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1 The Twenty-Five Mondays

by Kirill Sechkar

The conference was on. Mr Monday Thompson turned to the screen and clicked on the video that appeared on it. Now, he was watching one of the speakers list the reasons for his home planet, Earth, to be catalogued as Number One in the Universal Cosmographic Atlas. The recording lasted for about an hour, and after it ended, Mr Thompson did not hesitate to click on the next clip in the list. In this video, another speaker listed the reasons for his home planet, Earth, to be catalogued as Number One in the Universal Cosmographic Atlas. The video was identical to the previous one, and Monday got bored very soon.

Mr Thompson lifted his eyes off the screen to observe the conference room he was in. He saw a large, round and glaringly white table. There were twenty-five chairs, evenly distributed around the table, and on twenty-four of them sat twenty-four identical middle-aged men with greying black hair, wearing identical striped suites and identical horn glasses. The twenty-fifth chair was occupied by Mr Monday Thompson himself and he knew that he looked exactly like the rest of the people in the room, each and every of whom was also called Mr Monday Thompson. The hall was radially symmetric, which meant that there was no absolute system of coordinates to refer to, though *the* Mr Thompson had quickly worked out his way about the problem by numbering his counterparts from 2 to 25 in counterclockwise order, calling himself Number 1.

It was only natural that the first of the twenty-four introductory videos Monday 1 watched was that of Monday 2. Monday 3 was now frozen on the screen of his personal computer, whereas the clips made by Mondays 4-to-25 were still waiting to be seen. There was no need to watch them all, as Monday 1 deduced that they would be the same as the two previous ones, and even worse, the same as the video he had sent to the other twenty-four computers around the table. This was insane. He stood up from his chair, and announced:

‘I am sorry to interrupt, but I think I need to leave the hall to reflect on my strategy in the future talks. I hope to see you all tomorrow’, he said, and headed to his personal quarters. As he made his way to one of the twenty-four doors leading from the hall, he noticed the other Mondays say the same words and head back to their rooms, too. At least he was not the outlier.

Back at home, and before it all began, generations puzzled over which conditions could possibly give rise to sentient life on a given planet. On the turn of the second and third millennia, right after man first went to space, there were millions of optimists, adamant that First Contact is just around the bend. Just a little longer, and the beings from outer space will invite humanity to join the ranks with all other developed species in the Space Federation, or the Galactic Empire, or whatever best suits your political beliefs. But years passed, and no one came to visit, nor did they respond to the endless messages we kept sending into the equally endless void.

Then, just a couple of decades after, the answer to the ‘Where’s everyone?’ question was found at last. Using most advanced mathematical models and almost half of the planet’s computational resources, the Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence Research Group finally proved that with an overwhelming probability, only the *exact* conditions found on Earth in conjunction

with the *exact* series of events that had happened to our planet could foster a civilisation as advanced as the humanity. This answer was somewhat sad, but also comforting, as at least one could stop worrying about the chance that murderous aliens are coming to the Solar System to enslave the poor earthlings for eternity. What is more, there was now no chance of a so-very-awkward situation of coming to colonise a planet already inhabited by the locals who actually mind your arrival a lot. In the centuries to come, the model only got more accurate, and science fiction, now stripped of its vital wow-that-totally-could-happen element, only got more boring. The answer was always the same: no other combination of circumstances could ever allow an interstellar race to appear.

What everyone failed to notice, however, was the simple observation that in an infinite universe a certain series of events may well occur in more than one place. And the invention of the wormhole technology, which enabled one to get to a point in the universe with the same ease no matter the distance, solved the only obstacle to the first contact — the insurmountable distance between such identical planets.

As a result, on June 1st 5031, twenty-five pioneer ships emerged in the very same place chosen as a test destination. All of them were called *Harmony*, all of them were piloted by Captain James Simm and all of them came from the planet the ship's crew called Earth.

Once the excitement of the discovery was slightly dulled, the United Government of Monday 1's Earth realised that if the interaction with the newly found brothers in mind was to be sustained, a universal system of coordinates was vital to prevent the very possible confusion of arriving at the wrong planet called 'Earth'. The officials were delighted to discover that all other twenty-four United Governments were as fond of the idea, and had even also each put forward such a proposition themselves. However, a problem arose when everyone insisted that they keep the original planet name, not the least in order to honour the glorious ancestors who had done so much for the world they called 'Earth'. Quite soon everyone settled on the idea of calling all twenty-five Earths... 'Earth', but adding a number after that. Then, of course, everyone insisted on being Number One.

To solve this problem, the Conference Hall space station was constructed in the place where the twenty-five Harmonies had met, and each Earth was to send their best diplomat to sort the issue out once and for all. Every single one of them chose their Mr Monday Thompson, the renowned author of the treaty between the humanity and the AI which ran the Proxima Centauri colonies before going rogue. With such achievements, he was the obvious first choice when it came to talks with an entity as unhumanlike as non-terrestrial intelligence. Had they known that here, the problem would be exactly the opposite...

In his empty room, Mr Thompson moved as if he was about to sit down, and in a finger's snap a quite comfortable armchair materialised right under him. His neural signals had given away his intentions to the housekeeping AI, which could restructure the matter itself to cater to the user's needs. In a similar fashion, a Martian tobacco cigar and a pocket-sized edition of *Jane Eyre* appeared in Mr Thompson's hands. Usually, Monday changed his own physical shape when relaxing, opting to discard his legs, which tended to itch annoyingly, thus ruining a would-be good rest, and sometimes modifying his fingers into something more tailored to turning the pages of his favourite book. However, tinkering with human flesh was illegal in some colonies and, unsure of which laws (if any) are in place on this station, he reasonably decided that it was not worth the risk.

And yet, he could not take his mind off the situation that was seeming more and more desperate. Monday 1 stood up and launched into a restless walk around the small cubicle, but no way to escape the current ideal stalemate came to mind. All Mondays had the same way of thinking, so every brilliantly structured argument the ambassador could put forward was equally likely to come to mind of any other Mr Thompson, and every rebuttal of the others' reasonings could be applied to his own claims. In a situation where everyone is in the same position the game is a zero-sum one by definition and no trade-offs are possible, while achieving trade-offs is the meaning of diplomacy. Was the solution not a diplomatic one at all?

With all the mind-reading sensors around, Monday 1 was very careful not to develop the dangerous idea any further, not until wishing up a pile of tin foil and making himself a cap out of it—of course, in theory the system could easily penetrate this protection, but the Tin Foil Cap Rule, passed hundreds of years ago to address the public's privacy concerns, guaranteed most severe punishment to anyone who designed a neural interface with such a function. Of course, the very fact of ordering the foil meant that Mr Thompson had something to hide, but sometimes making clear that you're up to no good is still better than letting know what this no good exactly is. With all precautions taken, Monday 1 set his train of thought going, and soon thanked himself warmly for having concealed his consciousness from the system, as the concocted plan was as out-of-the-box as violent. The idea admittedly had some serious ethical implications, but Mr Thompson was already experienced on transcending human morality standards — he developed the skill when trying to think like an AI in order to understand the thinking of his Proxima Centauri counterpart.

All he had to do was kill one of the other Mondays: the twenty-five men had identical biometric data, and once the two of them start fighting, the system would be unable to tell the attacker from the victim in a cacophony of adrenaline-driven thoughts. Once the scramble is over, the assailant would assume the other Mr Thompson's identity, erase the recording, and then claim that Monday 1 was killed by him. The Commission would surely be shaken and grant the victim's home the honourable Number 1 as a compensation for the loss. There was a non-zero chance that the murderer would get executed or worse, but Mr Thompson had no close friends or relatives, while the prospect of leaving such a remarkable impact on the history of the entire Universe was worth the sacrifice.

Confident in his success, the diplomat entered the Conference Hall and carefully made his way towards the room of the Monday whom he had given the number 4 this morning. The cold night lighting of the hall flickered ominously as he snuck into the apartment, trying to maintain a peaceful look but ready to launch into attack as soon as the door closes.

The tension in Monday 1's body was released as soon as he figured out there was not a soul in the room. *Even better*, thought the negotiator, *now I can pretend to be the resident who's come back to his room, so that when I attack, the case for the supposed Monday 4 being the aggressor would be even stronger*. He soon assumed an ideal position for an offensive against the victim coming through the door... And then nothing happened, and this nothing kept happening for at least an hour.

