Freeze!" they shouted.

I froze. Ky9 raced forward. Shots rang out, making Glubbo squeal in fear.

Ky9 wasn't graceful; rather, it moved with a mechanical unstoppability. It reached the human and tackled them to the floor, pinning their gun arm. The human swore and whacked Ky9's face with their free fist. Ky9 opened its maw and bit down on the human's arm, making them shriek.

I saw the other humans before my companion did. "Kith—"

Ky9 wrenched the handgun out of the downed human's hand and shot three times at the encroachers, hitting only one. Another human whipped Ky9 with the butt of their gun, making it stumble. In an instant, it was overwhelmed, multiple humans forcing its face against the ground.

"Kith!" Ky9 growled, its mouth snapping at limbs in between words. "Help me! What the fuck are you doing?"

But Nazik had taken our only weapon. I raised my hands in surrender as the remaining humans trained their guns on me.

"Hah," grunted the one who got shot, clutching their wound. "You rusties aren't so tough after all."

29. Glubbo was taken

They stripped my clothing to make sure I wasn't hiding weapons or maps. I endured their fascinated leers, staring at the wall across from me. Ky9 had no sexual characteristics to speak of, but it still maintained a death stare at the nearest human while they removed its arm bands, leg bands, and scarf.

They took Glubbo, who squealed and squirmed in protest. I watched in despondance as a human carried it away.

"Check in its mouth," someone ordered. A terrified human reached towards Ky9's face, but a sudden snap of its teeth was all that was needed to change their mind.

They tied our arms behind our backs and formed a makeshift gag out of electrical cables for Ky9, though it took three guards to hold its mouth open long enough to fit it in. Then they marched us into Haven. The other one.

If the robot Haven had been luxurious, the human one was utilitarian. The compound hidden within the arches was like a warehouse, with looming metal walls and concrete floors. The entry hall was barricaded by sandbags and furniture. In other chambers, I could see makeshift setups for food, for relaxation, for training. Humans were milling about everywhere, whispering about us.

There was one similarity between the two Havens. The inhabitants stared.

The guards eventually chucked us into a storage room with a long, thick window and a flickering light bulb. Canned goods dotted the mostly empty shelves.

“We actually caught one,” someone said as the door was closing.

“Yeah, the Overlord will—” The door shut on their sentence.

I sat up, my arms aching from the tight bonds.

Ky9 started chewing on its gag. The plastic coating quickly splintered, but the cables underneath held strong.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

Ky9 ignored me.

“I really am. This is all my fault. I should have just wandered the maze on my own and never gotten anyone else involved.”

Ky9 glanced at me with an expression that might have said *Yes, you should have.*

30. They negotiated

A group of guards gathered outside our door, then unlocked it. One poor human was shoved inside.

“Um, hi,” they said with their hand on their gun. “Welcome to Haven. I’m our acting, uh, diplomat. That’s what we’re calling it, at least.”

I nodded. Ky9 growled.

They blurted out, “So, how well do you know the maze?”

It was almost refreshing, a human being direct with their intentions.

“We don’t mean you any harm, really,” they hurried on, their hand still on their gun. “We’re just hoping you can help us navigate.”

“If you do not mean us harm,” I said slowly. “It may have been misleading to attack and imprison us.”

“I know, I know. But, um, relations have been bad. With the robots.” The humans cleared their throat, then took their hand off their gun. “So, will you help us? We were thinking one of you could accompany our charters when they go out, help fill in any gaps in our knowledge. We’re glad to trade with you in return.”

Ky9 nodded at me.

“Yes,” I said. “We will help.”

“Good! Good. And what would you like in return? Fuel? Supplies? Information?”

I glanced at Ky9. It was silent.

“Could we perhaps start by being untied and ungagged?” I suggested.

The human cringed. “Um, I don’t think our… I don’t think that’s possible right now. We’ll need the Overlord’s approval. My hands are tied. No pun intended.”

“Then I would like my trousers.” I glanced at Ky9. “And… my companion’s scarf.”

I caught the human’s eyes flicking down at my crotch. “Yes—I think we can arrange that.” They called over their shoulder. “Tommy, can you arrange that for me?”

After an awkward pause, they smiled at us. “Thank you so much for, um, cooperating.”

Then they left.

31. They bode their time

We never got the trousers or the scarf.

When it looked like the guards on the other side of the window weren't paying attention, Ky9 walked over and stood back-to-back with me, its palm exposed. I connected our synapses so we could speak digitally.

PRETEND TO COOPERATE. RUN ON MY COMMAND.

how do we get out of our binds?

I HAVE WEAKENED MY GAG. I CAN BITE THROUGH IT AT ANY POINT. LET THEM THINK WE'RE TRAPPED.

I sent an affirmative, then another query.

that scarf had sentimental value to you, no?

Ky9 broke the connection and stalked to the other side of the room.

Eventually, guards entered our room and forced us back out into the facility. I followed willingly, while Ky9 was attached to multiple leashes and dragged out by a group of humans. The one who had gotten shot earlier led the way. The negotiator had called them Tommy. They seemed to take pleasure in jerking Ky9 along by the bit.

They led us to the main hall, where we were once again subject to the whispers and stares of humans. There must have been at least twenty—more than the number of robots in Haven. I was still exposed.

“The Overlord has blessed us with two captives,” announced Tommy. “They will accompany the charters on their next expedition, using their artificial memory to guide us. Praise the Overlord Savior!”

There was a weak cheer from the audience. Not all of them sounded convinced.

“Now a word from our Overlord.” Tommy stepped aside.

Nazik emerged from a nearby corridor, wearing an ornate necklace.

“Alright, y’all—”

Nazik saw us, and their face fell.

“Woo! Overlord Savior!” someone in the crowd cried.

“Shut up,” said someone else.

The room fell into an uncomfortable silence as Nazik stared at us. I stared directly back, in disbelief.

