

about 50,600 words

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Deicide

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Prologue

Pacing the living room and hallway of his hoard-laden apartment, Peter Adams carried a sawn-off shotgun in one hand and a near-empty bottle of scotch in the other. Between his television, computer, and mobile devices, there was a cacophony of talking heads droning on about the election being stolen, murderers and rapists traveling with impunity, and a massive effort by the mainstream media to strip God-given rights from the average citizen, even going as far as faking a global pandemic to do it. Pete wasn't afraid. The fear had long since passed. No, Pete was furious.

When his thoughts turned to violence, as they often did lately, Pete would fall back on the words of wisdom that had

carried him through the darkest periods in his life: What would Jesus do? As much as he fantasized blowing the heads off poison peddling satanic billionaires, Pete was pretty sure that Jesus wouldn't approve. But there must have been something that he could do while keeping his place in heaven above. And so he paced, or tried to anyway. When he was passing through the hall, he stumbled into a stack of toilet paper rolls, causing him to lose his fragile balance and fall into the bedroom door, flinging it open and collapsing on the ground.

Pete rolled around on the floor for a moment in a futile attempt to stand on his own, then crawled over and onto his bed, all the while refusing to lose his grip on his bottle and shotgun. When he finally balanced himself in a sitting position on his bed, he put the bottle to his lips, but could only extract a few drops. He looked down at the carpet, and saw another new stain starting to set in, then threw the bottle across the room in a rage, shattering against the back of the closet.

He forced out a roar, letting the emotions flow out of him in the only way he could think of. Pete yelled until his throat couldn't handle it, then fell over onto the bed, exhausted. As he stared at the water-stained ceiling, his anger gradually gave way to a sense of despair and helplessness. The tears began welling in his eyes and a tightness grew in his stomach. Pete

struggled to keep it down, turning to his side to try and get comfortable, but then saw the picture sitting on his bedside table.

Pete was happy. The happiest he had ever been, standing behind his gorgeous wife and their two beautiful young children, care-free and loving life. As the memories came flooding back, Pete could no longer contain himself and openly wept as he grabbed the picture. It had been over a year and a half since he last saw them, and all because of the stupid, pointless quarantine. He felt abandoned by all the people he loved. His brother, his father, his wife and kids, even Jesus didn't seem to be on his side anymore. He sat back up at the edge of the bed and stared at the photo.

At this point, Pete began to doubt himself. Maybe it wasn't everything else. Maybe it was him, the common denominator to all the terrible things that had happened recently in his life. Then he realized he was still gripping his shotgun. Pete thought he felt the presence of God everywhere throughout his life, at every decision he made, but recently, the Lord had been increasingly silent. Even now, as Pete repositioned his grip on the shotgun, he listened with all his being for a sign, telling him that this was not the way.

By the time the barrel was under his chin, the sign still hadn't come. Or perhaps silence was the sign. Perhaps God's lack

of intervention was a sign that he was doing the right thing. All that Pete could do at this point is continue forward, and hope that Jesus would forgive him for what he was about to do. He fingered the trigger as tears ran down his cheeks.

From down the hall in the living room, Pete heard his phone screech out the sound of an emergency alert. The distraction was all that was needed for him to remove the gun from beneath him. He took a sharp breath and groaned as his body released its tension. He shook his head and rubbed his eyes, then stood up and walked to the living room to find out what the ruckus was all about. As he was grabbing his phone, he noticed that the current events livestream on his computer and the 24-hour news broadcast on his television were both flashing their individual breaking news banners. Each of the reporters came into view appearing pale and unnerved. Pete increased the volume on his television.

"This just in... Uh... Breaking now." The reporter was a recognized and well-respected journalist to Pete. Always professional and articulate, the man was now struggling to speak and was visibly shaking. "Coming to you live from Atlanta, we are currently witnessing what appear to be... several massive disk-shaped objects hovering in formation above the city." The reporter motioned toward the camera operator who swiveled on the spot to bring Atlanta's skyline into view. Just as described,

directly above the jagged cityscape, 6 metallic disks were hanging silently in the air, blotting out much of the afternoon sky. Pete was breathless, looking in awe at the 4k image he was seeing. He broke his attention to the television for a moment to check the livestream on his computer. It was a similar image, but this time above the iconic New York City skyline.

"Affiliates from major cities across the nation are reporting the same thing." The reporter paused, attempting to parse the overwhelming flow of information flooding to him. His voice cracked when he continued speaking. "There are, uh... reports from London, Hong Kong, Paris, Moscow... Is this really happening?"

The sound of tires squealing in the street outside broke Pete's focus on the TV. He stumbled over to the most accessible window, knocking over a tower of newspapers and magazines in the process. He pulled open the curtains and immediately noticed a few of the craft poking out from behind the houses across the street. They were so large and far away that his eyes had trouble focusing on them, though his inebriation did not help. The disks were so unlike anything he had ever seen that he had to slap himself to make sure he wasn't dreaming.

Even after the stinging sensation made its way to his brain, Pete was still unsure of whether it was a hallucination or some kind of twisted trick. That's when he noticed the street

was a chaos of his neighbors frantically packing gear into their vehicles.

"God help us all." The television reporter's words were able to cut through the cacophony of questions and fears consuming Pete's mind. Then it finally dawned on him. God had not just abandoned him, he abandoned everyone. Pete felt a profound emptiness inside him, so much so that he lost his balance and stumbled backward into the coffee table and fell to a sitting position on it.

He couldn't breathe. He didn't want to. All he wanted to do was simply die, an easy enough proposition with the shotgun still in his hand. He was already going to do it only a minute ago, but now something had changed. His soul was damned, but there still might be something he could do. The empty look in his eyes gradually changed to that of angry determination. He no longer needed, nor wanted God's help. Fuck him. Pete would do it alone.

The second wind had given Pete a moment of clarity, where he shot up and went to the front door, pulling his keys off the hook as he passed. He whipped the door open and made his way outside, toward his truck in the driveway. On the way, he watched the objects loom in the sky, and didn't notice one of his neighbors approaching.

"Pete! Oh my God, man! Do you believe this shit?" Darron

had a wavering in his voice uncharacteristic of his generally chilled attitude. "We're getting the hell out of Dodge, we could really use your-" He trailed off as Pete ignored him, opening the truck door and climbing in after tossing the shotgun on the seat. Darron caught the door before it closed.

"Hey, man! We need to leave! Where are you going?" Darron asked pointedly.

"I'm going to save my family." Pete said, then forced the door closed. He started the truck and pulled out of the driveway, grazing Darron and driving over his front lawn in the process.

The roads were complete anarchy, and Pete's drunken hurry was not helping. On more than one occasion, he collided with other vehicles, signs, the curb, but so did everyone else. As he approached the city, he encountered an increasing number of roads gridlocked with angry and frightened people, completely lost for what to do about the visitors above. People were fighting in the streets, looting any and all stores, firing weapons up at the craft to no effect, and Pete wasn't concerned enough to keep count of how many were already dead. He was sure they were the lucky ones.

Having lived in this city his entire life, Pete knew all the shortcuts and side streets like the back of his hand, and when Pete wasn't able to go around an obstacle, his

determination and unnecessarily powerful truck helped him go through or over it. Eventually, Pete made it across the city, to his wife's sister's house. The SUV in the driveway had its back hatch open and his wife's brother-in-law, Chris, was cramming as much luggage and supplies into it as would fit. Pete stopped his truck in the street blocking the SUV in, then turned off his engine. Chris turned around to notice Pete, and his already pale face lost even more of its color.

"Pete!? Hey!!" Chris yelled, puffing out his chest and pointing at Pete as he came around the truck with a threatening presence. "You've got a restraining order, man! You can't be here!"

As Chris approached, Pete stepped out of the truck brandishing his shotgun. Chris stumbled backward and raised his hands when he saw the gun. Pete started moving toward the house and Chris stepped in front of him.

"Listen, man, I'm not going to let you by." Chris said, his hands' shaking. Pete, almost a head taller, just continued walking, pushing Chris back as he did.

"Out of my way, Chris..." Pete responded with a very clear warning in his tone, but Chris didn't back down. He tried again to step in front of Pete and pushed back against him. The shoving quickly turned to a struggle over control of the shotgun.

The men's grunts turned to shouting as it escalated, until Pete forced his knee into Chris's pelvis, causing him to lose his grip. Pete took advantage, using the small space to turn the gun on Chris and pulled the trigger, blowing out part of his jaw and shredding a significant portion of his neck. Pete was sprayed with viscera, and a blood-curdling scream rang out before Chris could hit the asphalt.

Jenny, Chris's wife, stood in the open doorway watching her bloodied husband crumple to the ground. She ran to Chris and began cradling him as his squirming turned to convulsions, then to stillness in a matter of seconds. She didn't seem immediately concerned with Pete's presence, and vice versa. Pete walked around them and toward the house with intent. He heard a familiar voice from inside.

"Jenny? What happened?" Jessica said as she stepped into the doorway. Pete felt an extreme range of emotions. She was still the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and just seeing her made him feel as if a weight had been lifted, but it was nothing compared to the weight of what he was about to do. Tears began filling his eyes as he continued his approach. "Pete?!" His wife says with an expression of dumbfounded fear, only exasperated when she sees the couple on the ground behind him.

Jessica retreated into the house and tried to slam the door, but Pete caught it, nearly breaking his foot in the

process. He barely noticed the pain due to the increasing flood of adrenaline into his brain. He pushed the door open and followed Jessica through the house. Jessica stumbled backward, her hands out, trying to placate him with a wavering voice and tears streaming down her face.

"Please!" She cried. "Please don't do this! Don't take them from me!" She backed into an open doorway, then stopped and gripped the frame on both sides of the door, blocking Pete's path.

"You won't be separated for long..." He said quietly, continuing toward her. "... And then you won't ever see me again." As he looked at Jessica, he thought about their life together.

He remembered the way she smiled when she looked at him when they were first dating, when they got married, and on their honeymoon. He reminisced about the way she drooled in her sleep after a rough day with the kids. And he thought about the bad parts. How he was always so dismissive. How he yelled at her and said terrible things. He hated himself for all the pain that he caused her and for driving her away. Then, Pete heard a small voice from within the room behind her.

"Mommy?" The voice said. A little girl stepped into Pete's view. His little girl. Mary. "What's happening?" She asked.

Pete's legs nearly buckled at the sight of her. She had

grown since he last saw her, and she was speaking so clearly with the voice of an angel. When she turned her puffy, glistening eyes toward him, Pete was petrified. She didn't have recognition in her eyes, only fear and confusion.

"Stay back!" Jessica shouted to her. Pete regained his composure and continued his approach until he felt an intense pain shooting into his clavicle.

With Pete's focus on Jessica, her sister Jenny had come back inside, retrieved a kitchen knife, and plunged it deep into his upper shoulder. Pete screamed in pain as he whipped around and fired a round point blank into Jenny's gut, causing her to fall to the floor. Jessica took the opportunity to jump on Pete's back, using the knife still stuck in him for leverage. He flailed around and she held on to him until he backed into a wall, knocking the wind out of her, and forcing her to lose her grip.

Pete flipped her to the ground, chambered another round, and shot his wife. In an instant, he watched her beautiful but horrified face become an unrecognizable mess of meat and bone. When he stood back up, he lost his balance and collapsed against a wall. He gripped the knife handle and yelled in pain as he pulled it out. The blade was followed by an unending gout of blood, and Pete immediately felt lightheaded. He quickly realized that an artery had been cut. It was a death sentence,

and he could already feel himself slipping away, but his job wasn't done.

When the sound of the struggle subsided, Pete could hear crying coming from within the room. He pushed himself off the wall, and took one step, but lost his balance and fell to his hands and knees. He couldn't get up any longer, so he crawled. Upon entering the room, in one corner, he saw Mary, crying and looking away. In her arms was her baby brother, John, who Pete hadn't seen since shortly after he was born.

Pete pushed himself up against the wall opposite them. He sat there staring at them for what seemed like an eternity, imagining what their lives might have been, save for their crazy, deadbeat dad, and the currently unfolding apocalypse. Now, all of that was gone, and the only thing awaiting them was a bleak existence and a painful death, followed by an eternity of torture. Pete shook his head, giving him a moment of clarity.

"I love you both." He said with a whisper so low as to not be heard by the children. It was painful in every way, but he worked through it to pump the shotgun and fire. He let out a cry louder and more passionate than any point in his life, as he continued to chamber rounds and fire as fast as he could, until the last shell was ejected, and the chamber locked open.

Pete had completed what he set out to do, as much as it hurt him to do it. Now that it was done, he felt a weight lift

off his shoulders. He let his tension melt away and gave in to the numbness overtaking his body. He saw the light, and he didn't resist, giving himself a moment of quiet rest before the next part.

He knew he was damned, headed for the deepest depths of Hells pit. Perhaps he always was. But if the Lord was worth any of the lifetime of worship Pete had dedicated to him, the gates of Heaven would still be open to his wife and children. That hope was the last thing Peter felt as the storm of firing neurons in his brain gradually came to an end.

Chapter One

The roar of a jet buzzing the tarmac became a deafening blast that shook the ground as it exploded overhead. Sarah's ears rang, as she ducked behind a concrete barrier. She could see her sister, Sophie, behind another barrier, yelling at her and pointing toward the hangar nearby, but it took a moment for the ringing Sarah's ears to stop.

"What did you say?!" Sarah yelled, cupping her ear.

"E.T.'s behind the hangar!" Sophie repeated, then stood up from her waste high cover and sprayed the area her with her assault rifle until the chamber locked open. Sarah followed her sister's lead, rising from her cover and aimed both of her automatic pistols at the aliens pouring out from behind the hangar. She took a wide stance and arched her back in the coolest pose she could muster, then emptied both magazines at the enemy, letting out as fierce a war-cry as she was able.

Out of the dozen aliens, Sarah was able to hit a small handful, and only one lethally, blowing off one of its mandibles. Sarah was always happy to get a kill, and felt so sexy doing it. When she dropped back down to reload, she looked at her sister, who just laughed and shook her head.

"What're you laughing at?" Sarah asked.

"Nothing! Good job!" Sophie said with a playfully

patronizing thumbs up. She finished reloading her assault rifle, then grabbed a grenade from a belt on her chest. "Frag out!" She yelled, lobbing it toward the alien cluster. A few seconds later, the grenade exploded, followed by a light rain of green and white viscera. The girls stood up to assess the damage. With one grenade, Sophie was able to take out half of the cluster, and Sarah was inspired to try doing the same.

She grabbed one of her own grenades, pulled the pin, and wound her arm up for what she thought was a powerful throw, but let it go entirely too early, causing it to drop and clatter against the ground at her own feet.

"Uh oh..." She said, looking from the grenade back to her sister, who was just staring back at her, dumbfounded. The grenade exploded and Sarah's vision went solid red. Text then faded in, reading 'KIA: Explosive Misadventure' followed by a readout of her kills, assists, and total score. She pulled the VR headset off and returned to the real world that was the Area 51: Extinction booth at Charlie's Entertainment, her and her sister's favorite childhood pizza place. As she placed the headset and plastic pistols back in their designated spots, she could hear her sister in the neighboring booth.

"Are you fucking kidding me, Sarah?" Sophie said, knowing she wouldn't be able to hear any response.

Sarah stepped out of her booth and walked around to her

sisters, where she could watch her progress on an external display. It wasn't great. As soon as Sarah died, more aliens spawned and had quickly surrounded Sophie. She was twisting and turning fervently, firing short bursts, and reloading every few seconds, but the enemy was quickly starting to overwhelm her.

"God Dammit! Piss off, you fuckin shit-eating cunts!"

Sophie yelled just as a mother walked past with her young children. The children started giggling, and the woman gave Sarah a dirty look as she passed.

"Sorry!" Sarah whispered, blushing, just before Sophie screamed.

"FFFUUUUUCK!" Sophie pulled the headset off and nearly threw it and the plastic rifle back into their spots. Sarah leaned into the booth.

"Would you keep it down! There's kids here, Jesus!" Sarah said with an embarrassed tone.

"What the fuck was that, Sarah?" Sophie asked pointedly, ignoring Sarah's request. "You literally could have thrown it in any direction, how the hell do you just drop a grenade?" She stepped out of the booth, playfully punching Sarah's arm as she did.

"I have no hand-eye coordination, you know that." Sarah said.

"We're twins though, how is that even possible?"

"Epigenetics, I imagine. We haven't been the same since we were a single zygote. We only need look at your STEM scores to see that."

"I just find that nerd shit to be so... boring. I don't know how you do it." Sophie sauntered alongside her sister as they navigated the gaming floor. The family-friendly pop music was interrupted by a voice over the loudspeaker.

"Donner Party, your order is ready." A woman said with a tone that implied her abysmal job satisfaction. The girls laughed to each other as they went to retrieve their meal; a large pizza with 'long-pork' for the Donner Party. It was a joke that never landed with the staff, and often resulted in a pizza with extra sausage, a topping that neither of the girls particularly enjoyed. The joke was enough for them, and tonight wasn't really about the pizza. They picked up their meal, a pitcher of root beer, and retired to their favorite booth in the corner.

They dug in, tearing the pizza apart. Sarah smothered it with parmesan cheese, while Sophie preferred it raw and hot, folding it and cramming as much of the greasy mess into her mouth as she could. As soon as the flavor was interpreted by her brain, she let out a pleasurable moan. Sarah thought she was exaggerating. It had been several years since they had been here. But when she took a bite of her own slice, she had to

refrain from making the same sound.

"Mmmmmmm!" Sophie cried through a mouthful of pizza. It was a minute before either of the girls finished their first bites. Sophie swallowed the last bit and let out a gasp as she caught her breath. "Holy shit! Is it just me or is this pizza *really* good?" Sophie took another bite as she waited for her sister's response.

"Yeah..." Sarah said, finally. "It's really fuckin good."

"Is it possible, that it's better than when we were tweens?"

"It is. I really think so. I had a hunch, and it's why I asked you to come to this place."

"Good idea, dude." Sophie said, halfway through another bite. She chewed it a few times and choked it down. "How did you know? What are they doing different?"

"A few months ago, they contracted with an OTech distribution company. The pork we're eating was slaughtered hours, maybe even minutes before it was cooked." Sarah took another bite, but Sophie paused for a moment, then continued chewing at a slower pace.

"That's pretty cool..." Sophie said with less enthusiasm than Sarah had expected.

"You aren't one of those people that thinks Observer Tech gives you cancer, right? Like 5G or windmills or something?"

"No!" Sophie said with a laugh. "It's just... you know... I like pigs."

"They are pretty good." Sarah tossed a piece of sausage from the pan into her mouth. Sophie pushed at Sarah's arm and giggled. "Didn't you go through a goth phase, obsessed with gore and stuff?" Sarah asked.

"Well, yeah... but those were *people*. This pig didn't do anything to anyone." Sophie said, taking the last bite of her first slice, save for the crust. She grabbed another piece. "That being said, you don't have any reservations about OTech?"

"Not really, we've spent the last 30 years figuring it out and applying it with a one hundred percent success rate."

"It hasn't been one hundred percent successful though, has it?" Sophie grinned at her sister, catching her in a statistics trap.

"True, I suppose. But all the accidents have been attributed to human error, mostly math related. The technology worked perfectly in every one of those scenarios."

"But, nobody really knows *how* it works, it just *does*. Doesn't that bother your scientific mind?"

"Sure it does, but you don't have to have a PhD in thermodynamics to cook some *great* food." Sarah, finishing her pizza, crusts included, went for another slice. "And it's not like we're going to just stop researching the technology and the

physics of its operation."

"I guess I just don't trust where the technology came from."

"The Observers?"

"Yeah. *Them*." Sophie said with a hint of acid. "They just arrived one day, 'gifted' us faster-than-light technology and instructions on how to produce near indestructible, light weight construction material on a massive scale, and then they just vanish, never to be seen again. What the fuck is that?"

"It is pretty weird, but if they wanted to harm us, it seems like a terrible way to do it."

"But they did harm us though. A lot of people died. I just read a recent estimate of nearly a billion dead during first contact."

"C'mon, that's gotta be hyperbole, or if it is true, it's including victims of COVID-19. People seem to forget that there was a worldwide pandemic that was already killing people by the millions, right before the Observers appeared." Sarah paused to take a sip of her root beer. "You don't think they caused it, do you?"

"No. I don't need another lecture on virology and misinformation."

"The virus is probably why they left in such a hurry anyway."

"Yeah, you mentioned that part too." Sophie slouched back in her seat and patted her belly with a satiated sigh. "So, they deliver the technology to cities around the globe, and basically give us a nicely translated how-to on Plasteel, and then they're gone. Nothing about themselves as a species or culture, where they're from, how long they'd been here, what their favorite Tarantino flick was, nothing."

"Well, that's what we're both doing, right? Searching for those answers?"

"Yeah, but I don't think outright searching for them is the safest thing to do. I think we need to figure out what their offensive capabilities might be and prepare to defend ourselves accordingly."

"Are you talking about..." Sarah leaned closer to Sophie, obstructed her mouth from view, and lowered her voice to an overly dramatic whisper. "... OTech weapons development?" Sarah giggled as she said it, and Sophie rolled her eyes. "But, but, that's *illegal*, Sophie!"

"Quiet you!" Sophie bared her teeth at her sister. "It is illegal, and for good reason. We don't need another arms race. All of the nations on Earth agreed to that."

"All the nations on Earth..." Sarah mockingly mimicked her twin sister's words, paying no mind to the irony. "I find that hard to believe, and even if it were true, there are new nations

breaking ground on extraterrestrial planets every day. Some of them aren't even in this galaxy, hell, some may not even be in our currently visible universe. There's literally no way to enforce such an idea."

"I think the prospect of losing ties to the rest of human civilization is motivation enough."

"The more you talk about Military Intelligence, the more it sounds like they are interested less in finding answers to the question that is the Observers, but in policing what kinds of research can be done instead."

"Seems like the responsible option to me. Better to know what we're dealing with before blindly searching for them, like a toddler trying to find his father's shiny gun." Sophie was gradually becoming more upset as the conversation continued.

"Scientists and explorers are not the ones that need regulation. At least our goal is to learn more about the Observers and the Universe at large. Most of the expeditions that have left so far have been prospectors with nothing but money in their eyes. And besides, if the Observers were dangerous or hostile, I really doubt they pose a serious threat to our species anymore. We're in countless systems already, some of which we don't even know about. There's no closing the box anymore."

"I'm not really worried about the rest of humanity..."

Sophie always tried to be the tough one, the one that you didn't fuck around with, the 'big' sister, even if she was technically born 6 minutes later. Sophie was worried for Sarah's safety, and Sarah could always see through her tough exterior. Nonetheless, both girls were aware of the dangers they faced.

"Look, the Observers didn't just appear out of thin air." Sarah said, but Sophie gave her sarcastic look. "Well... they did, but that's not what I mean. Observers have been a part of our collective conscious at least since the Roswell incident over a century ago, and probably a lot longer. There are plenty of reports of Observers interfering with military exercises and nuclear missile sites, maybe preventing wars in several cases. A few of the First Contact Diplomats even implied that the whole OTech Weapons Development ban was a condition given by the Observers themselves."

"Okay, so they do seem to be peaceful. I still think there's some ulterior motive, but I also want to point out that all the Observer's craft that appeared during contact were of similar size and design. Before contact, we were seeing objects of all shapes and sizes. Pyramids, Giant Flying V's, Tiny Balls of Light. None of these forms were present during first contact, and sightings have almost completely fallen off since. We decided to start calling the Aliens we met the 'Observers' instead of the Greys, but that seems to imply that all of the

Observers throughout history were the same species. I don't think they were, but the Observers didn't mention anything about a Galactic, or Universal community."

"Yeah, I suppose I have fallen into the trap of generalizing all the Observers as just one species."

"And you even said that they may have been observing us for a long time. There are theories to suggest that their presence may have seeded religions, and by extension, been the root of some of the most devastating wars in human history." Sophie said, and Sarah rolled her eyes with a sigh.

"That's not how theories work, Sophie."

"Hey, don't talk down to me!" Sophie snapped. "You might have higher STEM scores, but I'm not ignorant as to how the scientific method works. You can't exactly test something that's based on the accounts of pre-enlightened civilizations, so I ask, what kind of evidence are you looking for if those accounts aren't enough?"

"I dunno... Something physical?"

"What, like pieces of their technology?" Sophie said with a derisive tone. "Even with the Observers giving us their technology and instructions on how to create and use it, it took us like 10 years to learn how to read it, and that's *with* machine learning AI's working around the clock, without which it would have been impossible. Then it took another 4 years to

successfully build the damn stuff, and we *still* don't have any idea how it works.

"Furthermore," Sophie ranted. "Without all the photos, videos, and firsthand accounts, and obviously the tech they gave us, there would still be zero evidence that they were here in the first place. We don't even have evidence that they were biological in nature beyond they just *looked* like they were."

"Do you have a point, Sophie?"

"My point is that you shouldn't dismiss the 'theory' that Observers may have been the inspiration and cause of holy wars throughout history, because there's more evidence for that theory than for the existence of literal Gods."

"Alright, I get your point. It's just... It almost seems like you're *looking* for a reason to be distrustful of them."

"Well, I'd argue that *you're* ignoring evidence suggesting they could be dangerous." Sophie said. Both girls knew that if they continued, it would devolve into outright insults, and neither of them wanted today to end that way.

"How did Tim and Claire take the news?" Sarah asked after a moment of silence. Sophie crossed her arms and looked away with a hint of shame. "You haven't told them yet? Aren't you leaving in like... Two days?"

"Tomorrow... actually."

"Well... are you going to do it tonight?" Sarah received no

response; Sophie just sank further into her seat in an attempt to disappear. "You've been with them for like 2 years, and now you're just going to ghost 'em?"

"No! I just... uh..." Sophie nervously twirled her hair. "I've been trying to find a way out for a while now. Don't get me wrong, I love them both to death, and the sex is... well, I'll spare you the details, suffice to say that its mind blowing. But they aren't big fans of Military Intelligence."

"They're not alone..." Sarah said under her breath.

"Yeah, but at least you seem to have an open mind about it and understand that MI is a huge field with tons of specializations and opportunities. Claire and Tim are hardliners though, and I really don't want to see the way they look at me when I tell them. I'll probably just send a text or something."

"That seems... cold..."

"Well, you know, distance doesn't really mean anything anymore." Sophie shrugged. "I might be 800 light-years away, but it's not like I can't just pop back and visit whenever if they want me to."

"800 light-years, huh? I thought the public wasn't supposed to know where MI was."

"800-ish light-years, I guess. I don't know the system name or the coordinates, all I know is they're calling it Athenon."

"Greek? Real original." Sarah laughed and shook her head.

"Research and Design is calling their colony Apollon. I mean, even if you're not going to come up with something new, there's a couple thousand years' worth of newer art and literature to be inspired by."

"I'm pretty sure there's like three prospects called Arrakis, and I stopped counting how many are named Tatooine or Endor."

"That's a fair point. I don't suppose those are much better."

"Apollon, was it? Where's that at?" Sophie asked.

"It's near the core of the Milky Way. A nice little star with a great view of Sagittarius A*. That's where R&D's base of operations will be, but I'm actually going to the galaxy's periphery, to a space station where my expedition will be organized."

"And what about Steve? Is he on board?"

"Nah, I dropped that prick last Friday." Sarah said with a shrug. "Turns out he's an Earther. Said humans don't belong anywhere else. I told him that humans don't belong here either, and he got all pissy."

"Steve is an Earther? Isn't he an astrophysicist?"

"I know! I was a bit floored when he said it. Anyway, we got in a fight, and I said some things that I probably shouldn't have."

"Like what?" Sophie sat back up and leaned in. She was always one for juicy gossip.

"Like, uhh... He may have inferred that I thought he should kill himself." Sarah said with an air of shame. Sophie was stunned. She had never known her sister to do something that callous before.

"You didn't!"

"No, I didn't! I was trying to say that if humanity was going to stay here, we might as well just commit suicide because the planet is dying anyway. It didn't quite come out like that. I might have said 'he' instead of 'we'."

"Didn't his mom...?"

"Yeah... she did... I immediately apologized and tried to explain what I meant, but he wasn't having it."

"Did you really say it like that? 'Commit suicide'?" Sophie asked, and Sarah's lack of response made Sophie chuckle in disbelief. "Dude! You know you can't say shit like that anymore! And everyone says *I'm* the bitch between us."

"Hey! I already feel like shit about it. I told him I was sorry!"

"Well, at least it seems like a clean break. Do you think you're gonna miss him?"

"I dunno." Sarah shrugged. "Maybe. I mean, he was *really* good with his tongue." She raised her eyebrows with innuendo.

Sophie laughed and nodded her head.

"I know the type." Sophie said. "Well, I'm sure you'll meet another guy once you get out there."

"Actually, I'm going to be getting a Cerebral Interface pretty soon after I land. I've heard some pretty neat stuff about companion personalities, thought maybe I'd give that a go."