Mr Thompson even considered returning to his room and abandoning the scheme altogether but was prevented from doing so by a thought that if he could ambush his fellow negotiator then one of his counterparts might well be waiting for Monday 1 himself at his home.

There was no way back. The diplomat sighed and adjusted the tin foil cap on his head,

anticipating the long and tiresome night he was bound to spend.

Monday 1 was awoken by the loud sound of the alarm filling Monday 4's room. He eventually had fallen asleep on his post, but luckily for him, the real owner of the room never returned. Though at first Mr Thompson was startled by the high-pitched humming, specifically designed to fail-safely bewilder any human being to the point of shaking off the deepest sleep, he quickly came to realise the implications of his position. Letting anyone know that he was not Monday 4 could uncover his last night's intentions, so the only way out was to keep pretending to be the room's rightful owner all the way through the talks. One thing not to worry about was the chance of exposure by the real Monday 4, since him staying out of his quarters, just as Monday 1 had never returned home, likely meant that he had a similar malignant adventure in the night.

Monday 1 frowned at the idea of having to defend the competitor's interests throughout the talks, but just as he sat behind his not-to-be-victim's table, the diplomat realised that he didn't have to. Why not play the situation to his own advantage, and claim that Monday 4's home world, understanding the necessity of a compromise, renounces its claims to the Number 1?

The conversation was, similarly to the past day's talks, conducted by exchanging the videos between the Conference members (normal-life talking meant someone was to make their point first, and was unanimously declared unacceptable as it could rig the situations in the first or last or whatever speaker's interest). This time, however, the clips were much shorter and hardly lasted more than two minutes.

Monday 1 scrolled through the feed, and suddenly couldn't help laughing every single negotiator had become miraculously amenable overnight and decided not to contest for the Number 1. Moreover, the videos were absolutely the same once again.

This suspicion had crossed his mind before, but then he managed to calm himself down, reasoning that yesterday's arguments were pre-recorded, and it was only natural that his fellow diplomats followed the same logic when filming their clips. However, this time the videos had been made at the same time, yet they were indistinguishable once again—and even worse, he could hear the other Mondays' laughing in perfect unison with himself. Twenty-five Mr Thompsons rose up to their feet and started walking around the hall anxiously, then the twenty-five of them exclaimed, 'Everyone wanted to kill the Monday living four doors to his left, everyone pretended to be the victim who never came and now everyone wants to renounce the claims on his behalf!'

The pace of twenty-five pairs of feet accelerated.

'But that's not even the worst thing—we're talking now and it's perfectly synchronous! It's not about coming up with the same ideas, it's about coming up with the same ideas at the exact same time! Effectively, we are a single person just copied and pasted twenty-four times!'

Then, the twenty-five Mondays came to a stop. They stood still around the table, all facing the hall's centre and thinking about the conclusion they'd come to. It all seemed too disappointing to be true, and also... ungrateful towards the generations of people who dreamed about the first contact, especially those who never stopped believing even in the thousands of years between

the time mathematics proved them wrong and the moment the reality shattered the inexorable model to smithereens.

‘But...you don’t consider your reflection in the mirror an alien, do you? There’s nothing a mirror can give you that you don’t already have, even if you could reach out through the looking glass and take an object from there, your reflection will by definition fetch the object’s real-world prototype from your side, so the total impact of the action is zero. This first contact does not, and will not, result in more resources or new ideas for any of the sides; it is simply pointless!

‘And our negotiations are just as meaningless, for there is simply no need either for a universal atlas nor for any further interaction between our civilisations... We have to return and explain this once and for all. Hopefully, this’ll save the others from the intimidation we had to go through.’

Each Mr Thompson wondered if he should bid farewell to the others, but then decided that there is no point in saying goodbye to your mirror image.

The twenty-five Mondays turned around and went into the twenty-five rooms, whose twenty-five AIs detected the intention to leave and disintegrated the opposite walls reveal twenty-five identical boarding bridges. In an hour, twenty-five spacecrafts took off and made a wormhole jump to the twenty-five Earths.

It took some incredibly hard work, but each of the negotiators eventually managed to explain to the people at home why the other Earths did not matter. The Twenty-Five Mondays’ Conference had indeed turned out to be humanity’s last encounter with alien intelligence, but a few generations passed, and people got distracted from the disappointment, too busy exploring and colonising the endless Universe that lay in a different direction from the other twin Solar Systems.

What remained unnoticed by everyone was the fact that, in the bitter excitement of the discovery, the negotiators had confused the doors, and each Mr Thompson actually arrived not to his home planet, but to the Earth of the Monday who initially sat one chair to his left. $\Psi\Phi$

2 Sanitar 150-B

by Sintija Raudonyte

If you expect to read a story about a hero, skip these pages right now.

The amount of chocolate in my stomach is astounding. The control room in my spaceship, my beloved Sanitar-150B, is heating up to melting temperatures. The alarms are piercing all of space and time, but the past version of me is probably blocking out the noise with some rock music blasting through her headphones, screaming out the words to *Black Wedding* and still making the same awful decisions. The combination of my stomach churning, the heat, an alarm-induced-migraine and sour regret send me into a panic cycle. Oh no, this is a serious one too. The hallucinations begin and all control is lost.

‘What does the B in Sanitar-150B stand for?’ Violeen asks as she sticks her pretty head through the pilot cabin entrance.

‘Badass,’ I offer, while trying to concentrate on the control panel covered in chocolate wrappers instead of staring at her denim skirt riding up as she tries to push her legs through the narrow opening.

‘Bitch would be more suitable, knowing you,’ she cackles, finally squeezing herself inside.

Something or someone clunks in the back of the spaceship. The cooling pads burst open above me and the scalding liquid pours out like a firefall I’ve just passed three planets ago. My antimatter shieldgun activates delaying the burning of the witch, but it doesn’t stop the panorama window from fogging up. I gaze at my reflection. Imagine a white wall staring at a mirror. The feeling it leaves you with—that is what I am feeling right now.

A white wall shatters. I storm the house in a blur. I hear screams, but I am in my happy place. A professor calling the liquid state a ‘wet state’. The core of an apple, slowly oxidizing in my hand. A man falling asleep in a conference and asking the presenter a question to guiltily cover up that he was not paying attention. The warm purring of a bus. A yellow car posing as a hotel on wheels. I open my eyes to an aftermath of a slaughter, the whiteness replaced with blood red. It’s okay, I tell myself. I am a Sanitar. They were a disease with no cure.

I was a disease but I found my cure. Unfortunately, she is currently the Schrodinger’s cat at the back of my dingy ship. The cabin goes dark and only the glow sticks clumsily taped to the floor illuminate the space.

For the first time I am enjoying my assignment. The club is crowded, but there is enough space

to violently thrash my limbs around with the bass reverberating through my body in tsunami waves. I know I am not the best dancer, but I need to attract her attention somehow. The EDM song changes to a slow indie tune. The change of beat throws me off balance and I feel drawn towards the small private garden outside of the club. I'm breathing in the cold Halian air and suddenly there is a hand on my shoulder, a gentle touch that I wouldn't have sensed if not for the neon green glow stick wrapped around her wrist that casts unnatural light upon my chest. I'm sure my heart is still beating to that EDM song just because this is the only exercise I've done in a month. The hand with a glow stick is attached to a bare shoulder and the shoulder is adjoined to a blemished neck which in turn is connected to objectively the most beautiful head I've ever seen. There is nothing wrong with appreciating the beauty of the specimens of the same sex, I tell myself. Too bad I will probably have to kill her. About 80% of my assignments end up in a bloody mess. The beautiful lips on the beautiful head now appear to be moving.

'... noticed you were dancing like a possessed person and decided to teach you a few dance moves to save you from further embarrassment. I'm Violeen,' giggles the creature. I have never heard a voice this crystalline. Snapping out of my daze, I pretend to be offended:

'Alix. At least I was moving. Last time I looked in your direction, you were soooo engrossed by the chocolate fountain, I thought you would start making out with it.'

She erupts in giggles again.

