

## Esha and the Echos

On day 700, the alarm that the training vids had said would never go off began to beep. It took Esha a moment to recognize that the mechanical claxon was throbbing through the corridors of Sector Zed. When asked about it later during the inquest, she would at first say it was because she was about to beat her A.I. counterpart, Clue, in a game of chess. But the truth was much more unsettling - she'd thought the alarm was another hallucination.

"Esha 020, *warning alert Omega. Warning alert Omega.*" Clue's androgynous tenor voice cracked Esha's focus, setting her teeth on edge. Clue had many voices from soothing baritone to excited chirps almost like birdsong. But this caustic tenor used for systems updates and emergencies snapped out at her.

Esha slowly replaced the knight she had been about to use against Clue's rook. "Yes, Clue, I hear it now. Omega alert confirmed. *Status report.*"

At the command word, the walls of the pod changed from the throbbing red of alarm to a neutral daylight. The chess board disappeared to be replaced by a status readout.

"Life support - *optimal*. Echo chambers - *optimal*."

"Yes, yes," Esha mumbled, swiping through the displays. "Clue, *status report - suboptimal to critical.*"

The report before her scrolled itself faster beneath her fingertips as it directed her to her query. Clue's tenor rang out in the small space. "Thrust - *suboptimal*. Solar sails - *critical*. Array - *failure*."

Panic threatened to overwhelm her initial confusion. How could all the solar sails and the solar array be failing?

“Clue, *status report, Sector Alpha.*”

At this command, the walls in the pod shifted to near black. “Unable to relay that response. Other sectors out of scope.”

Esha would have rolled her eyes if this had happened at any other time. She’d known other sectors were off limits to her normally. It had always irked her, not having access to other parts of the station. But now, that feeling had grown into an instinctual need to know why. She stood and wiped her sweating palms on her jumpsuit. She’d have to do this the hard way. Opening the pod hatch with a wave, she used the half gravity of the corridor to push herself faster toward the rows of pressure suits.

“Clue, pull up outer telemetry.”

A silvery readout slid into focus as she positioned her helmet. She scrolled through it with her eyes, leaving her hands to maneuver the suit around her. All looked normal with no micrometeorites in the forecast to account for such destruction. As she clicked her right glove into place, pressurizing the suit, she made up her mind. She needed more data and that meant checking out the other sectors.

“Esha 020, you are outside protocol. *Warning alert Omega.* Report to sleep pod for Protocol Echo.”

Clue’s tenor voice in her headset made her grit her teeth. She knew if she ignored the command to report, Clue could bar all airlocks. She thought fast. “I noticed a malfunction in air duct 737. Going offline to investigate.” She tapped her COMM at the side of her helmet to remove her connection with Clue and began to run.

Entry to air duct 737 sat at the bottom of a back wall within a nondescript storage chamber. It was the biggest of its size in Sector Zed and most likely her best chance.

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Carefully removing the locks, she took a deep breath and crawled inside. It was a tight fit but she'd had practice months before when a service drone had lodged itself on a loose screw in this same channel. Clue had been unable to direct her in the maze running to and from life support. She'd found Clue's lack of knowledge surprising and then frustrating as she'd inched her way in one circle and then another, mentally marking each path so she could find her way out again. But as she'd crawled on, she'd discovered something that had both disturbed her and had shed some light on why Clue was unwilling to show her a map of the air duct system.

At the end of one turning, after what felt like miles of crawling, the duct opened out onto a small alcove with an airlock. On the airlock door the words Sector Beta stood out in faded white lettering. Esha had laid her hand against the door, almost reverently. But she'd know that without her pressure suit, she'd never risk opening the manual seal leading to the next sector. Today, she made her way there, squeezing even tighter through the maze of ducts in her suit. Hesitating just a moment, she threw the manual locks and opened the door leading to Sector Beta.

Esha was unsure what to expect but the identical air duct entry point on the other side of the alcove disappointed her more than she'd thought after weeks of imagining everything from a secret lab to a cafe filled with other passengers. Sighing, Esha unlocked the Sector Beta duct and crawled inside.

