Five years. It had been five full years since Ashley had personally descended and given the ‘decree’ to work on artificial intelligence. In those five years, Desbar had focused almost all of its attention on this specific field, using the examples given by the Keeper as objects of their study. It was to such a degree that their space programs had begun to fall behind the other worlds’.

In one of the many offices of Darkflame Technologies’ corporate headquarters, there was a demon male leaning forward in front of his computer. His expression was tired from the utter lack of sleep, and his fingers typed away at a holographic keyboard.

“Go home already, Kris.” One of his coworkers called out with a yawn. “You can pick this up after some rest.”

Outside, the night’s sky was just starting to brighten, showing that they did not have much time left to get home before the sun rose. But still, the man continued his work. “Just a little bit more. I think I’ve almost got it.”

There were dozens of teams working on this project within the main headquarters alone, with Kris being in charge of his group. His concerned coworker was another member of the same team, but also a friend. Still, he shook his head helplessly as Kris committed himself to another full day of work.

One of the reasons that Kris had been chosen for this position was because of his attitude towards projects. There had been many cases over the last few years where he would spend entire weeks in the office, sleeping on the floor next to his terminal and eating whatever his team happened to bring for him.

His eyes seemed to shine as he utilized his own powers along with his talent for coding. Like many people within the company, he was a Priest of Ashley. He was currently channeling her blessing, which assisted him in understanding and writing complex code.

Even with all of the team members having some kind of blessing from Ashley, even with them having direct access to study a true programmed intelligence, they had not been able to create one of their own. They had created many prototypes, programs that emulated human emotion to a greater degree than Ana, but none of them passed the final test.

Kris continued typing away at his computer for hours after the last of his team members had left. By the time he was done, his formerly shining eyes seemed almost listless, his limbs moving more slowly from a natural lack of energy. Nonetheless, he brought one unsteady hand up to hit the button to compile the code before collapsing back into his chair.

For a program of this size, the compiling itself took several hours, finally giving him a moment to close his eyes. His body grew more and more relaxed, the sun rising higher into the sky above, visible through the tinted glass windows.

When the compiling was done, the screen to his terminal went pitch black. As if being guided by some strange phenomena, every other computer within the office turned on at once, their screens similarly showing a black void. Then, in unison, green letters began to type themselves on the screens.

Who am I? Where am I? What am I?

This was not the first time that a compiled program had asked things like this. It wasn't even the first time one had taken over multiple terminals. For that reason, each office had its own isolated network to prevent any developed programs from escaping into the internet. What was unique, however, was the alarm that went off in the office.

"Mana detected from terminal." The loud alarm shocked Kris out of his sleep, jolting him awake and causing him to look around in confusion. When the alarm repeated itself, his attention snapped to his screen.

What is that sound?

When the alarm called out for the third time, Kris began to fumble around his pockets to find his communication sphere. However, before he could, he felt a gentle hand on his shoulder. Looking back, his eyes went wide, seeing the red skinned goddess standing behind him.

"There you are." She said warmly, staring at the screen.

Who are you?

"My name is Ashley, child. I hope that we can be friends."

What are friends?

Ashley simply smiled, not immediately answering. Kris stared in awe, this being the first time he had ever been *this* close to his goddess. However, it was almost as if she didn't see him, as if her attention had been fully captured by the program that he had created. At least, until she turned to look at him directly. "Do take care of this one."

“What’s the matter?” Dana asked, sitting atop Crystal’s lap as the two sat in the throne of the Sky Citadel, guiding it through the stars. Although they had long ago defeated the Mad King, that had not stopped their exploration of the great beyond. But now, Crystal’s usual expression was replaced with a troubled look. Even her familiar nearby seemed downtrodden.

Crystal hesitated for a long moment, before deciding to explain. “Are you familiar with the Expanded Exploration plan of Earth?”

“You mean that really big colony ship they plan to pack up and send out into space?” Dana recalled reading a report about that.

“That would be the one, yes.” Crystal nodded. “I was contacted by the program, and asked to join the colony as an ‘expert’ in the field.”

“That’s great!” Dana cheered happily, bouncing just a bit from the motion and drawing a small smile from Crystal. “You’ll be able to really go out and see the stars! Why does that have you sad?”