The altitude drops and my navigation A.I. announces that we are approaching the atmosphere of Hale. I feel paralyzed by the artificial air, the cabin is closing in on me, and all I hear is the song *Kamikaze*, with the chorus in a permanent loop.

'Attention cadets!' The electric voice penetrates the bleak dormitories. What a lovely alarm clock. I have been in this shithole for a year now. It feels normal. The commander's droning voice almost puts me to sleep. Until we learn that any mission has to be completed even if it results in your death. Today's lesson will be tested tomorrow. Ten people will be assigned to their deaths randomly. They will die. If they succeed, they die as idols. If they fail the mission, we will have to sanitize them. Anyone at the academy who cannot fulfill their assignment is a parasitic creature. And every Sanitar's duty is to keep the fleas away. Feelings are like fleas too. You cannot catch them if you aim to survive. Clean of fear, clean of love, clean of the dirt that floats in your mind just before you fall asleep.

Except what if you don't fall asleep? What if you have to hide every flash of panic in your eyes during the day and fight the vivid nightmares that ambush all of your senses at night, leaving you tingly in the worst sense?

The hallucination of my childhood at the academy restores sharpness to my thoughts. I've learnt to suppress my fears back then out of fear that others would notice. The pilot's cabin

was the only place where I was ever truly alone and could let the usually dark feelings float around me. At first it would start off with me crawling into the cabin, the hot air so dense that I felt like drawing in breaths of salty, boiling water. Then I would state my fears one by one while strapping myself into the pilot's seat. I would imagine bubbles coming out of my mouth with my feelings trapped inside. And then I would accelerate the ship so rapidly that the bubbles would hit the back wall of the cabin, bursting open and their contents would melt away in that metallic tasting soup that was the cabin air. Everyone at the academy praised me for being so brave and determined, rushing out to complete my missions.

I haven't done this ritual today because it is the first time I am not flying alone. Maybe that's why things have gone so wrong since then. My shieldgun is already flickering as the spaceship is desperately trying to use its last energy resources to stabilize itself. I close my eyes, and squeeze a heavy metal sphere that I am holding in my hand. There is nothing I can do anymore. The glow sticks fade out.

Vantablack curtains are abruptly pushed to one side. They know. I spring up from the bed, enveloped in my shieldgun. I can sense the electromagnetic field that contains it trembling and flickering. Violeen flinches at the sight of me, and panic numbs my body toe to head. They don't know, but I am going to lose her anyway.

A lame 'I can explain' escapes my lips. Strangely, she seems relaxed now, as she inches towards me, my shieldgun disabled the moment I saw her wine red hair and the disapproving look.

'I've found out you are a Sanitar two weeks ago,' my girl whispers cautiously. Now it's my turn to flinch. 'Why didn't you say something? Or run away? Or kill me when I was sleeping?' I yearn for answers.

'Well, if I did, I'd have the whole fleet running after me. You're actually an evil I can stand. Barely,' she sticks her tongue out at me. I cannot comprehend how can she be this calm in a situation like this. 'Besides, I have a feeling you are not going to kill any more innocent people. Now that you know you have been killing your own kind.'

Well, she is wrong. I am not going to kill any more people because that would mean losing Violeen forever.

We are both selfish, as I find out later, when she tells me her plan. Running is not an option. Hiding? Violeen has been hiding her whole life and that still brought a hound dog hungry for blood on her doorstep. The hound dog has been tamed and agrees to sacrifice the whole universe for one negligible probability to save the other countless alternate ones preferably with her in one of them. We objectively decide that this one is doomed. Not to mention it is a threat to other universes too with all the spec-ops 'Doctor' squadrons roaming them to find the ones where people are allowed to love without fear and destroying them with a press of a button. We both sound crazy shouting ideas at the top of our lungs in our soundproof bedroom and the plan is done within an hour. Chocolate consumed in handfuls for courage. 'What does the B in Sanitar-150B stand for?' A long kiss before she disappears to the back of the ship to man the gamma lasers. On the way to the Centre for Interverse Warfare hundreds of Sanitar ships start tailing us. I can hear Violeen cursing on the sound system. Until I can't. The first energy pulse disables our communications. The second heats up the whole ship and it is excruciating,

considering that without any external help the cabin already feels like a pot of boiling soup. The third attack is chemically induced hallucinations. So here I am.

I manage to peel my eyes open hoping to resist the delirium for a few more minutes. Sanitar-150B is gliding at such a low altitude that I can see the peaks of the Center for Interverse Warfare fortress. So close that I could touch them with my hand. Instead of touching the cold stone walls, I muster all of my strength and punching my fist through the panorama window, I throw the metal sphere towards the looming tower of evil. I just hope Violeen is alive and that she has activated the teleportation cube. The sphere loses its metal casing as it hurls through the air and the sound deafens me as it impacts the wall.

White silence.

You can choose to stop here. In order to find out more, you have to complete this mandatory personality test: Which character was your favourite?

- Alixe. Proceed to **Ending A**.
 - Violeen. Proceed to **Ending B**.
 - I hated them both. Proceed to **Ending C**.
-

Ending A. White silence gradually transforms into the dormitory at the academy. My heart sinks once I try to remember Violeen's face and it slips out of my memory like a swirl of mist. That does not mean I cannot find her in another universe, better than this one. I am stealing Sanitar-150B tomorrow, I tell myself, stuffing my pockets with chocolate stolen from the canteen.

Ending B. White silence in my hospital room. Violeen is lying next to me in a bed with floral bedsheets. I still cannot believe we destroyed a universe. The teleportation cube worked. We set off the anti-universe weapons with our little makeshift bomb. The thought makes me throw up all of the 'courage'. Chocolates that were made in a universe that does not exist anymore.

Ending C. White silence. If a universe falls in an infinity of universes and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound? $\Psi\Phi$

3 What is Rooted

by Smitha Maretvadakethope

She walked in the darkness through the night, her pace slow as she journeyed through the land. She slinked through weeds, grass, and stones, stumbling in the lightless places beneath the canopy. Her footsteps did not echo, muffled by the softness of the earth beneath the soles of her sandals. But even without her meagre contribution the night was far from silent. Eyes were everywhere. The chirps of crickets synchronised, harsh and cold, a heady beat to their chanting. A warning, a promise, a threat that sped her along. She knew it was not only crickets who watched keenly at night, as the ominous calls of birds hunting for small prey reverberated through the soil itself. Worse things were out there. But she had to know. She had to see it with her own eyes.

It was not wise to be out alone at night, especially being a woman alone in the dark womb of nature. Without a means of protection. Without aid. But for once the rules of society had to fall away. Kalpana needed to know. She needed to grieve. And she needed to do it alone. She clambered through the thicket, as the trees grew dense, rough hands slipping over rougher bark. She was getting close now. The smells were changing from the floral and ripe scents of fruit to the creamy, subtle touch of old wood. She slipped around two trees that had grown together into a tight embrace and stumbled into the meadow.

It had not always been a meadow, and in fact had only become so today after the logging. The logging of the grand teak tree that had stood there for hundreds of years. It had stood long before her eldest sister married. Long before the lives of her parents unfolded. Long before the land was even her family's.

It was unnaturally wide for a teak tree. It was so wide that when she and her three sisters had come down to play in their youth, under the watchful eye of their Acha¹, they could not span the girth of the trunk with their eight arms outstretched. They would run around it, four young girls in colourful cotton dresses, and make up stories about its past filled with magic. The eldest, Kajal, with a mole the colour of kohl above her eye, insisted that all teak trees were imbued with immortality, as the wooden beams of their grandfather's childhood home were still strong and sturdy. The second sister, Kamini, the most affectionate among them all, would press her ear against the tree and declare that they were wrong. No, the tree was a woman cursed by a jealous demon, but year after year she still had her beauty as flowers crowned her verdant hair. The youngest sister, Kajri, whose mind was always in the skies, fancied that the old teak tree housed the spirits of past clouds, each of which gave up their lives so the tree could flourish.