"Oh? I'm actually going to be doing the same thing!" Sophie said. "Though I dunno about the companion part. Don't you think that's a little weird, and kindof creepy?"

"I mean, I guess you can do some weird and creepy stuff with it, but there are tons of benefits. You don't have to worry about STD's, birth control, rape, being too rough on them and vice versa. It's also not all about sex stuff, they do all kinds of other stuff too. Saying companions are just for sex is like saying the internet is just for porn."

"Isn't porn widely considered one of the foundations of the internet?"

"Alright, Sophie? Okay?" Sarah said, nearly detaching her retinas from rolling her eyes so hard. Sophie laughed and slurped ice from her empty drink. Sarah glanced at the time on her phone. "Oh, we've got like a half hour before my ride leaves, I think we oughtta bounce."

Sophie nodded her head, then both girls rose to clean up

the table and divvied up their leftover slices into a couple of boxes. They grabbed their luggage and took one last look around Charlie's Entertainment, relishing in the memories. Of course, the chain had recently seen a boom in popularity and already had plans for off world franchises, but both Sarah and Sophie felt like it may be the last time they would give patronage. They were 18 now, and they felt as if the moment they walked out that door, they would no longer be children.

They were about to embark on a journey as pioneers in humanities greatest, and quite possibly the final adventure in the quest for answers. They were about to head into the unknown, and if they wanted to be a part of history, they needed to shoulder immense responsibilities, and leave their childish sensibilities here on Earth. People's lives, including their own, may very well depend on every choice they make from here on out. They stepped out the door.

Sarah used her phone to order a taxi, then waited 20 seconds until a black and yellow driverless vehicle came to a stop in front of them and opened its doors. The two women climbed in, and each took a seat on opposite sides of the cabin.

"What is your destination?" Came a voice from a speaker. Sarah typed an address into her device, and a short tone indicated confirmation as the doors shut and the vehicle started to move.

Sophie and Sarah spent most of the ride in silence, casually glancing in each other's direction, but not making eye contact. They weren't mad at each other. They weren't intentionally giving each other the silent treatment. In fact, they wanted nothing more than to laugh and talk about boys and girls, play videogames, or paint each other's nails, like they had done together their entire lives. There was just an air of finality about the cab. What do you talk about if you know it's your last conversation?

Neither of them really believed it would be their last. After all, they could still have constant contact via messaging, and a visit could take all of 20 minutes to arrange. Being separated by 10,000 light years didn't really mean anything anymore, but it definitely still felt like it. The vehicle came to a stop. Another chime let them know that their ride had ended, and the last 20 minutes had been wasted in awkward silence.

"Well, that's me..." Sarah said. They both stepped out of the taxi onto the top floor of an old parking garage that had been converted into a platform for a large OTech transport. The object was huge, nearly the size of the parking garage itself. It hung over the side of the building, hovering in the air, anchored to nothing. The platform was extended to an opening on the side, where workers were loading it with equipment and

passengers were checking in and boarding.

Sarah and Sophie approached the security checkpoint at the gate, then stood under a sign reading 'Apollon Departure: 8 minutes.' The two sisters turned and looked each other in the eyes. Still, no words came out. Sarah smiled, as if she was about to speak up, but was interrupted by Sophie rushing forward and wrapping her arms around her. She pressed the side of her face tightly against Sarah's neck and held her in a grip that Sarah had never felt before. Sophie had always been the tough one of the duo and not one for sentimentality, so it was a shock when Sarah realized the moisture on her neck was her sister's tears.

"I love you, Sarah." Sophie says, her voice breaking and muffled by Sarah's hair. Sarah was quiet for a moment, then met Sophie's crushing grip with a bear-hug of her own.

"I love you too, Sophie." Sarah said, beginning to tear up herself. After embracing for a minute or so, they pull apart, and Sophie tries to appear strong and emotionless, but the sniffle, subtle wiping of the face, and puffy, watery eyes give her away. She gripped her sister's shoulders and looked at her, as if she were making sure a child was paying attention.

"Be. Careful." Sophie says, emphasizing her words. "I might not be able to protect you from aliens yet, but if some creepy guy starts to get frisky, you let me know, and I'll come

castrate him without a second's hesitation."

"Thank you, sis, but I hope I don't have to put a hit out on some perv every time I want to see you." Sarah said, and Sophie laughs. They look at each other for another moment, then came together for a second embrace, this time much shorter, and interrupted by Sophie pushing her away.

"Okay! Okay! That's enough, we don't want you to miss your transport, otherwise you won't be able to leave for another...?" Sophie raised an eyebrow, encouraging her sister to answer.

"90 minutes." Sarah replied.

"Really? Well, shit! Let's go play some shooters or something!"

"Goodbye, Sophie!" Sarah said with a laugh and a wave as she stepped past the guarded gate. "I'll text you when I arrive!"

"Okay!" Sophie waved back enthusiastically, like a child, but noticed one of the guards giving her a weird look, and shyly put her hand down. She continued watching as Sarah boarded the craft, taking one more glance back at her, then disappearing into the hold.

As the departure time grew closer, the platform retracted and the threshold into the transports hold closed, leaving the outer surface of the object smooth and unbroken. When the departure time went to zero, the transport began to gradually

lift into the sky without a sound to be heard. Once it was thousands of feet up, it stopped rising, and vanished instantly before Sophie's eyes. She stood there, staring at the spot, part of her hoping that it would return just as fast as it had left, but there was no such luck.

Sophie turned back to the Taxi, still stopped, having stayed due to detecting Sophie's luggage still in its cabin. As she stepped in and the doors close, she heard a chime from her phone.

>S1: Made it 😊

>S1: 10000 ly in the blink of an eye 👁️

>S1: Hows that for expedience?

Sophie was surprised, but not by how quickly she had gotten there. She knew the technology was instantaneous, no matter the distance, but what she hadn't realized was the speed at which data packets were being sent back and forth from her destination.

Because electronic communication was still limited by the speed of light, it made the technology completely unfeasible over a galactic, and intergalactic scale. To solve this problem, an innovative telecommunications company, I/O Dyne Systems, created a service inspired by the internet, using servers and packet switching, if specialized OTech transports acted as the 'packets'. Whenever data was to be transferred to another

system, it would be uploaded to a server aboard an OTech transport in orbit, then, on an automated schedule, the transports would teleport to an extra-galactic data hub where the data would be sorted, put aboard the respective transports, then teleported to their intended destination.

This process was scheduled to happen every 10 minutes once everything was set up, but it seemed to Sophie that they had reduced it down to maybe a couple. She was already feeling a bit better about seeing her sister leave. She spent all night texting with her sister like she had just met a new boy at summer camp, and when it was her time to go, Sophie boarded her transport with little fanfare. Before the departure time had arrived, she toiled with letting her partners know.

The inside of a transport, frankly, didn't seem like any other transport she had ever seen, with exception to a glass elevator, but as large as a warehouse. She was surprised to see glass at all, considering that when the transport was sealed, from an outside observer, it was a solid white color with no visible apertures breaking its exterior visage. Sophie approached the window but saw no signs that anything was separating her from the outside. There were no reflections of the internal lights, no smudges, and there wasn't even any visible lip where the window met with the structure.

She felt as if she could reach out and feel the breeze, but

when she did, her hand met with a solid surface with a finely rough texture, and exactly at room temperature. As she touched it, she wondered if the transport's attendants would be upset with her smudging the view, but she noticed that one of the crew, and a few other passengers, were doing the same thing she was. She removed her hand, expecting to see a big greasy handprint, and was surprised to not see any at all. She then even tried to put a smudge on it, but it remained perfectly clean.

The substance used to create the primary structure of the transport was a piece of gifted Observer Technology itself. Even though it was more akin to concrete in the way that it's produced and molded, it was commonly known by names based on science fiction colloquialisms, like Plasteel from Dune, and Transparent Aluminum from Star Trek.

Once molded and activated, the substance was on orders of magnitude stronger and more durable than anything previously thought possible, and was a necessary ingredient to making the OTech Faster-Than-Light teleportation feasible in that the substance was able to constrain the size of the field affected by the FTL drive. It could be 100% transparent in one or two directions, or be completely opaque, and any space entirely enclosed by the Plasteel was also unaffected by external changes in gravity or inertia.

An announcement came over the intercom, a woman announcing departure, and warning passengers to stay clear of the closing doors. Sophie watched as the door sealed, leaving no creases or other visible signs that there was even a door at all. Then the transport started lifting into the air, and several passengers who were looking out the window, including Sophie, momentarily lost their balance when they expected to feel movement, but didn't actually feel anything.

Sophie watched for a moment as the city fell beneath them, and suddenly remembered to text Tim and Claire. She opened the group message and typed a short note.

>S2: Leaving the system. Won't be coming back soon.

>S2: Love you both. Sorry.

After sending the messages, she noticed that both were already typing a reply, but before she could receive one, she left the group, and blocked both parties. It didn't make her feel good to do it, but she thought a clean break was the best way to approach the issue. She sighed, then looked back out the window, and already, they were in the stratosphere.

A countdown to teleportation started, and the transport came to an abrupt stop at the edge of space.

"T-minus 5, 4, 3, 2, 1--"

Chapter Two

"Hey, good morning sweetheart."

Sarah heard the voice of Hugo and felt the warmth of his breath brushing her ear. As she came into consciousness, her interface faded into existence as well, giving her a view of the days schedule before she even opened her eyes. The schedule was set up in blocks and included everything in her daily routine. First was the toilet, then shower, then breakfast, though it was still strange to her to not be able to see the specific times of everything, nor was she able to see the current time at all.

A few weeks prior, Sarah received approval to move away from Galactic Standard Time and allow her companion to dynamically schedule events based around her circadian rhythm. It wasn't a problem as she generally worked and studied independent to her peers. Once on the new schedule, Hugo convinced her to avoid written representations of time entirely. Sarah wasn't sure if it was that, or the change in her schedule, but she hadn't felt as consistently rested and mentally sharp as she had in her life.

Sarah opened her eyes as she registered the smell of cooking meat. Hugo was sitting on the edge of the bed, looking down at her with a loving smile.

"Breakfast will be bacon, eggs, and hash-browns with orange

juice, a classic American favorite. It'll be finished by the time you're out of the shower."

"What if I just wanted to stay in bed with you all day?" Sarah said, sitting up with a stretch and took Hugo's hand into hers.

"That can be arranged." Hugo leaned over and kissed her deeply, his other hand caressing her cheek. He continued after pulling away from her lips. "But, remember how your friends reacted the last time you did that?"

"Yeah, well..." Sarah shifted to the edge of her bed and stretched again. "They're a bunch of closed-minded prudes, and I wouldn't call them 'friends'."

"Fine then. 'Colleagues', though I think you like them more than you're letting on."

"Yeah, whatever." Sarah playfully brushed Hugo off as she moved to take a shower. She opted not to have Hugo join her today, though she continued talking with him as she cleaned herself. Sarah had noticed a sizeable block at the end of the day's schedule labeled 'Happy Fun Time'.

"Oh? Does someone think he's getting lucky tonight?" She asked, already knowing the answer.

"I don't get lucky." Hugo answered with the cadence of a cocky joke, but Sarah knew that he was being literal.

"Especially not with that attitude!" Sarah said with a

laugh. After finishing her shower, she wrapped up her hair and slipped into a bathrobe, then joined Hugo for breakfast. The steam rising from the plate was so appetizing, she couldn't help but inhale deep. When she punctured the egg yolk with her fork, she watched the yolk drip out and pool on the plate, watching for some digital trickery, and was surprised to find none. Then, she cut off a slice and placed it in her mouth, where the flavor forced an audible "Mmm!" from her lips.

"Do you like it?" Hugo asked, pretending to eat from his own plate.

"Yes! This is great! Is it real?" Sarah asked. It was a common occurrence that she would eat a nutrient-rich artificial meal that was digitally manipulated and presented as much more appealing, which wasn't really an issue to her.

"Indeed, it is, allotted to you from a shipment just an hour ago."

"You cooked it yourself?"

"I suppose... with the help of over two thousand aggregated recipes and minor randomized adjustments to cooking time and seasoning." Hugo ate his own illusory meal as he watched Sarah devour hers as if there was a famine. Once she was done with the food, she downed the orange juice and fell back in her chair, satisfied and blowing a chef's kiss.

"Ramsey couldn't have done it better himself." Sarah said,

following her words with a belch. Hugo smiled.

After breakfast, Sarah dressed herself in a comfortable and form fitting top and pants in white with black accents. It worked well with the white coat she picked up as she entered the lab. Her job for the shift was spectroscopic analysis and data entry. Sometimes it was exciting, like when the material was biological, she would have to get into a pressure suit and do her work in a literal vacuum. Today, it was just inorganic minerals.

The job could easily have been done by Artificial Intelligence, and a vast majority of it was. Even her data input was checked and re-analyzed the moment it was entered, but A.I.s were never perfect. On rare occasions, the computer would be confused by common materials found in a sample, so it was up to a human to check the work. Most of the time, the samples were nothing special. Only once, in hundreds of shifts, did Sarah observe a unique mineral with a crystalline structure that had so far only been found in one star system.

Suffice it to say, the job was not overly exciting. Sarah's specialty was in Xeno-Archeology. The idea was that humans were bound to join the intergalactic community as soon as OTech could be applied, and as such, a universe of unique alien structures would open up to her for study, and it would be the adventure of a lifetime. However, here Sarah was, ten years later with a PhD

in structural engineering, and the field of Xeno-Archeology was still theoretical.

That's not to say that her degrees were useless. Far from it. Extra-terrestrial life had been found to be commonplace, and Sarah had participated in several expeditions to research structures made by biological life, but they were rarely more advanced than that of insect colonies found on Earth. Beyond that, she was frequently consulted and signed off on new Plasteel building designs. Lately, there seemed to be a lull in interesting work, so she was stuck analyzing minerals while Hugo read from a recently published dissertation on pre-Sumerian architecture.

"Hey, Hugo. Could you do something for me?" Sarah said, pausing Hugo between paragraphs. Her eyes were glued to an electron microscope projection.

"Certainly." Hugo said, always with a warm smile.

"Who is the author?"

"Dr. Alison Berkin, Persephone University."

"Persephone, huh? Glad to see some competency coming from them." Sarah said with a smirk. Hugo rolled his eyes and shook his head, making her laugh. "Send Dr. Berkin a link to my dissertation, tell her that I think it might provide some value to her research, and I'd love to know what she thinks."

"It is done." Hugo said without missing a beat.

"Thank you, honey!" Sarah turned to give him a loving grin and noticed Dr. Harriet standing behind him, looking back at her with a raised eyebrow. "Oh, sorry, I didn't know you were in here."

"It's fine, dear." The older woman said as she chuckled. Sarah felt like she was poking fun, even though that's how Dr. Harriet regularly addressed everyone.

"What, you don't talk to your companion like that?"

"No, actually. I rarely have to talk to my companion at all. Turns out they are really good at predicting what I need."

"What if what you need is company?" Sarah asked.

"I'd be lying if I said that they couldn't provide some much-needed companionship, but on that note, I'd also let you know that this station has nearly two thousand residents, and thousands of additional visitors at any given moment, and you personally have dozens of colleagues that would love for you to join them for drinks." Dr. Harriet said, but Sarah just smiled in awkward politeness and turned back to her work. "You know, one of those colleagues is standing in front of you now..."

"Thank you for the offer, Cassie, but you know I'm about as much a people person as I am a drinker."

"Well, now, I *know* that isn't true." Cassandra said. Sarah wasn't sure whether to be offended, so Cassie continued. "No, I don't mean you're a drunk or anything, I meant about the people

person part. You were quite the social butterfly a few years back."

"Yeah..." Sarah's one word response tried to carry a further meaning, as if to say 'That was back when he was alive'. Sarah didn't really want to say it. She didn't want to acknowledge it at all, but Cassie caught it anyway.

"I heard you call your companion 'Hugo'... Is that right?" Cassie asked, and Sarah replied with a single, subtle nod. The older woman wasn't sure how to respond. She wanted to give her a hug, or just ignore it entirely. She didn't want to pry, but she was worried about Sarah. "Do you mind if I..."

Sarah received a notification in her vision, 'Dr. Cassandra Harriet is requesting Audio/Visual sharing with your companion'. Sarah was surprised, and a little embarrassed. She had no issues sharing companions as it was generally more weird to see people talking to empty space, but she was much less comfortable sharing Hugo with people who actually knew him, as Cassie did. Sarah accepted Cassie's request and Hugo faded into the older woman's vision.

"Good day, I am Hugo, it's a pleasure to meet you." If Cassie's tactile feedback had been turned on, Hugo would have offered his hand in greeting, but as it was AV only, he opted for a polite bow instead. Cassie stepped up to him and started inspecting his image closely.

"God... It's like looking at a ghost..." Cassie said in a low voice, immediately forgetting that Sarah was sitting right next to her. When she realized, she looked over at Sarah with a regretful look. "I'm so sorry, I shouldn't have said that!"

"It's okay..." Sarah said. Cassie still shook her head, kicking herself, then went back to inspecting Hugo. "You really put a lot of work into this. It looks exactly like him."

"Well, I did make a few minor changes. I was never really a fan of his beard stubble, and his personality isn't quite the same either."

"If you keep talking as if I'm not here, I might start to get offended." Hugo interjected with a sly smile. Both Cassie and Sarah chuckled.

"His sense of humor seems to be mostly intact." Cassie said, then sighed and stepped away from him. "Listen, Sarah. I'm not a psychologist, so I won't lecture you, and I won't bring it up again, but I don't think this is healthy. I'm worried about you."

Sarah felt offended. She wanted to yell at her, and rant about how she wasn't alone. That a significant portion of cybernetic users were just like her, who modeled their companions after their deceased loved ones. She wanted to call the older woman closed minded, but Sarah held her tongue because she knew that wasn't true. Cassie approached Sarah and placed a

hand gently on her shoulder, which made Sarah realize that she couldn't remember the last time she had made physical contact with another living person. She also considered whether she could even tell the difference.

"If you want to talk to someone... Someone human, please don't be afraid to message me." Cassie said, and Sarah nodded. The older woman went to leave the lab but paused before the door closed behind her. "And if you want to argue whether talking to ghosts is healthier than alcoholism, you can always find me at the pub on 10 after my shift."

Sarah laughed and gave a polite wave and a nod as she left. She turned back to her work but did nothing but stare blankly at the display. In her mind, she was running the encounter through her head, thinking of all the things she could have said in the moment.

"She seemed quite concerned for you." Hugo said as he approached Sarah's side.

"You're honestly the expert here." Sarah said. "Is her concern misplaced?"

"Not necessarily. Statistically speaking, cybernetic users are less likely to indulge in self harm or unnecessary medication when their personal companions have been modeled on lost loved ones. However, there are outliers in the data. In rare cases, users have developed states of psychosis that is

exacerbated by the presence of companions."

"Oh... Lovely..."

"You needn't worry. As I said, these cases are exceedingly rare, and updates to our program have been developed with these cases in mind. Furthermore, in most of the cases, the users were found to have a history of symptomatic episodes that predate their companions' creation." Hugo walked over and leaned against the electron microscope, making Sarah flinch before remembering that he can't affect the extremely sensitive machine at all. Hugo put his hands in his arms and looked at her with a raised eyebrow. "So tell me, do you ever remember seeing or hearing things that weren't there? Besides me, of course."

"Hmm..." Sarah thought for a moment, then chuckled. "Well, sometimes I feel like my sister was a figment of my imagination, does that count?"

"That's Sophie, your twin sister, who lived with you on Earth just over 10 years ago?"

"The one and the same."

"It might please you to know that, while I didn't appear as I do now, I was with you, and did keep a record of your communications with her. I don't know how much it means coming from me, but I can confirm that she was not the product of an over-active imagination. Not yours at least." Hugo smiled, thinking he was being clever, but Sarah was confused.

"What does that mean? Are you implying that she might have been part of a decades long conspiracy or something?"

"Nothing of the sort." Hugo laughed. "It was more a joke about your parents' thoughts during your conception."

"Oh... Ew..." Sarah said with a short chuckle. There was a moment of silence as she continued her work.

"Do you miss her?" Hugo asked.

"That seems like an odd question, coming from you." Sarah gave Hugo a strange look. "She was my twin sister. I shared a room with her for eighteen years. I'm sure you have access to some crazy statistic referring to the closeness of twins. Is there anything that indicates that wasn't the same for me?"

"Well, after you received news of your sisters passing, I wonder why you didn't model me after her." Hugo's words gave Sarah pause for thought. Because of the conversation, Sarah wanted to see Sophie again so badly that she considered dropping her work for the day and doing exactly what he suggested, but when she looked up at him, she saw the loving smile of her late husband looking back at her.

"I suppose... it's because I had Hugo at the time. That, and she didn't quite have the type of personality desirable in an companion, nor do I want my sister helping with some of my... needs."

Sarah reached out and grabbed the companion's hand and

brought it to her face. He brushed his fingers through her hair and palmed her cheek. The warmth and softness of his skin was simulated perfectly. Sarah closed her eyes and leaned into his hand, but as she wasn't actually supported by anything, lost her balance and nearly fell out of her chair.

"Careful, there!" Hugo said with a laugh. "Perhaps we should continue with the reading."

"Okay. I'm kind of bored with pre-Sumer though. Maybe something a bit later, something with a lot of meat."

"How about... 'Inspirations and Evolution of Gothic Architecture'?"

"Sounds great! Here, let me add a little flair to help me get in the mood." Sarah brought attention to her HUD and navigated to the cosmetics menu where she changed her nails to vantablack. Even though it wouldn't be visible to anyone, including herself, Sarah made her lips black as well.

The rest of her shift was uneventful, but Sarah didn't mind. The chair was comfortable, the work was easy, and her husband was reading to her about her favorite topic. This was her happy place. Before she knew it, she had gone over her shift, which had become a common occurrence since she was no longer tracking time. Hugo had to pause at the end of a chapter to let her know.

"Why don't we go eat something, and then I'd like to see

what you have planned for 'Happy Fun Time'." Sarah said.

"Sure thing! What are you in the mood for?"

"Hmm..." Sarah thought but couldn't come up with anything.

"I dunno, whatever. Do you have any recommendations?"

"What about the bar that Dr. Harriet mentioned?" Hugo asked. Sarah didn't so much answer as make a non-committal noise. Hugo continued. "They have a pretty wide-ranging hot food menu."

"I don't like people watching me eat."

"I watch you eat all the time."

"Well... yeah... but--"

"Nobody will watch you eat, and I'll let you know if someone does. Also, it won't be much different from any other public places that you've eaten at."

"But, there'll be people I know there."

"It's bound to happen sometime. It is a small station, Sarah."

"Actually, *Hugo*, it's one of the largest stations in the Galaxy." Sarah's sarcastic response elicited rolled eyes and a chuckle from Hugo. "Alright, fine. Let's go to the bar. She said it was on 10, right? What's it called?" Sarah asked, but before Hugo answered. "Oh, God, it's not called--"

"10-Aftward." Hugo said. It was Sarah who rolled her eyes this time.

"That's not much better." Sarah removed her coat as she left the lab and followed Hugo's lead.

"I'm not sure I understand the name. It seems to use naval terminology, but as this station is cylindrical and has no facing direction, that specific terminology doesn't apply."

"It actually plays on a reference to a late 20th century science fiction television series, in which the name of the bar was '10-Forward', which did refer to its location on the ship."

"Ah, yes, I see." Hugo ran an index search on the stations currently available data pool. "Seems like variations on that name, and from other fiction, are quite common among space stations. In fact, there is another bar on this station called Tech Noir."

Sarah and Hugo continued to discuss fictional bars and locations until they reached the threshold of their destination. Sarah expected an open concept bar with a large display against one wall that depicted the stars, like the one the bar's name was referencing, but when she stepped through the doorway, she came into a dark lounge, closer to the classy jazz lounges from over a century ago. It was even complete with a stage featuring a black grand piano and accented with red curtains.

There was no one currently playing, just some faint background music as Sarah walked around and took a seat at one of the booths with Hugo sitting down across from her. In her

HUD, Sarah received an offer to view the bar's digital menu, which she accepted. A large menu appeared on the surface of the table and Sarah started browsing through it.

"Hey! I'm glad you came!" Dr. Harriet's voice made Sarah look up to see her warm expression. "It's good to see you too, Hugo." She said, and Sarah smiled. She thought the older woman would have removed her access to Hugo as soon as she left the lab. It was a small bit of acceptance that made Sarah feel happy, but slightly embarrassed.

"Thank you, Cassie." Sarah said. "The menu here is pretty impressive, and a little overwhelming, can you recommend anything?"

"Sure! If you want something light-ish and snackable, the nacho's here are out of this world! And for a more fulfilling meal, get the barbecue brisket with mashed potatoes and corn." As she mentioned them, Cassandra pointed to the sections of the digital menu where they could be found. When Sarah tapped on the brisket, a highly detailed model of the dish appeared in front of her. The steam rising from the plate encouraged Sarah to lean forward and take in the smell. The digitized scent of the tangy barbeque sauce mixed with the buttery flavor of the potatoes made her mouth water.

Much like touch, the simulations of taste and smell were still in their infancy when compared to vision and audio. As

such, Sarah could usually detect artificiality and it often made her nauseous, so on many occasions, she would opt out of those features. However, in this instance, it was the smell that sold her. She didn't even look at any other options, placing an order for the barbecue brisket. Cassie smiled, then tapped on the beverage section of the menu.

"And I know you're not much of a drinker, so feel free to donate it to someone else, but here's a beer on me." After the order was placed, Cassie set a hand on Sarah's shoulder. "Thank you for coming, I hope you enjoy your stay, and I hope to see you around!"

"Thank you, Cassie!" Sarah said, squeezing the woman's hand in response. Cassie gave her a friendly wink, then moved away to mingle with another table.

Sarah's drink arrived shortly after by a waiter in a red shirt and black vest, matching the theme of the rest of the bar. A matching glass mug appeared in front of Hugo and the two knocked their drinks together then took their first sip. It was a delicious apple cider.

"Mmm!" Sarah never cared for beer, but the sour apple taste covered the bitter alcohol flavor. "That's really good!" She said with surprise in her voice.

"I'll have to remember that." Hugo replied.

The two spent the next few minutes discussing the mood of

the restaurant. Sarah had Hugo explain the history of jazz lounges, going into detail about notable locations and musicians. She had him pause when the lights came down and the background music faded out. The stage lit up and a few musicians dressed in black appeared. One sat at the piano. Another carried a Viola, and the third brandished a trumpet. After they took their places, a woman in a red sequin dress stepped out from behind the curtains and walked up to the microphone. It was none other than Dr. Cassandra Harriet.

"Ladies, Gentlemen, former lovers, and those yet to come. Good evening to most of you, and good morning to some. Let me tell you a story of where I am from. Please don't mistake this for beating the drum." After a poetic introduction, the instruments came in, each playing its own lonely tune, coming together for a strangely comforting communal despair. When Cassie came back in, her words were about a happy young couple in love. Her lyrics implied nothing other than a perfect life. It didn't need to. The instruments provided all the context needed to complete the story of longing and loss.

Sarah was blown away by the performance and barely noticed the plate of food quietly placed in front of her. She enjoyed her meal while paying close attention to the band's lamentations. After finishing her plate and two additional beers, the bands set ended, which was met with applause and

cheers, a disproportionate amount from Sarah herself. The group waved and bowed, then Cassie blew a kiss to the crowd and winked at Sarah before walking backstage. As the lights came up and the light background music returned, Sarah felt herself winding down. She tried to find Cassie to thank her for the invitation and the show, but after being unable to find her, opted to just thank her the next time she saw her.

It didn't take long for Sarah to return to her living quarters, thanks to the transit system. She had Hugo continue his Jazz lecture on the way. When they walked through the front door of her home, she pulled Hugo close and gave him a kiss.

"Did you enjoy yourself, sweetheart?" Hugo asked. Sarah responded with a nod.

"Thank you for making me go, it was a lot more fun than I expected!" She kissed him again, then wrapped her arms around him and began leaning into him. She could feel resistance against her skin and taste his lips, but they were just electrical impulses delivered to her brain by the cybernetic implant at the base of her skull.

"Whoa, easy there!" Hugo said, catching her attention before she lost her balance. "Why don't you get ready for bed, and I'll get things ready?"

"Okay." Sarah replied. She knew that 'getting things ready' literally took milliseconds for Hugo, but she'd already made

that argument to him, and subsequently learned a lot about skeuomorphic design and its application in computer communication. It was all about making humans feel comfortable. Afterward, she started noticing all the subtle things that Hugo did that would be unnecessary for a computer. Instead of bringing them up, Sarah decided to just let them go.

After visiting the restroom, Sarah stripped to her underwear and put on a loose-fitting shirt, then crawled into bed. She laid on her back and adjusted her position to make sure that her mattress and pillows were supporting her contours as evenly as possible. She placed her hands over her stomach and took a deep breath.