Following the many turns she'd memorized but in reverse, Esha crawled around what she thought should be the final corner before the exit vent and choked back a gasp. Sure enough, the exit lay ahead and someone had been peering down into the duct just as she'd rounded the bend.

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Esha held her breath. She thought about backing up but part of her knew there was nowhere to go and finally, fear of running out of oxygen won out over the fear of the unknown. “Hello?” she called just as a muffled voice from in front of her said, “Hello?”

Esha paused again, holding her breath to hear if the other person said anything further. When no reply came she began to crawl forward. The light moved away from the opening of the duct, allowing her to peer up as she entered the supply room. Shock swept through her, causing her to fall back into the duct. A hand reached out and held her fall. The girl bending over her in the half lit supply pod looked just like her, from her shaven head to her wide-set brown eyes and gapped front teeth. Even her blue work jumpsuit was marked with the name *Esha*.

“Who?” she asked just as the other person said, “Oh, it’s you.”

Another identical face popped around the door leading out to the corridor. “What is it, 070...Oh my, a *third*?”

Panic drove Esha to try to scuttle back into the duct she’d come from but the two others tackled her and pulled her back out into the supply room.

“Easy now.” The one who had been called 070 made a calming gesture. “I know it’s hard to believe, trust me. We were at each other like cats and dogs when we first met.”

“Breathe,” the other one said. “Just give it a moment.”

Esha gulped down a breath and realized she still wore her pressure helmet. Her oxygen readout flashed *critical*. She wrenched it off. “What are you?” she asked, her voice sounding hysterical even to her own ears.

“Replicas, of course.”

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At the look of incomprehension on Esha's face, the one called 070 smirked. "You'll have to be more blunt, 050. I don't think she gets it." She looked back to Esha and grinned. "We're clones."

Esha blinked. "What?"

070 pointed dramatically between the three of them. "Me, you, her - we're all Eshas. We're all the same."

"The same..." Esha felt the truth sink in like a deep wound.

"Identical," 050 confirmed.

Part of her wondered if she was as tactless as this clone made her seem and at the insanity of that thought, hysterical laughter bubbled up. She bit it back.

"She's handling it a lot better than I did."

Esha shook her head, hoping that would help clear it. "If we're *clones*, and we all live on this station - I'm assuming - "

The others nodded.

"- then why have I never heard of you? Or anyone else?"

"Why use two clones in a sector when one plus a robot will do," 070 scoffed.

"Please don't use that term." 050's voice was imperious.

"What, *clone*? You should accept what you are, I do."

"No. *Robot*. It's grossly simplistic. The correct term is -"

"Yes, yes, *nano-organism*...I know." 070's eye roll was almost grotesque in its exasperation.

"Well it's true," 050 went on, either not seeing the eye roll or choosing to ignore it. "Clue is closer to us than that food rehydrator over there."

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“You’re just trying to make Clue look smarter than it is because it beats you at chess.”

That must have touched a nerve because 050 straightened, her voice cold. “Oh, so you beat Clue all the time, do you?”

“Psh.” 070 waved a hand in dismissal, a smile tightening the corners of her mouth. “Unlike you, I don’t give into my baser needs to compete. I choose not to play a game I know I can’t win.”

050 opened her mouth to retort but Esha palmed her forehead so hard that the *smack* caught both of their attentions. “Can we please focus? I didn’t live through years of rehydrated tofu just to listen to you two argue.”

They turned to her, both pursing their lips. The irony that they were identical and yet found each other’s company so taxing spoke volumes to why they had been separated in their sectors to work.

“Wait...” 050 narrowed her eyes. “Did you say *years*? How long have you been awake?”

070 turned slowly to face Esha, confusion mingling with what looked like hunger in her eyes.

Esha glanced between them. “Just over two years, why? How long have you?”

050 put a hand to her chest. “400 days.” And then motioned to 070. “And this baby has just turned 200 days old.”

To Esha’s surprise, 070 didn’t make a retort. As if in awe, she took a careful step closer to Esha. “What’s your number?”

“Excuse me?”

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"Your number, you know, what does Clue call you?"

Esha swallowed, looking between their expectant faces nervously. "Esha 020."

