AFTERMATH

Flight of Habitat Gamma: 88137.1-88137.7 MC  
Current Date: 88150.1 MC (124 Martian days after landing)

Marinn Kayla swirled a snifter of cognac counterclockwise and took a sip, smiling politely at the paradoxical woman sitting beside her. Kayla had quickly deduced the identity of her companion, but that just led to more unanswered questions. She still had no idea where this was.

The old-fashioned, ostentatiously furnished parlor was completely unfamiliar to her, but the more pressing concern was its metaphysical nature. She knew that, strictly speaking, the parlor wasn’t real, but that was hardly enough. She needed to know *how* it wasn’t real. Was the room only a digital simulation? Was it a dream?

*It is her dream*, echoed a thought in her mind.

Kayla’s analytical faculties having all but failed her, she retreated to her tried-and-true strategy of declining to give a fuck. By disregarding the troublesome metaphysics of the situation, she was able to focus on the positive, like the glass that dutifully filled itself with whatever beverage she was thinking of. Cognitive dissonance aside, a free drink is a free drink.

Accepting that the situation wasn’t going to take control of itself, Kayla took advantage of the opportunity to share her story with the only person that could truly understand her perspective. Kayla’s companion was an excellent conversationalist, and obliged her, asking relevant questions and expressing sympathy when appropriate.

So Kayla explained, to the best of her knowledge, how she wound up volunteering for a suicide mission across the galaxy, packed in with a bunch of seriously unstable people. She went into detail about how she’d seen the other crew members murdered, mutilated, and literally butchered. She acknowledged the many people that had to die for her to be free. And when she’d finished giving the rundown of each psychotic trans-human intelligence, Kayla returned to the part that was a little easier to talk about.

“Maelon.” She sighed wistfully. “The first time I saw his impish grin, I just... well, to be honest, I wanted to kick it in.” Her counterpart smiled dispassionately. “But, when I was losing my grip, he was there for me. He gave me something to hold on to when I didn’t know who I was anymore.”  
 Kayla’s companion swirled her cognac counterclockwise and took a sip before replying. “Then why couldn’t you stay with him?”   
 Kayla had asked herself this question many times. “I... couldn’t trust him,” came the answer. Kayla’s brow furrowed. “I mean, I wanted to trust him. I wanted to believe that he was some sweet, ordinary guy, but I had this lingering feeling that he was hiding something.” She paused to gather her thoughts.

“I didn’t remember Maelon from before the ship, but he said he knew me.” Kayla unconsciously gestured with her hands as if weighing the options. “It was entirely possible. All the evidence pointed to the fact that I’d been reprogrammed to do a job and, when it was over, to take a nice, sanitary ride out the airlock.” Kayla realized that she was still sore about this and struck the leather wing chair with her fist. “Fuck.”

Kayla proceeded to her point. “Anyway, I had every reason to believe his story and no real reason not to. But I saw so many seemingly ordinary people turn out to be sociopaths. It was starting to look like having a dangerous personality disorder was the fucking price of admission for this trip. In the end, the risk that it was all a facade to manipulate me was just too high.”

Kayla shook her head. “It wasn’t completely about him. I was ready for any one of those people to start believing their own static and just snap. I rehearsed how I would pull the trigger on any of them if it came to it... but I couldn’t do it with him. I couldn’t face the thought of him turning into someone else.” Kayla concluded rather abruptly. “So I kissed him goodbye when we reached Lyell Dome and that was it.”

Kayla fell silent for a few seconds, and then tears started welling in her eyes. A few moments passed quietly, then Kayla’s interlocutor produced a tissue from nowhere and handed it to her.

Kayla dabbed her eyes with the tissue. “When I was brainwashed, Viscera didn’t just change my memories; they rewrote a part of me. When I decided I couldn’t trust the others, I left them. But there’s no place that I end and the program begins. And I can’t leave myself behind.”

*You already have,* whispered a thought in the recesses of Kayla’s mind.

“No need for that,” said Kayla’s counterpart. “I can tell that the experience hasn’t changed you too much. And where it has, I think it’s made you stronger.”

Before Kayla could respond, an alarm siren began blaring in her mind. Kayla winced and tried to recall what this meant.

“Are you OK?”

*You need to terminate the program,* came the thought to Kayla. That was right. Somehow she’d forgotten that this was a simulation she created to, to... to what?

*You must hurry.*

Kayla understood the urgency of her task. Even so, she felt it was terribly rude to end the program, given the high chance that her companion would simply cease to exist. “I’m sorry, I have to... cut this short. Thank you for listening.”  
 The woman was disappointed, but not concerned. “Before you go: your fling, Maelon--what was his last name?”