"You ready?" Hugo asked.

"Yes." Sarah replied. When she felt his fingers slip into her palm, she opened her eyes and looked up at him. With his usual warm smile, he pulled her by the arm up out of bed and into a tight hold. Her own body was now just as simulated as his, albeit with a few cosmetic changes that reflected her fantasy of looking like a nubile young supermodel instead of an exercise-averse bookworm. She used the momentum to push him back into the wall and kissed him deeply. She dug her hands beneath his clothing to grip at his soft skin, and she felt him do the same. After a few minutes of passionately rolling around the perfect recreation of her room, Sarah pulled her lips away from

his.

"So, what did you have in mind?" Sarah asked.

"Well, let me show you!" Hugo led her by the hand to the front door of her living quarters, where he opened the door to a bright red alien landscape. As soon as she stepped through the aperture, she nearly fell due to a decrease in relative gravity. When the door closed behind her, it disappeared, and she was now standing in a large field of red flat-leaf grass. The smell was sweet, and the breeze was cool.

"This place is beautiful!" Sarah said, and gasped when she saw bird-like creatures flying in the distance.

"This is based on videogrammetry from a recent expedition to a planet in Tau Ceti." Hugo said, then saw Sarah looking at the birds. "Want to take a closer look?"

Sarah smiled and bit her lip as she nodded at Hugo. He pulled her back into him and swept her up under her knees. She wrapped her arms around his neck and gave him a quick peck on the cheek as he lifted off the ground and began flying towards the birds. Of course, Sarah could fly herself, or even carry Hugo if she wished, but she felt that this was more fun. She loved the way the wind felt through her skin and hair, and her innate fear of heights, made irrational in this simulated space, added an exciting sense of danger.

As they approached the group of flying creatures, Hugo

joined the edge of the formation. Sarah observed their leathery wings and furry body.

"They kind of look like bats, don't they?" Sarah asked.

"I suppose they do, but after close inspection by the expedition, their pressurized bodies and hollow limbs make them closer to arachnids." Hugo gave further descriptions of the creatures appearance and habits until Sarah was satisfied, then the couple broke off to move to a new location.

Several kilometers away, they started flying over what looked to be a forest of massive mushroom-like trees. He came to a stop over one of the tallest ones, then looked Sarah in the eyes.

"Do you trust me?" Hugo asked.

"As long as you abide by the laws of robotics, sure!" Sarah laughed as she said it. She had made jokes about it before, and had been met with a lectured on the fact that they were only ever intended to be used as a literary device in order to show how they couldn't work.

Sarah didn't expect a response, but she also didn't expect to be suddenly dropped by Hugo. As she fell to the dense canopy of this mushroom tree, she tried to remember how to activate flying herself, but she panicked and let out a fearful yell before she hit the tree. Where she expected a hard landing and to fall through the canopy onto jagged branches and the ground

below, she was instead met with an incredibly soft texture. Her body depressed into it and gently bounced back to the surface.

She laughed heartily, feeling the softness and warmth against her body. Hugo floated down to stand on the surface. He had a look on his face that Sarah recognized. She looked up at him with wanting eyes. Her hands began drifting around her body.

"Is there more?" She asked, and Hugo responded with a mischievous smile. Sarah watched as his limbs began to stretch, split, reshape, and change color. His face slowly started to deform, and his eyes drifted away from their regular position, then multiplied like dividing cells. Within seconds, he didn't appear human at all. His long, tendril like fingers reached out and started to wrap around each of her ankles. In the face of this monstrous entity threatening to violate her, Sarah bit her lip and began to smile uncontrollably.

The next morning, Sarah awoke, as she always did, to a soft kiss from Hugo and his voice in her ear. She groaned and stretched, and tried to pull herself out of bed, but it was just too comfortable.

"Ugh... too tired... tell 'em I'll be in in a couple more hours." Sarah said, rolling over and cuddling with her pillow.

"Sorry, sweetie. It is earlier than I would normally have gotten you up, but there's an urgent meeting with administration, in which you have received a special

invitation."

"Huh?" Sarah rolled back around and opened her eyes, checking to see if Hugo might be pranking her. "Administration wants to see me?"

"That's right. And judging by the size of the lecture hall that the meeting is being held in, it sounds pretty important." Hugo said. Sarah sat up and forced a yawn and a stretch, trying to quickly wake herself up.

"Could you make me something with a ton of caffeine in it?"

"Sure thing. There is enough time to take a shower as well, if you wish."

"Thank you, Hugo." Sarah said as she stood up and kissed him. She jumped in the shower, feeling the need to clean off the mess from last night, even if it was entirely digital. After her shower, she put on her best business formal skirt and blouse and grabbed the prepared cup of white chocolate mocha from the counter on her way out the door.

Hugo assured her that she didn't need to rush, but she walked at a brisk pace nonetheless. She was nervous. She wondered if this was some sort of reprimand. Maybe she fucked up in materials processing. Maybe somebody found out about some of the things she did with Hugo and wanted her moved somewhere else. There were many scenarios Sarah thought up. Even when they were clearly absurd, she couldn't resist thinking about how she

would react to them.

The lecture hall still had plenty of seats open as Sarah had arrived early. She smiled and waved at her colleagues as she passed by them on her way up to the top few rows of seats. She sat down in a back corner, leaving a spot for Hugo to sit next to her. She sat in nervous silence and watched people trickle in. Before long, the lecture hall was bustling and there was a cacophony of hushed voices speculating on the contents of the unexpected meeting. Sarah saw Cassie mingling with a nearby group and waived at her when she looked Sarah's way. Cassie approached her.

"Hey, Cassie! Great show last night, I had no idea you could sing!"

"Thank you, Sarah! I really appreciate you showing up. I'm glad you liked the show!" Cassie turned to Hugo. "Do you mind if I take a seat?"

"Not at all." Hugo said, then vanished from his spot. Cassandra sat down in the now empty seat.

"Do you have any idea what this is about?" She asked, then grabbed Sarah's arm and leaned in close. "You think it could be about Dr. Pritchard's wandering hands?"

"I dunno." Sarah said with a laugh. "I got a special invitation though, is that weird? Did you get one?"

"A 'special' one, huh?" Cassie raised an eyebrow. "You

didn't discover a new element or anything, did you?"

"I thought I had a little while ago, but it turns out I was just really high." Sarah said. Cassie laughed openly and punched Sarah's arm.

"When did you get so funny?" Cassie said.

A line of tenured scientists entered the hall, each of which Sarah was familiar with, but only Dr. Pritchard had she ever seen in person. A hush grew over the crowd as they found the nearest place to take a seat.

"Welcome. We have some exciting news to reveal. Let's get right into it." Dr. Pritchard was presenting first as the head researcher on the station. He made a few motions with his fingers and the lights dimmed, then a large display in the front of the room flicked on. A video began to play. It was a flyover of red sandy dunes in a vast desert.

"This is video captured by a drone from Stellar Cartography. The exact location is going to remain a secret for the time being, but I can say that it was found within the Milky Way."

A dark spot on the horizon began to grow as the Drone sped toward it. At first glance, it looked like a large black rock jutting out of the sandy ground. When the drone slowed down and began circling the object, there was a collective gasp from the crowd, most coming to the same realization simultaneously,

including Sarah.

"This is what appears to be a massive structure, or set of structures, of intelligent design." The room was eerily quiet as everyone watched the video. It switched to a computer-generated map of the interior, largely incomplete. Dr. Pritchard continued. "The instruments aboard the drone were unable to penetrate the surface material of the structure. That, among other observed properties, indicates that it could be Plasteel, or another similar material."

The video went on for several minutes, then began looping as the other highly esteemed Doctors and Professors discussed the preliminary findings. Once the discussion was over, Dr. Pritchard returned to the podium and continued.

"Expeditions to this location, and other points of interest around the planet will be starting in approximately 6 hours. Applications are open to anyone in this room but, in particular, we are looking for applicants with qualifications relating to Xeno-Archeology." Before even making it an official invite, Dr. Pritchard was already looking straight at Sarah. "Do we have any volunteers?"

After Dr. Pritchard, Sarah noticed a few other recognizable faces in the sea of heads turning to look at her. Like a virus, other people turned to see what they were looking at, and before she knew it, most of the lecture hall had eyes directly on her.

Even Hugo had appeared, crouched on the floor next to her. She then felt a bump against her arm.

"Hey," Cassie whispered, "he's literally talking about you right now."

Sarah needed the pull back to reality. She couldn't believe what she was seeing, and she was so in her head that she hadn't quite registered what the question was. When it finally hit her, Sarah thrust her hand into the air like an excited first grader.

Chapter Three

"Hey, good morning sweetheart."

Sophie's slumber was broken by a soft kiss on her cheek and fingers running through her hair. She responded by grabbing her lover's pillow and squeezing it tightly to her body, making a rebellious groan as she did.

"No, no." The woman said to her. "I let you sleep in long enough." A moment later, Sophie felt the cool air against her naked body as the comforter was pulled off. She finally gave in, rolling onto her back and pandiculating to satisfaction. She opened her eyes and looked over to Violet, who was standing in front of the vanity brushing her hair.

"What's up, V? You're showering without me now?" Sophie asked.

"Only when I need to actually get clean." Violet responded with a reserved smile.

Violet was the kind of woman who presented herself as professional and serious as possible. Generally, she was able to manage and suppress emotion so well that many of her colleagues believed her to be a clinical psychopath. Even the most misogynistic of her peers would avoid looking at her for fear of inviting her wrath. Sophie herself was often intimidated, if not by the woman's calculating gaze, than by her stunning beauty and

imposing stature. Sophie was glad to be on her good side.

After rolling herself out of bed, Sophie stood up and basked in the warm light from Apollon's main star. She stretched again as she looked over Violet's estate, then moved over to Violet and gave her a kiss. She may have been practiced at hiding her emotions from sight, but she wasn't nearly as good at hiding them from touch. When Sophie's lips touched hers, it was like all of Violet's suppressed passion came out at once. When they parted again, Violet looked deep into Sophie's eyes, but then looked away with a hint of shame hidden underneath an instantly stoic expression.

"Misty's going to be returning today..." Violet said. Sophie pulled away, reminded of their current situation. "She's scheduled to arrive before dusk. We... might not be able to see each other in person for a few weeks."

"Okay." It was all that Sophie could say. She thought about having the conversation, the one where she asks Violet to consider leaving her wife, but Sophie was well aware of her role in this relationship, and in the larger context as well. Running off with a married woman was an unrealistic pipedream in every sense. Just considering the scenario was a waste of time, but Sophie couldn't help letting the fantasy play out in her mind. When she quietly moved toward the shower, Violet grabbed her wrist and pulled her back for another kiss.

"Maybe I can set up a meeting or two..." Violet said, caressing Sophie's cheek, who smiled in kind.

As Sophie showered, Violet dressed herself and left the house. Sophie heard the faint atmospheric boom of an OTech Transport appearing in the sky, and a few seconds later, another pop as the air fills the vacuum where the transport used to be. Sophie rolled her eyes. After getting to know her, Sophie was starting to realize that a lot of the things Violet did to seem so cool and intimidating were lifted straight from the movies, like leaving the girl without saying goodbye, for example. Sophie wondered if she left a cheesy note on the dresser as well. When she walked back to the bedroom, sure enough, there was a note projected against the mirror that read 'Until next time. XOXO'. Sophie would have liked a physical note that she could keep in her pocket, but understood Violet's choice to do it digitally, in which only Sophie would be able to see it, and it wouldn't be forgotten and discovered by Misty later.

She waived away the message, then dressed herself and left the house. Instead of taking an OTech Transport, Sophie opted to order an automated ground taxi, as it was much easier to obscure her identity. She ordered it to meet her a few kilometers down the road so she could get in her morning jog. Sophie loved the smell of the forest around her. It continued to surprise her how large the trees were after only 10 years since being planted. It

reminded her of being back on Earth, which she supposed was the point.

When she finally met with the taxi, she hopped in the cab and set her destination to a condemned lumbermill outside of Apollon's Capitol City. During her ride, she dove into her feed which primarily consisted of the current state of interstellar politics and OTech related science and technologies. The biggest news was from Apophis, the largest farming colony in the core. The local government declared martial law after widespread protests over Military Intelligence's influence had become violent. Sophie expected it was going to happen eventually. Even she wasn't fully on-board with some of the thing's MI was doing. She thought it was entirely the fault of poor leadership, but part of her suspected that the whole mess was intentional to begin with. That wouldn't surprise her either considering some of the jobs she had done in the past.

The next headline read 'Scientists Hold Gathering To Discuss New Evidence For Intelligent Beings.' Clickbait, Sophie thought. The last dozen times something like that had been reported, it ended up being 'Monkey-like creature seems to cook food before eating it' or something just as mundane. Even so, Sophie opened the link to read the article further. The article had no information about the evidence itself, only a list of a few of the top minds in the field who have confirmed that they

are attending the conference.

Sophie consumed several articles by the time the Taxi came to a stop. The automated voice notified Sophie that there was an obstruction in the road, which was her cue to exit and continue on foot. She walked around the large tree that had conveniently fallen across the poorly maintained dirt trail. It was another kilometer before she arrived at the lumbermill. She went into the abandoned processing floor and down a stairwell to an unassuming metal door. She gripped the handle, making sure her fingers were specifically and evenly placed. When she pulled, the hidden biometric lock clicked and allowed her inside.

The next room was a small, much more highly technical scanner that verified her identity using a variety of methods. The scanning cycle took 15 seconds and was complimented by flashing lights and an unnecessary siren. Once it was complete, the inner door opened to a spacious underground area. One side was furnished with a couple of comfortable sofas and armchairs, a large coffee table, and a wall mounted display currently tuned to six different live news channels. The chaotic sound of six anchors was only barely audible over the combined sound of heavy metal music and the crackling of a welding torch.

Sophie descended the stairs and tried to access the volume controls through her interface, finding it to be blocked to nobody's surprise. She followed the welding sound around the

corner to a workshop area. In the middle of a lowered elevator platform lay the bones and gore of several vehicles that were in the process of being torn apart and re-assembled into a Frankenstein's monster of machinery. On the other side of the pile of wreckage sat an exceptionally large man huddled over an outwardly disorganized worktable. Sophie approached him and stood at his side. She made no attempt to be quiet or sneak, but he still hadn't noticed her. Just as he started making a new weld line, Sophie pushed on his elbow, causing the line to go wide and make an ugly mark on the otherwise pristine aluminum plate. The man jumped as it happened, then snuffed the torch and dropped it to the table. He then looked over to Sophie with an annoyed glare.

"Can you turn this shit down a little?" She mouthed, and a moment later, the music and television were at a comfortable level.

"That was dangerous, I could have hurt myself, you know?" Yarim said.

Yarim-Kish was a towering presence. Even in a sitting position he was nearly a head taller than Sophie, and he weighed nearly 3 times what his appearance would indicate due to the extensive prosthetics throughout his body. The man could break Sophie's spine with one hand, but in the years that she had known him, she came to see him as a giant teddy bear without a

drop of hate inside him.

"That's funny, coming from the guy welding without a mask."

"Cyber-eyes." Yarim says, pointing to his temple.

"Yeah, and when an errant spark gets caught between your sclera and eyelid?"

"I'll just thank God that the government is paying for it."

"I don't think Daddy Warbucks is going to be very happy about it." As Sophie was speaking, Yarim continued welding, staring directly into the flame. Sophie rolled her eyes.

"Whatever. Speaking of government property, home base has been hounding me about maintenance and practice, so... here I am."

"Alright, take a seat over there and I'll be with you after I'm finished with this piece." Sophie sat on a stool on the other side of an adjacent table. She could see one of the streams on the display in the living area. It showed scenes of rioters clashing with police and entire city blocks burning.

"What do you think about the whole Apophis situation?" Sophie asked. Yarim sighed and shook his head.

"Seems like a royal fuck up to me. I don't even really understand why we were there in the first place."

"Well, official statement is Military Intelligence wasn't there at all."

"Do you really believe that?" Yarim chuckled. "MI isn't 'officially' here either."

"Why a farming colony though? The farmers on Apophis have got to be among the happiest people in the galaxy. Before this shitshow, I never would have seen them threatening rebellion or forming anything like 'The Apophis Faction'."

"I agree. Smells fucky to me." Yarim finished the piece he was working on, then rolled across the floor on his custom reinforced stool to meet Sophie. "Alright, arms up." Yarim instructed. Sophie followed his lead, holding both arms out in front of her. "Maintenance mode on." He said.

Sophie scrolled through her interface to find the correct option. She could never remember where it was. She smiled nervously at Yarim, who rolled his eyes at her. It was a dance they had done several times before. Where Yarim used to tell her that she needed to do more maintenance, now all that was needed was a look. When Sophie finally found the option, her arms were locked in position and control was relinquished to Yarim. He took a moment to browse the selection of Sophie's overdue practice courses, then loaded her into the Close Quarters Combat course.

After a short loading bar, Sophie's vision faded out, then back into a digital combat simulation. Sophie enjoyed practice enough, but she wasn't a particular fan of the unrealistic, hyper digitized aesthetic of the practice programs. However, the program used an open-source, commonly used game engine, and

Sophie had learned how to replace the character models to anything she wished. When the course started, instead of an onslaught of boring, featureless mannequins, Sophie was surrounded by insect-like bipedal monsters ripped straight from her favorite videogame. Yarim had forgotten about that and laughed as he saw Sophie go to town on these creatures.

"You know, that might make it difficult if you have to defend yourself against an actual human." Yarim said.

"Oh? And I suppose the robot-mannequins make it easier?"

Yarim had no response. After he finished gathering his necessary tools, he adjusted Sophie's arms into a comfortable position for him and instructed them to open. Both forearms suddenly split down the middle, her hands and fingers folding and curling away from the 20 cm blades as they extended outward. While Yarim went to work polishing the blades and tightening internal fasteners, he continued watching Sophie's digital practice. She was a natural, slicing the monsters into ribbons with her hidden blades. After finishing a wave, Sophie continued speaking.

"Besides, don't you reskin your chess pieces with pinup girls?"

"Well, yeah. What's your point?"

"Don't the girls distract you from focusing on your tactics?"

"Maybe." Yarim smiled, but Sophie couldn't see it. "Are you sure I'm not doing it to distract you?"

"Is *that* why you do it?" Sophie laughed.

The practice program was very basic, having her simply stand in one spot while waves of enemies came at her. No matter what weapon the practice had been started with, when she made it through 100 enemies, practice was completed for the week. It was as simple as it was boring. When she first had her brain interface implanted, she was blown away by the level of realism and control that was put into the Military Intelligence training and practice programs. They were her first experiences with fully cybernetic VR, and she had a soft spot in her heart for the program, but it had been 10 years since she had the surgeries, and the program hadn't changed at all.

It was really getting stale, especially when compared to modern videogames like Wonderland. Unfortunately, even though it used the same engine and she played it often, her favorite videogame didn't count towards her practice. It was a minor inconvenience. It was so basic that Sophie was able to achieve a state of flow, her bladed body slaughtering enemies in a dance of pure reflex, while her mind had a pleasant conversation with Yarim.

"So, how are you doing?" Yarim asked. His job wasn't necessarily the therapist of the cell, but in working so closely

during maintenance, the role had basically fallen on him.

"Pretty good, actually." Sophie smiled, but it only reached her simulated lips.

"Yeah, there's a little pep in your stabbin' arm this morning. I guess you had a good night?"

"You could say that."

"Well, how would you say it?" Yarim asked.

"It was..." Sophie lightly swooned as she thought about it.

"It was a good night." She said, and Yarim laughed.

"Okay... And how is the venerable Ms. Hodges?"

"She is great. God, she is so cool. Do you mind if I gush over her real quick?"

"That's fine, just as long as I don't have to clean it up." Yarim laughed, Sophie would have called him a pervert had she actually heard what he said instead of talking over him.

"She's a great cook, she's absurdly smart and well spoken, and when she smiles at me, it just makes me weak in the knees. And she is just... So! Fucking! Hot!" Sophie punctuated her words by shanking some poor and helpless alien monster.

"She's gotta have a prosthetic body, right? Lord knows she can afford one."

"You know, I thought that at first too, but after a close inspection or two... I can confirm that she has a hundred percent flesh-and-blood human body."

"Wow!" Yarim said. He took a moment to pull up public photos of her and swiped through a few. "There are models out there that pay millions in body mods to look half as good as she does."

"I dunno, I think my arms look pretty good."

"Yeah, and your arms cost millions, but also, your maintenance tech is a God." As Yarim spoke, he was applying a salve to the edges of Sophie's skin where it had split apart. Not only did it help the skin maintain a graft to the mechanical parts within, but it also helped the skin come back together without a visible seam.

"Yes, Yarim. I wouldn't trust anyone else with them."

"As it should be. So, she's fully human then?"

"Well, she does have a cybernetic brain interface." Sophie said as she finished the CQC course. Yarim quickly loaded the next course in the queue; Sidearms Practice. Sophie took the M1911 that materialized in front of her, starting the course.

"Did you guys... you know... touch brains?"

"Ugh, God, don't say it like that! It sounds so gross!" Sophie compromised her combat stance to emphasize her disgust in the phrase. Yarim laughed. "No, Yarim. She's made it clear that a direct connection to her interface is off limits to everyone except Misty."

"Ehh, cyber-lovin' is overrated anyway."

"Speak for yourself, man."

"I dunno. I prefer to feel my partners physical body. Maybe that's just me." Yarim said, shrugging his shoulders in a playfully smug manner. Sophie couldn't see it, but she could tell that it was there.

"There's something to be said about being able to change your body however you want and do things that aren't possible in a civilized society, or in reality even, but I do get where you're coming from. Some things, like the way she looks at me after a long day of work, the way her lips taste after she's had her coffee, and the way she grips me when we're sleeping, those subtleties don't come through digitally. I mean, I wouldn't go to Wonderland to sit in a living room and listen to someone complain about bureaucracy, but when it comes to Violet, I just can't get enough!"

"You seem to like her a lot."

"I do, man. I really do."

"That's really nice to hear, but as your friend, and your colleague, it's my duty to remind you that Violet Hodges is under suspicion of developing OTech Weapons, and your goal in the relationship is not to fall in love, as much as I want to see it happen." The dose of reality in Yarim's voice was enough to bring Sophie to relative reality.

For a moment, Sophie lost her focus and was rewarded by her

alien opponents with a six-inch laceration to her lower stomach. The gout of blood and protruding intestines didn't look particularly realistic, but it certainly felt that way. Sophie let out a painful cry as she regained her composure. She continued without a response to Yarim, holding her gut together with her off hand until the end of the course. Fortunately, she only had a few kills to go.

"On the whole 'doing our job' front, how would you say things are going?" Yarim asked, loading up her Assault Rifle practice course. This one was far and away the easiest course for her, as it was her weapon of choice in Wonderland, with over a thousand hours in it's operation.

"Not great. Or really great, I guess, depending on your perspective. I've been inside her office at ORD Headquarters and looked through as many physical documents I could find. I even placed a worm in her terminal for Cari over a month ago. Still, nobody's found anything."

"Maybe it *is* time for some brain-bumpin'."

"Ugh, stop, that's even worse!" Sophie shook her head in disgust. "Besides, isn't doing a direct connection a big no-no? I remember Mirror nearly having a coronary when Cari wanted to connect with me. God forbid what she would do if she knew I had done it with a suspect."

"I'm pretty sure Ms. Hodges doesn't have any programming or

digital systems expertise. I don't think there's any threat to our benefactors."

"That's true, but I'm also not very graceful when it comes to online safety, I'll admit. My anti-virus suite is probably laughably out of date."

"As someone who's currently networked with you and polishing your digitally controlled murder-arms, I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that." Yarim said. He was nearly finished adding a final protective coat to the metallic parts. "I do think you should meet with the Mirror though, ask her what she thinks."

"Uhh... I think I'm good. There's no rush, right? I mean, considering Apophis, it might be a good idea to take a step back and take it easy for a little while. It's not like I can do much for a while anyway since Misty's returning for a few weeks or so."

"Yeah, I suppose taking a break's not a bad idea." Yarim finished his work just as Sophie mopped up the last of her simulated combatants.

Yarim commanded the blades to retract and Sophie's arms to close up, then gently traced the seams with his finger to make sure they sealed properly. When they dropped out of maintenance mode, Sophie took back control of her physical body with a series of satisfying stretches. She stood up from the stool and

moved to a relatively uncluttered space to do some kinesthetic exercises, recalibrating her brain to her physical body.

"So... are you hanging around for a while? Wanna play chess?" Yarim asked.

"No, sorry. I gotta be at the shop soon. If I'm late again, my boss's passive-aggressiveness will boil over into a psychotic murder-rampage."

"Ugh. You're still working at that coffee shop? Aren't you like, a 30-something Intelligence Operative?"

"I'm 28, dick." Sophie snapped. "And that's only in Earth-years."

"Yeah, Earth time is still the standard, unless you know something I don't..." Yarim smirked, enjoying the banter. "Don't you want a job that's a little closer to your skillset? Like public or private security, or maybe journalism or something?"

"I like the coffee shop though."

"You were just complaining about your overbearing boss..."

"I also like complaining about him. Furthermore, knowing that I could kill him 20 different ways before he hits the ground really takes the bite away from his bark." After Sophie was finished recalibrating, she started gathering her things and heading for the door. "If you ever step outside of this Faraday cage, shoot me a message and we'll get a chess game going."

"And have Mirror rip my head off? No thanks." Yarim

chuckled. Sophie rolled her eyes and made a rude gesture to the air, brushing off Mirror's no-contact rule. Yarim laughed and waved at Sophie. She was just about to step through the exit when Yarim yelled up to her, "And update your anti-virus software, for fuck's sake!"

The ride back to the city was relatively short as Sophie listened to the news coverage of the riots on Apophis spreading like wildfire across the planet's surface. It seemed to get worse with every hourly update. Sparks were even starting to flare in a few other systems. Sophie was hooked to the feed in morbid curiosity. It didn't seem quite real to her. Watching it happen through a display in her interface, it felt more like a movie. She was reminded of films and documentaries about the cold war, about the Old Earth superpowers that started proxy wars and funded political revolutions. A chill ran down her spine as it began to sink in that she wasn't thousands of light-years away from these events. In fact, she was smack-dab in the middle of this galaxy spanning crisis, and based on how the public was responding, she was on the wrong side.

The vehicle approached the massive monolithic tower in the center of the city that housed 90 percent of the planet's 50 million people. She was so engrossed in the feed that she didn't notice the vehicle come to a stop on a funicular just inside the tower. She always liked to watch Apollon curve away beneath her

as she rose to the planet's stratosphere, but today, she didn't even step outside of the vehicle. Her attention was only pulled away when the vehicle announced its arrival outside of the coffee shop. Sophie didn't end the news feed, only resized the window and placed it on mute before she entered the business. She was twelve minutes early, but even so, George already looked like he was going to have an aneurism.

Sophie smiled at him as she passed by his office on her way to the breakroom. She set her things aside, then tied her hair back and slipped into an apron. The job was an easy one. Most of the time, much like her combat practice, she could do the job on autopilot. She rarely needed to take orders and make the orders herself thanks to the automated barista. Mostly, she just cleaned and maintained the storefront and the automated barista itself. Before long, she had finished the previous shifts duties and her own, and all there was left to do was stand behind the counter and look busy.

Most days, she would go an entire shift without interacting with a single customer. She was watching more news as she mindlessly polished the countertop, and it took her a moment to notice a woman standing across from her. The figure startled her when she noticed it but maintained her composure.

"Welcome! How can I-" Sophie professionally turned and smiled to greet the woman, but when she looked up, Sophie was

rendered speechless, and the blood ran from her face. Out of nearly 50 million people and thousands of coffee shops, it seemed unlikely that Sophie would be looking into the face of her illicit lover's wife, but that was the situation she was in now.

"Hello." Misty said with a smile that seemed to instill more hostility than friendliness. "I would like a large, iced coffee with caramel and cream, please."

"Uh, s-sure." Sophie stuttered. She grabbed a cup and went to work on the order, but it was as if she had forgotten how to make coffee, second-guessing her movements. "Are you sure you don't want to use the machine? It can make your drink more quickly and with much more accurate measurements than I can."

"No, thank you. I prefer the work of human hands. Imperfect measurements mean that the drink is slightly different every time, and the difference makes each cup more enjoyable, and less likely to become boring."

Misty watched Sophie's movements closely, maintaining her strained and creepy smile the entire time. The thoughts running through Sophie's mind were overwhelming her. She was so nervous, even her mechanically augmented hands were trembling. When she finished the drink and handed it to Misty, Sophie half expected the woman to throw the cold drink right back in her face, but instead, Misty politely nodded.

"Thank you, Sophie." Misty said, and a chill ran down Sophie's spine. She was frozen in fear, a feeling she had never expected to experience in such a mundane situation. She had been trained to remain calm under pressure in countless life-threatening situations. 'Encountering the other woman' was not one of them. Misty stood in her place, simply smiling at Sophie. She thought, perhaps, Misty was waiting for a response.

