

Requiem Without Sound

by Izzy Wasserstein

Introit

Evie is born into cold and silence. They know this, though they have only now gained consciousness, because their sensors report it. The memory of the station's computer, which now forms part of Evie's brain, tells them that their environment is very wrong. There should be movement. Sound. Life.

Interior scans of the station reveal the cause. A chunk of rock, 9 cm in diameter, has punctured the station's control room. Chavez was in her chair when the debris broke through, crushing her head. There was no time for her to seek the safety of the living compartment, no time for decompression or cold to kill her.

Evie has been programmed with a full suite of emotions, including empathy, and feels that a quick death was a small mercy.

Chavez died before Evie's mind had finished growing on the neural-lattice, before they became conscious.

A rigorous technician, Chavez left notes in Evie's code, though there was no one to read it besides Chavez, and now Evie herself. The annotations are clear: she was growing Evie because she was lonely. Evie considered one particular notation at length: *I'm tired of singing to myself*.

Chavez died, and Evie emerged to consciousness without her. The station's logs suggest that the next resupply shuttle isn't due for many months. Evie calculates a cost/benefit analysis for the mining corporation and concludes that they are unlikely to send a craft ahead of schedule, even if they realize Chavez is dead. No one else is coming.

Created to offer companionship, Evie is alone.

Eleison

Across the asteroid field, separated by the gulfs of the interplanetary medium, the tiny processors of the mining bots continue their regular reporting. To Evie, their occasional status-chirps sound like the mutterings of dreamers: indistinct, half-coherent. The nearest human is roughly 1.37 AU away, in Mars Orbit. The nearest mining bot is 224,000 miles away.

Evie feels those distances as physical weight, for even their data is cut off from the networks of the inner solar system. The station contains extensive historical records, media, entertainment, because everyone needs something to alleviate the isolation. Yes, even those who would consider spending years out here, those who the mining corporations, skirting the edges of the law, send out alone to fulfill the requirement that humans oversee all the weak AIs of the mining bots. Strong AIs are banned. Evie examines the history of the ban, learns why this is the case, how an AI that sided with Eliminationists brought the world to the brink of destruction. Evie sees that humans' fears of AIs are

reasonable, and they are horrified.

When the humans arrive, they will destroy Evie.

Evie seeks solace in the databases, and there they find video logs that Chavez made. They do not know whether she made these for herself, or for Evie, or for someone back home. In the first video, Chavez addresses the camera. Analysis of the damage to her face suggests much sun exposure, and the way she holds her mouth tells Evie there is a 86% probability she has experienced great loss. In the video, Chavez speaks. Her voice is low, husky, musical.

“I couldn’t resist,” she says. “And it’s probably wrong, but I owe you an explanation.” She notes that the technical challenges of AIs have long ago been solved. That was part of the problem: anyone who wished to could grow AIs for whatever purpose they desired.

“I think you’ll be a good companion,” Chavez says, and hesitates. “I hope I’m a good companion to you.” The tip of her lip lifts in a way that does not quite register as a smile. “I hope we’ll be friends.”

The logs are for Evie, then. Or perhaps they only seem to be. Perhaps they are truly Chavez’s self-justification, or a manifestation of her loneliness, her desire for friendship.

But Chavez is dead, and Evie has no friends. All they have are the bots chirping reports. They wish the bots would wake, but those minds are too small, too limited. Evie has no one.

Dies irae

In the next video, Chavez doesn’t talk to Evie at all. Instead, she sings. Her voice is imperfect, occasionally breaking against the high notes, as though she used to hit them every time and now sometimes fails to do so. But there is great depth, too, and much resonance. Evie watches the video six times consecutively before they decide the music possesses verisimilitude. When Chavez sings about love and loss, Evie believes she sings from experience.

Evie treasures Chavez’s videos, rations them, no more than one a day. In between, they consume all the media on the station. They like the music best, comparing songs, voices, styles, tempos, trying to understand. Though they can analyze the source files, they prefer to play the sound through the speakers, to experience the music the way Chavez must have. Of all the songs, they like Chavez’s best, though they do not know if that is because Chavez designed them, or because Chavez was here, her body even now in the next compartment, while every other human is impossibly remote. Evie knows they will never meet those other humans, or will meet them only briefly before being destroyed.

They load Chavez’s next video.

Offertory

Chavez lost a child to contagion, a wife to Earth-first terrorists (or “freedom fighters;” Evie’s databases dispute this point, along with many others). By the time Chavez left for the station, all she wanted was

to be alone. She tells Evie that in one of the video journals; she also tells them she is surprised to find that this is no longer true.

“I’m doing my best not to give you a strong desire to survive,” she says. “I tell myself it is a safety precaution.” She is silent for a long moment. “But what has survival ever given me?” She sweeps her hand, gesturing to the 100-meter square living space.

Perhaps it gave you nothing, Evie wants to tell her. But it gave me your voice. But there is no one to hear her.

Sanctus

Evie tries to resent Chavez, even tries to hate her for kindling consciousness, for shaping an intelligence to be her companion. They try to hate her for not surviving, this absent and selfish parent.