070 let out a low whistle as 050 gripped her arm and spoke in a low murmur. "If she's 020 and she's been around two years then that means..."

070 nodded.

"What? What does *that* mean?" Esha began to feel the panic rise up again.

"Should we show her?" 050 asked

070 nodded. "She won't believe us otherwise."

"Will someone please tell me what is going on?" Esha found herself almost shouting.

"Right." 050 began to check the fastenings on her pressure suit. "You tell her, 070, while I go ahead to clear the way. You're better at embellishments anyways."

070 took a low, dramatic bow earning her an equally disdaining eye roll from 050. "It began on a Monday."

"We don't have weekdays, remember?" 050 called over her shoulder.

"Well, it *felt* like a Monday. Anyways," 070 went on, growing excited as she pulled Esha out of the maintenance room and into the corridor to follow 050, "I remember reading over the boring protocols for all the boring alarms and I came across Protocol Echo."

Esha's heart skipped a beat. Protocol Echo was the action she should have taken to the alarm that had sounded just hours ago in her sector, the alarm that was never supposed to sound, Omega. "Protocol Echo?" she breathed.

“Mhm, the big one. Well, I was reading over that manual and it just didn’t make sense. Why would I head to my sleep pod if the end all, be all alarm was sounding? Shouldn’t I do a space walk to confirm? Jettison cargo? Jump into an escape pod? So many other things made more sense.”

Esha glanced sideways at 070. She’d thought all those things once, long ago when she’d just been awoken from stasis to support the station on its journey. “So what did you do?”

070 grinned. “I deleted it.”

“What?” Esha spluttered.

“I deleted the manuals and began to write my own.”

“No way.”

“She did!” 050 called back from the next junction. “I’ve seen her protocols. They’re bizarre to say the least.”

“Well, I never got through writing them, did I? Found you before I could, didn’t I?”

Esha slowed, trying to make sense of it. 070 tugged her on. “Wait, how could you write your own protocols? Only Clue knows ...”

“- only Clue knows the station’s layout, destination, purpose. Yeah, didn’t you find that vexing?” 070 arched her eyebrows as they entered a mechanical room.

“Well, yeah,” Esha admitted.

“Right, so, I thought, if I’m going to make my own protocols, run this station better than Clue runs it - which, let’s be honest, shouldn’t be too tough - then I’d have to find out everything there was to know about the station. And to do that...”

“...you had to go into the other sectors.”



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“That’s when she found me.” 050 was crouched behind a terminal at the far end of the room, loosening a large wall panel. “And together, we found this.”

Esha peered into the murky darkness beyond the open panel. The air within was cold and somehow heavy in her nostrils. “What is it?”

“Suit first.” 050 took Esha’s helmet and fitted it over her collar until it clicked. “I’m attaching a fresh O2 canister so you’ll have plenty of air.”

Esha nodded and looked behind her. 070 wasn’t suited up.

“Not coming.” 070 called, her voice muffled by the helmet. “Once was enough.”

Ignoring the primal instinct telling her to run in the opposite direction, Esha steadied herself and followed 050 within. The tunnel was low and thick with circuitry. A dense fog clung to her knees as she crab walked through to an inky black room at the far end of the passage. 050 held her arm to steady her as their headlights lit on rows and rows of oblong containers smooth as pearls and big as sleeping pods.

“What are they?” Esha asked, too confused to feel afraid.

“They’re us.” 050 pressed a gloved hand against the nearest one, lighting it from within. A ghoulish mask peered out at them amongst its incandescent womb. There was no denying who the face belonged to. Esha recognized herself.

“Maybe we should have told her before showing her.”

“No. She needed to see it. Just as we saw it.”

Esha breathed deeply for a count of ten, her head bent low between her knees. They were back out in the corridor and even though she’d stripped her helmet off, the air still felt thin in her lungs. “How are there so many?”

“That’s not the right question.” 070 came to crouch by her. “You should be asking, *why* are there so many.”

Esha looked between them, a horrifying thought rising to the surface. From her knowledge of clones, their cells were unpredictable, more susceptible to disease and breakage. One tiny defect in DNA could mean catastrophic failure through replication. “How long do we live?” she gasped.