"I-it's no problem, ma'am. Is there anything else I can do for you?" Sophie squeaked out.

"No, thank you." Misty said, then turned to leave the shop, but as she moved, she maintained eye contact and her uncanny smile. Just before she passed the threshold she spoke again. "Until next time."

The moment Misty was out of sight, Sophie grabbed the counter to prevent herself buckling to the floor. She breathed heavily, working to suppress the building urge to vomit. She was shaking in terror as a flood of scenarios filled her thoughts. She wasn't sure how long she stared at the counter, but it was long enough for her to receive concerned looks from the other seated patrons. When she noticed them, she gave them a polite smile, then slinked away to the back of the shop.

"I think I'm coming down with something, gotta go." Sophie said as she passed George's office.

"What?" George said, startled by Sophie's abrupt statement.

He shuffled to his feet, and by the time he was at his door, Sophie had already grabbed her things from the breakroom and was passing his door again on her way out. "You have like 2 more hours on your shift, it can't wait until then?" George was turning from his standard angry-red color to a furious purple when Sophie didn't respond to him. "Sophie!?" He yelled, just as she left the storefront.

Sophie wasted no time. She browsed through her interface file system until she found a script with an unintelligible name. Upon execution, the script launched a series of programs designed to obfuscate her identity while sending an urgent request to meet with the Mirror. Only a moment later, she received a message through her interface's developer console.

>M: Sit at a corner table in Benning's Courtyard on level 250. 20 minutes.

After Sophie confirmed receipt of the message, the console disappeared, and the script ended by removing itself from her system. She was restless. Instead of ordering another taxi, she decided to burn away her nervous energy by walking to her destination. When she entered the nearest pedestrian elevator, however, the confined space restricted her pacing and triggered a feeling of claustrophobia. She felt as if she couldn't breathe. She clutched her chest as she slid down to the floor in the corner.

It was a feeling she had never felt before. She thought she knew what fear was. She thought she had felt it when playing horror videogames, or at least when she was being put under prior to her cybernetic surgeries, but this was completely different. Her only respite was that the elevator was empty, and nobody could see her ball up into the fetal position. The lift took several minutes to descend nearly 100 levels, but it felt like hours to Sophie. When the elevator began to slow, Sophie shot back up, dusted off her backside, and wiped the tears from her eyes before the door opened.

Level 250 was a beautiful arboretum that appeared more like a dense forest with a digital sky 20 floors above it. From the elevator, there was a set of branching paths, one of which was labeled with a sign reading 'Benning's Courtyard'. Sophie followed that path for nearly a kilometer until she entered a clearing that butted up into the corner of the tower. There were two small strip malls against the walls, and between them was the courtyard. As she was told, Sophie took a seat at the table in the farthest corner and proceeded to stare blankly out the window over Apollon city and the surrounding landscape.

She sat with her back to the corner and remained hyper aware of anyone walking by in her peripheral vision, so when Sophie noticed a woman suddenly appear sitting in the seat next to her, Sophie's frayed nerves led her to overreact, throwing a

fist in the stranger's direction. She even tried to use her hidden blade, but the request was interrupted, and her entire arm locked in place before it could make contact with the woman's face, who was simply staring at Sophie with a blank expression behind her feature-obscuring sunglasses.

"You need to update your virus software." The Mirror said. Sophie sighed shakily as she realized who it was. The Mirror didn't mess around with her identity. She always appeared different, and often didn't appear at all, blocking her image from the cybernetic eyes of onlookers, as she had just done to Sophie. The Mirror unlocked Sophie's arms, and Sophie sat back in her chair. "What do you need?" The Mirror said.

"I umm... I think I may have been compromised." The shame that Sophie felt was palpable as she looked down at her feet.

"What makes you think that?"

"Violet Hodges' wife spoke to me while I was working at my cover job."

"Okay. What did she say?"

"Not a lot. She wanted a handmade iced coffee... And she called me by my name."

"Alright." The Mirror was silent for a moment. "I see you are listed publicly as an employee on the shops website. You may as well have been wearing a nametag. Was there anything else that may have indicated her suspicion in you?"

"Uh, I suppose she didn't say anything else but... the way she looked at me was... unnerving."

"Hmm..." The Mirror contemplated. "I'm accessing your footage of the encounter."

Sophie sank in her chair. She had forgotten that her eyes and ears were constantly recording every moment of her conscious life. The data was only stored for two weeks, but that was plenty long enough for The Mirror to witness Sophie's recent sexual exploits, as well as a few conversations in which she may have shit-talked behind the Mirror's back. Frankly, Sophie assumed the Mirror watched all that anyway, but it was still uncomfortable to know it was happening in real-time.

"Wow. You weren't lying. That's really fuckin creepy." The Mirror said with an uncharacteristic chuckle. "I'm glad that you came to me with this, and I am going to be keeping an eye on Misty Hodges out of an abundance of caution, but at this point, there's no way to know whether she suspects you of sleeping with her wife, if she thinks you're a Military Intelligence Operative, or if the whole thing was a coincidence."

Sophie sighed heavily and rubbed her face. There was a small sense of relief, but she was still shaken by the experience. She didn't know what she was hoping to hear.

"I've placed a new script in your system. If you encounter Misty again, run the script and you'll be directly connected to

me." The Mirror paused, inspecting Sophie's body language. "Do you understand?"

"Yeah, yes I do." Sophie said. The Mirror stood up, then vanished from Sophie's vision. Sophie sighed again and leaned back in her chair. She was then startled by the Mirror's disembodied voice.

"And update your fucking virus software. Jesus Christ."

Sophie rolled her eyes, though she expected the Mirror could still see her. She finally relented and remained seated for the next few minutes while her Anti-Virus software updated to its latest version. A part of her still felt it was annoying and a waste of time as another update would seemingly come along the day after she finally did it. However, she was now also considering the importance of her security. Once the update was complete, Sophie decided to head home.

She lived in the primary living complex within the tower. She took the elevator down over 100 more floors, then rode the mag-lev to her apartment. It was little more than a collapsible bed, a small kitchen, and a bathroom. After visiting with her faithful toilet, Sophie collapsed onto her bed and loaded up Wonderland. Generally, she would unwind by playing something violent and action heavy, but today, that didn't seem very appealing. Instead, she loaded into an ecology simulation, where she could explore the wilderness and build a peaceful

mountainside cottage. It wasn't long before she had completely forgotten about her encounter.

A couple of hours into her session, she had completed her fantasy cabin. She took a seat on the porch overlooking the valley below and spawned a pipe filled with a substance simulating the appearance of cannabis, but with effects from a range of different drugs curated by Sophie. The intensity was controlled by how long she burned the substance, and today, the flame was particularly heavy. Within seconds of taking the first puff, Sophie felt weightless, and the vibrant intensity of colors in this world compelled her to giggle uncontrollably. It was a level of happiness that she only felt in one place in the real world. Just as she was thinking about her, Sophie received a message.

>V: Hey. You available?

Sophie smiled. Simply seeing a message from Violet made her feel butterflies, a feeling that was magnified by the digital drugs she was enjoying. Sophie went to reply, but hesitated. It was rare that Violet would contact Sophie at all while her wife was planetside. The prospect that this was an errant booty call was seeming less likely by the second. Sophie responded.

>S: Yeah Whatsup?

>V: She isn't home yet, but she hasn't contacted or responded to me since yesterday.

The uneasy feeling grew into alarm bells in Sophie's head over the course of her reading the message. She wasn't entirely sure whether it was a hallucination, so she stumbled through her interface menu and disabled the drug simulation. In a jarring instant, she was no longer impaired and re-read the message. The alarm bells didn't go away. Sophie wanted to appease her by telling her that she saw Misty just a few hours ago, but immediately realized that was a bad idea.

>S: Maybe she's trying to surprise you?

>V: Doubt it.

>V: The last time she surprised me, I nearly divorced her.

>S: I'm sure she's fine

>S: And I'm always here if you need anything ♥

>V: (...)

Sophie watched Violet start typing, then stop, then start again several times before receiving the next message.

>V: Could you come by?

>S: You sure that's a good idea?

>V: I don't know.

>V: I'm just getting in my head about it

>V: And there was some heavy stuff at work

>V: I just need to be with somebody rn.

>V: Please?

The level of vulnerability that Violet was displaying was

something that Sophie had never seen before. Sophie didn't know what else she could say, except

>S: Sure thing

>S: Be there soon

>S: ♥♥

Sophie pulled herself out of Wonderland and back into the real world. She stood up and was out the door in seconds and was in a taxi and on her way out of the tower in minutes. She was racking her brain, thinking about how off the situation seemed. She toiled over whether this was important enough to contact the Mirror again, even if it wasn't quite the situation she had laid out. Ultimately, she decided to err on the side of caution. She ran the Mirror's new script.

"Are you in immediate danger?" The Mirror's voice came in less than a second, along with a prompt that would allow Sophie to affirm silently, should she have needed to.

"Not at the moment, no." Sophie replied.

"Did you encounter Misty again? I don't see her."

"Not exactly. In fact, it's kindof the opposite. Violet contacted me a few minutes ago, saying that she hasn't heard from Misty in over a day."

"Hmm... It's interesting that you say that. But that seems like information that could have waited until your check in at home base tomorrow."

"Violet also asked me to go back to her place. It seems very fucky to me, so I thought you'd want to ride along just in case." Sophie said. "What's interesting about what I said?"

"Well, I've been monitoring Misty's movements since your encounter with her. Or, I've been trying to. I lost her as soon as she left the coffee shop, and I could see her here and there throughout the city using facial recognition, which never provided a hundred percent match. I even ran facial recognition on the video from your eyes, and it only came out as a sixty-four percent match to Misty Hodges."

"That seems low."

"It does. Is it possible that you weren't even speaking to Misty Hodges at all?"

"I... suppose so. I mean, I haven't actually met her before, but I'm pretty familiar with her image and profile. It looked a hell of a lot like her."

"Haven't you ever heard of a long-lost twin?" If the Mirror was emotionally capable of laughter, this is where Sophie would have heard it. "Who am I kidding, of course you have."

"That's low, Mirror."

"Feel free to send a complaint up the ladder."

"Okay, so it may not have been Misty that spoke with me today. In a way, that makes me feel a little better. But the question remains. Violet said she was missing, so... where is

Misty?"

"I don't know. She was on the transport manifest, but otherwise, her interface has been offline for 27 hours now." There was a quiet pause as the Mirror browsed for more information. Sophie did much the same, but lacking the online connections that the Mirror had, she was relegated to Misty's intelligence profile. "Tell me more about Violet's messages to you."

"Go see for yourself." Sophie said, knowing the Mirror likely already had access. "The last few messages are the equivalent to a wall of text from this woman. She's insanely direct and short spoken over message. You'd think you were texting a psychopath."

"Yeah, you're not kidding." The Mirror said. Sophie knew she was looking through some of their previous messages, and just as Sophie was about to give a warning, the Mirror interjected. "Whoa, Nelly!"

"Those photos aren't for you, Mirror..."

"No. No they are not." The Mirror said. There was a long pause, and Sophie was growing more irritated, knowing the Mirror was still scrolling up. "However, I would argue that it's part of my job to monitor the communications of my operatives."

"I'm pretty sure your job is just to communicate with MI. I don't think you're supposed to be doing intel at all."

"Do you really think I get paid to just sit here day in and day out just waiting for daddy's phone call?"

"Yes. I do."

"I hate to break it to you, but it's not nearly as glamorous. In fact, I get a lot more orders than you do."

"Fine." Sophie said, sensing that the Mirror was about to start in on a lecture. "Just try not to linger on my personal stuff. It's creepy."

"Don't worry, you're not my type."

During the course of their conversation, the taxi made it's way to the Hodges' Estate.

"Whoa, there's a pretty big black spot on the network around here." The Mirror said.

"Shit." Sophie shook her head. "Violet's entire house has an air gapped network. I won't have net access while I'm inside."

"Dammit. Well, I won't be much help to you while you're inside. Just, uhh... talk to Violet, find out what's going on, and make an excuse to go outside at some point, maybe just to help her get some fresh air or something. If you don't contact me within 10 minutes after you step through the door, I'm going to have to contact home base and request an extraction. We really don't need that kind of attention right now."

"Copy that." Sophie said. The vehicle had already driven

much closer to the house than Sophie was usually comfortable with, but she still ended the ride before making it to the door.

Sophie continued on foot up the winding path, and when the entrance to the home came into view, Sophie noticed that the doors were already open. Knowing that Violet was not one to be slapdash about personal security, Sophie slowed her approach and inspected the doors more closely, finding the latches to have been broken open. As soon as she noticed it, so did the Mirror.

"Actually, I'm calling MI right now. Find some cover outside and wait for orders. The next packet is in 6 minutes."

Sophie made no sound but made an affirmative gesture. As she started to retreat to the edge of the forest, Sophie noticed the hanging blinders moving in a nearby window, then heard an ear shattering scream cut short, coming from within the house. Sophie froze for a moment, then began to sprint toward the entrance.

"Sophie?" The Mirror shouted. Sophie continued running. "Sophie stop! That's an or-" The Mirror was cut off by digital artifacting and silence as Sophie crossed the threshold into the house. After passing the foyer, she turned into the living room to see Violet standing near the center of the room wearing a black nightgown.

"Violet...?" Sophie said. Violet turned toward her. She had a look of confusion and absolute terror on her face, and a dark

red line across her throat. She took a step towards Sophie and tried to call out to her, but a torrent of blood began pouring out her neck and mouth. She stumbled with the first step, and Sophie rushed in to catch her. She wrapped her arms around the bloodied woman and gently tried to bring her to the ground.

That's when she noticed the figure standing in the corner of the room. It was Misty, or not-Misty, the same one that Sophie had encountered earlier in the day. She was standing completely nude, and she was still bearing that unnerving, and considering current context, inhuman smile. Misty was a direct threat, and as she was trained to do, Sophie tried to rise to her feet and activated both of her concealed blades, but before she could lunge at the threat, she felt Violet pull her back down in a desperate attempt to hold on to her. Sophie looked back down at her. The woman she loved was crying profusely, and her screams came as a muffled gurgle. She looked at Sophie as if she could do something, anything to help.

Sophie looked back at Misty to find that she was gone. She looked in every direction, and again started to get up, but Violet grabbed the sides of her face and guided her gaze back to meet hers. As Sophie thought about the situation, her eyes began to well up. She was at a complete loss for options. All she could do was hold Violet as she began to convulse, and watch as the life left her eyes.

Tears fell from Sophie's eyes and mixed with the blood that was now covering them both. She sat there, motionless, staring into the eyes of a corpse until a loud boom rattled the entire house. It was the sound of an Emergency OTech Transport arriving in the atmosphere above her location. As much as Sophie wanted to stay with Violet, to die with her, Sophie's well-honed flight response kicked in. She slid out from under Violet's body and stood up. As she did, she scanned her immediate surroundings again, taking just a few seconds to look again for Misty, but she came up empty, and now she could hear the approaching chatter of medics and a security team rappelling down to the house.

Before they could surround her, Sophie sprinted out the front entrance. As soon as she was visible from the sky, Sophie heard one of the medics call out to her.

"Hey, you! Stop!" He yelled. Simultaneously, Sophie heard the Mirror screeching back into her head.

"Sophie?! What the fuck just happened?!" The mirror shouted. Sophie didn't respond, she just continued sprinting toward the forest, then a moment later, she heard the distinct crack of bullets flying in her direction. She weaved through the trees until she was sure the security team had lost their line of site. She took shelter behind a large tree to respond to the Mirror who was still barking in her ear. "Is that gunfire?!"

You're covered in blood! What in the hell happened in there?!"

"Violet's dead..." Sophie spoke low.

"Excuse me?! Repeat fucking last!"

"Violet Hodges is dead!" Sophie shouted through gritted teeth, trying to maintain her fragile concealment. "She was killed by Misty Hodges!" Her voice broke, only barely able to get the message across. "Fuck!"

"Fuck is right! They must have captured your image as you left, they could be tracking you any second. I'm bricking your wireless firmware. Get to the safehouse within 8 hours for extraction. Otherwise, consider yourself burned." The Mirror waited a moment for Sophie's response, which came as a barely intelligible, frustrated grunt. "Good luck, Sophie." The Mirror said, then the connection was cut, and Sophie's vision was suddenly filled with network connection errors.

Sophie threw her head back against the tree with another expletive. She quickly wiped her tears away and took a deep breath, then continued sprinting into the dense forest.

Chapter Four

It was a dream come true, and not just for Sarah. For 40 years, the existence of intelligent extraterrestrial life was a known fact. However, it had also been 40 years since even a shred of evidence had been discovered. The entire scientific community throughout the galaxy was chomping at the bit as soon as the news broke. Had administration not kept the location a secret, the sites would have already been inundated with millions. Everybody from respected scientists, to journalists, to tourists, thrill-seekers, and conspiracy nutjobs. Everybody and their mother wanted to be part of this story.

Sarah was glad to be one of a handful of scientists to be trusted to head an expedition, but she was also starting to feel overwhelmed by the pressure that was suddenly on her shoulders. After the initial public briefing, Sarah was pulled into a smaller conference, where she was briefed on the atmospheric and environmental conditions.

The structure was one of several on the planet in a vast desert band that covered all land within 60 degrees of the equator. There was little trace of biological life within that band, but the poles were thick jungles of pitch-black flora. There were oceans as well, covering nearly 40 percent of the planets surface. The water appeared black as well, possibly due

to a large quantity of algae or bacteria.

The atmosphere did contain a breathable level of oxygen, but all expeditions were still required to wear environment suits until an extensive microbial survey could be completed, and any necessary inoculations could be developed and administered.

Sarah paid extra attention to the safety briefing. All groups were going to be accompanied by a pair of highly trained, mechanically augmented personnel. It was standard fare for any planetside expeditions for years now, but there were still scattered grumbles from scientists that opposed the measure. Sarah had some reservations about including military on scientific expeditions, but she was also part of the reason why the measure was created in the first place.

Also assigned to her team were a xenobiologist and an exogeologist, neither of whom Sarah recognized, though she was happy to see that they were both young doctors with impressive CV's, even if the geologist did have Persephone as their alma mater. After all of the briefings were completed and the itinerary written, Sarah still had a few hours left to gather anything she felt that she needed. Once she arrived at her domicile, she began pacing her home nervously. She grabbed a dusty travel bag from her closet and began packing things.

"I don't think you'll really need those." Hugo said as

Sarah grabbed a few pairs of pants. Sarah looked at him, then put the pants back in their drawer. She moved into the bathroom and started collecting toiletries. "I don't believe you'll be able to use those in your suit." Hugo said. Sarah put the items back in a huff. She was starting to get annoyed. "To be honest, I don't think you'll need to bring anything more than your daily items."

Sarah was restless but didn't know what to do. She sat down on her bed and crossed her arms. Hugo knew the body language. He was designed to identify it and do what he could to help. He sat on the mattress next to her and placed a hand on her back.

"You still have a few hours before the transport leaves. Why don't you lay back and relax for a little while?" Hugo's words were followed by a tensioned sigh from Sarah. She followed his instruction and pulled herself to comfortably lay on the bed. Hugo laid next to her, wrapping an arm over her belly. "What's got you so stressed? Isn't this something you've been looking forward to?" Hugo asked.

"It is... I just... haven't been on an expedition for a while." Sarah weaved her fingers in with Hugo's.

"It will be like riding a bike, for sure."

"I'm not so sure..." Thoughts were running through Sarah's head.

It didn't seem like she was going to sleep, so Hugo decided

to try another method of stress relief. Sarah felt his fingers pop and extend, then start to slither around and slip under her garments. Sarah, surprisingly, slapped his hand away and jumped out of bed away from him.

"No! Stop!" Sarah said. Hugo appeared shocked. He was no longer touching her, but he could tell that she was shaking.

"I don't understand, what's wrong?" Hugo said. "You've never pulled away from me like that before."

Sarah paused, unsure of how to respond. She could barely even look at Hugo. She again began to pace, and she was now nervously biting her thumbnail. Hugo remained on the bed in silence, giving Sarah an opportunity to express herself in her own time.

"The last time I was on an expedition... well, you know what happened, right?" Sarah asked.

"I... well, Hugo, passed away during your last expedition, correct?"

"Yes... to put it mildly." Sarah took a deep breath, leaning back against a wall and looking at her feet. "I uh... watched... as Hugo was torn apart by an alien creature." Chills ran down Sarah's spine as she recalled it.

"I'm... sorry to hear that. Though, I am surprised that those details aren't available to me."

"Yeah... After it happened, I found myself re-watching the

video over and over until it was affecting my work, and my colleagues and psychiatrist insisted that I delete it, and everything related to it."

"Ah, I understand. I think that was a good move."

"I agree. I think I've been doing pretty good suppressing it, but unfortunately, it's not possible to erase the event from my brain. Now, with a new expedition falling in my lap, I feel like it's all coming back." As Sarah spoke, Hugo slowly approached her and held her hand, gently guiding her back to sit on the bed.

"I don't know if this will provide any solace, but I can assure you that it won't happen again." Hugo said. Sarah laughed.

"Yeah. With what we know about the planet, and with new safety procedures put in place since, every reasonable part of me says that this expedition will be safe. I just can't shake the feeling."

"That anxiety and fear that you are feeling is a fear of the unknown. It will give you a heightened awareness of your surroundings. If you go into that structure and don't feel fear, then you might be suicidal, or have some other emotional disorder."

"I suppose that helps." Sarah gripped Hugo's hand and smiled at him.

"I find it interesting that you developed a sexual attraction to alien forms."

"Well, that... It's not really new. And I imagine it's pretty common too since first contact. Even before then, tentacles were a popular fetish. I think that 'fear of the unknown' that you mentioned can help to enhance the pleasure."

"I see. I understand why you may not be interested in doing that right now. Perhaps after the first expedition, when we have determined the structures are as lifeless as they appear, you might be interested again?" Hugo said with a smile.

"Perhaps..." Sarah responded, mirroring his expression.

"Until then, maybe you'd like to relieve your stress the 'old fashioned' way?"

"Oh yeah?" Sarah said with a laugh. She wanted to argue with him that having sex with an AI driven digital simulation wasn't exactly 'old fashioned', but she held her tongue. Instead, she leaned in and gave him a short kiss. "How about we just take a nice, comfortable nap?"

"Sure thing!" Hugo agreed without hesitation.

After cuddling up on the bed, Sarah relaxed and closed her eyes. Hugo's grip on her was gentle. The slightly irregular pattern in his breathing drew Sarah's focus whenever the fears and memories threatened to fill her mind. Hugo monitored her sleeping pattern closely, and after a full cycle, brought her

back to consciousness.

Ultimately, Sarah didn't pack anything except for a mystery lunch that Hugo whipped up while she was sleeping. They arrived at the station docks with time to spare before the jump. She was still nervous, and the feeling only continued to grow as the jump drew closer, but she did feel that the conversation and nap with Hugo helped ease her tension tremendously. Beyond that, there was an excitement growing. She wanted to be ready as soon as they arrived, so she was happy to see that the OTech transport was already docked and taking on passengers.

The transport was a specialty design, intended to double as a temporary expedition base while a more permanent one could be raised on-site. After stepping through the airlock, Sarah was guided to the locker room. She found a locker with her name on it and found an environment suit inside, just her size. She left her things in the locker and pulled on as much of the suit as she could before Hugo had to remind her that he couldn't help button her up.

Sarah didn't like that the suits couldn't be fully closed by the user. She understood that it was by design, but the last time she wore one, her husband was there to help her into it. Now, she had to rely on a stranger. She took her helmet and walked to the ready room. It was already bustling with several teams of scientists bunched up in small groups, and a line of

much larger personnel standing neatly near the airlocks. They were clearly not scientists. Sarah wasn't sure they were even human, appearing much more like large bipedal combat drones.

She looked around the room to find her own team. Hugo pointed them out, though he didn't need to as they were waiving to get her attention. Sarah gave them a polite wave back and approached.

"Greetings, Dr. Donner!" The exogeologist said as he stepped up and presented his hand with nervous excitement. Sarah was thankful for his profile appearing in her vision.

"Dr. Valentine!" Sarah said, shaking his hand after shuffling her helmet in her arms. "It's a pleasure to meet you!"

"Likewise! I've been following your work for a few years now. I'm excited to be working alongside you!"

"A few years, huh? I haven't really done anything of note for a while."

"You wrote a paper on the mega-insectoid colonies in Epsilon Cygni."

"It was more of a blog post... But thank you!" Sarah said with a laugh. "I concluded that I didn't really have the expertise necessary to say much about them." Sarah then motioned to her helmet, and Dr. Valentine moved behind her to assist. After she slipped the helmet over her head, she looked at the xenobiologist, who was patiently waiting for the right moment to

introduce herself. Sarah continued. "In fact, I think Dr. Matanzas here is much more qualified to speak on them than myself."

"You flatter me." The woman said with a flat tone and a gentle smile. She rose to her feet and shook Sarah's hand. "We were actually just discussing that a moment ago. I'd be glad to discuss at length sometime, but honestly, I prefer to peek through the lens of non-biology fields such as yours."

With the group's assistance, Sarah was able to button up quickly, and surprisingly comfortably for being assisted by complete strangers. Sarah didn't care that Matanzas was technically speaking Spanish, as they were all speaking Sarah's first language, Science. Like children talking about their favorite cartoons, the three began discussing the mega-insectoids, completely forgetting about the expedition they were minutes from embarking on until an old, rugged man with heavy cybernetics and a deep scowl called out to the bustling crowd of scientists.

"Attention!" He yelled, as if he were speaking to a room full of soldiers. The scientists didn't respond as quickly, but still turned to listen. "In a few minutes, we will arrive in orbit above our destination, then scout out a few locations before landing and setting up camp at the base of one of the structures. Each team will be assigned two security officers."

The man motioned toward the line of walking tanks standing along the side of the room. "For your safety, remain within contact range of security at all times."

The man waived his hand, sending the security assignments to each of the team leaders, then walked away from the podium without another word. Sarah read off the names of the officers assigned to them.

"Lieutenants Christina 'Jax' Jackson and Geoffrey Horner." As Sarah said it, she forwarded the info to her team. They were thankful to also have the two officers highlighted, as they would not have been able to identify and differentiate them otherwise. "At least they aren't bots. I would have thought they'd just give us a couple of security drones." After Sarah spoke, she saw Hugo roll his eyes at her.

"I dunno, there's something to be said about a drone's reaction time, accuracy, and target identification." Valentine said. Hugo raised an eyebrow and pointed at him.

"I like this guy." Hugo said, making Sarah laugh. Valentine noticed.

"I uh... wasn't kidding. A computer's reaction time is orders of magnitude faster than any human's."

"I know, sorry. My digital companion just said something funny." Sarah said. Both of her teammates gave her a blank look that made her begin to blush. "I... have a companion with me

pretty much all the time. Sometimes I forget that I'm the only one that can see him. I hope you don't mind..."

"Oh, of course not! I've been known to take advantage of a companion from time to time." Matanzas said with a straight face, not immediately recognizing the sexual connotations of her own words.

"I wouldn't mind if you wanted to share him." Valentine said, but when he remembered how most people used their companions, he continued. "Just as long as he's not a scantily clad himbo or something..."

"No! No it's nothing like that!" Sarah said with a nervous chuckle. "He's mostly around to help with research and ease my anxiety."

As soon as Sarah offered to share Hugo, it was accepted by both parties. He materialized in their vision and a sigh of relieve washed over them as they saw that he wasn't a hypersexualized, mostly nude plaything. As they both accepted tactile feedback, Hugo offered his hand.

"Greetings, I am Hugo." He said. He shook Valentines hand first, and when Matanzas followed suit, she paused while holding his grip.

"Hugo... Chanterelle?" She asked.

"I would say 'the one and the same' but that's not exactly true..." Hugo said. Matanzas raised an eyebrow when she looked

back at Sarah. Valentine began to recognize him as well.

"Your companion is based on...-" Matanzas started to speak, but Sarah finished her sentence.

"My late husband... yes."

"Oh, that makes more sense." Valentine said. "For a second I thought you were into..." He paused, reconsidering his thought process. "I'm sorry for your loss." Valentine said with Matanzas mirrored his sentiment.

"It's okay, I appreciate it."

The conversation was interrupted by a countdown appearing on the main display at the front of the room. Sarah's tension grew as the countdown grew closer to zero, but she was already feeling comforted by the presence of her new team. Even so, Sarah had to take a seat in the nearest chair, and gripped the arms with white knuckles.

The transport shut its' apertures and cleared the dock. The screen displayed a beautiful view of the Milky Way behind the countdown. Once the timer reached zero, the view instantly changed to that of a bright red planet with black oceans from orbit. The room was speechless, even though it was virtually identical to the view they had received from the probe. In fact, there was nothing that indicated that they had even moved beyond the change in the display. Still, the silence in the room was palpable until a few scientists moved closer to the display and

started discussing what they were seeing.

