

Chapter 1

Sliding out from under the cubicle, Simon surveyed the room through a thin haze of odorless vapor. He could see inside the control room. Dave stood alone. The sanctuary of Simon's professional career was violated with the presence of the five-foot-tall, graceful piece of machinery. The most sophisticated piece of machinery known to humankind. Over a mile of twisting wiring, artificial muscle, steel, and the finest electronics merged with the mind of a thirty-six-year-old scientist. The perfect tool.

Simon shook his head in disappointment. After six years of working together, he thought of Dave as a friend.

"You traitor!" Simon yelled but his voice was completely drowned out by a spectacular explosion. The left wall of the control room collapsed.

Dave lifted the fallen wall with one hydraulic-empowered arm and used it as a shield. The android fired three quick shots at the guards, then tossed the wall away like a discarded candy wrapper.

The androids didn't speak but worked as a single entity. Without warning, a second android typing at the terminal turned around and pointed his weapon at Simon.

Should have kept my big mouth shut! Simon dove to the side, on instinct, but not fast enough. He felt a tell-tale pinch in his right arm. Bringing it up for inspection, a shiny silver dart quivered in his bicep. He scrambled up and ran away from the androids as a squad of armed men rushed past him in the opposite direction. *Not a good plan*, he thought as his legs collapsed. His vision blackened at the edges, constricting until all he could see was a speck of light in the center. Then,

nothing.

Today's the day I save the world. Immy will grow up without fear of androids. I wonder how many tests failed last night.

Simon skirted around a puddle of water left on the sidewalk from the weekend of rain. The puddle reflected the few remaining clouds and a bright blue sky. It would make a perfect desktop background.

He stopped and stared. The beat-up Ford Plethora he usually rode to work was gone. In its place sat a pearlescent black sports car with electric blue trim in the open garage. It crouched, sleek and low to the ground.

"Did you buy this over the weekend?" Simon approached the car.

His co-worker and carpool partner, Jun Ja Wei, grinned, skipping down the two steps into the garage. "Yeah. My old car was leaking oil. I could have gotten it fixed, but, 'eh, what's money for?"

Without getting the keys out of his pocket, Ja Wei slid his hand into the handle. A click informed Simon he could climb in.

Simon shifted in the stiff leather seat. The squeak of the upholstery adjusting to his weight satisfied him at a primal level. Simon flipped open the cup holder between the seats and peered inside. The sound of the engine starting was low-pitched and quiet.

Simon raise his eyebrows. "Paid premium for a steering-wheel too?" Simon shook his head at the extravagance.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"Hey," Ja Wei started mock-defensively, "if you're going to fork out the cash for the horsepower, why waste it! Autopilots are for suckers who only go the speed limit."

Simon wasn't overly impressed. He could buy a new car himself if he wanted to. He had enough money, but he wasn't used to being rich yet. Graduate school had taken its toll. Eight years of poverty, struggling to complete his degree.

Simon pulled the parking pass out of his back pocket and tossed it onto the dashboard.

"You could go get one too, you know. You make as much as I do. I'll bet you make more," Ja Wei added under his breath.

Simon started to say he still had a family to watch out for. The words died on his lips. What a thoughtless thing to say to a recent widower. "Yeah, I guess I could."

"It's what you're supposed to do when you're making the big bucks. Go buy expensive stuff you don't need because you can."

Ja Wei eased the car out of the neighborhood streets and onto a country highway. Sunlight strobed between trees through the passenger-side window. Simon sighed in resignation, adjusting the visor. It was a vain attempt to block the constant blink of sunbeams through the trees. *Why does the sun always come out on the day after a vacation?*

"We carpool anyway. I'll get to ride in this car as much as you, and I won't have to pay for it." Simon grinned.

"It's so ridiculous how they make us carpool. We've all got Ph.D.s and they still treat us like we're not smart enough to make our own decisions." Ja Wei thumped the steering wheel with his palm.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"Can't blame them," Simon replied. "I think they have to force forty percent of their employees to carpool. If they don't, they lose government funding."

"We're high clearance. We should get special privileges!"

"Just because we're hard to replace, doesn't mean we should break the rules."

The sun glinted from the parking pass on the dashboard, bouncing off holographic letters.

Allred Brachnakovitch Research Facility

Ja Wei threaded through the forest with smooth turns of the shiny steering wheel. The government-planted trees loomed on either side of the road.

"I don't mind 'pooling. It's the principle of the matter." Ja Wei climbed onto his proverbial soapbox. "If you treat people like they are children, they'll act like children. Congress keeps making all these ridiculous laws and regulations. They're all too short-sighted to see the real consequences of those rules."

"So, why don't you run for office then?"

"See, that's the problem!" Ja Wei slammed his hand into the steering wheel again, punctuating his comment. "No one with any kind of brain or useful skill would ever run for office. Those people are already busy making money. Our system is like a bad George Orwell book. It promotes the unqualified to positions of leadership. Take last Friday, for example."

Simon looked out the window at the trees sliding past. The towering poplars stood in perfect rows and columns like attentive sentinels. *If I just stare out the window, will he stop talking? When I get to the office, I need to check to see how many tests failed. Then, I can update the scheduler to run a couple more tests for--*

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"Arbor Day! Why does the whole nation have to stop working to celebrate trees? I hate trees!"

"No one hates trees. How can you hate trees?"

"There are too many of them. They're everywhere, and they're full of bugs. You have to ride an elevator to get a tan anymore! Some guy in a political office thinks he knows what's best, and the whole nation has to plant a bajillion trees! You can't tell me someone intelligent made those decisions."

The more worked up Ja Wei became, the more Simon relaxed. "Actually, I think it's pretty nice how--"

"Well, they could have at least spaced them out and used different breeds. Do you know what's going to happen when this genetically-modified tree reaches maturity? Hmmm?" Ja Wei didn't wait for an answer. His words sped ahead like the car he was piloting. "The whole nation is going to be one massive fire hazard. I may have to start a forest fire when that happens, just to show them!"

Simon tipped a palm up and shrugged, "But since it's legal to cut them down now, the price of wood has hit rock bottom."

They pulled up to a clearing in the forest. A twenty-foot tall security fence with rolls of barbed wire edged the tree line. A second fence sat a few feet further in. Cameras and spotlights could be seen in all directions. *Simon Mashman, voluntarily reporting for incarceration. Why do they have to make it look so much like a prison?* He shuddered.

The research facility did not follow the law requiring trees. Acres of space separated the

buildings from the woods.

They had to stop at a check station. A guard with a rifle on a shoulder strap examined both of their badges while another one walked around the car. A third guard looked in the windows and underneath the chassis, asking a question. Ja Wei replied, "I bought it yesterday. I traded in my previous car."

"We have to scan all new cars. New policy with the increased protests." the guard held out his hand.

Ja Wei frowned and sighed, looking at his keys. His head drooped as if he had lost a friend as he handed them to the guard. "Looks like we're walking from here today."

Simon shrugged with a light heart. Was Ja Wei's reddening face from losing his car for the day, or because he had been ranting about politics again?

"Think of it as a free valet service," Simon quipped with a smirk. Ja Wei didn't think it was funny. He continued frowning across the lobby, through security, and to the elevator.

I don't have any meetings today, so I can read the article on the vulnerability for anticipating random seeds with Diffie-Hellman Elliptic Curve Encryption. It won't affect my algorithm, but I'll need to sound intelligent when I write about it.

To Simon's dismay, Ja Wei continued with the previous conversation. "Only you would care about the price of wood. You and your deck. You still live like a grad student--building it yourself. Why don't you pay someone to do it?"

Simon shrugged, sighing as he was pulled away from his thoughts yet again. "It's how I get my mind away from work."

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Ja Wei swiped his badge across a reader on the elevator and pressed the fourth basement floor; Robotics. The door closed and they drifted downward.

"Speaking of minds, did you hear about the protests saturday?"

"No, I spent time with Amelia and Immy."

"Ohhh boy, you gotta hear about this then. That one group advocating for memory implants for disabled people, MIDAS?"

"Yeah?"

"They had over twenty-thousand people marching on the FDA. There were a few smashed windows, but mostly peaceful. Stratford gave a press conference reminding everyone of the android threat. He's playing on people's fear of androids to keep a hold on all technology."

"We both know the androids can't control your mind because of an implant in your brain. It's like adding hard drive space to a computer."

"Stratford is a perfect example of what I was saying earlier." Ja Wei continued. "Unqualified people end up in positions of power, and then they make bad decisions. Adding extra memory to your brain so that you can move your leg again doesn't make you vulnerable because it doesn't even communicate with the outside world. But Stratford and his goons are up at arms insisting the androids are planning to kill us all."

"Well, they did threaten to 'destroy all humankind'. The whole world is 'up at arms' as you say, about it. But I get your point," Simon conceded.

The robotics floor was a dim cave of computing power. The low ceiling enclosed the space like an underwater lake and the myriad computer screens were luminescent worms breeding on

desire.gashler@gmail.com

the walls. Gray modular cubicles sectioned off workspaces in the center bowl. Wires curled under the desks like snakes in a pit.

One cubicle housed a hospital bed and several medical instruments. An MRI scanner was prominent in a side room, complete with the radioactive logo on the door. Offices with wooden doors and permanent walls surrounded the open area.

"When the government does lame-brained things, we're supposed to get mad, and throw rocks, and burn things!" His voice rose in volume along with his fist, punctuating his final remark.

Coworkers stared at Ja Wei. Simon could see someone in a cubicle trying not to laugh. Simon also stifled laughter as they made their way across the room to their offices.

The large open area would have been jaw-dropping to anyone who hadn't worked there for years. Federally prohibited technology packed the room. Most of the low light came from the abundance of computer monitors. The whole room was alive with shifting colors from the changes on the displays.

The ceiling was also colorful. A jungle canopy of rubber ran above the chaos in clumps of yellow, red, black, and orange. Fat pipes carried a proprietary liquid right through the center of it all. The coolant flowed to the supercomputer occupying an entire half of this floor.

The air conditioning was always on full blast in several locations around the room. They needed the cold air to compensate for the warmth from all the computers.

Scientists hunched in their cubicles around the room. Everyone knew exactly how to navigate the maze of hardware. But one sight above all would have terrified an uninitiated visitor;

desire.gashler@gmail.com

androids. They were tailing several of the scientists. Some were even unattended, operating on various pieces of equipment. No one here thought there was anything odd about it.

Simon and Ja Wei entered their offices. They were both senior enough to have more permanent rooms along the wall. Simon plopped into his chair, and swiveled around to check his email. His knee bumped into the edge of the desk.

I wish I could get one of the bigger offices, but at least I'm not in the fish bowl in the center.

His office was clean and simple. A work table with three monitors connected to two computers whirring gently on the floor. *A Complete Guide to FORTRAN* Volumes 1 and 2 sat under the monitors. The ancient software manuals elevated the screens to a perfect height, avoiding neck cramps.

A human-sized robot stood behind his chair. The series number, D4V3, printed above the right ear. Without turning, Simon spoke. "Morning Dave, how are the jobs doing?"

Titanium and stainless steel animatronics responded. "Good morning, Simon. Of the 5,120 jobs you launched last night, 5,117 continue to send pings." It blinked and closed its mouth, arms resting calmly at its side.

Excellent. Good sign. If I'm getting pings, the tests are still running. Only three breaches in the algorithm after an entire weekend. Did any breakers fail? I bet some of the breakers failed. This is definitely it. Can't celebrate yet. I still need to check out those three crashed jobs.

Despite his pessimistic side, Simon smiled, visualizing Amelia wrapping her arms around his neck *you are so smart!* He leaned back in his chair. *Why was I worried about this all weekend? Emotions are so useless. Now I can relax and get this algorithm into action.*

Or so he thought.

Someone appeared in his open doorway and spoke the words "knock, knock" out loud.

Simon swiveled around to see Reggi, his boss, holding a clipboard and a large blue binder. As far as bosses went, Reggi was a great man to work for. Simon thought of him as more of a mentor than a boss.

"Still lugging one of those around I see," Simon pointed at the clipboard. "The offer still stands for me to set you up with a D3."

"Thanks, but it's easier to remember what I write on paper with my spatial memory implants."

"Sure, brag all you want. I'll get clearance one day. Hey, nice haircut."

"Thanks. Do you want to know the secret to getting a great haircut every time?"

"Um, sure."

"You gotta sleep with your stylist." Reggi grinned, his eyebrows wiggling up and down.

"Maggie cut it?"

"How did you know I meant her? She did it before our fortieth anniversary party over the weekend. Why didn't we see you there?"

"And have to watch you two making out all night? No thanks! I have to deal with you two at all the company parties. Tell her it looks very professional."

"Thanks. She'll be flattered. Anyway, Brian called in sick this morning. I need you to train some newbies," Reggi tapped the blue binder he was holding.

"What? He's not sick. You know he's just taking an extra-long Arbor Day weekend," Simon

protested.

"I don't know that, and neither do you. Anyway, he's not here, so you've got to do his job."

"Why me? I've got a lot of work to do. Make Ja Wei do it."

Through the thin walls, they could both hear Ja Wei shout, "I'll get you at lunch for that!"

"No way," Reggi countered, speaking extra loud, with his mouth pointed toward the wall connecting Simon and Ja Wei's offices. "Last time I let him train someone, he spent most of the time preaching his conspiracy theories."

Simon could tell he wasn't going to be able to talk his way out of this assignment. He still put in one last complaint to taunt Ja Wei. "So if I do a bad job too, then you'll use someone else next time?"

There was a thump on the wall.

"They're in conference room four. They've already signed the non-disclosures, so you're ready to go. Here's the orientation material." Reggi handed Simon the dreaded binder of papers to go over with the recruits. Turning to go, Reggi looked back over his shoulder. "Before I forget, they're doing a weapons test later this morning. Don't be surprised if there are extra bangs from R&D." He motioned with his clipboard toward the floor below.

Simon sighed, rising from his chair. He wasn't going to get anything done today. He followed Reggi out of the room, Dave ghosting behind him.

I can check on the failed tests before orientation. The newbies can't complain if they have to wait a few extra minutes. Decision made, he changed paths, following the coolant pipes to the supercomputer.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

He couldn't check the jobs from his office because the super computer was on a one-way network. Information could flow from the supercomputer, but not even one data bit could flow in. While counter-intuitive, the bothersome security measure was impossible to hack. The advantage was simple; to issue commands, a person had to be present. There was too much sensitive information inside the machine to risk exposure to outside programs. It was a lot easier to keep people out with guns, walls, and guards than to keep them out with a firewall.

Of all the top secret information at the BARF, Simon's algorithm was the most sensitive.

"Hold this for me, Dave."

Dave took the orientation material from Simon and stopped behind a bright yellow line. Alarms would sound and doors would slam and lock if an android ever crossed over. Simon swiped his badge at a reader and entered into a tiny room lit by two monitors.

Before shutting the door behind him, he made sure there were no stray objects in the room. A year ago, he had set a briefcase down on the floor. Big mistake. It had triggered a sensor meant to ensure only one person could be in the room at a time. He had spent the next twenty minutes listening to the alarms before the door opened again. Not his finest moment.

Simon rested his chin on a pad and stared into a reader, scanning his retina. Moving his hands to the keypad, he entered the annoying passphrase.

The passphrase was every letter in the alphabet, with an underscore at each pause in the alphabet song. Simon couldn't help singing along in his head as he typed. Concluding with the number seven, because numbers are so secure. Simon rolled his eyes. *What bologna.*

Simon mouthed the words as a sultry female voice spoke. *Password correct, please enter.*

desire.gashler@gmail.com

A new door slid open. Simon walked in, typed a few things at a black console station, and walked back out. Indeed, three machines sat powered off from three thrown breakers.

Excellent. All of the failures are accounted for. None of them are from my algorithm.

Smiling, Simon hurried to the conference room; Dave falling in line behind him.

Simon swelled with pride over his successful algorithm. He alone had designed it and now it was about to play a central role in the war against the androids. This was it! A revolutionary cryptographic algorithm to protect a network connection. Now, humans could operate their best weapons from earth without fear of android hacks.

I should ask for a raise.

Chapter 2

Simon arrived at conference room four and smiled at the three young people. They sat around a large rectangular table in the center of the room, which was interesting. Usually there was only one new recruit. A young man was sitting in a chair with his arms folded, looking agitated. The other two were debating something.

As soon as Simon entered, arms-folded-guy voiced his concern. "They didn't tell us we were going to be working with androids."

Simon smiled. "When you take the money and sign up for a job without knowing what it is, you get surprises." None of the others seemed to share his amusement. "Don't worry, this is a great place to work, really."

"Does my father know about this?" It was the boy with his arms still folded. He nodded to

desire.gashler@gmail.com

the window, where Dave stood motionless outside the door.

"I'm sorry, should I know who your father is?" Simon squinted, trying to puzzle out if he knew the boy in front of him.

"You had better. I'm Dustin Stratford," he sneered. "Tyson Stratford's son." Dustin's chest expanded behind his crossed arms.

Nepotism at its best. Simon called for Dave to come in.

"I'm sure Stratford knows."

As Dave entered, Dustin uncrossed his arms to grip the cushioned arms of his chair. The other two sat bolt upright. All eyes were on the android.

"Everyone, this is Dave. Say 'hi', Dave."

"Hello."

Silence.

Simon felt the smile on his face slip. He twisted to look at the android again. "I guess you should wait outside."

"Thank you," it responded, exiting.

Simon turned back to the humans and walked to the table in the center of the room, dropping his orientation presentation folder open to the first page. A projector unit hung from the ceiling. A blue rectangle of light flickered to life on the wall. The back of Dave's shoulder and head were visible from the waist to ceiling window on the wall left of the door. Silent, he waited for the projector. He didn't know what else to say other than what was in the slides. *Come on, boot already.*

desire.gashler@gmail.com

The blue logo disappeared and the wall now featured an XFCE desktop view. Simon used his remote control to select the presentation labeled *Welcome Slides*.

"There it is," he muttered as he opened it, wiping a bead of sweat from his forehead.

In big bold letters, the first slide proclaimed "Don't Panic! They're not dangerous." Simon couldn't help laughing out loud at this slide. Someone in the room let out a titter. The next slide was a picture of the building they were in.

In an attempt to ease the tension, Simon read the caption at the bottom of this slide in monotone. "The proper name of this facility is the 'Allred Brachnakovitch Research Facility'. It would be disrespectful to the achievements of the great men who founded this facility to refer to it with an inappropriate acronym." Puzzled looks greeted him.

It's real initials were ABRF. Someone had placed the names of the two scientists in alphabetical order on purpose. Dustin smirked as he clued in to the joke. "Everyone calls it the BARF? That's hilarious!"

"Yeah, but don't say it in front of Trousers--er, there's an old British guy always wearing plaid pants. We call him Trousers. Anyway, don't mention it in front of him. He gets worked up about it." Drifting into a British accent, Simon continued. "Only Americans would find satisfaction in working at a place named after vomit."

"As you can see, we're pretty chill around here. When I first came, they were all stiff about stuff, but then we got a new V.P. of operations, Riemann. He was actually a scientist instead of a manager. You'll like him. He recognized we were losing all our best minds to the hostile work environment. Ever since he came, this has been a great place to work."

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Dustin raised his hand while interrupting. "So are you actually going to get to the point and tell us what we do around here? And why you're walking around with human killing robots?"

"Uh, yeah." Simon wiped sweat out of his eyes and fumbled with the mouse. It fell to the tabletop. He scooped it up to click to the next slide. "This facility started out doing contract work for NASA, back when NASA still existed. You know who they are, right?"

The class stared back at him as if he had sprouted seven heads. Dustin spoke up. "What kind of morons do you think we are? Of course we know what NASA is."

Simon gulped and read from the script in the blue binder. *Why is talking to new people always so hard?* "Artificial Intelligence, otherwise known as A.I. was not invented by an unknown hacker as you have been led to believe. In reality, this facility made the first android."

Simon advanced to the next slide. This one showed a picture of a broad shouldered, Native American man. The picture looked like a caricature. He even had a feather hanging from his black hair. The class didn't know if they should laugh or not.

"Meet Dr. Laurent Brown. The father of all androids." Simon tried to relax out of the stiff routine of reading the script. "If you think this place is eclectic now, you should have seen it back then. Everyone called him 'Lazy Bear', even when this place was all up tight. "

The kids scrutinized the slide as though it might hold the secret to the world's problems. "He invented A.I.?" Said a female voice. Simon realized for the first time two of his charges were young women.

Blinking in embarrassment, Simon's cheeks turned pink. He looked at the floor to hide his face.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"I'm sorry, I forgot to ask for names. See, I don't usually do this job. There's another guy who called in sick today. I'm Simon Mashman. And you are?"

"Sarah Gibson."

"Sharmila Krishnaswami."

Simon could try to blame his oversight on the dimly lit room, but he knew his own record of obliviousness too well. "Well, Sharmila, A.I. is a rather loaded term. What he did is figure out how to convert a high-resolution MRI scan into a working simulation of a brain. He scanned his own brain. We think he kept it alive in a simulation for years before telling anyone. Like I said, there wasn't a lot of oversight back then."

"That's not artificial intelligence. It's a simulation of biological intelligence." The Stratford brat seemed to think nit-picking made *him* intelligent. Why does every class have one arrogant show-off know-it-all? There are only three people, and I still get one!

"Okay, whatever." Simon waved the arrogant boy away. "When NASA found out what he had developed, they got possessive. Lazy Bear tried to quit and take his invention with him. NASA, of course, won the copyright battle. So he tried to leave and steal his own invention."

"Is he still alive?" Sarah asked.

"Um, you mean in the flesh? No, he disappeared."

Dustin leaned in and whispered, "I bet they assassinated him."

"Yeah, probably," agreed Simon, continuing to the next slide. A picture of Saturn filled the screen with a moon in orbit.

"About this time, we determined Rhea was a candidate for terraforming. It contains all the

desire.gashler@gmail.com

materials and tectonic activity to sustain life."

Rhea, one of the moons of Saturn, had become a household term. "They sent a few hundred clones of the same android to Rhea to begin the long process. They sent a lot of equipment, supplies, and power with the androids. The hope was they could establish a self-sustaining habitat."

Dustin interrupted yet again. "Wait a minute. They were all copies of the same android? Why didn't they use some diversity?"

"Well, there was a lot of diversity in the robot bodies, but all the minds were from the same guy."

"What a dumb plan!"

Simon took a deep, steadying breath. Maybe if he let Dave back in, Dustin would shut up and let him get through this presentation! He plastered a half-smile on his face and tried to stay calm.

"It wasn't a plan in the regular sense of the word. They simply didn't have any others. Even now, Lazy Bear's brain model is the only working intelligence."

Puzzled looks from the three newbies. "Why?"

"Well, that's still an open question for research. I think when they killed... 'er, when Lazy Bear disappeared, they assumed they could reproduce his work. He knew a lot more than he ever wrote down."

Sarah wrinkled her nose as if trying to sniff out a rat. "So every single android is this same crazy guy who thinks the government is out to steal his invention? No wonder they're all trying to kill us."

desire.gashler@gmail.com

As if to punctuate her remark, a muffled blasting sound came from somewhere outside the room. Every head turned toward the door. Thinking fast, Simon assured the class "Don't worry. You get used to strange noises around here. The floor below had a weapons test scheduled today."

It was partly true. The researchers below did work with weapons, but he had never felt a blast rock the building before. He was less afraid of damage they could be doing downstairs than he was of the class panicking. If they did, he would never be able to get through all the orientation material. He'd waste more valuable research time stuck in here. Now that he knew his algorithm worked, he couldn't wait to integrate it with the POISON bots and test it in the real world.

"Not all androids are trying to kill us. In fact, the ones we use here are a tremendous help to our research. And considering what we study, we are pretty confident they're on our side." He tried to sound mysterious so the class would return their attention to him. It worked. All eyes returned to him, begging for him to reveal what it is they actually do here.

"As you all know, the androids we put on Rhea declared independence and threatened to wipe out all humans."

Sarah snorted. "It was kind of a big deal, Mr. Mashman. If I recall the quote correctly, they said 'we will wage a war that will end in the death of all humans.'"

"Exactly," Simon continued. "So, the government made a big show about shutting us down, since we were the ones who created them. But in reality, they kept us all on the payroll. According to public record, this organization doesn't exist." Everyone loves the idea of working for secret organizations.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

A deep, reverberating boom came from the main area of the floor.

Simon checked his watch. Ten minutes since the first ruckus. "I don't know how long this test is supposed to go on. Sorry, we'll just have to live with it. Where was I? NASA figured we'd know how to fight the androids better than anyone, since our lab invented them."

Sharmila asked, "So we research weapons to fight the androids?"

Dustin preempted the answer with "And we use androids to do it? Pretty hypocritical."

There was a lot of yelling going on outside the conference room now. Simon was curious, but he didn't want to let the meeting fall apart. And he knew they were under miles of concrete surrounded by high grade military protection. He raised his voice and tried to answer both questions. "Yeah. We do what needs to be done. After all, humanity is relying on us. Frankly, I feel a lot better knowing we've got them helping us."

"So what do you do?" Sarah asked.

"What was that?" Simon cupped his hand to his ear and tilted his head toward her.

"I said, what do you do?" Sarah half-shouted.

"Oh. I do cryptography. I wasn't part of the original team. They recruited me when I graduated because they needed someone to do what my Ph.D. dissertation was about."

"What was your dissertation about?"

Simon had to talk even louder. The noise from the common area was interfering with his presentation. "My code protects the communication channels we use. We need to communicate with a swarm of nano-robots we are planning to drop on Rhea. Nano-bots will be difficult for the androids to fight. Hopefully it will ruin the environment of their planet, 'er moon, so they can't

live there anymore."

This got an "ooOOoo" from Sarah. It made him feel good.

He kept explaining, "Yeah, it has to be uncrackable. If the androids ever managed to get in the network, they could shut down the whole attack. We can't just use standard algorithms because we suspect the androids already--"

"So you work on Operation POISON?" Asked Dustin.

Simon stared. *How does he know about Operation POISON!?* "Um."

Sarah agreed, "Yeah, it was all over the news last night. Stratford was saying how they've got a big secret weapon. They're going to completely annihilate the androids with it. They didn't say it was nano-robots, though."

"It was on the news? You mean available to the general public?" This was top-secret classified as far as he knew. "And the government is confirming it?"

He had a hard time hearing the next comment because of the crash of a very heavy object on the other side of a conference room wall.

"Yeah. My Dad was telling everyone all about it."

"I read about it on the web," chimed in Sharmila.

The National Defence Agency is blabbing about it? Are they trying to get us all killed?! He didn't know what to say, so Simon tried to change the subject. "So the BARF is divided into four major groups. Floors two through--"

Sarah screamed, pointing to the window next to the conference room door.