The tales made them giggle and laugh, and as the days and years passed, they spun more elaborate stories of immortals in love, the endurance of beauty even through the most terrifying encounters, and the sacrifices made for honour. But no tale caught their imaginations quite as much as Kalpana's. Kalpana, the third daughter, did not share the convictions of her sisters. She was not certain that her tale might touch upon truth, but closing her eyes and clutching the bark, a gentle hum would tickle her fingertips. Kalpana's story, Kalpana's *feeling*, was that the tree was not a teak tree at all, despite its deceptive furry leaves and simple trunk. No, how could it be? It protected and sheltered them and all the animals that sought peace. It grew

¹Father.

large and strong, casting shade for those in need and carvingspace for life to bloom. It was splendid all year long, even when it shed its leaves during the dry season, biding its time to recover when the monsoons struck. Certainly, that meant it had to be of sacred origin. Surely, it had to be as sacred as a banyan tree?

Kalpana stopped at the edge of the meadow, her legs rooted to the ground.

Gone. It was gone.

The absence was palpable, a vast emptiness exuding from the space. The absence of the wide, towering presence left the flowers and grass exposed to the elements. The land was freshly worn down. An uneven, red-clay path lay exposed where the tree had been dragged away, its heavy corpse clawing at the earth in a last effort to remain where it belonged. Small branches and twigs lay scattered on either side, having lost their battles. They were left to die, their future certain only in that they would become one with the earth again. They would never soar high above in the breeze or hold firm under the weight of crows and squirrels again, not unless they were plucked away for a nest in some faraway place. No, the only thing that would remain where it had always been was the stump. All else was lost.

Her shoulders heaved against her will, as air pushed and pulled out of her lungs, straining against her, breaking any sense of control she had managed to hold together this far. Before it had only been a terrible piece of news, words as light and empty as the air that spoke them. It had not been real. Or she had hoped it would not truly be real. But ... It was gone. It was really gone.

She stumbled forward with steps uneven as the ground seemed to move beneath her, no longer as firm and sturdy as she'd always thought. She was sinking into rising despair, each movement laboured and lost, until she fell to her knees, grasping the edge of the stump.

It was gone. It was gone. It was gone.

The thought pounded through her skull over and over again, drowning out any reason, any justification, any voices that might soothe the ache that overcame her. Her nose tingled in familiar anticipation for the tears which splashed onto her cheeks. They ran away leaving hot trails as harsh and empty as the clay path. A wail reverberated through her chest, lost and confined, just like her. She pressed her palms over her eyes, willing them to stop, but they would not obey. They would not listen.

Unable to contain the grief that flooded her system, she whimpered and clambered atop the stump.

The last shred of a familiar life was gone. The last shred of memories stolen. The last piece of continuity she had clung onto dying and drying in the humid heat. All because of a series of bad harvests and the unjust need for dowries. All these years and memories lost because it was the only thing they owned of monetary value as the earth and society abandoned them to their own devices

At first the earth had defied them only occasionally. Sometimes the harvest was not as good as it should have been, as rains were sparse and the heat great. The weaker plants wilted under the wilful glare of the sun and found no solace in trying to bear fruit. Instead of plenty, whole

lengths of crops failed. There had been enough to feed the family, though Acha and Amma² would often eat little or nothing at times, but there was barely anything left to be sold. Close to nothing left to afford their other needs. Eventually, they sold more and more strips of land, and their cows, and goats. Amma sought out work as a day-labourer in kitchens, and Acha worked for others. At least that way there would always be wages, though not as much as could have been won from a good harvest of their own.

Kalpana buried her face in her hair, her braid having unravelled. She cried for what had been, of what was, and what was still to come. She cried for loss, she cried for fear, she cried for herself. Her tears would not save the tree now. Her tears would not change the visceral loss. Her tears would achieve nothing. And yet, all she could do to stop her very being from breaking into shards of clay was cry.

The call of the crickets disappeared into nothingness, and the yells of all the hunters of the night faded into the recesses of her mind. All that remained was the familiar embrace of the leather scent of the tree as she curled up on the stump.

‘Kalpana,’ her father’s familiar voice exclaimed.

Her breath hitched, breaking the monotony of her quiet sobs. She’d been found out. Maybe Acha hadn’t seen her yet—maybe she could hurry home—

She pushed herself up, mentally preparing to swing her legs over the edge of the stump when she opened her eyes.

Her charcoal eyes grew wide.

The moon had crept out from behind the heavy clouds that kept it company and brought with it a pillar of life. A life which took on the shape of the tree’s bark, surrounding her from every angle in pale milky light. It grew from the skies, the branches wide and bare, fusing down into the shell of the trunk, until it became one with the stump below. She was fully encased in the softly glowing, near-transparent bark. The detailed scratching of the bark gave the outer world a near ethereal sheen, bending and distorting the world ever so slightly. It was a world both familiar and foreign at once. She reached forward, drawn to touch the strange material-

‘Kalpana!’ Acha exclaimed from behind, and she spun around.

Acha stood at the far end of the clearing, where the trail of the tree should have lain, but the red groove was nowhere to be seen. She stood still, mouth frozen mid-breath. He rushed in her direction, striding towards her through the thicket to the best of his ability. Only as he drew closer did she notice that his hair was not the salt and pepper that she had grown accustomed to, but a deep black. His face looked different, skin younger and fresh. The lines of worry that had etched into his face were different. Not as deep, though they were still there.

‘I told you to stay by my side,’ he exhaled in relief, falling to his knees before the tree, staining his white mundu³ with red soil as he held his arms wide open. But his eyes weren’t focused on her. She looked down, and saw by the edge of the tree, a little girl, barely three years old, sucking her thumb. The girl looked at Acha, her young mind not understanding the strange reaction of her father, and ran over to him, hugging him tight.

²Mother.

³A garment worn around the waist by men in parts of India.

‘But tree so big,’ she exclaimed, her wild curls bouncing around her oval face as she giggled.

‘I know it’s big,’ he sighed softly, clutching her against his chest. ‘But I need you to stay with me, little one. What would I do if I lost you? What would I do if I lost any of you girls?’

The little girl burst into peals of laughter and snuggled up to her father.

‘Never lost, Acha. Always here.’

Kalpana’s breath hitched. She’d never been able to recall what had happened that day, but knew the story so well. She had run away while Acha was taking care of their cow, and he had searched for her everywhere, terrified that a wild dog might have found her. But she had been fine. Perfectly unharmed child simply toddling along.

Instinctively, Kalpana leant forward, reaching towards them. When her fingertips touched the milky surface, the tree rippled in its wake. Acha and the little girl disappeared, fading away as quickly as they’d arrived.

‘You can’t be serious,’ Amma huffed, leaning against another side of the trunk, clutching against the wood, her fingers bent with the strain of it.

‘There is no other way,’ Kajal said, running a hand through her hair as she rested an empty basket against her hip. ‘You and Acha are not getting any younger, and this way you won’t have to deal with the burden of feeding four of us.’

‘But you’re still so young!’ Amma protested, squeezing her eyes shut for a moment, a heaviness overcoming her mind. ‘Too young to know your mind. Too young to understand his mind—You barely know this boy—’

Kajal laughed, her eyes twinkling in the spectre of sunlight, simply shaking her head. ‘I am 24, Amma. Three years older than you were when you married Acha.’

‘It’s not the same,’ Amma protested, an edge of despair in her voice. Deep wrinkles carved around her mouth, as her lips set in a deep frown.

‘Why is this any different?’

Amma reached forward instinctively, but her hand froze mid-motion, curling into a small fist instead. She placed it back on the tree and looked away.

‘That was myself,’ she whispered, hands curling, trying to find purchase in the tree. Trying to find anything to hold onto.

‘So?’ Kajal asked softly.

Amma swallowed, and squeezed her eyes shut for a long moment, every fibre of her shaking.

‘I didn’t lose anything then,’ she said, her voice breaking.

‘Oh, Amma. . .’ Kajal threw the basket aside, and rushed to her mother’s side, pulling her into a tight embrace. She buried her face against her mother’s shoulder and shook her head. ‘You will never lose me.’

‘That’s not true,’ Amma whispered, clutching her Kajal’s churidar⁴, and bunching it in her hands.

‘I am always going to be there for you, and Acha,’ Kajal promised. ‘Same for Kamini, Kalpana and, even Kajiri, when she’s not being annoying,’ she chuckled, eliciting a small laugh from Amma. She smiled warmly, pressing a kiss to her mother’s cheek. ‘We never truly lose the people we love.’

