The reconstructed forests of Earth seemed somewhat anachronistic to most, as much of the United Network of Interplanetary Systems featured landscapes that were almost entirely urban. Some people even considered the woodlands to be outdated novelties rather than actual environments. However, since the end of the Universal War, conservation programs had been raring to reestablish them across the systems and ensure that protective and reconstructive measures were implemented to make sure they were left untouched by urban expansion projects.

One such forest happened to be the meeting spot chosen by the CyberSoul-inhabited drone making its way through the underbrush—a spot with great emotional significance. The drone paused before heading deeper into the flora, stooping low to watch a banana slug—one of the many species revived after Earth's reconstruction—undulate over the dirt.

The drone chuckled, lightly brushing the slug's side with its fingers. "They never change," it murmured in a voice with a feminine tinge, a half-smile, half-smirk crossing her face. "One…" She turned and squinted at a pile of something like sawdust and quickly spotted another slug, observing it for a moment before straightening up and continuing on her path. "Two."

As she walked, the drone surveyed the landscape, attempting to capture its indescribable beauty, before coming to a stop at a seemingly-nondescript spot in the middle of the woods. She exhaled and brushed a braid of blue-and-purple hair away from her face, removing the forest-green bag she'd been carrying. "This seems about right," she whispered, taking a ceramic pot decorated with painted daisies out of the bag. She set it down on the ground and then pulled out a trowel, digging a small hole before placing the pot inside it.

Tears appeared on the drone's HUD, prickling the bottoms of her eyes but not yet falling. "Ah… god, you would've loved to see this place again," she choked out, slowly covering the pot with dirt again. She looked around for a moment before slowly picking up a small, flat stone, upon which she began to carve the words "For DeeDee, in a place that she loved" using a blade produced from the tip of her finger. The tears started to fall as she did so, and once she was finished, she placed the stone on top of the small grave, pushing it into the dirt before rising to her feet again and continuing on her way.

However, she did not remain unaccompanied on her walk for very long; moments after cresting a slight hill in the woodland, a new figure appeared at its base. It was a woman wearing hiker's getup consisting of a gray t-shirt tucked into a tough pair of pants with way too many pockets, and boots made for the rougher trails. A wide-brimmed hat with a large black ribbon sat atop her head, while a large stick in her hand and a large backpack summed up the look.

"Oi! Numbah 5!" Head Director Tessa J. Elliott of JCJenson called, stopping in her tracks and waving a hand at the drone. "Ovah here!"

The drone snapped her head up at the call, having been staring at the ground while she walked. She blinked away her digital tears and straightened her slouched, dejected stance, quickly pulling herself together. "Ah! Hello, Head Director," she called back, slowly making her way toward the woman as she forced her somber expression to relax into a welcoming smile. "Sorry, I didn't see you there," she went on apologetically. "Was a bit… wrapped up in my thoughts."

“No worries, mate,” Tessa responded in a breezy tone. “Happens to the best of us.” She extended her hand upon reaching the drone—who was, in fact, Councilwoman “Anastasia” of the SCPH—and gave her what she hoped would be received as a comforting, or at least kind, smile. “Thanks for agreein’ to meet me today, Councilwoman. And might I add, this is a RIPPAH location choice. Lovely scenery.”

“Thank you,” “Anastasia” responded, shaking Tessa’s hand. “The redwoods are home to some of my favourite memories.” She lowered her hand and clasped both below her waist in an expectant manner. “Anyways, I understand you probably have some questions about a CyberSoul presiding among the Society for the Conservation and Preservation of *Humans*. Feel free to ask any questions you wish.”

Tessa frowned a bit at the emphasized word. “‘Humanity’,” she corrected the councilwoman. “And CybahSouls are human just the same, y’know. I don’t have any problems with you bein’ on the council—or with Circuit, eithah. I was just plannin’ to ask about, well…YOU.”

“Hm. Fair enough.” The councilwoman began to walk again, prompting Tessa to fall in step with her. “Glad to hear that you see them as one and the same. That certainly wasn’t always the case.” She looked up, peering into the trees. “I can give you a brief summary of myself, if you’d like. Feel free to interject at any point.”