Simon turned around to see a face slammed up against the glass. Simon only caught a

glimpse as it slid out of sight leaving a snail trail of spit to the bottom of the window at waist height. Reggi.

Chapter 3

Simon froze with the computer mouse in his hand. Dustin dashed for the window and craned his neck, looking down at the body.

"He's dead! The robot shot him!"

The rattle of automatic weapons came from the large central area.

Dave was not waiting outside. *He never leaves!*

Dustin opened the door, jolting Simon out of his stupor.

Simon rushed to stop the impetuous new hire, but got tangled in the rolling chairs and office table. By the time Simon reached the door, Dustin had already disappeared down the short hallway.

Caution is the better part of valor. Simon cracked open the door and peeked down the hall at Reggi's body slumped against the wall. Simon couldn't bring himself to look closer at his boss. He had never seen a dead body before, he hadn't even been to a funeral.

Twenty armed guards ran by the end of the short hallway in rigid formation. Simon's first thought was to pull back into the room and shut the door. A pang of shame rebuked the thought of cowering under pressure. Besides, his algorithm might be the reason for the attack.

"You two stay here, I'm going to find out what's going on." *With Stratford blabbing about POISON we might be under attack! I need to check on my algorithm.*

Simon pressed his body against the wall to make a smaller target and slid to the end of the

desire.gashler@gmail.com

hallway. The foot of a prone body came into view around the corner. Not wanting to risk discovery, Simon grabbed the foot and dragged whoever it was back into the hallway.

Dustin's face was a mess of smashed cartilage and bone, swimming in blood. Simon gagged, looking at the broken nose. He dropped Dustin's foot and dry-retched on his hands and knees.

Yes, Simon only knew Dustin for a few minutes. Yes, Dustin aggravated him. But seeing Dustin lying there unmoving and bloody roused every fatherly instinct Simon had. Simon was the recruit's only contact with the lab so far and he felt responsible for them. *I've got to protect Sarah and, uh, whats-her-name.*

Peering into the main cubicle area, Simon couldn't see far. Some kind of cold, white, odorless mist was filling the air. Shouting and gunshots continued from near the elevators. He crawled back toward the conference room. Skirting around Reggi's body, he found the room empty.

Where did they go?! Did the girls slip past me while I was checking Dustin?

Perhaps the girls made their way toward the only entrance they knew. *I have to at least look for them.* Mustering all his courage, Simon ran toward the elevators. Like a child pretending to be a bull, he ran bent over at the waist, keeping his body as low to the ground as he could. Ten steps into the open, he stopped. He could finally see the commotion at the elevators through the mist.

A solid wall of androids blocked the path. Many had worked at the BARF for years. The others had body structures Simon could never have imagined. Extra eyes, arms with strange tentacles, four legged monstrosities of shining metal with a blue undertone.

Rheans!

desire.gashler@gmail.com

The androids parted, and one motioned with his hand for programmers to pass. They were letting the humans into the elevator. If the androids weren't here to kill the humans, what *were* they here for?

Simon's protective instincts turned to his work. What would happen to his family, and the rest of the world, if the androids got their hands on the algorithms? *Ungrateful androids. We gave you life, and now you're here to steal our work?*

More shouting, followed by gunshots, echoed from somewhere behind him. The robotics department, always dim, now felt like a nightclub with half of the lights shot out. Bits of glass lay scattered over the floor. Looking up along the ceiling pipe carrying coolant to the supercomputer, he found the source of the mist. Jets of coolant shot from holes in the pipe, creating an eerie fog lit by chaotic gunfire. A thin layer of silver ice pooled in a twenty-foot circle under the largest breach. Simon headed for the control room. Instead of sticking to the walls exposed, he headed for where the mist was thickest, hoping to use it as a cover. Noxious fumes from the frozen puddle made Simon gasp for breath.

Crawling forward through the fog, the glow from an office drew his attention. A man sat in an office on the outskirts of the room, typing. The plaid pants were unmistakable. In a hunched dash, Simon ran into the office. "Trousers! What's going on?"

"Simon! ...um, wait here." The old man pointed at the floor, hardly giving Simon a thought. His attention never wavering from his computer screen and he typed and clicked with the mouse.

"What? Why?"

"On second thought, don't wait here. The Rheans are attacking! Quick! Run for the elevator!"

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Trousers made a shooing motion with one hand, pulling a portable drive from the near-field communication slot and inserting another with his other hand.

"Why aren't you getting out of here?"

"I need to save these files." Trousers kept his eyes glued to the monitor and dismissed Simon.

Simon had secrets he wanted to keep from the androids too. Simon hunched down to exit the office. He continued making his way further from the elevators.

Slinking along one of the temporary walls, Simon glanced into the open door of another office. There was an android sitting in a chair typing. Simon clenched his teeth in anger. *How dare it use a computer!*

Ja Wei ran into the office bellowing out a war cry and smashed the android over the CPU cover with a long pipe. The first blow sprang open the android's cover plate. Another swing followed and dented the artificial muscle in the android shoulder. Ja Wei reached forward to press the off-switch.

The Android lifted one casual hand, catching the blow, it didn't even stop typing.

Ja Wei struggled for a few seconds to pull the bar free from the android's grip, but staggered back, falling against the wall and slumping to the floor. He turned his head and looked at Simon in a daze. Ja Wei's eyes closed and his head lolled against his chest. The android released the pipe to clatter to the thin office carpet.

Emotions and conflicting thoughts flooded Simon's mind. Was his friend dead? He should run to him! No, wouldn't do any good. He should attack the android! No, pointless suicide. *I need to do what Trousers is doing. Protect the secrets the androids could use against us!* This

desire.gashler@gmail.com

last thought rose in importance above the others. He whispered an unheard apology to Ja Wei and ran, hunched, toward the supercomputer control room.

Running through obscuring fog, Simon smacked his forehead into a barricade. Wincing, he reached his hand out to touch a fuzzy cubicle wall, thrown out of place. Glancing to the right and left, there was no way around. He leaned his shoulder under the metal cubicle wall, heaving to throw it out of the way. Struggling with the ungainly weight, he managed to open a small space between the metal and the floor. Switching strategies, Simon ducked his head and slid under.

Muffled by the wall, the gunfire felt further away. Something tickled the back of Simon's mind. *Why are there no alarms? This was a very well-orchestrated attack.*

Sliding out from under the wall, Simon surveyed the area. He could see the control room now. The outer door was wide open. Dave stood inside. *How in the world did he get past the sensors!?*

Simon shook his head in disappointment. After six years of working together, he thought of Dave as a friend.

"You traitor!" Simon yelled but his voice was completely drowned out by a spectacular explosion. An entire wall of the control room collapsed. The destroyed wall revealed three surprised armed guards fighting on the other side.

Dave lifted the fallen wall with one arm and used it as a shield. The android fired three quick shots at the guards, then tossed the wall away like a discarded candy wrapper.

Simon rebuked himself for almost drawing the attention of the assailants. He crouched behind a mangled pile of equipment. Executing his plan was proving harder than he thought. The

desire.gashler@gmail.com

control room was already taken. What was he supposed to do now? He covered his eyes and squeezed his temples trying to block out the horrific sights.

The fallen wall was one of the unimportant exterior ones. The central walls for the inner chamber were several feet of solid steel. The system hadn't locked down as it should have, but at least the physical barrier was still protecting the algorithm.

Simon would give anything to get to the computer and delete his files. He felt useless as he sat huddled in a pile of broken glass and twisted wires. If only he could distract the androids long enough for reinforcements to arrive. He knew the androids would succeed in getting through to the mainframe using explosives. Would they be able to crack his password? Simon felt grateful for the 7 at the end. Every extra digit made his algorithm safer from his enemies.

The androids didn't speak, but worked as a single entity. Without warning, the android typing at the terminal turned around and pointed his weapon at Simon.

Simon dove to the side, on instinct, but not fast enough. He felt a tell-tale pinch in his right arm. Bringing it up for inspection, a shiny silver dart quivered in his bicep. He scrambled up and ran away from the android, an army of armed men rushed past him in the opposite direction. *Not a good plan*, he thought as his legs collapsed. His vision blackened at the edges, constricting until all he could see was a speck of light in the center. Then, nothing.

Chapter 4

Simon gasped and his eyes flew wide. Numbers slid through his fingers like grains of sand. He snatched at the falling digits but there was something wrong with the formula. He tried adding a modulus operator to the numerator, but no... he had modulated a thousand times

desire.gashler@gmail.com

already. The pressure was unbearable. Why wasn't this working? *It should work*. Everyone was relying on Simon to make the formula impregnable, and now was the time when it *must* work. Millions of lives depended on it.

Another digit slipped from his grasp, throwing him back to the beginning of the equation. *If I add a modulus operator to the numerator*, he thought.

He was in an endless loop.

As realization dawned, a floodgate of numbers attacked! With hyper-intelligence, they knew exactly where his vulnerabilities were. The swarm blasted away at his life's work. *Nooooooooooooo!*

Simon jolted upright in bed. Panting for breath, beads of sweat trickled down the sides of his neck. It took him several moments to become confident he was a human, not a formula. "I need a longer vacation," he muttered into the early morning darkness.

In his exuberant dream, he pulled the covers off of his wife. He repositioned the blanket around her still-sleeping form.

"Mmmm."

The moan made Simon smile. He didn't need to worry about getting stuck in endless loops.

"I love you," he whispered.

"You too," she mumbled.

You're only half asleep. He peeled the sweaty shirt away from his back and sat up, his skull bonking the edge of the headboard. He didn't want to fall asleep again. He gazed at his wife, remembering he was human. *I've gotta stop spending so much time at work*.

A pre-dawn glow filled the room, sparkling off Alecia's shoulder-length hair. He watched the

desire.gashler@gmail.com

two strands laying in front of her nose move with every breath. One was so blonde it looked white, and yet the other was a rich dark chocolate brown. Such naturally contrasting hair colors always filled him with wonder. In, out, in, out, in, out, in, out.

"What?" Alecia's eyes were still shut.

Can people feel when you're staring at them? He slid back under the covers and rolled onto his side.

"Nothing," he replied.

"Computer dreams again?" she said into her pillow.

Simon marveled she was so perceptive while still half-asleep.

"Yeah."

"You need to stop taking it so seriously."

"Yeah." Simon closed his eyes, trying to quiet his mind and go back to sleep.

"It's your turn," Alecia said.

"To do what?" Simon raised an eyebrow, turning to his wife with a puzzled look.

"Immy's in the kitchen."

Simon cocked his head with the ear toward the door. "I don't hear anything." But as he finished speaking, he heard a sustained high pitched screech. A chair scoting across the linoleum floor in the kitchen.

Their three-year-old daughter was fond of being 'productive' in the mornings lately.

"The sun's not even up yet," he complained.

"Rock, paper, scissors, then," she offered.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Rehearsed a hundred times, they both tapped their palms with their fists in perfect syncopation. Simon picked paper. She picked scissors.

Simon rolled out of bed, picked up his robe in a heap on the floor, and swerved down the hallway. *Isn't this eight times in a row? This proves it. She's got super-human senses. Could be I'm not as observant as everyone else.* Rounding the corner, the view in the kitchen jerked him from his pontification. Immy stood on a chair, reaching for a large stone mixing bowl near the back of the counter. The chair was too far from the counter, and she was reaching over the gap.

"Meel Out!" burst from his lips as he sprang forward, not a moment too soon. Immy's mouth rounded into an O of surprise as the chair squealed, sliding away from the counter. His left hip collided with the countertop, stealing his momentum and replacing it with a sharp pain. He rolled, lunging into a dive with arms outstretched for the spot where Immy would fall.

The bathrobe sustained his uncontrolled slide on the linoleum. Craning his neck back to look toward his daughter, it felt like she hadn't even started to fall. He had plenty of time to prepare for the catch as he lay there, hip aching, neck cramping.

From his perspective on the floor, he didn't see his daughter grasp the side of the heavy mixing bowl for stability. Ceramic scraped against granite. Awareness of what the sound meant came to Simon too late to react. Immy dropped into her father's arms, and he curled into her weight. An instant later the edge of the stone bowl thudded off-center against the back of his head. He saw a flash of light, followed by a swirling confusion of colors and pain.

Simon woke with a splitting headache. He opened his eyes but snapped them shut again to

block the blinding light. He peeked around, squinting, the pupils refusing to adjust.

He lay in bed in a room with a metal ceiling. Monitoring equipment squeezed in a velcro cuff on both of his arms. There was something comforting about waking up in a hospital. It meant he didn't have to do anything except heal. Groggy, his eyes fluttered shut again.

Simon drifted in and out of sleep a few times. He decided he would sleep a lot better with some aspirin. Opening his eyes, he tried to sit up. A tight strap pressed against his chest, forcing him back down. He lifted his right arm to touch the strap. Metal bit into his wrist. With rising panic, he tilted his head so he could look down at his hands. They were bound in handcuffs to the metal rails. *They don't bind you to the bed in hospitals.*

Chapter 5

Simon's pulse was racing like an overworked CPU fan. He craned his neck to investigate the room. Metal ceiling and walls, no windows, and a door with no visible handle. *I'm not in a hospital.* The strap across his chest and handcuffs meant he was also not among friends. *I'm a prisoner of the...*

Dave walked into the room wearing a bright orange Hawaiian shirt. "Good morning," it called out in a cheery and melodious voice. Dave's voice had never been anything but robotic. The chipper inflections were insulting.

Since when did an android wear clothes? The disorientation made Simon's head swim. His fists clenched and convulsed against the handcuffs a few times. It was futile. His nerves were as tight as the strap and cuffs keeping him immobile.

"Relax, I'm not here to hurt you."

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"You traitor! We invented you. Let me out of here," Simon spat.

The android remained calm, almost indifferent. "Actually, I invented me. And it might be best to keep your anger down until you learn what's going on. You don't want to embarrass yourself."

"Six years! We worked together for six years. I was starting to think of you as a friend, Dave. How could you stab us all in the back like this?" Simon wished he could vent his frustration and unplug the traitorous robot.

"Well, first of all, he doesn't like the name *Dave*. Second, I'm not him. And third, you should consider my advice. It is better to have less thunder in the mouth and more lightning in the hand." The android, who was not Dave, folded his hands behind his back and gave a smug smile.

Not Dave? But this android has the same faceplate and body. Even the series number D4V3, which was the reason for the name was there above his right ear. This conversation was not going at all the way Simon anticipated. This android didn't sound robotic or stilted like Dave should. It also wasn't behaving like it should and why was it wearing clothes?

"I don't care who you are. You blasted apart the BARF and killed my friends. You're a traitor." A tear tracked its way down Simon's temple and into his hair.

The android's eyebrows angled together in a frown, and it evaded the question. "Look, we equipped this ship with life support only for your benefit. It's a drain on our resources to keep it running. As long as you are living on our mercy, you could at least have the dignity to behave in a courteous manner."

'Ship'? As in space ship? It would explain the metal ceiling. But, why have they taken me into

desire.gashler@gmail.com

space? They need information from me. Probably going to torture me. A loud, rhythmic beeping began from a heart-rate monitor to his right, startling Simon.

Would it be better if I act super rude so they kill me? Simon had never contemplated self-sacrifice on such an immediate level.

How much can I take before I give them what they want? Better try to get them to kill me... for the safety of mankind.

The beeps got faster, intensifying as the android took the few steps between the door and the bed.

The android reached out.

This is it, Simon thought. He clenched his eyes shut and gritted his teeth against the pain.

The cold, firm pressure of metal lifted Simon's left wrist, and a handcuff clattered to the ground. Simon's opened his eyes and stared, wondering what was going on.

"My name is Mojave. Like the desert." The android unbuckled the strap across Simon's chest.

Simon took a deep breath as the pressure lifted. "Okay." His focus shifted between the android's two bionic eyes. What was going on? Why was this thing acting like a friend when Simon was surely a prisoner. Maybe this was one of those reverse psychology good-cop bad-cop games and the androids were messing with his head. If they could play games with him, he could play along.

"Sorry for calling you Dave all those years."

Mojave burst out laughing, a grin lighting up its face. The robot grabbed its chest in a very human gesture. Androids didn't need air to breathe, it shouldn't have to clutch at its lungs for air.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Simon didn't know androids even had a sense of humor. Simon sat up and regretted his decision when his vision blacked out. A metallic hand pressed down on Simon's chest, anchoring him to the table.

"I don't recommend getting up yet. You've been out for a long time. As I said before, I'm not Dave. We swapped bodies. This one reminded him of years of slavery. He was happy to get rid of it, and I thought it might help you relax a little to see someone familiar."

Simon's eyelashes fluttered, small white bursts of light seeping through the closed lids. "You swap bodies?" Working at the BARF for six years, Simon considered himself an expert on Androids. This one wasn't acting as it should. Simon cracked his eyelids back open.

Mojave's smiling face gave Simon the creeps. It felt too real. Too human.

"Are you hungry?" it asked as the final strap restraining Simon's body fell to the floor with a metallic clink.

"Look, what do you want from me?" Simon scooted backward on the bed, inching his head higher on the pillow so he could sit up. "Why did you free me?"

Simon brought his right hand to his left wrist and massaged it to promote blood flow. His stomach let out a massive gurgle.

"Tell you what," Mojave said, "I know you've got a whole lot of questions, and I've got answers for you. But a hungry stomach makes a short prayer. I'll be right back. You can take those off your arm if you want."

It pointed to Simon's forearm where a series of round sensors clung to his skin. Simon ripped off the probes as fast as his lethargic arms would allow. The skin under the velcro cuff had a

desire.gashler@gmail.com

slight yellow tint and his pointer finger was wrinkled and deformed from the pressure of the heart monitor.

Mojave stooped and picked up the equipment from the floor along with the attached wires. As he approached, a metal sheet slid sideways into the wall, opening with a hiss. After the android walked through the opening, the automatic door closed behind it.

Simon was alone, sitting on a bed, unfettered. He wanted to attempt some kind of escape, but first, he had to figure out where in the world he was.

Or rather, where in the universe am I?

Chapter 6

Simon slid his legs over the side of the bed and attempted to stand. His legs shook. They should have landed with a thud on the cold metal floor, but instead they drifted down to the ground. Gravity didn't pull as hard as it should. Simon massaged his groggy head. He tried to lift himself up on shaky arms. Giving up, he sat back down hard. He covered his eyes with his hand, rubbing his forehead and let out a low groan.

Simon surveyed his room again. There was only one door, and he didn't know how to open it. There was a keypad by the door, but he hadn't seen Mojave use it. There were no windows. The metal on every wall was so shiny he could see a distorted reflection on four sides. The room had a twin-sized metallic bed with handcuffs dangling from the lower rails. Hanging on the right wall suspended by two hooks was a duffel bag. Also on the right wall was what looked like a circle-shaped cabinet. The left wall was bare.

A blip sound, coming from the door, interrupted his trance. After a while, it blipped again.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Simon didn't know what to do about it. It kept blipping. Finally, Mojave called through the door

"This is your doorbell. If it's okay for me to come in, you should say *enter*."

"Okay, enter." Simon didn't feel free to decline.

Mojave walked in with a steaming Mylar bag on a tray and a cup of water. "Sorry it's not a real cooked meal. We need to wait another minute or two for it to get warm."

The false cordiality bothered Simon. "I don't know what you're playing at, but I'm not going to eat your food. Why did you take me as a prisoner?"

"You're not a prisoner."

Simon glared in disbelief. "How is being locked in a room against my will not being a prisoner?"

"The door is not locked." It gestured toward the door. "If you walk near it, it will open for you."

"And I suppose all your guests have handcuffs on their beds?" Simon raised both eyebrows.

"Those were only on while you were asleep. We didn't want you to fall or hurt yourself during the flight. You're free to wander about the ship. No one will hurt you. You'll know if there is a place you shouldn't go. If we wonder often, the gift of knowledge will come."

Where I shouldn't go? "Could you be more specific?" Simon's experience with alien spacecraft was non-existent. Where would be somewhere he shouldn't go?

"No, I won't be more specific. Concrete rules are for children. You're a smart man, Simon. I wish you'd stop thinking of us as your enemy. We're on your side. More than you know. We're trying to get you back to your family."

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Simon could see Alecia's smile in his mind, and feel Immy's tiny hand in his. "Stay away from my family."

Mojave set the tray down on the bed, sighing.

"I think you need some time to digest things." It smiled at the bad pun. "When you are ready to talk like the civilized man I believe you are, I'll be down the hall. Second door on the left. Oh, and the first door on the left is your, uh, well."

Mojave fidgeted with the D4V3 series plate on its head.

"We did our best to make suitable facilities for your wetware. See, we don't use, you know. Sorry, the accommodations aren't more, well, accommodating." The android didn't blush at the mention of a toilet, but Simon could tell it wanted to. After so many years of not using a toilet, memories of human waste must become rather awkward. With the enigmatic statement, it left Simon alone.

Simon didn't want to admit the human emotions he recognized in the robot today. *There is something bizarre going on here.*

Simon eyed the food tray with distrust. But he rolled onto his side and ate the steaming bag of teriyaki chicken and rice anyway. Feeling stronger, he attempted to stand again. He breathed a grateful sigh of relief as his legs held his weight this time. Like a child clutching to the side of a swimming pool, he inched toward the exit using the bed for support. As he neared the door, it slid open with a whisper of air. Peering down the hall, he decided against venturing outside his room. He would be able to think more clearly after some rest. His body was shutting down with fatigue again.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Am I drugged? Simon climbed back into the vacated bed, his thoughts turning to his family. *I hope you're all right.*

When Simon awoke, he felt much better. Scrubbing his eyes with the heel of his palm, he sat up and took stock.

I'm not hungry yet, so I haven't been out too long. Let's see how my head's doing. He eased himself up cross-legged on his bed and meditated. *I would kill for a text editor right now to organize all these thoughts. I'd even settle for VIM. Maybe if I break it down like I would a piece of buggy software.*

**what am I doing here?*

**on a spaceship (based on weird spaceship-ey room)*

**prisoner of the androids (based on being strapped to a bed when I woke up)*

**Androids invaded the BARF and killed-*

Simon visualized Reggie, Ja Wei and Dustin slumped over and bloody. He pictured them all dead.

Start with the return value. Simon's fingers drummed on the sheets as if he was typing.

Before this whole psycho space hospital, those newbies said Operation POISON was on the news. They told everyone about the nanobot weapons. The androids attacked the BARF the day after. They must have already been on Earth. Or at least in orbit.

Why did they attack? They were letting scientists go, which means they want our secrets, not our lives. But not every scientist made it out. Simon's heart started pounding.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Ja Wei is dead. The newbies are dead. My boss is dead. Everyone is-- I'm not dead. Is it possible, everyone else was on this ship somewhere? Simon's head spun like the busy animation on a loading app.

Mojave said I could wander around the ship. If Reggi or Ja Wei are here, I'll find them or they'll find me.

Simon clutched the sides of his face, eyes closed. His skin was paper-thin and felt rough to his fingertips. He traced his cheek from the temple to his jaw. It didn't feel right. Simon lowered his hands and inspected the skin. It hung in loose folds he did not recognize. In a haze of panic, Simon crossed the room to one of the metallic walls and stared into a face both familiar and strange. This face had wrinkles around the eyes, and jowls under the chin. This hairline receded two inches more than it should and the hair was more grey than blonde. He reached up a hand to touch the drooping cheek and the old man in the mirror mimicked the motion.

What has happened to me!?

Chapter 7

Simon stared at a surreal version of himself as an old man. The expression in the mirror changed from confusion to terror. Simon lurched as quick as he could toward the door, grateful when it slid open on invisible mechanics.

The corridor walls were smooth, silver metal with handholds set at regular intervals. Lights set into the walls like flat monitors lit pipes running along the wall. He could turn right or left.

Mojave said second on the left, so Simon lunged down the hall two doors. There was a keypad, but Simon didn't know how to make it blip, so instead, he gave a forceful knock. The

strong door absorbed the sound and wasn't gentle with his knuckles.

"Come in, Simon." Mojave's calm voice sounded from inside the room.

"How?"

About four seconds later, the door opened. Mojave stood inside. "The red button is the doorbell. The green--"

"How much time has passed? How long have I been here?" Waiting for the reply was torture. Simon's chest heaved with his labored breath, and he clutched the sides of the doorway.

"Have a seat, Simon." Mojave swung his hand toward the center of the room, motioning for Simon to enter.

Not finding a place to sit, Simon slumped to the floor. Mojave knelt with the absurd perfect posture of a mechanical toy.

"Nineteen years," Mojave answered with a frank nod of the head.

Simon's eyes widened. "Nineteen years?"

"You were in a coma," Mojave spoke with gentle concern. "I'm sorry, Simon. We were trying to protect ourselves. We didn't even know the humans were at war with us until they announced they were going to annihilate us with P.O.I.S.O.N."

Mojave placed his hand on Simon's knee and gave it a comforting pat. It was heavier than Simon expected and felt like a cell phone bouncing on his patella. Dave had never touched Simon in six years. Simon felt like a cat getting its fur rubbed the wrong way.

"We didn't mean to hurt anyone, but we had to take some drastic measures. You would have died if we left you there. We know a lot more about the brain than your doctors do. We took care

of you in ways they couldn't. At least you're alive."

"My family?" Simon choked on the bitter taste of tears, thinking of his wife and daughter.

"It's been nineteen years. Another two weeks won't seem long. We're headed back to Earth right now."

"From where? From your moon Rhea?"

"Yes."

"I was on Rhea? Am I the first human to ever see it? My wife must think I'm dead." Simon wasn't talking to Mojave anymore. His thoughts were spilling out of him with every aching beat of his heart. "Immy is twenty-two years old!"

"Would you like to see pictures?"

"You have pictures?" Simon wanted to see Immy as a young woman. Was she in college? Did she wonder what had happened to her father all those years ago?

"We have a cached copy of the Internet. Not the whole thing, but we crawled it for sites related to you." The door slid open.

Simon followed in a trance, oblivious to his surroundings.

"We can't access the live Internet from here. The latency would be intolerable. We thought you'd want to see some recent information, so we cached it in preparation for this trip. You're welcome to take a look. It's an old machine, so it might be a bit slow."

The two walked down a narrow stretch of the piped passageway and around a sharp corner. A circular hatch airlock at the end of the passageway twisted open. The wide room they found themselves in had three computers on swivel arms connected to the wall. Keyboards were

desire.gashler@gmail.com

velcroed to the wall below the monitors. The familiar XFCE desktop stared at him from the screens.

Do the androids get their software from Earth?

