

Welcome to **Phases**: a short story anthology following the events of Moonbase Theta, Out.

Story 11: Raymond

Sitting in the Administrator's office of Moonbase Alpha, Coordinator Raymond Arterbury sighed, steepling his fingers together while he waited for the next message from Earth. As if the conversation itself weren't frustrating enough, the three second wait for each response made it absolute torture. It wasn't like he *needed* their instructions – he could have written the script for each exasperating directive. Hell, he used to – the last sixteen years of his life had been spent as the public face of the Combined Corporate Moonbase Project, until his corporate overlords sent him to coordinate from three hundred and eighty-five thousand clicks away.

Finally, the speaker built into the desk crackled to life, startling him back to an upright position. Several voices jumped into the call at once. "We sent you with a hundred bots –" "Can't you just surround their Bases –" "Bullshit, break the damn doors down. Like the old days!"

Raymond sighed again, and adjusted their volume a few steps down. "That's fine, if we want to depressurize an entire Base. *With* the whole world watching. The whole Universe." He didn't wait three seconds. "You dumped me here with nothing but your bots to break a full-moon revolt, no fix from your big brains for the rogue Ais in the satellite network, no solution offered to the *aliens* who are watching our every move. I've got the bots moving, I'm keeping an eye out for weak spots, I'm listening in where I can find a way to do so. If that's not enough, why don't you send someone else up here to do the job?"

He slammed his hand down on the arm of his chair emphatically, sitting up straight, counting the seconds to their reply. There were some sputters and stammers, at least one muttered curse from the other end ... but then that settled down into silence. Raymond thought he'd won, and was clearing his throat to scold them all again – when a new voice entered the call, sinister and silky smooth as it flowed across the airwaves.

"*Mister* Arterbury, I believe we all appreciate the difficulty of your situation. But you did accept this assignment, did you not? I recall your signature on the transfer."

Raymond gritted his teeth. "Mx. Parker. I accepted the job, but –"

She cut in again – which, he realized, meant she must have started to do so before he replied to her first question. "And with that, accepted *all* the related terms and conditions. We could have woken up Administrator Hart if we wanted someone who would wave their hands helplessly in the face of a challenge."

Raymond counted inwardly: *One ... Two ... Three*, but apparently now Monica Parker was waiting for his response. *Shit*. He blurted out, "I know what I signed up for," aiming for self-assured but coming out more like a teenage whine. He took a moment to breathe, and continued at a lower pitch. "I'm just saying I could use a little more support here, more of a free hand around the operation. Like those R+D levels downstairs ..."

“Do you want more support, or do you want a free hand? Those are two *very* different things, Coordinator.” Her voice turned to a snarl. “Do your job, under the agreed-to scope and schedule, with the resources already provided you. Or fail, and you’ll see what happens.”

She clicked her fingernails against the table on that end of the call, loud enough that he could hear even through the bad connection. “I’ll let you get back to it. We’ll be discussing ... contingency plans.” One more click, and the call was disconnected.

Raymond found he was leaning forward in his seat, hands clenched under the desktop. “Lilah!” he called towards the outer office. “Get off those cortex games and get in here.”

He composed himself while waiting, and felt reasonably in control again by the time the short, violet-haired assistant walked in. They didn’t say anything, just looked at him expectantly, a clip-pad at hand for any notes or documents.

“I’m sure you heard all of that. They’re being *particularly* helpful ... so we’re left alone to our own devices. Literally, since it’s you, me, and a fleet of multi-purpose Moonbots left to pick up the pieces here. Do we have any new reports from the ones out in the field?”

Lilah looked down at their notes – only to buy time, Raymond was certain, and then exhaled through their teeth. “Nothing positive. We’ve lost one ... *two* more from falling into crevices. Looks like the second was trying to help get the first one out. I’m working on changing that series of instructions.”