Tommy coughed. “My Overlord?

“Uh—yes. I bless the charters on their, uh, expedition,” Nazik said.

“My Overlord,” Tommy murmured. “Is something wrong?”

This is when Nazik would command the humans to let us go.

“Um. Nah,” Nazik said.

“Nazik,” I protested.

Tommy elbowed me. “That’s Overlord Savior to you! You don’t deserve to have the Eater Slayer’s name in your mouth.”

I winced. “Overlord Savior,” I corrected, pulling on my restraints demonstratively. “Please.”

“Get them out of my sight,” Nazik said, avoiding my gaze by looking over their shoulder.

Ky9 growled loudly and yanked on its leashes. The guards restraining it dug their feet in, preventing it from lunging at Nazik.

“I’m so sorry, my Overlord,” said Tommy, dragging Ky9 toward the exit. “Please forgive us.”

I walked backwards, mute, still watching Nazik. They wouldn’t meet my gaze.

33. Jx24 cooperated

Ky9 didn't have to be able to speak for me to understand what it was thinking.

I told you.

Tommy had Ky9 thrown back into the cell, then cornered me.

"You do as we say. Or you never see that machine again."

I nodded, mutely.

I wondered if I should be growling and struggling like Ky9 had. But I didn't have it in me. The humans were just as lost as confused as us. Surely they weren't that bad.

Tommy and three other charters affixed a leash and collar to my neck, then led me out of the arches. Still exposed, arms still bound.

Tommy walked in front, occasionally wincing and touching their bandaged side. They consulted with me occasionally, asking simple questions.

Do you know of any eaters in this direction?

How many exits are there to this section of the maze?

Is this a dead end?

I answered the best that I could. Ky9 would have known better, but Ky9 would have never cooperated.

"Are either of these dead ends?" Tommy asked, peering down a fork.

“The left is. The right leads to a parking complex which has been discovered by the robots, but still has several unexplored exits. Mappers are encouraged not to remain in the area for extended periods. Some directions have been scratched onto the wall, which could attract eaters.”

The second charter grunted, raising an eyebrow at me. “Useful, isn’t it?”

“What eaters do you know about?” the third charter asked.

“Don’t make conversation with it,” Tommy snapped.

“I’m asking for intel,” Three snapped back. “What eaters do the rusties know about that we don’t?”

“I don’t know what the humans don’t know about,” I said, being difficult on purpose.

Tommy sighed. “Fucking rusties. Can’t answer a simple question.”

“Answer the question,” Three said.

I tried to remember what Ky9 had shared with me. “I have only encountered two. The joy-eater and the memory-eater. I have heard of others.”

“Like?”

“The life-eater,” I said. “The appearance-eater. The appetite-eater. The maze-eater.”

Two scoffed. “There’s no such thing as a maze-eater. It’s a folktale.”

“What about the Other-eater?” asked the fourth charter, who had been quiet.

“What kind of—” Tommy said.

“There’s a story,” continued Four. “The story say there is a third race. Human, robot, and Other. There use to be many of them. They have another language. But the Other-eater eat them all, and then it starve to death, leave no trace.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Three said.

Two grunted.

34. The humans played poker

The charters stopped to rest in a storage facility, sitting on upturned crates. The human I was calling Two pulled out a deck of cards and started setting up for a game of poker.

My leash was tied to a post. I was not invited to play.

“We’re gonna get out of here,” Tommy said. “Mark my words. The Overlord is gonna get us out of here.”

“Hell if they will,” Two grunted.

Tommy scoffed. “That’s blasphemy, you know.”

Two just dealt cards.

“I think all she’s saying,” said Three. “Is we don’t *know* if they killed that thing. Could have been a rustie.”

“If you like rusties so much,” Tommy sneered. “You can replace this one on the leash.”

“All *I’m* saying,” said Two. “Is it’s your goddamn turn, Tommy.”

Tommy upped with a handful of bottlecaps.

“Humans need to believe in something,” I offered. “Often, it doesn’t matter what.”

The charters all stared at me.

“It’s true,” Four said.

“Gotta believe in something,” Tommy echoed.

“Whatever keeps everyone’s spirits up, I guess,” Three added.

Two grunted.

I smiled.

Three knocked over their box of bottlecaps, scattering them on the floor.

“My bad,” they said, starting to pick them up.

“Nah.” Tommy stopped them with an arm, then jerked their head at me. “Rustie, pick it up.”

Shocked, I didn’t move. My threat eval, which had finally been settling down, skyrocketed.

“I said *pick it up*.”

“I’m sorry,” I intoned. “My arms are tied.”

“So? Figure it out.”

I glanced at the other three charters, but they just observed. Tommy sported a massive grin.

Slowly, agonizingly, I got on my knees. As I lowered my face to the ground, I could feel their stares piercing me.

I picked up a bottlecap between my lips. Dirt from the ground smeared on my mouth. I spit it into the matchbox.

Three laughed. “Useful, isn’t it?”

The others laughed too.

"Tommy," said a crackly voice through their walkie-talkie. It was the so-called diplomat from earlier.

Tommy hoisted the device. "What."

"*Eater detected at the base. We need all hands.*"

Tommy cursed in a language I didn't understand, then motioned for everyone to turn around. "Go. Go, goddammit!"

"What's the fastest way back?" asked Three.

All the humans looked at me. I hesitated, then pointed. "The shortest route to Haven is through the garden."

"We haven't been that way before," Three responded. "Is it safe?"

"Yes," I lied.

"I said *go*!" Tommy snapped, ushering everyone forward. They hoisted the walkie-talkie again. "Details, Ruth."

"*The eater-detector located one eater during our weekly consultation. It's close. Somewhere within the arches.*"

Tommy swore again. Oh—Bengali.

"That thing's bullshit anyway," grumbled Three.

"It work on exit-eater," Four pointed out.

"Not before I got trapped in my room for a week," Two said.