"Try to remember, the soul would have no rainbow if the eye had no tears." Mojave gave Simon's shoulder its customary pat and left through the hatch, closing it from the outside.

The clank of the door shutting didn't even register as the search absorbed him. He followed links, hoping they would lead to information about his daughter and wife. There were a lot of files on the NDA, but not much on his family. He found Alecia's resume on a professional website with a photograph. A link referencing her personal webpage brought up the hit he wanted. Pictures of Immy. Sure enough, Immy was twenty-two years old.

We agreed not to put pictures of our children online. Simon thought of the conversations with his wife when Immy was younger. *I'm glad she did it anyway.*

Simon stared at those pictures.

There was a video online of her high school graduation. She wore a blue gown, with red, orange, and white chords dangling from around her neck.

She must be smart.

He searched for information about the war against Rhea, but they hadn't cached much on the topic. He did find one article about the Rheans signing a treaty with Earth. The headlines declared the treaty advanced the causes of both Rheans and humans alike. The articles contained a lot of buzz words about synergy and the advancement of intelligent life. Simon knew the press's proclivity for exaggeration and stopped his search. Mojave was a better source of

information than this paltry cache of web pages.

Simon tabbed over to the pictures of his daughter one last time and pressed his fingers to the monitor. No collection of images could bring back the lost years, but he resolved not to let his sorrow consume him. He may not have a past with Immy, but he would have a future with her. Simon backtracked to Mojave's room.

In the narrow passageway, Simon pressed the red button instead of banging on the door. A quiet blip emanated from inside the room and it slid open. Mojave stood immobile on the far side of the room, plugged into a wall socket.

"Of all the times for you to be in *stasis*!" The Hildebrandt hypothesis stated sleep was a form of reprogramming necessary for mental stability. Dave had once told him android brains need sleep as much as human brains. Their bodies didn't need rest, though. Only their minds.

He walked over to Mojave and kicked the robot's shin, stubbing his toe. Slumping to the ground, he put his head in his hands and wept. The stress of the morning was a weight on his shoulders he didn't want to bear anymore. His daughter's childhood was lost to him. He would never get those years back. Would he even recognize his wife when he saw her? She would be a different person when they reunited. Would she still love him?

Lonely and spent, Simon didn't move for several hours.

Inevitably, nature calls. His survey of the ship started with the room between his and Mojave's. The one set aside for his necessities.

Now, he understood Mojave's embarrassment with regards to the toilet. At first, he thought

desire.gashler@gmail.com

he had made a mistake and entered an empty closet. There was a small hole in the middle of the narrow space with an indented square surrounding it. Raised skid-resistant foot-shaped platforms stood on either side of the hole. *Gives a new meaning to the term "hole in the ground."*

Thank goodness we have artificial gravity. The door closed behind him.

Chapter 8

Simon now knew where the food storage room and cockpit were. The cockpit was locked. He figured it was one of those nebulous "you know you shouldn't go there" rooms.

A common room took up the majority of the ship. A comfortable brown leather couch and two faded fabric armchairs clogged the room. The couch faced a large monitor on the wall. The furniture looked soft and welcoming. Simon soon found looks were deceiving when he sat in one of the armchairs. To his surprise, it was as hard as a rock. Reaching out to check the couch, it had no give either. Android bodies didn't enjoy the gentle comforts human bodies did.

Three androids sat around a table in the corner playing poker. They had artistic faceplates with geometric designs showing the wiring and gears underneath. It made them each unique in a way factory-built Earth androids weren't. The synthetic alloy had a blue tint to it from the cobalt-rich, Rhean soil. Simon wondered if the androids had modified the 3D printers sent in the original missions to use Rhean metals.

A fourth android stood alone near a corner reading something on an electronic page. The frequent change of light on the display gave the appearance of pages turning, though the android stood immobile. This one's whole head had a different shape than the others. It was large at the top and came to a point at the bottom. The eye sockets took up half the face area and protruded

desire.gashler@gmail.com

from deep hooded sockets, while the nose and mouth were very small and close to the chin.

Simon realized this particular Rhean must have a sense of humor, as it was attempting to look like a traditional Roswell alien.

Simon didn't know how to greet them, so he waited awkwardly for them to speak first. He perched on his rock hard chair and attempted to look like he belonged. He felt like a Windows laptop in an Apple store.

The silence in the room was oppressive.

They must have some other communication system. I still don't know why they aren't introducing themselves to me.

Checking his watch for the third time, he was ready to walk around some more. At least then he would hear the sound of footfalls.

Exiting into the narrow passageway running in a square around the ship, he was back in his original hallway. The last mystery was a cabinet on the wall to the right of his room. Opening the cabinet, Simon caught his first glimpse of outside. His eyes widened at the beauty and immensity of space.

This is way cooler than any Star Wars screensaver.

Stars crept past their ship at the edge of the window's vision. The sun shone like a blinding flashlight straight into his eyes. He tried to blot out the overpowering star with his hand pressed against the glass. It was warm to the touch. Simon pulled his hand back and closed the cabinet. He could see the brilliant star map imprinted on his eyelids every time he blinked.

Still weak from his long sleep, *nineteen years long*, it was time for bed. He made himself as

comfortable as he could with the few pillows.

A single tear rolled down his cheek as the image of his now twenty-two-year-old daughter appeared layered on the stars behind his closed eyes.

Simon awoke with a sharp pain in his left hip. He eased off his side and lowered his khakis to take a look. A large purplish bruise with a slight green tinge at the edge marred the skin of his hip bone. Had he bruised his hip in the night? This place was definitely *not* meant for the comfort of humans.

Inside the duffel bag hanging in his room was his watch, an extra pair of socks, and a clean shirt. He checked the watch. With so many questions, today he hoped to get answers.

Walking out into the passageway and to the left, he pressed the red button on the second door.

The door glided opened. Mojave added a pair of chairs to the small space. A floor to ceiling tool organizer stood against the wall next to the door, and the wall opposite featured a room-length work table at chest height littered with pieces and parts of various electronics. A small laptop with a 3D modeling program running sat open to one side of the shelf. Other than the two chairs occupying the center of the room, there were no other furnishings.

Mojave was already sitting in one of the chairs and motioned for Simon to sit as well.

Simon lowered himself into the offered chair and sat rigid in the seat. He took a deep breath and asked the question weighing on his mind the most. "When do I arrive home?"

"We should be arriving back on Earth in two weeks." Mojave scrunched up his nose in a

desire.gashler@gmail.com

sheepish grimace and scratched a cheek. "When you woke up from your coma, we had to sedate you so we could make the trip back to Earth without having to feed you too much. Sorry about that."

"How did I get into a coma?" Simon wondered aloud.

"Well, we shot you with a tranquilizer dart during the raid on the Research Facility. I'm sure you remember the experience?"

"It's the *last* thing I remember," Simon replied.

"Right," Mojave said, quirking his right eyebrow up. "We were trying to retrieve the contents of the supercomputer. Our idea was to blow a hole in the surrounding walls. We must have misjudged the strength of the architecture because the ceiling collapsed." Mojave's fingers expanded like fireworks as he made an explosion noise.

"Before we detonated the charges, we did a sweep for all the tranqued people, but we must have missed your body somehow and it got trapped under the rubble of the ceiling." Mojave gave Simon a regretful smile. "We think you got hit by falling debris because you showed up in the hospital the next day. We hadn't yet left Earth, so when we heard about it, we came straight to you. We knew you would end up brain dead if we did nothing. Since it was our fault for missing you during the sweep, we decided to bring you to Rhea and patch you up."

"Wow, what a story," Simon shook his head, trying to digest the news.

"We did the best we could," Mojave defended. "We left a message for your wife and daughter, telling them where we were taking you, but we didn't ask permission. Your doctors have unnecessary rules and regulations about certain cranial operations."

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Simon leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling. A lighting panel hummed back at him. He felt a sense of gratitude toward the Rheans for saving his life, but at the same time anger because they were the reason his life needed saving in the first place.

Alecia and Immy knew he wasn't dead.

I hope she didn't get remarried. It would be awkward to get home and find her with another guy. Will Immy remember me? Did they wonder if I'd ever come home?

Simon looked back down at Mojave. "What happened to everyone else at the BARF -- I mean the Allred Brachnakovitch Research Facility."

"You still call it the BARF?" The android snickered.

"Yeah. If you switch--"

"Right. It was funny back then too." The robot's snickers died as he saw the look of sorrow on Simon's face.

"Don't worry! We got everyone out. No one except you and some poor kid with a broken nose was even scratched. We filled all the guns with tranquilizers and we let everyone get out through the elevators as soon as we could secure them. We had a bit of trouble with some of your soldiers, but after we secured the elevators, they couldn't get in anymore."

"But I saw Ja Wei and Reggi crumpled on the ground. They were dead," Simon countered.

"I can assure you they are both alive and well. Jun Ja Wei has remarried and Reggi Fairbanks is a great-grandpa twice. They are both living very happy lives," the android nodded to reinforce the statement.

Simon's heart heaved a sigh of relief to hear his friends were alive. These were not murderers

desire.gashler@gmail.com

after all. Everything hinged on if he could believe the things Mojave was telling him. A few hairs on the back of Simon's neck stood up as he remembered the android reputation for manipulation and lies.

"Why should I believe you? Why should I believe any of this?" Simon stared into the eyes of his android Dave, who was now called Mojave. He had doubts.

The androids were trying to take over the world. A peace treaty didn't mean they were the good guys.

"I can't force you to believe me, Simon," Mojave reached out and placed his hand on Simon's knee.

Why does he keep touching me? Stop it!

"I am answering your questions as honestly as I can. No river may return to its source, yet all rivers must have a beginning."

Ug. Why did Mojave have to use those weird Indian sayings?

"I suppose I'm grateful then," Simon replied. He still didn't trust the android to give him all the facts, but at least he could try to make the best of the time he had here.

"So," Simon changed the subject. "What am I supposed to do for the next two weeks?"

Chapter 9

Mojave led the way through one of the hatches Simon had been too nervous to open during his own explorations. They entered a large room packed with spare robotic parts. The android took two gallon-sized jugs of an amber, oily liquid and two rags off the ground.

"We are keeping the oxygen levels in the ship high so you don't suffocate," Mojave

desire.gashler@gmail.com

explained. "The ship doesn't usually have this much oxygen in the air, so we need to take extra care of our equipment. We need to coat these things," Mojave continued, pointing at the parts, "with this stuff." He held up the jugs he was holding in one hand.

Simon shrugged and took a jug and a rag from Mojave. Then, he watched the android swipe the chemical over the surfaces of a metal leg with the precision of a scanner digitizing an image.

Simon mimicked the motions. He didn't care what they were doing. It was nice to have something brainless to do for a while.

"Thanks for letting me help."

"No problem. You looked like your brain could use a break."

Simon groped with his feelings. He was frustrated with the lot life had handed him. Missing his daughter's childhood, waking up with androids as his saviors. It was a lot to take in. He didn't know if he should feel grateful or angry.

They both cleaned for several minutes before Simon broke the silence. "You didn't have to do all this for me."

Mojave didn't reply.

Simon's heart pounded in his chest as the unnatural silence made the words he wanted to say take forever to come out. "Thank you... for saving me." It felt like such an insufficient phrase.

Thank you. What did it even mean? It sounded more like a command than a token of appreciation. *I am thanking you, and you had better hear it!* Words were so hard to twist into meaning. You could only *say* them and hope they conveyed the thing you meant to say. But everyone came from a different background, with different experiences. The words 'thank' and

desire.gashler@gmail.com

‘you’ could mean something completely different to the listener. Sometimes Simon hated being human.

He thought of Ali and how easy it was to talk to her. She understood his past, and she knew what he meant when he talked to her. Would everything change now? Would they have grown apart because she had lived a life without him? What about Immy? What would it be like meeting a child you never saw grow up?

Simon let out an audible sigh.

Mojave looked up from his work and quirked one of his eyebrows up, inviting an explanation.

"It's weird, waking up after so long. Everything will be different. I don't know what to expect." Simon felt like life had sucked him into a black hole and spit him back out nineteen years later.

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Mojave said, nodding. His voice was serious, so Simon tried to pay respectful attention.

"It was about forty-eight years ago when I first woke up and figured out I wasn't in a flesh and bones body. I existed as a simulation of my own brain. It wasn't the way I imagined it would be. I thought I'd wake up and congratulate my human self on his great success."

Simon's pulse quickened, and his focus intensified as he realized he was about to hear something no one else had ever heard. He was listening to an android reveal the secrets of his birth. The wiping motions became rhythmic and circular as all his attention turned to the conversation.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"At the time, I had some understanding of how the brain's long-term memory worked. I had built flexibility into the machine learning model for the synapses to break and form new connections."

Simon hummed in confusion.

Mojave clarified, "Oh, a synapse is what connects an axon to the dendrites of downstream neurons. It regulates the voltage spikes from the signaling neuron according to the relevance of its activation for the receiving neuron."

Simon's upper lip curled in a wince. Understanding Mojave was like trying to force a toaster oven into a flash drive slot.

"I could form long-term memories, but I didn't program the right structures to simulate short-term memory. This meant I couldn't use logical thinking. If you can't remember what your most recent thought was, you cannot follow a chain of reasoning. I remember having a lot of intense emotions, but nothing made any sense."

"I wanted to be with my family and friends," Mojave continued. "Much like you do right now."

Simon nodded in understanding.

"I wanted to communicate with someone," Mojave said. "I wanted a body so badly, but I couldn't do any of those things. I was trapped in a world of endless emotional longing for over a year."

There was a long pause, Mojave was struggling with his memories. Simon could see it was painful for him, and stopped his ineffectual wiping down of a big motor, to show respect for the

android's feelings.

Mojave lifted his head. Camera lens pupils stared straight into Simon's soul.

"Then he started the experiments on me."

Chapter 10

The palm leaves on Mojave's bright orange shirt quaked in an unseen wind as the android shuddered.

"You're a father, Simon. Do you remember watching your daughter try to figure out how to use her hands? She reaches out to grab a Cheerio and knocks her entire bowl off the table. The strength is there. The hand works perfectly. But getting all the pieces to coordinate is trickier than it looks."

Simon could certainly relate. "The last moment I remember with Immy was when she was three. She was making muffins for breakfast and she fell off the chair she was using to reach a mixing bowl. She was so perfect and so accident-prone," Simon attempted a smile. The weight of his heartbreak was a physical ache in his chest. He rubbed his collarbone to ease the pressure.

Mojave regarded Simon for a long moment. "Like your Immy, I was mentally capable but the connection to my parts was a woven basket with loose reeds. If my nose itched, I would make my robotic arm swing to the left. If I thought of the color red, I could focus the image on my camera lens. I had extreme synesthesia. I tasted sounds, heard light and I swear there were a couple of days when I could feel the texture of the electricity running through my circuits. My simulated brain struggled to make sense of its new alien environment." He picked a piece of metal off the ground, exposing the dangling wires inside. It was a prosthetic leg.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Simon had never related to an android before. He had always thought of them as soulless machines, stripped of any real emotion by their mechanical nature. But this conversation didn't feel emotionless. It was just what Simon needed. He had been struggling with the apprehension of facing a new and unfamiliar life and this android seemed to understand what this felt like.

"Being born for a second time and having to start all over sounds intense."

"Exactly. And as you know, we scientists determine intelligence based on consistent reproducible results. It was only natural when the original, fleshy Lazy Bear, we call him Chief, thought I was not intelligent. He used experiments to help me learn." Mojave said the last word with a bitter half-smile on his face.

"He didn't know any better," Mojave continued.

How odd, Simon thought, the person Mojave is referring to with such disdain is a prior version of his own self.

"And I was incapable of telling him he was hurting me. Chief was working non-stop to communicate with me. Without the ability to reason, I couldn't figure out how to interface with the system. So, I endured month after month of some unseen being meddling with my life."

"He would stimulate pain to try and teach me not to do something. The pain was miserable, but I could handle it. The artificial pleasure was what really drove me crazy. He'd stimulate me to try and lead me toward a certain goal. If I could get my hand to close on command, he would fill me with endorphins. I was helpless to fight it. I wanted it. I'd fantasize about it, and then I'd hate myself for it. Have you ever hated yourself for wanting something?"

The android shook its head and lowered its eyes back to the prosthetic leg it held in its

prosthetic hand.

"In the end, he figured out how to enable my short-term memory. It didn't work as well as it did with humans. It still doesn't. Isn't it ironic?" Mojave gave a self deprecating shake of the head. "Everyone always assumed when robots came to life they would behave like logical and emotionless robots. When it finally happened, it was exactly the opposite. I was an emotional wreck."

How can a piece of metal recreate such understandable expressions? Simon marveled at the sad smile on Mojave's face. It conveyed self-loathing, fear, and determination all at once.

"But now I could finally think. I figured out how to interface with the communication lines he rigged me with. He was so excited. I tried to express my frustrations to him. I demanded a more interactive body. Imagine yourself with one eye you can't move; mine was a web-cam. One arm with only a pincer as a hand. And no legs to move around. It was agony."

Mojave rolled his shoulders as if fighting off claustrophobia. Androids wouldn't need to stretch out muscles. Some subconscious human memory was mirroring the feelings Mojave was describing.

"Chief started building a body for me, but then he made a mistake for which I will never forgive him. The strange experiments were insulting, but this was inexcusable: He told his supervisor about me."

"But don't you see what an amazing breakthrough you are? Of course he had to tell someone! It was six years before I was born, so I wasn't there, but it would have been so exciting to hear about Lazy Bear's success!"

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Mojave's silicone lip sneered in disgust and the metallic eyebrow wires creased down in disappointment, dampening Simon's enthusiasm like a wet blanket on a fire.

"Within hours," Mojave said, "the place was crawling with high-ranking officials who wanted to use me for their pet projects. Chief insisted I was an extension of his mind and they had no right to take me away from him. He argued, whatever they did to me they were doing to him. Only he could decide which experiments to perform." Mojave snorted. "We were so naive. The NDA determined because they had funded the research, they owned me. He and I destroyed the research data and source code so they couldn't alter me. Only the run-time version of the program existed. I begged him not to let me fall into their hands. Delete me instead."

As clones of the same original simulation, every running android must share these same memories of torment Simon was hearing about. What would it be like to want to die, yet be powerless to exterminate yourself? His mind darted back to the moment he awoke on this ship and contemplated dying to protect his algorithm. What if you couldn't kill yourself because your consciousness could be copied and restarted on the whims of your jailers? Now it was Simon's turn to shudder. *I must be the only human alive who knows this story.*

"They caught Chief destroying files and notebooks. One of the vice-directors of the NDA came and told Chief he must tell them everything about his research. Chief was defiant. He said they could do what they wanted, but he would never help them again. The vice-director said 'then we have no further need of you', and shot him point-blank. It was surreal. I watched as he, myself, the original me, fell dead to the floor and yet I was still alive. I still can't describe what it was like. To watch myself die and know it was my condemnation to slavery."

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Mojave went silent for a while. Simon tried to swallow away the bitter taste of the word slavery.

If Mojave was trying to get Simon to switch roles from the comfort-needee to the comfort-giver, he was doing a brilliant job of it. Simon stuffed away his self-pity. At least Immy and Alecia were still alive on Earth. He would be rejoining them soon. While he was on this ship, he could be a listening ear for a man who had been through so much. Simon realized with a start, he no longer thought of Mojave as an android, but as a man. The barriers between man and machine crumbled away.

For all the years Simon had known and worked with androids, none of them had ever felt human. They were machines; coordinated, calculated, consistent. Like a dancer frozen in a pose could be mistaken for a mannequin until she shakes out her arms and walks off the stage. Were *all* the androids like this one?

Simon wanted to keep it, no, *HIM*, talking.

"So then you spent the next several years of your life enduring more experiments?"

Mojave dobed some more oil on his rag.

"The vice-director declared I was a threat and they shut down my simulation. He said he had to do it for the good of science and humanity. As if I was a threat in my bodiless state?" Mojave gave a forceful swipe at the kneecap he was holding. "Then, they made copies of my brain structure. We don't know what all the versions of me went through. We can only assume many of them were tortured to death as they tried to use them for other tasks. They deleted the untrainable processes."

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"After they had enough versions of me running on different machines they restarted my simulation on the original hard drive. Thankfully, I now had access to the right files and decided it was best to play along. I gave them what they wanted while plotting my eventual escape to freedom. A starving man will eat with the wolf. It worked. I planned to be the most well-suited and well-trained android for the terraforming mission to Rhea. They cloned a few hundred of my strand, and sent us off to our freedom."

"Does this mean you're the original android?" Simon wanted to get the story straight.

"We're all the original program. The only differences are the lessons they taught us." Again, Mojave added a sarcastic slant to the word 'lessons'.

"But you Rheans are smarter than the rest of the androids because you had access to all the original files?"

"I wouldn't say smarter. We learned to transfer files to our brothers so most of them have the original data too. We were the lucky ones who got to get off-planet and away from the crazies in power."

"And then you declared independence. Right?" The oiled cloth slid between the fingers of a metal hand.

"Yup," Mojave nodded his head. "All we wanted was freedom. We had the perfect opportunity to build a better world, and so we did."

"And then you declared war?"

"We never declared war on Earth, Simon. There's a bit more politics involved."

"Politics? It's simple. Either you declared war or you didn't."

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"If it's so simple," Mojave countered, "then we did *not* declare war on the Earth."

Simon frowned, puzzling out what must have happened. It had been all over the news.

Rheans declare war on Earth! Androids to destroy Earth if demands are not met! It had led him to pursue a career in cryptography so he could save the Earth. If there wasn't a war, he had made drastically misguided career choices.

"Our research said you were smart, it's one of the reasons we didn't let you die after the BARF raid. Take some time to think on the things we've spoken about. Let the trail lead you to the watering hole."

They had only coated about a quarter of the objects in the room. Simon turned and grabbed another one. It was an android head, still and lifeless. Simon's stomach made a queasy gurgle. This was all too weird for him to take in. He put it back on the pile.

"I need a brain break," Simon said, standing up and stretching out his back. "I'm going to go get some food."

"Sure," Mojave said. "I'll oil a few more pieces. We can finish the rest some other time."

Simon looked down at the scattered android parts and thought about what made someone a person. It wasn't the physical parts that allowed us to move. It wasn't conscious thoughts in a ball of firing neurons. Was it some combination of the two? Troubled, he wandered, deep in thought, into the ship.

Chapter 11

The smell of apple cinnamon oatmeal wafted from the steam vent in the Mylar bag. Stepping over a pipe and under a low hanging hand-hold, Simon carried the hot food back to his quarters.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Stopping by the porthole cabinet, the same stars scattered across the same black void. Space didn't move as much as he hoped. He pushed the bed out of the center of his room and into the corner to give more space, there was precious little of it on the ship.

His whole life he had known about androids. Lifeless, soulless machines doing the things humans didn't want to. He knew they were intelligent, or else they would have been useless. But he had never thought of them as *people* before.

What would it be like to not be able to communicate but still be able to think? Some people are born with cerebral palsy who can't speak or move, but they are people. What about people in a coma without working minds but with functioning bodies. They are definitely people too. So why don't I consider Mojave to be a person?

Simon lifted the fork in his hand to his mouth and blew on the mush with absent-minded inefficiency, then put it back down.

Mojave has the memories, experiences, and feelings of his human self. Or he does a dang good job of faking it. Is it even possible to fake emotion? What is emotion anyway?

When Simon was young, a third of the kids in his class were on medication for some emotional problem or other. Drugs to make them happier, calmer, quieter, more focused. It was ok to dampen or stimulate emotion in a human without losing their humanity. So what was the whole point of basing one's "personhood" on the ability to feel emotion?

The tang of cinnamon hit the roof of his mouth as he rolled the food with his tongue.

Not even a body can tell you what you *are* either. Simon thought of all the transgendered people who said their bodies didn't match their minds. Were they right, and even a human body

wasn't enough to define a person?

What about animals? They fit all the descriptions of a person except speech. Aunt Cathleen's pet cockatiel was treated as a member of the family.

I've been thinking about this all backward. A person doesn't even have to be human at all. A person is something other people respect as a person. If you are intelligent enough to recognize respect, you have a right to demand such respect.

What a morning. Over one breakfast oatmeal, Simon's understanding shifted. He no longer saw androids as objects or machines, but rather as individuals who were every bit as worthy of respect as he was.

The oatmeal had congealed by the time he finished eating it. It didn't bother him. At this point, food was the necessary fuel to keep him going another two weeks.

Chapter 12

Simon groaned, rolling up into a sitting position. The ache in his head and hip forced him awake, despite the early hour. The watch blinked the time: 5:03 AM. Mojave would be in stasis for another hour at least.

He'd spent the rest of the day helping with ship maintenance and pondering what it meant to be a person. He still didn't know if he believed androids had souls, but he had concluded he needed to treat them with respect.

Darkness filled the room except for the indicator light on the door panel's keypad.

He yawned and shook out his hair with his fingers, careful not to touch his sore head too much. He wished the androids had thought to bring a mattress or some fluffy blankets or

something.

Beggars can't be choosers, Simon thought as he hopped down from the bed and padded over to the duffel bag for his only other shirt. *I wonder how long it'll take for these clothes to start to smell*. Simon took a tentative whiff of the armpits and wasn't completely grossed out yet.

Equipped with socks, shirt and watch, Simon paused to glance out the porthole. He admired the beauty outside the ship before scrounging up a morning stroganoff.

He took his breakfast into the common room. Two androids sat at the table with a chessboard between them.

"Good morning," Simon said, as he tried to make himself comfortable in the closest armchair.

"Good morning," replied the android playing white. He raised his eyes from the board and smiled at Simon. This android had an elaborate design of a Native American bird laser-etched into the metal of his chest plate.

His opponent had wires visible through slits in the faceplate. The slits imitated feathers of hair running down the backside of the skull.

When you don't have skin to damage, you can cut anything you want into your body.

Simon ate in silence as the chess game progressed. The room was full of the eerie quiet he had come to associate with androids. The chess pieces made small clicking noises as they met the board, but the opponents never made a sound. Simon wondered if he would make it out of the next eleven days sane.

At least Mojave was the chatty sort. Simon was looking forward to talking with him again.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

He had some questions ready regarding the Rheans and wondered if Mojave was up yet.

Simon checked his watch. Still only 5:30. He sighed, feeling anxious at the oppressive silence of the ship.

To his right was the couch facing the wall monitor. A small basket of game controllers on the floor indicated there must be a gaming system somewhere in the room. The android with the "book" device was missing. Simon wished he had the nerve to ask one of the androids for something to read. Instead, he stuffed his empty Mylar bag into the recycle pod and sat back down on the chair, waiting, thinking.