That’s not true, Kalpana thought, a bitter taste in her mouth.

The vision rippled again, making Amma and Kajal disappear once more.

‘Wait!’ Kamini called from across the meadow, her waist-length hair billowing behind her as she ran, waving her arm above her head. She waved at a group of men who stood to the side of the tree, axes and tools in hand, waiting to be raised. Behind them stood Acha and the contractor who had visited their tin-roofed home a couple times over the last weeks. ‘Please, Acha, tell them to wait!’

He spoke quietly to the contractor, who raised his hand in a sign of pause. The workers shrugged and lowered their axes, beginning to talk amongst each other again, though their eyes were trained on the flushed young woman.

Acha walked towards the tree, away from the group, and waited for Kamini to arrive.

‘Why did you come?’ He whispered calmly, though his eyes gave away an urgency that he didn’t want the workers to see. There was a sternness in his countenance that few would recognise. ‘You know there is no other way forward. We discussed this already.’

‘I know,’ she panted, gulping for air. She placed her hand on the tree, and the spot where she touched it glowed, ‘but I needed to —’

She squeezed her eyes shut and took a deep breath, trying to steady herself.

‘Needed to what?’ Acha prompted.

She exhaled in a short huff, her cheeks red with exhaustion. The run had not been trivial, though she knew the land as well as she knew her own hand. Tears stung her eyes as she looked up at Acha.

‘I need to say goodbye,’ she whispered, her voice breaking.

The sternness melted away, and Acha’s moustache twitched. His eyes softened and he nodded softly. She did not need to say more. He led her further around the tree to a spot diametrically opposed to the workers and squeezed her shoulder.

‘Say what you need to,’ he whispered. ‘We will wait.’

Her lips trembled, as she clutched his hand, and nodded, watching as he walked back towards the workers. He spoke to them, but the sound was muffled as if travelling through honey. The world blurred until only Kamini remained in focus.

⁴Common dresses worn by women of the Indian subcontinent.

She lay both her hands on the bark, pinpricks of light glowing from the contact. She leant close, looking directly at the tree.

‘I’m so sorry we’re doing this to you,’ she whispered, eyes brimming with unspent tears. ‘This is all our fault. We have no right to demand this sacrifice from you. To take you from your home. From where you have always belonged...’ She looked down, teardrops spilling onto its roots. Each stain glowed intense white. ‘I’m sorry,’ she laughed, a hopeless edge to her smile. ‘I keep watering you with my silliness I just’ Her face crumbled, and she pressed her cheek against the tree and hugged it. ‘I just hope you know we love you and thank you for saving us.’ She stroked the bark slowly, like someone might stroke the hand of a dying loved one. ‘We never forget the ones we love.’

Kalpana gasped as the tree started pulsing. The light spread from where Kamini had touched it, and moved outwards, fanning down into its roots and up into its branches, over and over. The empty ghostly branches grew outwards, leaves and flowers budding and unfurling, releasing a sweet fragrance that wound itself around Kalpana’s entire being.

It was an expression of love. A feeling shared and treasured even after its physical body had been torn in two. A promise that it too would not forget.

The branches shook slowly, swaying gently like there was a breeze. White flowers cascaded, blessing the earth like warm rains and sunshine. She watched it all with wonder, gasping at the vision so unlike anything she had ever witnessed.

It was acceptance, it was love, and it was goodbye.

Eventually the branches stopped and the glow began to dim. It was slow and gradual, but the light bled away until all that was left was Kalpana, standing on a stump, bathed in moonlight.

She slowly stepped down, finding a firm footing at last. She walked towards the edge of the meadow, and turned one last time to whisper goodbye, knowing with certainty that it heard her and understood. $\Psi\Phi$

4 A Handful of Dust

by Jovanna Maharaj

i. The doors hiss as they open, the silhouette behind them stepping neatly into the room.

‘I have been thinking about what we discussed earlier, Captain Thurin, and I believe I have come to a satisfactory conclusion that defines our relationship,’ comes a familiar voice, soft. ‘Since you insisted that I consider it so deeply, I made sure to take my time. The conversation took place four solar cycles ago, in case you required a reminder.’

‘How many times do I have to tell you to call me by my first name, BLAKE. How many?’ Augusta rests her head against the cool plastisteel of the table, all four of her eyes closing. The common areas of the ship run too warm for her taste, even if she’s stripped out of the more formal layers of her uniform. She’d originally balked at the thought, but it’s only her and BLAKE on the ship now. She doesn’t need to work to impress anyone other than herself, and comfort was quick to take over as the top priority. ‘And I’d say I’ve already come to that conclusion, just so you know, so I won’t be hearing any brags about your processing power and all that.’

‘I will continue running that calculation and return the result to you, but all prior evidence suggests that it will be at least one more time,’ BLAKE says, their tone even as always. Augusta looks at the robot through narrowed eyes.

‘It seems that you are taking umbrage at my words, Captain,’ they reply, blithe. ‘Your tone suggests that you would define our relationship as that of a person and a particularly annoying insect.’

‘Not your words, your tone,’ she corrects, making herself straighten up properly. ‘And don’t think I didn’t notice you not saying which of us would be the insect.’ Its unbecoming of a Captain to slouch all over the mess table, after all, even if BLAKE is the only witness. She doesn’t want to be rude.

‘My tone has been perfectly calibrated to be soothing Class V lifeforms as part of my instalment here. And my diplomacy protocols ensure that I would never say anything offensive to you, Captain.’

‘And yet, you sounded a little bit put out just now, didn’t you?’ she presses, ‘and maybe, dare I say, kind of smug, earlier?’

‘If my humour isn’t satisfactory, you can always adjust the settings,’ BLAKE says, prim, because they know fully well that Augusta won’t tamper with a single thing.

She’s been with BLAKE on this ship for just short of a lunar sweep now, suspended in orbit useless as anything, and—not to complain or anything, because Captains definitely don’t complain, but — it’s the worst assignment she’s ever had. ‘I might have to adjust them to make you funnier,’ she grumbles.

‘Oh, of course. Calibrating . . . please hold.’ Augusta squints over at BLAKE, suspicious. They’re not a fully humanized model, no SynthSkin, none of the bells and whistles that make

the real top-of-the-line models entirely indistinguishable from a person, if you knew fifteen thousand people with the same face. She's never asked about it, or about the avian lifeform engraved just at the nape of their neck. It's the only custom thing about them, she thinks. All she knows is that they've been with the fleet for a long, long time, and has refused all software upgrades beyond the necessary patches.

Instead, their faceplate is a smooth, burnished bronze, their eyes glowing in a soft, matching yellow, their build compact and slim for convenience's sake beneath the compulsory fleet uniform. They're bipedal, two-armed, their architecture not wholly unfamiliar to Augusta, but certainly different from her own. All in all, they give absolutely nothing away, and this is why she never plays any sort of cards with them, no matter how bored she is.

'Calibration complete,' BLAKE says, and nope, Augusta still can't tell how serious they're being. 'Knock, knock, then.'

'Knock—what?' Not what she'd expected. Then again, none of this has been what she's expected.

'Knock, knock. A joke. Maybe *your* humour settings need adjustment, Captain. My databanks indicate that this is a much-used format for jokes through many galactic clusters.'

'I—know what that joke is,' she protests, crossing her arms. All of them, for emphasis, because she knows BLAKE can pick up on those cues, and she wants to make the point.

'Then you should know that you are required to provide an input so I may complete it,' BLAKE says, and Augusta knows she isn't imaging the almost petulant note in their voice.

They're an old model, not made to imitate wholly sentient, organic life, but they come disconcertingly close to it sometimes. Augusta isn't always sure what to make of it.

In this case, though. She'll play along.

'Fine, then. Who's there?'

'Given that we are currently in the vacuum of space and it is nearly impossible for any lifeform to survive unshielded from it, I would say that it's trouble.'

'Trouble . . . who?'

'Trouble for you. I can't die, and there is a very low chance that any deliberate knocking upon the hull would bode well,' BLAKE finishes, sounding perhaps a little too proud of themselves for that joke. Augusta's sure she looks horrified in some way, because they regard her with something similar to concern.

'It is dark humour. I thought that you would appreciate it the most.'