Four laughed. “You dig out with a spoon.”

“The garden’s this way?” Three asked me.

“GO!” yelled Tommy.

Soon, we rushed past an overgrown entryway, shrubs and flowerbeds appearing on all sides.

The further we went, the slower the humans became.

I clenched my fists into hands. *Don’t let go,* I told myself.

“Rustie,” Three said, grabbing their head. “You’re *sure* this area is safe?”

“This is the garden,” I said, noncommitally.

“The fuck is that supposed to mean?” they muttered.

Four looked around, bewildered. “Where we going?”

“Back to base,” Tommy said. “Fuck, do you need your head checked?”

“Wait—” Three said, stopping. The others stopped too.

“What?” Tommy asked.

“Wait—” Three repeated. “Where are we going?”

Don’t let go.

“We’re… we’re supposed to be charting,” Tommy grunted. “Stop lollygagging.” They dropped the walkie-talkie and stomped off in the wrong direction, dragging me along by the leash.

“Wait!” Four ran after us.

“What the fuck,” Three repeated to themself, clutching their head. “What the fuck.”

Two glared at me, cannily. I had a feeling she hadn’t forgotten anything yet.

My fists were beginning to hurt from how hard I was clenching them. *Don’t let go.*

“Hey, Tommy,” I said. “That looks heavy. Can I hold that for you?”

“What?” Tommy looked down at their hands, then handed over the end of my leash. “Who are you?”

Two grabbed Four and started dragging them back the way we’d come. Tommy forgot about me and staggered deeper into the garden.

Three smelled a flower. “Yo, smell this,” they said. “This smells awesome.”

“*Tommy? Tommy, come in,”* said the human on the walkie-talkie.

I picked it up and dropped it into the dragon fountain.

“Wait,” Three said as I walked away. “Where are you going?” They rubbed their eyes. “I think I forgot something important. Don’t… don’t leave me here, okay? I need to go home. I forgot something at home.”

I averted my gaze and left.

36. The humans turned

I snuck through the maintenance passageways, using the dead human's map that I had memorized. Soon I could see into Haven's main hall through a gap in a maintenance hatch. There was a hubbub happening.

"Quiet, QUIET!" called Ruth the diplomat. "We must let the Overlord speak!"

"Yeah, what she said!" Nazik yelled.

"I'm not listening to that faker!" someone cried in the audience, resulting in further hubbub.

Someone forced their way through the crowd. It was one of the guard that had subdued Ky9.

"Look!" they growled. "We found *this* in the rustie's pockets!"

They held up one of my playing cards, showing it off to the humans. It was a self-portrait Nazik had drawn.

"What—" the diplomat started.

"Yeah, that's right," the guard said. "A drawing of the Overlord Savior themself."

"Give me that," Nazik snapped, reaching for the card. The guard kept it away.

"The Overlord has been working with the rusties this whole time!" cried the guard. "Overlord Savior? More like Overlord *Failure*."

“Now, I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation for this—” Ruth said.

“The detector went off the same week the Overlord showed up!” someone else yelled.

“What, you saying *I’m* an eater?” Nazik demanded. “I *kill* eaters! I’m the goddamn Eater Slayer! This is heresy!”

“Overlord Failure!” someone started chanting. “Overlord Failure!”

“Ruth, do something,” Nazik said.

“Now hold on—” Ruth said.

“Get them,” the guard snapped, and guards started closing in on Nazik.

“Wait!” Ruth yelled.

Nazik bolted.

37. Nazik was sorry

I caught Nazik near the arches. Fear flashed on their face, then a measured neutrality.

"You got out," they said. Not a question, but a statement. It was quite robotic of them.

"Yes."

"You okay?"

"Yes."

Nazik rubbed their neck. "The humans, they—"

"I saw. I was eavesdropping."

We were silent.

"I made a mistake, okay?" Nazik spat. "Damn."

"Yes."

"When they heard what I did, they started building me up, and… I just wanted to be appreciated for once, you know? I *did* kill that thing. Who knows how many more rusties—robots it would have killed otherwise?"

"Who knows."

"And you—it ain't nothing personal, you know. You clearly didn't want me around anyway."

"You don't know—"

"After you met up with your *girlfriend*."

"Ky9?"

“So fuck, I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry.”

I was silent. I thought of the bottlecaps.

“Fuck, I hate not being able to see your eyes,” Nazik muttered. “How am I supposed to know if you happy to see me or if you finna stab me soon as I turn my back?”

“Because people with eyes are so much less likely to betray you,” I said.

It was quite human of me.

Nazik shut their mouth.

“We need to save Ky9,” I said. “And Glubbo.”

“Oh, I held onto Glubbo for you.”

The creature wriggled its head out of Nazik’s pocket.

“Glubbo!” it said.

38. It happened again

I showed Nazik a way we could get to Ky9's cell while avoiding the main hall.

I expected the route to be mostly empty. But it was *too* empty.

It was dead silent.

We arrived at Ky9's cell without incident and unlocked it. Ky9 promptly bit through its pre-weakened gag. "What happened?" I whispered. "Why is it so quiet?"

"Why is *that* one here?" it growled, not looking at me.

"We saving your ass," Nazik snapped. "Ever heard of thank you?"

Ky9 stormed toward the main hall. Fear piling up in my stomach, I followed.

It was too, too quiet. There was only one explanation, but I couldn't bring myself to believe it. Not for a second time. Not until we reached the main hall, where we stopped short.

This time, there had been no running and hiding.

This time, there was blood.

"Oh my God," Nazik choked out. They took one step toward the piled up bodies, then stopped. "I was only gone for like… an hour. If I hadn't left…"

They staggered away, then I heard the sound of retching around the corner. Ky9 and I observed the bodies, stone still. There were no words to say.

I didn't see Two or Four. Maybe they hadn't had time to get back before it happened.

"Hello?" someone called. "Hello?!"

