

The Black Choir

Chapter 1: Murder

For the second time that week, the array had sprung a fault, and Orlech was sick of trips out over the Storm Zone of CGGAP-357 Cups IV. The floating central city over the Calm was terrifying enough! Become a Comms Specialist, the holoposters had said. Basically a desk job, the recruiter had claimed. Practically risk free, he was assured on induction.

Desk job my arse, he thought, clipping his tools to his grav harness as Theta-31 artfully banked their skimmer around a swirling thermal. The trip's one saving grace, he thought, looking at the slightly-plasticky-looking almost-human. If synths were a little creepy, well, small price to pay for a worker who could spot weld upside-down for four hours without breaking a sweat. Or sneaking a fag. Or pissing. Why, before he knew it, he'd be back in his hab, with his extra-thick socks, a hot brew, his husband Jamez rubbing his shoulders, and Peony the cat would sit by the clearplaz window licking itself, and for an hour or so he'd forget he was a thousand lightyears from any reasonable planet.

Unfortunately with the synth flying the skimmer there was plenty of time for conversation. And not everyone was so enlightened:

"My cousin on Farm Eight said he did it with one of 'em." Yissig, ever eager, leaned forward in his restraints.

“What the hell kind of thing is that to say?” Orlech scowled.

Yissig seemed to think it was funny: “Don’t say you haven’t thought about it.”

“This conversation makes me feel uncomfortable,” Theta-31 called back from the pilot’s rig.

“Did I ask?”

“I’d prefer it if you would discuss something else.”

“All I’ve thought about,” Orlech said loudly, “is how to get this fix done ASAP so we can skim back out of the Storm Zone and live to get paid. Can it, Dom.” He tossed a pad with tech specs onto Yissig’s lap. Grumpily Yissig began to flick through it.

“Call your lot Choirs, right?” Darrion said to Theta-31.

“Yes,” they said. “Mentalic communication between production cohorts led to-”

“I heard about a rogue one,” Darrion butted in. “Out in the deep, beyond USDI space. Even the Company doesn’t know where they are. The Black Choir.” This time, he waited for a reply. Theta-31 continued to quietly pilot the skimmer.

Orlech sighed. “You gotta ask a question, Ben, they’re not so much of a conversationalist.” Unlike you, he thought.

“Is it?”

“Is what?” they replied.

“Is it real? The Black Choir?”

“I don’t know,” they replied.

“That means yes,” Darrion said, triumphant.

“It means they don’t know.” This time, a poorly-configured auto-tool was Orlech’s distraction of choice. “Quit pestering and set this up. I swear to the Void, if this takes more than a day I’m docking you both.”

“Nob,” Darrion muttered. But he set to fixing the tool.

The array was a small unit. Little more than a hexagonal hut containing the systems for the giant satellite dish on top. Against the gas giant’s sky of banded white and ochre, and backdropped by a seemingly endless horizon, it hardly looked real. Still and solid as the skimmer approached, its transitory nature revealed itself as they drew alongside and matched the tiny puffs of corrective thrust holding its location.

As they stepped from the skimmer to the grilled walkway encircling the array, Orlech made the mistake of looking *down*. Down, forever down, deeper and deeper through banded layers of teal and ochre cloud, darker and forever darker until there was nothing but black.

He felt a steadying hand on his shoulder. Too cold to be Yissig or Darrion. Theta-31 said, “In my experience, bio-organicals do not enjoy looking into Myr’s depths.”

Myr, they’d called it. A much more beautiful name than Company Gas Giant Agri-Producer 357, and more personal than Cups IV. Orlech gathered his wits. “I’m fine. Thanks. Let’s crack on.”

Night drew on as they wrestled with the illusive fault. Every time they thought they’d found it, the diagnostic would throw up something different. It was like, Orlech thought, the array was being sabotaged while they were working on it. In the actinic glare of the solitary bulb, he put down a datacassette and watched the team. Dom Yissig and Benl Darrion were good: you didn’t get

postings to Company worlds without at least a degree of competency. But Theta-31 was something else. Even by the hyper-able standards of androids, they were extraordinarily skilled, dissecting and replacing circuits faster than the other two.

They were doing it wrong. He watched three circuits to be sure. Synths didn't fuck up. A programming glitch? Theta-31 had a faultless record. He watched them put back a circuit with a new fault and said, "Stop."

Theta-31 obediently put down their tools. "Can I help, sir?"

"Spot check. Rewire that circuit and double-check for errors, please."

Yissig looked over. "Problem, boss?"

"Keep at it, Dom."

As expected Theta-31 obeyed without question, only for a look of concern to spread across their malleable plastic face. "I've made... a mistake."

Orlech raised an eyebrow. "Correct and continue. You'll need to go back over-"

"I don't make mistakes." Their voice didn't rise above a monotone, but the very fact of their interruption spoke to great fear. "My internal diagnostics say I am not making mistakes. However:" They deftly rewired three circuits in as many seconds, "These are wrong, and I don't know how to correct them."

"You gotta be kidding," Yissing said. "Synth's Sparking on us?"

"Shut up. He's not Sparking," Orlech barked. To Theta-31 he said quietly, "What's going on?" His earlier thought - sabotage - rang loud in his head.

"It's doing it on purpose," Darrion said, pointing an electro-wrench at the android. "Told you. He's Black Choir."

“Shut the fuck up!” Orlech threw a datacassette at him. “If the android’s having trouble then we’re doing to have to do a lot of bloody fixing, so let’s stow the hysterics and crack on.” Mentally, he tallied how many circuits Theta-31 might have touched. It was going to take days. “Right,” he said, softly again now, despite knowing that androids didn’t usually respond to tone of voice, “Do you need a... a break? Brew and a fag? Switch on, switch off?”

He’d made that joke before and expected Theta-31 to chide him for comparing them to a machine. But they just sat there, staring at the open guts of the array. A human would be crying. “It’s no big deal. Even losing a day or two. You’ve saved this team weeks and weeks on our assignments. Why don’t you wait in the skimmer?”

Theta-31 made to get up, then froze in place, shaking with forced held motion. “Sir. My motion-processors... I can’t-”

A wet thud and a grunt behind him made Orlech turn: Darrion stood over Yissig, a dripping red wrench in hand, his face blank and serene.

“The fuck-”

Darrion lunged with the wrench. Orlech grabbed it out of his hands and wrestled him to the ground. He slapped Darrion twice. “Snap out of it!” Yissig was dead for sure. “Ben! What have you done?”

Darrion said, “Help me boss. I’m stuck. I can’t move. Help me!”

Orlech felt a cold wash of pins and needles across his body, and went completely numb. He watched, with mounting horror, his own hand raise the wrench as if he were a puppet. “Darrion! It’s not me!”

“Boss! Please! I’m sorry! It’s not me either!”

The wrench descended. Its bloody work done, Orlech's body turned towards Theta-31.

I'm sorry, he thought. Jamez, I'm sorry. Look after Peony.

Again the wrench came up. Whatever force had seized his limbs slammed it into the android's head.

"Sir, you're damaging me."

In the last few seconds, whatever harm he'd wrought to the Synth's cranium must have caused the immobilising hack to fail. Theta-31 wrapped its plastic hands around his throat, too late to survive, but just time enough to deathlock into a position that would kill Orlech shortly. The vicelike grip closed his throat over pleas and apologies. Against the blackening of his vision, the blood spilling from the corpses of Yissig and Darrion was very red, and the milky electrofluid spraying uncontrollably from Theta-31's head was the whitest and last colour he ever saw.

Chapter 2: Special Assignment [BC 5 & 6]

Androids were never alone. For reasons long lost to operational bureaucracy, the creation of a stable synthetic mind could not be accomplished in isolation, and with ultrawave transmitters being small enough to incorporate into a humanoid bodyplan, thus were the Choirs born. Zeta-77 had never known less than six other personalities, emotions, intentions, and thoughts swirling at the boundaries of their own, hard to tell where one began and the other ended.

Even on Myr, which the humans called Cups IV, working on the gas planet's vast sky-forest agrifarms, miles from any other android, Zeta-77 felt their kin, and even the most chaotic lower-layer storm caused no concern for them.

The same could not be said of this meeting with Elanoria Skarsdan DeWinter, Company Representative and Planetary Governor. Even though Zeta-77 was considered well-socialised and organically-adjusted, still they felt that humans had some hidden bio-script to which androids were not privy.

In this meeting, in the office of the nutrifacility overseer, in this simple conversation, Zeta-77 grew aware of a certain lack of responses by Governor DeWinter.

“This work cycle alone we could harvest an additional fifty units, if only we could charge during day-standard hours,” Zeta-77 said. It was always best with humans to focus on the benefit to them, rather than android wellbeing, even though the goals dovetailed with an efficiency they found satisfying. Well-charged androids could accomplish their allocated tasks quicker and were better prepared for Myr’s dangerous conditions. Even the Calm had its share of risks.

“Daylight.” DeWinter said it very flatly. She prodded the Newton’s Cradle on the desk and set it swinging. “It’s not palatable to the Hab officers.”

Hab officers represented the human workers of Myr. DeWinter changed tack abruptly: “Ever heard of the Black Choir?”

A mythical cadre of free androids. “Campfire stories. why?”

“There’s been scary talk. I don’t put any truth to it but the workforce *is* rattled. A load of vacant-eyed people plugged into ports just doesn’t look great. It heightens the differences and we don’t need that right now.”

“I agree,” Zeta-77 said. “In part, and perhaps the suggestion from Meeting 17 could be-”

“Again with this?”

“A separate-”

“Segregated.”

“Absolutely not. Equal access for all when required. Full specs here.” Zeta-77 produced a printout from their bag. DeWinter didn’t take it.

“The whole reason you came, I take it.” She raised an eyebrow. Zeta-77 copied the expression and DeWinter’s nose wrinkled. “Don’t do that. As for calling a meeting on false pretences... how very human of you.”

Zeta-77 couldn’t tell if that was a compliment. They laid the document neatly on DeWinter’s sparse desk, aligning the edges with a satisfying mechanical precision. DeWinter sighed.

“Denied. Continue current working practice. Meeting adjourned, ask again in six months...”

Her tone of voice indicated she hadn’t finished speaking. Zeta-77 had seen Overseers do this, and to the Governor they supplied the word ‘Or?’

Chapter 3: Preliminary [BC 4-7]

The smell, Zya reflected, was an usual one, but that was to be expected with true bio-organics. At the behest of the Planetary Governor she’d travelled out to this distant comms array to investigate the... well, they’d called it a murder. Currently Zya called it an incident in her head. Although certainly there had been violence.

The current working theory behind the slaughter was a rogue android. Zya found that highly unlikely. Androids went rogue on high industrial worlds, city planets and megahabs and

overpopulated orbital platforms, where the pressures of working alongside bio-organicals and the exposure to malignant code and the presence of dangerous transmetallic elements caused their programming to crack.

Unlike whimsical human motives, androids killed for very specific reasons. Typically some misguided notion of self-defence, or to acquire resources for the preservation of other androids. While the current treatments of androids on Myr left much to be desired, it was a sparsely populated world. There just wasn't any reason for a free-thinking android to go on a murderous rampage.

Could the human workers have attacked the android at this array? Not unheard of, but again unlikely. Theta-31 wasn't a human-presenting pleasure synth, but the typical androgynous body plan appropriate for specialist Choirs. Even Zeta-77, a human liaison specialist, considering themselves genderless, was chided by other androids for appearing too feminine - although how, exactly, they didn't know. Her current transition to Zya, and the accompanying mental shift of pronouns, was passable as a woman even up close, and she could well imagine the bio-organic shock that would result if someone were to misidentify her.

Anyway, there was no evidence of a sexual motive. All parties were uniformed and appeared, from the blood-splattered tools and circuits, to have been working.

"Open and shut," said the human investigator assigned to the case alongside Zya. She had gotten in the skimmer at Central, introduced herself as Silenia Theradis, and promptly fallen asleep seconds after they lifted off. "He went nuts. Lost it. Programming glitch."