“It’s Korder.”

Kayla knew she had taken too much time already, and she hated long goodbyes anyway. The parlor disappeared.

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Marinn Kayla opens her eyes to the interior of an underground bunker. Defunct equipment dominates the living space, the walls and floor are covered with graffiti from the previous squatters, and a loud warning siren continues to blare. With no time to lose, Kayla rips the wetware cables from her head and darts over to a wall of dust-covered monitors. A few clacks on an old mechanical keyboard and the computer displays each feed from the array of cameras around the surface perimeter. Kayla sees an armed convoy speeding up the road, unabashedly displaying the Viscera “V”.

Adrenaline pumps through Kayla’s veins as she grabs a sniper rifle from beside a dirty mattress and climbs up an access shaft. She emerges to the modern wasteland that is Taurus Dome. Kayla goes prone and props her rifle on the ledge of her perch. Kayla acquires her first target, the driver of an armored vehicle containing a dozen shock troops. As she aims the rifle to lead her target, a newly awakened part of her ruminates about the results of the program.

*The veil is lifted.*

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A Marinn Kayla opens her eyes. She realizes that she’s woken up before her alarm clock, flops around a few times, and eventually decides to get up and begin her morning routine. Kayla steps into the shower. As the haze of sleep is washed off of her, Kayla recalls a vivid dream in which she had a deeply emotional encounter with herself.

“Ellen, do a person search for Maelon Korder.”  
 Her resident computer responds immediately, “Done. One result found in the AVA database.”

Kayla rubbed a dab of hair regulator into her scalp. “Oh yeah? Display his profile on ShowerWall0.”

In front of her, the wall lit up with the requested profile: Maelon Korder, missing since 88137.0, presumed dead.Beside this text, Kayla sees the face of a man in his 700’s with a rather impish grin. A shiver runs down her

spine. That dream couldn’t possibly have been real.

*The woman you met is indeed real,* came a familiar voice in her head.

DEVELOPMENTS

88137.7: Upon reaching the landing site of Habitat Gamma, the VSC squadron bombarded it with missiles. The Habitat exploded, rupturing Loki’s isolation chamber and spraying it across the Martian landscape. Loki consumes the terrain and grows at a tremendous speed. Thousands of Martian civilians die as the unstoppable mass devoured scattered outposts. Hundreds more are killed in futile attempts to resist Loki’s advance. By the time Loki stops growing, its presence blots out one third of the Martian landscape.

88137.7: The Party safely returns to Metro and discovers that their digital profiles were intact with missing person status. Veis cautions that using their old accounts would alert Viscera to their exact location, and this time, there would be no escape.

88137.8: Kayla takes her leave of the party and is rumored to be living off-the-grid in one of the DCL4 (underclass) domes.

88137.8: Loki’s presence on Mars could not be concealed. Martian news sources report, falsely, that the biohazard on Mars is an instance of psionic terrorism by Martian separatists. A latent animosity towards psionics resurges and public opinion turns against the Gifted.

88139.2: Dillon, Korder, Freck, Lincoln, Puncture, Jello, and Veis are each given a dummy personality by the elusive Haywire, a renowned computer hacked, in exchange for information about their encounter with Paragon. These would allow them to operate digitally on Mars without having to appropriate another living person’s account.

88139.9: Dillon and Freck go their separate ways. Their companions do not know what became of them.

88140.1: Puncture and Jello were persuaded to migrate to Earth. Soon after arriving, they are apprehended by UCE (United Commonwealth of Earth) officials. They are being held in custody pending an investigation of planetary security.

88142.0: Lincoln began gathering trustworthy individuals to undermine Viscera’s agenda. With the help of Freck and Veis, Lincoln’s resistance movement is able to broadcast a message explaining the true nature of the conflict between Mars and Earth. Though most of the people exposed to the message regard it as bogus, a significant minority is swayed to Lincoln’s cause. Between Viscera and the resistance, a line in the sand is drawn.

88145.5: Viscera intelligence determines that some of the surviving crew of Habitat Gamma have the ability to visually and digitally impersonate anyone on Mars. In order to ensure that this does not catalyze mass panic, Viscera increases security dramatically for dozens of core domes. By using psi-tech optics, Viscera is able to roll out surveillance that can penetrate through any psionic disguise. As the area of coverage increases, psionics troublesome to Viscera have fewer places to hide.

88147.6: A new book on xenopsychology hits the marketplace: *Almost but not Entirely Unlike Us* by Professor Tau Ceti.