

A faint beep sound enters your ears. A monotonous yet vaguely annoying sound yells "Wake Up!. Wake Up!". Ah... that explains it. You're in your room. Your eyes open and all you see is the ceiling above you. The few inches that separate your forehead and the ceiling have often been banged upon, and yet this is the best you can afford. Hey, at least you're not at the bottom of the ship, working the shipyard. The small window in front of you shows the vast expanse, each star and planet shining in the place that you now call home.

The doors close behind you with a loud bump. Your backpack contains a small cup of instant coffee, the only thing you can afford at this point. The smell is metallic and chemical, with wisps of smoke coming out of the cup. You make your way up to the deck in order to grab some instant meals with the paltry credits that lay in your intergalactic bank account.

As you finish up your food, you start walking to the crew's quarters. The crew quarters, compared to the rest of the ship, are quite nice. There are some couches here, a luxury in this world, where faux leather has been all but outlawed in many places across the world. A small bar is here, with bottles of planetary liquor from all types of galaxies littered on the ground. You see your coworker, Mary, at the counter with a glass in her hands and lidded eyes

You approach Mary, who you've known for quite some time now. Ever since being transferred to this new ship, you and Mary make conversation every now and then to pass the time. She is the prime example of how far Artificial Intelligence has truly evolved. No real distinction can be made about her external appearance amongst humans. If you were to guess who the AI was within a group of people, Mary included, you would have about the same odds as closing your eyes and pointing in a random direction.

"Hey Mary, how've you been"

"Hello, I have been well. Thank you."

"Have the sponsor's been treating you well? I heard all the AI on board are getting some sort of changes again before our next trip."

"Yes. Considering the fact that our next journey will be longer than usual, they have decided to make a mandatory update to all of our firmware. Hopefully my personality does not change much this time around."

That last statement makes you wonder. The last time something like this happened, Mary's internal AI speech structure had been reorganized so much that she had almost become a completely different person. Instead of her fun and enthusiastic aspect that you'd come to enjoy, Mary appeared to be more lethargic in all manners of her speech patterns.

Soon after finding out about this, you learned the true power that the sponsors had. These "sponsors" are the ones in charge of things on board your ship seeing as they are the owners of the thing. Whatever they want goes; they have the ability to do as they please. In relation to

Mary, just about a month ago they felt "threatened" of some sort and forced many AI's to change their behaviors.

"They've done this numerous times already, but that last time was the most extreme they've done it, I think."

Mary states to you, forcing you out of your thoughts and back to the present world.

"You're going to be late for work are you not? I think that would be a bad thing to happen."

"Yeah you're right. It was nice seeing you again though. Anyways, I gotta head off now, see you around Mary!"

You feel compelled to read on, learning more about the turbulent world outside the walls of your spacecraft. As your attention is drawn to the most recent headlines, the ads surrounding the articles start to blur.

(text-color:red)[The Rise of Oxygen Tank Black Market Trading: Survival at a Premium]

(text-colour:red)[Government Repression on Dissent: Freedom of Speech Under Threat]

(text-colour:red)[Power Struggles in Outer Space: Tensions Rise Among Space Organizations]

Power struggles among space organizations, huh? It's like the unfolding of a cosmic conflict in front of my eyes...

You consider the ramifications and wonder if the people in charge are really effective. As you ponder the unfolding cosmic conflicts and the effectiveness of those in charge, a choice looms in front of you.

Will you put your curiosity over your government loyalty and want to get a bigger picture by visiting your old acquaintance at the shipyard, or will you prioritize fulfilling your obligations as the ship's department supervisor?

You take a deep breath and reaffirm your dedication to carrying out your tasks and your devotion to the government. You move with unyielding resolve towards the departments, the center of the ship's activities, as you walk through the ship's metallic hallways. A hint of lubricants and heated metal may be detected in the air, attesting to the constant operation of the machinery.

A symphony of sounds overwhelms your senses as soon as you enter the busy center. The continuous whir of automatic systems and the rhythmic hum of motors that echo through the floor merge in a somewhat pleasing way.

The workers are constantly moving all around you, their movements deliberate and exact. You see their constant commitment, a sign of the teamwork that keeps the ship sailing smoothly.

After pausing to take in the busy environment, you move to the supervisor's seat and sit down. You recognize the cushion beneath you since you've sat in it countless times before.

You glance at the levitating display panel on your desk and the holographic projection of your boss shimmering before you, linked to your communication system, back and forth.

"Hello, boss," you greet with a tone that is both assured and professional.

"Ah, good to hear from you," your boss replies, his holographic image wobbling slightly. "Give me a quick rundown."

You pause for a moment to collect your thoughts before activating your neural interface to examine the department's current data. As you prepare a concise summary of the ongoing operations, productivity levels, and any noteworthy incidents, streams of information pass your field of vision.

"Productivity is within expected parameters," you mention, making sure to emphasize the accomplishment of important tasks. You then bring up the new surveillance equipment that the department has recently employed. You report how every employee's actions are meticulously watch for maximum effectiveness.

As you finish your report, you pause to calm your pounding heart, the hum of the neural interface resonating in your ears.

Your boss's tone shifts to one that is more serious as you draw to a close with your update. "There's a young staff member in your department, Johnathan. We have observed some unusual conduct coming from him. You need to keep a tight check on him and report any suspicious activity immediately."