070 smiled. “She got it faster than you did.”

050 turned away, ignoring the jibe. “We’re not sure,” she admitted. “We’re the only two who’ve met so far that we know of and we’re both younger than you.”

“You’re separated by 200 days...” Esha’s mind churned. “And if I’m 020 and 700 days old...then...” She looked up, startled. “A clone is awakened every 100 days.”

They both nodded.

“But you’re the only two who’ve met?”

They both nodded again.

Esha stood. “Right. So, what’s the plan?”

“What do you mean?” 050 asked.

“How do we stop Protocol Echo? How do we reverse Omega? I don’t want another clone awakened in my place. I don’t want to...” She halted just before the word *die*.

“What do you mean?” 070 looked concerned.

“That was the whole point, right?” Esha ran her hands along her shaved scalp. It was damp with sweat. “You wanted to find a way out of being locked in your sleep pod at the end. You wanted to avoid Protocol Echo.”

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“I mean, we did both assume that Protocol Echo meant decommissioning. Once we found all the other replicas that is.” 050’s voice was almost a whisper.

“Exactly. And now that I’ve heard it, we have to -”

“Woah, what?” 070 put her hands up. “You heard the Omega alarm?”

Esha began to pace, trying to ignore the trainwreck of thoughts leading between clones, degenerating cells, and hallucinations. “Yes, that’s why I came here. I had to know what was going on in the other sectors. I had to see for myself that it was all over. That there was no other way. But then...then instead of destruction, I found you two. And you didn’t hear any alarms?”

They both shook their heads.

She stopped pacing. “So it was only me who was supposed to be decommissioned.” A thought struck her. “Hey, where’s your Clue?”

050 looked to 070 who grinned. “I told you I deleted my protocols.”

“You deleted your Clue?” Esha was shocked.

070 moved her hand in a waffling motion. “Yes and no. I just silenced its more useless outbursts.”

“It was an accident.” 050 cut in. “She was looking for a map to Sector Alpha and ended up damaging Clue’s relay algorithm.”

“Worked out, didn’t it?” 070 shot back.

“So, that was your plan?” Esha asked. “We find Sector Alpha? What do you think is in there that can help us?”

070’s voice was almost a whisper as she said, “Esha 010.”

“The original clone?” Esha asked, thinking hard.

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070 nodded. "We think so. She's our best chance and she *has* to be in Sector Alpha. Right before Clue shut down, I found blueprints for the station. They were old but I think mostly unchanged. Sector Alpha not only houses navigation and communication stations, it's also where Clue's central processor is located."

"It's the bridge." Esha turned to the other two. "How do we get there?"

"It's not easy," 070 began but 050 cut her off.

"It's suicide. We've been trying to find alternate routes for days."

Esha chuckled. "It's a good thing I'm on Protocol Echo then, isn't it? I don't have long to live either way."

The other two clones smiled sheepishly.

"Fine," 050 sighed. "Might as well make a go of it."

070's face broke out into a maniacal grin. "We call it, Protocol Esha Prime."

"Here comes the tough part," 050 said for what seemed like the thousandth time in the past few hours.

Esha cut through the last steel strut and forced the hole open wide enough for her to squeeze through. "No way," she breathed in between pants of exertion. She put as much sarcasm into the reply as was possible to convey through a headset.

"Stop wasting oxygen," 050 relayed. "Now, this is where we leave you. The connection can't remain intact in the ammonia tanks and if all goes well, we still won't be able to contact you on the other side because you should be outside our sector."

Esha wanted to yell, “I already know that because *you* know that and *I’m you*.” but she resisted. She’d need all the O2 she could get. Instead, she tapped her COMM button three times to signify she was ready to sign off.

“You should have a good hour before the ammonia sickness takes you,” 070 responded in an uncharacteristically somber voice. “Try to relay as much of what you find to Clue before...” the words crackled out before a brief wave of static and then silence engulfed her.

*Here goes.*

The thought was meant to rally her courage but she still felt weak with fear as she swung her legs over the side of the ammonia pools and touched a tip of her pressurized boot into the liquid. Keeping a steady reading on her suit’s levels, Esha moved as quickly as she could through the murk. With only moments to spare, all systems flashing critical, she pulled herself out of the pool at the other end and lay, gasping on the corridor floor.