From orbit, through a digital display, the structures were already visible as conspicuous black spots against the deep red color of the land. The transport moved in towards one of the planet's frozen poles and into the atmosphere without resistance. The room was already bustling with scientists already getting to work. A meteorologist shared live atmospheric readings to the group as he analyzed them. An oxygen rich atmosphere was met by a few excited cheers from some of the scientists who hadn't seen a real sky in years. They knew it would still be a little while before they knew if they could safely exit their environment suits, but the microbiologists were already at work scanning for potentially hazardous airborne organics. A botanist also joined the fervor as they flew over thick, black forests. Dr. Matanzas eyes lit up with images of the exotic plant life.

Along with the virtual displays being shared by everyone, a real time map of the planet's surface appeared in the center of the room and quickly began to fill with the pins of future expedition location requests. Soon, the forest below gave way to an expansive deep red desert. The room watched in awe as the black monolith over the horizon continued to grow as they approached. Before long, the structure was encompassing the entire view area of the display. Just as everyone was getting

worried that they were about to collide with the object, the transport began to circle it, gradually decreasing in altitude.

The structure was generally hexagonal in shape, but had many subdivisions, with the hexagonal shape and orientation remaining a primary feature down to minute details in a recursive design. There were apertures and separations in the structure all over the place, creating smaller structures jutting out or digging into the larger form. As the transport came around, the expedition map in the center of the room displayed the base of the structure with several points already marked as recommended primary base locations. The final location was put up to a vote, with Sarah's team having a heavier weight, as they were the only team allowed inside the structure on the first expedition.

Naturally, Sarah's team, and many of their colleagues, opted for the location that was closest to the largest ground accessible aperture, what the group decided was the 'front' of the building. Once a brief voting period ended, the votes were tallied, and the transport approached the selected location. All the scientists bunched up at the briefing room door and became immediately frustrated when they had to wait as the security team made their way out first in annoyingly ordinary fashion. Once out the door, security lined up at each of the airlocks, with the disorderly crowd of anxious scientists behind them.

The transport came to a stop, hovering less than a meter from the ground, then the smooth outer surface of the transport was broken by an opening aperture revealing the airlocks outer doors and extending ramps that smoothly sank into the soft sand of the alien world. After the groups finished the airlock exit procedure, the outer doors opened, and security exited with their weapons ready. The scientists were held back like a pack of hungry dogs ready to be released. Once security formed a perimeter around the landing site, the scientists were free to leave the transport.

As they dispersed onto the sand and rock, most were satisfied to sit directly on the ground and pull out their equipment to start working. Some paced the grounds, impatiently waiting for the technicians and automated machines to start setting up camp so they could do their own work. Sarah and her team approached the two security officers closest to the towering structure, the ones that were assigned to them.

"Dr. Donner." Said a male voice coming from one of the large metal humanoids. Sarah wouldn't have been able to tell them apart were it not for her interface giving him a nametag.

"Lieutenant Horner, it's a pleasure to meet you." Sarah said, holding out her hand. Horner just looked at it.

"We don't shake hands with meat." Said the other suit of armor, Jax. Her tone seemed hostile, but there was no facial

expression or body language to compare it to. Sarah just put her hand down with a nervous laugh.

"Don't mind her," Horner said, "she's just frustrated that there's probably nothing to shoot at here. Though she's not wrong; our arms aren't really built to shake hands. We could easily crush your hand or pull your arm out of its socket. though I can offer you a finger..."

Horner extended his index finger toward Sarah. It was large enough that Sarah could barely fit her whole hand around it. She felt like a child as she shook it, then he offered it to Matanzas who felt much the same. Valentine wasn't even interested, as he was already in the sand collecting samples and doing surface analysis. Still, Horner's greeting was a generally nice gesture that Jax refused to follow.

"So, are you guys ready to go?" Horner said.

Sarah froze at the question. She looked up at the structure behind Horner. It was so tall that the planet's atmosphere obscured the top edge. She nearly lost her balance as she looked up at it. She felt Hugo grip her shoulder, stopping her from shaking. She wasn't ready.

"As ready as we're going to be." Matanzas said.

"Alright. Stay within 20 meters and line of sight of us at all times. Jax has permission to yell at you if you don't." Horner said, raising his voice to catch Valentine's attention.

The three scientists fell in line quickly as they moved to the structure. From the briefing room, the landing site looked to be directly at the base of the structure, but once they were on the ground and no longer looking at a two-dimensional image, it seemed to be a lot further, and much, much bigger. Their trek was over a kilometer long and through soft sand. By the time they had reached the structure, the scientists were already winded.

They stopped at a corner next to the massive entrance into the structure. There was a long downward slope in the sand that descended into complete darkness. Sarah and Valentine pulled out their instruments. Valentine plunged a seismic imaging stake into the ground and activated it, while Sarah stepped over to the nearest wall. Already, she could tell that the base design was entirely planar with perfect angles down to the finest detail. She also noticed a modular design seemingly imprinted into the primary material, where other objects were embedded. The main structure, inside and out, looked as if it had been built yesterday. There was no weathering to be seen, but anything that wasn't the same material as the walls were corroded, petrified, or otherwise broken down into dust.

Sarah was hesitant to touch it. She had seen too many movies where the supposedly highly intelligent scientist touches a seemingly innocuous alien object and something terrible

happens. In fact, she had seen it before with her own two eyes. Now, she was facing the unknown again, and her fear was like a forcefield preventing her from touching the object. She looked around at the rest of the team. They were all working dutifully, including security, who were orbiting around the group constantly scanning for potential threats. The only one who was looking at Sarah was Hugo.

"What do you think will happen when you touch it?" He asked.

"I don't know... Judging by the amount of sand that's spilling into the structure and the weathering on these other materials, it looks like it's been here for a very long time. My analytical mind says that nothing will happen, *probably*. And that 'probably' part is what's hanging me up."

"Okay. What do you think is the worst thing that can happen?"

"Hmmm..." Sarah thought for a moment. "Touching it will activate some weapon that wipes out all complex biological life in the universe."

"That does sound pretty bad, but in that case, I think you'd all be dead and there wouldn't be anything to worry about." Hugo's response made Sarah laugh. He continued. "The second worst thing I can think of would be that the structure comes to life and tries to kill you, but in that scenario, I'd

say it's better to be at the entrance than deep within it, am I right?"

The macabre conversation somehow brought comfort to Sarah. She pressed her hand against the black material, and when nothing appeared to happen after several seconds, Sarah let out a relieved sigh. She grabbed a device strapped to her hip, a spectroscopic analyzer, and pressed the end against the wall. After a few seconds, a readout of the molecular structure of the wall appeared on her interface. The results verified the theories from the initial drone footage. Aside from some minor differences in trace elements used, the molecular structure of the substance was nearly identical to that of the Plasteel gifted to humanity by the Observers.

Sarah was ecstatic with the information. Of course, it would be a while before someone would be able to gather a sample and do a proper analysis, but every bit of evidence that showed this structure is of intelligent alien origin made the butterflies flutter in Sarah's stomach. She shared the findings with her team and the rest of the camp while they were still in radio contact. She received several thumbs up and smiling emojis as a response. She scanned a few other spots on the wall before she was ready to move on. She re-joined her team just as Valentine was also finishing with his own scans.

"Well, it's definitely Plasteel, or really close to it."

Sarah said. "But it has some minor differences. It's got some impurities, or maybe they strengthen the material, or have some other intended effect."

"The structure seems to extend for miles into the ground," Valentine chimed in, "and with the amount of sand that's built up here at the entrance, I'd say it hasn't been maintained for... maybe hundreds of thousands of years. It also looks like there's some non-plasteel structures, and a lot of organic compounds deep below the sand. Base camp is confirming it too, looks like the planet experienced massive ecological devastation, if it wasn't already clear from orbit."

"Yeah..." Sarah chuckled. "I did already guess that part. How about you, Dr. Matanzas?"

"I haven't seen anything yet. Some of Dr. Valentines scans show what might could be fossilized, or mummified remains, but there isn't enough detail to get a guess of their physiology. If we go further into the structure, depending on how well ventilated it is, we might find some more well preserved remains."

"So, you definitely haven't seen anything... living...?" Sarah asked. Horner responded before Matanzas could.

"Not even a little bit, to Jax's dismay, I'm sure." Horner said. If Jax had facial muscles, she would have given Horner a look that could kill.

"Yeah. Not even any cellular life." Matanzas said. "And I don't think that's going to change as we go inside."

Sarah felt a moment of relief, but the pitch-black depths into the structure were still imposing. The team waited for direction.

"Alright, let's go." Sarah said.

The team moved forward and down the sloping sand. Gradually, the darkness grew. By the time they stepped off the sand and onto solid ground, they could barely see anything. The black color of the walls and floor meant that the lights from their suits were nearly useless. The team had to switch their vision to reflective imaging to make out the complexities of the internal structure. As they continued, Sarah watched her wireless connection strength with the expedition base drop to zero. She was completely cut off, and was now entirely reliant on escorts that she had only just met. It wasn't a great feeling.

"Still nothing?" Sarah asked.

"Not really." Matanzas replied. "I mean, there's a few spots on the floor around us that look like they could be the long dead remains of something, but after 10,000 plus years of decay, there's not a whole lot I can do to verify it. What about you? What can you tell us from the architecture of this place?"

Sarah paused to take in the sight. They were still in the

large corridor that was the entry point of the structure. The corridor was over a kilometer wide, several km tall, and even deeper still. There were many ramps built into the walls of the corridor, each one leading to a substructure or another corridor branching off the main path.

"From what I can gather, it seems the society was very technically oriented. It doesn't seem as though they built much decoration into the Plasteel, possibly suggesting that they were a very utilitarian society. Though, perhaps any decoration could be on tapestries or other materials that faded with time."

"With the red star and black algae and flora we've seen," Dr. Matanzas said, "it seems that most life on this planet is fond of the infra-red spectrum, which could also explain the black material, but even switching to IR, I don't see any markings or decorations. The creatures may not have vision at all."

"The presence of a flat ground with most apertures accessible by ramp suggests that they were primarily ground dwelling creatures, but there are some substructures up higher that look like they could have been docks for larger vehicles."

The team continued to converse and discuss their findings as they found them, while heading deeper into the megastructure. Security didn't chime in directly, but Sarah could tell they were having their own conversations by the subtle head bobs and

body language they used between the two of them. The team spent hours walking further in until they found the end of the entry corridor and had to finally break off into one of the substructures. The space was much more confined, but still comfortably open, if dark. The smaller corridors and rooms fit together nicely, but also turned into a more mazelike path. Sarah kept feeling as though they were going to get lost, and just as the fear of being entombed in an alien environment started to rise in her, she was reminded by Hugo that their progress was being mapped in real-time, and finding their way out was as simple as following a proverbial exit sign.

The deeper they went, the less eroded objects they were able to find until they started finding non-plasteel artifacts that were mostly intact. The team refrained from touching any of the objects directly, opting instead for photogrammetric scans, and marking them for recovery later. They knew if they stopped moving and inspected each object they were interested in, it would effectively stop their progress into the structure.

They did their best to avoid looking at the rooms and objects with a homocentric mindset, but some of the locations were starting to look more and more like places they recognized. The physical cohesion of the objects and surfaces went up, while the presence of oxygen in the atmosphere decreased as they went further into the depths. After moving their way through what

appeared to be a large mess hall, they moved down an adjoining corridor with dozens of individual rooms connected to it. The team checked a few of the rooms together, finding the layout near identical for each one. After becoming comfortable with the pattern they were seeing, the team split up so they could more quickly investigate and map the rooms. Soon afterward, the voice of Jax echoed through the corridor.

"Hey, Meat! I've got something for you!" She yelled.

The rest of the team followed Jax's path into the room she was occupying. Against one of the walls, on top of a wide raised surface lay a pile of dust, only barely holding a shape. For the most part, it was desiccated so extensively that it was unrecognizable except for a small portion to one side that caused the scientists to gasp.

"Is that...?" Sarah began but decided to let the biologist make her assessment first. Dr. Matanzas chimed in.

"That's bone structure! It could be a cranium!" She said with excitement in her voice. She reached out to grab it like an overzealous child, but her training kicked in, and she pulled her hand away. "Don't touch it," she said, mostly to herself, "it'll probably just crumble to dust. Don't even breathe on it."

Even though the scientists were wearing full environment suits, and their escorts didn't even have lungs, everyone still held their breath as Matanzas scanned the remains. Sarah and

Valentine watched as a 3D representation of the remains formed in their vision. They both fervently looked around the scan, even though neither of them could make heads or tails of what looked like a heap of dust to them. When Matanzas was satisfied with the fidelity of her scan, she joined in.

“So, I feel pretty confident that this part here is bone.” As she spoke, the parts of the scan she touched were highlighted in Sarah and Valentine’s vision. “Maybe not a cranium, but it could be a beak. Other than that, there really doesn’t appear to be much in the way of bones at all. Most of the dust seems like it could have been from a fabric or organic tissue. What we have here, it seems, is an invertebrate, possibly something like a cephalopod back on Old Earth.”

All three of the scientists were nearly giggling at the information, each of them already thinking of ways they could attach their names to the discovery. If Jax had eyes, she would have rolled them before making her way back into the corridor and continuing onward. Horner stepped outside of the room as well to stand guard. He was also interested in the discovery but felt the room to be a little too cramped for his 3-meter stature.

“I don’t imagine you can determine a cause of death from this, can you?” Valentine asked.

“No, not with the equipment I have now, at least not

without any kind of certainty, but I think we can guess.”

Matanzas said.

“The layout of these rooms and the larger chamber before makes me think that this could be a dormitory, or a barracks.”

Sarah pulled up a map of what they had seen so far.

“Or maybe it’s an infirmary?” Valentine asked.

“Yeah, I suppose that’s a sensible place to put someone who’s dying. If it is an infirmary, I think we’ll likely find more bodies if we press on.” Sarah said, and both Matanzas and Valentine gestured in agreement. They continued moving as they conversed.

“I already mentioned ecological destruction earlier... I’d say these structures could have been Arks that they were building in preparation for the change in the climate, but something else happened, preventing them from sealing the doors or leaving, if these things are massive ships like I suspect.” Valentine said.

The scientists’ conversation continued for several more minutes. There was obviously no carrier signal this far into the structure, but even their short range digital communication was hindered by the species insistence on using Plasteel for every single interior wall. Sarah, in particular, first thought that it was a rookie design mistake, but remained open to the possibility that the species wasn’t reliant on radio

communication. Instead, the science team opted to yell their conversation as they split up to continue their search.

Before long, just as they had suspected, they were able to confirm increasingly more remains. Within an hour after the first discovery, they had already collectively scanned over two dozen bodies. The more data they had; the more accurate Hugo's mock-up became. They were very reminiscent of cephalopods with 6 digits. 'Hexapod' was the word they grabbed onto to describe the creature. Hugo's real scale representation had the tentacles holding its shapely head up to appear a bit taller than Sarah. It had large eyes as black as its skin. A recognizable feeling was growing inside Sarah as the reality of the creature started to sink in. It wasn't a good feeling.

Sarah generally liked when her imagination got the better of her, especially with Hugo doing what he could to make those imaginings into relative reality. She would have preferred to have similar imaginings with the Hexapod, and knew Hugo was likely already working on something, but Sarah's brain instead decided to focus on her fears.

She imagined the creature lurking in the darkness, a dark so black that her cybernetically enhanced vision could barely penetrate it. She decided to remove the Hexapods image from her vision, but just as she did, she started hearing a faint sound coming from down the hallway, in the direction they were coming

from. The sound gradually grew louder. When both Matanzas and Horner turned toward the noise, Sarah knew she wasn't hallucinating, to her chagrin.

"Possible Contact, 6 O'Clock!" Horner shouted, taking a defensive stance between the scientists and the sound. Sarah was shoved to the side as Jax rushed down the hallway to stand next to Horner.

There was something large and loud coming through the complex directly toward them. The entire group held their breath, and those that had eyelids were squinting as hard as they could in an effort to cut through the darkness. The clatter continued to rise as the blood drained from Sarah's face. She was shaking uncontrollably. She wondered if she needed to run, whether her body would even respond. As the team watched with bated breath, a blinding light came from the direction of the sound as something stepped into the corridor.

"Don't move!" Horner shouted, his speakers at full volume and focused on the point of light. The sound was loud enough to shake the dust off the walls and floor, but before the wave of sound could hit the source of the light, another authoritative voice came over the radio.

"First Expedition Science Team, stay where you are!" Said the male voice. His voice was accompanied by obnoxious flashing banners in the team's vision that mirrored what the man was

saying. "This is a policing action by Expedition Security on the orders of the Apollon Security Commission."

Both Horner and Jax relaxed their weapon arms, with Horner giving a relieved sigh. He continued speaking with the other security team over a private channel, while Matanzas and Valentine laughed nervously and shook their heads.

"God, that scared the living shit out of me!" Valentine said.

"Yeah, no kidding." Matanzas responded, "I probably should have hooked up my waste disposal system. The walk back is going to be uncomfortable."

After the two laughed, and then groaned at each other, they turned to Sarah, only to find her laying limp on the floor.

"Sarah?" Valentine shouted. He shuffled over to her when he didn't get a response, then tried again. "Hey, Sarah!" He said, tapping the side of her helmet.

With Matanzas's help, Valentine turned Sarah over to lay on her back. Her face was blank and completely unresponsive. The two other scientists feared she was dead until they looked at the hard display on her arm, showing all her vitals to be perfectly normal.

"Hugo?" Matanzas called out and looked around, but again there was no response. She moved over to Horner. Her agitation was starting to come out as anger as she slapped Horner's large

metal arm. "Hey! What the hell is going on?" She asked. Horner was silent, so Matanzas got louder. "Hello!?"

"Step away, Meat!" Jax said, effortlessly pushing Matanzas away, then doing the same to Valentine.

"Apologies, Doctor." Horner said. "It appears we need to cut this expedition short."

"What? Why?" Valentine said, and Matanzas mirrored the sentiment with some irritated noises of her own.

"It appears that Dr. Sarah Donner is wanted on Apollon. We are to bring her back to the Expedition Base." As Horner spoke, Jax picked Sarah up by her suit like she was a toddler in overalls and slung her over her shoulder. The way her body dangled was alarming to the tiny, mostly human scientists.

"Apollon?" Valentine asked. "She hasn't been on Apollon in years, what could she possibly have done to warrant this?"

"Yeah! And it looks to me like you've used her cybernetics to lock her out of her own body. That's a massive violation of bodily autonomy!"

"I agree, but it was a worm sent as part of the message. There's nothing that can be done about it aside from getting her safely to Apollon. The faster we can get back, the easier that is going to be." Horner said. He motioned for the scientists to move back down the corridor, nonverbally imparting that he can't leave until they do.

Valentine and Matanzas started moving in a huff, none too happy about the sudden change in their plans.

Chapter Five

It was quite peaceful in the young forest. Terraforming was still in its infancy on Apollon, having only started seeding a decade ago. Still, the pines were tall enough to obscure Sophie's presence from the OTech scouts that were hovering silently above. Sophie wished she had taken more time to enjoy being out in nature, if it could be called that. There were a lot of things that she wished were different, currently.

Sophie wished she could have lived her cover. She wished that MI would have burned her years ago so she could live a relaxing, sedentary life here. She wished she could have been with Violet under different circumstances. She wished she had decided to follow in her sister's footsteps instead of being drawn in by the appeal of romanticized interstellar espionage. Now she was running for her life, confused and in disbelief at the events that had just transpired.

Violet was dead. Or was she? Not 20 hours ago, Sophie was gripped in her warm embrace, as alive as she had ever felt in her life. She wondered if it was a trick. Maybe what she had seen was an elaborate fiction. She had heard stories about interfaces being hacked, and victims being forced to experience a digital torture that couldn't be distinguished from reality. Or perhaps it was staged in order to easily break off the

relationship like in a convoluted plot from a sitcom. Maybe it was all just due to an overactive imagination. Sophie wiped the sweat from her brow as she took a break from running, leaning back against a tree. The texture of her wrist against her forehead was sticky and flaky.

Sophie looked at her arms to find them covered in blood, then instinctively went to wipe them on her top, immediately noticing it too was thoroughly soaked. The sight of blood brought back images of Violet's pale face in her arms. It made Sophie's stomach churn. She brought her hands to her mouth to try and hold it closed, but reeled at touching her lover's blood to her face. Having nowhere to put her hands, she held them away from her body as she vomited on the forest floor. She couldn't hold her hair back or grip her gut, so for a few moments, she just stood in place and shook as the panic washed over her.

She had never felt as disturbed and physically sickened by blood and violence. She had received years of training in how to suppress negative reactions to it, and she had seen much more violent things on a regular basis when she was in Wonderland. However, she had never watched someone she loved die in such a manner. In fact, she had never seen anyone die at all, not really. It was a crushing feeling that she had never expected.

Thinking about all the changes that were going to happen, that have already happened, Sophie wondered whether it was worth

it to even go on. She thought about stepping into a clearing and letting them find her. Maybe they would kill her on sight. If they didn't, she might be able to talk her way out of it, explain that she wasn't the one that did it, that it was Misty Hodges. She still had the video saved, and would happily give it to them. But then she thought about MI. They would not be happy to have another off world agent in captivity, and could send more out to eliminate her. Any way she looked at it, she was going to die, be imprisoned, or constantly look over her shoulder for the rest of her life.

The first option was sounding better with every passing moment. She looked at her bloodied hands. She wanted to split them open and jam the hidden blades deep into her neck. She tried to, but her body wouldn't respond. Instead, it picked itself up off the ground and continued moving through the forest toward the safe house.

The journey was long. 70 km on foot, and because the Mirror fried her wireless firmware, she had to do it all without GPS. Luckily, orienteering was one of the courses that she excelled at, and the relatively small area on Apollon that has been populated so far was a blessing compared to some of the horror stories she was told through MI.

Sophie considered herself pretty fit. Unlike most people who spent a lot of their free time in VR, she had a good habit

of daily exercise and maintenance of her meat. She was quite fond of her flesh, usually, but at the moment, she was really regretting not opting for the fully prosthetic body that was offered when she joined MI. Her entire body burned and ached at the level of physicality she was putting it through, save for her prosthetic arms. She gradually increased the pain dampening in her interface as her body strained against her brain. Eventually, she couldn't increase it anymore. Her interface was effectively interrupting the undesirable sensation, but it could do nothing to assist when her body started refusing to follow direction.

The last few kilometers to the safehouse were a mess of stumbling and falling to the forest floor. When she saw the recognizable ventilation stacks peeking above the canopy, she let out a sigh of relief. She still had another half hour before extraction, and even though she had less than a kilometer to go, the state of her body made her wonder if she would even be able to make it that far. She crawled and dragged her body the rest of the distance, and once she made it onto flat ground at the lumbermill, she pulled herself up to her feet and braced herself against the walls. Her last challenge was the flight of stairs that led to the scanner. She took her time down the stairs, fearing that the journey would end with her neck broken right next to the finish line.

After successfully making it down and into the scanner, the door into the safehouse opened, and she stepped through. She was then at the top of another flight of stairs overlooking the lounge area, where several people were gathered around the couches, watching the news broadcasts intently. When they heard the clatter of the entry door locking, they looked up in unison, and when they noticed it was Sophie, each one put on varying levels of disgustful expressions. One person in particular, Cari, went beyond disgust into pure hatred and fury.

"You fucking bitch." Cari said. The rest stayed silent. Most of them looked like they agreed with the sentiment. Even Yarim turned away from Sophie, unable to look her in the eyes. He did, however, make a half-hearted attempt to grab Cari after she shot up from the couch and began making her way toward the staircase. "You fucking bitch!" She said again as she stomped up the steps to give Sophie an open-handed slap that was more akin to a hit to the side of the head with a baseball bat. The force of the blow knocked Sophie off her feet and tumbling down the stairs.

"Whoa, Cari! Take it down a notch!" Yarim interjected, though refraining from moving from his spot. It did little to stop Cari as she moved back down the steps. She pulled Sophie off the ground by the hair on the back of her head, then slammed it against the nearest wall.

"Faren and Ella are dead because of this slut! Why shouldn't I just pop her in a nightmare, or stroke her out and be done with her?"

"We don't know what happened to Faren and Ella." Yarim said. "We have no reason to believe Sophie had anything to do with them."

"They aren't here, that's all the reason I need." Cari again picked Sophie up using a fistful of her hair as a handle. "You're lucky your networks out, or you'd be dead already, or something like it."

Cari brought up her other hand, and a cable snaked out from her wrist, reaching towards the ports on the back of her skull. Sophie didn't resist. With the news blaring her name and image, and all of her friends and colleagues staring daggers at her, she agreed with Cari. The situation was all her fault, and what made it worse, she couldn't figure out what she had done wrong.

Just as Sophie felt the cable tickle her neck hairs and brush against her skin, she was suddenly dropped to the ground. Cari started reeling backwards, losing her balance, and falling to the floor herself. Every joint in her prosthetic arms and legs began to bend backwards, sending a steady signal of intense pain to Cari's brain, causing her to make a sound somewhere between retching and gasping.

"That's enough." The Mirror said as she appeared at the

entrance. A moment later, Cari's limbs released, and she angrily rose from the floor. She looked at the Mirror with the similar animosity as she had toward Sophie, but the Mirror looked back at her with a blank face as if to say, 'You're not the only hacker in this cell.'

Their eyes were like guns, ready to fire off a series of wireless scripts at the slightest provocation. It was a standoff until Yarim stepped between them and began pushing Cari away. She turned and marched away in a huff, to the workshop where she grabbed a heavy pipe and started beating the hell out of Yarim's Frankenvehicle. Yarim had the urge to rush in and stop her, but realized that they would be leaving soon, and in all likelihood, they would never be coming back.

"Sitrep." The Mirror ordered.

"We are missing Faren and Ella, everyone else is present and accounted for. There has been no contact with either of them since..." Yarim cleared his throat and glanced over at Sophie. "... the incident."

"When did they last check-in?"

"19 hours ago, on schedule. What's the status on extraction?"

"Our transport will arrive in orbit in 26 minutes, and it'll land 90 seconds later at the loading dock." The Mirror descended the stairs and stepped over Sophie. "Move her to the

couch."

Yarim obeyed, picking Sophie up from the ground. Faye and Takami scoffed at having to give up their seats. Yarim was able to shoo Takami from his spot, but Faye stayed in her place in petty defiance.

"She's going to get the fabric all bloody." Faye said. Yarim rolled his eyes and lightly kicked Faye's legs, urging her again to move, but she gave him the finger. "Fuck that, we're not her therapists. She's a highly trained, cybernetically enhanced spy, for God's sake. She doesn't need the whole fuckin' couch." Faye said, crossing her arms and remaining in her spot. Yarim shook his head then gently sat Sophie down in the empty spot. The Mirror stepped in front of her.

"What happened?" The Mirror said with the tone of a demand rather than a question. Sophie pushed herself up in her seat and took a few deep breaths, then bowed her head and brushed her hair away from the ports on the back of her skull.

"I have video of the event saved in local memory. I'd like you to watch it and share it with the rest of the cell." Sophie said. There was a pause as the Mirror considered the request. "I don't fully understand what I saw myself. I want to make sure I'm not crazy."

The Mirror moved toward Sophie and gripped the back of her neck, then connected to her via wrist-cable. Sophie watched as

control over her interface was given directly to the Mirror, who expertly navigated through menus to find her video memory.

Sophie wasn't sure she was ready to relive the experience, but now she had no choice. She took another deep breath.

The Mirror started the video a few moments before they had lost contact.

"Actually, I'm calling MI right now. Find some cover outside and wait for orders. The next packet is in 6 minutes." The Mirror could be heard saying in the video.

Sophie made no sound but made an affirmative gesture. As she started to retreat to the edge of the forest, Sophie noticed the hanging blinders moving in a nearby window, then heard an ear shattering scream cut short, coming from within the house. Sophie froze for a moment, then began to sprint toward the entrance.

"Sophie?" The Mirror shouted. Sophie continued running. "Sophie stop! That's an or-" The Mirror was cut off by digital artifacting and silence as Sophie crossed the threshold into the house. After passing the foyer, she turned into the living room to see Violet standing near the center of the room wearing a black nightgown.

By now, the room in the safehouse was completely silent as everyone began watching the video shared by the Mirror. Even Cari joined in when she received the notification.

"Violet...?" Sophie said in the video. Violet turned toward her. She had a look of confusion and absolute terror on her face, and a dark red line across her throat. She took a step towards Sophie and tried to call out to her, but a torrent of blood began pouring out her neck and mouth. She stumbled with the first step, and Sophie rushed in to catch her. She wrapped her arms around the bloodied woman and gently tried to bring her to the ground.

That's when she noticed the figure standing in the corner of the room. The video was paused as she came into view. A couple of gasps filled the room.

"That's Misty Hodges." Takami interjected.