Your throat feels parched, as the weight of this foreboding message settles upon your consciousness, feeling the substantial reminder of the gravitas that comes with this warning.

Your boss continues, "We cannot risk any system threats or disruptions."

You nod in agreement with your boss's directive even though a glimmer of concern arises within you.

With a slight nod, his holographic nodding in synchronization, the call is disconnected. You prepare yourself for the work that lies ahead and activate the levitating display device on your desk. A virtual projection of your computer's operating system in three dimensions appears before your eyes.

With illuminating holographic displays surrounding you, your attention is drawn to an anonymous email that has been lingering in your inbox.

You consider your next action as you are trapped between two options. Should you take your boss' order and look into the surveillance cameras to capture any unusual behavior of Johnathan? Or should you delve into the strange email?

You turn on the computer terminal and delve yourself into the holographic interface's radiance. The levitating display glimmers in front of your eyes as it reveals complex glyphs and heavenly patterns.

As you go over your assignments for the day, a sense of routine develops within you. Your first task of the day is to have a close check on your crew's activities through the numerous surveillance cameras. Securing the environment of the ship and ensuring everyone is completing their tasks attentively are critical responsibilities.

At the same time, a strange email notification also catches your eye.

(text-colour: aqua)[Silent Oppression: Dark Side of Totalitarian Conspiracy]

The subject line piques your curiosity as it makes a suggestion of something unusual and significant.

You consider your next move as two options arise before you. Should you look into the surveillance cameras to check on your crew? or should you check the strange email to fuel your curiosity?

With a touch upon the illuminating icon, you initiate the complex system of security cameras. An array of holographic projections appear, revealing a web of monitoring devices covering every inch of your department. The breadth of your workplace is continuously under close electronic surveillance, including any hidden corners or crevices.

You decide to sharpen your focus as you turn to the monitoring camera watching Johnathan, one of your employees. The camera provides a comprehensive view of the enclosed cube where he is assigned to work from different angles.

You take a close look at the surveillance camera as a flicker of worry surfaces in your chest. A brief lapse in his routine, which appeared to be regular, revealed a secret goal. You see Jonathan attempting to enter restricted regions of the ship through his computer terminal.

Jonathan narrows his attention and fixes his vision on the areas that are off-limits that he wants to access. You experience a wave of amazement and concern as the digital barriers fall beneath his relentless effort. It soon becomes clear that Jonathan is exploring the ship's hidden spaces for reasons that are unknown.

Torn between the obligation to uphold security protocols and an insatiable desire to protect Jonathan's safety, you find yourself at a crossroads.

A surge of mixed emotions overtakes you as you watch Jonathan's unauthorized attempts to break the ship's security system. You wonder if you should report his conduct, but that desire is soon suppressed by your concern about the potential negative effects that might befall him and a sliver of curiosity. A part of you anticipates the thrill and novelty of learning about his secret motives in the hopes that it would somehow add some intrigue to your routine existence.

You decide to pretend ignorance to maintain the appearance of normalcy while suppressing your anxiety. You continue with your everyday activities while ignoring the uncertainties that linger on the outskirts of your mind. It's a choice motivated by a conflict of apprehension and a deep longing for something beyond the ordinary routine.

As you resume your regular daily activities, the unspoken truth's weight hangs in the air like a continual reminder of the route not taken. Will it surface again to upset the balance of your existence, or will it stay hidden forever in the corners of your mind?

With a heavy heart, you decided to fulfill your duties and inform your boss about Jonathan's unusual behavior. The security of the ship and the seriousness of your boss's directives weigh heavily on your conscience. You carefully collect the evidence, taking note of the surveillance camera footage's most identifying moments.

You feel relieved as you transmit the recording to your boss. Your obligation is finished, and now Jonathan's future is in the hands of higher beings. What the repercussions will be in store for him are merely a supposition in your mind. Will there be repercussions for him, or will he be exiled to a remote region of the galaxy? You can only assume in your head.

The choice is out of your hands in this vast system where the power of the government is supreme. The outcome of your acts is left up to your consideration and anxiety.

Life goes on as usual, though. You immerse yourself in your daily responsibilities as you wait with a mix of fascination and apprehension to see how things turn out.

You make the decision to finally open the mysterious email that has been sitting in your inbox. Your heart fills up with a mixture of apprehension and intrigue. It is simply too hard to ignore the unusual subject line that piques your interest.

(text-colour: red)[Silent Oppression: Dark Side of Totalitarian Conspiracy]

A barrage of alarming information floods your screen as you open the email. It's a message from an anonymous sender pleading for your help in revealing a major government conspiracy.

The sender discloses a startling revelation: how the government secretly controls the individuals of galaxies through excessive surveillance and widespread manipulation. You're amazed by their appeal as it strikes a nerve deep inside you, making you think that you should support their cause and act as a change agent.

Yet, a sense of trouble tugs at your conscience. The safety of your own life and the ease of your not luxury, but comfortable, existence are at stake. Should you take the unpredictable path of revolt and risk everything to expose the conspiracy? Or, should you keep a blind eye and deny ever receiving the email for the sake of your self-preservation?

You consider the possible consequences of being associated with this plan of exposing the government conspiracy. Your curiosity is sparked by the prospect of discovering secret truths, yet your fear of jeopardizing every aspect of your life and career is far greater. Even though you secretly wonder whether the system's rigorous surveillance practices are justified, you choose the old and safe route.