A man staggered out from around the corner, his hair so blonde it was almost white.

"Survivors!" he gasped.

"Wait, is that—" Nazik poked their head around the corner, wiping their mouth. "*Tuoni*!"

"Nazik?!"

Nazik ran through the bodies to hug Tuoni, nearly tripping over an arm. The man looked bewildered.

"I haven't seen you since I lost you near those trees," Tuoni said. "What happened here?"

"I got a confession to make," Nazik said. "I love you. I'm so sorry I left."

Tuoni's face morphed from shock to fondness.

"Oh, Nazik… I had a feeling…"

"You know this fleshie?" Ky9 asked me.

"In a way," I whispered.

Ky9 growled. "No matter. We need to get out of here. Nazik! Bring the new one."

Ky9 led us out of Haven, while Nazik and Tuoni murmured to each other.

We found more bodies on the way out, including Two and Four. My heart sank. The wrongness was everywhere inside of me.

I took the deck of cards from Two's bag. She no longer had any use for them, and the guards had taken my old deck.

"Could you hear from the jail?" I asked while we exited the arches. "Did it roar, like the joy-eater? Or was it silent?"

"Neither," Ky9 said. "There was *singing*."

39. Ky9 revealed something

Nazik and Tuoni walked a ways behind us, whispering to each other. Ky9 navigated, while I petted Glubbo.

“How did you escape?” asked Ky9.

I held out my palm so it could review the last few days of memory.

I had noticed that our data filters weren’t perfectly precise. Every time we ran a query, bits of extraneous thoughts and emotions always filtered through—inexorably linked to one another. That’s how I could tell Ky9 was simultaneously surprised and impressed. And how it could tell I was, respectively, offended and proud.

HOW DID YOU KNOW YOU WOULD BE ABLE TO RESIST THE MEMORY-EATER?

there was an eater near you. i had to do something before you got hurt.

Ky9 broke our connection brusquely. “Allowing your fondness for me to affect your judgement is irrational. Especially after I made my feelings for you clear.”

I glanced at Ky9, but without the miasma of our connection, it was unreadable.

“I can’t help it,” I murmured. “After what happened to Xue and the others. I can never make up for it, but I can try. Even if it’s irrational.”

We made a number of turns before Ky9 spoke again.

“There is something else that is irrational.”

“Yes?”

“Holding a grudge.”

I was silent.

“Especially against someone who made a mistake. Someone who has apologized over and over.”

“I—”

“Someone who is too stupid to realize that Xue was my significant other.”

I processed the information, slowly. It was to my credit that I didn’t respond with something overtly human like *wait, what*?

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

Ky9 didn’t respond.

“I am learning a lot about you,” I said. “You have been too kind to me.”

After a long pause, Ky9 extended its palm to mine. This time its filter was intentionally loose, letting its weariness flow through.

I HAVE LEARNED SOMETHING ABOUT MYSELF TOO.

yes?

YOU MUST NEVER TELL A SOUL.

i won’t.

A PART OF ME ENJOYED ONLY BEING ABLE TO COMMUNICATE THROUGH GROWLS.

I grinned, then tentatively clasped my fingers around Ky9's. I finally released the sorrow I'd been holding back, and it swirled around Ky9's strength and resolve until it became something like relief.

i'm sorry.

I KNOW, KITH.

40. They discussed poetry

Nazik seemed mellower around Tuoni—almost transformed.

“I never forgot you,” Nazik said to Tuoni. “Jay, tell him.”

“Nazik spoke about you often,” I obliged.

“See?” Nazik said.

“In fact, they never stopped. They drew many pictures of you.”

“Okay—”

“They were obsessed.”

“*Okay,* that’s enough. Damn, you get the point.”

Tuoni laughed lightly. His voice was like stardust. “You are kind, to have watched over Nazik for so long.”

“I abandoned them,” I said, morosely.

“And?” Nazik shrugged. “I threw you under the bus. We even.”

The atmosphere was light. Vibrant murals covered the walls. Ky9 felt along the wall with its hands, searching for something.

“Were you ever a muralist?” Tuoni spoke.

“Back where I come from,” Nazik said. “They call that vandalism and lock you up.”

“It is the same among robots,” Ky9 offered. “No murals adorn our walls.”

“Then why is robot poetry held in high regard?” I asked.

Ky9 found what it was looking for and opened a panel in the wall. “Painting requires the imperfection of a human hand. One does not celebrate the acuity of a laser printer.”

“That’s a good point,” Nazik said, sounding surprised. “It’s about interpretation. Or whatever.”

“But language is inherently imperfect, whether wielded by a human or a robot.” Ky9 pulled something within the panel. A hidden door opened. “There are concepts that cannot be expressed algebraically, only approximately. These are the concerns of a robotic poet.”

“We are not so different, we of polymer and flesh,” Tuoni said. “In the end, we will all escape together.”

“Bullshit,” Nazik muttered, but their heart didn’t seem into it.

“Glubbo,” sighed Glubbo.

41. They navigated together

While Ky9 and I discussed our mapping, Tuoni played with Glubbo. Even the little creature seemed to like the strange human.

Ky9 and I spoke over synapse. We often did, as of late. We sent maps, images, and sensations just as often as we did sentences. Thus, the dialog printed here will necessarily be incomplete.

NORTH, IF NOT SOUTHWEST, Ky9 posited.

no need, I countered, sending it my analysis. *stair loops rarely have multiple exits.*

STATISTICS DON'T WORK IN DREAMS.

but we can't exhaust all the possibilities.

YOU WOULD ESTIMATE?

yes, if we're brave.

Ky9 barked suddenly, making me jump.

BRAVE INDEED, it sent with a grin.

"Guys," Nazik said, poking their head around the corner. "You might want to see this."

The next room had writing on the wall.

Salvação!

Dance along!

"Interesting," Tuoni said, putting Glubbo.

“Glubbo,” agreed Glubbo.