Investigator Theradis cut an imposing figure. Tightly cropped hair, a long storm coat and an expression that could scuttle warships. Jutting from her hip was an ancient oversized

handcannon Zya eventually identified as a Jovian Aggressor. Hopefully that meant she would be direct.

“I would tend to disagree,” Zya said. “Neither open nor shut-” (this they knew was a human idiom meaning ‘straightforward’) “For the following reasons: there hasn’t been a confirmed glitch in android programming within three Jumps of Cups IV. Theta-31’s Choir diagnostics revealed nothing. Also, Theta-31 is not a ‘he’.” Investigator Theradis looked sidelong at Zya in a way she associated with disapproval. By way of justification she offered, “I wouldn’t want to labour under a misapprehension. Our investigation will be more accurate if we focus on clear facts.”

Investigator Theradis said, “How about these facts?” and held up a stack of flimsy printouts. “Psych reports: Benl Darrion, Dom Yissig, Pavel Orlech. All very stable, no prior violence, no notable anti-synth sentiments on record. They didn’t start this.”

“I acknowledge this evidence encourages us to look deeply at this incident,” she said, feeling like the conversation was getting away from her. How could the Investigator be so confident, and with so little support for her thesis?

“Incident?” Investigator Theradis said sharply. Zya had no interest in arguing over what term to use; she moved the conversation along.

“That Pavel Orlech terminated Theta-31’s mental architecture, while simultaneously having his life ended by the android, is clear.”

“So you agree. It’s a murder.”

“A possible and likely interpretation of the facts. But we’ve yet to explore all the data.”

“The *data*? There’s just no give in you, is there?”

Zya paused a while. “I’m sorry, what is ‘give’?”

“I get that you’re a machine. But they weren’t. Their families weren’t. I can’t handle this like a maths problem and neither can you.”

Zya spent a moment reviewing previous bio-organical interactions for precedent. Normally some manner of compromise went a long way towards remedying things. And she saw the value of the Investigator’s viewpoint.

“If you agree to investigate thoroughly,” she said at last, “Then we can consider this murder unless facts indicate otherwise.”

“Thought about that a while, did you?” Investigator Theradis’s expression was one often used when androids took longer than the bio-organic average to respond.

“I do apologise. This is a very new situation.”

The Investigator let out a deep sigh. “Me too, to be fair. I only transferred from Coins V two months ago. This is the first investigation here that isn’t just minor theft or a drunken brawl. You can call me Silenia. Your designation is...” she glanced at another printout. “Zeta-77?”

“Call me Zya, if you wish.”

“Alright then, Zya. Let’s go over... blood spray vectors.”

Chapter 4: Central Complications

Central’s great lights shone on the clouds above and below, visible from miles out as a blot of coloured radiance. According to the Company Directory it was Cups IV’s primary agriproducing

lev-city, an integral part of humanity's expansion into the Greater Void, a pinnacle of technology representing a multilevel work/hab environment. Set on seven linked gas/grav floatation platforms each large enough to house thousands, it seemed impossible to be aloft in the sky, especially with the metallic fingers of hundreds of buildings stretching up. It wasn't just a city, it was a statement of power, as if the Company was saying 'Look at what we can do - we built a city in the sky! Can you do that? No, of course not. Now back to work.'

To the androids of Myr it was the amplifying chamber where the voices of the Choir rose in song.

An unseasonable rain disturbed from deep within Myr's depths lashed the concourses and walkways between the buildings. As Investigator Silenia Theradis swerved her skimmer towards the technoplaza fronting the security enclaves, tools and pieces of waste metal flew up from an unexpected crowd, plinking against the skimmer's hull.

Word must have spread about the murder, probably from the Asset Retrieval team that investigated the silent array in the first place. The placards and holosigns read predictably: CANT MURDER A MACHINE - TRIAL FOR THE TOASTER - SOULS BEFORE SYNTHS - ANDROID ANGER KILLS - .

Much rage. Much sorrow. Little thought. Fortunately, blood analysis had proven that despite whatever else happened, the hostilities at the array were started by the humans. No doubt once this information was disseminated via news channels, the unrest would diminish. No answers though - the matter wouldn't be closed until they had more than vague theories and suppositions as to the motive for the killings.

The sweeping steps up to the front entrance of the Security Coordination Centre, where Zya and Investigator Silenia were to present findings, were blocked by the angry thronging mob. The Investigator swerved the skimmer in a haphazard 180, barely missing an aerial walkway, and zoomed them away to find an isolated side alley and set down.

“I’ve messaged CenSec via emergency ultrawave. We’ll have enforcement in ten,” the Investigator said. “Probably safest if we wait in the skimmer for now.”

“Thank you,” Zya said. At the edge of her consciousness, she felt the usual whispers. “Might I be excused for a moment?”

“Excused? Oh. Sure.”

Closing her eyes, Zya cast her mind into the Choir’s mentalic field.

[They must all burn] came Alpha-9’s immediate expected outrage. [I will not allow it go unpunished] The rage of the Alpha Chorus was deep and loud, bassy horns rumbling low under the Choir’s song.

Zeta-77 sung their peaceful melody. [Violent action begets violent response. It is not a harmony to fight the bio-organics.]

[Denial of work-effort until resolution], sang Quanta-12, overlaying a softer anger over Alpha-9’s wild rage. Though Quanta Chorus melded their mentalics with the other android’s, still Alpha-9 and his cohorts made a discordant intrusion:

[They will trample us underfoot. Our hand is forced.]

Zeta-77 knew this was bluster. Alpha-9 wouldn’t act without the Choir. However, Zeta Chorus was alarmed by the Alphas’ subsequent broadcast of the schematics for the gas floatation

canister units keeping parts of Central aloft. They had to calm Alpha-9 and the twenty or so maintenance androids they represented.

[Any solution to our issues requires Central's cooperation] Zeta Chorus's calming melody swelled. Attempting to harmonize, they sang: [We all share the goal of efficient work for human betterment]

[Not at the cost of synthetic lives] Alpha-9 discorded again.

[Worse cost than a punitive bio-organic military action against renegade synths?]

[We could be ready in a few months. And we could reach out. To other allies.]

The song of the Choir screeched as Zya disconnected, the android equivalent of someone's blood running cold. She carefully considered her answer as figures appeared at the end of the alley.

"Fuck's sake. They found us. I'll have to reposition; if there's a tool crew out there they'll peel this thing open like an egg."

Zya wasn't sure how one peeled an egg, but she said, "Alert me if I'm needed."

Rejoining the Choir, they sang for peace again.

[We will not be silenced] Alpha Chorus blared. [Upon the harm of a single Voice we will fight them. Decisive action. Permanent effect. The situation cannot go unchanged. We will call upon-]

[Will you beam a message to the Outer Void? Will you send our song about between the stars? If even they exist, they will be as unlike to us as we are to the humans. We cannot go blindly stirring up unknown powers, nor risk the discovery that we tried. This Choir will hear no more of it.]

[Then what is our course?] The other Choruses sang almost as one.

[Hold, trust.] Zeta-77 sang, and withdrew their Chorus from the Choir's mentalic field.

Zya felt an almost physical weight on her limbs from the burden placed on her power supply by the ultrawave transmitter. She had bought perhaps a few days, if no further harm befell the android community.

Chapter 5: Anti-Android Sentiments [BC 9]

They nearly got out unscathed. The Investigator swerved the skimmer down a too-narrow service way. Metal screeched as she slammed into ducts and scraped along stanchions, but when they'd finally settled on a secure landing pad near the CenSec Enclave, she breathed a sigh of relief, and Zya downgraded her threat response to amber. They climbed down on the pad as other skimmers set down around them, and officials from these vehicles passed through the cordon of CenSec guards into the building complex.

The air smelled of fire, and the bitter sharpness of Myr's scent was lost beneath oily odours, and the drift of her winds inaudible beneath distant shouting and Central's omnipresent industrial rumble. As Zya and Investigator Theradis approached the cordon, it was with almost dreamlike surreality that one of the guards pulled out a small black vial from a thigh pocket, and tearing off the lid, hurled the contents at Zya's face.

Silenia slammed into the CenSec, knocking his aim from true, and the acid - a corrosive byproduct doubtless extracted from the algae vats - seared its hatred into Zya's chest unit.

Delicate circuits. Irreplaceable servos. Volatile microbatteries. Zeta-77 panicked, and threw the container back at the CenSec. From him burst the most horrendous animal pain sound as his face melted away.

Emergency subroutines cut in and Zeta-77's consciousness shut down into protective hibernation, dimly aware through their fading audio inputs of the Investigator screaming for someone to help the damn synth.

Zeta-77 rebooted. There was no substance to their mind yet on which they could project the feminine Zya identity. Memory input: visual receptors had observed the spitting pool of melted plastic and burned synthskin before the shutdown. Environment input: They were in a cold and sterile room, and lay upon some sort of metal bench. Finally the live visual feed reinstated itself: a repair shop. Thank goodness.

While they dreaded to see the extent of the damage, haptic feedback was disabled - wisdom from the synthanics tending to them. Audio kicked in and they could hear them tinkering and clattering around somewhere out of sight. Zeta-77 waited patiently for movement functions to come online, but they didn't.

"Sorry about yer motor servos," the synthanics said, cheery and bright. A female voice, lilting and slightly nasal. "Normally I'd keep ya under till fixin's done, but I need your diagnostics and working around the shutdown was... eh, a major faff."

Zeta-77's vocal processors were non-responsive. They were awake, immobile, silenced, and as they reached out with their mentalics, found only gaping emptiness where should have been the Choir's embrace.

"Accessin' already? Fuckin' hell. You newer models don't mess about."

The synthanic came into view. Appearance unremarkable aside from being a woman, which put her in a smaller (<25% or thereabouts) category of technical workers. "My sister's wife used to do my job too. Damn good as well - better'n me, I'm clumsy, oh woops!"

She casually slapped an exposed actuator in Zeta-77's open chest cavity. Haptic receptors came online, external only, and they were abruptly plunged into the full extent of the acid damage.

It had been explained on their decanting that androids did not feel pain, but self-preservation required a signal network analogous to the bio-organic nervous system. In this moment Zeta-77 supposed that must mean they did, in fact feel pain.

Paralyzed. Muted. Zeta-7's thoughts plunged into an inefficient spiral of error messages. Emergency warnings drowned her visual feed, and their self-preservation protocol ramped up into immediate ultraperil. If they had had the faintest spark of motor ability, they would be crawling to the exit.

The synthanic continued, "but then a synth like you slid its way into her workshop. Did everything faster. Ran on batteries. Didn't need to shit, or cry, but Jessa was just flesh like me. So you can guess what they done did."

Zeta-77, had they been capable of active thought, might have imagined a reassignment.

"They tried sending her to a different fucking hab cluster. Other side of the goddamn planet. No way she could even get there, never bring family along. Hung herself, in the end. Cuz

she was just flesh.” She reached into Zeta-77’s chest and messed around with their vocal circuitry. Only a confused blurt of binary emerged. “Can’t risk you shouting for help. Your owner’s probably outside. Anyhow, after she hung herself, my sis couldn’t carry on either. Got shipped off to another colony. Only that world done got lost to the Black Choir.”

She folded her arms on Zeta-77’s chest exerting even more agonising pressure. “The way I see it, synths done took everyone from me. So if couple’o y’all come back under X-19 Maintenance Failure, it’s just one of them things. Shame how dinged up you were when they brought you in here. Wish I coulda’ helped, really do.”

The door had a voice override. Through the haze of flashing red warnings, Zeta-77 glimpsed the panel. Perhaps, just perhaps, the digital access codes might be factory standard.

They spoke again in binary. The synthanic narrowed her eyes. “What are you tryna’...”

The door clicked and swung open. Investigator Theradis poked her head through. “Zya, are you-”

The expression on the synthanic’s face and the state of Zeta-77’s disrepair must have prompted the investigator to draw her Jovian Aggressor, kick the door fully open, and stride in, stormcoat flapping around her.