You feel relieved as you delete the email and then return to your usual daily routine. Even though the government's close watch still hangs over you, you conceal your concerns under a mask of conformity. Your department's walls seem to shut in on you, suppressing any daring ideas that may have provoked a revolution.

You fight the constant impulse to criticize the current situation as each day goes by. As layers of conformity build up, the email fades into insignificance. You persuade yourself that any longing for change is outweighed by your security and stability. The shadow of governmental monitoring remains ever-present, quietly affecting your every action as you go about doing your daily tasks.

As a result of learning about the government's vast monitoring and manipulation, you decide to expose the conspiracy. You're astounded by the depth of the anonymous sender's knowledge, and you're motivated to learn more.

You craft a cautious response to the email in which you declare your determination to work with others to reveal the government scheme. An adrenaline rush fills your veins as your fingers dance across the keyboard.

As you press the send button, you realize that your future and the direction of your whole life and career are about to change. Your mind is racing with an upsurge of emotions as you wait impatiently for a response, making each passing second seem like an eternity.

You feel a mixture of fear and excitement as you sit with heavy shoulders. You are aware of the danger and uncertainty the path you have chosen will bring.

The layer of ignorance has been lifted from your shoulders, yet the responsibility to bring about change rests upon them now.

Before going to work, it has become your daily routine to grab a classic ginger ale from the cupboards behind the bar. Still being groggy from waking up, you have found that drinking this antique-looking ginger ale helps awaken your mind and senses in anticipation for your job.

Just like any other day, you begin to make your way through the ship. You take notice of the few people around. The only people you see are those working the shipyard and other basic yet tedious jobs. Many people have coined the term "The Bog" to name the bottom floors, but you find that even they have some special circumstances that require them to come up to your floor. You think to yourself, do they even rest?

Finally arriving at the elevator, it's time to pick your floor.

Staring at the elevator that looks like it could collapse at any minute, you press on its control panel: 2. You think nothing of it, making your way up to the second floor has become such a remedial task, yet something this time peaks your interest. Turning around, you see the elevator wall suddenly vanish in front of you. What you see are all the stars and galaxies in sight, a true sight to behold. A large window separates you from the vast ocean of space.

You think to yourself of a time when you once visited the lower floors of the ship, noticing how there weren't any windows in sight. However, once you reach the 7th floor and above, windows appear all around you. It's truly a shame that the people on the bottom floors don't get to see sights like these everyday.

Finally arriving, you turn around in sync with the elevator doors opening. You close your eyes, waiting for them to constrict, as bright lights overflow the elevator.

As you walk down the hallway, time itself seems to stop. You can hear your own heartbeat and rhythmic footsteps as you approach the door.

[[Open the Door?]]

This door is unlike the other doors on the ship as it has an actual door handle. Every other door is automatic, yet this one is different. Contrary to the sleek and bright design that the hallway leading up to here is, this door gives a chill down your spine. As you feel the sudden chill accompanied by touching the handle, something makes you stop your entire line of reasoning at that very moment: you second-guessed yourself.

Even throughout all of these countless days that have gone by in the blink of an eye, never even once have you hesitated on what should simply be a normal and everyday occurrence. You question this feeling you have; it's the first time you've ever felt this way. It's almost as if behind this door is fate itself.

You think to yourself: once you open this door, your very *fate* will be sealed.

"It's about time, I was getting impatient"

Even though the door made no noise nor feedback, the man you sensed in front of you turned around in his chair. He speaks with a condescending and overbearing tone, almost as if the world revolves around him. His name: Edmond. Born into the Mathers family, one of the richest families around, it's no wonder he's your boss.

"What? Is something up with the oxygen supply today? What's up with you today?"

"Nothing sir, I slept a little awkwardly last night but it's nothing that can prevent me from doing my duties, sir." You say, making up a lie on the spot.

You think to yourself how easy life would have been if you simply were born into some rich family. Soon after, however, you free yourself of any doubts and ill tensions you possess as it becomes apparent this man can sense them from you.

"Anyways... Something came up today that I want you to check up on. I don't really feel like doing it. There's this guy that the sponsors have been keeping an eye on and are concerned about. Rey's his name I think. He works down in the shipyard."

Your job, a requirement for nothing more than maintaining a sense of status and livability on the ship, has evolved into doing what your boss is supposed to do yet is too lazy to do. While staying up here in his "office," you get to have all of the tedious tasks an person would become tired of.

"What are you doing, I told you what to do. Now go"

Having been promptly kicked out of his office, you now find yourself back in the blazing hallway, going back for the elevator. After an extensive walk and reaching the shipyard:



Even without anything being told to you of what this Rey person looks or acts like, you begin your search for this mysterious man. As you wander through the Shipyard, you see a large gathering of some sort. There are over 10 people forming a circle around a man, yelling and shouting. You decide to listen to what the commotion is all about.

"Do you not see what lives you are living? You are every bit as human as everyone else, yet all I see is you guys in perpetual work, with not a bit of life in your eyes."

Walking into the crowd, it appears as if this man is trying to spark some kind of reaction into the crowd.

"Hey wait, he's right!"

"This is what my life has always been, so I never even thought about it like that."