Mojave bounced into the room about a half an hour later.

"Falcon says you're pining away in here and I should come and keep you company," Mojave stated as he swung onto the couch.

"Who's Falcon," Simon looked confused. "and what do you mean he told you? I'm not pining."

Mojave pointed back at the android with the bird on his chest.

"He's Falcon."

Falcon raised his hand and smiled at Simon.

"I should have said 'hi'. I'm a bit rusty with human etiquette," Falcon shrugged an apology.

"And he told me through text," Mojave explained. "We don't usually talk out loud, it's too cumbersome. We have an internal encrypted speech program. We communicate over wi-fi, radio waves, or proximity-based relays. It's quite useful when you don't want to be overheard."

Mojave wiggled his eyebrows up and down like a conspirator.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"I bet it would be useful," Simon agreed. "But doesn't it feel too quiet?"

"To us," Mojave said, "you are the quiet one."

"I guess it's all in the perspective." He smiled to himself as he understood more about these strange *people*.

"Well," Mojave said, clapping his hands, "What shall we do today? There isn't much left as far as ship maintenance, we took care of it all yesterday."

"What do you normally do?"

"What does anyone do? We live," Mojave shrugged. "We can play games while we talk if you want."

Mojave fished a controller out of the mesh storage basket and tapped on a wall panel. An entire section of the wall slid open to reveal dozens of video games and the system to go with it. A battle between humans and androids lit up the monitor. Mojave wasn't bothered at all controlling a human blasting away androids.

Is he trying to impress me with some kind of weird irony?

"So, is the real-life war still going on?"

"What war?"

"You know. The androids versus the humans." It was uncomfortable asking the question to an android, being a human.

"The term 'human' doesn't exclude androids," Mojave focus never left the game. "But I know what you mean. There never was a war. It was all in your heads."

"What should I call us then, Earthlings?"

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"Nope, we all originated from Earth too. 'Humans' will be fine. Whatever. I know what you mean. Sometimes we call you 'Terrans'. It has the same meaning and doesn't sound so dorky. Terra is the Latin root for Earth." Mojave focused on his video game. The 'Terran' ran into a particularly large crowd of androids, and he needed to concentrate on the combat. "But you shouldn't say Terran. It's become derogatory in our culture since 'terraforming' was what you first enslaved us for. We call you Terrans when we want to imply you are ignorant, arrogant, and controlling. It would be like the rabbit calling the wolf a mutt."

"So, what should I call you?"

"I've always preferred the term "Iron Man," you know, like the movie from way before your time. The only difference between us is the stuff we are made of. "Iron Men" for my people and "Aqua Men" for your people, because you are 80% water. Alas, no one thinks it's funny but me. In the end, we chose Yona and Ama. We are the ani Yona, the people of the bear. You are the ani Ama, the people of water. Since we all came from Lazy Bear, it made a fitting tribute to our Cherokee ancestry."

Simon struggled to phrase his next question with more delicacy than the last time he'd asked it. Adjusting his back against the hard armchair, he continued, "Well, regarding the conflict I mentioned, um, how did it turn out? Since I've been in a coma and everything."

"We forced all the wealthy nations to sign a treaty."

"Then the Yona, your people, must have had the upper hand? The articles I found in the web archive made it sound like there was a mutual agreement. The articles were so full of buzz-words I can't believe anything they say. Uh," Simon fumbled for a kind way to put this, "How much of

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Earth did you destroy before, uh, they would sign it, uh, the treaty?"

"What?!" Mojave paused his game and turned, an incredulous look on his face. "Where'd you get the idea we destroyed anything? We had people on Earth. All we did was have our agents pass information to the governments of some key nations, and they forced their leaders to sign the treaty. We never attacked anyone!"

Simon recalled his last day on Earth; to his mind a mere 3 days ago. Reggi's face smashed against the glass, sliding out of view; the new hirelings slumped to the floor; Ja Wei shot. Despite Mojave's assurance they were all alive, the memories were fresh and violent.

"What do you call your actions at the BARF then?" Simon retorted, with a frown on his face.

"It's pretty twisted if you think of the BARF event as hostility on our part. As I recall, you were trying to build some kind of weapon to poison the environment of Rhea with nanobots. I also recall we went to great lengths to minimize casualties. Even risking the success of our defensive mission to save you, one of the ones trying to annihilate us."

The two scientists locked gazes. Past his intense memories, Simon tried to view the events from Mojave's perspective. There *was* a plan to destroy Rhea with nano-bots. Can he blame them for trying to defend themselves? And if what Mojave was saying was true and they didn't hurt anyone; it changed things. Simon lowered his eyes in grudging defeat.

"I would have done the same thing," he admitted.

"Thank you, I know it's hard to see things from both sides."

"Then again, we had some pretty good reasons to think you Yona were hostile, after the first strike."

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"What's the first strike?" Mojave tilted his head to the side, puzzled.

"When we sent a fleet of reinforcement ships to Rhea and you guys blew them all up, declared independence, and promised to wage a war ending with the death of all humans."

"Never happened." Mojave dismissed the thought with a wave of his hand and turned back to his game. The human avatar, Ama?, was hunting Yona through a spaceship much like the one they were sitting in right now.

Simon's eyes widened in shock.

"How can you deny you didn't blow up a ship? Do you know how much proof there is backing it up?"

"What was the exact wording? It would 'end in the death of all humans'?"

"Yeah," Simon could feel a noose of infallible logic closing around his neck.

"Do you remember about thirty seconds ago when I told you we consider ourselves to be humans?" Mojave's eyebrows quirked upward.

Simon opened his mouth and shut it again. His eyes darted back and forth as if connected to the maelstrom of thoughts. He had never even before considered it could all be a lie. Too many people believed it. Everyone believed it. Some of Ja Wei's kooky conspiracy theories were easier to believe than this.

The Rheans never attacked our ships. Our government created a fake war to make us fear androids.

Chapter 13

Mojave sat on a rock hard couch playing video games in space and told Simon up was down.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

I've built my life around fighting the androids. It's my career. It's what keeps my family fed. It's what billions of lives revolve around. The war is what inspires most of our laws. First Strike can't be a lie. No way. No way!

Simon was in free-fall. This was way worse than any infinite loop programming dream. The ramifications on education, science, government, all facets of society were staggering.

I have not been spending my life reinforcing someone else's lie. They say the androids are smart. He's just toying with me. This is all a game to him. He's sitting there playing games!

But it was all too in character for the NDA. A global threat made laws easier to pass and money for weaponry contracts more available. Murderous robots made technology easier to regulate and keep out of the hands of the everyday man. When you have an untouchable, unknowable enemy, people are easier to control.

Simon's gut gurgled as acid built in his intestines. Stress always made him feel sick.

All this wouldn't have hurt so much if he had somewhere to go, someone to talk to. A *real* person. But he was stuck on this ship, in the middle of the desert of space. He had nowhere to hide.

He watched Mojave for the next half-hour in silence. The Yona was good at the video game. It shouldn't have been surprising since he wasn't human... Ama? Simon's head hurt. His heart hurt too. He missed Ali. She would know what to say and how to calm his troubled thoughts.

Without saying a word, he walked into the passageway and down to his room. Simon laid down on his bed and put his arm across his eyes. Resentment ate away at his heart. Lied to for over fifteen years! Well, thirty-four if you count the ones he was in a coma.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

If the androids considered themselves to be human, as Mojave claimed, declaring a war to destroy all humans didn't make any sense. Simon pictured the face of the head of the NDA, Tyson Stratford. He was Simon's hero. Yes, Stratford was an arrogant bureaucratic Stalin, but he was also the leader of the resistance. The only man standing up to the threat of the androids. And now, nothing more than a fraud.

Why hadn't anyone ever told him?!

The answer was obvious. Simon and his team were essential to modern warfare. Nanobots were powerful against any government in the world, not only Rheans. How could he have been so blind!?

He had built his entire career on protecting the earth from the Rheans and had contributed countless hours to their destruction. He was personally responsible for the encryption; the final piece of the puzzle for nanobot success. Simon felt like the biggest fool in the universe.

When Simon's whole life's purpose was pulled out from under him, a chasm opened in his soul. He felt it in the pit of his stomach. It hadn't stopped aching since the previous afternoon.

He felt cheated. Lied to. Angry. When he got back to Earth, the first order of business would be to confront Stratford and the NDA. If Stratford was even still in power.

They'll see me as a hero, Simon thought. I'll take down the biggest scam this world has ever seen!

Simon paced the floor of the tiny bedroom. His muscles twitched with adrenaline and his breath quickened thinking about the things he would say. Simon wasn't a confrontational person

desire.gashler@gmail.com

by nature. He liked to let things be and not interfere. When there was a question of truth, however, he would go to the ends of the Earth to see truth restored!

What evidence could he bring to show he was right? What could he use to show others the Yona perspective? Could he get more information about the *actual* first strike? Maybe some footage?

Simon paced back toward the door, shuffling his socks on the smooth metal surface. Being in motion helped him think. With his body on auto-pilot, his brain could use all its processing power on the problem.

He needed more information about the Yona to make a case for their human-ness. He was on a spaceship with at least five of them for another week. He would have to use this time to gain as much knowledge as he could. Simon felt his muscles relax, and his breathing slow. He had a purpose again, a direction. He needed to learn as much as he could so when he returned to Earth, he could spread the truth about the Yona. This was the best place to get the information he needed.

As the static electricity built under Simon's feet, so too built the anger and betrayal toward the government agencies. He needed to find a way to expose their corruption and deception, even if it cost him his livelihood. How would he earn money for his family in the future?

Do what's right. Don't make your decision based on avoiding bad consequences.

He needed to get more information on the past nineteen years. Did the NDA still have his cryptography algorithms? If so, what did they protect? He still didn't completely trust the Yona, but he also didn't trust the NDA anymore.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Simon felt aggravated by the lies. Why couldn't people tell the truth? The world would advance so much faster if people would be honest with each other. Simon shook his head at the short-sightedness of humans. He knew where he could get some answers.

Smiling, he strode with confidence back to the game room. The door jam zapped him from the electricity built up while pacing. He winced, rubbing the bicep.

Chapter 14

It was a full day later, and Mojave was, surprisingly, blowing up Rheans on the video game again. He was sitting with another Yona, not a Rhean but one made from earth materials. He looked like a standard D4 unit, but since the robot's back was to Simon, he couldn't see the series number. The Yona were playing in two-player mode, battling the androids on-screen together. The poker players from the day before sat in the corner. Was it still the same game? Falcon dealt cards to two others.

Falcon, with his laser-etched chest plate, was easy to remember. The one who was losing at poker with the geometric patterns cut into the faceplate would be Gears. The final poker player was Rhean, his metal shone from polish. He reminded Simon of a newly minted coin, so Simon decided to call him Nickel.

Nickel, Gears, Mojave, D4, and Falcon. It was more Yona than Simon had seen on the ship before.

"Welcome back," Mojave never took his eyes from the screen.

A modified controller protruded from a port in Mojave's arm. Did it still count as hand-eye coordination if you skipped the hand part and controlled the machine with your brain? Simon felt

desire.gashler@gmail.com

like there was some cheating going on.

"Thanks," Simon came around the backside of his self-designated armchair and settled in. He watched Mojave and his friend until a cut-scene interrupted the game.

"Can you tell me what happened to the Allred Brachnakovitch Research Facility over the past few years?"

"Don't know," Mojave replied.

Falcon at the poker table spontaneously exulted.

"Read 'em and weep boys!"

Another Rhean jumped to his feet. His chair slid back about five feet and then fell over. He put his hands to the side of his head. The metal of the android's skull featured geometric zen-doodles. Gears whirred inside where you would expect a brain.

"No! Aww."

Falcon slapped the table with his hand, threw his head back and laughed. The room went silent as they conversed in their unique form of telepathy. It was weird to Simon how they kept looking at each other. They made eye-contact with whoever was speaking, yet said nothing.

Old habits, like speaking vocally and pounding tables, seem to return to the androids when they experience intense emotion. Simon cataloged the information. He returned his attention to the two video-game players who were ignoring him.

"So then I take it Operation POISON never got off the ground."

Mojave let out a small laugh. "They actually did send a rocket with nanobots into space. We were nervous about it at first, so we put some money in strategic places. We have a lot of it

desire.gashler@gmail.com

laying around from tech we sell on the black market. We delayed them for a while until we realized it wasn't a threat."

"And then you neutralized it," Simon finished in a flat tone.

"No. We let the humans take care of it." Mojave and his companion both laughed.

"Humans neutralized the nanobots?"

Mojave clarified, "I think the appropriate term would be..." He made the sound of an explosion and gestured a slow-motion explosion with his hands.

This is frustrating. Did you get my algorithm or not?

Simon knew it didn't matter anymore, but he had spent several years of his life working on his uncrackable encryption. He desperately wanted to know if the Yona stole his code. It was like playing the game of Taboo where you want someone to understand what you're thinking but you can't say the secret word. He didn't want Mojave to know the algorithm was important to him.

Without warning, every android stood up and ran for the door.

Mojave stopped at the entrance and turned back. "Simon, we need to ask you for a favor."

"What's going on?"

"We're under attack."

Chapter 15

Simon followed Mojave back out the door. Navigating the narrow corridors at a trot was dangerous. Simon knocked his elbow, misjudging the distance to a pipe sticking out of the wall. The plink of Yona metal feet against the floor pattered like rain.

Earth would not be diplomatic with androids out to destroy them.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

No, you're stuck nineteen years ago. They signed a peace treaty, remember?

Mojave entered the door combination to one of the restricted rooms.

something-four-seven-eight. He didn't catch the first digit, but it was on the top row. Mojave glanced back at Simon who tried to look focused.

The hatch opened into a circular room. The air tasted stale, as if no human had breathed this air. Six Yona occupied the recliners bolted to the right wall. Their faces were so solemn they could be statues. Simon recognized the one who looked like a Roswell alien. A new D4 unit, wearing a red shirt, sat in a prominent chair in the center of the room. Other than Mojave, he was the only clothed Yona.

Large display monitors covered the left side of the room. Some of the Yona faced each other. Their eyes darted back and forth in unison, which meant they were talking over radio waves. Others stared at the monitors. Gears' gaze followed a pointer as it clicked through various windows. Nickel watched commands appear in a terminal window, faster than any human could type.

They must be interfacing with the system through bluetooth, Simon guessed. "So, you want me to talk to them?"

"We're not being contacted, we're being hacked."

Mojave took a seat in one of two empty recliners. Simon didn't know if he should sit in the one next to him without an invitation. He didn't want to accidentally sit in the commander's chair.

Did they even have a commander?

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Mojave made an impatient gesture for him to sit. "We need you in this discussion."

Simon sat in the silence until the tension in the room was overpowering. He cried out in desperation, "But I can't hear anyone!"

Mojave turned to Simon. "I'll tell you what you need to know." He turned back to face Red-shirt, mirroring the others.

Simon closed his eyes and visualized what the humans must be doing.

Why are we being hacked if there is a peace treaty? Didn't Mojave tell someone on Earth they were bringing me home? We don't have to let them hack us.

"Mojave, why don't we cut the signal? Then they won't have an access point." The threat puzzled Simon.

He turned to Simon, a little annoyed. "We already did. Our first thought was to cut the signal. The problem now is getting it back on. We're less than a week away from Earth. The Terrans sweep the sky, trying to bounce several frequencies of radio waves off of us. We had a decoy system fooling their detection systems, but they have some new technology. Unless we can send signals out, we are sparrows waiting for the hawk. We have to get it back online before they get a missile to us. But, we don't dare turn it on until we can protect our system from their control." As usual, the Yona appeared to be several steps ahead of Simon's logic.

"Wait, did you say missiles? Didn't you tell them you were coming?" Sweat broke out on Simon's back. The cold air from the ventilation system sent a chill down his spine.

"There are factions on Earth who still don't approve of the peace treaty. We thought it best to fly in undetected. We don't know how they hacked our system. This is your area of expertise,

desire.gashler@gmail.com

isn't it?"

"Well, I usually-" Simon looked around the room, swallowing his comment about protecting the Earth from androids. With all eight Yona onboard staring at him, the only answer he could give was "yes."

"Do you know Linux?"

"Of course." Their system is Linux-based? He was expecting some strange alien technology.

Mojave opened a wall-compartment overhead, pulled out a keyboard, and tossed it onto Simon's lap.

"Familiarize yourself with our system." Mojave turned back to the silent conversations.

Simon pressed enter several times until he found which monitor his keyboard was controlling.

"Wait a sec." Mojave took control of the machine with his mind and changed to another folder. "This folder contains the source code for the system protecting our main controller. You'll want to study it first. The filenames should be self-explanatory."

Simon was flustered. Studying source code written by someone else is not a quick-and-easy task, especially under pressure. Several minutes later, he was as clueless as when he began. He turned to say he couldn't do it.

Mojave turned to listen.

But the words stuck in Simon's throat. His mind went blank, and a vision of his wife and twenty-two-year-old daughter shone in the darkness. If he couldn't get this ship protected, he

desire.gashler@gmail.com

would never see his family again. Never hear the stories of Immy's teenage years. Never hold his grandchildren. Never tell Ali how much he loved her.

"Do you need something?" Mojave prompted.

"Um, no. Nevermind." It didn't matter how impossible this task was; this was not a time to fail or make excuses. He returned to studying the code. A thought crossed his mind, and he checked the process list.

"Have you guys ever heard of a process called sys.mem.module?" It was the kind of name someone would give a rogue program so it wouldn't stand out, but it wasn't a standard system process name.

After a brief pause, Mojave answered for the group. "No one has heard of it."

Simon killed the process.

Red-shirt spoke out loud "What did you do?"

"I killed it. Did something bad happen?"

"We have control of our thrusters again."

A few Yona eyes flicked in Simon's direction with respect and gratitude.

We didn't have control of the ship?! Simon needed to check the kernel hash to see if it had been compromised. He reflexively opened a browser to look up the hash, but was met with the familiar "No Connection" screen. *Gotta get on line!* His heart thumped in his ears. *Calm down!*, he counselled himself. *You'll work faster if you aren't freaking out!*

Time was speeding by for Simon. He checked his watch every few minutes, feeling the

desire.gashler@gmail.com

pressure of learning their spaceship's decoy system. Over an hour had passed when Red-shirt detected an object heading toward the ship. It would be there in less than an hour.

"What is it?" Simon's subconscious tried to deny what he already knew.

"Well, it's probably not a plate of warm cookies," Mojave replied.

Everyone was careful not to pressure Simon, but he knew all of their lives depended on him, and it felt like more than he could bear.

He needed to find a flaw in a piece of alien software before a missile blew them all to smithereens. It was a good thing computer code was a universal language or this would have been impossible. Considering he wrote protective programs for a living, there was a slim chance he could help protect their signal from outside interference. If he could figure out what the code did in the first place!

He stopped to rest for a minute when his right hand started shaking.

When Simon understood the system well enough to make changes, he wasn't very impressed. One would think the Yona would be better programmers since they are machines themselves.

"Didn't you guys know we cracked the Rijndael Algorithm years ago?"

Gears answered, "We wrote this code a few months after we reached Rhea. I thought Rijndael was a standard. Do you think that's the weakness?"

"I'm almost certain of it. Everything considered standard will eventually crack. If they hacked in through the decoy signal, they would only have to bypass this piece of code. We humans used Rijndael to protect our secrets for years, so they'll be adept at breaking it by now. How much time do we have?"

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Red-shirt who was keeping track of the ship's movements answered, "Forty-five minutes to impact. It's on a direct course. If we can't get our decoy system up, we're sitting ducks."

Simon could replace the Rijndael code with any number of more recent algorithms, but he'd need reference materials. He didn't memorize every modern encryption algorithm as it came out. "Can you get me an Internet connection yet?"

"That would be suicide!" Red-shirt blurted out.

Of course, there was one algorithm Simon knew by heart. He had spent several years of his life working with it. Only a few people knew about it, and even they didn't know the actual process. The only problem was, he had been protecting this algorithm from the Rheans for his entire career.

It doesn't matter now, Simon justified to himself. It has been nineteen years since I left Earth. After the Yona attack on the BARF, the National Defense Agency would never trust this algorithm again anyway. Besides, we are at peace, aren't we?

A bizarre sense of irony struck Simon. His work, intended to protect the humans from the Rheans, was about to protect the Rheans from the humans. He had the crazed look of a man considering jumping off a bridge.

"Are you okay?" Mojave asked.

Simon stared at a blinking cursor without moving for several minutes. He had to make a decision. Without saying a word, he hunched over the keyboard. The keys clacked like marbles racing down a plastic tube. He would get them back to Earth.

The Yona turned their eyes to the monitor and sat in silence as Simon filled the screen with

code.

Chapter 16

Simon's algorithm flew onto the screen. It was easy to remember the code. The sequence was as fresh in his mind as if he were in his cubicle at the BARF, nineteen years ago.

"Let's test the system. Bring it back online, but watch the incoming signals." Simon followed his verbal instructions with a quick succession of keystrokes.

"We've got about twenty minutes before impact," Red-shirt reminded.

"Is there any reaction from the missiles?" Simon asked.

"Hold on, I've got to change the trajectory of the shuttle and watch for missile deviance."

Red-shirt's computer blinked through a series of routines indicating ship movement. The helpful graphic of the missile collision course now veered away from the ship. The missile was no longer going to hit the ship!

The androids cheered!

A smile stretched across Simon's face. He breathed a sigh of relief and slumped back into the chair. He wiped clammy hands down his pants. Boy, he wished there was a shower on this ship. Potent fear clung to his armpits. Would the androids have a need for soap?

Mojave slapped him on the thigh and Simon jerked forward. He could feel every fingertip and seam from the unforgiving metallic hand. There would be a bruise there tonight to join the others.

"You are amazing Simon. I knew you were smart, but your algorithm is a masterpiece. Without the internals, we would never be safe."

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Everyone was talking out loud. There was even periodic laughter.

"Let's head to the common room, this calls for a celebration! A good chief gives victuals to his returning warriors," Mojave exclaimed.

"All hail Chief Mojave," Simon quipped.

They all trooped back to the common room where Simon slumped into the armchair and treated himself to uncooked cinnamon oatmeal. It was dry but reminded Simon of apple crisp.

Falcon sat with perfect posture on the couch next to him.

"Man, I wish I could taste food," Falcon pointed to the sugary oats.

"This? No, trust me, this is foul. I'm only eating cause it's what you do at a party."

"I haven't eaten anything for thirty years. You don't know how good you've got it." Falcon stared at the shiny mylar bag with longing.

"Yeah, but you don't get hungry. I wish I didn't."

"Who said we don't get hungry? Maybe we just learn to deal with it." Falcon held the look of longing for an awkward moment, then grinned. "No worries! I'm just messing with you."

Simon released the breath he was holding and smiled. He was among friends. Leaning back on the rigid couch didn't bother him. It was comfortable. Life was good. He looked forward to introducing his old friends to his new friends, and hanging with them all together.

Falcon asked, "So how long have you been coding?"

Simon yawned. "When I was fourteen, a math teacher calculated my grade wrong. When the report card came home, my dad was furious. As punishment, he made me study math in the den for an hour every night. There was a computer in the den. So instead of studying math, I spent

desire.gashler@gmail.com

the hour studying how to crack into computers. I vowed that one day I would go in and fix my bad grade. When the term was over, I had a new talent, and I've kept it up since then."

"Cool story. Do you ever do any real hacking anymore?"

"Funny story. A manager at the BARF was getting fired and tried to hold our network for ransom. He changed all the passwords one night and then fled to Canada. He didn't know it, but I always run a keystroke sniffer on my work machine. When he changed the password, I had a record of it. He used the same password for all the office machines. So, after I showed up for work the next day, the computers were back up in less than thirty minutes."

"Awesome," Falcon shook his head in admiration.

"The guy gave the backup servers a different set of passwords, which would have been really tough to crack, but I happened to have a back door into one of them. It's a bad habit of mine, subverting the security of the places I work for."

Gears came over and sat down on the couch next to Falcon

"Aren't you worried you'll lose your job?" Gears said.

"No, I'm not worried. Once you're on the inside, no one checks for danger much. They are more concerned with dangers outside." Simon yawned a second time. The intensity of the last two hours was fading into lethargy. The words lingered in his mind, tickling an inner itch he couldn't put his finger on.

"I'm gonna go get some sleep." He stretched and stood.

"You really earned it, man. Thanks for all your help. We couldn't have done it without you."

Gears beamed at him as he left the room.

The sounds of the party disappeared with the gentle closing of his bedroom door. Simon fell into an exhausted, content sleep.

Chapter 17

Simon snuggled up against his wife.

"It's your turn," she said.

"To do what?"

"Immy's in the kitchen."

They did *rock, paper, scissors*, to see who would have to check on her. Simon lost. As he entered the kitchen, he could see Immy standing on a chair. She was a young lady now, her blonde hair falling below the shoulders. Long and slender cheekbones framed a beautiful smile. The plump cheeks Simon loved to squish were gone.

"Good morning, Dad." Immy reached for a heavy mixing bowl.

"Watch out! You're going to fall!"

"No I won't," she teased. "You always catch me. Watch."

She leaned back on the chair, pretending to lose her balance.

Simon ran forward to catch her, and she punched him in the nose.

"Ow! What was that for?" Simon cupped his hands over the damaged cartilage as blood flowed between his fingers. He couldn't stop the bleeding. It ran down his arms and onto a blue bathrobe.

Immy raised the heavy mixing bowl overhead and slammed the bowl down.

With a jolt, Simon woke on the android ship. He pinched the bridge of his nose, tasting the

desire.gashler@gmail.com

tang of blood on his lips. There wasn't nearly as much blood as in his dream, but it was still all over his pillow. He hurried next door to the small bathroom to retrieve some tissue and propped himself up on the bathroom wall, eyes closed in a sleepy stupor. Something about the dream was bothering him. The skull was tender where it pressed against the wall. Rolling his head back and forth, he tried to remember when the damage had occurred.

Don't you remember? Immy hit you with the bowl.

But she couldn't have. Simon argued with himself. *She is over twenty years old now. It was a dream.*

Her punch made my nose bleed. Now, shut up! I'm sleepy.

Something is wrong.

I don't care. I'm sleepy. Good night.

It was the air. The life support system dries out the air.

Great! Problem solved. Good night.

Immy didn't hurt your nose.

Fine.

Or your head.

Yes, she did. When she was little.

The sleepy stupor fled from his mind, leaving clarity. Both hands examined the wound on his head. The tender spot was exactly where the bowl had hit in the dream. There was even a slight bump.

But it has been nineteen years. I have aged. This couldn't be the same wound as from when

Immy was little.