“We’re still losing bots? What the – you better be doing something about it! If they don’t find something for us soon, we’re going to run out of options. They’re already threatening to move on to whatever Plan B they’re cooking up without us.”

“Noted,” Lilah replied a bit absently, marking something down on their pad – unnecessarily, Raymond thought. Nothing he’d said was any sort of revelation. They stood there again, waiting for him to continue.

“Get out of here, go *do* something,” Raymond said after a minute. “No, wait. Were you able to figure out anything about our ... access issues?”

Lilah looked down at their pad again. Everyone assumed their devices were always bugged, but it wasn’t like he hadn’t asked the Board directly – they’d assume he was trying to work around them. “Even Pearle – Administrator Hart – wasn’t allowed to enter the lower levels. Only Science Leads had access.”

“Hell, there’s only you and I awake. Can’t you update the personnel files to elect one of us a Science Lead?”

Lilah frowned, still looking down. “Not without credentials ... it says here you managed one of the regional Xinopec Science Wings on your way up?”

“Technically, for about six months or so. They needed a new face for the PR while they buried some bodies. Does that get us anywhere?”

Lilah tapped the screen of their pad again. “I’ll let you know.” They immediately turned around and headed back out of the office. A moment after he heard their chair squeaking outside, they called back in. “Coordinator Artebury! There’s a message from your husband. *Another* one.”

He stood up and walked around the desk and out of the private office. "Send it to my implant?" he asked Lilah as he passed by, trying to look busy. "I'm heading down to the kitchen. Need anything?"

He heard them mutter, "No, *thank you*," as he wandered further into the maze of cubicles that was the bulk of the upper level on Base Alpha. Every time he left the office – he couldn't think of it as *his* office – the rest of the Base confounded him all over again. What had they been *doing* with a full level of administrative number-crunchers and paper-pushers on the Moon? What couldn't they have done from back on Earth? The rumour was always that most of them were spies, but Raymond didn't buy that – even that many *spies* didn't make sense.

Regardless, it was a good level for getting yourself lost while thinking about problems that can't be solved. Which was the perfect category for the message that Raymond was listening to as he walked.

"Hey, Ray-ray ... it's me, just checking in again. Have you had any luck getting out of that contract? I could find a lawyer here if you need one. It'd be great to have you back before my birthday ... it'd just be great to have you back. I just rattle around the house without you."

Raymond wanted to smile, but it came out as a grimace. The reference to the contract was a sore spot. He'd never told, agreed, even *implied* to Chuck that he wanted out of the contract. (Even though he obviously had his reservations, he kept them buried.) His husband had just decided, and kept pushing from his end as if it were a done deal. And the reasons for missing him ... were they really emotional, or did it have to do with the bills Raymond usually paid? This far apart, it was hard to feel sure.

He looked around, and realized he'd wandered the whole way to the office kitchen. It was tiny in comparison to the other Bases – just enough room for a coffee maker, a microwave, a couple of stools, a recycle bin. A half-size freezer held trays of pre-prepared meals – the only option when they didn't have a garden of their own to renew the food supplies. Lilah had told him that, before the shutdowns, all their produce had been provided from the garden on Epsilon – not much chance of that happening now.

Glumly, he heated up a packet of desiccated corn 'dogs' and soggy fries, then poured a cup of stale coffee (no sugar, no milk or creamer available) to wash the taste out of his mouth. The coffee was too hot to drink right away, so he cradled the mug between his hands and walked back across the level, blowing on it every so often until it was drinkable.

As he passed Lilah again, they looked up and gave him a nod. "A few reports back from the bots," they said, "Nothing exciting, but they're in your stack for signoff. And your husband called again."

"Why didn't you put him through? I was just over –" But Lilah had dropped their head again, engrossed in something on their screen. Clutching his coffee to his chest, Raymond made his way back to the desk and opened his messages. The audio linked to his implant with one keystroke.