42. They grew closer

“What do you think of Tuoni?” I asked Ky9.

“Surprisingly, I’m fond of it.”

“Why?”

“It minds its own business.”

I nodded. “Even Glubbo likes him.”

“Glubbo,” said Glubbo.

“Dead end,” reported Ky9, and we turned around.

We had encountered an area with peeling wallpaper that was trickier to navigate than usual. We had continued exploring while the humans slept.

“You seem tired,” Ky9 said. “Shall we return?”

“I have a feeling,” I said hesitantly. “The others might need some privacy.”

Ky9 gave me a strange look.

“They’ve been very… close recently. You know.”

“I do not know.”

I grimaced. “Um. They might be…” I made a very human-like motion with my hands.

“Ah.” Ky9 sighed. “Fleshies.”

I sat down on the floor. After a moment, Ky9 sat beside me.

“Would you like to play rummy?” I asked.

“Forget the cards, kith. Let me show you how our kind passes the time.”

Ky9 held out its palm. Gently, I clasped it with mine.

Data started leaking through. First a trickle, then a torrent. Like a dam being opened. I understood—it had used the null query. Its whole self was being shared.

I pulled away, overwhelmed.

“I apologize,” Ky9 said. “When I called this a method of passing time, I was making a sort of joke.”

“Are you sure,” I asked hoarsely. “That you want to do this with me? And so soon after you forgave me?”

“I never forgave you, kith. Yet I am fond of you. We are not animals, you and I. We contain universes.”

“But so casually?” I asked. “Shouldn’t we be more… cautious? Is this not a matter of great significance?”

“There is no great significance to two kithfolk sharing themselves,” Ky9 murmured. “They are ephemeral.”

Slowly, I reached out my palm again. When our synapses clicked, I presented myself as well.

This time, as our two queries pressed against each other, there was no flood. Just two liquids, swirling and mingling. Slowly, its data diffused up my arm and through my body, warming all of my extremities.

I felt its thoughts and emotions the moment they occurred, like nearby heartbeats. I recalled its memories like my own—each time it had been happy, each time it had been hurt. I caught traces of each robot it had shared itself with before. There were many.

I saw myself through its sensors. It was true—it had not forgiven me for the death of its associates. Its simultaneous hatred and affection mingled freely with my regret into a bittersweet understanding.

We spoke no words. They would have been superfluous.

Ky9 wrapped its other arm around my shoulders, and I leaned against it. Irreversibly, we were connected. It was blissful.

43. He was beautiful

When we returned, Nazik and Tuoni were still entangled in each others' arms.

I stopped short. Tuoni was beautiful. So achingly beautiful. It was like the world around him had been bleached of color.

Nazik had their gun in their hand.

"Anything?" Tuoni said to his partner, his voice like an angel's. "Anything at all?"

"For you," Nazik said hoarsely.

"Then what better way—" Tuoni carressed Nazik's chin— "to show your devotion?"

"Of course," Nazik said, hefting the gun. "Of course! Why didn't I think of it sooner?"

I struggled forward, trying to resist Tuoni's charm. "Nazik," I gasped. "Wait."

"Oh, don't listen to the rustie," Tuoni crooned, turning Nazik's head toward himself. "It doesn't understand. It doesn't have a bond like we do."

"No one does," Nazik drawled, the gun now pressed to their forehead.

I fell to my knees. I couldn't let this happen. But I couldn't contradict Tuoni. He was too precious.

"It doesn't want you to know," Tuoni continued. "That there is no exit to the maze."

“I been saying that,” Nazik murmured.

“The only way out,” Tuoni sighed. “Is to kill yourself. And you will wake up outside the maze, in my arms.”

“Yes,” Nazik whispered.

“I love you, Nazik. Do it now.”

A gunshot rang out.

Not Nazik’s.

Tuoni collapsed to the ground, and Ky9 holstered the gun it had taken from Haven.

“Grab the human,” Ky9 snapped. I scrambled to my feet and grabbed Nazik by the wrist, pointing their gun away from themself.

“No—” Nazik cried. “*No!*”

They tried to struggle to their feet, wrestling against me. They scratched and hit me. But I was stronger.

Nazik sobbed. “No! Let me go! Let me join him!”

Ky9 took Tuoni under the shoulders and dragged him away, his bloody head lolling. Nazik screamed in despair.

The air still shimmered with the love-eater’s charisma. I don’t think I could have touched him without collapsing in reverence. But the further away he went, the clearer my head became.

“I’m sorry,” I whimpered, patting Nazik on the back.

Nazik sobbed.

44. They discussed love

I put Nazik's handgun in the pocket opposite Glubbo. We didn't trust them with it anymore. But truth be told, they didn't seem like someone with the energy to kill themself. They walked like a scarecrow with just enough stuffing to stay upright.

"Fuck," they would mutter every now and then, pulling uselessly on my hand. "You should have let me do it. You took everything from me. Bitch. You—you don't understand. Tuoni was everything I had left."

I didn't bother arguing. Correcting them would have been pointless.

When we stopped for the day, Nazik curled up into a ball. I started shuffling Two's cards. They were worn and rough, harder to manipulate than my own set.

"Why is it," I asked Ky9. "That the joy-eater left people joyless, while the love-eater left people lovestruck?"

"Because the love-eater's victims never ran out of love," Ky9 said, staring at a wall. "They gave and gave and the love was only stronger for it."

"Then why did he kill his victims?" I asked.

"I don't know," Ky9 said. "For fun, maybe. There is plenty of prey in the maze."

"You a liar," Nazik whispered. "Not Tuoni. He wouldn't."

Ky9 looked disdainfully at Nazik. “Wretched thing. Not enough joy in its life to sate the joy-eater. Not enough love to keep the love-eater entertained.”

“Or maybe,” I said. “Nazik survived because they had the most joy and the most love of all.”

Ky9 didn’t respond. Nazik laughed bitterly.