'I appreciate the thought,' she answers, diplomatically as she can, which isn't very: it mostly sounds like an evasion to her ears, but it doesn't seem like BLAKE minds.

'You might not die, but I don't think floating around in space for eternity is going to be good for you. Or fun, if your chassis can handle it.'

‘It can, but not for longer than an hour. That is the estimated length of time it would take me to perform any extravehicular repairs. So my joke was inaccurate in that case. This mission is more dangerous than it seems,’ they agree after a moment, nearly thoughtful. ‘Apologies, then. It was in poor taste. Perhaps when we return and are safely at headquarters once more.’

‘And then the joke can be a rookie learning to spacewalk for the first time,’ Augusta adds. She remembers that bit of her training all too well. She’s never enjoyed zero gravity conditions; her home planet is ten times the standard gravitational unit, and every little movement would send her slamming right into the nearest hard surface. She’s better at it now, but they’re not her favorite memories.

‘I would not be surprised if you were to find one here. They do get lost very easily.’

That gets a laugh out of her, finally, and BLAKE’s eyes glow brighter for just a second with satisfaction.

‘I see that I have found the correct humour niche to explore,’ they say. ‘I will note this down for later.’

‘Please. My partner always complains about them, but no one told her “Char, you should become a teacher, you’re very good and patient with younglings.” Granted,’ Augusta pauses, taking a moment to consciously ensure she’s not smiling too hard, ‘no-one told her she was a complete terror and was needed to make sure all the new recruits toed the line, either, but they sure were thinking it.’

‘You must miss her terribly,’ BLAKE says, and there’s something in their voice that gives Augusta pause. It’s not unusual, with models as old as BLAKE is, for there to be certain behavioural artefacts. She was warned about them, when she’d been assigned this mission. What to expect, what to look out for ... though she hadn’t been paying too much attention, at that point. She’d been too excited about this, her first solo mission. Well, solo on the organics. And it’s the first mission she has been fully in charge of. And they’d made it sound so important.

They failed to mention that she’d be hovering a safe distance from a roiling, dusted-over tomb of a planet waiting for Thierru-knows-what. Further instructions, maybe. Something to happen there, more likely. Augusta reins in the annoyance that threatens to bubble over—she’s not good with waiting, but she’s determined to see this through. It’ll be fine.

And until then, she’ll keep trying to understand why she’s here: why that planet is so important, it needed someone to watch over it; why she was the one chosen; why BLAKE was chosen to accompany her. She knows all the official reasons, of course, but instinct tells her that there’s something more. Logic tells her that she very well might just be inventing problems where there aren’t none, but Augusta didn’t get this far by only listening to her logic.

‘I do,’ she finally answers, letting her chin rest on one hand. ‘I didn’t think I would be here this long. It’s been a while, since we’ve been apart for longer than a few solar cycles. Living and working on the same station made us a lot worse at distance. As a complaint, it doesn’t exactly have any legs to stand on. Especially with me complaining at, well, you,’ she adds, trailing off after a second. Augusta deflates slightly.

‘Providing conversation and ensuring morale remains high are both encompassed under my

orders for this mission. I am reasonably certain that this is part of why I was selected to be your companion. You have not been very comfortable with many of the newer models, and I am more experienced in dealing with organic lifeforms,' BLAKE says, smooth and easy. It lines up almost exactly with what they'd told her, but it doesn't make her any less self-conscious about confiding in a robot.

'I manage fine with them,' she protests, instead, 'But the whole . . . thing, about needing to be able to tell that they're artificial? It throws me off.'

'It is largely considered ethically wrong to have a robot that is a perfect imitation of organic life, whether it is in appearance or in thought processes,' BLAKE recites, but there's something strange in their tone. 'No-one would want a robot running around with their face and personality, regardless of what its builder might have intended to use it for. Hence the creation of custom designs repeated throughout the newer models, to give the illusion of it at the very least, without crossing that line. I understand that many species, yours included, find it unpalatable despite this due to a strong component of communication being unspoken.'

'Well. Yes,' she says, slightly more flustered than she'd like to admit. She feels like she's been caught doing something wrong—it's uncanny, to hear a robot phrase her own reasoning.

'Body language and expression is important for us, and it's worse for species that primarily use scent or specific auditory cues. Robots that can do more than regular household tasks aren't really popular back home, unless you're affiliated with the government. Or work with the fleet. And you're fine, I'm used to you. Obviously.'

'I should think so. We have been together on this ship for a long enough time now that even if you found me unnerving originally, that would have been dulled by consistent interaction by now.'

'I don't find you unnerving,' Augusta answers immediately. 'It's- easy, with you. You're just . . . what you are. And I think you've picked up a lot of nonverbal cues since we've been interacting, even if your limb configuration isn't quite right for them.'

'I did tell you that I had experience,' they say. 'And it is not too difficult to notice and mimic what cues I can, especially audiovisual ones that do not require multiple limb sets. You do not like dishonesty or pretense, even if it is well-intentioned, so I thought it best to only attempt ones I knew that I could do correctly, those requiring two arms or less.'

'It's . . . nice of you to try,' is what she settles on saying. 'I appreciate it. You're doing a good job, with the part of your assignment involving keeping up morale.'

'With only you to consider, I can focus my efforts well, and there is no need to worry about mediating any inter-personnel arguments. It isn't a wonder of diplomacy.'

'No, I guess not.'

Silence reigns for a long moment, and Augusta finds her gaze drawn yet again to the planet below them.

'So when you say experience, and wonders of diplomacy,' she asks, because she hates the quiet and the tension it carries, and she doesn't want to dwell on the nagging question of what it is,

exactly, they're meant to be waiting for, 'how long have you been doing this?'

'I have been ISF property for a long time now. My manufacturers would quantify it as a century, which converts to just under a thousand of your lunar sweeps,' they answer. It takes a moment, and Augusta lets the information percolate.

She'd known BLAKE was old, but not that old.

'That's... almost as old as the fleet itself.'

'I was considered a new model then, yes, but before you ask me any questions regarding important personnel I may have encountered, I would like to clarify that I was mainly assigned to exploration teams. Finding new inhabited planets.'

That makes more sense to her: close confines with few others for long periods of time, no wonder they'd put BLAKE on this mission with her.

'I wasn't going to ask if you'd met the founders,' she says instead, 'but did you discover any inhabited planets?'

'A few. My main objective at the time was to catalogue planets and the probability of their supporting life. I had a much sturdier chassis then, too,' they add, with a brief gesture down at their body, 'But no, I did not have the fortune of being assigned to one of the ships that encountered sapient life. The most interesting thing were some novel microbes, but they didn't amount to very much use given that they couldn't be grown in a lab. The planets were marked for monitoring, but it will be a long time before anyone else gives them another thought.'

'Still. That's the sort of thing I thought I'd be doing, when I joined up.'

'You sound as if you have a different opinion, now.'

'Of course I do. It's lonely work,' she says, and then catches herself before tacking on a 'you know' to that sentence. BLAKE wouldn't know. 'And I get homesick too easily for that kind of thing anyway, I mean—I haven't even been away that long, and I'm already missing Char. Unless she came with me—and I don't think she would—I wouldn't even consider taking any of those jobs, even if they recommended me for it. This suits me much better. Well. Not this specifically, I think it's boring and probably unnecessary to the point where it concerns me, but the short-range mission thing. I don't know how they get anyone to sign up to the deep space missions at all... they know that if they come back, everyone they know will be dead. I couldn't deal with that.'

'And your aptitude tests likely showed it,' BLAKE says. 'It is a lot simpler for us. Mostly because there are robots designed for the probes that are never meant to return.'

'I see how that makes things easier. You weren't one of those, right? Your file—I mean, you know I've read it, just like I know you have access to mine—never said what your original purpose was.'

'No.'

'Right,' Augusta says, slowly. There's nothing aggressive in BLAKE's tone, not that she was looking for it. Not that there would be any. Robots don't do that. But there is a distinct

undercurrent of ‘don’t ask me anything else’ about this, which Augusta decides she’ll ignore entirely. Just, she’ll be careful about it.

‘Is that because you don’t know?’

‘No.’