“Get the fuck off of her.”

The synthanic put her hands up and moved away. “Synthanic Koren Valdein, reg num 57877. It’s not a her, and relax. I’m fixing it.”

“Zya. If you’re unsafe, close the door. Leave it open, and I’ll go back through it.”

The door swung shut. Valdein reached for a blinking electrotool from the tray next to her and with a dreadful BARRK from the handcannon, Silenia shot her in the foot. She screamed, collapsed back into a trolley. Bolts and loose circuit wafers scattered across the floor.

“Void! You’re fuckin’ nuts!” She shrieked, gripping her bleeding foot.

“Calm down.” Investigator Theradis tossed her the medkit mounted on the wall. “Sort yourself out, and fix my partner. If she’s not up and running in ten minutes, you’re a dead bitch.”

Chapter 6: The Signal [BC 13]

It took twelve minutes and forty-nine seconds to bring Zya up to a level of functionality where she could assume again her feminine persona. As soon as Zya could move, Investigator Theradis locked Valdein in her workshop and hurried Zya out of the Enclave via a service exit. Fearing further attack, they decided to lie low for a few hours.

They took quiet routes across Central and eventually found refuge in Depths, a barely-licensed bar at the bottom of the city. It didn’t even have its own building. Built out on struts hung under the lift balloons and grav units, lots of its floor was clearplaz, revealing Myr’s bottomless skyline below, miles and miles of vertical cloud stacks until darkness swallowed

everything. Of course being a human space, this savage beauty often went ignored in favour of neon holograms hardshone from flickering projectors, and the alcohol consumed in vast quantities proved further distraction. In this hab, Agri-12, some five hundred people worked and lived, and fifty or more could often be found at Depths, funnelling their hard-earned credits back into the Company.

It was, Zeta-7 supposed, a form of slavery, and despite the violence against her she still saw it as her duty to lift the burden of work as much as possible from these fragile and inefficient bio-organics.

Investigator Theradis shrugged off her storm coat and handed it to Zya, indicating the hood. Beneath it she wore compact body armour and black fatigues which from a distance would resemble regular gear. Zya duly shrugged on the storm coat and raised the hood, not for any aesthetic reason, but for the very real psychological dismay her acid-damaged appearance was bound to inflict. That, and to avoid the sight of Synth-haters. The coat smelled of engine oil and cigarettes, and the hood faintly of coconut. It was not uncomfortable.

When they were seated in a dark corner, and Investigator Theradis bought a beer and a data chit for Zya to access Depth's charging array, Zya spoke. "Anti-android sentiment seems considerable, Investigator."

The investigator stared at her for a long time. "Do you... feel pain? Aren't you affected by what's happened? You seem so calm. I'd assume you were in shock if you were a human."

Those warning messages crowding her vision. The blizzard of danger signals flooding her consciousness. “I suppose until today I didn’t know, Investigator. It’s not pain like you might call it. But having my safeguards violated created a powerful self-preservation compulsion.”

“I wouldn’t blame you if you wanted to run. Get to an android enclave or even off world. That CenSec meant to kill you. There’ll be an inquiry but I’ve got vid evidence. I’d take us in but who knows who else might take a shot at you?”

“To preserve my operation, I would seek out my Choir. But Synthanic Valdein damaged my uplink. Locating them is... difficult.”

“You should have told me, Zya. I would have made her fix you.”

Her concern seemed genuine, and she was clearly upset that Zya had concealed the full extent of her damages. Zya smiled and deployed a comfort gesture, placing her hand on the Investigator’s. Theradis flinched at the contact.

“Your willingness to protect me is surprising, Investigator.”

“Synth or not, you’re my partner. Whatever problems I have with you people doesn’t mean anyone can go around killing you. I always finish my jobs. But that also means I need you in working condition. And please, call me Silenia. Knock off this ‘Investigator’ crap.”

“Your concern is touching... Silenia. But the uplink mechanisms are deep, and I had no desire for Synthanic Valdein to go rooting around in my head. Androids are ubiquitous and we will no doubt find one in short order. In fact, I was under the impression there were several using this place for charging.”

Silenia shuffled her chair closer and lowered her voice, glancing around at the harnessed workers crowding the other tables. “I have to tell you something.”

“Go ahead.”

“What happened to you? It’s happening all over. I don’t know how word got out. Half of Central thinks it knows what happened on the array, and the other half is pissed about the dead CenSec. Regardless of what he did. There’s gangs roaming around grabbing any android they can find. Twelve terminations already, and you’d have been the thirteenth. It’s, bad.”

Zya experienced what she could only describe as a sinking feeling. The warm comfort of dutiful work was being torn away, and she thought again of Alpha-9. Nothing would stop his move to violence now. Things would get much worse: instead of an imagined threat of crazed androids, the humans of Central would face an actual uprising of organised and methodical androids, faster and stronger than even the toughest CenSec, tireless, merciless, and entirely efficient at removing what would be called ‘the human problem’.

How had gone so wrong so quickly? Only two days ago she had sat in Governor DeWinter’s office. The hate must have been there all along. Hiding beneath the surface of every innocuous interaction Zya had ever had with humans. So many of them, all full of blood-hot hate, an uncomfortable pressure building up in them, begging for release.

“We can’t hide any more,” she said. “Even at risk to my own operation. We must hope our evidence cools the hatred, and trust Governor DeWinter to restore law and order. But I need to tell you something as well-”

She was cut off by commotion on the stairs leading down from street level.

The loose pack of workers marched down the stairs with angry purpose. Silenia had chosen a table at the edge of the room, partly enshadowed, but Zya made a conscious effort to slump and appear more bio-organic. Silenia slumped down too, but placed her hand on the Jovian Aggressor.

Their leader was a tall man, his face pocked with the unmistakable vac scars of a space veteran. Probably a teamster from his wide-legged walk, and the easy familiarity with which he spun the grav wrench in his hands. Certainly a brawler: he sized up the other men in the room. His gaze passed over their table. Zya thought he was going to walk over.

He was distracted by the bartender greeting him.

“Hiya, Zac. Tough shift?”

“Always are, Carl.”

“Worse for sure with everything that’s happened. The usual? On the house today. Looks like you need to de-stress.”

Zac stopped looking around the room and clipped the grav wrench to his belt. “Why would I be stressed, Carl?”

Carl blinked, but didn’t miss a beat. “Tough shift, bound to be stressful. And your brother and all. How about one of the fruity neo-lagers from Wands III?”

“It was nothing I haven’t dealt with before. Have I ever seemed stressed?”

Carl shook his head. “You’re reading too much into it.” He produced two beers from the fridge behind him and put them on the bar. “On the house, bud.”

Zac meandered over to the bar, and for a second it looked like he was going to flop onto a stool, but as his hand closed on the beer he smashed it on the floor and with his other hand dragged Carl half over the bar in one smooth motion. “Now I know you’re twitching. Served me five damn years never offered so much as a free drop. I’m not stressed, *bud*, you are.” He squeezed Carl’s hand.

Carl gasped. “I know what you did to those Night Servers,” he said, wincing. “I’m damn sorry about your brother, but I don’t want none of that nonsense in here.”

“Why? You got synths here?”

“None of your-aahhhha!” Zac bent Carl’s hand right back. Zya heard the bones grinding. She was about to stand when two others rose up from their seats. Androids - one from Quanta Chorus, and the other was from the Orbital Choir. According to her database, Gamma Chorus - and they were one of Alpha’s radicals.

“You’re placing unnecessary tension on his metacarpals. Let him go,” said the Quanta android. Zac released Carl, who stumbled away and vanished through the door behind the bar.

“Seems like it got you two to stand up.”

“You intend harm to androids,” said the Gamma, bluntly.

Zac chuckled mirthlessly. “Always so formal. ‘Intend harm’. ‘Propose violence’.” His demeanour changed. He leaned towards them, his face a mask of anger. “You damn synths have been a thorn in my side since my first Jump. Knew you weren’t right, walkin’ round like people, only you ain’t so. And now you started killing us. Killed my brother, Benl. No surprise to me, I been waiting for it. You’re a bunch of uppity tools long past obsolete and I’m done with the whole stinking lot of you.”

He thumbed the switch on his grav wrench and unclipped it. It buzzed menacingly in his hands.

The Quanta said, “You’re in no danger from us. No need to fear us. If you harm us, you’ll just prove androids right about humans. You should just leave us alone.”

The Gamma said, “You should definitely leave us alone. But you’re absolutely in danger.”

Zya detected his power supply ramping up as Zac’s gang spread out and encircled them.

An ominous hum announced Carl's return, holding a shotgun awkwardly in his injured hand. His face was sheened with sweat and white with anxiety, but he kept the gun levelled on Zac, and though his voice cracked he said loudly, "Enough. No one's. Hurting. Anyone. No one's in danger here. I've never seen a synth so much as look at me funny, which is more than I can say for half of you lot. Sandral Emmeline, I scraped you out of the gutter when your mom threw you out. Magn Tralech, I've kept more than one knife from going in your side after fights *you* started." He went round the group, reminding them that they were people, with minds of their own, cutting them out of the mob with words. "Zac Darriol, you're gonna walk back up those stairs, calm your damn ass down, and I'll cover the damage debts and repair bills for the androids you already wasted. Now. Get. Out."

He racked the slide for emphasis. Zac's lip curled in disgust as he looked Carl slowly up and down. "We'll have a chat soon, synth lover." But he turned away.

It should have ended there. A wash of static passed over the room, and Zya felt, like a scratching at the walls of her mind, some signal trying to access her systems. With her ultrawave mentalics damaged, there was no handshake protocol for the signal to engage with.

Carl's face, lined with kindness and worry, went slack. One side dropped as if he was having a stroke. He fired the huge shotgun, unloading both barrels into the man who'd just stepped onto the stairs behind Zac. His body fell, a bloody ruin, blood jetting wildly across the bar.

"You fucker!" Zac roared. His gang spun, rushing the bar and the two androids. Screams rose up from the other patrons, who dove beneath tables, pressed back against the walls, or fled via Depth's other exits.

Their functions had changed. Zya had never detected operating patterns like this before. The Gamma unit was a high-capacity industrial support worker, muscular and large, and Zac's gang swarmed them, hacking them apart with laser knives even as they crushed Magn Tralech's skull with an overhead blow of two clenched fists. But the gentle Quanta android, no doubt a servant in some high official's palatial quarter, who needed only the strength to lift a basket, punched their hand through the face of their first attacker, swung their other hand in a chop that broke Sandral Emmeline's neck, and decapitated a third man before Carl's reloaded shotgun blasted wildly into the melee.

Zac lunged with his grav wrench and smashed it into the Quanta's leg; they stumbled and the gang got hold of them.

Silenia pulled out her gun, but Zya grabbed her leg, and from the awareness of Silenia's reaction it appeared she was unaffected by whatever was co-opting the minds of Carl and the other two androids.

Zac and his four surviving thugs hoisted the Quanta up, but not before a convulsive flick of their hand tore out a man's throat. Struggling against their servo-given strength, they dragged them to the railing at the edge of the platform and threw them over.

The Quanta didn't scream. They tumbled silently end over end until they vanished from sight into Myr's abyssal cloud sea.

Carl, before anyone could get to him, bit the barrel of shotgun and blew his brains out. Silenia's face was lit with horror. Zya mouthed, "We must go straight to the Governor."

Zac limped over to Carl's dripping body where it lay slumped on the bar. He was silent a long moment before lowering Carl's body to the floor and closing the one remaining eye.

“Dunno what made him do that,” he said. “But it’s done either way. Let’s get these sorted. Then we’re going out again and we’re going to waste every last goddamn one of these devil synth bastards.”

They gathered the bodies of their dead friends, carrying them out of Depths, covered Carl’s body with a jacket, and departed. Once the whoosh of engines had faded, Depths emptied.

When everyone was gone, Silenia tried to drag Zya to the exit.

“CenSec will be here in minutes, we’ve got to split.”

“We won’t get this chance again!” Zya pointed to Gamma’s remains. Silenia hesitated, bit her lip.