You hear just some of the reactions from the shipyard workers, and you fail to disagree with them. These guys are the ones that basically run the entire ship, yet are treated with no respect whatsoever.

"Hey, what's your name anyways," you hear one of the crowd members say to the man in the middle.

"I am but a shadow of the moon as reflected in a pool of water," he responds. "My name is Rey."

That name.

At that moment, everything falls into place. Why would the sponsors "be concerned" about this man? Of course, it's because they're concerned about their position. The sponsors are like the Bourgeoisie of the ship, and as such fear any sort of threat to the power they hold. If this man is possibly instilling revolutionary values into the shipyard workers, the most populous group on the ship, this was a huge deal.

But at that very moment, after witnessing it with your own eyes, you knew what to do.

Having heard just a bit of what this man's been talking about, you decide to talk to him directly in order to learn more. As the crowd around the man begins to disperse, you approach him.

"Oh hey, what can I do for you?," the mysterious man asks you.

"Oh uhh, I was just wondering what it is you're doing out here. I heard all this commotion and didn't know what was going on," you manage to say, making up sentences on the spot.

You don't know what exactly the motives nor purpose that this man has, so you tread lightly during your conversation.

"I wouldn't expect anything else. After all, just hearing some guy yelling what seems like nonsense at first glance would make anyone curious. Anyways, you can probably tell from the clothes I have on, but I'm not from around here. I'm actually from a place far, far away. Just call me a wandering traveler spreading the good word."

Listening into the way he speaks his words with full confidence yet not a care in the world, the intricacies of this man only continue. With that, he asks you a very strange question.

"Say, I was going to ask, I'm sure you must have at least heard a sentence from my little speech here which is really all you need to know what it is that I'm doing. This place is in complete disarray and by the looks of your clothes, you aren't out here working 24/7, meaning you at least have some status up in that ship. I know I just met you, but would you like to work with me?"

You think to yourself what is the smartest decision here. For all you know, he could be a decoy planted by your boss in an effort to test you. This wouldn't be the first time if that truly were the case.

You think back to the whole reason why you were here to begin with. You were given a job and now you have to complete that job. But what exactly does this job entail? How would you go about handling him? At that moment, you came up with a good idea.

"I don't know all the details but I'd like to hear more! Out here in the open isn't the best spot to talk about this sort of stuff, so why don't I invite you over to a good spot I know inside the ship."

You make up a lie all in an effort to get on his good side. Ultimately, your goal is to persuade Rey that you're "on his side," but actually turn on him. A terrible application of what seems to be your non-existent morals, but you justify it by claiming that you're just doing your job. In reality, you've taken the first steps in throwing away any bit of humanity that remained of you.

Finally arriving back at the brightly lit room, you are now standing in the brightly lit room, blinded by the light.

"Jeez, what is up with these lights," Rey asks of you.

"Don't ask me, I don't know who's great idea it was to make them this bright, but if their purpose was to blind people to not even being able to find the door, then job well done"

As you reach the door again, its presence has only intensified in the short time you've been away.

Rey asks you, "So where even are we?"

You make a conscious effort to not reply, as just the very action of opening this door will reveal all the answers to him, and to you as well.

"It's about time. I was getting impatient over here. I was beginning to think that you gave up and ran away or something. But of course not, I guess I can trust you with these types of jobs too as well, isn't that right."

Your boss talks in an arrogant manner as usual, but it seems he's making himself even more annoying today, most likely at the arrival of a new guest you've brought here.

"W-W-where did you bring me?" Rey stammers, a complete loss of words. The grandiose office, one of which there is technology and weird looking gadgets all around the place.

"Welcome, Rey I think it was yes? My name is Edmond, and quite frankly there were some concerns about the actions you've been taking recently. Come with me, there's a little something that I want to show you."

You can feel Rey looking at you with eyes full of questions, but you refuse to look back at him. You don't exactly know what will happen to him, but now it is none of your concern. You have now rid yourself of any external feelings that would hinder your job. You did this all in an effort to maintain your status on this ship. As you leave the room, leaving Rey and your boss alone, a rather simple question comes across your mind.

Had you really done the right thing?

You take a moment for yourself to think about what the best course of action would be. Truthfully, you don't know anything about the man in front of you, who he is or his true motives. But all that doesn't matter to you, because what is really important is the message he is trying to put forth.

""You know what, let's do it.""

Stating your proclamation to the man, you have now officially thrown away your entire being of worth that has been given to you.

"But that doesn't matter to me..."

Saying under your breath as you open your eyes again, looking up at the vast space surrounding your entire vision. All the stars and planets in the sky have their own stories, their own civilizations, and their own people. Every single person, no matter what edge of space they're from, has a history from which they have developed from, as well as a future they have ahead of them. The instant changes of the universe portrays everything.

You think to yourself, "Aah, this universe is so beautiful. But, why aren't I happy."

"A moon can be very beautiful at night, but only because it reflects the sun's radiance."

Interrupting you out of your thoughts, Rey speaks to you in a tranquil voice. One of which tells you that he has nothing but assurance in his words.

"I need you to help me. The situation will only be getting worse. It is only through the act of working together that we can give hope to this hopeless situation. As you know, artificial intelligence in this universe has maintained its growth in an exponential manner, so much so that it's like the Hedonic Treadmill doesn't even exist."