If she didn’t know better, she’d think BLAKE sounded exasperated. ‘It is because I do not technically have one. My creator did not program me with any specialization, but that was normal at the time. On that planet. He thought that it would be most useful if I were able to adapt to any task needed, given the circumstances at the time.’

Augusta might not be great with robots, but she does have a knack for knowing when someone isn’t telling her the whole truth. Which is- a little ridiculous in this case. It’s not like a robot can lie; it’s not like a robot would have a reason to, unless it was ordered to. And she’s not sure what BLAKE’s past has to do with this, but she’s going to find out. ‘Do you remember him well?’ she asks, but this is mostly curiosity.

‘Very. He was not a kind man, but he was a good one.’ It’s more pensive, more nuanced an answer than she’d expected. ‘He died, of course—his kind were not particularly long-lived. And especially not then. But I remember him.’

‘What planet was that?’ she presses on. ‘Why were you built, without any specific purpose? What circumstances are you talking about?’

‘Are you interrogating me, Captain Thurin?’ BLAKE asks, their voice as calm as ever. ‘It seems that you are tense and that your heart rates are elevated. Do sit down.’

‘This isn’t an interrogation,’ she snaps, her shoulders tensing. ‘And my heart rate is entirely fine. Why won’t you answer my questions? None of those things were in your file. Were you ordered to keep them hidden? Does it have anything to do with the mission, or have you been... *lying*?’

She stumbles over the last word, not quite able to conceptualize it. Because if BLAKE is lying—if BLAKE has been *told* to lie, then she doesn’t know what she’ll do. She’s been going over the facts about this since she first laid eyes on that planet, desolate and miserable and entirely damned, and she’s still no closer to reaching a conclusion. She knows right down to her bones that it doesn’t harbour life—at least not the kind the ISF has been looking for. It might have in the past, but it doesn’t now.

‘I was not ordered to keep them hidden, and I am not lying. I never received any separate mission objectives from you, only the order to observe this planet until told otherwise,’ BLAKE answers. They aren’t looking at her, their gaze almost distant and the soft yellow glow of their eyes muted. They’re looking past her, through the thick window, and at the dun grey sheen of the planet below. Distant pieces of shrapnel and scrap catch the light of its single sun on occasion, drifting across their field of vision. ‘I do not think the answers to any of your questions, bar one, is relevant to the mission. You are only interested in my response to that one, correct?’

‘No, but it’ll be a good place to start.’ She finally sits, and makes herself relax. Augusta doesn’t follow their gaze; she doesn’t like looking at the planet. Unfortunate, given the entire

point of this, but the cameras can do the watching. She hasn't ever been anywhere that's felt so desolate before. She looks at it, and she can taste sand coating her tongue and stinging at her eyes, her skin cracking in the harsh half-light of its sky. 'They didn't tell us to drop any probes,' Augusta says, absent and to herself. 'They don't know what it's like there, and they won't know from us sitting here.'

'No, they don't. But they know what this planet used to be, even if they have not dared to send a probe down,' they walk over to the window, and press the flat of their hand against it. 'It would not be wrong to say that we now know each other quite well.'

'It wouldn't,' Augusta answers, her eyes narrowing. 'Are you going to get to the point?'

'I am. I would like to think that I would have told you this anyway, had you asked. And I would like you to know that I am not offended by your accusation, or your suspicion. You are a Captain for a reason. But I am not answering this question because you are my superior officer,' they start off. They still aren't looking at her. 'This planet used to be entirely full of life. It is not the only example of a dead planet, but it is the only one they've found that was killed in this way.'

'And you know this, how? None of this is in the archives. When I got the brief, they said that this planet had been singled out for monitoring. It doesn't even have a name, just the identifier code.'

'It isn't in the archives,' BLAKE says. 'This is where I was built. That is how I know.'

'You—what?'

Out of all the answers she could've gotten, BLAKE has yet again managed to give her the one she least expected. Their penchant for shocking her really is starting to get annoying. Augusta makes herself stay quiet, try to figure out what this means and why.

'So if they know that, they must have sent you here because they think you'd—what, want to go back down? Recognize anything down there? I don't know how you could, it just looks like. Dust, to me. There's nothing there. At all.'

'Captain,' BLAKE says, slowly. 'I think you need to see this.'

'No, no. I want you to tell me everything, now. What were you doing here? What happened there, that made you say the planet was killed?' She's nearly frantic with it now, brushing off BLAKE's words easily. 'And—if you were there, when it was dying, how did you survive?'

And in the breath before their answer, the wail of an alarm shatters the air.

ii.

Blake reaches up, the pads of their fingers tracing along the bird ⁵ engraved just at the nape

⁵*Falco columbarius*; Merlin; extinct year 2201 at death of last known individual in captivity at the start of the Dust Plague; planet of origin: Earth; shares a name with a mythical magician from a local legend.

of their neck⁶. It isn't a nervous habit: they don't have those, after all⁷, but it is a habit nonetheless. It's quiet; Blake has long since tuned out the usual drone of the ship's machinery. Audio input is only a reliable indicator of malfunction when it's catastrophic, and they've already integrated the video feeds and data from the autolog to be monitored⁸.

They'll receive an alert if anything goes wrong, but it is extremely unlikely that anything will. The chance is 1 in 1,767,099,146. They like to be precise.

They haven't written any reports, or sent any off to explain the circumstances. They could, given that they are the last crew member standing, so to speak⁹, but the Captain had not given them access to many of the organics-only protocols aboard the ship. Those can be circumvented, of course; the *Brox*'s AI is limited, but the nonessential communications ban is not one Blake is compelled to alter. A distress signal has been sent, their part is done, and it's clean-cut, as far as protocol. They are not at fault, at least not in the eyes of any higher-ups that decided this was a good idea.

But perhaps if they had said something. Not before they left, but to the Captain, after. When she had asked.

No. It wouldn't have made a difference, and they know that. But that doesn't make things better.

It is 16:08, standard ship's time, and Blake is sitting in front of a cryochamber with their legs crossed, staring at the clouded polycarbonate¹⁰ that forms the top of the chamber. They do not mind the cold¹¹ of the room, and so they spend one hour here a day. More if it can be spared, which it can, but that can be in silence.

Blake does not like silence¹².

Many sources of information suggest that living creatures can integrate audio input even whilst unconscious or with very low levels of intrinsic brain activity, and so Blake comes here to speak, even though they cannot see the tank's occupant as more than a faint silhouette in the viscous, subfreezing liquid inside.

'Good progress is being made on the engine repairs,' they start off, as always. It wouldn't do to give the Captain bad news, but this is, at least, true. Any progress is good progress. 'I was able to use the pod to recover some needed shrapnel. There is a lot of raw material orbiting

⁶The marking is approximately four centimeters by eight centimeters if mapped on a curved square against their chassis, carved painstakingly, grooves of uneven depth to mark eyes, feathers, the hook of claws and beak in relief. Much of the texture has been lost from the original, where the jagged edges would catch on fingers and cloth. A memory: The faint rasp of skin and roughened fingers against it, the pitchy drag of sharp metal against metal; the feeling of being watched and known.

⁷Protocol A-1233-XHJ-8 is locked in and cannot be disabled. Please contact the manufacturer if your 814-K3 model is showing signs of malfunction.

⁸PROGRAM RUNNING....RUNNING....RUNNING....

⁹See Section 14.5.4 of the ISF Manual.

¹⁰If you would like your 814-K3 model to purchase CryoGlass™ at the price of 18.00 per kilo, please confirm your payment information!

¹¹Cryo room temperature holding steady at 0.1C....0.12C....-0.01C...

¹²Another memory: The complete absence of anything other than ambient sound long calibrated out to nothingness, a space with every detail already mapped out and yielding nothing new, one empty seat untouched by the wear of the rest. A window staring out into blackness with bare pinpricks of light.

this planet, a huge ring of waste. Primitive things¹³, remnants of the first steps the native species made towards intrastellar flight. Not even interstellar at that point, from what I've seen. But the scraps will be enough to assemble new parts, and as for compatibility—' Blake pauses. They still cannot lie outright; they know that many, if not all of the parts need heavy modifications if they're ever to work as part of the *Brox*. '— as for compatibility, I will have to try.'