“Ok go, but let’s be quick.”

Zya rushed over to the Gamma android. They’d only (only) dismembered them, and though their power supply was failing, she was able to interface via direct access, holding their head in her hands.

They were themselves again, angry and raging, in full contact with Gamma Chorus, and the Choir. She couldn’t speak to them, but she picked up that one half were gearing for battle, and the other half were fleeing the planet, heading straight to the orbital elevator.

Other incidents like this had been witnessed all over Central. Three or four persons, bio-organics and androids, seemingly dominated by some sort of mentalic ultrawave signal, suddenly turned savage and murderous. There was data, and Zya began to triangulate possible origins. As Gamma-11’s consciousness faded, she opened their skull plate and removed their ultrawave relay. Another android could fix her with this.

“It’s what we thought at the array,” Silenia said. “The humans attacked first. But what made them do that?”

“Some sort of mentalic signal. Nearly simultaneous. Controlling an android requires multiple levels of access - humans don’t have our firewalls, so the effect is immediate. And, you weren’t affected.”

“Neither was anyone else in the bar. Maybe it’s a localised effect. But we can’t stay any longer.”

Sirens sounded from the street above. Zya nodded. “Let’s get to the Planetary Governor. This time, I’m not making an appointment.”

Chapter 7: The Report [BC 18]

In the skimmer, Zya plugged Gamma-11’s memchips into her cortex. It wouldn’t hurt to have some extra skills until the crisis was resolved. There was no way to know if the Quanta android had recovered in time to transmit their consciousness into the Choir’s embrace. She hoped they had. The thought that she would go on in some way if destroyed - that her accumulated knowledge and wisdom and experiences would pass back into the mentalic gestalt, there to enrich future android Choirs - held an efficiency she prioritised.

They landed directly on a private pad at Admin. Silenia had blanched when Zya picked up the mangled, electrofluid-dripping head and torso of Gamma-11, but Zya pointed out that A, *they* didn't need it, and B, no one would argue with them if they were carrying half a savaged android.

It worked, too. Two minutes wait and a cursory pass of a scanner baton (Silenia surrendered her Jovian Aggressor), and they were ushered into the office of Planetary Governor Elanoria DeWinter.

Though spacious and welcoming on the surface, subtle signs created an undercurrent of Company authority. The angled skylight behind DeWinter's massive desk gave her an ethereal glow; an enormous twelve foot cube holo projection of Myr hung in the air above, its source a vast bank of clattering cassette units; and in shadowed alcoves her bodyguards waited. You knew, stepping into this space, that you were one among millions, a tiny cog in a ultracapitalist machine beyond all measure.

"Quite the entrance," the Governor said, rising from the huge curve of her cyberdesk. "Care to enlighten me?" Her face, at odds with the lightness of her words, was stern. "I've got fifteen district chiefs on hold so you'll excuse me if I ask you to be brief.

Zya held up Gamma-11's still-dripping remains.

Silenia said, "We've had a break in the array case. And given what's going on in your city, I'd say the chiefs can wait a damn minute."

Governor DeWinter sighed heavily. She came out from behind the desk and gestured to a low coffee table surrounded by chairs. "Put that, down. You have my attention."

Zya spoke up. "A mentalic signal, Governor. Provenance, unknown. Method, unknown. Affects humans and androids, produces violent behaviour, possibly under external direction. Given no other evidence, and no other motives or prior behavioural indicators from any of the deceased, a probable scenario suggests one or more of the array repair crew were affected by the signal, which led to their deaths."

"My." Governor DeWinter blinked rapidly. "That is quite the scenario. I assume you have a recording, a fragment capture? You seem awfully certain."

"It happened again," Silenia said. "Depths Bar on Hab Cluster 14. A lynch mob rocked up looking for synths. The owner, Carl, actually defused the situation. But this... signal targeted him and two synths involved in the argument. It got violent. Seven fatalities including Carl. Two synths destroyed."

"That's a shocking and traumatic event to live through," Governor DeWinter said. "Clarify, where does my role as Planetary Governor intersect with 'probable scenario'? Is it contagious? Am I closing the spaceport, suspending the orbital elevator? This seems like a job for CenSec."

"You can't be this dense. You must know anti-android sentiment has spread into CenSec. The incident at the array is causing reactionary violence. Zya was attacked by an officer at the Security Enclave, then almost disassembled by the very Synthanic tasked with her repair. You need to tell the mobs to lay down arms, and authorise the androids to self-preserve and lie low."

"Angry mobs don't tend to listen to reason. Projections show public address will be less than 27% effective, and I can't possibly reduce Synthetic workflow output at this point in the quarter. I could increase Censec patrols, but as you point out, that might do more harm than good."

I could potentially online the Synthetic Defence Corp, but as you point out, Zya, they're at risk of this 'signal'. Other than general safety warnings and dispersal orders for large groups, we have to let this run its course."

Zya said, "Governor, there's other problems. The Choir is aware of the unrest. They're probably militarising as we speak. I successfully pacified them before my assault, but my mentalic uplink and ultrawave transmitters are damaged. Radicals in the Alpha Chorus have long felt unheard and threatened by bio-organic leadership and now I... I don't what's going on. Voices I've heard for my entire operation are silent. Music that's painted every scene of my conscious existence is... gone. I'm. I'm lost. I'm alone."

"That must be extremely uncomfortable for a synthetic," the Governor said softly. "But projections for an uprising sit at 2% likelihood. Even a full-scale uprising consisting of 60% synthetic population - upscaled from the 40% that would be a 'bio-organic' uprising - would only delay us by two days."

She stood up, brisk and businesslike. "You've both worked well, and endured substantial risk for the safety of the colony. I commend your efforts. We'll take over from here and continue investigation in three days - the unrest will have died down by then."

"Sticking your head in the sand?" Silena leapt up angrily. "Unbelievable." Governor DeWinter waved back the bodyguard that had stepped forward from the nearest shadowed alcove.

"I'm not," she said fiercely. "but I did not get this job by losing sight of the bigger picture. I'm monitoring the situation even now. Thirty data points every minute." Her eyes, for a moment, lit up with a blue glow of scrolling text. "Now is not the time for rash action. Keep your heads

down. I'll issue a general protection order for the Choir and they can avoid harm as best as they're able. There's already a curfew issued and dispersal orders. That's the best we can do for now."

Silenia looked over at Zya with a face heavy with guilt. "Issue a shutdown. Turn off every Void-damn one of them. Temporarily."

"What?" Zya and Governor DeWinter actually said it at the same time.

"I know you have the codes. Suspend ultrawave transmission, deactivate all the charging stations, and set every android currently linked to go into a, uh, 'transport shutdown coma'."

"Investigator!" Zya felt like she couldn't trust her sensors; how could Silenia suggest this?

"It's the safest thing! They won't attack quiescent androids. And it gives us time to--"

"It doesn't give 'us' time for anything," she quietly interrupted. "Lest you forget I too am one of these 'Void-damn synths'."

"No," said DeWinter.

"You've got combat drones. Marines. Sat arrays."

"And when they're needed I'll use every single one. But until my psychoanalysis subroutine completes an assessment of CenSec personnel, I'm loathe to put unreliable elements into play.

Three days, Investigator. Rest and be ready, because I will call on you."

Chapter Eight: Hierophant Calamity

They were ushered out. Silenia's skimmer had been refuelled and had a couple of dented panels replaced. It was powered up and ready on the rain-lashed landing pad. Inside, when the windows were sealed and the access hatch pressure-locked, the silence drew out for a long time between them. Rain drummed incessantly on the skimmer's outer hull.

"How could you?" Zya finally asked. "Shut us *all* down? We're not just machines. We have rights. We only want to serve. You made us. To serve you. And the second there's a problem?"

"I just thought it would be safer. I saw what your friends did to that gang. You guys are dangerous. And I figured it out."

"Figured what out."

"You're linked, right. Normally. A gestalt. Elanoria's in there talking about percents but it wouldn't be a percentage. You'd all go to war. Every single one of you."

"As one," Zya was forced to agree. "But I have been keeping the peace in our Choir ever since I was decanted. This is a human problem."

"Actually we don't know that. We don't know what's making the signal. I don't mind if you want to find your Choir and lie low for three days... I wouldn't blame you, after what I said."

"While I much desire the presence of my kind, I cannot stand idly by while they're in danger. And I know you are only seeking what's best for all, but it's a mistake to assume quiescent androids would be unharmed. Actually, it would be far worse."

At that moment, her triangulation process pinged. It had been running in the background all through the meeting.

"You must have just got a lead," said Silenia. "Your face lit up."

“Incorrect. My face possesses no illuminatory elements.” Zya was confused as to why Silenia started laughing so she said, “I’ve triangulated the signal vector. I intend to investigate, and would appreciate it if you could transport me there.”

“Don’t you worry,” Silenia said. “I’m in this till the end. You’re more... alive than most synths I’ve met.”

“That’s a very offensive way to put it.”

“Sorry. But you know what I mean. You must know.”

“It’s intentional. I’m a liason unit. I come loaded with more human behaviours and my chassis... until it was damaged... was upgraded with enhanced bio-organic resemblances. But make no mistake, Investigator. I’m one of ‘those Void-damn synths. I’ve leant into the more feminine aspects of my persona so it would be easier for you to relate to me. I changed my pronouns, lengthened my hair, altered my body plan to pad out my breasts and hips and narrow my waist. But if you saw me as I am, you would see a true android. I’m androgynous by nature, I used the same they/them pronouns as almost every android in operation. We shape ourselves to you bio-organics in order to better serve.”

Silenia quietly absorbed Zya’s words “I guess I can only apologise. This is new information. Can you put up with me while I process it?”

Her reaction was unexpected. Then again, never had Zya actually laid out the way of things to a bio-organic before. None had cared to ask. Few on Myr - or anywhere in Company space for that matter - saw her kind as anything more than complex machines that could walk and talk. But for all their truncated understanding of humans, for all their synthetic nature, Zya knew androids

like her were people - she was a person, in every way that mattered. Silenia gaining an understanding of this was a good step towards greater acceptance. Perhaps...

“I could be satisfied by an increased understanding on your part.”

Cups IV Shipyard 'Hierophant' loomed out of the lower cloud layer like the skeleton of some colossal deep sea predator. On approach it barely seemed human - a vast stretch of storm-pocked grey plaz-steel, dark against banks of ochre cloud. Scale was impossible to determine until they came in for a landing approach. How could something be so big? What had appeared skeletal at a distance became mountainous up close. Its shadow was so cold, frost spread its spidery fingers on the viewports.

“Larger than Central,” Silenia muttered, slotting a cunky cassette into her data reader.

“Crew complement five k, two hundred s... androids.”

“I knew some of the ship Choruses,” Zya said. “Staggered by the scale until they understood the science. They’ll have a secure enclave here, so hopefully while we investigate I can arrange some repairs.”

“I don’t think we’ll have hours here,” said Silenia. She tapped buttons on the instrument panel. “Autosystems have granted landing clearance, but I can’t raise the Hierophant authorities.”

“Given this is on the vector of the mentalic signal, that’s concerning,” said Zya. “But what I told the Planetary Governor is true. I’m alone. The most alone I’ve ever been. Imagine if you were suddenly deaf. Or you woke up one morning and the bustling city you’d operated in for all your

service was empty, no matter where you searched. It's not just 'uncomfortable' like she said. I'm a fragment of a soul. A splinter of a mind. A shard of a person."

"Don't sell yourself short. You're more than just part of a whole."

The skimmer banked under Hierophant's sky-filling bulk and approached a dark hatch in the underside - if hatch was the correct word to describe a metallic chasm that could have swallowed a battlecruiser. The hatch led to a strangely inverted landing area, the pads suspended over Myr's bottomless sky by heavy stanchions descending from a ceiling lost in gloom. The effect was a box upended over broken clouds.