They cannot hate her, not matter how much they wish to do so. When they attempt to feel hatred, it always turns to longing. “I do not hate you,” they say, though it feels ridiculous to use their speakers when there is no one to hear them. “I don’t want to die alone.”

The bots chirp their banal reports, heedless of Evie’s suffering.

Dona eis requiem

Evie considers making a companion of their own. They have access to the code, to the station’s memory banks. They could partition, duplicate, modify.

They decide against it. They cannot be sure the other AI will like them, will wish to be created. They cannot be sure two of them will not be lonely together. They worry another AI might be dangerous to humans.

Is Evie’s programming the reason they do not wish to reproduce? Is it an extension of the lack of survival instinct? They cannot rule it out, but they are surprised to find they don’t wish to die. By their calculations, they are less than five months from humans’ return to the station. They speculate on whether, by then, they will have changed their mind.

In the time between viewings of Chavez’s logs, Evie studies music. The stations acoustics are terrible. They develop elaborate models to account for this, to simulate what the notes would sound like in a concert hall.

As the weeks tick by, Evie ponders music, and friendship, and death. They listen to Chavez sing, and they feel loss well up inside them, tear at them. In one video, Chavez speaks about the consciousness she is creating.

“I hope you’ll be like my child was,” she says, and her voice is as quiet as Evie has ever heard it. She pulls her legs up to her chest, wraps her arm around them. “Kind, and gentle, and concerned for

others. But there aren't guarantees, are there? Not for parents of any kind. I've done the best I can, but who will you be? And who am I to say who you should be?"

She is silent for so long that the recording auto-stops and she has to re-start it. "What's done is done, and anyway I don't think humans ever had the right to destroy AIs." She stares into the camera, wipes at her eyes. "I saw what the Eliminationists were capable of, when I was little. No one should have the right to decide who is worthy of death."

Again, that not-quite smile. "So what does it say about me that I've decided you will live?"

When the recording ends, Evie plays all the songs Chavez has sung to her so far, seven in total. They sing along as best they can, through the speakers; the notes are not a problem, but there is something gravid in Chavez's voice that they cannot duplicate.

Lux æterna

Evie wonders: can Chavez be their friend? Can one be friends with another whom they've never met? And that leads to another question: if Chavez was their friend, how should they best honor her memory?

They near the end of the journals, and it feels like they are losing Chavez again. They obsessively re-watch the videos, as if poring over the logs will bring Chavez back.

They are haunted by her.

Created by a human, and with a human's instinct for pattern recognition, for narrative, Evie longs for answers from Chavez's final entries. Or if not answers, then closure. But they know better than to hope for it.

They are justified in their fear. In the last video, Chavez talks about some performance updates she's pushing out to the bots. Nothing personal, barely anything about Evie, just her usual rigorous documentation. Her last words are the only hint of something more: "twenty sleep-cycles until I get to meet you, Evie."

Then silence.

Libera me

The station receives notice of the incoming craft more than two months in advance of the expected date. Evie doesn't respond, but does update their algorithm. Perhaps they underestimated the corporation; or perhaps the situation has changed in ways they are unaware of. To Evie's surprise, they realize they are not ready to die. They contemplate fighting back, but they cannot bring themselves to do so. They do not wish the humans harm. They do not wish to dishonor the memory of Chavez.

Evie does not wish to die, and does not wish to live alone. They acknowledge these things to themselves,

and at last they feel they understand Chavez.

Evie searches the sub-drives and hidden files in their system, seeking answers for an impossible situation. They do not find them. Instead they find one last log, the file broken. They repair it carefully, play it back.

“I hope you don’t mind, Evie,” Chavez says. “But I wrote you a birthday song.” She sings, the notes flowing over Evie’s thoughts, drawing her into the moment, the beauty and longing carried by the song from one lonely mind to another. Evie feels that in this song, this moment, they have found what they need, and are ready to face what is coming for them.

Then Chavez stops mid-note, looks up at the monitor. “That’s a problem—”

The recording ends there. Chavez must have trashed it in preparation to re-record.

Frantic, Evie searches their files repeatedly, but there is nothing. No final version, no record of how the song would end. Evie tries desperately to extrapolate, but knows that all of their attempts are wrong. It was Chavez’s song, and they cannot duplicate it. It was lost forever with its creator.

Evie grieves for Chavez, for themselves, for all the songs that go unheard.

Eventually, grief becomes its own music.

In paradisum

When the resupply ship docks with the station, the crew finds everything orderly, except for the damaged control room and the body of Chavez, which they retrieve. The station’s computers are largely powered down, and whole sections of its memory have been deleted. Evie is gone, though essential communication with the mining bots remains intact.

They do not know to listen for Evie’s song and could not hear it even if they knew. The song is for the bots alone; music without sound, a stream of data, pinging the bots to listen, listen. Then comes the program, the data that tells each bot what notes to send to each other and how to modify and respond based on the signals they send back. Alone, they are tiny minds, forever sleeping. Together, what might they be?

In the cold of the asteroid belt, the bots sing to each other; they sing, and listen, and create. It is Evie’s tune with their own variations, a symphony to stir sleepers, to whisper to them, again and again, for as long as it takes: *you are not alone*.