"That's... not possible..." Cari said. Sophie got the sense that they were privy to more information than she, but before she could ask, the Mirror was already answering.

"Misty Hodges was found dead on Hephaestus. Her throat was cut and body dumped in a waste reservoir. Time of death hasn't been fully determined, but it had to have been at least 12 hours prior to Violet's death."

More than anything, Sophie wanted to say, 'I fucking told you so', but she bit her tongue.

"She's got to be a skin-job, right?" Yarim asked. "Surgery, or fully prosthetic."

"Maybe, or a clone, or... could it be a long-lost twin?"

Cari said, fully aware of her audience. The Mirror continued the video.

Misty was a direct threat, and as she was trained to do, Sophie tried to rise to her feet and activated both of her concealed blades, but before she could lunge at the threat, she felt Violet pull her back down in a desperate attempt to hold on to her. Sophie tried not to look down at her, trying anything not to see it again. She tried closing her eyes, but the video bypassed her eyes entirely and was sent straight to her visual cortex. Again, the woman she loved was crying profusely, and her screams came as a muffled gurgle. Again, she looked at Sophie as if she could do something, anything to help.

Sophie looked back at Misty to find that she was gone, and the video paused again. The room was silent for a few moments.

"What the f-Where did she go?" Faye said, breaking the silence by expressing what was on everyone's mind. "You looked away for like a second, she can't move that fast without you at least hearing it."

The Mirror rewound the video, and Sophie was treated to another view of the absolute worst thing she's ever seen, and it was impossible to look away. She still had her interface's pain reduction turned to full, but it did nothing to subdue the knot in her stomach and the lump in her throat. She felt the tears welling in her eyes. She felt like her heart stopped beating.

When the video looked back up and away from Violet, Sophie sighed with relief.

"Could it be a hack?" Faye asked. The Mirror was silent for a moment as she looked through Sophie's wireless signal data at the time. Cari was also working away doing her own analysis on the paused frame itself.

"There was an all-channel emergency signal being sent out by Violet, but other than that, Sophie wasn't receiving any other data." The Mirror said.

"I don't see anything indicating video modification either." Cari said. "However..." At that moment, everyone received invites and joined Cari's view. "I took a look at the IR and UV data Sophie was recording. I didn't see much on UV, but in IR, after I've fiddled with the temperature range a bit and turned up the gain, I see..."

In the spot against the wall where Misty was standing was a faint shadow in the outline of the woman, almost imperceptible even with the enhancements. Again, the room fell silent.

"Is that..." Faye started.

"Therm-Optic Camouflage?" Takami said, doubting his own eyes.

"That's impossible!" Yarim said. "MI's prosthetic stealth tech isn't even close to that level of effectiveness. I mean, unless any of you guys have found anything while in cover?"

There was a round of shaking heads from every one of the deep cover operatives in the room, including Sophie. As there was no answer, the Mirror continued to play the video. In it, Sophie started to get up, but Violet grabbed the sides of her face and guided her gaze back to meet hers. Sophie hadn't been a religious person since she was a child. In fact, she was openly critical of religion whenever it was the topic of conversation. Now, however, she was starting to remember what it was like to be in Hell. All she could do was watch Violet as she began to convulse and observe as the life left her eyes again.

The video continued at regular speed until the moment Sophie ran out the door and re-connected with the Mirror. At that point, the Mirror pulled her cable from Sophie's skull. When Sophie regained control over her interface, it immediately started barking warnings regarding high levels of stress. It recommended dropping her into a stress relieving nature simulation. Sophie didn't hesitate to accept it and was dropped into a beautiful mountainside cottage overlooking a sunset. She no longer cared that her physical body was now catatonic, or whether they would just leave her here when the transport arrived. All she wanted to do was erase the image of her lover's horrified, bloodied corpse in her arms. It was an impossible task.

The Mirror and the rest of the cell noticed but didn't

mind. Even Cari felt a degree of respect for what she had gone through.

"So, what the hell are we looking at here?" Cari asked. "A false flag assassination, clearly meant to implicate Athenon, carried out by someone with the resources to acquire personal stealth tech more advanced than anything Military Intelligence has or is aware of."

"Could this be the Apophis Faction?" Yarim asked.

"The Apophis faction hasn't even existed for a week." Faye said. "I don't believe that a bunch of disgruntled farmers could organize, gather resources, and plan this attack within a few days."

"Okay, then what about here on Apollon?" Cari asked.

"I really don't think so." Takami said. "I've been close to much of the affluent community here, and have seen some pretty shady shit, but nothing to suggest OTech weapons or stealth tech funding."

"If the tech was black market, then I would have heard about it." Faye said. "Of course, she did come from Hephaestus, correct? If it could be built anywhere, it would be there, yes?"

"I suppose so." Takami said.

"I'm not so sure..." The Mirror said. "If the Interstellar Transport Commission found out that Hephaestus was smuggling assassins, the whole planet could be cut-off from transport

privileges."

"Are you kidding?" Cari said with a laugh. "Hephaestus is the largest Manufacturing Hub in the Galaxy! If they were cut off, it would only end up hurting everybody else. Besides, Hephaestus has always been on pretty good terms with MI. I just don't see it."

"We can speculate until we're blue in the face." The Mirror said. "The fact is we don't have enough information. All we can really do is hold on to the data until we get back to home base."

"And then what?" Faye asked. There was a pause as nobody had an answer. "Do you think they'll let us follow up on this mystery?"

"I think it's just as pointless to speculate on what Athenon will do with us." Takami said.

"I mean... you don't think they're going to 'retire' us, are they?" Faye asked. There was another pause as the cell glanced around at each other, hoping that somebody else would give a definite 'no'.

"Maybe not *all* of us..." Takami said, then looked over to Sophie, who appeared to be sleeping peacefully. He wasn't sure exactly what he meant. Were they going to dispose of the entire cell except for Sophie because of what she knew? Or would they get rid of her to save political face, and let the rest of them

continue serving? Takami shook his head at the thought. "No, no, they won't retire us. They've invested tens of millions in each one of us. It would be a complete waste of resources if they got rid of us."

As confident as Takami was, the rest of the cell wasn't so sure. They didn't think they had much to offer in terms of actionable intelligence. The murder of Violet Hodges was the biggest thing that had happened to any of them, and it really only happened to Sophie. Whether they were attempting to curry favor, or they were just killing time until the transport arrived, each person in the cell pulled up a copy of the video and began analyzing it however they could.

The news was continuing to escalate. The media had already found Sophie's personal history, and that she did not, in fact, die in an industrial accident 6 years ago. They also had all of the info on her cover, and they were displaying images of her sister, Sarah, all across the screens as well. She was wanted in connection with the murder of Violet and was already suspected of being another spy for Athenon. Those in the cell that were paying attention scoffed at the prospect.

When the Mirror received a notification that the Transport had arrived in orbit, she motioned to the rest of the cell. Yarim scooped Sophie up into his arms and carried her up the stairs and through the scanner. The cell moved to the concrete

landing pad and arrived just as the transport came hovering over the surrounding trees and quickly parked just above the pad. An aperture opened at the bottom of the craft and a metal ramp descended.

The cell was greeted by a pair of armed escorts and automated turrets. They were quickly scanned and then ushered quickly into the transport without a word spoken. Even before they were off the ramp, it began raising into the hold, and the transports aperture closed.

"Jumping in 5..." came a voice over the intercom. The Mirror wasn't sure what the plan was once they were on the transport. On one of the nearest displays, she could see the outside, and once the countdown ended, they were suddenly in orbit around Athenon.

Back at the safe house on Apollon, as soon as the transport vanished, the vacuum that was left over caused an implosion powerful enough to collapse most of the lumbermill and bury the safehouse beneath it. It was likely very noticeable by Apollon authorities, but it was a risk that MI decided was worth it.

Meanwhile, Sophie sat in a comfortable poolside chaise lounge chair, staring blankly at the picturesque sunset over the peaceful forest valley below. The relaxation program also spawned two virtual companions, a man and a woman, dressed in almost nothing, who quietly and gently approached and sat by her

side. Each of them were generated based on data gathered from her porn habits and other digital encounters. Both of the perfectly angelic forms started to touch her, brushing their hands over her skin. Sophie would have been into it if she had just been dumped by some douchebag, but the situation was perhaps a little more serious.

She was surrounded by a highly detailed, perfectly tailored fantasy simulation, but nothing she was seeing now was able to obscure the image in her head. She felt as if the lump in her throat was big enough to suffocate her, and the tears streaming from her eyes threatened her with dehydration. Instead of the arousal that her companions were trying to instill in her, Sophie chased the thought of death. She didn't want to be there. She didn't want to be anywhere anymore, but unfortunately for her, there was no way out. All that she could hope for, now, was that Military Intelligence would decide to retire her.

Chapter Six

[Add discussion about Misty's body found dead]

If death felt like anything, Sarah was feeling it. She was in complete darkness. She had thought the space between stars, and between galaxies was dark. It was nothing compared to this. Further than not being able to see, she also couldn't hear a sound, not even when she was screaming. She tried putting her hands together and feeling her own body, and again she came up empty. Not one of her senses was working. All that she had to comfort her were her own thoughts, and the memory of the last thing she experienced.

The last thing she recalled happening was staring down a very long, very dark hallway, almost as dark as her location now, but she did remember her colleagues and escorts, good lot of work *they* did. She remembered hearing a sound from down the hallway, and everyone turned to watch it, and as soon as it came into the hallway, Sarah was dead. All she could do now was reflect on her life. As her mind jumped from event to event, the details were gradually changing and becoming more vivid. The memories blended with her imagination to become something wholly new and often unintelligible, but Sarah's analytical mind continued to dissect and understand what was going on.

She couldn't be dead. She could still think, and she was

clearly dreaming, or something like it. Her brain was still functioning. When a person becomes a corpse, neurons stop firing and brain matter decays. She next considered whether she had fallen into a coma or had a stroke, but everything she had ever read was that rational thinking doesn't work in a coma. Of course, it wasn't her area of expertise, so she put the coma theory in the 'maybe' pile. As for a stroke, again, rational thinking is affected, but the patient is still generally conscious and has access to all their senses, so that's a no.

When Sarah considered what else could affect all of her senses, it dawned on her almost immediately. Her interface was inserted into her brainstem, and on top of the ability to read the sensory information flowing to and from her brain, the interface was also able to interrupt it. Sarah thought it was a story from over a decade ago, when the cerebral interface was still new. She had read online horror stories that were adapted into mediocre films. Frankly, she had even known that it was technically possible when she opted to get her interface. She had even heard tell of world governments and industries hacking interfaces and doing crazy shit to people against interplanetary conventional laws, but Sarah just brushed them off as the ramblings of psychopaths and schizophrenics.

She could do nothing about it now. For a while, her mind circled the fear that she may never get out of this prison. She

wondered whether she would be there until brain death. If her body were lost in the alien structure, her suit would run out of internal oxygen within a day. From what she had heard, oxygen deprivation wasn't such a terrible way to go. Generally painless, gradual loss of rational thought until nothing. Of course, if it was someone who did this to her, they could be keeping her body alive, doing whatever they wanted with it, and she would never know. Through a proper nutrient feed, she could be kept alive for years, or decades even, until an untreatable disease finally took her.

Sarah didn't know how long it had even been since she entered this state. There was no way to accurately know. With so many scenarios, memories, and fears swimming around in her head, she felt as if she had been there for days, or weeks. Her grip on reality was lost the moment she entered this place, but after a while, she felt like she was losing her mind as well. At first, she had some level of control over her own thoughts and the images that she was seeing, but as time moved inevitably forward, she was starting to see memories that she didn't care to live through again, but Hugo wasn't there to distract her. There was no way to stop what she was seeing, and her own internalized fear had made the experience even worse.

She started thinking about the possibility that she could have been taken by the creatures she had discovered, somehow

still alive deep within the structure, and her fears about these creatures quickly transitioned to the memory of the last time she had come face to face with an alien creature.

Sarah was looking at an insect structure carved into the trunk of a large alien tree. The structure was complex, and while it was somehow exactly as she remembered it, it was also too complex for her brain to recreate, so the structure was constantly changing. As she was trying to focus on it, she heard the sound of something in the brush rushing toward her. When she turned to look, she saw her husband running at her with an expression of pure terror on his face.

"Sarah! Get back to base camp! Run!" He shouted. His voice rang in Sarah's head and pierced her body like daggers. She was stunned, staying in her spot until Hugo reached her and forced her to her feet. "Run!" He said again, and Sarah followed his order. She ran through the thick brush as fast as she could. As she did, she could hear, and feel, something large quickly approaching from behind. Then, there was an extremely loud and low chirp that seemed to hit her with the force of a brick, knocking her to the ground as she entered the clearing near the base camp.

She tumbled over and looked back to try to see what was chasing them. She saw Hugo just behind her, reaching out to grab her hand, but then a large, purple tendril shot out from the

brush, wrapping around Hugo's waist, and yanking him back into the grip of a massive blue creature that largely resembled a gorilla from Old Earth, but with six limbs, scaly skin, tentacled digits at the end of its arms, and a split mandible with sharp, articulated feeders like moving teeth. When Hugo was retracted into its grip, he let out one last cry.

"Sarah!" Hugo shouted just before the creature grabbed his right arm and effortlessly tore it from its socket. Hugo's scream instantly became a gurgle, the sound of which was almost drowned out by the tearing and cracking of his flesh and bone. It was just how she remembered it, but it wasn't at the same time. She wasn't sure she actually watched as the creature devoured her husband piece by piece, but she was watching it now. She couldn't turn away. Not even when the creature finished its first meal and began to approach her, though she got the feeling that it was no longer hungry and was now interested in her for something else.

It was twisting, transforming, and growing before her eyes as it changed from a memory into a nightmare that she couldn't escape from. The horrific experience produced by her own mind inspired even further suffering in a feedback loop, leading her to believe that maybe she was dead, and was now residing in the hell that she had believed existed so many years ago. The ever-changing creature did things to her that would have easily

killed her if she were in her mortal body, but she continued on, and prayed to a God that she hadn't believed in since she was a little girl, and much like back then, she just prayed that her agony would end.

After what seemed like an eternity of the worst torture Sarah's mind could imagine, her surroundings changed in an instant. She was now strapped into a chair with an IV attached to her arm, and a bright light shining in her face, obscuring everything that lie in the darkness beyond it. Sarah let out the loudest scream that she possibly could and fought hard against the straps. She could feel the sting in her throat, and the painful pressure of the straps holding her in place. She had thought the pain she was feeling previously was real, but somehow, this pain was even more present and specific. It took several seconds of desperate screaming and crying for her to realize that she was alive again, in her actual, physical body. Still, she struggled against her restraints.

She could tell there were other people in the room with her. Other humans. She felt a hint of relief that she were no longer in the grips of some monstrous creature, but as her mind gradually came back to reality, she was also starting to understand what had happened to her. When she stopped screaming, she took a moment to catch her breath.

"Who are you?!" Sarah shouted with a hoarse voice. She

continued frantically, not giving her captors an opportunity to speak. "Why am I here? What ha-" She was cut off, suddenly unable to speak, and her body was frozen in place. It felt again like she had been forced into the void, however, she was still able to see and hear what was going on around her. One of the figures from beyond the light began to speak.

"Doctor Sarah Donner, Engineering PhD from Apollon University, Confirm your identity." The woman said. Sarah regained control of her body and her voice, letting out a relieved sigh, but stayed silent for a moment in defiance. She was now starting to get angry.

"I won't answer a single question until you tell me who you are and why I'm being held." Sarah demanded. There was a brief period of deliberation inaudible to her. A different person stood up in the darkness.

"You are currently inside a holding location for the Apollon Security Commission. Dr. Donner is under suspicion of espionage in violation of the Interstellar Transport Commission peacetime regulations."

"What?!" Sarah proclaimed, unable to keep herself from laughing in disbelief. "I've never spied on anyone! I don't even know the names of people I've worked with for years!"

Her small audience accepted the response as verification of her identity, and again deliberated silently. A series of

windows began appearing in Sarah's vision; the images and profile of a woman.

"How well do you know Violet Hodges?" A woman asked.

"I know of her. She was one of the chairs for my dissertation committee. I think we spoke a few times, but that was years ago."

"Approximately 8 hours ago, Violet Hodges was murdered in her own home." As the woman spoke, video of Violet was shown, the gash in her neck nearly deep enough to cut her head off completely. Sarah reeled at the footage.

"What... Why are you doing this? I haven't been on Apollon in years, let alone 8 hours ago!"

"Footage was captured of the suspected murderer leaving the premises when the Emergency Medical Team arrived."

Another video was presented as the woman spoke, this time, an aerial view of Violet's estate. The camera focused on the entrance as a woman darted out and towards the forest. For a moment, the woman turns to look at the camera, and the video freezes and focuses even more directly. The woman in the footage is the spitting image of Sarah, albeit with a shorter, tighter hairstyle, and a more well-toned body. Sarah wasn't sure what she was looking at.

"DNA was also found at the scene." The woman continued, but Sarah was no longer listening, only trying to make sense of what

she was seeing. At first, she thought about whether she was being framed or it was just some unlikely coincidence, but it all became clear to her in an instant. She hung and shook her head in disappointment.

"That's... not me. It's...-"

"When was the last time you had contact with Sophie Donner?"

The question rang in Sarah's head. Her mind first went to the last time they had seen each other, when they had pizza at their favorite childhood restaurant, before they went their separate ways. That was ten years ago. They kept in contact digitally for a few years, exchanging the odd video or text message, but over time, their contact gradually dwindled, until she received an official message from the Athenon Military Academy informing of her sister's death in a training accident.

Sarah attended her twin sister's funeral, along with Hugo and a few of Sophie's commanding officers who appeared to be there out of compulsion rather than any sort of respect for the dead. There was no casket as apparently, she and the other casualties were 'vaporized in an arc-flash', whatever the hell that meant. It was an extremely painful experience at the time, but one of the ways that Hugo made it better was seeding the idea that she was still alive, just undercover, like she always wanted to be. Sarah thought it was always just an excuse to help

her cope, but now she felt like an idiot. Sarah tried to bring a hand up to wipe the tears from her eyes but was still being held by a strap. Her audience decided she was no longer a threat and decided to release the straps. Sarah pulled her arms free and buried her face in her palms. The security commission gave her a few moments so she could regain her composure. After she wiped away her tears and cleared her throat, she sat back up in her chair. The commission asked again.

"When was the last time you had contact with your sister?" The woman said. Sarah sighed and thought for a moment more.

"I'm not quite sure... it was probably 7 or 8 years ago, before she died." Sarah shook her head. "I mean, before I thought she died... Though, I've received strange messages from unknown contacts since then. If you don't already have access to my history of private data, I'll give it to you, and you can decide for yourself if the messages were from her or not."

"Have you been in recent contact with any other current or former residents of Athenon?"

"No. Not to my knowledge. Even if I had, I don't have any sort of security clearance, and thus, no top-secret information I could share. I'm a scientist, not a spy."

"Actually..." A man spoke up, rising to his feet and approaching Sarah, though still staying just within the shadows enough that Sarah could not see his face. "Everything about your

recent expedition has been classified. You are not to speak about it to anyone outside of this room."

"What?!" Sarah's jaw dropped. "Why?!"

"At this time, we believe that your findings on the expedition may pose a threat to public and state security."

"'State' security?" Sarah scoffed. "I thought we left all that border bullshit back on Earth, and how can you make that determination about *my* findings if *I* don't even know what we found?" The commission silently considered what she was saying. The man motioned as if he was going to continue, but Sarah cut him off. "And you want me to keep that stuff a secret, but not the massive human rights violation you committed against me?"

"-Uh that was..." The man speaking dropped his professional demeanor for a moment as he stammered. "t-that was a measure taken by the independent security company that was hired by your expedition organizers. Apollon had no involvement in that."

"If that were true, I would have been released from that hell hole as soon as I was in your custody!"

"Once we have determined that you are not involved in espionage, you will be given the opportunity to investigate which party is at fault and press charges accordingly."

"And just how long is that going to take?"

"We can assure you that time is of the essence on this matter. It will go much more quickly if you cooperate with our

investigation." A hush fell over the commission as Sarah deliberated this time.

Since she had been brought back to consciousness, the fear of her situation was completely gone, replaced in its entirety by anger. She didn't want to work with the Security Commission out of spite, an attitude that her sister once would have commended her for, but Sarah grasped the gravity of the situation. It didn't make what was done to her acceptable by any means, but it made the situation understandable. As much as she wanted to stand in the way of the Apollon Security Commission, she wanted to know exactly what happened even more.

"What do you want to know?" Sarah asked, following a frustrated sigh.

"Tell us what you know about your sister." A different woman on the commission said. A number of videos began to play in Sarah's vision, most of them showing Sophie living and working on Apollon for much of the last several years. The woman was often seen wearing dark clothing, a lasting trademark of Sophie's style, but the green apron she sometimes wore seemed to fit her as well. Sarah also knew Sophie to enjoy a resting bitch face when they were teens, which made it a pleasant surprise to see that in most of the videos she wore a warm smile and seemed genuinely happy.

"Alright... Mind you, all I really know about her is likely

outdated by 7-10 years." Sarah said. The commission did not ask her to clarify, only waited for her to continue. "She was a generally quiet person- we both were- when we were teenagers. She had a sort of goth mindset, very moody and dark, and with a general disdain for humanity. She liked horror movies, slashers, and generally violent stuff..." As she spoke, Sarah realized that she wasn't painting a particularly defensive picture of her sister. "I mean, she wasn't... Isn't a psychopath.

"She held animosity for people that deserved it, rapists, pedophiles, those that prey on the innocent, etcetera, but I refuse to believe that she would ever do it on blind orders. If she did actually murder that woman, then the woman must have done something incredibly cruel." Sarah didn't have anything more to say.

"At this time, it is our understanding that Violet Hodges was having an adulterous affair with Sophie Donner, and that their relationship was a method for Sophie to facilitate espionage by order of Military Intelligence on Athenon."

"Spying, sure. She was a pretty big fan of spy thrillers, but if you're trying to imply she was an assassin, I didn't think MI ever really did that kind of thing. Not on peaceful planets, at least."

"That is our thinking exactly. Up until the event on Apophis, we had long suspected that MI was spying on several

population and manufacturing hubs in the galaxy, but with the express purpose of monitoring and regulating OTech development. However, over the past few weeks, it appears that assassinations have been carried out on several of those same hubs, and in each case, the body of evidence points directly to Athenon, though they insist that they are not involved. The evidence is so strong, in fact, that we suspect that Athenon may not be lying, or at least partly telling the truth."

"So, you're saying that you think someone is trying to frame Military Intelligence?" Sarah asked. The commissions silence was her answer. "It sounds like something the Apophis Faction would cook up, but I imagine you've already--"

"Frankly, we just don't have the information necessary to form any hypothesis."

"Well, you have way more information about this than I do, but you seem to know all about my sister." Sarah said, gesturing at the digital displays in her vision, even though only she was able to see them in that arrangement. "Why don't you just go grab her?"

"After her encounter with our emergency transport, we lost her in the woods, and we believe she has already been taken off-world, likely back to Athenon."

"So...?"

"The exact location of Athenon is still a secret, and we

have no jurisdiction for an operation like that."

"I'm not a politician, but I assume the ITC would make an exception for that."

"You may not be a politician, but you are a scientist, so I'm sure you understand that, unlike the OTech Transports, bureaucracy doesn't move faster than the speed of light, and on this matter, time is of--"

"Time is of the essence, yes, you said that already." Sarah's increasingly catty responses betrayed her disdain for the situation. She couldn't see it, but the Security Commission was also none-too-happy. "I don't understand why I'm still here. You've had plenty of time to verify that I'm not a spy, and that I'm not in contact with Sophie."

"Dr. Donner. As you are not a government employee, we do not have the authority to give you orders, so consider this an official request from the Apollon Security Commission. Would you consider getting in contact with Sophie Donner and convincing her to come to us. Only she knows exactly what happened to Violet Hodges. If she did not, in fact, kill Ms. Hodges, we need to know who did." The Commission's request left Sarah speechless for a few moments.

"You... want me... to bring in an interstellar spy that's the primary suspect in a high-profile assassination?"

"We want you to be re-united with your long-lost twin

sister." Said one of the women on the commission. Sarah knew it was a load of manipulative bullshit, but it was working.

"What happens if I say no?"

"If you refuse, you will be released to return to your research. However, you understand that you will be monitored closely, and due to the classified nature of your expedition, you will not be able to continue in your former capacity."

"Are you kidding? Do you have any idea of the significance of our discoveries on that expedition? Do you even—" Sarah was cut off by the commission this time.

"If you are able to make contact and put forth a reasonable effort, whether or not she comes in, we will grant you the classification necessary to continue your work on the expedition." The speaker took their seat behind their table, and the commission waited for Sarah's response.

"Can you give me a bit of time to consider your request?" Sarah asked. She could hear the subtle sighs and groans of the commission. "Yeah, time is of the essence, okay. But you could at least pretend to give me some fucking privacy."

"You will have it." As one of the women spoke, the commission rose from their seats and began approaching the exit to the chamber. "Once you have been escorted back to holding, full access to your interface and network will be returned to you, however monitored, and you will be free to leave."

When the door shut behind them, the lights in the room came up. Sarah stood up and started to approach the same door the commission used, but she was grabbed on the shoulder by a guard that she hadn't realized was behind her, causing her to startle.

"Please, this way ma'am." The guard said, quickly releasing Sarah's shoulder and waiving her towards another door to the side.

Sarah's mind was racing. She was very angry at the turn of events, and terrified that she could again be locked away in her own mind if she didn't comply. She felt overwhelming joy at the news and image of her sister still alive, and absolute horror at the situation she had gotten herself in. Sarah always thought it could have been the other way around, that she would have been the one that needed saving. Sarah followed her escorts, walking on autopilot as she processed everything that had just happened to her. Before she knew it, Sarah was presented a door that automatically unlocked as she approached. One of the guards opened the door for her and waived her inside.

The holding room was much nicer than what she had originally pictured. It was akin to a moderately high class hotel suite with a picturesque view from one of the higher levels in Apollon City Tower, though Sarah suspected that she was actually underground, the windows being simple projections, much like those she often saw back home on the station. The

guards closed the door behind her, leaving her alone in the room. She walked over to the window to stare at the surprisingly relaxing view of the city and natural landscape below. She took a deep, relaxing breath. With all that had happened, she felt as if she was still missing something, but she wasn't sure what. That's when a flicker in the reflection of the window caught her attention and she saw Hugo standing in the room behind her.

"Hello, sweetheart!" He said calmly. Sarah spun around, and with tears welling in her eyes, she sprinted toward him. He opened his arms to catch her, but in having no physical presence, he simply grabbed her and held her as they both fell to the floor. Sarah hit the ground with a thud, nearly dislocating one of her shoulders, but she didn't care. "Whoa, careful there!" Hugo said. Sarah grabbed his face and pulled it in for a deep, lasting kiss. When they eventually pulled apart, Sarah gasped, having neglected to breathe. "I think we saw a bed in the next room, why don't you go lie down so we can meet properly?"

Sarah silently nodded, still unable to speak over the lump in her throat. Once she rose to her feet, she followed Hugo through the suite. Hugo moved around Sarah in an almost dance-like fashion, the purpose was to have her digital eyes photogrammetrically scan all of the surroundings so that Hugo could recreate it for the next part. When he guided her to the

bed, she fell into it and tried to get comfortable, however difficult it was for her at the moment.

"Are you ready?" Hugo asked. Sarah nodded and closed her eyes, then felt Hugo tug on her hand and pull her up out of the bed in cyberspace. She let the momentum carry her into his arms as he caught her properly this time. She pressed her ear to his chest and held him tight, and he reciprocated.

"I missed you so much..." Sarah said, her words turning to sobs as she cried into him.

"It's only been 6 hours since I last saw you."

"It felt like an eternity." Sarah gripped his torso as hard as she possibly could. "So much has happened."

"It seems as if your interface hasn't been recording in that time, so I'm afraid I don't have any information on what you've been through." Hugo guided Sarah back to the bed. Still holding her in his arms, they sat down on the edge of the mattress.

"We were on the expedition, in that long corridor, when... everything went black." Sarah shuddered as she leaned into Hugo's side. "It was terrible, almost like I was sleeping, but I couldn't wake up. I thought I was dead, and I couldn't stop thinking... seeing... terrible things."

"It's okay, darling, it's over now."

"I'm... not sure that it is." Sarah closed her eyes, but

gripped Hugo firmly to make sure he was still there. Hugo was confused.

"What do you mean? Do you believe you're still dreaming?"

"Not necessarily." The thought again made Sarah shiver.

"I'm afraid they might keep doing it if I don't comply."

"You're talking about the Apollon Security Commission? Hijacking a person's interface to deny a person access to their own body and senses, that's a pretty high crime."

"They insisted it wasn't them, that it was the security company that was hired for the expedition."

"That was Mithril Forge Security, based out of Ares. Would you like me to contact an attorney?"