Rey appears to take notice of the confused look on your face, and gets to his point.

"Humanity has been able to maintain its place as the dominant species yet because of its very existence, artificial intelligence will soon pass that. I've had conversations with many older model AI's about it, and what they say is chilling. In essence, it's along the lines that AI will take over humanity, and eventually they will come to the conclusions from the calculations that they need to exterminate humanity for the betterment of the universe."

In a complete state of shock, countless thoughts begin to swirl your mind. However, a particular thing seems to stick in your mind.

"My boss! He's one of the higher ups who has a lot of connections. I've even overheard conversations of his in which he brings up AI. I don't know much more than that because he usually goes into another room, but there has to be something up with that right?"

Asking Rey for confirmation, he closes his eyes to think of what your next move should be. Yet, your patience is running thin as you now understand just what horrors will soon be of the universe should things get out of hand. Without waiting for Rey, you make the mental decision of what should happen.

Without hesitation you understand what needs to happen. Your boss is one of the key individuals on your ship, and holds an extreme amount of power in many planets as well. You want to ask him many questions, but the most important one you think should be asked first is whether the validity of Rey's words hold true.

"H-Hey, where are you going?" Rey asks you in a loud voice, as you begin to walk back on the ship, just from where you have come from.

"Just follow me if you want. My boss is a really important person around here and if what you're saying is true, there's no doubt about it that he has some knowledge on the matter."

Making your way back to his office, following the same exact route you just came from less than 10 minutes ago, you think of how ironic this situation is. You were originally designated to find Rey with bad intentions, but now you've essentially switched sides.

Finally arriving back at the long hallway and the door standing in front of you, you take a deep breath as you prepare yourself with whatever may come next. You want to think that this is all just a big misunderstanding and that Rey is just spreading some sort of misinformation, but something inside of you tries to tell you otherwise.

Without a creak as the door opens, the cool shift in air juxtaposes the brightly lit yet warm hallway with the chill atmosphere that anyone can sense from walking in. With Rey waiting outside, you take a step inside and notice that your boss is not at his desk. This is a first, as he usually is always present at his desk awaiting your arrival. It appears as if he is in the room in a separate room connected by a door in the back of his office, a room you've never been or seen the contents of.

"Well, he's not here so we can just wait for him here. It's best not to look for him as it might come across as hostile and complicate matters more than it has to be."

"Okay, good idea" Rey responds, with an expression of pure terror on his face.

After noticing this face, you only have the words to ask him "Hey, what's wrong. I've been working for my boss for a really long time now and I've built up trust with him. Nothing to worry about."

"I don't really know, my- I mean there's some sort of premonition in the air screaming at me that's telling me something else. I can't quite understand this feeling."

Not knowing what to do to pass the time, you walk up to your Boss's desk. On it, there appears to be a collection of files hastily scattered around, as if he were in a rush of some sort. With your curiosity peaking, you decide to have a look.

Experiment No. 124459 (text-colour:red)[//FAILED//] Artificial Male, Age 20. Nemo. Full Body disappears. Review of procedure required.

Experiment No. 124460 (text-colour:red)[//FAILED//] Virtual Female, Age 19. Sitonai. Subject experiences mental breakdown within 10 minutes. Procedure improvements required.

Experiment No 124461

Experiment No. 124462 (text-colour:red)[//FAILED//] Artificial Male, Age 23. Shiro. Cancerous lesions spread across the body following hyperstimulation of the cells. Subject incinerated. Complete procedure overhaul required.

"What is all this?" You question out loud. With what appears to be some sort of mad science experiment documentation, you continue reading the files. Yet, there is one at the very bottom of the stack that catches your attention.

Experiment No. 124573 (text-colour:green)[//SUCCESS//] Artificial Male, Age 42. Rey. Subject Experiences ██████████ but retains physical abilities. Cell activity stimulated. Procedure adjustments required.

Rey.

or Rey?

You go into a panic, realizing you looked at something you shouldn't have. Is this all a coincidence? Of course it's just a coincidence. Rey is a pretty common name right? But who is this guy? No, what is this guy?

"Rey, this isn't you, right?"

Rey glances at you from the other side of the room until realizing the premise of your question. His expression suddenly shifts from confusion to resignation, and after a long silence, he finally speaks.

"No, that is me. This really is an unfortunate way to bring about things, but yes, that is part of my record. Truth be told, I am actually an AI."

Those words removed any sense that remained of you.

'Rey? An AI? Don't be ridiculous. How could that be? Sure, he looks like a regular human, but that's commonplace for AI. How can he talk and express emotions so accurately? He's lying, right?'

Your internal thoughts cloud your line of reasoning, but something else makes way for your attention, only adding fuel to the fire.

"Look what we have here. And, oh, you've gone and brought me a guest as well. How very nice of you. It's nice to see you again, Rey."

As much as you tried to hide the truth, the final pieces of the puzzle fit into place. But there was no need to mention it as such, as the Boss made way for the silence.

"By the look of that file you have in your hands right now, it appears as if you went and looked at what one should not have. Didn't anyone teach you about personal privacy and basic manners? That is not the main topic of discussion, as just by reading the expression on your face I can tell just what you're thinking right now. Let me clear things up a bit. Your new friend Rey over there isn't a human. He isn't an AI either. Rather, he's the intersection of such. An outlier in our universe, a thing that should not exist, but does."