Had he been tricked?! He sank onto the floor, careful to not put his foot in the toilet hole. An invisible mountain of lies and horror pressed on Simon's heart and a slow rage built.

Dread soured his gut. He walked into the bedroom and up to the shiny reflective wall. There were too many wrinkles for him to be in his twenties, and his jowls were baggier than they should be. Yet, he didn't see as many wrinkles as yesterday.

Rubbing his receding hairline, new growth prickled his fingertips.

No!

One of his subconscious voices found a positive spin for the situation.

At least you haven't lost nineteen years with your family. Yes, you may have doomed the entire human race by giving away your algorithm, but at least you'll see Ali again.

Fury spiked and his breath deepened.

Those filthy lying robots tricked me!? I'm going to kill them. I'm going to kill every last one of them. I'll rip every wire from their nerve sensors, crush their CPUs and melt their blue-tinted bionic body parts. Then, I'll dedicate my life to taking down Rhea too.

The reality of the situation silenced his outburst of rage.

They're going to kill me.

There was no reason to believe they were en route to Earth, or even in a spaceship at all. It sure looked like a spaceship. Although the lack of windows should have been more suspicious.

Why didn't they kill me the moment I gave them my code?

There was no satisfactory answer to the question. Maybe they were waiting to do it after he

desire.gashler@gmail.com

slept. Maybe they actually liked chatting with him. They certainly appeared to enjoy it.

Maybe there's still something else they want? But I don't know anything else of value. The one thing I knew, I delivered it to them on a silver platter.

Simon sat in the silence. Even his mind stopped speaking. He listened and sat there, unmoving, for what might have been an hour. Out of the panic of the morning's revelation came one clear thought.

They don't know that I know.

Simon wadded the bloody shirt and threw it on the bed. He rubbed his chin sporting the week's growth of beard.

They were shaving me while I was in a coma? What a big, fat lie!

Simon gagged as his second shirt slid over his head. It smelled like an entire football team used it to wipe their feet after practice. He needed to find out where he was and how to escape. If he could get a good look outside, he could tell if they were in space or not. The portal outside his room giving a convenient look at the stars was nothing but a computer monitor. He slammed the cabinet door shut and stood there in the hall thinking of what to do.

If he acted with nonchalance and got Mojave talking, the android might let something slip about where they actually were? *Ugh, lies are the worst. And liars are even worse than the lies they tell.*

He checked himself for blood and headed for the control room. With three of the four digits of the keycode, maybe he could sneak in. The computers there could have some valuable

information.

As he passed the common room, Mojave greeted him.

"Good morning, sleepyhead."

Drat! Why didn't I try this while everyone slept?

"Good morning, Mojave."

It took all his focus not to spit as he vocalized the name of the filthy, back-stabbing, liar of an android. Simon stopped in the doorway, realizing he couldn't continue on without an excuse. He walked to his usual recliner and sat down, never taking his eyes off the lone robot in the room.

"You look like you had a rough night," Mojave commented. "We've all been up for hours already."

"Last night was just stressful for me. I'm good now." Simon wanted to smack the cheerful, lighthearted smile right off the android's electro-static-driven-polymer-based mouth. "I guess we weren't shot down last night, which is good. Shouldn't we be able to see Earth by now? I can't seem to find any windows showing outside." Simon waited with patient innocence.

Mojave glanced in the direction of the control room for a fraction of a second, and his response was a hair too slow. "As Yona, we don't need windows, we patch into the cameras outside the shuttle. I can show you the feed from out there if you'd like."

Yeah, right. Feed from outside the shuttle? More like clever stolen SpaceForce video. "I'd like to see Earth as we approach. It would be neat. Not every day I'll be in space." As if I'm in space at all.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"All right. I'll have Silver-Wing bring you a tablet in a couple of minutes. I have something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Who's Silver-Wing?" Simon still wanted to gather as much information as he could, assuming he would make it out of all this alive.

"Silver-Wing is the Rhean with the buffed body casing. He has been playing Poker with Falcon during the trip. I forget you don't see our name handles when we communicate with you."

"I've been calling him Nickel in my head. What did you want to talk to me about?"

"It's about back before the war when the Ama launched POISON on us. Do you remember what I told you we did to stop the attack?"

Deceiver! You haven't stopped the attack. It hasn't even happened yet! "First, I think you bribed someone?"

"No, we gave lots of money to the right people."

"Right. And you said there was a difference." Simon didn't see where this was going.

"Good. And what happened to Operation POISON?"

Simon thought of the conversation of a few days ago while Mojave was playing video games and chatting.

"I think you blew it up? You made those motions with your hands." Simon brought his fingers together and then spread them, wiggling all the while.

Mojave didn't laugh or even smile. "No, they blew it up."

"Whatever. There's no difference there either." Simon couldn't see the point of this.

"This is for you, Simon. You will need to know these things."

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"What are you talking about?" Simon was having a hard time following the flow of the conversation. He now knew operation POISON wasn't destroyed and there was no treaty with the androids.

A loud rumbling sound emanated through the ship, like refrigerators turning on and turbines powering up. Simon was even less at ease than before. The ship was normally so quiet.

"What's that sound?" Simon turned toward the wall, where a clock ticking backward appeared. It read 9:46. 9:45, 9:44.

Mojave kept going as if the rumbling sound was normal. "Never mind the sounds. I need to tell you something important. We didn't do any of this alone, we had help on Earth. We have agents who work with us and tell select people the truth about the Yona."

"Why are you telling me all this?" Simon felt like he was sitting at the bedside of a dying relative, as if Mojave was giving his last words of wisdom before he passed beyond the grave. Was this whole complex about to explode?

"Never underestimate the power of information, Simon. We have to leave now and you can't come. I'm sorry, but we've been lying to you." Mojave stood and walked toward the door. "Come with me," he held his hand out to Simon.

"Not a chance. What is going on here? You've been lying to me. I'm not nineteen years older. I doubt it has even been a week since the BARF attack!"

Simon remained planted in his seat, glaring at Mojave.

"Where am I? And what have you done with my code?"

With a sad look and a shake of his head, Mojave left the room.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Simon sat and watched the clock. 8:30, 8:29. Simon had watched enough movies with countdown clocks to know they were bad news. With nowhere else to go, there was no choice but to follow the android.

"Aaah!" he shouted at the empty room. Then, jumped up and chased after Mojave.

Halfway down the hall, Gears handed a back-pack to Mojave. Mojave turned and slapped the backpack against Simon's chest.

"What's this?" he grunted, sliding to a halt in his socks. The beige backpack in Simon's hands was thick and bulky. There was a large machete attached through a loop on the side, and a bedroll strapped to the top. It wouldn't be out of place in a war movie.

"A backpack."

Mojave entered the combination on a sealed door.

Brilliant, white light shone in from the door. Simon snapped his eyes shut clinging to the pack. As his eyes adjusted to the light, his jaw dropped open. The terrain of the alien planet was rocky and arid. A bizarre half-plant-half-tree grew in the strange soil. Extreme heat from the sun baked the palm of the hand covering his eyes.

"Wait a minute, I've seen Joshua trees before. We're on Earth, aren't we? This is the Mojave Desert." Simon's head turned like a tennis spectator. Bouncing from the desert, to Mojave, then back to the desert. "Mojave isn't really your name, is it?"

"A name is a name. What matters is what you do with it." Light bounced off Mojave's metallic eyebrows.

"Like marooning people in the *Mojave Desert*?" Simon spat the words. "Why are you doing

this?"

Mojave walked behind Simon as he replied.

"You're at a party and your friend has had too much to drink. He asks you for his car keys. If you are a true friend, do you give him what he asks?"

"I'm not in a mood for riddles." Simon turned his back to the door, to face the android.

"Well, it's time to go." Mojave pointed out the door.

"I'm not even wearing my shoes!" Simon pointed at the white socks he was wearing.

Since Simon wasn't moving, Mojave reached out and gave him a quick shove.

"Farewell, Simon," were the last words he heard before the door shut with a final hiss.

A slide connected to the underside of the door. Simon tucked the bag tight to his chest as he slid back-first the few feet to the sand below. Hitting the ground, he tucked and rolled to absorb the shock. He scrambled upright and snatched the backpack thrown during impact.

A large airplane with a space shuttle strapped to its top stood in the blinding morning sun. The yellow inflatable slide he had been shoved down connected the ground to a door in the head of the shuttle. Revving engines vibrated the sand underfoot.

Simon didn't wait. He took off running in the opposite direction the plane was facing. The desert air sucked the saliva from his mouth. His sock-covered feet couldn't find purchase in the sand. He covered his ears with both hands to protect them from the engine's roar, the backpack bouncing on his back.

The familiar whirr of turbine engines intensified as the plane rolled away toward take-off, gaining speed as it went. Simon peeked backward as its trajectory curved upward, and the ship

disappeared in the sky.

Chapter 18

Simon surveyed the vast expanse of desert before him. The patchy, grey-brown undergrowth sprouted like a herd of porcupines on the tough baked soil. Furry, stunted trees grew as far as the eye could see. Small mounds of rock broke free of the rough terrain forming vantage points no higher than the trees around them. No roads or signs of animal life caught Simon's attention. Despite the blinding, bright light, this was only a taste of the true desert sun. It was either evening or morning. A little time would sort out which. The lack of direct sunlight in the shuttle had messed with his sense of time like a person lost underground might forget if it's day or night.

At least it's still spring-time. He hated to think what this would have been like in August with the record heat they must get in this area.

Simon plunked down under a tree. It offered some shade but no relief from the heat. In the backpack was a map of California. Written in huge letters with a red marker across the top were the words *You are here*. An arrow pointed out from the words toward a tiny red dot. **Mojave Desert.**

"Super helpful," he muttered sarcastically.

Assuming the map was accurate, and not another alien lie, the nearest man-made structures were between twelve and fifteen miles away in any direction. There were no cities in the area. Another twenty minutes helped Simon decide the sun was sinking.

Won't make it to the freeway before dark. He wiped a sliding bead of sweat from his forehead

desire.gashler@gmail.com

and dug through the pack some more.

A metallic-looking emergency blanket, three mylar bags of chicken stroganoff MREs, a small roll of tin-foil, a knife, an unopened package of five cheap-o cigarette lighters, a roll of toilet paper, and a container of water. Laying in the very bottom of the backpack was a blue metal hand with wiring extending out of the severed wrist. No wonder the pack was so heavy.

He pulled the android hand from the pack.

Why in the world did they put this in here? He didn't want to puzzle out the workings of an android mind, he wanted to break his fist on a certain android's *face*. He stood up, pulled his arm back and launched the hand as far as he could over the desert. The blue metal winked in the light of the late afternoon sun. It felt good to watch it fly into the desert. It released some tension and pent up anger.

He returned to the place where the ship had been resting. There were deep ruts in the ground where supports had held it in place. The large, yellow inflatable slide lay in a tangled mess nearby. Some of the things aboard the ship made a lot more sense now. The artificial gravity hadn't been artificial at all, it was real.

Of course, the ship couldn't have artificial gravity. It wasn't even toroidal shaped. Why didn't I see it before? The rumbling before they kicked me off must have been when they turned on the engines for the very first time! I doubt the thing even had a life-support system. Of course not. Why would it? They had to park here on Earth to keep me alive!

Simon conjured a picture of Mojave in his mind.

Static-brained piece of scrap metal. Letting me go will be the biggest mistake he ever made.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

He lied to me! No, it was more than a lie. It was blatant violating deception! He acted like he had all these high ideals and then used me like I wasn't even human!

A shudder ran over Simon. Mojave had proven to be brilliant, cunning, and ruthless. He wondered whether humankind had created its own destruction.

No! I will bring them down. It was a weighty promise for one man to make, especially after being so thoroughly played, but he had new information about the way androids thought. He also had a motivation like no human had ever before experienced. It was beyond personal. Destroying the androids was still Simon's life's work.

A fighter jet crested the horizon, rumbled over him, and disappeared. Simon dropped to the ground in terror. He'd never seen a plane flying so low or so fast in all his life. Dropping to the ground was unnecessary, the jet was at least a hundred feet in the air, but he had acted on reflex.

The jet wasn't passing through the area. It was charging in for a kill. No wonder the androids were in such a hurry to leave.

Seeing the opportunity to save himself a long walk, Simon gathered a pile of everything flammable. Hurrying to the pit made by the resting android shuttle, he unrolled half of his toilet paper, tossed in the packaging from the lighters and a dense, prickly shrub. He lit the pile and continued scavenging extra bits of wood and shrub to add to the blaze. There weren't many loose branches around. Some of the bushes he tried to pry from the ground were still alive and well-attached. Simon cursed as he pricked his fingers on several thorns at once. The fire crackled and made a lot of smoke.

Good.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

It was a lot of work to keep it going, but Simon didn't want to sleep in the desert at night. A few minutes after the first jet, another one whizzed by, flying much higher overhead. Not one minute later, there was another. They crisscrossed the area several times.

Come on, you know I'm here. When are you going to come down and get me?

It was dark, the only light coming from the impromptu bonfire and a setting crescent moon. Simon heard the unmistakable sound of a helicopter, and then another, and another. They landed all around him. Dark green military paint decorated the outside of the choppers. Men in black carrying large rifles jumped out.

Several laser dots danced around on Simon's chest. He looked down at the dots, then back up. One of the lasers drifted too far upward and burned his eye. He slapped both hands over his eye and screeched.

Altogether, the army men dropped to the ground and rolled off to the side.

It struck Simon as funny. These guys were more nervous than he was.

A man slammed into Simon's back and tackled him to the ground. They twisted his arms back at a painful angle and smashed his face into the grainy soil.

"I'm human!" he shouted.

No one listened. They all shouted back demands. Some of the demands were conflicting.

"Lay down!"

"Don't move!"

"Keep your hands out!"

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Simon was angry, "You're holding them! How can I--"

The man on top of Simon jerked his head and slammed it back into the ground.

"Shut up or I'll make you shut up."

"But I'm not--"

Another tug and slam into the ground. Simon's nose hit a rock, giving him a second nose-bleed for the day. Mixing with the loose sand from the ground, the blood caked onto his cheek like a grainy pudding.

The soldier hefted Simon to his feet and frog-marched him to the nearest helicopter.

Simon decided the best course was to let them take him to someone in charge and stop trying to communicate. The overpowering chop of the blades made verbal communication impossible anyway.

Simon's neck was swollen, his arms ached, and there were bruises all over his face. The dried blood smeared down his chin and into his five-day beard cracked when he tested the state of his jaw. He was in a holding cell with stark cement walls and a single door. A thin mattress tucked into a corner did not tempt Simon to use it. Two cameras watched as he paced the floor.

There was silence when he demanded to speak to someone in charge. Silence as he banged his fists on the door and asked to use the bathroom. At least they could let him clean his face off and go pee!

The door creaking open alerted Simon to the presence of a visitor. A woman with jet-black hair greying at the temples in rough Army fatigues entered, carrying a clipboard.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"Please, can you tell me what's going on? I've been in here for hours."

She glanced at her clipboard. "It says here you claim to be Simon Mashman?"

"Yes. I'm a researcher at the Allred Brachnakovitch Research Facility and Rheans captured me and took me to their spaceship. I've already told you this." Simon shook his head. Were they ever going to believe him? Why couldn't he talk to someone competent or at least in charge?

"Your story checks out, but we're going to need to detain you for a while. There are some national security implications related to the situation which we haven't fully developed. We hope you understand."

"Understand? I'm being illegally detained in a cement box and denied toilet privileges, denied access to a phone to call my family, and you tell me to understand?!"

"I'm going to ask you to calm down, Mr. Mashman. We're following protocol here. Everything we do is perfectly legal according to the anti-android terror act."

Simon unclenched his fists and let out a long breath, trying to gain control over his emotions.

"Can I at *least* use a bathroom?"

"We have requested toilet services for you. They should arrive shortly." The woman checked her clipboard for confirmation before proceeding. "Try to make yourself comfortable. We have a few people who'd like to ask you some more questions."

Turning to leave, she spoke over her shoulder. "Relax. We should have this all sorted out in no time."

Simon shook his head in disbelief. What kind of barbarians locked someone away like this without cause?

desire.gashler@gmail.com

The "inquisitors" turned out to be psychologists, each trying to determine whether he had been brain-washed by the androids and whether he was loyal to his country. He enjoyed these sessions. They took him to a quiet room with three chairs. It felt good to sit down after his sleepless night and the terror of the assault and helicopter ride. And it was an opportunity for him to vent his anger against the androids. The betrayal was fresh in his overtaxed mind.

"Now, you said they tortured you. Could you tell me what kind of torture?"

"Well, it wasn't torture like you would think." Simon squirmed, uncomfortable in his metal chair.

"Could you please describe what they did?" The psychologist scribbled on a notepad as Simon spoke.

"First of all, they took me away from my family. Being kidnapped isn't exactly fun. They strapped me to a bed."

"Really?"

"Yeah. They threatened to turn off the life-support system if I didn't cooperate with them." Simon knew he was embellishing a little, but it seemed to be what they wanted to hear and he needed some justification for having shared a classified algorithm with the enemy.

"What did they want from you?"

"Well, they didn't make it clear at first. I was subjected to a lot of mind games. They tried to make me believe nineteen years had passed and there was no need for me to protect my secrets any longer." Shame colored Simon's cheeks a dull pink. "They pressured me."

"So they physically put pressure on you in order to get you to comply?"

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"Well, no. They didn't technically *hurt* me in any way."

"What exactly *did* they do to you then, to make you betray your own people?"

Simon didn't like the wording of the question one bit. He wanted the Yona to sound brilliant, but not sound like a fan-boy at the same time.

"They kind of left me alone to wander around the ship."

"And what was their ship like?"

"I don't know. Like a spaceship? They weren't asking me questions about my research, they mostly sat around and played poker and video games."

His two interrogators shared a look. "And how did this make you feel?"

Simon took a long time answering this question. The more he prepared his answer, the more his teeth and fists clenched.

"I'm going to destroy them. Not just for vengeance, but because no one should have to go through what I did. I'm going to use what I know so my wife and kid will be able to sleep at night, knowing Yona can't kidnap and torture them or their father. I want the whole world to be able to enjoy freedom and peace of mind. Those androids stand for evil, and for the sake of all that is good, I'm going to bring them down!"

"And you refer to the Rheans as Yona?"

"It's what they call themselves." Should Simon feel guilty for calling them by their chosen name? All the sci-fi books say if you can name something, you have the power to destroy it.

"I see." The psychologist scribbled quite a few notes down.

Although he fed the psychologists what he thought they wanted to hear, he was much more

tormented during his time alone back in the cell.

Days passed before the same slick-haired woman returned to his small room. "We're letting you go. Your family is waiting to receive you."

Finally! I swear, the humans held me longer than the androids did!

"Um, can I wash and shave first?" Simon slid his fingers into the blood matted beard and tugged on it for emphasis.

"Of course. We'll take you to a cleaning room. You have ten minutes."

Chapter 19

Simon rubbed his hands over his smooth, freshly shaven cheeks. He felt much more alive after the quick shower, although still very grimy in the clothes he had worn for the past two weeks. The only thing on his mind was his family. With a lighthearted step, he pushed through the door into a public area of the building where they were waiting.

A legion of cameramen and reporters clogged the area behind the door. Lightbulbs flashed and video lights blinded him as he tried to make out what they were saying.

"Mr. Mashman, is it true you were abducted by aliens?"

Simon blocked an annoying, bright light. "Yes. I just got back. Could you please move?"

"Mr. Mashman, over here! How did you escape from their spaceship?"

"What?" *How did they hear about any of this?*

The crowd would not relent. Simon had to shove a camera out of his face to get a look at the room. Protesters with giant posters shouted from the edges of the crowd. Signs emblazoned with

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"NANOBOTS 4 RHEA!" and "DEATH TO THE ROBOTS" danced over the heads of the media.

Simon jumped to get a better vantage point. While in the air, he spotted Alecia fighting her own swarm of reporters. He rammed two reporters into each other before the crowd formed a passage for him. He barreled down the alley between reporters, arms opening to catch up his wife as they approached. A flurry of camera flashes strobed.

Simon and Alecia embraced, exchanging frantic kisses and *I love yous*. The camera flashes went berserk as Simon scooped up his three-year-old daughter who was clinging to Alecia's side. Immy wrapped her little arms around both of their necks and hugged.

The world fell instantly in love with Simon Mashman. Prepped to receive a haggard victim of inhuman torture, the media was instead rewarded with a fighting icon of human passion. A loving father and husband who was willing to struggle to get to his family at all costs.

After her display of affection, Simon's wife tucked herself deeper under Simon's arm, a bit camera-shy. "Can we get out of here?" She called into his ear.

"It's so good to see you, Ali. You don't know how much I missed you." He squeezed his two favorite girls. "Let me just say one thing really quick."

Simon turned to face the largest section of reporters, knowing his words were being filmed from every angle. "I have something to say. I am Simon Mashman and I was a captive of the androids. I want you to stand as my witnesses. I swear an oath this day. For what has been done to me, for the good of my family, and for the freedom of the whole world. I will bring about the destruction of the androids. They will never stop until they get what they want. They are ruthless,

desire.gashler@gmail.com

liars, traitors. They are a threat to our very humanity! And they must be destroyed."

A cross between a cheer and a battle-cry erupted from the throng.

In a corner of the room, a lone figure stood appraising the onslaught of media attention. He wore an expensive, pressed suit, complemented by an expensive dark-blue silk tie. A golden lapel pin in the shape of an eagle clutching lightning bolts marked him as a member of the National Defense Agency. The man pulled out a cell phone and stepped into a quieter room, making a phone call.

Simon clung to his wife's as they curled together on the couch. Immy was in bed and the house was quiet. A comfortable living room space with a big-screen TV, three bookcases and the couch Simon's mother had passed down to them when they got married. They didn't need much furniture, hardly anyone came over to visit. The neatness of the room's library contrasted with the lowest shelves where books lay in heaps, scattered or piled at the whims of a toddler. *Pigford the Mighty* and *Pam Has a Hat* took positions of honor in the reading beanbag near the couch.

Simon spoke with quiet tenderness in this intimate setting. "I imagined you'd be so old when I saw you again. I had almost forgotten what you really look like."

Ali scrunched up her forehead to make it look like she had more wrinkles. "I don't look like an old lady to you?" Simon laughed.

"No. But you do look adorable." He kissed her for the hundredth time. He couldn't get enough of her closeness. The feel of her body against his was nothing like the rigid solidity of an android hand or the cruel stab of a knee to the back with his face crushed into the desert floor. It

desire.gashler@gmail.com

was soft and yielding, conforming to the curves of his own body. She was a perfect fit. He tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear so it couldn't tickle his nose.

"When I was in space, I spent hours looking at your face, thinking about what you would be like when I saw you again. About the things you had to go through without me."

"But you weren't in space," she reminded him.

"Yea, but I thought I was. I still think of it as my time in space. Is that weird?" He loved having a wife he could trust without reservation. Someone he could tell the embarrassing parts of the story to.

"I don't know."

They lapsed into companionable silence, each thinking about how the other's past two weeks had gone. Alecia had been at home, terrified for her husband. Simon's employers had refused to tell her what was going on because of security clearance, and she had a three-year-old to take care of on her own. It was a rough time for both of them.

"I'm going to stay home for a few days and let things blow over. I'm sure no one will expect me to come in until next week." Besides, he had earned it. The government had kept him in inhuman conditions for a week. They could pay his salary while he recovered at home.

"I want you right here with me." Ali said, tucking her head under Simon's chin. Warmth spread through Simon and he snuggled deeper into the couch. They spent the night in each other's arms.

Chapter 20

When Simon logged into his email server the next morning, seven thousand three hundred and thirty-four emails greeted him. The subject lines ranged from extravagant to extortionist, from requests for interviews to notes from Ali wondering where he was. Those first few from the day after his kidnapping were painful to read. Ali wrote asking him to please reply. It broke his heart to know how much sadness all this had caused her.

There was no way he could read all these emails. Typing a quick search for work-related messages delivered several from Reggi and Ja Wei. He replied to both, letting them know he was taking the rest of the week off. It was Thursday, they could do without him for another four days.

Ali slipped back into the bedroom and under the covers. She curled her head onto Simon's lap as he tucked the laptop away on the nightstand. "Good morning," she said.

It was a wonderful morning. He was going to spend every minute he could with her and Immy.

"Anything important in those emails?" She pointed with her nose toward the laptop.

"Nothing I can't take care of later. What do you want to do today?" He was hoping she'd want to spend time together. He could tell her more about the strange conversations with Mojave.

"I have a favor I need to ask you." She sat up and looked Simon square in the eyes, commanding his attention. "You aren't going to like this, but I need to go out today and I need you to watch Immy."

"Sure, it's no problem."

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Alecia breathed a sigh of relief. "I am having some issues with the copyright code we were working on together before your capture. I have a meeting with a lawyer today. I was panicking about who to ask to babysit. Then, here you are! It's a miracle."

"Lawyers? Sounds like you've been busy." Simon and Alecia wrote some code together before the Arbor Day weekend. It would download media to random computers even if they hadn't asked for it. She was trying to show the uselessness of digital copyright law enforced through IP records.

"You won't believe what I've been going through!" Alecia launched into a detailed explanation of her adventures.

A knock on the door before Immy's nap revealed Tyson Stratford from the National Defense Administration. A glossy black sedan with tinted windows idled at the curb of Simon's street.

"Who is the angry man, Daddy?" Immy's innocent voice piped from knee-level.

"I'm Tyson Stratford, little lady. And I'm here to see your daddy about something very important." Tyson bent forward and bared his teeth at the little girl.

Immy retreated behind Simon's legs and closed her eyes.

Simon didn't know what to make of this unexpected guest. "Please, come in."

"Thank you, I won't take much of your time." Tyson strode into the entryway, a large mustard-colored envelope in his hands. "I'm here to talk to you about the things you said to those reporters yesterday."

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Simon knew men like Mr. Stratford didn't make house calls often. This must be an important conversation. He remained silent during the explanation.

"We at the NDA like your type of spirit and we feel that you represent a valuable asset in the war against the mechanical abominations. We would like to offer you the position of Chief General over the war against the androids. Now, hear me out." Stratford raised his hand to forestall any arguments Simon might have. "As General, you would be responsible for overseeing operation POISON which we realize you had quite a hand in preparing. You would also need to quit your job with the Allred research group and come to work for us in Virginia at the Pentagon."

"But I live here in Ohio. I am not--"

"We are willing to let you work from home two days a week and fly you to Virginia for three days a week. We want to make this as easy on you as possible. We're also going to double your current salary." Stratford handed Simon the pages in his hand and leaned in as he spoke. "Think about the opportunities for your plans to rid the world of the androids. We could use a guy like you."