"Ray-ray. Hi. Chuck here, your husband. Weird that you haven't called back yet – I thought you had all the time in the world up there? Guess they've got to make you work sometimes. Corporate jerks. Not you, I mean – them. You're not a jerk as long as you call me back! Waiting for some word, sweetheart."

Raymond closed his eyes and rubbed his temples with his fingertips. This was getting to be a day. And every day was longer on the Moon ...

He was just about to return Chuck's call (like it or not), when he remembered the reports that were waiting. He checked the time on his implant, sighed, and pulled them up to check through. As Lilah had promised, there wasn't much there. "Near miss," he murmured, "another near miss, visual receptor issue ... fell into a crevice. *Another* near miss – not even, I think they probably saw that one. Wait ... that unit picked up some audio near Gamma! How'd Lilah miss that? Clean up, enhance, and play back."

The voice faded in and out through the static, but anyone on the Moon would recognize the voice as Maria L'Anglois. "*Putain*, Zana. I don't care what ... he'll be with us ... first move! We can take Alpha ... right? Assholes." He went back a little. "... can take Alpha ... right? Assholes." *We can take Alpha.*

He started to stand, crashing into the desk with his knees. "Ahh! Dammit. Lilah! LILAH! Did you hear this in the report from Gamma?"

"You listened to the reports?" He heard them get up. "You don't generally ..." And they were at the door, looking in, eyebrows raised.

"With the Board breathing down my neck? Good thing I did." He played the message one more time. "They're – they're after Alpha. Right now! What's the – was there a protocol for this sort of thing? What defenses do they have set up?" He rubbed his knees and then walked around to the front of the desk, buttoning his suit jacket, anxious and ready for action.

Lilah took a step in the doorway, holding up their hands. "Just a sec. You won't find much, to start with. Pretty obvious management never prepared for this. But it's not like anyone can walk right in the airlock."

Raymond nodded. "There's that."

"I think Administrator Hart would have written up that report first, sent it for management review."

He thought about Monica Parker's reaction. "That's the last thing we need. There's not time to go through the Board on this. There's got to be something we can do ... the extra bots up there, I thought I read something about a reset to Security programming ... let's go check their terminal and we'll--"

Lilah broke in, and he actually thought they sounded stressed for the first time. *Finally realizing the gravity of things*, he figured. They said, "Boss, I might have something better. I think I can get you access downstairs."

It took a little while – they had to turn the air and heat back on down there, for one thing. Oxygen was limited – without a garden, their supply came from the ice mining on other Bases – and since their side of the Moon was in dark phase, the energy to heat every level was just wasteful. But a half-hour or so later, it was fit for human exploration, and the two of them stood at the secure portal to Base Research and Development.

Even fully-lit and warm, it gave Raymond the creeps. Nothing else he'd seen up here was built like this. Reinforced doorways, security locks, warning signs about protective gear and radiation. Every step had echoed down the huge, empty hallway. He shuffled and coughed now, uncertain. *Dammit, Arterbury, this is your lucky break*, he reminded himself. *Sort this out and the Board has to back down.*

He leaned in and looked over the locking mechanism. “What do I do, is it biometric, or is it coded to my voice now? You said you were trying that thing with my credentials?”

Lilah tapped on their pad. “I broke through the protocols that way, but once I was in – now it’s as simple as this.” They gestured across the pad, and without touching the door at all, it popped open with a slight hiss of air. “Done.” They gestured broadly, inviting Raymond to enter first.

He walked inside – it was much darker than the outside hallway, so his eyes had to adjust. He heard Lilah follow him a step or two in. He still couldn’t see yet, but just getting *in* bolstered his spirits. “This is gonna be ... we’ll find something in here to turn the tide. I’m sure of it, Lilah, they should have given me access the whole time. A free hand, Monica Parker, I’ll show you a free hand! This will be the ... the one thing that ... my whole *life* ...”