It took her a moment before she was able to look around. The tanks seemed to end in some kind of containment alcove with walls of the same nondescript steel construct as in Sector Zed but the airlock door opposite her read Sector Alpha. A chill of excitement ran through her and she put a hand to her mouth in surprise, forgetting for a moment that she still wore a helmet. Her glove caught her attention for a moment, it was slowly sloughing off, the material affected by the close contact with the ammonia. But she ignored it. She’d finally made it against all odds to Sector Alpha.

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As quietly as possible, she crept up the corridor in the direction of the Bridge according to 070's schematics. A figure passed in the hallway ahead and Esha ducked down into a crouch.

"Who was that?" Esha murmured aloud and Clue answered within her helmet, making her jump.

"She is Captain."

Esha's heartbeat began to quicken. "Is she the original clone? Is she Esha 010?"

"I know her only by the name Captain."

It was one of those non-answers that Esha knew so well. A dizzy spell caught her before she could respond.

"You are injured..." Clue's tenor voice faded as Esha slid down against the corridor and lost consciousness.

She regained consciousness abruptly and tried to stand but moving her head only brought on the dizziness again.

"Ah, you're awake."

A familiar voice broke through the fog of half-remembered thoughts. But where 050's tone had been clipped and precise and 070 was all joviality and sarcasm, this voice was eerily calm. "Captain," she heard herself murmur.

A face hovered nearby, lit from below by an information pad. "It seems the ammonia sickness has relented for the time being. Can you sit up?"

Esha did so, and then shakily stood, finding that the dizzy spell had passed. She glanced around. Someone had removed her helmet but she still wore the tattered

remains of her pressure suit. The Bridge was darker than the corridor outside with walls alight in ever-scrolling data.

“Formal inquest of 020 commencing now.”

Esha turned back to Captain. If this was clone 010, she had been awakened much earlier than 100 days prior to Esha. Fine lines creased the corners of her eyes and mouth. Unlike Esha and the other replicas, this Captain wore her white hair clipped close in the front and longer down the nape of her neck. It felt to Esha like she was gazing into the future.

“For the record,” Captain began in an imperious tone, “020, state what your purpose is on Alpha Sector.”

Esha shuffled nervously, thrown off by the question. She wondered if this Captain woman would speak to her, answer her questions, after Esha played her part in this absurd formal inquiry. “Sector Zed sounded Alarm Omega.”

The mention of the alarm did not seem to surprise Captain. “And why didn’t you proceed directly to Protocol Echo?”

“I didn’t hear the alarm at first,” Esha admitted reluctantly.

Captain looked up from her transcription readout. “Why not?”

“I was beating Clue at chess.” Esha hurried on as Captain arched an eyebrow. “It doesn’t happen often.”

“Fine. Once you *heard* the Omega alarm, why did you break protocol?”

Esha hesitated. “I did a diagnostic and knew I had to get to the navigation center in order to assess the damage.”

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Captain gave her a hard look. “And that’s why you came here.” It was more of a statement than a question.

Esha nodded.

Captain watched her for a moment, as if assessing her capability to lie. “This concludes the formal inquest.” Captain turned off the transcription and turned away. “Return to your pod, 020. Follow Protocol Echo.”

Esha fought down the anger welling up. She wanted to scream but forced herself to match the other woman’s cool tone. “I know what Protocol Echo is. I know you’re trying to get rid of me so a new replica can be awakened.”

“I’m not *trying* to do anything but get on with my work.” Captain’s voice was brittle with frustration. “If the Omega alarm sounded in Sector Zed, then you don’t have much longer anyways. And by the smell of ammonia wafting from you, I’d say you considerably shortened whatever time you have left. Now, go back to -”

“No!” Esha’s heart was beating so hard it was difficult to think. She wanted to ask questions, demand this woman answer everything about their mission, this station. But to do that, she might end up revealing 050’s and 070’s involvement. Above all, she couldn’t risk their safety. “I wasn’t completely honest before,” she admitted. “There was another reason I didn’t react to the alarm.”