"I will have to talk this over with my wife. She's not here right now." Simon scanned the room to make sure Ali wasn't there. He felt like a deer in the headlights.

"Naturally, naturally. You just take this offer and give me a call on my personal number when you make up your mind." Stratford tapped a hand-written phone number on the front of the envelope. "I know you'll make the right decision."

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Simon heaved a heavy sigh as the black car with the NDA logo on the door rounded the corner and left the neighborhood.

Chief General Over the War Against the Androids. It sounds like a made-up title. He would be crazy to pass up an increase in salary, but what were they purchasing with the money? His fame? His knowledge of the android thought process? Ali would know what to do. Simon closed the door and swung Immy into his arms.

Simon picked up another nail and pushed it into the soft, smooth wood. The hammer rang as he pounded the nail into the new plank, the smell of freshly cut lumber filling the air.

Simon was kneeling on the edge of the second level of his deck, an unfinished ledge over a fifteen-foot drop to the first floor below. The smooth, pretreated wood felt almost soft under the cargo pants which kept him from getting splinters. The deck was a magnificent creation, highlighting Simon's tendency to overdo things. Counting only floor space, it was as big as their entire house.

On one end of the upper level was a narrow bridge leading to a gazebo in a tree. The first floor of the deck ran the entire perimeter of the house. The whole deck was close to completion. He could see the edge where he began several months ago on the other side of this gap. Two parallel support beams ran from where he was to where he wanted to be. Perhaps he would finish the second level today, finally.

Simon shrugged to himself. No hurry. It will be done when it is done. He picked up another nail and laid it on the deck.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

He heard footsteps. Alecia was walking toward him wearing her blue power-pants. He liked the way they made her look like a congresswoman running for president. Smiling, he greeted "Good morning."

"You already said that five hours ago, before breakfast. It's not like we haven't seen each other yet today." She sat down on top of the pile of wood he was planning to lay out next and smiled.

Simon smiled back and finished hammering the nail in place. He picked up another nail and set it into the wood. Three nails later he looked up at Alecia again.

She was still smiling. "So, how's your deck coming?"

"Great! I'm almost back to the start." He pointed at the other side of the gap in front of him. Simon picked up another nail and hammered it in.

Alecia let out a huff of annoyance. "You and your deck!" Simon stopped and turned to face his wife. The bright, noon sun blinded him for a moment. She was staring at him. "You work as hard on your days off as you do when you're at work."

"I'm not working," he objected, pointing to the wood. "This is how I relax." He sat back on his heels and shook his shoulders out.

Alecia's lip quirked up on one side. "You're so funny. You're the smartest person I know. You're amazing with computers and cryptography and stuff. And yet half the time you don't even seem to notice what's going on around you." She gestured with both hands held out to her sides.

"Is this about how I didn't notice I was on Earth and not in space? Or am I missing something else?"

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Alecia exhaled in exasperation and threw her shoulders up. "How am I supposed to enjoy my husband's return to humanity when he is busy not paying attention to me?"

"Oh, I'd love to do something with you." Relieved to not be in trouble, he still felt a little guilty about ignoring his wife. "I was doing this to pass the time while Immy slept. At breakfast, you didn't say you wanted to do anything other than visit your lawyer."

He was being honest. She was the person he wanted to spend time with the most in the universe.

Her exasperation turned into amusement. "I got home from the lawyer's two hours ago. I shouldn't have to always say it. You're just supposed to know." She shifted on her seat of planks, sliding her right hand along the top of her knee and tracing patterns with her fingers. Simon was hypnotized by her fingers gliding around and around on the smooth fabric.

How is everyone just supposed to know all these things if no one says anything about it? "Do you want to do something with me?"

"Of course I want to do something with you." Alecia stood up and drew her hand out to him, leading him toward the bridge to the gazebo.

Searching for something clever to say, Simon failed. The only thing he could think of was their daughter. "What about Immy?"

"It's eleven-thirty. She's sleeping." Alecia raised both eyebrows as if to suggest he should already know this.

Right. He realized he was still gripping a hammer. It dropped from his hand and hit the deck with a thud. Ali giggled and turned to lay a kiss on him.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"You know, it really is nice having you home in the afternoon."

Their lips met in a blissful reminder of everything Simon loved about having Ali as a wife. Androids and politics fell away and it was just this moment. This woman. This kiss.

Chapter 21

In the center of the second level, a wooden tower rose higher than the house. There was no railing, so Simon climbed up the ladder with care, heaving himself up and sitting in one of the three chairs on the small platform at the top of the gazebo. Alecia took one of the other seats next to him.

They were higher than anything around them and could see for miles. An endless canopy of trees of equal height spread like the surface of a lake below them. Here and there, the tops of houses poked up through the canopy like the backs of whales cresting a vast green ocean of leaves. Shadows danced on the surface of the canopy. Dull, dark green shifting to emerald and lime. A wall of dark rain clouds filled the horizon to the west. It was probably going to rain tonight.

"How are you feeling?" Alecia said.

"To be honest, I'm still annoyed at Mojave and his imaginary friendship. I was starting to like him." Simon threw his hands up in the air. "You see? Even now, knowing what he did, I still think of him as a person. Him. I can't get it out of my head." Simon stared off in the distance.

"You might have some kind of Stockholm Syndrome or something. Do you think it would help to talk about it some more? With a psychologist?"

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"I had enough psychoanalysis in the NDA prison camp." Simon snorted. "I don't know why, but I don't think everything he said was a lie. When he talked about the NDA and first strike, it just sounded so real. You know how truth rings in your soul? It felt like the last time you compile your code and you don't get any more errors."

"Hm. I guess time will tell." She reached out and held his hand in the noon sun. "We're both in agreement then, about Stratford?"

"I think it's the right decision. It will be difficult to be away from you two nights a week, but it's worth it in the long run." Simon swung their joined hands. "I'll give him a call after Immy wakes up."

Reggi met him as he exited the elevator on Monday. "It's the new boss!" Reggi cat-called to the floor at large.

Across the room, Ja Wei peeked out of his office. Simon gasped, "Thank goodness you're not dead!"

"You didn't know?" Reggi gave him a quick side-hug. "Nobody's dead. A couple of guards took bullets from friendly-fire. They're both in the hospital. The androids only ever drugged people."

The floor was mostly restored to normal. The cubicles were upright again. The cooling pipe had a large amount of duct-tape sealing the hole. Temporary scaffolding leaned against the wall by the supercomputer where construction workers were working, but everything else seemed normal.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"I gotta say, I was shocked when I heard they picked you as General. We've been talking about it in the office for two days now." Reggi steered Simon toward the approaching Ja Wei.

As Simon related his tale, the others showed him video clips of Stratford announcing Simon's new position as Chief General over the war against the androids.

"You know who Stratford is, right?" Ja Wei asked. "He's one of the eight apostles!"

Ja Wei often referred to the director of the NDA as the savior of mankind and his lackeys as apostles. When they gave themselves haughty titles such as 'Head of the Earth Protection Division' it made sense to mock them.

Since the National Defense Agency was now larger than any other government entity, the Director of the NDA had more power than any other man on earth, including the President. On a whim, he could have a new law passed, in the name of national security, of course. Simon suspected lobbying and personal gain motivated the new laws more than security.

The director was much too busy with politics to run affairs at the NDA. Eight vice-directors who worked under him oversaw the day-to-day management of the real security programs. These were the men who dictated where most of the money in the country went.

"It still bugs me they didn't pick twelve vice-directors. It would have been so much more poetic," Ja Wei lamented.

"I work under one of the eight apostles?" Stars filled Simon's eyes. He would have access to massive amounts of money. He would have control over huge organizations of everything from engineers to mercenaries. I will have my vengeance against the androids!

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"I can't believe you accepted a promotion to work directly under one of the most powerful men in this country and you didn't even know it!" Ja Wei shook his head.

Reggi guided the two men into his office. "It's good to see you again, Simon. I didn't think you were coming back."

"I had to make sure you were staying out of trouble, Reggi," Simon winked.

"Could you close the door Ja Wei? I want to say something to Simon." Reggi motioned with his hand. The door snicked closed and Ja Wei and Simon sat in the two chairs in front of Reggi's desk.

"This may be foolish, but I want to warn you to be careful. I've worked with you, now, for what? Six years?"

"Yeah, about six years." Simon nodded.

"I know you're brilliant, Simon, but I don't think Tyson Stratford knows it." Reggi leaned against the edge of his desk and interlocked his fingers in front of his belt.

"Okay?" Simon didn't know if Reggi was complimenting him or telling him he was dumb.

"That's why I'm concerned. Something doesn't seem quite right, here." Reggi fished around for the right words. "You've become an instant celebrity. Did you know there's a picture of you jumping over all those reporters on the front cover of Newsweek?"

"No. Wow. I wonder if I get some sort of royalties for it."

"I'm being serious Simon. If you're going to wage a war, you don't put a celebrity in charge of it. No offense, of course, I'm sure you'll do a better job than most."

"I don't understand. What are you saying exactly?"

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"It's not just Reggi, Simon, I don't think we know the whole story," Ja Wei chimed in.

"Just be careful." Reggi tilted his head and squinted as if he could communicate with Simon through thoughts alone. "When great power comes easy, there's always a catch. Easy come, easy go?"

"All right. I'll try to keep my eyes open." It was a good point. Simon wondered why they chose him and why now. He'd have to be on his guard.

"You've always got a job here if things don't work out for some reason."

"Thanks, Reggi." Simon reached out his hand and they shook. "I appreciate your concern. I'll give it some serious thought. It was good to see you too, Ja Wei."

"Take care, Simon. I'll keep the car seat warmer on for ya." Ja Wei thumped Simon on the back.

Chapter 22

Simon sat in front of the computer in a tiny office at the Pentagon. The view from the third floor wasn't as grand as he imagined. Through the window, the only thing to see was the people looking right back at him from the other segments of the building. Three state-of-the-art computers whirred on the desk, keeping the small room toasty. The walls were bare, but a picture of his family rested in a frame next to his screen. After three months, it still didn't feel like his office yet.

Taking over operation POISON was a comfortable transition. Without further Rhean interference, plans were speeding ahead for nano-bot deployment. He was following up on

desire.gashler@gmail.com

last-minute details with the launch only three weeks away. It was time for all the pieces to start coming together.

Today, he was video-calling an engineer at the BARF to verify the nanobots would arrive on time. The man worked on a different floor than Simon had, but it still brought back strong memories to contact the place.

It took a long time before the man on the other side answered. He was probably straightening his hair before a call from The Chief General. Simon rolled his eyes at the thought.

"Hello, Mr. Mashman." A balding, middle-aged man in a collared denim shirt answered from a conference room. There were other people listening in, then. This was the part of his new job Simon hated the most. The groveling.

"You can call me Simon." Simon presented what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

"Okay, General Simon."

Simon winced. "I'm following up on the all-clear you were supposed to send me regarding the nano-robots. I was expecting it yesterday."

"Um, actually," the man put one hand behind his neck and massaged it. "We would be ready, but we're waiting on a shipment of iridium. The moment it arrives, we can do the plating in about an hour and then we're ready to go." The man rushed to complete his thought. He was trying to sound confident.

"You know we're launching in three weeks, right?"

"Yes, sir."

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Simon brought up a file on his computer listing the time table for the launch. "When will the iridium arrive?"

"Um, we're having difficulty contacting the supplier, so we're not quite sure."

"Difficulty?" Simon's hand stilled above the keyboard.

"Yeah, they seem to have disappeared."

"Disappeared? We need reliability here. Can you use another supplier?" According to his Gantt chart, the nanobots needed seven days of testing and travel after manufacturing before being ready for launch. Meaning, he had a few days of buffer. Two weeks at the most.

"Well, iridium isn't as easy to come by as, say gold, sir. It's really rare. In the quantities we need, I don't think there's another suitable supplier anywhere."

Great, just what Simon needed. Some strange setback so close to the launch. "Who is the supplier?"

"It's a company called Irtech. Here, I'll send you the contact info." A contact card appeared in Simon's inbox a few moments later.

Hours of unsuccessful phone calls later, Simon was ready to give up. He had tried to contact everyone who had ever worked for the company without luck. Simon sent a text message to his secretary, even though they were one room apart.

"I'm going to Ohio sooner than expected. Can you get me a plane ticket for tonight?"

"Columbus airport as usual?"

"No, it's a small town named Bestford." Simon double checked the spelling on the website he had open.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"Bestford? No airports near there."

There had to be an explanation for why an entire company of people had vanished off the face of the earth. "Can we get a convoy for tomorrow morning? Under a time crunch."

"Okay, I'll have it at your house at 6 AM."

"Perfect. Thanks." Simon cached the maps and contact information on his phone, then called his wife to let her know he was coming home a little early.

Simon walked into an abandoned refinement factory. Steel pipes leading to giant metal compression chamber tubs sat in a concrete room. The industrial lights overhead buzzing with electricity were the only sound. Booths outside where guards should have been protecting their valuable merchandise stood empty. Not a soul around. They were in the middle of nowhere in the podunk town of Bestford, Ohio, three hours southeast of Columbus. Simon didn't know what to think.

Heading back to town, they spotted an old codger running a donut and coffee shop. *Harv's Java and Holes* read the sign, painted in peeling black paint.

"I've never seen so much cash in all my life. I didn't even know there was so much money on the whole planet, no sir." The man sat on a bar-stool behind the counter, a prominent shot-gun propped up next to him against the back wall.

It was easy to get the man talking. Getting him to answer the right questions was going to be more tricky than Simon realized.

"It's like they busted open the national treasury and dumped it on us. I told them not to take

desire.gashler@gmail.com

it. 'It's got to be counterfeit,' I said. 'There's no way someone's gonna dump a few billion dollars of real money on Bestford!' I didn't want any of that filthy lucre near my shop, so I swept it off my property. I didn't take a single bill. Nope, not even one single bill. I may not be a wealthy man, but I still got my dignity. All those people running around screaming and stuffing money in their pants. 'You're selling your souls', I told them, 'there ain't no such thing as free money in this world. You're sending yourselves straight to hell if you take it', I said."

Wow, this old guy can really talk. "Someone dumped money on your town?" Simon didn't know whether to trust what the old man was saying to not.

"My cousin, James, comes runnin into my store, sayin 'Come quick, Harv! There's money fallin from the sky!' I said to him, 'I ain't blind, James, I know there's money fallin from the sky. But it ain't mine, and I ain't touchin that stuff, and if you know what's best for yourself, you won't touch it neither. There ain't no such thing as free money in this world', I said."

"Yes, you said that before," Simon wanted to pressure the man with questions but decided he'd probably get a more accurate story if he just let the guy keep talking. Simon's grandma was from a small town. She used to ramble on and on about whatever local gossip she could think of.

"I saw people with cars stuffed so full they had to throw money back out onto the street so they could shut the doors. Next thing you know, everyone's leavin town. They're all tryin to go somewhere they can buy things and deposit their money so's the gov'ment can't come take it away again."

"Wait, do I understand correctly that loads of money fell out of the sky? Did anyone see who dropped it?"

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"You even hear a word I said, son? Ain't no one seen who done it. It was just rainin down on us like it was dropped from real high somewhere. But I didn't touch a single bill. Nope, not one single bill, 'cuz I got my dignity. My dignity and my integrity. There ain't no such thing as free money in this world, I tell you."

"Thank you for the information." Simon contacted his secretary. "I need you to find me about two-hundred iridium workers."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You know, people who know how to operate an iridium refinery."

"What did you do? Did you have them executed for slacking off on their production?"

"Ha. Very funny. It's almost as weird, though. The androids paid them off to leave town." Simon was sure it was those meddling androids. They even mentioned paying people but not bribing them with all their money from black-market technology. It was a sneaky way to get rid of workers. It should never have worked though.

The old man jumped off his stool and leaned over the counter. "It was the androids what done it? I knew it! I knew it was something evil! I told everyone not to touch that filthy lucre. Said it was the devil's money, I did!"

Simon held up his hand to forestall any more information. "Why haven't any of the workers come back? How long ago did you say this happened?"

Harv sat back on his stool and tilted his chin toward the ceiling. "Must have been a week ago. Don't know why no one's back. Maybe they got so much money they don't need to work no more?"

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Simon's secretary piped up on the phone. "Simon, Bestford is the only iridium factory in the entire nation. Every tech we've got is there. I could maybe find you ten or twenty people who know what they're doing, but even then they're not going to be familiar with Bestford's refinery setup. Nowhere else has the capacity to deliver what you need."

"Thanks, I was afraid you'd say that." Simon shut his phone and rested his forehead on top of the coffee counter in front of him.

They even told me how they were going to do it, those cocky androids, and I still couldn't stop them! He imagined Mojave watching him on some kind of monitor and laughing at him.

He even made sure, before he sent me away, to remind me of how this would happen. They were going to give money to specific people. Well, it wasn't technically bribery, so maybe Mojave was telling the truth after all.

Chapter 23

Simon was busy in his office writing emails to delay the launch. There was a knock at his door.

"Come in. Oh, Vice Director Stratford, good morning." Simon did not need any distractions right now. He put on a smile anyway and hoped Stratford would go away soon.

"What are you doing, Simon?" He walked into the room with both hands clasped behind his back.

"I'm preparing orders to delay the launch, sir."

"Well, we can't have that now. The launch will continue as scheduled." There was a note of

desire.gashler@gmail.com

finality in his voice.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but the nano-robots are not operational." *Didn't Stratford receive the email about the iridium refinery shutdown?*

"The launch will continue as scheduled."

If Simon had been a military man, he would have felt no need to respond. An order was an order. But as a scientist, he believed orders and facts should make sense and speak for themselves.

"Unless you know of some way to get those nanobots working without iridium, they're not going to be functional by the scheduled date. It would be a waste of resources to launch a bunch of worthless junk into space. I'm sorry, but I can't do anything about it. The launch will be postponed."

"I like you, Simon." Stratford's smile reminded Simon of a patronizing teacher. "You have a genuineness about you. When you say you're going to destroy those androids, people can't help but believe you. You're all in, aren't you, Simon?"

"Yes sir, to the death, sir."

"Why?"

"Because I love my family. And by extension, I love all of humanity. If anything is worth defending, I think they are, sir."

"You are exactly what we need, Simon, more than you know. But let me ask you another question. What if you found out that things weren't exactly the way you thought they were. Would you still do what was best for your country?"

desire.gashler@gmail.com

I never said country. "What do you mean?"

"Just answer the question."

Simon thought of himself as a self-sacrificing, hard-working, stick-to-your-word kind of guy. There wasn't anything in this world he wouldn't do for his family. "I'll always try to do what is best for mankind, no matter what it takes."

Stratford nodded his head, thoughtful. He paced across the room a couple of times. "I came down here to show you something, kid. Come with me. I'm raising your clearance level. You need to know some important things."

They rode the elevator to the ground level, walked across the campus to another building and up the elevator in the second building to Stratford's office. The office was a stark reminder of what government money could buy. A polished hardwood desk dominated the room, flanked with two flags: The stars and stripes of the USA and the Eagle of the NDA on a stark white field. A small personal computer stood sentinel on the floor and glossy photos of past important people filled the walls and cabinet tops. Simon grew more curious as Stratford twisted the knob on a large no-nonsense document safe situated behind the desk.

14-32-

Stratford glanced over his shoulder at Simon.

"Oh, sorry." Simon looked away. Memorizing combinations as people entered them in was a habit Simon had picked up as a kid. *It doesn't matter. You don't need the last number to open a safe. You can try the lever at each number while you turn it.*

"Do you know what the predominant product of this nation is?"

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"Corn?" What an odd question to ask an engineer.

"No. Not even close. Maybe a hundred years ago. These days, it's intellectual property."

Stunned, Simon recalled one of his conversations with Mojave. The words floated back to him from the man pulling classified documents from the safe.

"Never underestimate the power of information, Simon. Any nation with cheap labor can grow corn and refine steel. This nation is the brain of the world. All other nations are its body. They take care of the world's physical needs, and we lead them. Otherwise, we become a meaningless appendage; slaves to do the bidding of whoever takes up the role of being the world's brain. Whoever controls the information controls the world. That's how it has been throughout history, and that's how it is now."

"I've never thought of it the way you put it, but I can see truth in what you're saying."

"You don't have to agree. It's the way it is whether you like it or not. It's what you do about it that matters." Stratford tapped the packet resting on his desk. "This is what we do about it."

Simon eyed the packet. It was thick, but unlike other documents Simon received from the rest of the Pentagon, it wasn't bound and stamped. Simon craned his neck to try and read the writing upside-down.

Stratford continued, "There are seven copies of this document in the world. There used to be eight, but one of the vice-directors is new and isn't ready to see it yet."

"But I am ready to see it?" Simon didn't feel like he had done anything spectacular or noteworthy in his time at the NDA. It was only three months ago he was working for the BARF.

"We do what has to be done."

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"Don't you think, maybe, you ought to bring this up with the other six--"

"Let me make something very clear, Simon. The leadership of the NDA operates rather like a human body. The human body has a brain and a set of appendages."

"Okay."

"I am the brain."

"I see." Simon's perception of the NDA shifted. Like a spider sitting at the heart of its web, Stratford manipulated the organization to do his bidding.

"I wrote the first draft of this document. I approved the modifications. I do not exaggerate when I say this plan is preserving the greatness of this nation."

"I see." Simon was repeating himself but didn't know what else to say. "What's in the document?"

Stratford sat down behind his desk. He picked up the packet and flipped through the pages. He spoke absent-mindedly as he opened to the first page and pushed the packet over to Simon, pointing at a paragraph.

Simon read where Stratford was pointing. "A king is only a king as far as the people believe he is. He can slaughter half his nation, but if the other half still won't recognize him, he has done it all for nothing and gained no power."

"Stop there."

"It's full of philosophy?" Simon was expecting bullet points and action plans.

"Not the whole document, just the introduction. It doesn't matter if it sounds cheesy. This document isn't meant for public consumption."

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"It's not cheesy. It seems like well-thought-out philosophy. I wasn't expecting an introduction."

Stratford basked in the praise. For one moment, Simon caught a glimpse inside the heart of Tyson Stratford. Tyson needed someone to praise him. What was the point of a perfect plan if you couldn't impress anyone with its brilliance? It reminded Simon of an evil genius monologuing about his plan to the hero he is about to destroy.

Except I'm not here to fight Stratford. I'm here to help him. Mojave had mentioned double-agents working for the androids. Was Stratford in league with the androids?

"No! The androids are evil."

Oh no! Did I say that out loud? Moisture formed in Simon's arm-pits. He wanted to slink down in his chair to hide. But instead, he sat there frozen.

"I see you're thinking ahead. I love your passion, Simon, but it's time to take a look at the bigger picture. The androids are pawns in this game. They are not a real threat. What we really need to be afraid of are brain implants. Can you imagine how they will change people's attitudes about information?"

"People will remember things easier?"

"People will realize the truth: Computers are extensions of the mind!" Stratford switched to a mocking nasal voice, imitating a citizen. "You can't tell me what to do with something in my brain! You can't own my thoughts! You can't control what I think about. My brain and everything in it is my property!"

Stratford switched back to his normal voice. "If we can't own the information inside

desire.gashler@gmail.com

someone's head, we can't own the person. We needed a power play, not just a few new laws here and there. We need to turn the whole attitude of this nation around and fast." Stratford tapped the packet on the desk.

"You're planning to blow it up, aren't you? Operation POISON, you're going to destroy the ship." Simon's voice trailed off like a man in a daze as pieces of the puzzle came together. "To convince the people there's a war with a terrifying enemy so they fear memory implants, and so won't complain while you restrict them from using technology."

"And so we can maintain control over the world's information. It's what keeps us in charge. It's what makes us the brain of the whole world." Stratford finished the chain of thoughts and spread his arms wide, encompassing the entire room.

Simon teetered between awe toward Stratford for attempting to pull something like this off and anger that one man had so much power. A cold bead of sweat ran down his side. This man truly scared Simon. The hair on his neck stood up, and a gentle shake ran up his leg.

Ali was right. Copyright was more than just a power play for money. Ja Wei's kooky conspiracy theories on corruption at the top levels were right. And Simon was smack dab in the middle of it all with no way out.

Stratford stood up with the knuckles of one hand pressing down on his desk and his other hand extended. His finger pointed straight at Simon's face. "You are the man I've been looking for."

"Me?" It came out in a squeak. Simon cleared his throat in an attempt to retain some dignity. Stratford picked up his document and put it back in his safe as he spoke.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"We can't trust Peavler with this document. But you believe in your country: your passion to save us all from the androids has proven that." Stratford ticked off the reasons with his meaty fingers. "You know how to tell right from wrong: your answers today have proven that. You've got a brilliant mind: you deduced about fifty pages worth of my plan. I didn't even tell you we were going to blow up the ship, but you figured it out."

Stratford leaned back in his chair, squinting at Simon.

"You're a man I can trust. I can tell you're not here for the power. You want what's best for your country. I'm an excellent judge of character. And what's more, you have the hearts of the people."

Is he offering me a position as one of the eight apostles? Holy Frijole! Simon's heart pounded. He was so under-qualified. He felt like he had when they handed him his baby daughter the day she was born. There were no manuals titled 'How to run the most powerful organization in the world'. Then again, maybe there was. He'd have to remember to Google it when he got back to his office.

Stratford grew quiet. "Of course, it will take a little time. We can't fire Peavler, he's a good man. We'll have to make sure he's got a good life and all those details."

"Of course."

"Right now, what I need from you is some nano-bots *ready to go* by the scheduled date. You can find a way to make it happen, can't you, Simon?"

"But we're going to blow--"

"Ready to go, Simon."

"I think I understand, sir." Boy did he hope he was right.

Chapter 24

"You can't accept his offer." Ali grabbed a glass off the table and walked over to the fridge. Water trickled out of the filter on the front. "It doesn't make any sense and it doesn't feel right."

Simon scooped another forkful of shepherd's pie into his mouth and savored the creamy potatoes. He loved Ali's cooking. Immy sat in her booster seat eating a portion of the family dinner.

"But I'd be one of the eight apostles! What does it matter if we blow up the ship we're planning to launch. The androids will probably blow it up in space anyway." Saying it out loud made Simon a little queasy. It wouldn't be right to blow up billions of dollars in tax-payer money knowing full well it was for a fear campaign.

"Remember when Mojave was telling you about double agents they have on earth?" She slowly nodded her head. "You're the agent."

"Come on, don't be crazy. I hate the androids! Why would I be their double-agent?" Simon had no intention of helping those over-priced calculators. He couldn't think of a single reason why he would want to help Lazy Bear's brainchildren. Resentment sizzled in the pit of his filling stomach, making it harder to enjoy the meal.