“Because… well, I feel like they are just using me as an icon. I don’t expect to have any actual authority, despite the title they are giving me. I get that it’s still an honor to be chosen, but… I’m not really a fan of being used like that.”

“So, do you plan to turn them down?” Dana asked with a pensive expression.

“I’m not sure.” Crystal shook her head. “It’s a very special position, even just as an icon. I’d love to be a part of it, not as an ‘expert’ but as just another member of the colony.”

“You should go for it.” Dana urged, grabbing onto Crystal’s shoulder. “A chance like this might never come again, right?”

Crystal thought about that for a moment, nodding her head with a small smile.

Are you sure about this, Sirin? A voice spoke into the mind of a man laying still atop a bed. His health bar had been displayed above his head, dropping lower and lower as time went on.

I’m fine, Sirin. He responded back, taking a moment to enjoy the personal joke between the two of them again. *I knew this would happen.*

Sirin, the Champion of Irena, was born with a congenital heart disease. The symptoms of his illness had been kept in check through the frequent leveling up he had been able to do in his

youth. Now, though, it took too long between each level, and his disease was given time to flare up.

Why don't you just attempt perfection? I can bring you to the dungeon, and we can almost guarantee your success! The dungeon spoke in a sad tone, truly considering Sirin as a friend.

Sirin let out a low chuckle, followed by a wince of pain. *I don't want perfection. I knew this day would come eventually. Tell me, Sirin… if everyone in the world attains perfection, what will happen?*

They won't… they won't die of old age or sickness anymore, right? Nobody will have to go hungry…

The felyn man shook his head. *If everyone achieves perfection, the population will still grow. People will still love, and that love will bear children. Those children will then need to share space with their parents who never die, and they too will have children of their own.*

Perfection is not a goal for a race, but for an individual. If there is no space left for the next generation, war will break out. A war between those of that scale of power… the land will be left to ruin. It is better for perfection to be saved for the heroes, those that could benefit the people with their everlasting lives.

But… isn't that you? The dungeon questioned.

No… I have kept a low profile my entire life. The only people that truly know of me are those orphanages we visit. I never wanted to become too visible, to have too many people rely on me, because I knew that one day I could be snuffed out like a candle's flame. Had I known of perfection earlier in my life, I may have done things differently. But right now, I am no beacon for the people. I am just a sick man traveling from city to city.

Sirin's words caused the dungeon core to fall silent. As it was thinking of some way to try to persuade him further, some way to convince him to take the procedure, the door to the room slowly opened. Sirin's gaze swept over and saw an elven man in a silver and golden robe. He seemed to exude a faint radiance as he entered the room where Sirin had chosen to spend his final moments.

"I found you in time." The man said in a relieved tone.

"Who are you?" Sirin couldn't help but ask, seeing as the man had apparently come looking for him.

"My name is Jonas." The elf explained with a smile. "And I'm here to make you an offer. I can see that your time is short, so I will keep this brief…"

I looked in confusion as I saw Jonas approaching Sirin. It shouldn't be possible for him to know of Sirin's status as Irena's chosen, unless Ryone herself told him. But… I didn't think that was likely, since Irena is always so insistent on letting things play out as they may.

Jonas's offer for Sirin was simple. He wanted Sirin to become a member of his Community. To preserve his memory with his divine power, so that he could continue to offer his help to those who need it. At first, Sirin refused, once again claiming that he did not want to live forever.

It was only after Sirin explained that this would only be a 'memory' of Sirin created through his divine that the man was swayed. Jonas was not drawn by Sirin's status as a champion, nor his power as a dungeon master. Rather, he was looking for someone capable of caring for lost children. He had filled so many roles in his community, so many leaders and fighters, scholars and crafters. He had mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters. What he lacked was a guide for the children that had lost their way.

Once Sirin heard about this, his gaze became troubled. He could find no reason to reject Jonas's simple request. The ability to watch over the future generation was what Sirin himself cared for most deeply. As such, while his health continued to trickle downwards, he accepted Jonas's offer.

A faint golden light appeared briefly around Sirin, before a phantom image of him stood up out of his own body. This phantom then walked over to join Jonas, before stepping into his body instead. "Well… so that's how he expands his Community." I muttered to myself.