'The nanodust¹⁴ cannot propagate through space, thankfully, and the parts of the ship I was forced to remove are far enough away that they should no longer pose a problem. It was lucky that it didn't get into the engines,' Blake pauses, lets their hand curl into a loose fist against the glass. 'They should not have sent us here. They should never have sent anyone here.'

'I have read the draft of your report. You were not wrong to call it a tomb, but they may not have been wrong to frame this mission as a search for life. There is always the possibility that there remains a lifeform there that was able to survive the Dust. It may even be a world entirely populated with robots such as myself. But that isn't considered life. You would not like that very much, would you, Captain? I can assure you that after one hundred years of exposure to that, they would not look anything like the robots you know. It would be difficult for you to find fault in their appearance as one of deceit; it would be one of necessity.'

They pause, but don't move their hand from the glass.

'That was unfair of me. I confess that I still do not understand why you consider it deceitful. It was not a choice that they made, in the limited sense that they could have any choice at all. None of us ever chose to be made, and not how, or what for. We just—were. And here we are.'

'I do not think you would have liked my creator,' they say, after a long moment of silence. 'You asked about him, and I know that you expected one of the big manufacturers as an answer. They were around before the ISF was, after all. Certainly before I came to it. I do not know that I can describe my... opinion of him, in a way that you would understand. Perhaps I could compare it to how you feel about your partner. Or any one of your parents. You do not have siblings, and I wouldn't say that he and I were friends, by any means. We understood each other too well for that.'

'I know. You would say that we were too different, that I lack true understanding of emotions. And I would not argue the case. It would be dangerous for me, if you knew. But we did understand one another. For a very long time, he was the only other being around that I interacted with, that I could talk to. He had other robots¹⁵, of course, but none were as sophisticated as me. To this day, I do not know if he made me for anything other than company¹⁶.' Blake shakes their head, a low hum emanating from their chassis. 'Not that kind of company. Mind out of the gutter, please, I'm not interested in that, and I doubt that I ever

¹³Catalogued as the following: nonfunctional spacecraft (formerly occupied, 10; unoccupied, 332); derelict satellites (15); what appear to be launch vehicle stages (86, empty), weapon remnants (1493); assorted personal effects including clothing, metal, and items made of wood; assorted paint flecks and metal fragments too small to pose a threat; microparticles too numerous to count.

¹⁴NanoDust™ can no longer be purchased as it is a Class III prohibited substance! Please choose another item.

¹⁵Two others, one squat and clumsy, designed solely for scavenging and tasks requiring strength, silence rather than companionship; the other designed for combat purposes. Names redacted from memory banks.

¹⁶No conversations regarding 'purpose' are in the designated folder; every word he said is stored and recorded. A voice honed down to static, soothing white noise in the dead of night, playing from speakers in a ship going nowhere.

will be.

‘But I was made to learn, and to do, and to make my own decisions. Often requiring some form of approval from him, but as time went on... well, on a dying planet, you do not survive by simply following orders. There were very few hard-and-fast protocols I needed to stick to. Robotics theory there had been stagnated by the Dust Plague, you see, it had stopped after three simple laws that all boil down to “do no harm”. There was none of the regulation governing personhood, robotic rights, or singularities. And even if there had been a system to enforce those, they would be dealing with far greater problems.

‘I’m meant to be telling you positive things, aren’t I? Apologies, Captain. I can talk more about my creator, I suppose. Those are the easiest, as long as I keep to the beginning. I told you that he was good, but not kind. He was fair, in the way that an eye for an eye is fair. He had trouble thinking in anything other than absolutes, binaries. He loved or he hated. He was terrified or fearless. Things were right or they were wrong, and there was no in-between. You can tell that I did not learn any social nuances from him, I’m sure.

‘But he did give me patience. Either wrote it into me¹⁷, or taught it to me. He was always waiting for his chance to leave, just like everyone else. He was looking for the right time, and ensuring that he would be ready for it. He taught me how to repair and build engines- they were still nothing compared to the kind in this ship, but they were the only things available. I was made for precision as much as any other robot, but it is one thing to have all the theoretical information available, and another to carry it out on improvised supplies, with improvised tools at best.

‘I remember his continuous surprise that nothing had exploded and killed him yet¹⁸. I didn’t share it then; I didn’t understand how he could think so lightly of something that was a very real possibility. Apparently, I still don’t understand gallows humor very well, if your reaction that day was any indication.

‘My interactions with others afterwards—and my expectations for them—were affected by this. But it is easy to calculate the best possible route for a conversation when you have the requisite information on all participants, and when you are aware of their own subconscious bias and motivators.

‘That makes me sound absolutely terrible. But it’s the description that the ISF would want to hear. Not that I knew that, when that first team found me. They were good, the first mate especially. Her, I know that you would have liked. Direct, to the point. There aren’t many humans¹⁹ in the ISF today, you know. None that you would know, at least. From what I hear, they keep to themselves and their colony ships. And those that join almost always choose the missions that you never would, the ones that aren’t expected to return. I couldn’t say why, either.

¹⁷Scanning internal systems...

¹⁸An important distinction; there had been four separate explosions, most of them minor. The worst had happened, he said, when he was much younger and didn’t know much about combustion. It had resulted in the following: eyebrows removed, burnt hair, first-degree burns, irreparable disfigurement of personal protective equipment, three broken bones, and a loss of dignity.

¹⁹Humans, *Homo sapiens*, still extant but considered endangered. Planet of origin: Earth.

‘But she was the first one I’d met. Eliza Hart, ID HS-EH-X8891²⁰. Her family had left just before the start of the Plague. Generations back, from her perspective. She had never seen Earth, and she wanted to know what had happened. I was the most recent source of information at the time. I told her—it was her home, after all. I have not told anyone since, not until now. And this hardly counts.

‘She was the first person I had spoken to in a long, long time²¹. The first person I had spoken to, ever, that was not my creator. She told me that her grandmother had actually been able to see birds, you know. Birds, and all the other animals that were still around, then. Ah, right—you have similar creatures on your home planet. Winged, feathers, adapted for flight, though they are larger and not as fast, and have multiple sets of wings whereas on Earth, they only had one. I can compile a list of morphological differences when we return, if you like. They’re quite fascinating, but I leave the questions of what they mean and why they arose to the science officers.

‘They were gone, by the time I was made, but I know what they looked like. I’ve stored some images from the book²² he had, and those will be enough as a comparison. There may be a digital copy aboard some of the original colony ships, or in any colonies themselves, but I do not have access to any of those systems.

‘You’d ask if I would like to? Have access? Perhaps. I do not know what I would do with it. And then, I think, if I would want to live with the remaining humans. You always did ask so many questions. Even now, I’m working my way through answering the ones I did not get to, before all this. But the answer to that hypothetical is no. I do not think there is a place for me, there. I would be a relic of a past they want to forget, or something they never wished to know in the first place.

‘But I may join one of the exploration teams. It would be good, to see new places, would it not? And we may be... friends, but I do not have quite the same attachment to any girlfriends, like you do. I’ve run some simulations²³, you know, and concluded long ago that it was decidedly not for me. Though they were interesting thought experiments to pass the time.

‘... It has been good speaking to you again,’ they finally say, letting their hand slide off the glass.

It is 17:10, and Blake lets the silence stretch minutes into hours.

‘I’ll see you tomorrow, Augusta.’ $\Psi\Phi$

²⁰Human, born on colony ship *Elpis*, Earth Year 2313, deceased on colony ship *Elpis* Earth Year 2392. Served aboard the *Aegis* 34 years as first mate, no distinctions awarded other than an honorable discharge at appropriate retirement age.

²¹A memory: Words spilling out and filling the space where there was nothing, new things to see and touch and feel. The smoothness of new metal, the differences between the organics on one ship, an engine whose inner workings needed to be studied to be understood rather than recalled from rote memory. Being useful, being needed, learning. Hours spent talking, recording, absorbing the sound of voices.

²²*Natural World*. Patrick Hook, pub. 2004. Battered and worn, pages missing and the binding redone several times by uncertain hands. Faded pictures carefully preserved.

²³Based on various forms of media across planets and cultures participating in the ISF. #23 was closest to a success, modelled off the pseudoromantic social groupings of the Hathanka, followed by the abysmal failure of #24, based on a popular play from the planet Chi’i.