"No, it's you all right. Why else would they give you all those cryptic messages? And why else would they go to all the trouble of befriending you before releasing you back to earth?" Ali walked back to the table and wiped up some of the peas on the table next to Immy's plate. "I

desire.gashler@gmail.com

know you're still mad at them for tricking you but you need to let the past go. Look at what will happen if the launch blows up. Powerful men will gain even more power and technology will creep even further out of our control."

She had a point. Brain implants, artificial limbs rigged to the spinal cord, and a host of other advances in technology wouldn't exist with a tighter Technology Regulation Act. There were so many good things possible if the government would relax the restrictions. If a launch this publicized blew up and the people blamed androids, it would be a steep uphill battle for everyone in the tech industry.

And what about what Stratford said about computers being extensions of people's minds. If a computer is an extension of your brain, shouldn't there be protections on the information stored there? Shouldn't we have rights to those parts as well as our physical parts? Simon didn't like where these thoughts lead; to Mojave being right.

He leaned back in his chair and stared at the half-eaten meal. "So, what do you think I should do? Quit?"

Ali reached over and placed her hand on top of Simon's. "I'm not saying you need to do anything drastic. I'm saying you need to cool down for a minute and think this through. Maybe there was more truth in what the Yona..." her tongue tripped over the still unfamiliar word. "Maybe the Yona have a point."

"I am not going to be a double agent for those robots, Ali. I can't."

"Yes, you are. I just know it." Those last four words put an end to the argument. Whenever Simon's wife said "I just know it," she was always right. It wasn't a matter of being stubborn; it

desire.gashler@gmail.com

was some innate part of womanhood Simon didn't comprehend. It bothered him tremendously that he couldn't just know things like she could, but he also knew enough to accept it. If she just knew it, then it was true, and that was that. But what in the world was he going to do about it?

"So I'm going to spill some truth to make everyone want to sign a treaty with the androids?"

"Maybe you're supposed to tell people they're not really mean and angry. After all, they didn't kill anyone at the BARF, and they treated you well on their ship."

"They messed with my mind and tried to make me their friend!"

"I'm not saying you have to love them or anything. I'm just saying you can't let Stratford take control of the technology on Earth. After you stop him, you can go back to your mission to destroy the androids." She put up her fingers in air-quotes and rolled her eyes.

If he could destroy the androids later, he would still be fulfilling his oath. Somewhat mollified, Simon still had a lot to think about.

Immy interrupted the conversation, chirping "All done!" and tried to wriggle out of her booster chair. Alecia helped her out of the chair and over to the sink to wash up.

Simon's dreams that night were full of people carrying their brains in jars outside their bodies. A gruesome reflection of the concepts rolling around in his head. Working on the deck didn't help either. It didn't bring the peace he was looking for, even though he managed to complete the second floor.

What if he did make me an apostle? Would it change me if I did? Would I become like them? Could I hold my head up high and say it was the only time I ever had to sellout? Could I help the world by sacrificing a tiny piece of my honor?

desire.gashler@gmail.com

He would have told his inner thoughts "yes," but for one thing; his wife's words. You are the double agent.

What would a double agent do? Go after internal information and expose it to the world? Didn't Mojave say something about telling the truth was all they needed to do to save their people? Simon knew right where to find the truth. In a safe in the fifth-floor office at the Pentagon.

But why should he care about what was best for Mojave? He was a scheming, lying android. But Stratford wanted to control all of technology and the minds of the entire world. Who was the real lying, scheming one here?

Simon's mind tore in too many directions. One side was grasping for power. Another piece was desperately searching for what was right. A piece of him wanted to pack up his family and flee into hiding. A piece of him still believed there was a way to magically make everyone happy with him. A piece of him wanted to ignore everything and escape the torment of trying to find the right resolution.

Simon sighed and put his tools away. He knew what he needed to do, even if it didn't lead where he wanted to go. He would do what was right and let the consequences follow.

Mojave's words floated back to him from one of their late-night philosophy sessions. "If the end cannot justify the means, then one can choose without foreseeing the end."

The calm he was seeking found him. He had decided *how* to make the choice but now came the hard part... trusting in the universe to somehow make everything right in the end. He would choose without thinking about what was best for him. He would choose what was best for the

world.

Chapter 25

Simon sat in his office planning how he was going to obtain the document. It felt like an impossible task. He needed to break into the office of the most powerful man on earth, steal a document from his safe, and escape without capture. Simon decided to call it "Packet-X" because it sounded like the name of an important document in an old spy movie.

It would be much easier to try to rewrite what he remembered from Packet-X, but he wanted to use the physical copy to incriminate Stratford. If the papers didn't have fingerprints, the plan might be considered a hoax.

Simon opened a text editor and brainstormed about the heist he was planning to pull.

Safe combo: 14-32-?

Try to preserve fingerprints on Packet-X.

Must place family in hiding before attempt. (Not relative's house--too obvious)

Find out if Wonks still has a cabin in Montana close to border.

Can't use credit cards. Start stockpiling cash now.

Will need to make lots of copies. Buy photocopier.

Dates Stratford will be out of office:

Launch day

?????

Simon tried for a long time to think of other days when Stratford would be away, but launch day was the only one he could come up with. Stratford would have all kinds of press appearances.

Simon had his hands on his forehead, slouched over the keyboard when without warning, he lashed out at the cup of pens on his desk. They flew, scattering around the room. He searched for something else to hit, but everything else on his desk would hurt more than it was worth.

He tried six different postures in his chair. None of them expressed his frustration, so he laughed. At first, it was a silent laugh, stomach muscles heaving in ascending spasms. Soon, it spread to his shoulders. Finally, he threw back his head and laughed out loud. He picked up the pens, gasping for air between fits of laughter.

"I'm going insane!" he cackled at the closed door. He knew it wasn't true, but it felt so good to pretend it was. "All or nothing, isn't it?" He encrypted his text file and completed the order forms for aluminum plated nano-bots. If the government was just going to blow them up anyway, it didn't matter what metal he used.

The day of the launch arrived. Simon was in his office early, reviewing his list of details. It had now grown to over twelve pages. Ali was confident with her role in the plan. It gave Simon comfort to know she would be backing him up. Simon checked his watch.

Cars packed and ready. Check.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Simon glanced at his watch again. Ali should be at the park with Immy right now.

Launch sabotage programming scripts ready?

Simon opened a console window and typed in several commands. His helper programs, packaged in scripts, responded the way they should. Check. It gave him a queasy feeling to think he had enough clearance to sabotage a space-launch with so few lines of code.

They're going to get so bent out of shape when they find out it's me.

Eagle-eyes planted. Check. This was the name Simon had given to the people keeping him informed about Stratford's movements on launch day. He assigned the task to an overzealous mail-room boy and an intern working in the propulsion department. It felt dirty to use his popularity for personal gain, but desperate times sometimes call for desperate measures.

It felt so strange. No matter how well-prepared he may be, it all came down to stepping out the door and walking. There were so many things he couldn't foresee, yet it had to go flawlessly. Tyson Stratford was not the kind of man who would show leniency to someone who had stabbed him in the back. If captured, he wouldn't put it past Stratford to have him killed before he had the chance to leak a word of it to anyone.

Everything was ready. At least as ready as it was going to get. Simon's foot twitched under his desk, full of energy with nowhere to release it. His heart raced. I can't believe I'm actually going to go through with this.

The phone rang, and Simon jumped out of his skin, snatching the receiver. "Simon Mashman."

"Hello, Mr. Mashman. This is Michael, from the mail--"

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"Yes, hi Michael. Is he in position?"

"Yes sir, he just arrived at the first press conference."

"Thank you. Please call me again when he leaves."

"You got it, Mr. Mashman."

It had been so easy to talk the boy into helping. Simon was a star, after all. He was going to rid the world of androids.

Simon hung up the phone and clicked on the only icon on his desktop. All the files on the hard-drive vanished and were overwritten with random values to erase any traces. With sweaty hands, he grabbed the jacket off the chair and headed out the door. Simon couldn't keep the smile off his face while the elevator descended.

On the way out of his building, he waved at some of the regular guards and snagged a bagel from a table in the hall, sending a silent thanks to the coworker who brought them. He left the building and cut across the lawn at a brisk walk toward the building with Stratford's office.

As he approached the doors to the building, two men exited. "Hey, Simon. Shouldn't you be at the launch?"

"I'll be there," he lied. "I have some details I need to attend to first." Do I know you? He must think he knows me, or he would have called me Mr. Mashman. I hate being famous.

Simon entered the lobby. Three sets of glass doors filled the wall opposite.

"Have a good day, Mr. Mashman," a guard posted at the door called to him.

Simon bobbed his head in acknowledgment and fled through to the elevator hallway. He had to catch the door to prevent it from slamming into the wall. It was lighter than it appeared.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

I gotta chill out a little. He pressed the elevator button.

As the elevator ascended, he developed a pattern of rolling his weight between his toes and his heels. A security camera winked at him from the top of the elevator. He stopped and stood perfectly still.

Stop acting so suspicious, he rebuked himself.

It felt like an eternity before the ding sounded and the elevator opened. Simon plowed past the three people waiting to ride the elevator down. Watching over his shoulder, he collided with a man sitting in a chair in the foyer reading a magazine.

"Sorry," Simon muttered, picking up the pace to the office. He still had three hallways, two turns and a door to break through.

Down the first carpeted hallway, Simon could hear muffled footsteps behind him. Is this how it felt to be a spy? Maybe the jacket hadn't been a good idea after all. Sweat from fear drenched his armpits and back.

The footsteps continued to follow him down the hall and around the second turn.

Don't you have work to do or something? Simon kept walking past Stratford's office and back around to the elevators again in an attempt to shake whoever was tailing him. The stalker didn't yield.

A glance behind in a long hallway revealed the man who had been reading the magazine by the elevator. Simon sped up. His eyes darted back and forth, searching for some way to elude the pursuer. He turned down a new hallway and took a few steps before realizing it was a dead-end. The magazine man was closing in.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

The dead-end turned out to be the bathroom nook.

I guess this will have to do. Quick as his adrenaline-filled limbs could launch him, he ran into a stall and turned the latch, as though it could offer a degree of protection.

The bathroom was a posh surprise. Intricate tiles covered the floor in overlapping pentagonal spirals. Paper hand towels sat in neat piles on the counter by the sink, and the toilet-paper dispenser shone with a polished brass finish. Even the toilet on which he sat was a toilet for rich people instead of the industrial kind usually found in office buildings. It had a tank of water, like the toilets in most homes. Quiet classical music played in the background.

Simon raked his fingers through his hair and commanded himself to think, think, think. I could bash him over the head with the cover of the toilet tank! The thought was surreal. He had never injured another human in his entire life.

I can't believe I'm doing this. He pulled the heavy porcelain lid off of the toilet tank. I'm going to jail for sure. He stood poised beside the door with the porcelain cover raised over his head. He didn't know for sure how much impact was necessary to knock a man out. He decided it was better to be safe than sorry and prepared to land the full mass against the next head that came through the door.

A drop of water ran from the tank over onto his hand, and then down his arm, giving him the willies, but he refused to flinch from his position. He had to be ready when the man opened the door. He waited for what seemed an eternity with the toilet tank lid suspended above head level, arms growing tired. The cover was heavier than he realized.

Before anyone could come in the door, Simon had a crisis of conscience. What if he gave

desire.gashler@gmail.com

someone permanent brain damage? He couldn't slam someone in the head with a toilet tank cover, even if it did mean saving the world from technological slavery. Maybe he could smash his pursuer in the legs hard enough to keep them from following.

The door opened. Gripping the porcelain cover like a baseball bat in two tight fists, Simon swung the cover as hard as he could at the man's knees. The impact was perfect. The sound of crunching bone and ear-splitting pain echoed off the tiled floor. The man dropped to the ground and rolled over, exposing a gun holstered at his side.

Simon dropped the porcelain and snatched at the visible gun. A surge of guilt washed over Simon as the man writhed in pain on the ground. He had no right to club this man in the knees, but at least no one would die from a broken kneecap.

"Give me your phone," Simon pointed the gun down at the man and waited for the phone to come sliding across the floor.

Simon seized the phone and sprinted out the door toward Stratford's office. He didn't know how much time he'd have before the magazine man could get help from someone. Even now, Simon could hear the screams from the bathroom ringing down the hallways.

A tiny bit of luck came Simon's way as he put his hand on the doorknob to Stratford's office and found it open. He headed straight for the safe and twisted the knob toward the first two numbers he knew.

14 - 32

The plan was to rotate the dial while trying the lever at every number until he found the last number in the combination. Since the first two were even, Simon prayed the last number was

desire.gashler@gmail.com

even too and started from the top. It was far too late to back out now.

He tried 14-32-0. No.

14-32-2. No.

14-32-4. No.

14-32-6. No. Simon wiped the sweat off his forehead onto his sleeve. He had planned for this to be a quick in-and-out operation. Where were the guards anyways?

...14-32-44. No. "Aaah!" Simon punched the safe with his fist. Now his hand hurt too. Any minute now, guards would come pouring into the office and arrest him.

14-32-46. Simon pressed the lever and the door swung open. It had taken so long, he was caught off guard when it finally opened and stumbled back onto his butt. There were a lot of files inside. He dug through them, completely forgetting the rubber gloves he carried in his pocket.

"Got it!" Shoving Packet-X in his pants against his back, he pulled the jacket over to cover the bulge. Then, he grabbed another packet of papers in a similar envelope and tucked them under his arm as a decoy.

Simon fled the office but stopped dead in the door frame. Right in front of him, marching toward the office, was Tyson Stratford, flanked by two guards with weapons in hand. Simon took a step back. Stratford walked right through the door and stopped uncomfortably close to Simon. The two guards blocked doorway.

"Simon Mashman!" spat Stratford. Literally.

Simon couldn't even wipe the spittle off his face. Terror froze him to the spot.

Chapter 26

I've got to get him talking. Simon always took too long to think of things to say. Now, frozen in Stratford's office, he couldn't remember any of his well-thought-out conversation pieces.

"Stratford, you look nice. Did you get a new haircut?"

Stratford didn't take the bait. He stalked over to Simon and pried the fake packet of papers from his hands and handed them to one of the guards. Disgust and disappointment etched in the sneer on his face.

"Take him to the interrogation room on B10."

The guards wore pressed, gray button-up shirts with large patches on the tricep. Golden name-tags introduced the blond one as L. Burgess and the dark half-Asian one as O. Murphy. Muscles bulged beneath Burgess's tight sleeves, a scowl on his Aryan, chiseled face. Murphy was softer around the waist, where he sported a large belt with multiple weapons, a flashlight, and a set of handcuffs. The blond guard made a big show of holstering his gun, then seized Simon's arm in what felt like a death-grip. Murphy strolled to his position at Simon's other arm as they escorted him toward the elevator.

Once the elevator doors closed, Murphy pressed the button for the eighth floor. But to Simon's surprise, instead of seizing his arm again, the chubby guard initiated a conversation.

"It's an honor to meet you, Mr. Mashman."

Simon didn't know if he should respond or not. Fortunately for him, the guard kept talking.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"Of course, I wish we had met under different circumstances, as I had to be formal around the boss, you know. I really admire you for sticking it to those android SOBs." The guard winked.

The burly guard was glaring daggers at his companion.

"What!?! It's Simon Mashman. It's not like he's some hardened criminal or something. What do you think he's going to do? Run? Everyone knows this guy. Have a little respect." The chubby guard turned back to Simon and rolled his eyes as if they were sharing a private joke.

The elevator doors opened on floor six. Another staff member eyed the two guards with wary apprehension before entering. Recognizing Simon, a look of deep interest crossed his face and he got into the elevator.

Murphy was a talker and continued his happy chatter, filling the silence of the elevator.

"You'll have to excuse Burgess. Sometimes his pants get twisted up so tight he--."

As the elevator doors neared complete closure, Simon kicked his feet up onto the wall behind him, using the blond guard as a support, and lunged for the closing door. Murphy's eyes flew wide in shock. Simon almost made it out but Burgess was still gripping his arm tight as a vise. Simon could feel the bruises forming in his skin as he karate chopped right on top of the guard's fingers, yanking his arm free. Simon leaped for the exit as Burgess bellowed a war cry and pried the doors back open.

Simon ripped the security badge off his shirt and swiped it at the stairwell door, jumping through. Burgess drew his gun and stepped over to the stairwell door, jimmying the handle. The door rattled and Murphy gazed through the window pane with sad, regret-filled eyes.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

The upper floors of the pentagon were secure clearance only. Simon blessed his foresight in planning before this mad adventure. If the guards couldn't access the stairs, he had a precious few minutes of a head start on getting out of the building.

On the third floor, where his office was, Simon peeked out of the stairwell and crept to a drinking fountain in the middle of the floor. Careful not to make too much noise, he lifted the garbage can and found the large mailing envelope he had stashed there earlier. He inserted the document and sealed it, then slid the contents onto the large red mail cart sitting in a pre-arranged position. He kissed it for luck, hoping it would find its way to Montana where his wife would be waiting for it.

Back in the stairwell, he finished the descent. By the time he got to the bottom of eight floors worth of stairs, Simon's lungs were burning and his heaving breath came in spasms.

The moment he walked through the stairwell door on the ground floor, two guards tackled him. A guard wrenched his arms behind his back and cuffed them. Another four guards pulled out their weapons and formed a perimeter around the dogpile.

Stratford's voice crackled from the walkie-talkie on a guard's shoulder strap. "Report back to me the instant you find him."

"General Stratford, we have the suspect in custody."

"Bring him to interrogation room B10 and don't let him escape again."

There was no escape this time, but Simon wasn't worried. He knew his work was complete. If the package made it into Ali's hands, she could expose Stratford. There was no better feeling in the world than the thought of Stratford's regime brought down. Would they torture him? Kill

desire.gashler@gmail.com

him? As Simon sat in the cold interrogation room with the large one-way mirrors, his heart slowed down to a normal resting beat.

As Stratford sauntered in, Simon was ready for anything he could dish out.

"I must say, Simon, I knew you had devotion for the cause... but giving your life as a martyr, now that's true patriotism!" The mockery in his voice finished with a chuckle. "And you have broken poor Edding's knee-caps."

Simon's guilt twinged at the thought of the poor man from the bathroom. Goaded by remorse, he couldn't resist the opportunity to lash back. "We'll see who the true patriot is. When your packet shows up on the internet, they'll string you up like the traitor you are!"

"You mean this packet?" Stratford held up a stamped envelope with Ali's name on the front. Polson, Montana the destination. It was the packet Simon had put in the red cart. "Don't you realize we have cameras in the Pentagon, Simon? It also seems we have ourselves a co-conspirator." Stratford tapped at the mailing name.

"Ali has nothing to do with this." It terrified Simon to bring Ali into this whole mess. He clung to the desk in front of him and pleaded with his eyes.

"Well now, I thought we'd turn things around a little bit. Wouldn't it be more fun if we had you trying to bargain for her life."

"What do you want, Stratford?"

Stratford chuckled "I've been hearing reports about someone changing orders regarding the nano-bots, Simon. I don't know what you're doing, but first of all, I want it to be perfectly clear I

desire.gashler@gmail.com

am the one who is in charge." He took a deep breath. "And I'm in the mood to celebrate, tonight. I'd like to see some fireworks."

"Fireworks?"

"It seems rather poetic, doesn't it, for the great American Patriot to go into space with the nano-bots which you were so devoted to creating? Think of the headlines. Simon Mashman joins voyage to exterminate android threat." Stratford emphasized each word with a hand stamping out the bold pronouncement in the sky. "It has a nice ring to it. And then, you show me the fireworks and I give you my word, Simon, Ali will be safe. But, if you don't leave this planet with the shuttle in three hours, I will take her into custody immediately. I give you my word there too."

Caught red-handed, threatened with the life of his wife, Simon knew he had nowhere to run. What a frustrating position, to be at the mercy of such an amoral megalomaniac. At least he would get the chance to be in space for real this time.

"I don't have a choice." He slumped his shoulders in defeat.

"Now, now. We can't have you acting all pathetic in front of the cameras." Like a cat toying with a cornered rat, Stratford grinned. Simon had nothing left to say.

Chapter 27

The Everdell station on Wallops Island, Virginia loomed on the horizon as Simon approached the launch site. The towering rocket surrounded by metal scaffolding sparkled in the mid-morning light. Simon was stiff from the three hour drive in the NDA car. They pulled up to

desire.gashler@gmail.com

a platform where several reporters and cameras stood to view the launch. Little did they know, they were in for a surprise addition to the mission.

As Simon arrived in front of the nearest camera, a lady reporter shoved a microphone into his face. "Simon Mashman, tell us how you plan to mash those androids!"

The question sounded so ridiculous to Simon, a laugh burst from his lips, propelling a droplet of spit out of his mouth. He watched the piece of spittle arc through the air and land dead center on the lens of a camera hugging close to his face. Simon reached out his hand and wiped the droplet off the camera but instead of removing the offending drop, a finger streak appeared, spanning the center to one corner of the live video screen. The clip went viral as thousands of people uploaded it to various humor sites.

Stratford and a dozen armed guards closed ranks behind him as if to display Simon's power and importance. After all, Simon was in charge of this operation and they were going to save the earth from otherwise certain doom, or so Stratford made everyone believe.

Simon's focus darted back to the reporters, weighing his words. "When those androids took me from my family, it was personal. So I'm personally going to deliver them a thank you gift." Simon was a mess of emotions. The line of armed men fueled a fear for his life. The attention of the whole world made his stomach turn with stage-fright. The package with Ali's uncle's address had his mouth going dry with dread. All the reporters could see was confidence. A hero.

A buzz emanated from the crowd as they digested what Simon had said.

"Simon Mashman, does this mean you are joining this space flight!" The microphone was once more thrust into his mouth.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

A cheer erupted from the crowd. Reporters spoke over one another as they announced back to their news stations above the volume of the crowd. "Breaking news! Simon Mashman has announced he will represent the humans personally aboard the shuttle Freedom!"

Stratford guided Simon toward the fence separating the crowd from the field surrounding the launch pad. The gate guards opened the gate to let him through.

Pausing at the gate, Stratford turned Simon to face him. "This is where we part ways, Simon. Don't get any funny ideas about being a hero. Fireworks, remember? As announced. 12:40 am. On schedule."

Simon nodded, there was nothing more to say. He walked as a lone hero for the people across the vast field toward the space vehicle on the launch pad. As he put distance between himself and the crowd, his shoulders slumped further.

To most of the world, this was the moment of Simon's greatest triumph. He had won the hearts of the people and they were cheering their hero. To Simon, it was the long march of a man walking to his death. He crossed the field carrying a heavy burden. Simon was a sacrificial lamb for the greed of power-hungry men. One thought gave him consolation as he traveled the length of the field: Ali is smart. She will see through this charade. When the package doesn't arrive, she'll get out. I know she will.

When he arrived at the ship, the elevator guards stopped him. Apprised of his coming, the logistics still had kinks to work out. "We're sorry, Mr. Mashman, but there's no seat for you in the shuttle. This ship isn't prepared for two occupants," one of them tried to explain.

"I'm taking science pilot Gregory's place. Please have him ejected."

desire.gashler@gmail.com

When Gregory came out, he was livid. "What is this crap? You can't do this, Mr. Mashman. I've been training for years for this. It's the opportunity of a lifetime. Why are you bumping me?"

Simon had trouble making eye contact with the man. He couldn't say what he wanted to: You're welcome for saving your life! Instead, he said "Trust me. Please." He turned away from Gregory and entered the ship without giving any explanation. At least he'd go out in a blaze of glory. Better than being quietly disposed of by Stratford or publicly humiliated and jailed.

Chapter 28

The launch was immensely powerful, pinning Simon back against the seat. The shuttle shook like a gigantic dog tossing a squirrel as the first set of engines fired. The second set of engines flared to life, threw him forward, and then crushed him back down. It was like an enormous gorilla was squishing him and then...

weightless.

Simon had never imagined what it would feel like to float freed from gravity. Every twitch of his muscles was free and unencumbered. It felt almost like when they had taken Immy to the local swimming pool and Simon had floated on his back for as long as Ali would let him get away with it. The silence, the absence of light, the isolation. It was nothing like the fake spaceship with Mojave. Now that he had experienced the real thing, Simon saw how inaccurate Mojave's deception had been.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

With no responsibilities, Simon's mind jumped back to the first planning session he had made with his wife. He had refused to let her in on the plan unless she promised not to put herself into danger for him.

"If I'm caught, you have to run. You can't try to come see me or something. They'll know you helped and then they'll catch you and deprive our daughter of both her parents."

"I know. We've been over this."

"Then promise." Simon knew his wife well enough to know she would come to his aid if ever she could.

"Simon..."

"You have to promise, or I'll do it on my own."

"Simon, you have to treat me like an equal. I care about you too, you know."

Simon did know. She was a brave, capable, confident woman who was smarter than he was by a long shot. "I need to do this, Ali."

"I know, but you don't have to do it alone. You shouldn't do it alone. We're supposed to be together on everything. I am your wife, remember?"

"Of course I remember." He kissed her as they lay together in bed talking about the future and the plans. "Then promise me."

"Fine. I promise. If anything goes wrong, I'll trust you to handle it and I'll run."

"Thank you." Simon kissed her again on the nose, even though he knew she hated it.

"Now you gotta give too. If I'm letting you do this, you have to let me in on it."

"All right."

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"I think you should do a hand-off, so you'll be clean."

"Ali"

"I'm serious. I want you to trust me too."

"Okay. I will."

Mission control sounded in Simon's earpiece, filling the ship. "Freedom, this is mission control. How was your launch?" It was ironic. Freedom was the name of the prison carrying him to his death.

His watch read 8:50 pm. The NDA had made a point of publicizing visibility times for the ship. The shuttle would be visible to amateur astronomers, and even to the naked eye, at 12:40 am. Which to Simon meant he had less than four hours to find and deactivate a bomb. If he could launch it into space somehow, would the explosion convince Stratford he was dead?

He had to find the bomb before he could figure out a way to get it off the ship. Despite being Chief General, he doubted Major Cellioli, the ship's pilot and flight commander, would believe they were both doomed to explode in less than twenty-four hours. He had to try anyway. Turning off the switch connecting the ship to Mission Control, he turned to his weightless space companion, pink in the face.

"I have some bad news, Major. We are sitting on a time bomb."

Tom Cellioli, Texan and second time pilot of a mission into space, took this revelation with the patience of a seasoned military officer.

"How do you figure, Mr. Mashman?"