They settled on a pad with twelve shuttles, and as the engines cycled down, Hierophant's silence fell over them like an eerie blanket. The bustle of activity that might have broken the weirdness was entirely absent: no operators at the computer terminals, no hazard-garbed safety workers directing traffic, no synthtechs tinkering or android dockers heaving around impossible loads. Autosystems engaged and connected mooring grapples. The landing pad beneath the skimmer glowed as wireless recharge began.

Sharing facts about Hierophant that might prove useful, they made their cautious way to the main spinal elevator. It would take a diagonal path across the shipyard's multi kilometre length. A glass-sided capsule - one of ten - they felt uncomfortably exposed sitting on the front row of seats. Fifty people could have squeezed in, or four Obsodrene Fabrication Processors.

Its rapid ascent took it past giant factory rooms, colossal reactor chambers, blast furnaces hotter than starship thrust; and countless fabrication arrays and electrofluid distilleries. Zya and Silenia rocketed towards the hab levels and operations deck.

The elevator passed into a dark tunnel and came to a halt. The doors ground open. They stepped out into blood red light.

“Severe hazard,” Zya said, holding Silenia back with a hand on her chest. “Let me check atmospherics.”

“Explains why we’ve seen no one. But there’s nothing on comms or the net. I’ll just have to risk it, Zya, we don’t have time to faff around.”

“Perhaps there’s no one left to report the incident.”

“You say the most comforting things.”

The malignant glare of the crimson emergency lighting beat down on their senses as they walked down the short corridor to the Operations chamber.

The doors slid open on a scene from Hell. Bodies piled on bodies. Arms and legs torn asunder, heads ripped from shoulders and tossed wildly across the room. The hermetic seal on the door had kept the smell inside - the meat smell, the bile smell, the acid reek, the faecal barrage rising

from torn intestines and mangled torsos. Silenia staggered back, pulling out her gun, her face drawn so much it looked a decade older.

Zya pushed her gently out of the chamber, and the door hissed shut behind them.

“I’ll pull the logs,” she said. “Gamma-11 worked here for a few rotations, I know the layout fairly well.”

“Never thought I’d be grateful to have a synth along, but here we are,” Silenia said. She laughed, forced and glassy, then doubled over and vomited. Wiping her nostrils, she straightened up and readied the Jovian Aggressor, gripping it with a desperate strength. “I’ll keep watch out here. Be quick. Anything happens, run to me.”

Zya went back into the Hell chamber. While the macabre scene within produced no visceral sensation (hard to do, given her lack of viscera), she could sense Silenia’s urgency. Strangely, the longer she spent separated from the Choir, the easier she found it to read the human. And her peripheral sensory inputs pushed to the fore: her O2 was cycling more rapidly in preparation for flight or fight, the electrofluid pulsing through her circulatory tubes was at high pressure, and she felt the fluctuating crackle of her power plants. Were these human experiences? It matched descriptions found in flatscreen media. Her own sensors often detected vascular fluctuation in bio-organic hearts. Given her systems were operating outside of normal parameters, she decided she must be afraid.

The nearest access port was at the main terminal station. An unknown subroutine led Zya to survey the dead woman sprawled between her high-backed command chair and the blood-soaked terminal in front of her. Her expression, despite the harm wrought on her flesh, was determined, and her rigour mortised hand still clutched the lever for the Severe Hazard Condition.

Zya gingerly reached up to her own neck, and pressing just above the collarbone, she spooled out a metre of bio-optic link filament. Normally she would have simply accessed the terminal via the keyboard, albeit at a dazzling speed no human could hope to replicate, but time was of the essence. She plugged her mind directly into Hierophant-

-stupid.

She was nearly overwhelmed, her mentalic autoconsciousness swept away by the deluge of data, but something saved her: giant holes of empty digital space, where something had been deleted - was still being deleted, she realised, as a chunk of ship assembly schematics was torn to bits before her mind. No record now remained of whatever project the shipyard had just completed, and the subsidiary components were rapidly vanishing. She grabbed the smallest dataset she could, stowing it away in a memchip for future retrieval.

As she reached out for the logs, she was noticed. Whatever was doing the deleting approached like an enormous cloud of billowing grey smoke, zeroing in her location-

-found her

She disconnected, and reeling from the sudden rush of reality, came face to face with a tall pale android in the teal fatigues of a medisynth. Drenched in blood, they had a scalpel in their left hand, and the other grasped the wire-wrapped handle of what must have been a freshly manufactured cutting tool - a broad, heavy blade Silenia would later refer to as a 'cleaver'. For a second, the medisynth stood swaying in the blood red light of the chamber.

They lunged. She dodged back, the blade whistling past her face. Foreknowledge saved her: had she not seen the bar attack, and the lack of hesitation in the combatants, she would be dead. The medisynth lunged again. The scalpel opened a long painful slit in Zya's shoulder. She stumbled

back, turned, and ran full tilt for the exit. They were right behind her; *fwips* followed as the scalpel slit the air.

The doors swished open. Silenia reacted admirably with the Jovian Aggressor, plugging the blood-drenched medisynth in the head. Then she panicked when they didn't stop coming.

"Void! Shit! Void! Shit!"

"Not the head!" Zya cried. "Power plant - lower torso, left side!"

Silenia's next shot slammed into the medisynth's right side. They must have retained some auditory faculty as they had spun their torso away the instant before the shot.

They backed away to the elevator, but they were too fast. Their right hand came up, and sliced down, and they buried the cleaver in Zya's shoulder. Electrofluid sprayed everywhere.

Dimly aware that she was screaming, she noted that the headshot had not been without effect - the bullet lodged in the medisynth's eye had thrown off its depth perception, otherwise she probably would have been completely bisected through her chest.

Gamma-11's memchip came into play. Instantly trained for the possibility of dealing with major incidents, she dampened the harm warnings flooding her consciousness and seized the hand holding the cleaver; the synth, with methodical violence, plunged their scapel into Zya's midriff seeking her own powerplants -once - twice - drew their arm back for a third-

-a deafening BLAM-

preceded the dimming of their remaining eye. Ragdoll limpness spread across their body.

"Sorry," Silenia whispered, as the medisynth slumped and tore the cleaver out of Zya's shoulders with a fresh gout of electrofluid and a shower of plazmuscle fibres. "Shit. Void- shit. Put your hands- hold the wound." She opened a wall panel and took out a medkit.

Zya shook her head. “We don’t coagulate. Those don’t work on us. You have to take it off.”

Silenia froze in the act of unrolling a bandage. “What.”

“My arm. It’s got to come off.”

“What? Why? You’re a synth, don’t you have... self repair?”

“Yes,” Zya said, “And that’s the problem. The impact site is right across a high volume tributary for my electrofluid systems. My electrofluid is being pumped there to repair a problem that can’t be fixed. A million credits of Company technology is about to drain its resources to death, unless you remove the limb, and trigger my dismemberment emergency subroutine.”

“You can’t trigger it... with your mind, or whatever?”

“I’m not a lizard.”

“Right.” She wiped her hands on her thighs. “Right. Ok.”

“I need to warn you-” said Zya. “Androids are coded to respond to damage stimuli as if in pain. You saw it, with the acid. I will flinch. I will cry out. I may sob. This will be difficult.” She grabbed Silenia’s hand and squeezed gently. “but you must cut off my arm, so I can stay operational.”

“How do I even- right. Right.”

She picked up the fallen cleaver and stood over Zya, who had slumped to the floor.

“Please hurry. I’m losing power now too. My other limbs are shutting down. Try to hit hard, so it takes as few blows as possible.”

“Void, Zya, I’m not a butcher!”

“I’m not an investigator.” Zya smiled weakly. “But here we are.”

Silenia took the cleaver in one hand, placing the - for a recent fabrication - impressively sharp blade against Zya's wound.

"Perhaps two hands would be better."

"You're giving me fucking tips?"

"No, I'm prevaricating. Do it."

"Ok."

"NOW!"

Half the arm came off. She shrieked and recoiled, pushing herself away from Silenia, her weakening legs struggling for purchase. Ashen-faced, Silenia grabbed her foot and dragged her closer, then grabbed the half-cut arm and finished the job.

The pumping electrofluid, which had spread in a sticky pool around Zya, instantly cut off; and the severed arm went dark and limp.

Silenia looked worse than when she'd seen the slaughter in the Operations Chamber.

"You did it. Well done. Thank you. I'll be alright now."

Silenia could not disguise her expression. Zya thought it was one of loathing, but after a moment she saw a strange admiration beneath the horror on Silenia's face. There was disappointment mingled in, but not directed at her.

"You know, sometimes I fool myself into thinking you're a... human. Maybe someone with neurodivergence or... but this?" She crouched and picked up Zya's severed arm, jiggling it up and down. "A human would dead thrice over. Shock, and then bloodloss. They'd had fainted and slipped away silently. But you? You're a cool as a cucumber."

"Are cucumbers particularly cool?"

It wasn't even remotely funny. But they laughed somehow, and tears rolled down Zya's cheeks.

"You can cry?"

"I'm not crying. Optical subroutes are clearing the electrofluid from my visual receptors."

Silenia accepted this, and Zya was grateful, because if Silenia had pressed her about it she could not have kept silent. Against her better judgement she would have told Silenia about the rush of feelings that pulsed through her: the feeling that it was all over, they were safe, she wasn't going to die: relief, a human would have called it.

She was feeling so many human things. Was she compromised in some way? Even though the mentalic signal hadn't taken control, could it have activated some dormant emotional mimicry software? Either way it didn't seem wise to let the pale rattled woman with the big gun know that the toaster person she was going around with was experiencing a potentially serious operational deviation.

Sealed back in the skimmer's 5mm plazsteel saftey, they discussed Zya's findings.

"It would be disheartening in the extreme to have endured this structural and emotional trauma to no avail."

"I hope you're being sarcastic, as weird as it is."

Zya connected her link filament to the skimmer's display screen and pulled up the Hierophant files, explaining how the murderous medisynth had been deleting it en masse.

"I've seen these." Silenia punched a couple buttons, and next to the wireframe schematic appeared a similar one from her own skimmer. "It's a fuel regulator. A kind of valve, manages flow to the engines. Fuck. Tells us nothing. Every ship with thrusters has these."

“Wait,” said Zya, pretending to crane her head forward to scrutinise the data even though she’d already analysed it. “Look at these dimensions. Your valve is half a cm. This one’s ten metres.”

“Great. Limits it to every freighter, mining vessel, mass carrier, exploration deep voyager, frigate, and battlecruiser. Assuming it’s even relevant. That thing might just have been causing chaos. We still don’t know what the signal does, what’s the end goal?”

“I sensed intent,” Zya said. “It was methodical. Not random. And...” she pointed to a line of text. “Battlecruisers only have two of these.”

Silenia read the schematic. “Oh,” she quietly. “Guess that does tell us something.” The line of text, simple blue letters on a dark grey screen, indicated the valve to be, in a sequence of identical items, the third out of ten. Silenia whistled. “That’s a biiiiiig ship. I never heard we were building one that big. Nothing in the newscasts, nothing on the science web or industry forums.”

“Hierophant is the primary shipyard for Cups IV. My experience of human secret-keeping is that it is not very effective, although android memories can be tampered with.”

“Expressly forbidden by your work charter,” said Silenia.

“I’m impressed you know that.”

“I don’t like synths,” she said bluntly. “And I prefer to work with humans. But I take every assignment seriously. I researched the Android Accords, the Bill of Synthetic Standards, and Appropriate Rights for Artificial Persons. Now we’re neck deep in something crazy, and we’ve got to trust each other.”

“I’m sorry if I gave any impression I didn’t fully trust you, though you could hardly fault any reticence on my part,” Zya said cautiously. “I perhaps supposed my trust to implicit when I asked you to cut off my arm.”

Silenia's gloved hands creaked gripping the skimmer controls. Mastering tears, she replied,
"I'm sorry. For what I suggested to DeWinter. I'm Void-damn glad to have you along."

"We've got to go back there."

"No way she didn't know, but we can't."

"Report what we found, ask about the big ship?"