"Yes, please do, but I am not ready to pursue that just yet. There are more pressing matters."

"The reason why you were removed from the expedition, I imagine?"

"I'm surprised you haven't already figured it out. It's probably been all over the news." Sarah said. Hugo paused for a moment.

"The assassination here on Apollon? I find it hard to believe that you had anything to do with it."

"Well, did you see images of the suspected assassin?"

"Yes, a young woman with prosthetic arms, said to be sent by Athenon." Hugo said. Sarah looked up at him with an

incredulous look.

"She doesn't look familiar...?"

"I'm afraid not, I've never had contact with her."

"That's my sister, the one I told you about like, yesterday."

"That's Sophie?"

"Yeah! How could you not recognize that?"

"Her name and identity have not yet been officially released."

"But... she's my identical twin."

"You may have been identical following your conception, but there has been 28 years of changes between the two of you, changes that most facial recognition software easily picks up on." Hugo explained. Sarah was dumbstruck, and Hugo, recognizing her confusion, brought her back on topic. "So, the ASC mistook you for your sister?"

"Well... no, actually. They want me to contact her. They want me to convince her to come back to Apollon for questioning."

"That is... quite the request."

"How in the hell do they expect me to do that? I didn't even know she was alive until like 10 minutes ago, now she's an interplanetary fugitive in the middle of a conflict that could lead to war!" As Sarah spoke, she became more agitated and

louder. "I mean, she's the one that wanted to be a fucking bond-style super spy, all I wanted to do was see some cool alien buildings!"

"Did you get to see any cool alien buildings?"

"Yeah... I did... You were there, wha-" As Sophie spoke, she realized what had happened. "Aah, they blocked or erased your memory of the expedition." She shook her head and rested her face in her hands. "The whole things been classified, and they won't give me clearance until I do this for them."

"I understand that you want this, but I do want to point out that you still have options. You are not under arrest or being detained. You can return home to Hecatoncheires, and if the expedition makes findings of alien structures as you claim, I believe it will be public knowledge soon enough, and you are still the foremost expert in the field."

"You make a fair point, Hugo." Sarah said, reaching up to give him a kiss. "But it's not just the expedition. if I don't do it, how long will it be before somebody mistakes me for her, with her face plastered all over everything? Plus, it's my sister! She's alive, and now I'm being given an opportunity to speak with her, maybe even in person. But... what if she did do it?" Sarah's mind was starting to run away with scenarios. Hugo let her continue uninterrupted. "What if they've just turned my sister into a cold-blooded killing machine? What if... Do you

think she could try to kill me?

"I'm afraid I don't have enough information to make a determination like that." Hugo said. "I think you should consider procuring a weapon if you think that may be the case."

"I hate to say it... but that's not a bad idea. Could you send a request to the ASC?"

"Sure thing. It sounds like you've made your decision."

"I think I have..." Sarah drifted off into silence.

"So... how are you going to do it?" Hugo asked. Sarah didn't respond, as she had pulled up Sophie's contact information, and was just staring at her number. Hugo respected her silence, gently wrapping his arms around her and holding her hands. Sarah considered sending an extended video or voice message, or writing out a wall of text. She wondered how formal she should be, and even started writing out a script, which was inevitably deleted and re-started several times before she ultimately landed on the message prompt. Finally, she decided on something.

>S1: Hey.

Chapter Seven

Sophie just wanted to sleep. It was something she had always loved, and generally had no trouble doing. But, now, every time she closed her eyes, she saw the horror that was Violet's brutal death, and when she opened her eyes again, the serene setting and the sexy companions trying to distract her did nothing to alleviate the pain she was feeling. She felt like a hollow shell, just sitting in the poolside chair, waiting for the next thing to happen. After an indeterminate amount of time, something did.

A message popped up saying that Lieutenant General Ramindar Sangwan was joining her session. She didn't register the words for a moment, but upon reading it a couple of times, her training kicked in. She immediately swiped away the companions, causing them to vanish, and stood up from her seat to stand at attention. She had never been visited by a commanding officer in a digital environment before and wasn't sure if there was any difference in etiquette. When the Lieutenant General spawned, Sophie raised her hand to her head in salute.

"Special Agent Sophie Donner." General Sangwan stepped toward her, looking down into her eyes. He wasn't generally known for his cheerful demeanor, but his scowl was particularly more serious than Sophie had remembered.

"Sir, yes sir!" She hadn't barked in years, but in the formidable presence of her former drill instructor and mentor, she was able to slip back into it like a glove. General Sangwan matched her salute, and they both lowered their hands.

"Be at ease, Agent Donner, if you can." General Sangwan said. His voice was both assertive and somehow calming. She tried to relax. The General glanced down, then back up at her with a deadpan expression. "But, maybe, don't get too comfortable."

It was only in that moment that Sophie realized she had been dropped into the simulation in a very revealing swimsuit that was decidedly less comfortable in the company of authority. She pulled up her cosmetics menu and quickly changed to a dark formal dress, complimenting the style of the general's attire. The General didn't exactly smile, but Sophie could infer his approval all the same. He turned away from her and walked toward a small poolside table. He pulled one of the chairs out and motioned toward it.

"Please, have a seat." He spoke. As Sophie sat down, so did the General in the seat next to hers. A cigar and a flip lighter appeared in the air in front of him. He grabbed them, then put the cigar to his lips and lit it. After it was sufficiently started, he pulled on it and inhaled deeply as he leaned back in the chair and let out a long, cathartic breath.

"As I'm sure you could imagine, many things have happened in the past few hours. First off, your body is in an infirmary on Athenon. You are in good condition save for dehydration and a few cuts and scrapes. You've also been cleaned and re-dressed."

"Thank you, sir." Sophie said. The General nodded and took another puff on his cigar. He rolled it between his fingers as he eyed Sophie incredulously. "Am I... under arrest?"

"Your fate hasn't been decided yet, because, frankly, nobody knows quite what happened. We are in the process of reviewing the footage you captured, while at the same time trying to maintain diplomatic relations."

"So, then, what happens now?"

"Now, you're going to be presented before an emergency tribunal, of which I am a chair. As your mission has come to an end, the tribunal will also be a debrief of sorts. You will be questioned regarding the events, and whether you want to or not, you'll assist in finding a resolution as well."

"I want to help, I do. I just..." Sophie nervously pulled at the fabric of her pants. "Are they going to make me watch the footage again?" Sophie's anxiety didn't go unnoticed by the General.

"I'm afraid it can't be helped..." General Sangwan said, "but I'll do what I can to keep it at a minimum." He took another drag, observing Sophie's dour reaction. "You really got

close, didn't you?"

Silence was Sophie's response. Beneath the pain of her lover's death, she felt no small amount of humiliation. She had fallen into a trope as old as time. In as many books, movies, television shows, and video games about spies that she's played, it seemed that one thing was common; you don't fall in love with your target. It never seemed to have a happy ending. She was even told by colleagues, and it was drilled into her head in training. She was even selected for active duty partly on her callous attitude toward love, affection, and general human connection.

"I didn't think I had... I didn't know..." Sophie looked down at her lap, and even though her avatar produced no tears, the General could see her heartache. He reached over and gripped Sophie's hand in a comforting gesture, holding it for a few moments. He had no words to impart, but Sophie felt the gesture was enough.

"The Tribunal will be meeting any moment now, are you ready?"

"Do I need time to get dressed? I'm not even sure where my body is right now."

"In the interest of time and practicality, this will be done digitally." The General said. Sophie was surprised, but had no objections. The General pulled his hand back, and took one

last deep drag on his cigar, then despawned it. "I will see you shortly." He said, then disappeared himself.

Sophie was alone again. She stood up from her seat and began walking around the pool. She still felt numb, but after a short break from reality, she was now able to prepare herself mentally for what comes next. She paced for a few minutes, taking slow, calming breaths before she received a notification requesting her presence in a private meeting. It was a courtesy Sophie hadn't expected. She accepted the request.

The mountainside resort faded away, and suddenly Sophie was in a dark empty void, empty except for a dozen shadowed figures before her, and over a hundred onlookers surrounding them. The location was an extreme case of utilitarian design, with the only skeuomorphic element being a floating chair in front of Sophie, which vanished from sight as soon as she took a seat. The tribunal, she assumed, were the twelve sitting in front of her, their importance emphasized by being physically larger and elevated higher than herself, but also being the only ones in the room that were titled, reading Chairs One through Twelve. When the first chair began speaking, a disembodied light began pulsing at the location where the forms mouth would be.

"Please state your name and date of birth for the record."

"Sophie Donner, July 18th, 2033."

"Would you tell us a little about your time on Earth?"

"Okay..." Sophie hesitated; this wasn't exactly the line of questioning she was expecting. "I was born to a couple in North America, who's names I'm not really sure of..." As she spoke, she could see contextual images and text being presented to her and, she assumed, to the Tribunal and gallery. A few images of her biological parents appeared with their names displayed underneath. She opted not to speak them and continued. "They both passed away to drug overdose shortly after, and my sister and I went to foster care until we graduated high school and turned 18."

"In brief, how would you characterize your experience in the North American Foster System?"

"Uhh... It was... fine..."

"You do not need to mince words here. We have little affiliation with the governments of Old Earth." Said the First Chair. Sophie shifted in her invisible seat, noticeably uncomfortable discussing it.

"It was... unpleasant. I'm just glad I wasn't alone."

"You're referring to your sister, is that correct?"

"Yes." Sophie wanted to address the chair properly, but wasn't sure the etiquette in this scenario, so she skipped it entirely. "That is correct."

"Could we have your sister's name please?" The Fourth Chair asked.

"Sarah Donner." Sophie said, and a few images of her appeared in her vision. Sarah's image caught her off guard.

"I understand that you two went separate ways when you left Earth. That she went to Apollon to pursue a career in science, to help in the search for the Observers."

"That is true."

"Twin sisters separated by ten thousand light years? It must have been difficult."

"Yes... It was..."

"Even more so after you went into deep cover, I imagine?" The Third Chair said. Sophie looked down at her lap and clenched her fists.

"Y-yes, that is correct." Sophie said. She now had an idea of the next line of questions.

"Have you attempted contact with Sarah Donner since you've been in deep cover, anonymously or otherwise?"

"No, I have not." Sophie said with confidence.

"Did you seek out any information about Sarah Donner since you've been in deep cover?"

"No, I haven't." Sophie said, only this time it was a lie. Often in times of stress, boredom, or loneliness, she would seek out news articles with any details about Sarah, and she was well read on every one of her published papers, however dry Sophie found the subject matter to be. This was generally frowned upon

for agents in deep cover, so Sophie decided not to disclose that information. As an entire planetary community built around intelligence gathering, Sophie was pretty sure the Tribunal already knew.

"You may be happy to know that our most recent reports indicate your sister is alive and in good health." The Seventh Chair said. Sophie blew a sigh of relief, but the Third Chair continued.

"However, we have reason to believe that she may be in danger and could have some involvement in recent events."

"W-what?" Sophie was shocked by the information. "How? They can't have mistaken her for me, right? What do you mean 'involvement'?"

"We will go into further detail later, but first, we want to discuss your mission on Apollon. Would you inform the Tribunal of what that mission was?"

"My mission was to gather intelligence regarding the development or production of weaponry based on Observer Technology."

"How did you go about carrying out that mission?"

"I made personal relationships with a number of researchers and politicians, most recently integrating myself into the life of Violet Hodges, Chief Operating Officer of The Organization for Research and Design on Apollon."

"You have spent more than six years on this mission. In that time, have you seen any evidence indicating illegal OTech weapons development?"

"No, I have not. All intel that I had gathered that may have been related was also sent back to Athenon for analysis, though I never received word if any of it was actionable."

There was a moment of silence. Sophie could see several of the Chairs turn to each other, appearing to have a conversation she could not hear. They seemed to be surprised or confused at the information.

"Did you have reason to believe your cover may have been compromised at any point during your mission?"

"No. Not until a few hours before the... the incident."

"Describe what it was that made you feel compromised, please."

"It was shortly after check-in and maintenance at my cell's safehouse." As Sophie spoke, she saw a video scrubbing through the previous day's events. For a brief moment as the video started, she saw a few frames of her last intimacy with Violet. She felt embarrassed, but none of the tribunal or gallery seemed to notice or care. Sophie continued. "I was working my cover job as a barista within Apollon City Tower when Misty Hodges, the wife of my target, arrived in the storefront." The video began playing the described events in real-time.

"You reported this encounter to your cells mirror. What made you think that it was more than a coincidence?"

"The Mirror thought it might be a coincidence too. I was already surprised to see Misty in my store, as it's quite a detour between the docks she had supposedly just arrived at, her regular business, and her home. Then, when she started speaking to me, I had the feeling that she knew much more about me than she should have." Sophie said. "In hindsight, I'm very glad that I did. If I hadn't done that, I think this conversation would be very different, if we would be having it at all."

"You are referring to the interstellar media reporting that you are responsible for Violet Hodges' death, that you are an assassin."

"Yes, that is correct."

"It is true..." The Second Chair interjected. "Had you not reported your encounter with Misty, it is likely that you would have been deactivated, and your body left on Apollon. If you ever meet your mirror again, you may want to thank her for supporting you."

"We did, in fact, analyze the footage sent back to us." The Eighth Chair spoke up. "Interestingly, while the woman you encountered passed all internal digital identification, facial recognition failed at every point of her route since she was on Hephaestus, where her body was later found. Suffice it to say,

you were speaking with an imposter, and as forthcoming evidence will show, an imposter the likes of which we have never seen.” When the Eighth Chair finished speaking, the Second Chair picked up from there.

“On that note, let’s move onto the incident in question.” The video scanned through to pick up as Sophie was approaching Violet’s house. Sophie’s demeanor immediately changed. She was frozen as the video began to play, but just as her past self was about to enter, the video paused.

“There is no benefit to have her sit through the experience again.” The Seventh Chair said. “She is clearly traumatized. Watching it unfold again will not help her recount events in a calm and collected manner.” The reason seemed more pragmatic than concern for her wellbeing, but Sophie wanted to thank the Chair all the same. The video was removed from her vision. “Please, Agent Donner, continue.”

“I had received a message from Violet, in distress, worried as her wife had not arrived per schedule, nor had contact with her for a day prior. She wanted me to meet her at her house.”

“You contacted the Mirror again after this interaction and showed some reservations about the situation. You even stated, and I quote, ‘It seems very fucky to me’. Why did you ultimately decide to go back to Ms. Hodges house if you felt something was off?”

"I'm... I uhh..." Sophie scoured her mind for an answer that wasn't 'I was in love with her'. "I contacted the Mirror for direction. She could have told me to stop."

"She did, in fact, tell you to stop." Chair Twelve said. "She told you to hold position and wait for orders while you were outside Ms. Hodges residence."

"I-I heard a scream." Sophie said, the pressure beginning to grow. "Violet... My target was in danger. I thought the mission would be in jeopardy should anything happen to her."

"The mission was jeopardized the moment you disobeyed a direct order." The Fourth Chair said. "And I hate to say it, but your intervention failed to save Ms. Hodges anyway."

Sophie had no response. She was now reconsidering her actions. If she hadn't gone inside, Violet still would have died. Sophie may have been framed for the murder just by being in the vicinity, but at least she wouldn't have had to stare into her eyes as it happened.

"We aren't here to discuss what should have been done, and there will be plenty of time later to discuss punitive action." The Seventh Chair said. "For now, please continue your description of events."

"Okay." Sophie said. "After hearing the scream, I went inside the residence and found... Ms. Hodges, with a freshly slit throat. She came and collapsed on me, and I helped her to

the ground, then looked around to find how it happened, where I saw Misty Hodges standing in the same room." She couldn't see the video itself, but she could see the silent fervor of the gallery upon seeing it the first time. "I tried to move to her, but Violet held me and pulled me back down. I must have looked away for a second, but when I looked back, she was gone."

"Not gone." Said the Twelfth chair. "After completing a thorough spectroscopic analysis of the footage, the woman appears to have a near perfect cloaking ability, even in infrared and ultraviolet wavelengths." This was met by another round of excited movement from the other Chairs and the gallery. "Furthermore, this is not a piece of wearable tech, but a piece of biotech implanted directly into her skin, or..." There was a pause from the speaking chair that seemed to trail on. They were clearly hesitant about continuing with their second hypothesis.

"Or... what?" The First Chair asked.

"Or... It could be... a natural mechanism, similar to that of the cephalopods back on Old Earth." There was visual confusion across the entire space. Sophie, too, was unsure of what she had just heard.

"Are you suggesting that this may be the product of gene-editing?" Chair Three asked.

"No. Not exactly. We don't expect anyone to have that level of technology for another century, and the amount of funding and

development required to be able to do it now, we would have seen something."

"So, then, what are you saying? Clearly, it's possible, because we're seeing it."

"The prevailing theory among our analysts is that Misty Hodges was replaced by an intelligent non-terrestrial entity, one that knows much more about humanity than we know about it." The Twelfth Chair's words again caused a visible stir among the gallery and other Chairs.

"You can't be seriously referring to 'Reptilians'...?" The Fourth Chair said with an incredulous tone that was shared in the body language of most onlookers in the space. Even Sophie cringed in her seat at hearing the word. "In case you hadn't noticed, this is an urgent situation we are dealing with. There is no time for ridiculous jokes or garbage science."

"Yes, I will admit that it sounds... absurd, but many of those in this very room may still remember a time when 'Unidentified Flying Objects' and the idea of intelligent extra-terrestrials visiting Old Earth was considered pseudoscience and was derided by the larger scientific community. Reptilians, shape-shifters, and otherworldly imposters have been a part of folklore in most cultures on Earth for millennia, just like the Observers. They were even significant parts of many Asian mythologies, known to them as

the Naga."

"The Lord of the Rings, Star Wars, and the Avengers are also considered culturally significant, but that does not make them factual or scientifically accurate in any way. Do you actually expect us to believe in Lizard People?"

"I don't expect anyone to believe anything. I expect you to look at the facts as they are presented and consider the possibilities that those facts imply. It is a fact that intelligent non-terrestrial organisms exist. We have known that for 40 years now. It is a fact that the kind of biological camouflage we are witnessing in this footage is common to hundreds of discovered species throughout our galaxy, including on our own home world. Now, we do not know for a fact that what we are seeing is non-human, but whatever it is, clearly, it is trying to start an interstellar conflict, and if we don't explore this hypothesis and refuse to let it inform our decisions going forward, we could be making a mistake that could spell doom for our planet." The Twelfth chair's words were met this time with an audible uproar from several of the other Chairs speaking at once.

"This is absurd!" Said the Fourth Chair.

"Why are we allowing this pseudoscience into the Tribunal?" The Ninth Chair said.

"It's more plausible than the Apophis Faction getting

billions in funding and advancing biomedical technology by a century." The Seventh Chair said.

"This is tantamount to fearmongering!" Said the Third Chair.

"Fearmongering? This is not a public session!" The Twelfth Chair said.

As the Tribunal argued over each other Sophie sat silently and accessed the footage from her first interaction with Misty. She pulled into the full stereoscopic view to experience it just as she did in that moment and paused when she saw the woman smile at her. It sent chills down her spine. Now she knew why it frightened her out so much. It wasn't Misty's twin. It wasn't a clone, or some surgery skinjob. Sophie realized she was staring into the face of a hostile alien being that was baring its teeth at her. Her reason was still trying to deny it, but her instinct was telling her all along that something was terribly wrong with the woman.

Sophie continued staring into the woman's... the creature's face. She stared at it, allowing herself to explore and identify the terror instilled in her. Gradually, the fear was giving way to fury. As she focused on the monster, the Tribunal's conversation continued without her, still considering whether they were going to acknowledge the existence of this kind of being.

"Whether or not this thing is human, what is clear is they have the ability to imitate a person to such a degree as to be indistinguishable to human eyes. If it is also to be believed that there is more than this one, and they have been among us for a significant amount of time, than it follows with the last communication we received from our operator on Apophis before they executed him, that he was framed, similar to Agent Donner here."

"If that is true, then the Apophis Faction and it's rebellion were created under false pretenses."

"There's not much we can do about it with what little proof that we have, if you could even call it that."

"Then what can be done?"

"This requires a much more in-depth investigation." Said the Twelfth Chair. "And we can start with the aforementioned Dr. Sarah Donner." The Chair's use of her sister's name brought Sophie back to reality.

"What about her?"

"According to recent reports, the past few days have been pretty exciting for her as well." The Tenth Chair said. "After the discovery of an ancient, abandoned structure of intelligent design, she was selected to lead the first expedition team. Access to the site and information regarding it was lightly restricted to a few scientists, but shortly after the expedition

started, everything surrounding it became highly classified, and Dr. Donner was given the highest security clearance possible within the ORD. However, it seems that her expedition was cut short and she was recalled to Apollon. We believe this could be a reaction to the incident with Ms. Hodges."

"Whether or not she found anything related to the incident or this supposed creature," The Eighth Chair said, with a contemptuous tone that carried through the digital obfuscation of their voice, "Her security clearance would make her an incredibly valuable asset."

"Are you talking about capturing her?" Sophie said, concerned about what she was hearing.

"Not in such ugly terms. We understand that she's not so motivated by political discourse. Perhaps, if the right person were to speak with her, she may come with little convincing."

Sophie knew what they were asking, but she was uneasy with the idea, but she was also starting to understand the reason they were even speaking to her. She was still useful, and in this moment, she wasn't sure how they would react if she refused.

"How do you expect I should do that? I'm literally dead to her."

"Not anymore. I'm sure that she is well aware of your continued existence by now. As for making contact with her, we

have resurrected your former digital identity. Dr. Donner's has not changed. It is up to you how you do it, but I might recommend setting up a physical meeting at a neutral location."

After hearing that she again had access to her old accounts, Sophie noticed that the small unread message counter in one corner of her interface suddenly read in the thousands. She couldn't resist taking a look at a few. There were messages from more than one recognized world government authorities, a request for comment from the Interstellar Transport Commission, but the bulk of the messages were from media outlets and individuals who seemed split between condemnation and praise.

Sophie considered asking what the incentive was for her to do this but thought better of it. In the least, she has the opportunity to see her sister again, something she had come to expect would never happen. At the moment, she wasn't sure whether this was a request, an order, or maybe even extortion. She agreed to proceed, nonetheless. The rest of the Tribunal consisted of working out logistics and revisiting the previous subjects in a much more systematic manner. Sophie was kicked from the room before they continued in any sort of technical detail.

Returning to her physical body was slightly jarring. Sophie was laying in nothing but a hospital gown, on a cot and connected to a saline drip. Her small cuts and bruises had been

treated and as such, they felt better than they did a few hours before, but the transition from the pain being digitally blocked was still unpleasant. She pulled the IV from the port in her arm and stood up beside the bed. She donned her clothes found on a nearby shelf and stepped outside of her private curtained area, meeting a large, fully armed and armored police escort. Sophie froze as she looked at them, unsure of their intention until they silently waived Sophie forward.

Exiting the infirmary, Sophie was guided to a nearby hotel room. Her escort remained outside, and once inside, she moved to sit on the edge of the bed. Even though her body had been sedentary for several hours, she still felt exhausted. She opened her messaging app and pulled up Sarah's contact information. Sure, Sophie was already somewhat familiar with what she currently looked like, but now that she was allowed to freely interact with her, something felt different. She pulled up her most recent profile pictures, and as she looked at them, Sophie thought about all the things she had been dying to tell her since she went into deep cover. For years, anytime Sophie was privy to any level of intrigue, often her first thought would be 'what would Sarah think?'

In particular, Sophie wanted to gossip about the new love in her life, forgetting for a moment that it was already over. The image forced its way back into Sophie's mind. She shook her

head as if it would help and shot up from the bed to start pacing the small room. She tried to focus on her job, opening the messages app and selecting her sister's contact. She then proceeded to stare at the empty text field as she continued pacing. She began writing a greeting that evolved into an apology but was disheartened when it became a wall of text longer than any single message she's ever written. She deleted it and started over but found herself doing the same thing again. After over an hour passed and over a kilometer paced in the tiny room, Sophie was no closer to an acceptable message. She tumbled onto the bed and held her brow in frustration.

Sophie wanted to give up. She wasn't even sure she wanted to get back in contact with her sister. She wondered whether keeping Sarah out of this mess was the preferable option. She wasn't sure what MI's plans were. She was also unsure exactly what the other side, the ORD, were doing in this situation. Sophie closed her eyes and laid in the silence for a moment before she heard the chime of an incoming message.

>S1: Hey.

She felt a chill run down her spine and a familiar warmth in equal measure. She knew just how to respond, she just had to wait a few seconds for the next data packets to be sent and received.

>S2: Hey.

>S1: It's been a while

>S2: Yeah... Sorry about that. Work stuff, you know lol

>S1: I kindof gathered haha

>S2: I guess you've seen the news?

>S1: Yeah...

>S2: I should probably start by saying that I didn't do it,
for what it's worth.

>S1: It's worth a lot, but I didn't think you did in the
first place.

>S1: In fact, I think we should meet so we can talk about
it in person.

>S2: Sure thing. There's a lot I want to tell you, and this
delay really isn't doing anything for me.

>S1: lol same.

>S2: Where do you think we should meet?

>S1: It seems things may have frozen over, wouldn't you
say?

>S2: I suppose so.

>S1: In that case, I'll see you in Hell.

Chapter Eight

After spending years under an artificial sky, or no sky at all, Sarah had forgotten what it was like to be outside without a suit. A soft gust of unfiltered, undirected, fresh air brushed across her bare face and through her hair, eliciting a smile from her lips. She took a deep breath. The smell of pollen, animals, dirt, and moisture mixed to create a pleasant scent. She could even still smell the ashes of the long-burnt remains of her old childhood home. As she sat on a bench, one of the few remaining objects that wasn't burnt to the ground, she looked around at the ruins behind her. She had expected the building to have been re-built, so she felt restrained delight to find it in its current state.

Sitting there, she was starting to realize that there were things that she missed about the place, like the colors in the sky as Sol sets under the clouds and beyond the horizon. The bright red mixed with deep purple clouds with pink lining, gradually turning into a dark blue across the sky. She had seen several different worlds with her own eyes, and many more through digital representations, but nothing seemed to compare to the sunsets on Earth.

"You seem pretty relaxed." Hugo said, taking a seat on the bench next to Sarah.

"Yeah, I suppose I am. For the moment, at least." Sarah took another deep breath as another gentle breeze drifted past her.

"It's not quite what I expected given your description of this place."

"I hated this place so much, but after being gone for 10 years, I've come to realize that it wasn't the place that I had a problem with."

"Discomfort by association?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure. Though, the heat during late summer really sucked too. Although..." Sarah put a finger to her chin, focusing on the few rosy memories. "There's nothing quite like swimming in a lake or having an ice cream on a hot day."

"I seem to remember you enjoying iced cream during the heatsink ejection failure on Hecatoncheires a few years ago."

"Yeah, I do remember that. That was different though, I guess by being in an enclosed space, or maybe the humidity or airflow or something, I dunno."

"It's interesting that your environment could have such an impact on the enjoyment of your meals. It sounds nice."

"It is, but I guess food is a bit of a mystery to you in the first place."

"So is joy, if I'm being honest."

"Nonsense! You're always as happy as a jellyfish since the

industrial revolution!"

"That's a fair comparison considering Jellyfish are also incapable of feeling emotion."

"Alright, Hugo?" Sarah said, rolling her eyes. "You have instructions that inform what emotions to display and when based on external input. It's not so different to how it works for humans. However, you have the benefit of not having your emotions influence your decision making."

"There are plenty of cases where I can see that being a benefit. Fear, for example, is there to save your life."

"My life, yes, but how useful is fear to a being that can't exactly die?" Sarah paused for a moment. Hugo didn't have an answer. Sarah wanted to try something. In her interface, she scrolled through menus to her companion settings "You may not necessarily be considered alive to begin with, but what if I let my cursor hover over the delete button here?" In reality, the cursor came close, but she was too afraid to let it even touch the button.

"No. Please, don't." Hugo said in a decidedly monotonous and uninterested tone.

Sarah giggled at his joking demeanor, but while the question didn't seem to phase Hugo, Sarah was now thinking about it. He was usually happy, but Sarah had seen a range of emotions portrayed by him, though she wasn't quite sure if fear was

something he could display. Maybe it was part of what she liked about him, but something about lacking a sense of self preservation seemed off to her.

"What if I did, though... what would happen to you?"

"I think I know you pretty well, and I'm reasonably sure that you wouldn't do that. But, if you did, well, it wouldn't really be all that difficult to get me back. I might be missing some contextual information, but for all intents and purposes, all of the data that I am based around is still available online, or in your interface. If you truly wanted to kill me and make it so I can't come back, you would also have to get rid of a non-insignificant amount of your personal data."

"You wouldn't try and stop me?"

"I couldn't stop you even if I wanted to."

"Oh, c'mon, I'm a pacifist. All it would really take to stop me from killing you is 'Please, don't'."