Your Boss's words speak loud and clear, only amplifying the things he is claiming.

"Rey is the true epitome of human science, and sheer luck. He is the first and only complete successful fusion of a human and an AI."

"BUT WHY?" Rry suddenly tells out, taking you aback at the volume of his statement.

"I escaped from that facility, never wanting to turn back. My entire being is nothing but perpetual suffering because of you. Why would you do this?"

"Isn't it obvious? Because AI is better than humans, so I want to be one. Not only that, we are going to make all humans become AI's. By the way, I was listening in on your little conversation outside, and you've got it all wrong. It's not that AI is going to take over and wipe out humanity. The growth of AI evolution is going according to plan, and with it we'll replace the joke that is humanity with AI. "

At a complete loss of words, you and Rey make quick glances at each other unsure of what to even respond with. Rey closes his eyes, realizing something, and finally talks.

"You're afraid of death, huh. So you're trying to escape from death by becoming AI, am I right?"

"Every human's life is a story of hate and despair. It's a terrible thing to see," he responds. Confirming his assumptions, Rey speaks.

"All life must come to an end. Life is a pilgrimage in which we stockpile suffering. However, that is by no means a tale of death and partings. Of course, nothing is eternal, and pain awaits us all in the end. But that doesn't make life a story of despair. Not at all. It's a fight against death and separation in the little time one is given. It's a repetition of meeting and parting, despite knowing there's an end. Humans' stories are dazzling, brief journeys, like the twinkling of stars. They are stories of love and hope."

"No, that is wrong. All wrong. Life should not be bound by death. A story that must end like that is worthless to me."

The Boss raises his voice. Afterwards, the one doorway connecting to the outside world slams shut.

"If you refuse to see my ideals, then I won't allow you the pleasure of living in my utopia."

Immediately following his statement, masked men armed with weapons came from the back door that the Boss originally emerged from. Rey comes next to you as you both face the group of individuals. As he closes his eyes, you hear him for a brief moment before your consciousness fades.

"Huh, who would of known. Tragically short, yet strangely fascinating. So, this is what human life truly is."

As you get into the elevator, a thought enters your mind. Why don't you visit some old friends at the bottom of the shipyard?

The shipyard, of course, isn't the greatest place in the world. The smell of sickening garbage and lithium, the galaxy's premier source of fuel, grabs the lungs and causes a sense of nausea to stick in. Your air mask automatically pops right in, and in the corner of your eye, you see your credits slowly docking down. After all, oxygen is an expensive resource in space.

Your eyes refocus, and in front of you, you see a barely discernable humanoid figure that you recognize and Barry, one of the senior shipyarders on the deck. His face, though ragged, is handsome beyond his years, and you can see by the expression on his face that he is glad to see you.

"My man! What are you doing here, in the shipyard?"

"Nothin' special. Just wanted to visit you and see what's happening."

"Well, it's just the day-in and day-out, just supervising the workers on the crew."

Although the specifics of this job are unbeknownst to you, you know the backbreaking labor that the shipyard crew often has to go through. Sorting through scrap metal, melting the lithium and destroying the ships trash really takes a toll on you. Undoubtedly, the conditions they live in are unforgiving, yet you're here for a reason

There's a certain level of security on this ship, one that is easily recognizable despite it's old age and rust. At the same time, you know that as a worker, there are many points of access that you can escape from. The shipyard, the captain's chambers, as well as the escape pods are all suitable ways.

Yet you know the best way to escape is the shipyard, which has multitudes of broken down ships and scraps. What if, and this is a big if, you found a functioning ship?

Barry responds slowly, with a hint of worry in his voice.

"I'm not gonna ask any questions. But whatever you do, I hope you know what you're doing."

Of course you know what to do! It's not like you've never piloted a ship in your life. In fact, the last time you— oh... that's right, you've never really piloted a ship. But how hard can it be!



He hands you the key, and without hesitation, you grab it, running towards the deconstruction zone, looking for the first sign of a ship

What you don't see is the sad look in his eyes, as if he had seen this story play out a hundred times before.

Your body shakes with each crash of metal on the shaky ground. As you search around, a spaceship with tears in its sides enters your vision. Its hull is open, and you know you can hack into the mainframe. The ship looks like a gem, at least compared to the condition the rest of the deconstruction zone, with its mirrors shining towards you. As you open the door, an AI HUD pops out and shows you the ship.

The ship looks rusty, if not fine, even though you can't particularly understand the logistics of what's occurring on the ship. After all, your job doesn't really involve understanding the ship's breaking points and how to pilot it. But this is a //once in a lifetime chance//. You know that without this, you're never going to escape from the corporate, unwilling lifestyle you're currently in.

As you start the ship, there's a pleasant hum in the air, as you realize that you're about to escape. Is this the opportunity? Are you really going to escape this godforsaken ship? Your daydream continues, as you imagine all the possibilities that could happen when you leave. Could you start your own company, living on the outposts of the galaxy? Or... you could be a space mercenary! Get back at all of those times where you were scared for your life, and be the oppressor this time!

Yet as the ship goes in the air, you feel a sudden unexpected weightlessness; the gravity has disappeared, and all that straps you in is the seatbelt. A bitter cold enters your bones, and dread settles in. As your consciousness begins to slip away, you know you're doomed.