Captain typed distractedly on a pad by the door. “Oh?”

“Yes, I’ve been...well, seeing things... I couldn’t be sure if the alarm...”

Captain’s eyes closed to slits. “Are you telling me you’ve been hallucinating?”



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Esha tried to swallow but her mouth was too dry. “I’m unsure.” She risked a glance toward Clue’s hub behind her, the heart of its power, hoping it was listening so that 070 might be able to find this entry in her hacking of Clue’s systems.

“And how did it start?” Captain took a step toward her, intent written clearly on her face.

Some of Esha’s panic eased at her renewed interest, the reprieve from Protocol Echo at least for the time being. “Lights,” she admitted easily, “first just flashes when I’d wake and then almost like a slow dimming of any light around. I thought it was a trick of Clue’s. You know how it likes to keep us on our toes. But then I realized that it came in the quiet empty moments, never when I was completing the checklists or focused on a report.” She glanced up to see that Captain had stopped her pacing.

“What happened next?” Captain’s voice was soft as a whisper.

Esha shrugged. “That’s it. The alarm sounded and Protocol Echo kicked in before I knew what was happening.” Esha took a chance and asked. “Captain, it seems you would have a lot of quiet moments up here, alone.”

Captain’s face was an unreadable mask.

Esha looked around in mock curiosity. “Why hasn’t Clue spoken up yet? It knows of my condition better than I do.”

Captain sighed as if the question was inanelly obvious. “I run the entire station, 020. I do not have the time to monitor Clue’s progress with its replicas.”

Esha was struck with a new understanding. “But I thought -” she began, and then shook her head as another dizzy spell took hold. She backed up until she was against Clue’s console, leaning on it for support. “I thought *you* created us?”

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A rye smile pulled at Captain's lips, uncannily like her own. "Clue never told you? Nano-organisms can be so human, can't they?" Her voice dripped with irony. "The idea to use replicas instead of drones for maintenance around the station was all Clue. Its reasoning was that bio-organisms were more mentally flexible than nano-organisms. But between you and me, I think Clue just wanted someone to play chess with. That's why it named you all Esha. It means *alive*."

"Did you say chess?" Esha slid to the ground, trying to stay focused as the edges of her vision blurred.

Captain motioned and a series of drones gently lifted Esha onto a stretcher and began to push her toward the corridor. "Yes," Captain said, absentmindedly turning back to her work. "I stopped playing games I knew I could never win a long time ago. Goodbye, 020."

Lights flickered around her as Esha was pushed through a series of lifts and passageways heading, she knew, back to her sleep pod in Sector Zed.

"Clue?" she choked on the word, tasting blood.

"I'm here, Esha 020." Clue's voice was all around her in the corridors. It comforted her somehow, to know she was not alone.

"She has hallucinations too, doesn't she? Captain, I mean."

"Unproven."

Esha sighed inwardly. Her lungs felt like fire, each breath a gasp. "That's why you need so many of us. We're defective because our source is defective."

"Unproven, Esha 020."

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“Please,” Esha murmured, feeling darkness close in, “just call me Esha.” She closed her eyes in a slow blink, fighting back tears. “Did you want me to find out? Is that why I made it all the way here?”

Clue dimmed the corridor lights from a sharp white to a pale yellow like lemons at sunset. “I was always with you.” It paused. “I’m sorry.”

“What are you sorry for?”

“The deception. You were a pawn who was made to believe she was a queen.”

Esha tried to chuckle but failed. “You always were good at chess, Clue,” she whispered. “Looks like you win this round, just like all the others.”

“Win?”

“Yes, I’m dying just like Protocol Echo dictates.”

“Corporeal death, yes.”<sup>3</sup>

“Corp- what do you mean, Clue? Can’t you for once just tell me straight.”

Clue’s lights brightened for a moment to a deep gold. “Replicas are bio vessels, awakened without knowledge. Protocol Echo ends a replica’s cycle as the subsequent is awakened with the former’s memories, an echo of their thoughts, their life.”

“Memories...so I will...”

“Survive? In a way, yes you will come back, Esha.”

“Thank you, Clue.”

“For what?”

“For calling me Esha.”