“Thanks, mate.” Tessa followed SCPH-5’s gaze for a moment before glancing at the councilwoman herself. “How long’ve you been with the company?” she inquired. “And in that same vein, how long’ve you been a CybahSoul?”

“15 years with the company, about 10 as a CyberSoul.” “Anastasia” fingered her braid and explained, “I believe I’ve one of the youngest on the council—and some of them weren’t exactly keen on having CyberSouls in the Society.”

“How’d you end up as a CybahSoul, if you don’t mind me askin’?” Tessa asked, tilting her head. “Pre-planned transfah, or… y’know… some othah way?”

“I guess you could call it pre-planned,” the councilwoman responded. “I just transferred my consciousness into this body once it had been prepped to my liking.”

“So you became a CyberSoul by CHOICE?” Tessa remarked, her tone and gaze carrying a mixture of confusion and wariness. “Why?”

The councilwoman shrugged. “I always wanted to,” she confessed. “Ever since I was young, I loved assembly and robotics. More than that, I always wanted to improve the human body—to increase its… versatility. So when the opportunity to become a drone presented itself, I leapt at it.”

“Ah… so you’re a transhumanist,” Tessa realized, her eyebrows rising slightly. “That explains… a lot.”

“Yeah… I’m not necessarily the type of person you’d expect to end up on the Society,” “Anastasia” replied with a wry smirk.

“So what was your background, then?” Tessa asked with a squint of her eyes. “Was there a specific reason they offahed you a seat? I find it hard to believe they’d bring on someone like you without a MASSIVE upside. No offence,” she added quickly, raising her hands as her cheeks flushed pink upon realizing how that had sounded. “I-I’m just sayin’… from their point-a’-view, y’know?”

“No offence taken, ma’am. I’m VERY crazy AND insane,” the councilwoman told her with a cheeky grin, “and definitely not someone you would expect to be ALLOWED on the Society in the first place. But as for how I was brought on… well, I was one of the best mechanical and robotic engineers in the company, as well as a proficient programmer. They granted me a seat based on my knowledge of how drones, mm… *tick*.”

“Drone specialist. Makes sense.” Tessa nodded understandingly. “I guess part of ‘concervin’ an’ preservin’ humanity’ involves keepin’ tabs on what we make.” She gave the councilwoman a sidelong glance, her previous wariness creeping in again as she took into account the descriptors “Anastasia” had just utilized. “Gotta admit, though,” she went on in a careful tone, “I’ve been hearin’… rumours. They say you tried to team up with Circe behind the Society’s back, an’ that you maybe, kinda, possibly… hold drones in highah regard than, er… humans…?”

“Correct on both counts,” “Anastasia” responded without a hint of hesitation or shame. “I view Circe as a role model—and Josephine was causing a lot of chaos at the time. You were still young, still working through everything… and though I knew the others were not fond of Circe, I thought and still think that it wouldn’t have been as bad as people feared.” She cocked her head, giving Tessa a curious look. “I favour you as Head Director compared to her, however. You’re much more stable and sane, which is preferable when dealing with the insanity of this monstrosity we call a ‘company’.”

“…Eh-heh.” Tessa frowned, unsure of whether that was a compliment or not.

“And I DO prefer drones over humans, due to the stains that humanity has left on this universe,” the councilwoman went on, her tone remaining casual. “They are… corrupted by primal instincts, left over from early evolutionary developments that are no longer conducive to the modern man.” She chuckled, adding, “And before you ask, Head Director, yes; I am fully aware that both of these quote-unquote ‘infractions’ are grounds for removal from my current position.”

“So you admit to goin’ behind the Society’s back, AND to preferrin’ drones ovah humans.” Tessa let out a chuckle of her own, albeit one far more uncomfortable than the councilwoman’s. “Gotta say, mate: you’re eithah really brave, or really DUMB for sayin’ so to my face. Dunno if I should admire you or… be SCARED a’ you.” She gave a slight shrug and continued, “In any case, I think you’re wrong about humans. We’ve got a mean streak somethin’ AWFUL, yeah—haven’t encountahed a sentient species WITHOUT one—but there are so many things that make us bettah than the bad! B’sides, it’s not like DRONES are perfect, eithah,” she pointed out. “I’m pretty sure the only things that’ve kept ‘em from bein’ as bad as humans are their limitahs.”