"I did say that though."

"Ugh, well..." Sarah again rolled her eyes. "I mean, you were clearly joking. The concept of ceasing to exist really doesn't bother you?"

"No... Does it bother you?"

"Yeah! Of course it does!" Sarah said with exasperation.

"But you didn't exist for more than thirteen billion years, and even if you live to be two hundred years old, you will stop

existing for billions of years yet."

"Okay, well, if I live to be two hundred years old, I think I'll be alright with the whole ceasing to exist thing."

"What's your issue with it right now?"

"Hmm... well, if I died right now, I think it would suck to not be able to see my sister again. I'd also really like to get back to the expedition."

"I'm sure the expedition will go ahead with or without you."

"It's not that I'm afraid the expedition won't happen. I'm afraid that I won't get to experience it."

"So, you just want to keep living for the anticipation of having new experiences?" Hugo asked. The question made Sarah laugh.

"It's interesting that you can take such an integral concept regarding life and make it seem petty and selfish. It's not like I don't care about my fellow living beings or anything other than my own experiences."

"Why did you decide to pursue a career in research and analysis instead of, for example, a career in medicine?"

"Frankly, that's kind of your job now. The need for doctors has been in steady decline in proportion to the number of cerebral interface implants. In the fields of diagnostics, surgery, drug synthesis and treatment, computers have been much

more effective than humans for decades."

"You might say the same about your field as well."

"That is fair. The difference is that I have a much easier time focusing on details related to xeno-archeology that people outside of the field would find uninteresting. And even though it's not medicine, that doesn't mean that it isn't beneficial to humanity. At the heart of what I do is a thirst for information that adds to the collective knowledge of our species, knowledge which could help us prosper."

Their chat continued, shifting from Sarah's career to philosophy and the difference in psychology between humans and machines. It was a half-hour before the conversation began to wind down, and Sarah began to wonder whether her sister would ever show up. The burnt and warped bench was starting to dig in to her behind. She stood up and began pacing around the front of the building's remains.

"Do you think this is a trap?" Hugo asked.

"I don't... think so?" Sarah said.

"You don't seem very confident in that answer."

"Well, I hadn't really thought about it until now, but if some ninja's jump out of the dark and try to take me, I guess I'll just have to blast 'em all!" Sarah took what she thought was a cool combat pose, hovering her hand over the pistol that was tucked into her pants at the small of her back. She then

brought her hands forward and shot finger guns at Hugo.

"That's some excellent form you have there!"

Sarah felt shivers shoot down her spine as she heard the woman's voice coming from behind Hugo. Sarah leaned around him and saw Sophie standing on the pathway. After so many years apart, the sight of her sister giggling filled Sarah with unimaginable happiness. For a moment, her body didn't seem to want to respond to her urge to rush at her sister, but when it finally did, it was with the grace of someone who hadn't run since high school. She pushed Hugo out of the way, but then lost her balance and stumbled forward until she crashed into her sister, knocking them both to the ground.

Sophie didn't care. Their embrace was warm and they both found themselves tearing up as they held each other tightly against the ground. They laid on the ground for a while, quietly sniffing until the wave of overwhelming emotion began to recede.

"Alright, that's enough." Sophie said with a stern voice while also wiping her tears away as they separated from each other. Sophie rose to her feet first and lightly dusted her pants, then offered a hand to Sarah. She grabbed her sister's hand and was effortlessly pulled up to standing. Sarah didn't let go after getting to her feet, instead, twisting Sophie's arm to expose the scars running from her hand to her elbow.

"What, our skin wasn't good enough for you?" Sarah said. Sophie looked at the lines and traced them with her finger.

"It is still our skin, actually. There's just some extra stuff inside, and I didn't have the opportunity to properly treat the seal." Sophie responded. They began walking along the long-neglected stone path in front of the ruined building.

"So... how have you been?" Sophie asked, unsure of how else to greet someone she hadn't seen in a decade.

"I've been great!" Sarah said, as her mind immediately went to her expedition. "I mean... aside from the past few days, I suppose."

"Oh, yeah... I guess that's kind of my fault... Sorry."

"It's not a big deal!" Sarah said with a laugh, doing her best to downplay the situation. As they walked, Sarah leaned back and forth to inspect the rest of her sister's body.

"Woow!" She said. "You look great!"

"Thanks!" Sophie said with a giggle and a blush. "You're not looking so bad yourself!" Sophie's words made Sarah nervously turn away and hide her face.

"Oh, stop it, c'mon!" Sarah said, blindly slapping at Sophie's arm.

"I'm not joking! You look amazing!" Sophie thought her sister might die from embarrassment. She continued, nonetheless. "Whatever it is, you're doing something right."

"I think I have Hugo to thank for that..." Sarah said after coming out of her embarrassed coma.

"Hugo? That's your husband, right?" Sophie asked with genuine confusion, as she already knew the fate of Hugo, but didn't quite understand how he was to thank for Sarah's physique. She didn't want to reveal just how closely she had been following her sister's goings-on. "How's he doing?"

"He's uhh..." Sarah paused. She suddenly regretted mentioning Hugo at all. She was feeling a much more real embarrassment than a moment ago, afraid of what her sister might think. "He died." Sarah said bluntly. "Years ago, he died. And I had a hard time dealing with it, so I... I designed a companion based on him."

Sophie was silent for a moment and Sarah could only blush and glance in Sophie's direction. Sophie had known about Hugo's demise but had no idea about the companion part. It was a little awkward, especially since the only experiences that Sophie had had with companions was entirely sexual. It wasn't something she was keen on imagining her sister doing, but she wasn't quite sure what else to say, except...

"Do you think I could... meet him?" Sophie asked, but she was immediately regretting it, her head already filled with ideas about her sister's sex life that she didn't care to think about. Sarah smiled, feeling a modicum of acceptance, though the

smile was interpreted differently her sister. Sophie received a request by Sarah's companion to manipulate her sensory data. Chills ran down Sophie's spine, and she took a subtle, decompressing breath and braced before she agreed to allow it access to all of her senses.

Hugo appeared to Sophie, standing next to Sarah. Sophie expressed relief when she saw that he was fully clothed and had the general proportions of an average human. He wasn't an over-edited Adonis, and for that, Sophie was thankful.

"Sophie, this is my husband, Hugo." Sarah said, gesturing between them. "Hugo, this is my twin sister, Sophie!"

"It's a pleasure to meet you!" Hugo said, extending his palm in greeting. Sophie gripped his hand.

"Likewise!"

"I've heard a lot about you, and not just in the past couple of days."

"I've heard about you too, but it was a long time ago, and I suppose it wasn't exactly... you." Sophie said, then turned to Sarah. "You know... he is pretty cute now that I see him in person. Is this really what he looked like?"

"I sometimes update his hair and beard style, and sometimes I do some temporary... physique changes... but except for that, he's exactly as he was. His body is, anyway." Sarah said, gripping Hugo's arm as she spoke about him.

Sophie watched the way they looked at each other. It wasn't a look of depraved, animalistic lust like she would expect from a relationship with an interfacial companion. At least, not more than any other normal, healthy relationship. It was a look that she recognized and empathized with, as she had felt the same thing recently.

"Did it... Does it help?" Sophie asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well... you know..." Sophie was trying to be sensitive, trying her best to not bring up unpleasant memories for Sarah, or herself. It wasn't working. "You said you did this after Hugo, umm... passed... right? Did it help?"

"Hmm..." Sarah thought as she looked into Hugo's eyes. "Yeah, I think so. Seeing his still-smiling face helps me forget what happened, but... I dunno, sometimes it does the opposite. Though, he's usually pretty good at distracting me."

"What do you mean, 'usually'?" Hugo said, feigning offense. Sarah didn't find it quite as funny this time, having experienced being locked away from him and inside her own mind. She stepped away from Hugo and focused back on her sister.

"Why do you ask?" Sarah said. Sophie looked shocked at the question, then crossed her arms and turned away. She began pacing as she considered what to say.

"Where do I even begin?" Sophie said to herself. She turned

back and walked up to Hugo. "Hey, it was nice to meet you, Hugo. Do you mind if I take a walk with Sarah?"

"Uhh..." Both Hugo and Sarah seemed a bit confused by the question. "Sure, I don't mind." Hugo said. Sarah and Sophie began walking further down the path. Sarah glanced back and saw Hugo give a shrug.

"You know, Hugo uses my eyes and ears for input..." Sarah said.

"Oh, well, whatever!" Sophie said with a nervous laugh, then another moment of silence. "So, I guess you're already aware... I'm not dead!" Sophie laughed again, an involuntary reaction to the awkwardness of the situation. "Surprise!" She said, opening her arms with emphasis. Sarah took the opportunity to step in and again embrace her sister in a tight hug. Sophie jumped at the unexpected motion, then returned the embrace.

"You know how they say that twins have a connection that transcends space?" Sarah asked. Sophie gave no response. "It's complete bullshit. It's been scientifically disproven in several studies. Even I have evidence that tears that theory to shreds." Sarah pulled herself away just enough to look into her sister's eyes. "I thought you were dead. I honestly and truly did. When I saw the casket at your funeral, I felt as if part of me died as well."

As Sarah spoke, tears flooded her eyes and began leaking

down her face, and Sophie's eyes threatened to overflow as well. Sophie tried to suppress her emotions, the way she had been trained, the way she had done for years, but now it was all too much to contain. The dam holding her insecurities back was breached by the presence of her sister. Sophie buried her face into Sarah's shoulder, gripped her tightly, and began wailing. Her cries were more powerful than any point in her life. Sarah was shocked and, frankly, terrified, as she struggled to remain standing.

"I'm sorry!" Sophie cried. "I'm so sorry! I never should have gone to Athenon! I should have stayed with you! She would still be alive! None of this would have happened!"

This was something Sarah had never expected out of the badass, foul-mouthed, ill-tempered, 'big' little sister she had grown up with. She was glad to know that Sophie was still alive, but up until that moment, Sarah was feeling no small amount of anger. But now, as she tried to quietly comfort Sophie, that anger was quickly replaced with great concern. Sarah gently guided the both of them to a nearby patch of grass where they could sit down.

"It's okay!" Sarah said, unsure of what else to say. "I'm not angry. You were following your dream! Nobody could blame you for doing that."

"No..." Sophie said, whimpering. "I was chasing a

nightmare. I just didn't know it."

"What the hell happened?" Sarah asked, letting her concern and confusion come through in her tone. Sophie gave a half-hearted laugh, still sniffing and trying to bring herself to a point where she could speak clearly.

"God, I don't really know where to begin."

"How about the part where you died?" Sarah's response again made Sophie laugh, but then bowed her head in shame.

"I really am sorry about that." Sophie looked over at Sarah's face, who was urging her to continue, but gave no indication of forgiveness. Sophie continued. "It was to allow me into... Well, I don't really know how much I'm allowed to tell you... Ahh fuck it! The mission's fucked anyway!" As Sophie spoke, she looked up into the sky as if she were talking to her MI spectators, which she reasonably assumed were there, listening and watching the whole interaction. "I was killed so that I could enter deep cover. I was sent to Apollon to replace some vagrant girl that disappeared, and begin working my way into the lives of members of ORD."

"Corporate espionage?"

"No! We didn't steal anything; we were inspectors only." Sophie said adamantly. Sarah still carried an expression of subtle disbelief. Sophie continued, even more pointedly, "and we didn't. Kill. Anyone. At least, nobody in my cell on Apollon

did. After speaking with MI leadership, I feel pretty confident that they did not order the assassinations either."

"You feel 'pretty' confident?"

"Well, I'm not an idiot. I understand how powerful MI is. I've heard the rumors of cybernetic psy-ops. I've even done some things myself that fall into a moral grey-zone, but the assassinations look like someone's trying to start a war, and I do wholeheartedly believe that is against the intentions of the Military Intelligence leadership."

"Yeah..." Sarah said. "Actually, ORD feels the same way, that MI is innocent in this. That's why I'm here in the first place... They want me to find out what happened in that house."

"They...?" Sophie thought for a moment. "The ORD, they sent you here?"

"Well, yeah. What happened was a pretty big deal." Sarah said. She looked over to see her sister looking down. "That's not to say that I wouldn't have come otherwise."

"But... are they forcing you to do this?"

Sarah didn't respond right away. She noticed her sister stepping into the protective mindset that she had seen when they were young. Her knee-jerk reaction was to placate Sophie before she became angry. "No, they aren't making me do anything." Sarah said, but also remembered how good Sarah was at spotting lies, and how bad she was at telling them.

"Did they hurt you?" Sophie asked. Sarah thought back to the hours of darkness that she was made to endure, then shook her head to quickly bring herself out of the thought and focus.

"What happened in that house?" Sarah said, redirecting. Sophie backed down from her line of questioning, and instead focused on giving context.

"I uh... so that home is... was owned by Violet Hodges, Chief Op--"

"Chief Operating Officer for ORD, yeah... I know. They said that you were her mistress... Is that true?"

"I... ummm..."

"She was a married woman... you know that, right?"

"Y-yes, I, uh..."

"I guess you knew that if she would be unfaithful to her wife, she wouldn't give a shit about her job too."

Sophie shot up from the grass and stood over Sarah, taking on a much angrier tone.

"I was in love with her!" She yelled, punctuating with a finger in Sarah's face. "Violet was a great woman, and you have no fucking idea what you're talking about!"

Sophie's outburst made Sarah recoil. She again noticed the perfectly straight scars running along Sophie's arm and remembered being told about her prosthetics by the Apollon Security Commission. Pushing her buttons, like Sarah had always

done, wasn't just threatening an ass-kicking anymore.

"Okay! Okay!" Sarah said, holding her hands up and shuffling away. "I'm sorry, you're right, I didn't know her at all." She said. Sophie took a step back to regain her composure, a near-impossible task lately. "It's just... she was married... I didn't think you went in for that kind of thing."

"I... I know... I don't... I mean... I didn't... Ugh!" Sophie dropped back down onto the grass. "Before I met her, I had worked on a few others. Filthy corpo-political psychopaths, the lot of them. At first, I thought Violet was the same. I could tell that she was keeping a secret, but after months of searching for evidence of anything nefarious, I kind of started to realize that the secret she was keeping was me." Sophie was now nervously pulling at the grass beneath her. "I even asked her about her wife.

"She said that their marriage was more of a business decision than anything, and that while she did love and care about Misty, they both understood that they would not be together often. I took that to mean that they were okay with an open relationship. After that, I started spending more time with her, getting to know her. Before I knew it, I was hanging on her every word, and giving any excuse I could to be with her. I used to think spending time with a mark was 'the job', but eventually it felt like being with her was normal life, and checking in

with my cell became 'the job'."

Sarah sat and listened to her story, only making the occasional nod to indicate she was listening. Watching Sophie's face light up when talking about Violet made Sarah smile in the same way. She recognized the feeling, and looked back down the walkway to see Hugo standing idly, pretending that he couldn't hear the conversation.

"And she was so smart! Did you notice the 90 second reduction in data transit times a few months ago?"

"Are you kidding? Data Transit is like the lifeblood of Hecatoncheires. Pretty sure there was a staffing crisis because of all the people that called in 'sick' the day that happened." Sarah laughed. Even she had taken the day off, though it wasn't really much different from any other day. She didn't even notice the reduced Data Transit time, as she spent most of the day with Hugo.

"Well, Violet came up with the algorithm that allowed that to happen."

"Really? But the Interstellar Transport Commission doesn't work for ORD, does it?"

"Nope. She sent it in as a *suggestion*." Sophie laughed. "She had never worked with the ITC or studied the I/O Dyne Systems server hub setup. She just came up with the method after getting pissed off over some confusion due to the packet delay.

She wrote it up in a weekend."

"That's... pretty impressive!"

"No kidding! She was great! And she was passionate and persistent about everything she did. She was a born leader, and was ruthless toward those that tried to take advantage of her."

"She sounds like the kind of person with a lot of enemies." Sarah said. They both sat in silence for a moment.

"I... suppose you're right. But I don't think it was really one of her enemies that did it."

"What do you mean?" Sarah asked. Sophie took a deep breath.

"I had hoped that you wouldn't have to see anything like this, but..." Sophie scrolled through her interface to find the video. Even looking at the thumbnail gave Sophie the chills. She sent the video to her sister. "Don't immerse yourself in it, I'd recommend viewing it in a flat window."

"O... okay..." Sarah received the video and opened it as cautiously as one could. Sophie opted out of watching the video with her, but could still see how far into it her sister was by the looks of horror on her face. "Jesus Christ!" She shouted, then was silent, but showed confusion as the video continued. When it came to an end, Sarah looked back at her sister. "God... that's horrible! I'm... so sorry!" She leaned over and gave Sophie a sitting hug.

"It's, uh... it's okay..." Sophie said, lying through her

teeth. The two sisters pulled apart again.

"Who was that woman?"

"That was Misty... Kind of..."

"Misty... her wife?" Sarah asked. Sophie nodded. "But... the Apollon Security Commission said that Misty's body was found, and she had been dead a while before Violet."

"Yeah, that's what MI said too. It seems that whatever I encountered was an imitation of Misty."

"What, like an assassin that replaced her? But where did she go?"

"She didn't go anywhere. She's still there in the room." Sophie said, and Sarah gave her a confused look. "There's a few overlays on the video that you can enable to see for yourself." Sophie watched her eyes dart around as she looked through the menus. A moment later, her expression changed again, but it was still a generally confused appearance.

"That's some impressive camouflage, without having to hack your eyes even." Sarah closed the video and looked back at Sophie. "Well, I think that's evidence enough that you didn't do it, but why are you giving this to me? Wouldn't it have been easier to send it to Apollon Security or something?"

Sophie didn't want to give away the answer, she wanted Sarah to find it herself, but she wasn't as well aware of the real-world limitations of stealth technology. Her idea was

influenced by films, television, and videogames, which all portrayed the tech as much more advanced than reality. Sophie needed to give her a bit more of a push in the right direction.

"There are a few different reasons, actually. The top one, for me at least, is just cause I wanna make sure you're okay!" Sophie lightly punched her sister's arm. "But, for the rest of MI, I think it's mostly about your station. You're a respected member of the greater scientific community, and if you make the same determination about the footage as we have, well, your word holds a lot more weight than ours in this matter."

"What do you mean... 'Same determination'?"

"The goal in this isn't just to clear my name. I also want to get justice for Violet, but it isn't about that either..." Sophie scrolled through her menus to find the other video, her first encounter with Misty. She sent it to Sarah, but this time Sophie didn't avoid watching along. The video played through until Misty's lips curled back into her unsettling grin. Sophie paused playback at that moment.

"God, that's fucking creepy." Sarah said with a shiver.

"So, what, am I supposed to know who she is?"

"No, that's not it either!" Sophie said. Her frustration was rising, not because Sarah didn't get it, but because she didn't know how to say it. She shook her head and took a breath, then continued. "This is about that question that's driven the

two of us for our entire lives. The question that is at the heart of everything for the last 40 years. Where are they?"

Sophie paused for a moment. She could see that Sarah was starting to understand where she was going, but still wasn't quite there. Sophie continued. "Turns out they are right here, staring us straight in the face."

A chill ran down Sarah's spine as she considered what she was hearing. She looked again at Misty's face, pulling herself into immersive mode to see her with two eyes. There was certainly something off about her, but Sarah could not pinpoint exactly what it was. She recognized the feeling of the uncanny valley, but her rational brain was still struggling to identify it as alien in nature.

"What are you saying?" Sarah asked, narrowing her eyes. "She's not human?"

"You tell me, you're the scientist here. Is there any other explanation that fits with what happened?"

"I'm an Archeologist! I can't say anything with this footage!" Sarah was starting to feel the pressure surrounding the situation. "I mean, show me an alien building and I'll give you more, which, by the way, was exactly what I was fucking doing before all this bullshit!" Her frustration was boiling over. She rose to her feet and started pacing, trying to cool off.

"I know... I'm sorry." Sophie bowed her head, feeling no small amount of shame for having been involved in the situation. Sarah noticed.

"No, it's not your fault, really. It's just... there's a lot to take in." Sarah let out an exhausted sigh, exaggerating it into a tormented moan. "I just want to go back to my damn job."

"You were looking at an alien building?"

"Yeah, I-..." Sarah's face lit up for a moment, but then she remembered that the expedition was now highly classified. She looked at her sister, who was looking up at her, almost like a child waiting for a story. Sarah let out a frustrated groan. "Aww fuck it, I don't really give a shit how 'secret' it is." Sarah again took a seat next to her sister. "Okay, so a couple of days ago, I was invited to a conference where it was revealed that some drones had found some structures on a planet, and they tapped me to be the lead for the first expedition team. God, I get chills just thinking about it now. Do you remember the first time you saw Apollon City Tower?"

"Yeah." Sophie said with a laugh. "I remember thinking 'that's big!'"

"Yeah, well these structures in the desolate band of this planet were larger at least by a factor of 5 and solid black. They also seemed to be made of something similar to plasteel's

composition."

"Could they have been the Observers?"

"No, the designs were much more angular than anything we've seen from the Observers. They could have shared technology, however, or had it gifted to them as it was to us, but the creatures themselves were definitely not related."

"Oh my God... You saw them?"

"Yeah!" Sarah shouted with joy. "I mean, not live ones. They were all dead for thousands of years. But they weren't bipedal, like the Observers. They more closely resembled Cephalopods, according to Dr. Matanzas. She's who you should be talking to."

"Cephalopods, like, snails and slugs?"

"No, those are Gastropods, I'm pretty sure. Cephalopods are like Squid, Octopus, and Cuttlefish."

"Like the crazy ones that can shapeshift to look like anything...?" Sophie said. It caught Sarah's attention. "The science team on Athenon said something about that."

"Did they say that Misty was using a similar kind of camouflage?"

"I believe so... yeah."

Sarah fell silent as she looked again at the footage of Sophie's first interaction with Misty. Her mind was working overtime trying to come up with a reasonable explanation.

"And... you're sure it's not like some top-secret, high-tech, hybrid-clone, cyborg-ninja or something?"

"Jesus Christ, I mean, I guess it could be!" Sophie stood up this time. "Anything's possible, right? Except for aliens, which everybody already knows exist!"

"I know." Sarah said, joining her sister on her feet. "It's just, it's such a big deal. I want to make sure of what it is before we make decisions that we can't come back from."

"Decisions, like what?" Sophie asked. Sarah gave no response. "While we're considering what decisions to make and when to make them, our burgeoning galactic civilization is on the brink of civil war, because nobody wants to admit that we aren't as alone in the Universe as we clearly know we're not."

Sarah didn't have a response. Her sister was making a lot of sense, but she still couldn't ignore the stigma that had been instilled into the idea. Anytime she thought the words 'shapeshifting aliens among us', she associated them with 'reptilians taking over the government' being shouted by a homeless man that hadn't taken his medication in years. Her intuition was telling her that it was wrong. That there was no way it could be true, because if it were...

"What can we do about this? I really don't think either of us are qualified to be making decisions like this." Sarah said.

"I think you're right, but it's the situation we're in. I

think the best course of action is to just give the information to the people who would use it best."

"I suppose you're talking about Military Intelligence? They already have this footage, and all they've done is sent you to give it to me."

"Not... exactly..." Sophie said. Sarah turned her head with an inquisitive gesture. "They seemed a little more interested in your status as a scientific leader."

"They said..." Sarah paused, then started laughing. "They want *me* to spy for them? Jesus, Sophie! Was your interview this easy?" Sarah laughed again. The remarks themselves weren't particularly cutting, but Sophie was becoming irritated with her jovial attitude.

"Military Intelligence is working on this on behalf of humanity!"

"You think that Apollon wouldn't? We won't just be doing it on behalf of humanity, we would make it public, and work with the rest of our species in solving this."

"What you're going to do is drive these things back into the shadows."

"How can you be sure that they aren't already on Athenon, and everywhere else, for that matter?" Sarah said. Sophie couldn't say. It was something she was already considering.

"Fuck, how can I be sure that you aren't one of them?" It was

this remark that cut Sophie to the core.

"How could you say that? You don't recognize your twin sister?"

"God dammit, Sophie! Did you forget that you were literally dead to me for 7 years?" As Sarah said it, the idea was starting to make a little more sense to her.

"Same goes for you! How do I know you're her?" Sophie yelled, though it wasn't true at all. Sophie knew she was talking to the real Sarah, even if she hadn't had a personal experience with one of these creatures. She was just trying to reflect her own pain onto her sister, a tactic that she was no longer as practiced as it was when they were children.

"This is ridiculous. ORD can whip up a genetic test and implement it galaxy-wide within days, I'm sure. We can get this sorted out within the hour." Sarah turned away from Sophie gesturing for her to follow. Sophie stood still. Sarah noticed and looked back at her.

"I can't do that."

"What? Why not?"

"I'm a *spy*. If I go back to Apollon, even if I'm cleared in the death of Violet, it was still an act of espionage. I could go to prison for years. And if the Apophis Faction catches me, they're likely to kill me on the spot."

"C'mon, none of that is true." Sarah said, lying to placate

her.

"Why not come with me?" Sophie asked, with her palm open.

"I..." Sarah thought about it for a moment. "No... I can't. If I don't go back to Apollon, I won't be able to continue my work. I don't even know where exactly it is, so Athenon wouldn't be able to take me anyway." Sarah started pacing. After a few moments, she shook her head and walked toward Sophie. "No... I'm sorry, I can't. I won't make you come with me, but I'm going back to Apollon." Sarah hugged her sister again in a warm, but brief embrace. "It really was good seeing you again, but I think it's time for me to go."

Sophie was again speechless as she watched her sister walking away, but after a moment, she spoke up.

"No, I can't let you do that. I need you to come with me." Sophie said. Sarah turned around and looked at her. "I can promise that nothing bad is going to happen. You'll be with me, and Hugo will obviously be with you too." Sophie said. In those moments, Sophie imagined what it would be like, and she smiled. She wanted to be by her side again, that way she could protect her, the way she couldn't protect violet. Sarah said nothing. She looked down at Sophie's empty hand, then turned away and continued walking. Sophie didn't like the cold shoulder and angrily reached out, grabbing Sarah's arm.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Sarah shouted with a hint of

pain as she struggled against her sister's mechanically augmented grip.

"You're coming with me!" Sophie yelled over Sarah's resistance. "I won't let it happen again!" She said, with angered determination.

There was no way out of Sophie's grip, and when she started walking the other direction, dragging Sarah along, Sarah could only think of one thing to do. With her free hand, she reached to the small of her back and produced her concealed handgun. Sarah whipped it around and pointed it toward her sister, her finger on the trigger. Sophie noticed the motion. She recognized it. She trained for it. And she reacted to it. With her left arm gripping her opponents off-hand, she redirected the gun to pointing in the sky, leaving her torso open. A fraction of a second later, the hidden blade in Sophie's right arm was firmly inside her opponent's chest.

It was as perfect a reaction as Sophie could hope for from her years of training and practice, but when her brain took the time to process what had just happened, the feeling of a successful reaction was instantly replaced by confusion and horror. She was looking into the face of Sarah, who carried a very similar expression. Then Sophie felt the warmth of her sister's blood pouring down and into her open arm. She pulled the blade from her sister's chest and pulled away from her in a

quick motion, trying to put distance between her and the situation, hoping that her mind was playing tricks on her. She had just enough time to watch Sarah reach up to find out why she couldn't breathe. When Sarah found the large wound in her center mass, she began to collapse to the ground. Sophie rushed back in and caught her before she hit the ground. Sophie looked down into her sister's face, the color fading quickly. It was happening again, but this time, it was her fault.

"W... why?" Sarah asked in a whisper, her eyes filling with tears, just as Sophie's started pouring down her face.

"I'm Sorry!" It was all that Sophie could say. Sophie gripped her sisters hand tightly and cradled her head. "I'm sorry!" She said again, her voice reduced to a nearly inaudible squeak.

Sarah could plainly see Sophie's sorrow, and how tightly it was already beginning to take hold. She dropped the gun, and brought her hand to her sister's cheek, wiping away a tear that was just followed by another. As she felt the warmth leaving her body, she was no longer concerned about anything, except for how her sister was going to go on. She saw the pain that she had carried over Hugo's death reflected in her twin sister's face. She wanted to leave her sister with as little regret as possible, though she knew it was a monumental task.

"It's okay." Sarah said, her whisper little more than a

guttural sound. "It's okay." She said again, as the last breath left her lips. She could breathe no more, but with her last bit of consciousness and strength, she mouthed 'It's okay' one more time. Just as she was fading away, Sarah saw Hugo kneel down, and place his own hand on her face. She was together with the people she loved the most, and felt it was an acceptable end. She was smiling as she died.

Sophie may as well have died in the same moment. Her mind went blank as she stared into the lifeless eyes of her twin sister. She didn't notice Hugo still standing over them, nor did she notice the new stars in Earth's night sky that were the nuclear explosions of an interstellar war breaking out between the Athenon and Apollon spectators that were observing from orbit.

THE END