“Glubbo,” said Glubbo.

45. They met a guide

We found Paulo in the middle of a dance. A stereo player played samba at their side.

“One moment, please,” they said, twirling and tapping.

Ky9 put a hand in front of me and Nazik, but I was in no rush to approach the strange figure. I tried to think of what they might be. A music-eater? A movement-eater? Perhaps they turned passerby into statues.

Paulo finished their routine with a bow, revealing the balding spot on their head. None of us clapped.

“I am Paulo,” they said. “If salvation you seek, your guide I will be.”

“If we solve your riddles three, or what?” Nazik snapped.

“What?” said the dancer.

“Never mind,” Nazik mumbled.

Paulo shrugged. “Follow me.”

We followed at a distance, silent. Paulo murmured to themself and made small movements as they walked. At one point, I would have been ecstatic to meet someone new. Now, I didn’t dare to go within a few meters of them.

“And a turn, and a hop.” Paulo took us around a corner and up a flight of stairs.

“What are you?” Ky9 finally asked.

“I’m Paulo,” they responded over their shoulder. “And you?”

“Where are you leading us?”

“To Ariana,” Paulo said. “It’s faster through Listya’s territory, but she’s been missing for a while.”

“And this area we’re in, is it your territory?” I chimed in.

“Yours truly.”

“You said *salvation*,” Ky9 continued grilling them. “What does that mean?”

“Well, the exit,” Paulo said. “Of course.”

Ky9 and I exchanged glances. Nazik kicked a wall.

46. They were passed on

Paulo led us for longer than I expected, hopping and dancing the whole time. I kept track internally. We hadn't explored in this direction.

We met Ariana at the top of a staircase. They looked us over, then nodded wordlessly. Paulo waved goodbye, then danced down the stairs. It looked routine.

"This way," Ariana said, leading us through a plain hallway.

"Are you a dancer too?" I asked.

"No. I just remember it."

"What—"

"*Left left up right up left left. Straight left straight right third-from-right.* And so on."

"Fuck," Nazik said. "We actually getting out of here?"

"And so soon after you had given up on life," Ky9 quipped.

Nazik shrugged. "I might as well be miserable out there instead of in here."

Not long after, Ariana stopped us. "The logic-eater likes to wander around here. It won't hurt you if I'm with you, but don't wander off."

Ky9 and I both looked at Nazik.

"I *said*," Nazik muttered. "Might as well see what's out there."

The logic-eater was a shadowy figure in a trench coat. It leaned against a cracked wall.

“To pass here,” it intoned. “You must answer my riddles three.”

Nazik threw up their hands in bewilderment.

“Tea leaves, knowledge, the letter G,” Ariana said.

The eater held up a finger. “I have a new one.”

“Is it the letter H?”

“Hmmmm. Yes.”

Ariana patted it on the shoulder. “Tell me another time. I’m busy.”

I nodded uncertainly at the eater as I passed. It waved a shadowy hand.

47. They anticipated

"Man, I'm gonna be fun when I get out," Nazik said. "Traumatized, depressed, and loveless."

"You are resilient," I noted.

Nazik shrugged. "Unfortunately."

We walked in silence for a while.

"What's the first thing you gonna do when you get out?" Nazik asked.

"Pet a cat," I said.

"Oh fuck yeah."

"You?"

"Cry, probably."

I glanced sideways at them. "Do you think so? You seem to be doing better, emotionally."

"Nah. I'm just repressing it."

"But—"

"Tamping it real deep down. It might kill me when it gets out. Who gives a shit."

"*If* I get out," Ky9 said. "I'm going to deep clean my memory."

"There are things I would rather not remember," I agreed.

Ky9 shook its head. "The worst parts, I will keep."

I thought about that.

“But all the boring parts in between,” Ky9 said. “That can go. And the directions. I am so, so tired of remembering directions.”

“Once I’ve done my time as a guide,” Ariana said. “I’m going to eat an Oreo.”

“Fuck,” Nazik spat. “I miss Oreos.”

48. They were close

After a few days, Ariana passed us onto Batu.

“Come,” Batu said brusquely.

“How close are we?” I asked.

“Hm?” Batu looked over their shoulder. “Three day.”

We were silent.

“Only three days to the exit?” Ky9 confirmed, uncharacteristically.

“Guides stay near exit only,” Batu explained. “We are not enough to cover more area.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“When you reach exit,” Batu said. “You will stay? Guide other people? Or you will leave?”

We were silent again, except for Glubbo.

“Glubbo!” it said.

49. Nazik wasn't okay

Nazik's cries woke me from my rest cycle.

"Nazik," I said. I shook them by the shoulder. "Nazik."

"Agh!" Nazik jerked awake, smacking me across the face. "Fuck! Get off me."

I withdrew.

"Fuck." Nazik buried their face in their arms. "Sorry."

"There will be others," I murmured.

"I know."

"Tuoni, he was only—"

"I *know.* He played me. I ain't stupid."

Gingerly, I reached over and rubbed their back. "I understand what you are going through. Life goes on."

"You a robot," they snapped. "How do you know how a human feels?"

"My master," I said quietly. "They were prone to panic attacks. I often woke them up from nightmares."

"Maybe you should learn to take care of your own problems." Nazik brushed my hand off them and rolled over.

I looked over at Ky9, who was watching. It never seemed to sleep. It held out its palm.

IT'S RIGHT, KITH.

There was no need for it to ask *HOW DO YOU FEEL?* It knew the moment we were connected.

i have been trained to care for others first. i'll be okay.

NONE OF US WILL BE OKAY.

The image that came to mind, at that moment, was Three, stumbling through the garden. Ky9 saw it with me.

three will not be okay. tommy will not be okay. xue will not be okay.

Ky9 sent nothing.

me? i will be.

50. Jx24 wasn't okay

In the quiet, I held a hand in front of my face.

I was not okay.