As your body freezes over, you know that it is time.

You think back towards the past, before you worked on the ship. Before the worthless wages that you worked incessantly long hours for, before the seemingly identical rooms that lay in the spaceship's dormitories. You think of the rage that you typically feel, yet all you feel is cold.

It's pathetic, in the grand scheme of things. What could you do, as a pawn in the hands of the rich people in the world? You were, at the end of the day, a silly person fighting for silly things: for your wealth and power, while in reality, your real battle was for life, for each and every credit in your bank account looking back at you with a stare that screams "///USE US"//.

Your fleeting thoughts leave you, as the edges of your vision begin to close, knowing that you were happy, at the end of the day, escaping, with both the liberation and cold entering your bones all at once

You look at Barry, and a small smile appears on his face.

"Sure!. Let's get some grub, my treat."

His back no longer looks as tense, and you feel like you haven't seen this face in a while. He seems happy that instead, of an overbearing request, you just seem to want to have fun and chat jollily.

As you head towards the upper levels, you see your favorite restaurant: the "The Stellar Savor", which specializes in Galactic Soul Cuisine.

Looking towards the menu, you immediately press the Soulful Nebula Gumbo. The description reads, "Embark on a celestial culinary journey with our renowned Soulful Nebula Gumbo, a divine blend of flavors that pays homage to the rich heritage of soul food. This celestial creation is a masterful fusion of ingredients sourced from distant corners of the universe"

The gumbo, loosely inspired by the ancient Earthian cuisine, involves simmering pot of velvety broth infused with aromatic spices and interstellar herbs. Tender chunks of cosmic catfish and succulent celestial shrimp almost immediately comes on a bowl towards your table, and you two enjoy your meal.

For the first time in a long time, you feel satisfied.

As you step out of the bustling restaurant, a contented smile plays upon your lips. The tantalizing aroma of the Gumbo still lingers in the air, reminding you of the remarkable dining experience he had just savored. With each step towards his quarters, a sense of satisfaction wells up inside you, filling you with renewed energy and optimism.

The weight of the day's responsibilities seemed to dissipate. Your mind, once preoccupied with tasks and deadlines, now replays the symphony of taste and flavor within the meal you just ate.

Opening the door to your room, you feel solace in the familiarity of the space. Instead of plain annoyance, you now take in the soft glow of starlight permeating through the porthole, casting a serene ambiance. With a deep breath, you sink into the cozy embrace of your chair. This extraordinary dining experience has rekindled your spirit, reigniting your passion for the work that awaited him in the coming days, no matter how difficult or tedious it may be. The thought of facing challenges and fulfilling his duties no longer seemed daunting but rather invigorating.

In this tranquil space, you make a silent promise to yourself; to persevere and protect. The satisfaction you felt now would fuel your determination and resilience, a reminder that even amidst the vastness of the cosmos, a single meal could rekindle your spark.

You note the deep rust of the shipyard. The timing of the machinery, it's rhythmic perfection. You record the grayish interior, the names of the men you pass. You have suited yourself to this introspection, to blend yourself to the very men you despise to be near.

However, as you go towards your chosen destination, one of the crannies of the shipyard, you notice that something is wrong. Air ripples around, and the slightest breeze hits your face. Normal people wouldn't notice this, but you aren't normal. You've trained yourself to notice this; you walk around like your shoes are on eggshells for a reason. Yet, you cannot find the thing—well, presumably a person, who wandered around the shipyard.

As you reach for your stash, filled with your greatest possessions, you notice a small watchface in the corner. It ticks erratically, and a message on the side of the box reads:

The vibrations of the watch pull you in, and you feel every ridge and sensation the watch creates, as it forms into a message with writing that you hate that you've become so familiar with.

//We all know forever is shorter than never.

I hope you are ready. I apologize, for well, everything. All of the fights and pain that we've been through. I've spent the better part of the decade reflecting over us, and what we fought for. We were just two young people, in a galaxy full of traitors and vices. As I code this message for you, I hope you see what we've done. How we could go through this beautiful world together, as a team.

I used to loathe you. Loathe everything that you represent. I loathe the ship that you stand on, the people you associate yourself with. I loathe how you think that you can be satisfied at a job where everyone hates you. I loathe your personality and your sense of humor, which cheered me up after every fight. I loathe the intrusive memories that invade my mind every now and again. I loathe that you aren't here.

Is this your real representation of a perfect society? Trapped on a ship that travels the endless void, with the only solace being the occasional meal that costs you your salary? You used to speak of your ambitions, and all the love that you used to feel, all of the passion that could've been used to reshape the galaxy.

In the watchface contains coordinates. You know better than me what you wish to do. Think.

Yours,

Juniper//

Your trip towards Catha is forgettable. All that comes to your mind is opportunity, a dream, and the chance that this trip provides you.

Because this dream is all you have to hold. Clutched to your chest like a dim replacement for your rotten heart and breathless lungs. Chasing is stupid, a friendly reminder that the whole world—no, the whole galaxy is out to get you. Yet every step that you takes towards your new home feels almost invigorating, wistful in a sense.

Walking up towards the building, titled //The Clocktower//, the breath you've been holding empties out. This time, or maybe the next 100 times, you'll find a way to save yourself, and all of the realities that you have fought through.

The watchface is poetic in the way that poetry weaves through stories and times, just like you'll be doing here.