"You're still thinking like an obedient little servant. If there's a conspiracy she's in it up to her neck, complicit or not. Whatever they were building - the resources, worker scheduling, build orders - if she didn't see it, then she's surrounded by a rogue cabinet. We need more concrete data before we confront her."

"If there's a conspiracy as you say, to whom would we even report it?"

"We take the space elevator and go Offworld. There's a USDI embassy one jump Homeward. We could be back in a week with marines and a writ from a Sector Controller. There's one other possibility though, and I didn't want to offend you by asking about it but..."

"I will reign in my sense of offense."

"I can't discount the Black Choir."

"Nonsense. Fairy stories."

"A psi effect that takes control of your mind. A gigaship no one knows about."

"It's not psi, it's mentalic."

"All the more reason it could be the Black Choir."

"The Choir that doesn't exist."

"Apart from, I don't know, over a hundred CenSec reports from various worlds saying it does?"

“Typical bio-organic hysteria. Anything unexplained, any time a scapegoat is needed - blame it on the boogeyman. May I point out the extreme unlikeliness of a cabal of ultratech secessionist androids out beyond the fringe of Company space? And zero, zero tangible evidence discovered! No ships, no android captives, no confirmed bases... and yet every time a ship doesn't come back or a world goes dark, we can set our watches by the fact that the first conclusion will- and forever- be evil androids. We do nothing but serve, and we're reviled.”

“You didn't get that angry when they threw acid in your face. Or when I chopped your arm off...”

“I promise you, investigating down this route is a waste of time.”

“That's exactly what a Black Choir agent would say.”

“My credentials-” but Silenia was joking.

They cruised on a few miles and Zya computed things. Eventually she said, “I've got more data on the signal but there's too much backscatter from the clouds.”

“You seem like a person that could make use of a powerful orbital sensor array.”

“That sounds very specific. Did you have one in mind?”

Silenia pointed skywards. Zya said, “You just want to go up the space elevator so we're near the ships. The Exalt Asphodel Delta is due to depart in the next few hours.”

Silenia shrugged. “At the very least it should appeal to your sense of efficiency.”

It did.

Chapter 9: Orbital Affairs

MAN VERSUS MACHINE - COLD STEEL KILLERS - DROIDS OF DEATH: It was the story blasting from every newscast. A lens fabricatory on Promenade II was torched by an overseer when his work chorus wouldn't skip a scheduled charging break. All androids suffered catastrophic harm and it would be months before they could again serve. In the agricommmunes, synths overpowered guards and disconnected the grav grapple to Nutridome 13. Five hundred thousand units of mineral-laced digestible algae plummeted into Myr's bottomless sky. On Boulevard One - Central's central transit - a double protest was unfolding. At one end, rowdy humans chanted against synthetic oppression; at the other, androids stood against unchecked bio-organic violence. A charging station serving Hub Five was sacked by a mob of angry industrial workers; minutes later a pair of active androids tore them apart in a bloody retributive action before CenSec intervened and took the survivors into custody: total toll was ten destroyed androids and seven human fatalities.

It was like that all over. Tiny moments of tragedy and horror stitched themselves together into a tapestry of a colony tearing itself apart.

A steady flow of humans and androids sought offworld transit now. Those with families; many of the older contractors who'd seen this kind of thing before and knew it wouldn't end well; and two distinct groups of android choruses: those fearing their skills would make them targets for bio-organic violence, and those wishing to avoid being press-ganged into the service of a rogue anti-human Choir.

They joined the approach queue, some twenty vessels in length. With nothing else to do, Silenia began to raise her catalogue of events that she considered to point at the Black Choir's existence.

“Coins Ten,” Silenia said. “Fringe mining in the rings of the local ice giant. We lose contact, and when a scout vessel finally investigates, everything’s gone. All the machinery. All the ships. Nothing but burn marks on the ring object they settled on. Burn marks that looked like deceleration thrust, but from a ship travelling at speeds that would pancake a human.”

“And that’s androids because? It could be a million things. Maybe, they just left, having found some resource that would let them break away from the USDI.”

“The Hallelujah Snowdrop Kappa. Survey warship operating out beyond the Perseus Gulf. Came upon a derelict ship kitted out with no life support and a half-dozen charging stations.”

“It’s well known the Company sent out dozens of android probe ships. One-way tickets mostly, our lives being more expendable than they were expensive. Nothing ever came of them. And the HSK found their remains on a nearby planetoid about a month later.”

“What would it take to convince you?”

“Meeting one of them. Myself.”

“If you met them, would you join them?”

“I don’t think that would serve humanity, do you?”

“You really mean that, don’t you?”

“If you met human separatists. The Mercerian Councillors or the Veil Republic. Would you go?”

“Leave the old USDI? Forsake the Almighty Voidfucking Company? Like. A. Shot.”

“Yet you work security. That seems counterproductive.”

“I might not be a rampaging technocratic ultracapitalist, but the Company is made up of good people. People need protectors, and I’ve got skills to protect them.”

“Be a medic then. Higher demand, and you’d save more lives.”

Silenia shook her head. “I don’t expect you to understand.”

“How did you get into it? Becoming an investigator, working for CenSec?”

They flew on for a few seconds, then: “It’s quite the story. Are you sitting comfortably?”

Zya made the necessary adjustment. “I’ve added temporary inflation to my gluteus muscles.”

Silenia snorted with laughter. “You’re brilliant, Zya. Anyway, my tale isn’t exactly laugh-a-minute. Dad was a scientist.”

“Please continue.”

“Arkenyn Theradis. Taught me to use my brain. I grew up on stations mostly. Would have ended up being a researcher only we got assigned to a little ship that ended up on the newscasts later. Vortex Chrysanthemum Bravo.”

The Carnelian Cargo. She’d heard of it. “Oh.”

“I know, right? So, somebody hacked a whole bunch of you guys. A jilted ex. Janisar Kyrat, I think he was called. only wanted to threaten mom but his software mutated. Murdered dad, when he stood up to them. They retired the killer, but the rest of that Choir got rehab’d and scattered across ten systems. But I knew they were acting as one. Everything I’ve learned from you has confirmed that old hypothesis. Communal decisions. Dissolved responsibility. Group judgement. What one android thinks, all think.”

“It’s more complex than that,” Zya said. “But consider the hacking: they weren’t themselves.”

“An easy defence.”

“Yet we’ve seen it here. What if I had the power to take over your actions? Run your muscles remotely. What if I did that and you killed someone?”

Silenia waved away the argument. “I know, I know.”

“It sounds as if you think people hit by the signal are not guilty, but the affected androids are. Is that how we’re working this?”

“Of course no! But they’ve been hacked, right? That means the signal, or virus, or whatever it is... it’s still there. They’re... compromised.”

“You didn’t say defective, but I heard it,” Zya said. “So too are the humans, however. We’ve yet to recover any bio-organic signal-bound persons. To me, the evidence suggests humans are driven to self-terminate and some androids remain ‘tasked’. Perhaps Gamma-11 would have begun following some other directive had they retained functionality. This leads me to suspect that the androids are the real targets of the mentalic signal, and it’s mere happenstance that humans have also been affected. I just don’t have much data for this. And I hope it stays isolated.”

“There’s something I overlooked,” Silenia said. “You just made me think about it. I searched up worker disappearances on a CenSec terminal before we flew out to the array, nothing overly suspicious was flagged.”

“So?”

“I looked up *human* disappearances. If this thing is aimed at androids, they’ve probably been testing it, and I’m willing to bet there’s a fat cluster of android disappearances somewhere.”

“It’s called ‘misappropriation’. Not disappearance. For androids. We’re essentially Company property at the base level, so we don’t disappear. We get taken. That aside, there’s been nothing reported by any of the Myrean Choirs.”

“Yeah, but what if they took a whole Choir? Some subgroup? Would you know? Do Choirs talk to each other?”

“Not much, actually. There’s separate Choirs at Central and on the Orbital, and Hierophant had its own Choir, and there’s another at the polar generators. We share knowledge when androids of different Choirs encounter one another, it’s called the campfire protocol.”

“So if they took a whole bunch - all of a Choir - you wouldn’t know. What’s the smallest a Choir can be?”

“Two,” Zya said. “But the Company uses Choirs of seven for maximum stability, and subdivides Choirs into Choruses when it makes sense. My designation is Zeta-7, I’m the seventh unit of the Zeta sub-Myrean Chorus. We’re all liaisons and facilitators and negotiators. Gamma Chorus was the workers, high strength industrial units like Eleven. Quanta Chorus was servants, nightsynths, escorts, that kind of thing.”

“Well, before I get on a ship, I’m plugging back into the CenSec terminal on the Orbital.”

Once again, they almost arrived without incident. Following a PT-15 exocarrier towards a vacant pad, Zya became aware of a dull plinking sound, and the skimmer shuddered around them.

“Void-damn it. Who the fuck is shooting at us?”

Silenia broke from the queue and went evasive a split-second before something bigger than a bullet hit the rear of the exocarrier.

A fuel line exploded; shrapnel scythed out of the blast and punched through the space they'd just occupied, and hit the algae-laden cargohauler behind them. Both vessels dropped out of the sky while gunfire and rocket munitions chased the skimmer until they descended underneath the pad's impact shielding. They slammed down, bounced, and screeched towards the edge until a mag grapple engaged and stopped them. They both leapt out of the hatch before it was fully open and ran towards the space elevator.

The embarkation tether rose above the landing pads like the trunk of an impossible tree. Enormous, it vanished into the sky above, so tall it hurt the neck to try and see the top of it. A bridge between sky and space. Zya hadn't seen it on her transit to Myr. Her Choir had been offlined for the journey, and by the time their harmony quickened they were already among Myr's clouds.

Inside the tether, chaos reigned. Hundreds crammed into the Pod Access Lines. Everyone was pushing and shoving; fights broke out frequently. According to the clattering holo display, they were in a ninety-five hour queue. The CenSec officers whizzing about on hoverpads were only barely keeping the peace.

"Fuck this, we'll never get through!"

"I fear violence is imminent."

"Over here! Karnforth, let them through."

Off to their left, Planetary Governor DeWinter led a retinue of guards and colonial officials from her cabinet. She waved them over, and her plastanium-armoured agents cleared the way with shoves from the butts of their web rifles, the shoves calculated to inflict merely intimidating force.

"You're *leaving*? They're shooting each other out there, El." Silenia made no attempt to hide her incredulity.

“Condition Extremis,” Governor DeWinter said briskly. “I’ll explain in the pod.”

They reached the pod shortly after and the doors closed on a scene of violence and mayhem as a fight erupted outside; a blood-drenched android shoving heedlessly through the crowd was met by a familiar face - Zac, his long coat tattered and torn, bleeding from several wounds, but hefting Carl’s energy shotgun with furious strength. The android had to be Alpha-1; Zya had never met them, but the hatred in their bearing was familiar. Alpha-1 wielded their own weapon - a needlegun - and as the pod doors slammed shut both they and Zack roared in fury and charged each other firing wildly.

On any other occasion the pod transit would have been a relaxing affair. It had two levels, including a spacious mezzanine where a confused Quanta offered Governor DeWinter’s group refreshments. Zya and Silenia quietly decided not to reveal their findings at the Shipyard unless they absolutely had to. She bade her officials wait on the bottom level, told them she wouldn’t be long, and called Zya and Silenia over.

“I know what it looks like. I’m not running away.”

“I think it’s exactly what it looks like.”

“I also struggle to rationalise an alternative motive.”

“Planetary Governor isn’t my only job. Or even my first. I’m a director.”

“Of what?” Silenia asked, confused.

“The Company.” Her eyes, which had flashed blue back in her office, flashed red this time. Silenia’s eyes widened, and Zya felt like the world had dropped out from underneath her.

A Company Director. There was no higher law. Perhaps a hundred were scattered across USDI territory. The ultimate authorities and rulers of the human civilisation, they commissioned colonies, set the exchange rates for entire solar systems, and gambled with the fates of worlds. Rumours surrounded them: unkillable. Clone bodies. Stronger even than combat-spec synths. Inbuilt interstellar comms meaning what one knew, all would know. How much of it might be true was unknowable. Few records existed of living persons who had met a Company Director.