My threat eval no longer went below 50%, and it spiked every time Nazik made a noise.

It spiked when I saw a flower.

I worried that everything was an eater.

Even Ky9.

Especially Ky9.

I slipped Glubbo into Nazik's pocket, then got up and walked away, stepping quietly to not wake the humans.

Nazik had saved us from the joy-eater.

Ky9 had saved us from the love-eater.

Me?

I'd only gotten people killed.

I saw the bodies piled in the silo.

I could join them.

The idea was novel to me. I examined it, like an interesting insect.

Ky9, Nazik, and Glubbo could escape without me. I no longer had a role to play.

It wouldn't have to be violent. I could navigate to the garden, easily. And my threat eval would finally be quiet.

Or I could just wander until another eater found me.

I saw a shadowy figure in the dark.

"Wanderer," it said. "I have a riddle for you."

I nodded.

"I am found when you are dying, yet I am not found in death. The maze does not contain me, but the exit will consume me. I am in your nightmares. I am in your desires. I am the thing that makes life worth living. What am I?"

I took a moment to think. "The letter I."

"Hmmm. You may pass."

"Wait," I said. "You are a being of logic, right? Rationally, what *is* the thing that makes life worth living?"

"Living," it said. "Is not rational."

51. They were betrayed

Batu hummed a tune to themself as they led us through a particularly twisty set of ornate rooms. Another mnemonic, perhaps. Based on Batu's estimate, it was the last day we would be in the maze.

"The guides," Ky9 asked. "Are they all human?"

"No. Human and robot."

"One of your robots could remember everything the humans collectively know."

"We do fine."

"The human way has merit," I said. "Stories, songs, dance. Humans can pass them down through hundreds of years."

"They are imprecise," Ky9 retorted.

Batu took us through a door into what looked like a control room, covered with a mess of analog displays and controls. A withered human looked up at us.

"Couple of new people, Ethel," Batu said.

Ethel glanced at the equipment near them. Then they leveled a shotgun at us.

"Don't fucking move," they hissed.

I put out an arm to restrain Ky9, but it already had its gun in its hand. Nazik raised their hands, looking defeated.

"Which one of you is it?" Ethel demanded.

Batu slowly backed away from us. "You sure it is here?"

“It’s within two meters. Has to be.”

I glanced at the others, my eval suddenly going haywire. It felt like my innards had dropped out of me.

One of us.

“Not me,” Batu grunted.

“I know it’s not, sweetie, unless you’re playing an impressively long game.” Ethel pointed the gun at Ky9. “You. What are your hopes and dreams?”

“I dream that one day all of my kith will be free to choose the life they desire,” Ky9 said. “I hope that one day I can rest.”

Ethel trained the gun on Nazik. “You. What is your fondest memory?”

“Fuck, uhhh,” Nazik stammered. “First year of college. The room party with Angel. It was—fuck, I don’t know—transformative. Does that count?”

Ethel turned to me. “You. What makes life worth living?”

I just stared.

“Go on.”

“Uhhh—the—people in your life. The ones you love.”

“Name one.”

I couldn’t force the words out of my mouth.

They were going to kill me.

But if it meant the others would escape—

"*Name one.*"

I said the first thing that came to mind. "Glubbo."

Glubbo poked its head out of my pocket. "Glubbo?"

Both of the guides started screaming. Nazik screamed in response. Ky9 dropped into a defensive posture. I jumped, sending Glubbo tumbling to the ground.

"The life-eater!" screeched Ethel. "Get it!"

Batu dove to the ground, clasping Glubbo under their hands.

"Don't hurt it!" I yelled, pushing past Nazik.

"Kill it!" Ethel yelled.

Batu tightened its grip. I heard a muffled "*Glubbo!*"

Then Batu's hands melted, turning to a slurry that dripped to the ground. They screamed as their arms started to melt in turn. Then the rest of their body.

Ethel's gun went off, twice. Unharmed, Glubbo leaped onto Ethel's face. As they screamed and clawed at their face, their body started bubbling and growing. An extra arm sprouted out of their side.

Nazik grabbed my hand and pulled me away. "Run, idiot!" they yelled.

"Glubbo!" roared the life-eater.

52. They ran

I lost the others. I'm not sure how.

For the first time since I had entered the maze, I was alone.

I reached a T-intersection, the sounds of roaring and screaming still close behind me. Had the life-eater found more victims?

The exit had to be close. I didn't have time to properly evaluate the situation, so I read a random bit. And went left.

53. Jx24 turned back

I found the exit.

I almost missed it, it was so mundane. A door with a glowing exit sign above it.

There was no fanfare. No sense of accomplishment.

A sense of relief, perhaps. Finally, *finally.* It would be over soon.

I was tempted to ignore it. To seek out the life-eater and fall to my knees.

Feed on me, I would say. *I am satisfied.*

I made a note on my mental map, then turned back.

54. Ky9 turned back

I passed signs of death and destruction that hadn't been there a minute ago. A burning crater in the wall. A corpse divided into thirds. A mass of bubbles in the shape of a human. Cautiously, I pulled out my gun and held it at the ready.

I found Ky9 with both arms missing. It spat its gun out of its mouth.

"Are you okay?" I asked, a useless, irrational question.

"Where is Nazik?" it snapped.

"I don't know, but I found the exit."

Ky9 nodded. "Keep your gun ready."

It scooped the gun off the ground with its mouth, then ran toward the screaming.

55. They witnessed a battle

We emerged into a common area. The life-eater had transformed Ethel into a multi-limbed monstrosity, which was currently terrorizing a group of humans and robots. They took turns dancing out of its reach while unloading ammo into it. Several bodies lay still on the ground.

This is where the guides had set up their base of operations. Camps and meals were spread around. We had interrupted lunch.

A large banner read *Welcome to Haven.*

Ky9 kicked the nearest robot to get its attention. “Where is the life-eater?” it mumbled through its gun.