“Anastasia” was silent for a moment at that—but when she spoke again, she did so as if she had not heard Tessa at all. “At the end of the day,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone, “the Society

is just a special name for a well-informed group of advisors with power over the company. It's your decision who you want to be in that position, and what beliefs you want to be represented." She met Tessa's gaze again, holding it steadily. "I'm someone who strongly supports drones, and some who often bucks against the Society's trends. I'm fairly young and stubborn, especially compared to my peers—but that is who I am. If you believe my opinions, views, and beliefs have value, then keep me there. If not, remove me."

"I'm not sayin'—" Tessa began to argue.

"I wills ALWAYS," the councilwoman broke in, her tone becoming stern, "try to be forward and direct if I believe something is worth considering. If it doesn't, I will try other methods to do what I perceive to be most beneficial for the greater good. And I NEVER go behind people's backs unless I feel the situation is dire enough and lacks any better alternative. The debacle with Josephine was one such situation, and I felt that the risks I took were less costly than those present with Josephine in command. Then, when a new option presented itself in replacing her with you, I fully agreed with and supported the decision, as again the reward far outweighed the risk."

A long silence ensued as Tessa scrutinized the councilwoman; it felt as though there was a small-but-growing ball of ice forming in her stomach, the chills it produced intensifying with every word spoken. "Y'know, I'm not usually one for all the formal business talk," she said at last, her tone uneasy, "but it sounds like you're espousin' some dangerous ideals, mate. The whole 'drones ovah humans' thing is a big part of drone supremacist rhetoric, an' callin' the Society nothin' more than some 'advisors'?" Sounds like you don't fully grasp what you all actually DO." She narrowed her eyes slightly, a white "X" flickering in the left one. "Seems to me that you're sayin' point-blank you don't wanna be a part a' this anymore."

"I'm telling you point-blank that if YOU don't want me to be a part of this anymore, then I am okay with that," "Anastasia" responded evenly, her gaze unflinching.

Tessa stopped walking.

The councilwoman did the same, still holding Tessa's gaze.

Tessa worked her jaw, the gears in her enhanced biodigital brain turning rapidly as she mentally made her way to a conclusion. Then, after another long moment of silence, she finally said, "I'll put your status as a councilmembah up for the rest a' the Society to review. We'll hold a vote."

"Anastasia" nodded in agreement, apparently unbothered by the decision. "Understood."

Tessa exhaled, relaxing a bit, and glanced over her shoulder before facing the councilwoman again. "I hope you reconsidah your thoughts on humanity, mate," she told her. "Every lump a' coal's just a diamond in the rough. Sure, we got a penchant for bein' ugly—but every one of us still has potential to be GOOD. I've spent most a' my life with some a' the finest blokes in the universe—a lot of 'em humans. So don't let our worst stop you from seein' our best, yeah?"

"Carbon."

Tessa paused. "Huh?"

“Carbon turns to diamond,” “Anastasia” clarified. “Not coal.” She smirked and added, “But I understand. It’s the same for every species, I suppose.”

“Right.” Tessa lifted her shoulders in a questioning shrug. “Well, I have what I came for. You got anything else you wanna say—y’know, partin’ words or whatevah?”

“I wish you well in all pursuits,” was the councilwoman’s plain-but-genuine response, “both personal and occupational.”

“…Thanks. Same to you, Councilwoman,” Tessa replied after a beat, dipping her head to “Anastasia”. She turned around and began heading in the opposite direction. “And hey,” she called over her shoulder, “don’t give up on us, yeah?”

“Anastasia” chuckled as she walked off, nodding in acknowledgement. “I won’t,” she promised, cracking a half-grin. “It ain’t that bad anymore.”

Tessa grinned as well, feeling a bit more at ease as she faced forward once more. “Too right, mate.”