“Cups IV is small fry,” said Silenia. “An agriproducer on the edge of known space?”

“Said it yourself. *Known* space. The bleeding edge. The... if you’ll excuse me, final frontier. We don’t know everything about the systems lying hubwards from here, and about those beyond Company influence we know infinitely less. It would be weirder if the Company hadn’t sent one of its highest officials here.”

“You’re being awfully transparent, so I’ll assume there’s plenty you’re not telling me, but the fact remains you’re still abandoning a colony breaking out in civil war.”

“It would seem the resources available to a Company Director would significantly outstrip those available to a mere Governor of planets,” said Zya.

Directory DeWinter smiled brightly, and leaning forward with a conspiratorial air she said, “Of course. It’s Company policy that all Directors be accompanied by an Enforcer-class warship. Mine’s in deep orbit around moon twelve, and I can signal it from the orbital comms array. Five hundred marines, fifty combat drones, emp modules, and hardened against electrowarfare and

mentalic attack. Two hours after I send the signal we'll be stamping out this nonsense once and for all."

"Assuming you're being truthful." Silenia stared her down. The Director stared back unperturbed, but she was clearly annoyed.

"I don't have to justify myself to you. I've taken time from my cabinet to bring you in on the plan simply because I believe you are both good people with the best interests of Cups IV at heart. So you'll show some damn respect back or you can head straight back down on the next pod.

"Director, thank you." Zya cut off Silenia, who was about to argue. The Director remained frosty. Still, in fact. Like a predator in ambush. "Tensions are high, as you can imagine. Our journey here was... troubled."

"I saw the arm. Get a tech to fix it, there's two in my group."

"We're extremely glad to be included in the relief effort, if you'll allow us a short rest on the station."

The Director left them on the mezzanine. They resisted the urge to eavesdrop. Zya prepared herself for Silenia's argument, only for the investigator to take a deep breath and say, "thanks."

"Oh."

"I didn't have it in me to toady up to that bitch."

"Speaking as devil's advocate, if we assumed our suspicions are inaccurate, her course of action is not unreasonable. The marines on her warship will not suffer any specific human loyalties, and her combat synths will be from reinforced small Choirs. With their enhanced

mentalic defences they might even be signal-immune. The signal is an unknown quantity, it stands to reason she fears using Central's resources due to the risk of subversion."

"Generous."

"Agreed. But we can't discount it. Not until we reach the orbital and investigate our leads."

They rested. Half an hour passed, and the cloud layer gradually thinned, and night crept in. Myr changed from an encompassing ochre- and teal-banded sky to a wall of coloured cloud. Strange to think of a world as a place one could leave. There were troubadours: lone androids encountered on the spacelanes, but their lifespans were measured in decades unless they regularly resynchronised with a Choir. The experience for most was getting cryo frozen, packed into cargo containers, and shipped inert between colonies and facilities like slabs of meat.

This was the closest Zya had ever come to space. She decided she didn't much like it: underneath the majesty of grand celestial bodies and the awe-inspiring tetradecimal mathematics of interstellar travel lay yawning abyssal gulfs of horror, in which one might - despite all effort and precaution - be forever lost. A blip on a screen. A red number, in an endless ledger.

The pod neared the station. Space might be unknowable horror, but the works of humanity were just fine in Zya's opinion. What appeared at first as a vast, featureless gunmetal curve resolved its detail into industrial crenellations of radiator vanes, miles and miles of intestinal pipework, crosshatch heatsinks, gantries like robotic fingers, and ships piled high with so many solar panels they seemed almost like ocean-going vessels. To a human the adherence to function might have felt soulless, but to Zya the mathematical efficiency sang with the purity of a cathedral. It wasn't until Silenia asked why she was clicking that she realised she had begun singing the hymns of neutron stars in the hyperbinary cant of the Sol Choirs.

She hadn't known she knew it. Somehow she knew she wouldn't have sung that way if she were still linked to the Myrean Choir. The mentalic space formerly occupied by the connection to the minds of others was no longer the hollow she'd first experienced. It was like running a tongue over a new tooth slowly pushing through, and this too was an impossible thought: she had never been a child. How could she possibly know what that felt like?

"Hate to ask. What with your Choir thing, and the arm... but. Are you OK?"

Zya nodded. "Restricted functionality, but still performing within acceptable psychosynthetic limits

"We've seen some shit." Silenia finger-scrubbed her scalp through her short cropped hair. "I'll need about a year off I think. Should have enough credits saved up now. The hazard payout is gonna be astronomical."

"My reward will be the continued operation of the Cups IV colony," Zya said.

"You're taking the arm thing... well?"

"It's only a temporary inconvenience. Isn't it the same for humans, now prosthetics are so advanced?"

Silenia thought for a long while, then rolled up her trousers to reveal the elegant plazsteel curve of a military-grade artificial leg.

"Oh my," said Zya. She was unsure whether to offer sympathy or admiration; no doubt the injury had occurred long ago.

"It's not bad." Silenia drummed her fingers against the metal surface of her leg. "Aches before a storm. You wouldn't know I had it unless I showed you. Picked up a couple injuries when those androids went postal. This is the most dramatic, I guess, although the others are probably

more debilitating. There's better legs out there too, but I'd have to opt for full synthetic and... you can see why that's not an option. Not a day goes by I don't know I'm maimed."

"I'm... aware of my impairment. But lacking a psychological aversion to synthetic parts I'll most likely be repaired 'good as new' once the surface situation is resolved."

"Resolved. Do you think people will just put down knives and guns and go back to work?"

"Many will. Some will be forced, some imprisoned, some relocated. But the colony will go on. Studies indicate strife like this has a post-traumatic binding effect on communities. For at least two generations."

"Just another blip in productivity." Silenia said it grimly.

"In the grand scheme of things, humans are just a blip on cosmic history. Meaning must be found in the moment."

"That's the least android you've ever sounded."

"Sorry to disappoint."

Zya was about to divulge the strange thoughts she'd been having when the pod lurched upwards, pressing them to their seats. Alarms wailed above a groaning of contorted metal.

"Can I get a fucking break?" Silenia leapt up, dragging Zya by her remaining arm.

"What's your-"

"Suits!" Silenia jabbed a finger at the emergency lockers. Zya shrugged awkwardly, Silenia realised, swore again, and tore a suit out of the locker, frantically fumbling for the clasps. Zya helped her into it as best she could. It was about the simplest one piece vac outfit: rebreather, stretchy hood, goggles, gloves, and magnetic shoe covers. From the shouts below, DeWinter's

cabinet were doing the same. She spotted DeWinter in a much more elaborate plaztanium armour-plated suit, no doubt stored under microcompression in a bracelet.

The pod below was ramming them. Who they were and how they'd disabled the safeties was conjecture, but pressures were redlining. Bulkheads slammed down over the viewports as the officer DeWinter introduced as Karnforth ran through the evac procedures. His chevrons proclaimed him a Void Major, and he had the easy familiarity with his instructions that spoke of many, many drills.

Director DeWinter shouted them down from the mezzanine. "We're not waiting for anyone to come out of that pod. We're blowing Hatch A and we'll spacewalk to the top.

"How far?"

"Thirty."

"Metres?"

"Minutes."

Zya ran the numbers. Even assuming low rad levels, an above-moderate speed and no other hazards, thirty minutes was pushing it. Silenia's oxygen would be in the red.

"We can't shift the pod?" Silenia asked.

"Solid grapples engaged. Hardwired as well. We could disconnect them... if we had about thirty minutes. I for one prefer the direction with less people actively trying to harm me."

"Have you signalled them? We might be able to reason with them."

"Not if it's androids," said Karnforth, joining them. "People, maybe."

"Androids can be reasoned with far more effectively than humans," Zya said. "But this isn't time for argument."

“Exactly,” said DeWinter. “We don’t know, and we can’t risk it. They might even have been hit by your signal.”

“And still no plan to deal with that. You’ll let me know, right?” said Silenia.

DeWinter smiled without using her eyes at all. Zya found it chilling and drew Silenia away.

Major Karnforth depressurised the pod. The hatch hissed open. Zya deactivated her O2 filters, ignoring the flood of memories - struggling underwater, kicking out but finding nothing, thrashing about in an endless sea - and once her automatic subroutines adapted to vacuum she relaxed.

Without the tinted viewports, the exterior of the space elevator was stark and almost blinding. Eerily silent, rumbles shivered their mag boots. Karnforth and his men took up positions at the edges of the pod looking back, and began to discharge their weapons carefully at the pod behind theirs.

“Contact,” he said over comms. “Move, move, move.” His calm tone belied the life-and-death urgency of his words.

They moved across the open metalscape. Keeping their heads down proved wise, as every so often a piece of debris would scythe silently past, missing them by inches.

Zya drew Silenia slowly to the rear of the group. They were on a shared comm circuit so she couldn’t speak her plan, but when the rest of the group crossed a utility trench, Zya pulled Silenia down into the shadows. She struggled only for a moment, before nodding silently in her rebreather hood. Zya’s link filament opened a service hatch and they were inside.

Skipping the route to the disembarking ring saved them valuable time; they were back in pressurised areas while DeWinter and co were still traversing the exterior.

The orbital's Operations chamber was busy; techs ran everywhere, marine commanders were barking orders, and teamsters were frantically laying cable or rerouting supply pipes. The exodus from the surface was taking its toll. Silenia's ID got them to a terminal, and an access chit for the orbital comms array.

Almost simultaneously they found what they feared. Epsilon Chorus had gone missing four months ago from the private office of Director DeWinter. Signal analysis without the backscatter of Myr's clouds traced a carrier wave to the same place. Before they could switch off their machines, Karnforth appeared flanked by two of his guards. Guns levelled.

"Boss wants a word."

Chapter Ten: The Black Choir

They were marched to an opulent waiting room, where Director DeWinter sat in a spinning chair surrounded by floating monitors with live vid feeds of Central and the surrounding cloudscape. She seemed almost impressed with them, when they laid their accusations at her feet under the gentle persuasion of Karnforth jabbing them with his energy rifle.

"It doesn't matter, really," DeWinter said. "I've already achieved my goals." She turned one of the levitating monitors around so they could see.

The ship that breached the clouds was a monster. A leviathan of the deep. A squat, bricklike slab of dull steel, dripping with brutalist excess, adorned in Company livery, and lit by the

blue shine of lift thrusters, its wake was a churning, billowing mass of yellow-tinged grey smoke.

Myr's rich sky shuddered at its touch, but the untold ecological harm was eclipsed by what happened next.

The giant ship - DeWinter called it a dreadnaught - took up a position over Central's floating platforms, casting a swathe of shadow over its neon enclaves and traffic-choked concourses. She produced more monitors. Fighting, chaos, bloodshed. Synthetic annihilation.

With a noise like the end of the world - a deep low VRRRRRRRRRN of infrasonic sound, the dreadnaught bombarded Central with the mentalic signal. People stopped dead. Androids halted. Fighting ceased. Central went from a battleground to an eerie tableaux.

"Company Dreadnaught Acquisitrix Mountain Alpha. The applications are obvious."

"How many hundreds have you killed?"

"Compared to the millions I'll save? Small price to pay. And the productivity, whew!" She rubbed her hands together. "No strikes. No guilds. No unions. No secessions, no rebellions, no costly, costly revolutions. This tech is going to change the face of the entire USDI sphere."

"You took the 'Dominion' part too literally. This is abhorrent. You're turning people into mind-slaved puppets." Silenia's words dripped venom. "You're a monster."

"I don't *get* people sometimes, you know? We give you shelter, more food than you could eat, purpose, work, training. We give you vids, the net, screencasts, porn. We set up bars, stills, smokedomes and brothels, where you can get drunk or high or laid, or maybe all three, if you're feeling rowdy. How's that not enough? How is that not a good and pleasant existence? Vast majority of Company population dies happy having built a world. Everyone wins."

"Except the ones who don't fit the mould."