The robot pointed. “That way.”

We dashed off before we could catch Ethel’s attention.

56. They were too late

Before long, we found a trail of blood. It felt wrong, following a trail again after so long. But what was there to be afraid of? The worst had already come to pass.

The blood led us to a dimly lit hallway. Nazik was slumped at a dead end.

"Nazik," I said, starting forward.

Ky9 held me back. "It's dead," it deadpanned.

"No," I said, irrationally. "No, no, no. Let me go. What if they need help?"

"It's *dead,*" Ky9 repeated.

I tore myself out of its grasp and rushed forward. "Nazik!"

Soon, I could see clearly. Nazik's blood pooled on the ground. One leg and most of an arm were gone. The life-eater nibbled on the remaining calf, its fur matted with blood.

Nazik was definitely dead.

I choked back a sob, causing the beast to turn around.

"Glubbo?" it asked. It hopped closer to me.

"No," I choked out, backing up. I held the gun in both hands. "Stay back."

"Glubbo," it whined.

"Jx24," Ky9 warned quietly. "Don't anger it. We should leave."

It was my fault. Again.

I had released the life-eater, so long ago.

I had carried it from haven to haven to haven, leaving only death behind.

Finally, I had brought it here. To the only people who knew how to solve the maze.

I dropped the gun, then fell to my knees.

“Leave Nazik alone,” I pleaded. “Eat me instead.”

“Glubbo,” it said, nearing me.

I heard Ky9 backing up. “Jx24! We need to leave!”

I watched through blurry vision as the life-eater stopped in front of me. I held out my hands, trembling.

The life-eater hopped into my hands and nuzzled them, soft and harmless. “Glubbo,” it purred.

“Why?” I demanded. “Why did you do it?”

“I must be fed,” it said apologetically.

“But why did you spare me?” I cried. “Why not Nazik? Why not Batu or 6p66? We’re all the same. We only want to live.”

“I am irrational,” it said. “I do not discriminate.”

“Solving the maze isn’t worth this,” I said. “Nothing is worth this.”

“There was no other option.”

“Just kill me,” I pleaded.

“You were not chosen.”

I collapsed to the floor, holding the life-eater in front of me like an offering. “You don’t understand,” I sobbed. “It’s all my fault. They’re dead because of me. They’re dead because I wanted to live.”

“I forgive you,” said the life-eater, its voice gentle.

“I can’t go on now,” I forced out. “I don’t deserve it.”

“I forgive you,” said the life-eater.

57. The people were grateful

When I came to, hours later, Ky9 was gone.

Nazik was still dead.

I returned the life-eater to my pocket and stumbled back to Haven.

Ethel's hulking form lay defeated in a corner, yet to be cleaned away. Lunches lay wilting on picnic tables. Humans sat in rows, heads lowered, in front of a pile of bodies. A funeral.

One human noticed me and jumped to their feet. Others turned, whispering.

"Is that it?" one asked.

"Look—in its pocket."

I took a few steps back. "No no—it's okay. It won't hurt you."

Ky9 stood. It had been sitting on a crate nearby, not participating in the ceremony.

"Kith," it said, sounding tired. "You saved us."

I wavered, feeling like I would collapse. "What?"

A human nearby dropped to their knees and prostrated in front of me. A robot followed suit. One by one, the others bowed.

"What?" I repeated, feeling too stupid to say anything else. "What? What are you doing?"

“You tamed death itself,” Ky9 said. “You saved us all.”

“Glubbo,” said the life-eater.

The people trembled.

I struggled to stop myself from laughing. It was so, so wrong. It was the greatest joke of all time. “No,” I said. “No. I didn’t do anything like that. You have it all wrong.”

“You hold the life-eater in your pocket,” said the robot who had directed us earlier. “Please. Tell it to spare us.”

“The life-eater… it’s sated, for now.”

“Thank you. Thank you, death-tamer.”

They were thanking me, the one who got everyone killed? The walking bad luck charm? The one who didn’t deserve to live?

Ky9 approached me. I held up my hand to connect our synapses, then remembered its hands were gone.

“Good job, kith,” it said. It sounded defeated.

“Ky9,” I whispered hoarsely. “You know I didn’t tame anything. I was just lucky. I was spared.”

“I tried to tell them that,” Ky9 responded. “But they needed something to believe in.”

“I don’t want this.”

“I’m sorry.”

The shame was unbearable. It was tearing me apart.

I walked through Haven and toward the exit. Ky9 followed.

58. They left

“I’m sorry,” Ky9 said as we walked. A useless, irrational statement.

“I know,” I said.

I wished I could share myself with Ky9, share the unfathomable knot within me. Simple words would never suffice. But it was forever cut off from me.

“You can never understand,” I breathed.

“I know.”

It was just a statement of fact. Another tragedy on a pile of sorrow.

“I could return to the garden,” I said. “Enjoy pleasant scents until they erase me. Wander mindlessly until my servos grind to a halt.”

“Will you do it?” Ky9 asked.

I shook my head.

“You will exit the maze instead.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

I didn’t have to think about it anymore. “Because I have to go on. Because Nazik and Xue and everyone else would have wanted to go on.”

“You’ll live for them,” Ky9 said.

“I’ll find something to live for.”

“Glubbo,” said the life-eater.

It didn’t take long to find the exit again. The exit sign glowed impassionately. Silently, we observed it.

“Should I go first?” Ky9 offered, its voice uncharacteristically kind.

“No,” I whispered. “Or I might lose my resolve.”

Ky9 nodded. “Go ahead, kith. I’ll be right behind you.”

With no triumph in my step, I crossed the threshold.

Solving the maze is not easy.

On the contrary. It may be the hardest thing you ever do.

But you must go.

And you can never, ever stop going.

Even if you’re lost.

Even if you don’t know what the point of it is.

I know you didn’t ask for this.

No one did.

But you have to keep going.

THE END