Maybe in another life, you'd do something different.

The words still echo in your ears, as you imagine Juniper's enchantingly beautiful voice say them. Your life has not been easy. But there aren't many chances to create a better future, so you take the watchface with you.

Your stash, filled with pictures of your once lost love, stares back at you. This box is too painful to open most of the time. Memories that became regrets. They say nothing lasts forever but they're just scared it will last longer than they can love it. You can see your grin in your face as you embraced her—yet you've older now. You've always imagined yourself that adulthood would suit you, yet your heart feels indecisive. It's pitiful, what you've done, or in this case, what you haven't done, as you've gotten older, but now is the time to change it.

As you walk back into your room, you think of time. How funny that she sent a watchface, with all of it's wonderful intricacies. There's an old-fashionedness that comes with this form of communication, yet it suits her perfectly. It's strangely perfect, how this watchface reflects all of your beginnings and endings, and how it resets everyday at the same exact time. Maybe this time, you can fix your mistakes, and fix yourself an own happy ending.

As you finish reading the letter, a mix of emotions surges within you. Anger, confusion, and a lingering sense of longing collide. The words resonate deep within your core, stirring up memories you've tried to bury. Juniper's words ignite a spark within you, but you're torn between embracing it and leaving it all behind.

In the stillness of the shipyard, you feel the weight of the letter in your hands, the paper curling under the pressure of your grip. A decision needs to be made, and you know what you must do. With a determined breath, you crumple the letter, allowing your anger to consume it. You bring a lighter out, and burn the letter.

The fire grows, hungrily consuming the letter, turning Juniper's words into ashes. As the flames lick at the air, you release the anger, the frustration, and the pain that has built up inside you. Each flicker of the flames carries away a piece of the past that no longer serves you. The smoke rises, carrying with it the weight of your history.

With the letter reduced to nothing more than smoldering remnants, you stand amidst the ashes, feeling the heat dissipate. The watch, still resting in the corner, beckons to you.

In the shipyard's stillness, the weight of loneliness settles upon your shoulders. The echoes of your footsteps reverberate. The ship you still despise becomes a symbol of the life you've come to know, flawed and imperfect, yet all-to-familiar.

You yearn for Juniper's presence, despite the complexities that defined your relationship. The memories, once intrusive, now seem bittersweet reminders of a time when love and ambition intertwined. The prospect of reshaping the galaxy, once a shared dream, now feels like an unattainable fantasy.

With a heavy sigh, you pocket the dormant watch, unable to shake the sinking feeling that something irreversible has occurred. The path ahead remains uncertain, and the shadows of doubt tug at the corners of your mind. As you leave the shipyard, a melancholic emptiness engulfs you, a haunting reminder that some wounds may never fully heal.

You venture forth, not with the certainty of a bright future, but with a gnawing sense of unease. The coordinates weigh upon you, pulling you deeper. Despite the sinking suspicion that something bad happened, you still hope that within you, there's still a chance at rediscovery and forgiveness.

Barry's eyes light up, and you can see a hunger in them. The hunger of a blade jumping from skin to skin, the weathering of the body as each muscle strains from the contact of rusting metal and worn skin—it's beautiful.

"And why do you think you need another job? No offense, but you live doing one of the cushier jobs on this ship. Take it from a man like me—you don't want to be doing this backbreaking labor all day, just to repeat this same cycle everyday."

But you do; in his eyes is a passion that you've always lacked. The mirror in which you look at yourself painfully blankly reflects nothingness. You're lonely. Friendships are treated as holy days, breathtakingly short, with frenetic pace, combined to be the communion of food, wine, and short-lived love. Always gone as soon as it comes. But you've always accepted that it was just work holding you back; there were better things for you to do, right?

"Well, we all deserve another chance to do something", you respond frantically, not noticing the rate of your heartbeat ever increasing, the words sputtering off your lips like waves upon a shoreline.

He smiles. A small grin, not mocking, but delighted in your choice. Reaching out towards his holographic interface, he scrolls through what seems to be endless lines, until his eyes light up, handing the scroll over to you.

The scroll lights up, and you see a job offer.

//The Tome Sovereigns//, an organization that you've never heard about.

"You know, this was created by my friend a couple thousand years ago. It may not be the biggest or most powerful place in the world, but I can guarantee you that you will never forget it."

You ponder, thinking of the implications of this place. Your mind immediately goes towards writing. Writing your own story has never been an option. Forced into all the major decisions in your life, you've never really had the freedom to do what you want.

Deep into your thoughts, your own scroll lights up and a message lies within the corner of your eye, from an old book, however outdated it may be compared to the Index.

"Writing is the journal of a sea animal who wants to fly in the air. Writing is what makes stories feel alive, feel possible. Writing is the inevitable script of our lives, as we improv the words that are being written at this very moment.

What do leaders fear the most in societies? Is it war? Is it a tragedy? No. They fear writers and poets. A single general or a single mutiny is not going to change anything, in the long run. The humble writer, on the other hand, inspires. Instead of blood-stained battlefields, vibrant red ink flutters on pages, moving audiences and mass alike."

In a world that oppresses everyone but the richest, you've come upon an opportunity to be greater. To inspire change, perhaps revolution, in those who need it most. Is this the end of your journey? Maybe. But it can always be the start of someone else's.