His voice trailed off as he looked around and could finally *see*. Like the level above, this appeared to be a single, hollowed-out cavern. But instead of being filled with cubicles and water coolers and file storage, this one was filled with ... mostly nothing. More empty space than Raymond could wrap his head around. There were some boxes to one side, a few larger things covered with tarps to keep out the dust ... and it looked like some extra banks of stasis pods at the far end, maybe backup units? But mostly, they were stocked with thin air and rock dust.

Raymond took a few more steps, and a few more, his stomach turning in on itself. He looked back to Lilah and gestured. “There’s ... where is everything? Is there another level, is this just the ... is it some kind of cloaking, invisibility thing? Is it extra security if there’s a break-in? Did you see anything when you ...”

He trailed off when he noticed Lilah was shaking a little, but not with fear or nervousness – they were laughing. “This is it, Coordinator Arterbury,” they replied, shaking their head, checking off a box on their pad. “A few boxes of hard drives they wanted to hide far from home, a few unprofitable prototypes ... and a few difficult employees they had to keep in a more *private* stasis situation.” They smiled. “This whole thing must have been some sort of money grab on one level or another. Not sure if that’s something you should bring up to the Board.”

Raymond was still trying to wrap his head around the whole thing. “How do you know all that? Why would they ... it doesn’t even make *sense* ...”

“We didn’t think so, either, but ... corporate and logic don’t exactly go together. And in the end, it’s gonna work out for us either way.”

He shook his head. “How does this work for us?”

“Sorry. *Different* us. You know how they always said this Base was full of spies? Truer than they knew ... just about everyone here was a spy, but not for the same side.”

It clicked. “You’re one of them! You’re working with the ... whatever they call themselves, the Moonbaseians, the rebels.”

Lilah chuckled again. “I haven’t been in touch since we woke back up. Too many eyes and too many *ears*. But I’ve been gathering information, backing up data ... it’s just about time to reach out and offer my assistance to the cause.”

He thought about charging them, but somehow he knew they'd be prepared – he'd probably go down with one gesture on that damned clip-pad. And the whole thing was too much anyway ... he felt too weak to struggle. Slowly, he sat down in the middle of the floor. "And what ... happens to me in this situation?"

They gestured across the space again. "This is where they sent the problems they wanted to disappear forever. No reason we can't do that, too. I'll tell the Board you must have fallen into a crevice."

Raymond trembled. "Hold on, just ... wait a minute here ..."

Lilah frowned. "I'm not going to kill you. I'm trying to suck up to the good side, remember? But there's a stasis pod back in the corner there with your name *all* over it. Someone will find you, I'm sure. Eventually."

There was a slight tone from their pad, and they looked down again. "I should really get my act together before they *do* storm this Base or something. Make sure they know who's friends and foes." They looked up again and met Raymond's eyes. "You can take all the time you need. I won't be back down to check in, but ... your pod will be waiting."

They turned back to the door, resetting the locks with a touch. "Best of luck, Coordinator." Raymond tried to get up again, but he didn't seem to have control over his limbs.

As the door closed again with Lilah on the other side, he heard their voice one more time, faintly. "You have a message from your husband ... I'm sending it through."

And then the door thudded shut, the locks turned, and silence. Huge, all-encompassing silence. Raymond didn't need to check his implant to know he was completely cut off.

Though he did check it, a moment later. His husband's voice filled his ears again, the frustration obvious now. "Raymond. This is *not* like you! Are you trying to ... I don't want to make this all about *me*, but if I can't count on my husband, who doesn't seem to be trying to get back home at all at this point ... well then, where the heck are we? You ... you better call, Ray-ray. You better call."

[END NOTES]

Thank you for listening to Phases: a Moonbase Theta, Out short story anthology. Written by D.J. Sylvis. Read, produced, and edited by Cass McPhee. Our theme music is Star, by Ramp - check them out at Ramp dash Music dot net. Our cover art is by Peter Chiykowski.

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And, as always, keep watching the moon.