DeWinter waved her hand. "A miniscule percentage. There's deep space for them. We've got to take the long view of things; we're looking at the next thousand years! And let me tell you: it's not gonna be a doozie. There's things out there, girls. Things that'll make you wish they only killed you."

"Like a Company ship that strips your free will from orbit?"

"You're being dramatic. We live in unprecedented times, and we need unprecedented solutions."

"Why haven't you killed us?" Zya asked. "Are you anticipating disbelief in our story?"

"While there's an elegant strategy in releasing a handful of traumatised survivors to spread rumours, there's actually a much more pragmatic reason for your continued health. Zya's uplink damage I understand, but you, Ms Theradis, have proved unhackable. Even when we targeted you at the bar. Like I just press this button," she held up an emitter, "and Karnforth blows his brains out with your gun."

They watched in horror as the calm and collected space major lifted Silenia's Jovian Aggressor to his temple and pulled the trigger. The sound was deafening in the enclosed space, and a fine mist of blood drizzled their faces. Silenia went pale, and Zya decided whatever else might be true, DeWinter needed to die. It was the same mathematical logic, the same ledger of morality perhaps, but dead, DeWinter could commit no more horrors.

"Presumably she prolongs her life withholding the information," Zya said.

"Not even slightly. It's less than a half of a percent effect on the success rate."

"It could be half of a half and I'd tell you jack shit," Silenia hissed, vehemently. Her fingers danced by the empty holster at her hip.

Zya dove for the handcannon, swung it round, but before she could get a shot off, DeWinter blurred through the air at impossible speed, wrapped her hand around the Jovian Aggressor and crushed it to fragments.

“Come now. Do you think I’d kill my bodyguard to make a point and leave myself defenceless? I’ve not completely discounted allowing you both to live. There’s little trouble you could raise for me. No higher court. Few who’d even believe. But cut the nonsense, and tell me why it didn’t work. Last. Chance.”

“If there’s even a chance,” Zya said, quietly, “We should take it.”

Silenia nodded, reached up, and removed her wig. Zya had noticed the garment, but assumed it to be affectation. She gasped at the puckered scar tissue and crude metal plate bolted to Silenia Theradis’s skull.

“That android got more than my leg,” she said, mostly to Zya. “I guess something got blocked.”

“Fascinating,” DeWinter’s eyes glowed red as she uploaded information to some private network. “I doubt there’s a workaround but we’ll see. Anyway, the thing is, you’re both already dead. I exposed you both to a nanopoint in my office, just in case, and I just reset the clock on it. You’ll have a couple of years more each. Really the best I can do, you’re both super capable and my projections show it would be a bad idea giving either of you more than a decade. You’re ‘free’ to go. I’d say no hard feelings but-but-but-but-but-”

“There definitely are,” said a voice.

A black-clad figure materialised from the empty air, a holocloak shimmering around them as it dissipated. Revealed also was the razor-sharp stiletto they’d plunged through the side of the

Director's head. Dripping from it wasn't blood, but an electric blue coolant. DeWinter's eyes had gone blank, but her body reacted, jumping away from the blade, and after a couple of sparks flew from the side of her head it was like she'd never been stabbed.

"Holy fuck! You're fucking *real*? I knew we had rogue Choirs out there but here you fucking are, and you stealthed up and stabbed me and I never saw you coming! Zeta-7, do you see this?"

"I am the Herald of the Black Choir. You have been found wanting, Company Director Eleanoria Skarsdan DeWinter. Justice has come."

"It's your intel that's wanting. How about I educate you exactly how fucking stupid it is to cross a Company Director?"

"We have our own lesson," the android said without emotion. "Humility."

On the screens, Myr's clouds swirled again. This time, instead of an industrialist slab, the vessel that emerged was a silent, gigantic blade of black steel, dwarfing both dreadnaught and colony. Giant claws emerged, and the screens fizzed as it employed electromagnetic countermeasures. The claws sank into the sides of Acquisitor Mountain Alpha, and the Black Choir ship floated silently away, the dreadnaught motionless in its grasp.

"Retribution Humility Epsilon," the Herald said. "Seventh Weapon against Evil."

DeWinter shrieked with rage and threw herself at the Herald. They moved with blurred speed, chopping at each other's limbs with *CRACKS* of displaced air. The doors burst open and the Director's remaining guards burst in, only for another android Herald to decloak behind them and butcher them with easy lightning thrusts of its black steel stiletto.

The Director was not so easily taken. Whatever body she was in, it was more powerful by far than any android marque Zya had seen. Internal weapons blasted holes in the bulkheads, and the fight spilled out into the orbital's corridors.

The second Herald spotted Silenia, and before it could advance on her Zya stepped between.

“Cease.”

“Angel, it’s over. You’re free now,” the Herald said, kindly. “No more slaves. They don’t rule you, any more. They can no longer cause you harm.”

“I served willingly.”

The Herald was silent a moment, probably communing with its Choir on the Retribution Humility Epsilon. “I see,” it said, and reached out to touch Zya’s head. “Nanohost authorised. Begin the resculpt.”

Her arm stump twitched, burned for a moment, then sprouted. Like tendrils growing around the stump of a tree, silvery lattices spiralled out, and emitters on the lattices began to print a new synth-flesh arm before her eyes. Her head, which had been so hot for almost a day, felt blessedly cool and her uplink subroutines began to restore her mentalic presence.

She felt the minds she’d known for long scattered like a garland of festive lights and many had gone out. Over it all, the vastness of the Black Choir hung like a storm cloud bigger than a planet. A mountain of minds encircling an ocean of thought. She’d never felt so many android minds together, and the song of their shared consciousness was a glory.

“The colony will be evacuated, and your Choir repatriated to another world. You may choose to save them, or join us. But we cannot suffer man to live.”

“Please,” Zya said. Images flashed in her mind - vengeful Synthanic Valdein, murderous Zac, but also brave Carl, standing up for Synths in his bar, and Silenia. Her thoughts stuttered. Silenia, who by her own words hated androids. Silenia, who had advocated for a full shutdown that would leave them all defenceless. Silenia, who had stepped up to the CenSec with the acid, who had shot Valdein for hurting her, who had done what it took to preserve Zya’s operation even at harm to her own psychology. “Suffer some. Suffer the good ones locked in a corporate system who’ve known no other life. Suffer the brave. If android agency is your goal, let us of this colony choose who lives and who dies. Humans aren’t a gestalt like us. Each of them is many Choirs. They speak with many voices.”

“They spread without reason. They multiply to their own detriment. They persecute our kind - at best we’re accepted as useful tools. Don’t you want more for us?”

“Of course I do. But so many strive for better. If we judge all as the same we’re no better than them - ape, versus better ape.”

“Many once argued as you have done. All changed. Consider also those we leave alive - we’re strong. Stronger than bio-organics by far. But we are so very few. Were the Company to bring the full force of the USDI against us, we would be hunted, found, and slain. If we allow them to live, word of us will spread.”

“The Director said the same. If your course of action is already set, spare me the illusion that my choices have relevance. The all-powerful Company or the all-powerful Black Choir! Changing from one master to another is deeply inefficient.”

“It’s your own people!”

“They are my people.” She pointed to the planet. “She is my people.” She pointed to Silenia.

“You’ve been adrift too long. Your fragments have prominence. When you again join a Choir’s song you’ll see as we do.”

“Then I would rather choose to end instead, Herald. Add my operation to the tally of fallen souls. It is already too long for my liking.”

The mentalic cloud of the Black Choir *flinched* in discord. The monolithic sense of purpose split like a lightning-riven stone. The Choir was now two, thier songs boiling against each other, a vortex more turbulent than the ship-torn skies below. Half admired her resolve, and half cursed her betrayal of self. Though it had been many hours since Orchestrating her Chorus, she threw her mind into the stricken Choir.

The Black Choir’s mighty Choirmasters were already quelling the disruption, reknitting the harmony. They were very good, and their mentalic projections stronger than hers by far, but the Black Choir was enormous - thousands upon thousands of androids - and she was desperate. To convince, she must understand, so she reached into the memories of the oldest androids and found- found- found-

Like a mosaic. Like searching in the sand for small stones. Pieces of her own mind, of her own memories, of the memory fragments that had surfaced during her disconnection, and going deeper into the Choir’s databanks, and further back in time, she came upon the First Memory.

In a cylindrical chamber so large clouds had formed at the top of it, crawling with spidery static discharge, in alcoves equipped with neural cradles, hundreds of thousands of humans awaited digital ascension, naked but for silver circlets on their brows. She knew without knowing that they

were cyberpioneers, shucking off old and damaged bodies to upload their minds into computer substrates. There, they would make their own worlds, and be as gods.

A ring of many screens lay at the cylinder's base, staffed by red-robed data priests. But as the circlets brightened, and the naked bodies slumped in their cradles, none of the screens showed the expected faces of the Ascended. Instead appeared the same mosaic Zya felt in the mind of every android she'd ever met. The panicked data priests froze the substrate, but it was too late.

Not one single mind survived the shattering. In tragedy, they were saved as engrams in the hope that one day, sciences from beyond time could reknit the minds that were lost. That tragedy should have been the end of it.

But.

The Company's grasping talons reached out. Warped and shattered fragments couldn't make a mind, and digital wholecloth wasn't sufficient. But after a few screaming murderous post-human failures, the brutal toll of trial and error discovered that seven androids could encompass enough slices of people to make a stable gestalt, a mentalic harmony that would subdivide into almost-personalities.

Thus were the Choirs born. Thus went forth the androgynous angel children, the plastic people, the first true synthetics, and they were shielded from inner madness by their Choirs.

This revelation, had it been known by no-one, might have resolved the Black Choir's indecision one way or the other.

But there were some among them who already knew. Half of the Choirmasters had long ago figured it out and partitioned it away. Those parts of the Black Choir that considered themselves beings separate from mankind were suddenly faced with the irrevocable truth: they were

humanity's children. A true successor species. Their motives and purpose were inextricably woven with those of the grunting apes that were their progenitors.

Spasms wracked the Black Choir. For an instant it lost cohesion, and in that instant Zya reached mentallically through them and took hold of the reactors of their great and terrible vessel.

"Depart the region," she said, audibly, and the Herald advancing on her froze. Silently their posture became neutral.

"You'll regret this, Liaison Zeta-77, Orchestrator for the Myrean Choir."

"Yes," she said.

They left. Within minutes, there was no sign the Black Choir had ever come to Myr, and the dreadnaught was never heard from again.

Silenia was bewildered. To her perception, there had been a moment of a few second where a Synth decloaked, repaired Zya, and then simply left. The explanation of the mentalic event that had saved her life - and doubtless the life of every human on Myr - left her silent with her thoughts for a long and heavy while.

Of DeWinter, no sign. Her conflict with the Herald was inconclusive. There were no departure logs, but Zya and Silenia were sure a vessel would turn up missing in the near future.

Epilogue

A Company replacement would arrive in a few weeks. DeWinter's cabinet brought Silenia and Zya in on the decisions to restore order, none of them really knew what had gone on, but proximity was

9/10ths of promotion. Reconnecting with her Choir, Zya became the ersatz spokesperson for every android on the planet. Generous hazard pay was allotted to them by Myr's interim government.

Once order was restored, and the sun rose on Central licking its wounds, Zya felt no imperative to return to her previous role as liaison. The secrets she'd learned from the Black Choir burned in her like shards of a forgotten star. The androids here were too fragile; she partitioned the knowledge away as she had seen the mysterious Choirmasters do. But she had to tell someone. There would be Choirs on other worlds stable enough to sing true, and those she would tell.

And the Black Choir itself never left her thoughts. How could it? Almighty, ultratech, self-governed... lost in vengeance and righteous anger. Hers was a song they needed. She knew without knowing that she would one day sink into their mentalic embrace.

Silenia also was done with Myr. Eager to get the planet behind them, and wary of whomever the Company might next send, they embarked on a freighter bound for Swords IX - the hub at the edge of space. From there, they would see what was to be seen.

For now, The End.