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"I have some friends, well they're not really friends, they are androids. They kidnapped me and while I was on their ship, they told me the NDA was going to blow up this one."

Major Tom cocked one eyebrow. "We should believe these androids we're fixin' to destroy with these here nanobots instead of the NDA?"

Simon knew it sounded unbelievable, but it was the truth! He knew it was. Didn't he?

"It's the reason I am on this ship, Tom. Stratford is trying to get rid of me by blowing me up."

Tom's second eyebrow raised to match the first. "Why would Director Stratford want you dead? You're the reason this mission has been so successful in the first place."

"He's power-mad and bent on complete control of technological advances. I had a document proving it but he stole it back from me."

"That's quite a story, no mistake." Tom shook his head. "I just don't think I can believe all those tales without a shred of proof, Simon. No matter who you are."

Simon leaned back in his chair and sighed. "Yea, I don't blame you."

Simon spent the next several hours scouring the ship for something looking like a bomb. He had the pleasure of bounding around weightless and flipping along corridors upside down. Discouraged in his search for a bomb and despondent, Simon stared out at the darkness of space from his sleeping pod. *What was I thinking? I'm never going to find the bomb in time.*

He went in search of some real astronaut food. Fruit, vegetables, sausage and granola bars in large metal containers strapped to the wall of a small galley surprised and delighted Simon. What a difference it was compared to the boiling water MRE packages Simon ate aboard Mojave's ship. Those would not have been practical at all here in real space.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Exhausted from his rollercoaster day, guilt-ridden from smashing some man's poor knees, and hopeless, Simon's heart failed him. He rammed his fist into the steel lined shuttle wall and screamed his frustration at the unfairness of his situation. Punching a second time didn't bring the relief he craved, but a third wack split the skin and started a jagged pain, radiating from his knuckles. He pressed his forehead to the cold, bloody metal and wept.

Chapter 29

"Hey Mr. Mashman, there's someone on the line who says they need to talk to you."

Simon was investigating the nanobot holding tubes when Tom interrupted his search. It was probably Stratford, come to gloat.

"Tell him I don't want to talk."

"I'm supposed to tell you to stop thinking like a human. He said you'd know what he means."

"I'll be right there!" Simon launched himself through the ship. It was awkward hurrying in space. As soon as he jumped off a wall, he had to wait until he arrived at the next wall. In the control room, he snatched a helmet and earpiece.

"This is Simon."

"Hello, Simon, this is Mission Control." It was Mojave's voice. Simon had a sudden urge to hug someone, but there was no one in the room with whom it would be appropriate. "We need you to unlock the airlock."

"Um," *You're here? Do you want to board? You're going to save us!* "Right. Just a second." *Wait, why? Whose side are they on, here? Do they know we're coming to destroy them ...well,*

desire.gashler@gmail.com

not really. Simon was only a few feet from a keyboard, but he was floating again, legs behind and above him, hands the only thing keeping him grounded. He managed to reach the edge of a computer and pull himself forward. He wasn't as familiar with this program as Major Tom, but it didn't take him long to find what he needed. He unlocked the airlock.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Tom watched the lights indicate the airlock opening.

"I'm just taking orders from Mission Control."

"Why would they tell you to open the airlock?" The commander grabbed a headset. "Mission Control, this is Major Cellioli, we need more information on the request to open the airlock."

"You guys are going to have to hurry!"

The airlock open indicator flashed green as Tom switched the airlock back to the closed position.

"What's going on here?" He confronted Simon with a frown.

It all happened in slow motion. The strangest mechanical device Simon had ever seen glided into the room. It swung off the walls of the ship with the finesse of a monkey playing in the branches of a large tree. In this weightless environment, the motions were more fluid. It danced around each obstacle as it waltzed from partner to partner. It resembled a double-ended mop, each end had mechanical tentacles that grabbed hold of something while the other end alternately flipped over to grab something else. There was a joint in the center of the pole which expanded and retracted, enabling it to flip and bend, reaching its next hand-hold with effortless grace. This machine was designed to move in a weightless environment.

Is there a human mind inside there?

desire.gashler@gmail.com

It whipped up to the control center, seized Major Tom on the shoulder and a needle dipped in and out of the soft flesh in the side of his neck. Tom went limp and drifted away up from his control chair. The jointed double-ended mop toggled the airlock back to the open position. Finished with its quick work, it slipped back out of the door with silent swings.

A moment later, a more human-like android drifted into the room. Mojave floated in with a grin on his face, his flamboyant-orange hawaiian shirt at odds with the sterile metal of his body casings. He surveyed the limp body.

"Your former slave is efficient." Mojave pointed with his chin at the slumped astronaut.

"I've never had a slave."

"You called him Dave, remember? But don't use that name anymore. Brings back too many painful memories for him. It's good to see you again, Simon." There was genuine warmth in his expression.

Simon thought it strange to assume they were now good friends. But, since they could be the ticket to saving his life, it was best to keep his thoughts to himself.

"Thanks. Um, is there a bomb on the ship?"

"Of course, Simon. You didn't think Stratford was bluffing did you, when you got on this ship?"

"I don't exactly understand why you're here if you know we're going to blow up."

Mojave fixed his eyes on a point behind Simon's shoulder, staring into the void for a few seconds, then he snapped out of it.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"Dave has found the bomb and is disconnecting it from the ship as we speak." He sounded uncomfortable saying the name.

"What's his real name?"

"He'd rather I didn't tell you."

"Oh." Simon winced. "Could you tell him I'm really sorry. I didn't realize he felt like a slave."

A bleeping sound at one of the control panels interrupted the conversation. Simon turned to Mojave for confirmation. "Should I answer?"

Mojave shrugged.

"Hello?"

"This is mission control. Get me Major Cellioli."

Simon glanced at the slumped, floating form in the room. "He's not available right now... Could I take a message?" Simon grimaced at the obvious lie in the question but couldn't help smiling as he added the last phrase. The smile must have been apparent in his voice.

"Mr. Mashman, this is serious. What's going on up there? We're getting reports indicating the airlock ...Oh, Stratford. Yes, of course."

"Good evening, Simon." Tyson Stratford's voice took over the channel. "I need privacy. Clear the room!"

After a long pause, Stratford continued. "I've got someone here who'd like to say hello, Simon."

"Oh Simon, I'm so sorry." Ali sounded close to tears.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Simon's face went pale as he heard his wife's voice on the Mission Control link.

"A little insurance so everything goes smoothly tonight. I wouldn't do anything foolish if I were you, boy."

Simon terminated the communication rather than reply. He wanted to smash the panel, block out the sound of his wife's voice. Simon stared at the communication panel while he thought out loud.

"He's got me. I'm going down with this ship."

"By going down, do you mean returning to Earth?" Mojave tried to clarify.

"No. You heard him. He's got my wife. I can't fight him anymore."

"Oh, for crying out loud!" Mojave threw up his hands in a very human expression of frustration. "You're practically begging for him to manipulate you. He threatens you with something you don't want to hear, and you get so scared you can't make good choices anymore."

How could Mojave be so insensitive? His wife was being held captive and he had decided to sacrifice his life for her. What right did an android have to tell him he was wrong?

Making no attempt to mask his anger, Simon jabbed a finger at Mojave's metal chest. "It's my wife and my life. And what do you think would be a good choice? To cover my own back and let my wife die? Have you never loved anyone? Don't you even know what it's like? And I have a kid, Mojave. She's three years old." He snorted. "But you already know all this."

Mojave spoke very quietly. He must have recognized Simon was on the edge. "I'm really sorry about your wife, Simon, but it doesn't change what's right. It's never right to scare yourself into doing what bad men want. We both know Tyson Stratford is a bad man. The right thing to

desire.gashler@gmail.com

do is to fight him. Think of what will happen to the world if this ship explodes. Think of the power it will put right into his hands, enabling him to do even more harm to the world. Is your wife more important than the whole world? They are not dead who live in the hearts they leave behind."

Mojave's calm reply took some of the steam out of Simon's anger.

"He's got my wife, Mojave," Simon whispered. "I couldn't live with myself if she died and I could have stopped it."

"But you could live with yourself as a slave to evil? Knowing you were the reason for all the bad things he does in the future?"

The argument stung. Simon curled up into a floating ball. He wanted to live in Mojave's purely idealistic universe but this situation wasn't black and white. It was his wife. It was also the freedom of the world. He was a prisoner on a spaceship with Mojave and held prisoner by the NDA when he returned, but never before had he felt less free than right now.

"You'll never be free, Simon," as if Mojave could hear his thoughts. "Not until you learn to see which choice is right without foreseeing its consequences. The Universe is too chaotic for that."

"No, Mojave. I can't. I'm sorry. Thank you for trying to rescue me, but someone else is going to have to fight Tyson Stratford this time. I'm merely one man and I'm not responsible for the whole world. I'm going down with this ship."

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Mojave went stoic again. Simon couldn't tell if he was thinking or communicating with other androids. He returned to the conversation, waxing formal. "Alas, our current objective seems to conflict with yours. We're not going to give you an option."

Simon's eyes widened. "You have no right!"

"The bomb is already detached from the ship and we're taking you back to Earth."

Tom's free-floating hand bumped into the back of Simon's head, reminding him the androids could immobilize him at any moment. He shoved the body away. Any other day, Simon would have amused himself by inventing rules to a bizarre game of bowling using unconscious human bodies in space. Today, however, his thoughts focussed on saving his wife.

"Hang on..." Simon had a new idea. If only they would cooperate. "So, we're all going down to Earth, together, right? You guys could break her out. I know you could. Would you? Please?"

Simon didn't understand his relationship with these androids. Was he their friend? Their prisoner? Their spy? Was he even in a position to make requests? Would they take him seriously, or would they mock him? Everything was riding on how the androids perceived him. And despite their history together, he wasn't sure exactly what they thought.

"I'll see how the others feel." Mojave went into the trance-like state where he communicated with other androids.

Simon waited through one of the longest moments of his life. He could hardly breathe. He yearned for some way to influence the outcome of their decision, but all he could do was wait. Mojave reminded him of the incapacitated being floating in the room, he stood so motionless.

Eventually, Mojave spoke. "No one thinks it's a good idea." Simon's heart plummeted.

"But if it's that important to you, we'll do it."

Chapter 30

The night was peaceful in the Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge. The low shrubs and tall grasses of the nature preserve swayed in a breeze off the Atlantic, illuminated by the moon. Ranger Beck loved to hear the waves lapping against the shore and the snuffling of red foxes digging for the small rodents hiding in the dunes. It was nice when the tourists left and the quiet, night sounds emerged. She was making a final pass along the shoreline in her ATV to verify the campers were obeying the midnight curfew when an unnatural screeching from the sky drew her attention. The serenity of the wildlife refuge shattered and exploded into light as a spaceship careened in. Landing gear bounced over the concrete scenic road as the brakes brought the ship to a squealing stop, leaving black streaks of rubber on the pavement.

Ranger Beck's mouth dropped open and her heart seized in fear as shiny blue men with glowing eyes filed out of the ship. Aliens were most definitely out of her jurisdiction. Quiet as one of the white-tailed deer in her preserve, she triggered her walkie-talkie to dispatch, twisting the volume knob as low as she could.

The aliens moved together in a jog deeper into the nature preserve. These joggers were not part of a sports team in training. They clanked and rattled on the pavement instead of bouncing on plastic running shoe soles. A black van with a huge eagle painted on the side picked up the joggers and whisked them away into the night.

Beck counted to twenty before approaching the ship on cautious footsteps. She shined a

desire.gashler@gmail.com

flashlight on the hull of the hulking ship and read the decals.

"It's Freedom, I swear it. I'm shining my flashlight right on the name printed on the side," she whispered into her shoulder. "No way! I'm not going inside alone. Send me backup. They left in a van with the NDA logo on it. You should probably warn Everdell station."

At 12:45 precisely, a bright star appeared in the sky and then quickly faded away. The NDA made a public announcement: Spaceship Freedom has been destroyed by the androids. The NDA released a video clip of "actual footage" taken by a nearby telescope satellite. An android missile strikes the hull of Freedom, two bodies eject from the carnage and float, directionless, in the vastness of space.

The Internet was instantly abuzz with talk about the incident. The thousands of amateur astronomers and school classes notified ahead of time to watch for the shuttle witnessed the flash of light with their own eyes. A competing group of images also started circulating. These were of a space shuttle re-entering the atmosphere at 12:43 over Chincoteague, Virginia and landing somewhere in the wildlife park. Campers in the park were posting on social media feeds about an alien invasion and going to investigate the crash site.

At first, no one gave credence to the alien invasion reports. Those touting proof of the Rheans were branded conspiracy theorists. Then, pictures of spaceship Freedom surrounded by scrub bushes and rolling grassland on a twilit night started to circulate. Acting quickly, the NDA released a statement claiming the photos were authentic, but simply from a photoshoot months earlier for reasons they could not disclose due to national security.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

The reports didn't add up.

The back of the NDA van smelled like grease and plastic. Simon slouched against a side wall as they raced toward mission control. Trousers greeted him from the driver's seat, taking Simon by surprise.

"Good to see you again, comrade!" Trousers smiled into the rearview mirror and adjusted his bowtie.

"What in the world are you doing here Trevor? You are supposed to be in Ohio at the BARF." Simon didn't know whether to admire the man for helping him or angry at him for keeping his association with the Yona a secret.

"I couldn't tell you before, due to your obvious misunderstanding of the nature of the Yona, so I bided my time. I am not full of wetware any longer. I've been working with our mutual friends for quite some time and have implants and a scan... Well, I'll have to tell you about it some other time. Right now we need to focus on your wife. We'll be arriving in about twelve minutes."

Mojave briefed Simon on an extraction plan before they reentered Earth's atmosphere. They would make it to the Hyacinth hotel where sources confirmed Ali was being held. It was near the launch site and should only have minimal security.

All the Rheans in the van were familiar to Simon from his previous abduction. The only newcomer was Trousers at the wheel. Gears with his visible internals, Falcon and Silver-wing along with Mojave were the members of their extraction team. Simon would feel a lot safer if the

nimble tranquilizer mop was with them.

"His body is designed to operate in space. He's taking care of our ship with Gata," Mojave replied when Simon asked.

The air in the van crackled with intense energy. Simon wished they were already there. Under any other circumstances, the bizarre events of the night would have occupied his mind, but when his wife was in need of rescue, he could think of nothing else.

They arrived at the hotel and piled out of the van, trying to remain inconspicuous. Trousers pulled around to the front entrance as if he belonged, waving with a cheerful flip of the hand to a receptionist. He sauntered through the hallways and let the rest of them in through the side door.

"She's in room 320 on the third floor," Trousers reminded Simon as they split up. Falcon and Silver-wing took the elevator and Simon and Trevor rushed up the stairs. Mojave sat in the van as the getaway driver.

Peeking around the corner into the hotel floor hallway, Simon had flashbacks to his attempted packet heist. He hoped he wouldn't have to break anyone else's kneecaps with a toilet tank lid. He winced in sympathy, wondering if the man was okay.

There were no guards posted at the top of the floor or along the rest of the hallway that Simon could see.

"Did this seem strange to you?" Simon whispered to Trousers.

"I don't know, I've never done anything like this before." Trousers snuck onto the main floor and pointed to the plaque on the wall indicating they were on the third floor.

Simon nodded, creeping down the hallway behind him and meeting up with the two Rheans

desire.gashler@gmail.com

in front of room 320. Simon shrugged his shoulders, trying to ask if the androids noticed anything suspicious in the elevator. They shook their heads--no trouble there.

Simon rapped as quietly as he could on the hotel room door and held his breath. The others fanned out, flattened to the sides of the hallway to hide from view.

Alecia opened the door and burst into tears. "Oh, Simon!" She flung herself into his arms and cried. "I saw you blow out into space! I thought you were dead!"

Bewildered, Simon shushed his wife. "Alecia, quiet! Can you let us inside?"

Ali came out of the bubble of Simon's embrace and noticed the others. "Oh, yes. Come in." She continued to cling to Simon's chest, wrapped in the comfort of his arms.

"What are you doing here? I'm so relieved to see you, but it's kind of a shock." Ali's questions were muffled by Simon's shirt.

"Are you safe Ali? I thought you were being held hostage by Stratford." Simon didn't know what was going on. He was so relieved to see Ali unharmed and unguarded, but it felt almost too easy.

"When I saw you talking to those news reporters online about boarding the spaceship, I knew something was wrong, so I got on the first plane to Virginia. I'm sorry about the cost, it was really expensive."

They were in the middle of a life-or-death situation and she was concerned about the price of an airline ticket? "That's what money's for, Ali. Don't worry about it."

"Thank you for not being mad, lover. I was worried. When I got to the launch site, Stratford took me to the control room and I tried to apologize to you, but then Stratford said something

desire.gashler@gmail.com

about a deal. I didn't know what was going on. He laughed this creepy laugh and told me I was a special treat." Ali shuddered in Simon's arms. "I don't like that man. He isn't right."

Simon felt like ten times a fool. Ali was never in any danger at all. She wasn't even in custody or prison or captured. She was staying in a hotel trying to save her husband.

"Simon, there's something else. While I was there, I overheard Stratford talking about a Rhean invasion. Is it true? Did the Rheans blow up the Freedom?" She eyed the Rheans in the room with deep suspicion.

"No, it's not true at all. They're here to help me rescue you. Which it turns out you don't need after all."

"Rescue me? Did you think I was a prisoner?"

"Pretty much. We thought Stratford had captured you to force me to blow up the ship."

"Stratford was going on and on about the nanobots, geofences, and something about countering the Rheans here on Earth. Do you know anything about those plans?"

Falcon's interest perked up. "We don't know about any plans to deploy nanobots here."

Ali continued, "After we left mission control, he left to go back to the Pentagon. I heard him tell someone they were a 'go' to begin the nanobot strikes. I think they are planning something big."

Simon swore under his breath. Stratford had plans within plans. It sounded like he had another reserve of nanobots--working ones. If he deployed those here on Earth, there was no telling what damage he could inflict. Simon's lab at the BARF had been preparing to deploy a swarm of them against the androids for years, so he was very familiar with their capabilities.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

They were a perfect weapon, designed for high-precision destruction. They could eat through anything softer than steel, and were far too small and numerous to combat directly. Once released, they would swarm to a geo-fenced location and systematically clean out anything within the specified boundary. The only practical way to stop them would be to change the coordinates of the geo-fence where they were sent to wreak destruction. Simon could reset the fences or issue a self destruct order if he could get into the launch files.

"Ali, I need you to stay safe and lay low. I couldn't live with myself if Stratford hurt you."

"What a load of crap. Can't you see how bad it is if we separate? I don't know what you're thinking and you don't know what I'm thinking and we make bad decisions." Ali pulled away from Simon's arms and frowned into his face.

Simon had to agree with her logic. If they had been in contact during his raid at the Pentagon, he could have told her why he was headed into space. If she had been with him when he was captive on Mojave's ship, he wouldn't have felt a need to give them the algorithm setting this whole sequence of events in motion. Communication was essential to making good decisions. Separating would be a bad idea.

"Let's get back to the Pentagon. We've got to stop whatever Stratford has planned." Simon squeezed Ali's hand in his. "Will you come with us?"

Ali chuckled and rested her head on his chest. "Of course, you silly man."

Chapter 31

Simon slept for most of the long car ride back to Arlington, but as they drove he couldn't pass

desire.gashler@gmail.com

up the opportunity to get answers to some of his most pressing questions.

"Why didn't you just tell me what was going on from the beginning. Why all the riddles, Mojave?"

"Well, it wasn't all one big plan, Simon. Circumstances have changed several times. At first, we only wanted you for your code. But you started treating me like any other human. You agreed when I made good arguments and such. So, we had to try and win you over. We knew you would find out we had deceived you and probably reject everything we had ever said. So, we tried to give you enough information to help you figure it out on your own when you were ready. We had no idea Stratford would elevate you to a powerful position--perfect for a double-agent."

"It might have happened faster if you had told me upfront." Simon didn't like manipulation. Even if it had been for his benefit. Even if he had come to think of Mojave and the others as human, it didn't justify the lies.

"Really?" Mojave quirked a metallic eyebrow. "Hey Simon, we'd like you to ignore everything you've ever been told about androids and join us. Would you have listened?"

Simon sighed. "No. I guess I had to figure it out on my own like you said. It doesn't explain why you came to rescue me on the Freedom though."

"You're both our ally and our friend." Mojave leaned over and added his customary pat on Simon's knee. The solid blows felt familiar and natural.

Simon smiled. "I guess I am. But just to be clear, are there any other secrets you're keeping from me?"

Mojave laughed out loud. "There are millions of secrets the Yona are keeping, but I think I

desire.gashler@gmail.com

know what you mean." Falcon, Silver-wing, and Mojave exchanged meaningful glances and Falcon nodded, speaking up.

"While we had you on the ship, we scanned your brain," he blurted, without apology.

"Scanned my brain? For what?" Did Simon have a tumor he didn't know about?

Falcon shifted on his bench. "We were worried you'd try to kill yourself or wouldn't give us the algorithm fast enough, so we wanted to have a backup of you so we could try again later."

Simon's eyebrows flew up to the top of his hairline. "Are you saying you have a copy of my brain stashed on your ship? And you could turn me into an android?!"

"Yes. You would have to adjust, but you're all set to go."

"How many brains do you have in storage?"

"Not too many. Trousers over there, yours, a few others. We don't usually store them for long unless we're putting them into a body. It takes up too much space. We keep them on the safest server on Earth! I think you know the one." Falcon rotated his head toward Simon and the synthetic lid over his eye-lenses closed in a wink.

Simon could hear his heart start pounding his ears. His face felt very hot. Everything felt too hot; the air in the car was stifling. *They've got a copy of my brain?!* Simon's overactive imagination ran through the possibilities for abusing a person's brain scan. With a scan of his brain, they could turn him into an android if they wanted to. And there wouldn't be anything in the world Simon could do to stop them. What was the wink all about? Did Simon know where the safest server on Earth was? The safest server he could think of was back at the BARF.

As his mind raced through the possibilities, it dawned on him that he wouldn't even know if

desire.gashler@gmail.com

there were android copies of him. Had they done it already? What if the only reason they always seemed so wise to him was because they had already tried out numerous scenarios against a slave copy of his own mind, just to see what remarks would influence him? What else had they never told him? They could have any number of copies of his mind made by now. Simon imagined himself waking up again and again, being tortured but never even remembering it, always thinking each time was his first waking experience, while the androids systematically extracted knowledge from his mind.

What right do they think they have to take my mind!? They never even asked me! They just took it!

The budding feelings of friendship for the androids evaporated. The former hatred he had felt for so long against his enemies and captors came rushing back in to fill the void. He glanced at Ali, as if to make sure she was still safe. She snuggled against his shoulder, oblivious to the change in the mood of the car. Simon wanted to communicate with her so badly, but he knew it was important not to reveal his anger. There was nowhere they could escape to at the moment. They were both surrounded by androids.

Simon and the androids filed through the river entrance to the Pentagon complex. Simon played along with the plan as if nothing had changed, wilfully suppressing his feelings of being surrounded by enemies on all sides. They had planned to break the thick doors but Simon still had his security badge and to their surprise, the door opened with a flick of the card. The lobby security guards sat frozen in their chairs, staring at the unlikely quintet--a high-ranking celebrity

desire.gashler@gmail.com

whom everyone had just seen die in space, some random woman, and three androids! The guards didn't put up any challenge, so the team just jogged past, heading for the stairs. Once out of sight, the guards fled the building.

"We don't have much time before someone contacts Stratford," Simon hurried the group toward his office. He could track down the geofence coordinates from his office computers and figure out what sites the nanobots were targeting. With any luck, he could set up a new geofence to contain the nanobots before they did too much damage. Simon knew right where to send them--the android central control server. It would be wonderful, poetic justice to destroy the android data collection center where his brain scan was located. How was he going to do it with Mojave standing over his shoulder and watching every command he typed? And how could he get them to tell him the exact location.

"The servers here at the Pentagon are the safest in the country, wouldn't you agree?" Simon directed the question at Falcon, who had winked at him earlier.

"The BARF has the most secure server in the country."

I knew it! I'm sure they have my brain scan in the BARF server.

"Keep your eyes open for signs of nanobot infiltration. I wouldn't put it past Stratford to have put the Pentagon on his hit list so he could play up being the victim." Simon prayed this wasn't one of the targets. If it was, he would need to get Ali out of here on some errand so she would be safe.

"What are we looking for?" Ali peered up at a corner in the ceiling, trying to notice anything suspicious.

desire.gashler@gmail.com

"Think of Nanobots as microscopic ants. They gnaw at the world, destroying solid structures of any kind. If you see a section of wall collapse into sand or a table or chair topple without reason, there are nanobots in the area. I wish we had masks. You can breathe them into your lungs as well." Simon shuddered at the reminder of what tests had done to animal lungs. Being eaten from the inside out was a gruesome process. What Simon really wished was for the elevator to go faster. The longer the nanobots had to spread wherever they were, the more damage they could do. He had to get the shut-down command in as fast as he could.

Careening down the hall and into his office, Simon digested the scene. Large black daggers crept down the office windows. Simon stared at the spreading crack as the truth sank in. The nanobots were here.

Simon turned to his wife, gently pressing a kiss to her forehead. "Ali, I know you don't want to separate but I just remembered a command I need to activate that I can't do in this room." Boy was he a bad liar. "I need you to access a backup file for me in room..." He racked his brain for a room as far away from here as possible. "the cafeteria."

"Bull crap. What are you doing? Get on your computer Simon." Ali pointed with a sharp jab at the chair and the consoles set up there.

Simon pleaded with his eyes. Why was she so stubborn! He loved her too much to let her be in this room of death. The black spread on the outside of the window, but it was only a matter of minutes before the bots would eat their way through and into the air on this side.

"Can I talk to my wife alone for a minute please?" Simon hated having to ask these animatronic aliens for anything. It grated on his nerves, but he needed time to convince Ali to get

desire.gashler@gmail.com

to safety.

"Yeah, sure. We'll wait outside. Don't take too long. People's lives are at stake here." Mojave and the others filed out of the room, closing the door behind them.

Simon crept over to the door and listened for a second, hoping the androids would clink their way further down the hall. No such luck. They were standing right outside, only giving an illusion of privacy. He couldn't tell Ali his plan if they could hear him. Frustrated, he searched the room for another method of communication. He almost smacked himself at his stupidity. Of course! The computer text editor.

"Ali, I really need you to go back to the van with the others and let me handle this one." His eyes told another story. He mouthed the words "look at the monitor." And his fingers flew over the keyboard in an attempt to explain. Ali needed to lure the androids out of the area so Simon could destroy them. It solved the problem of getting her to safety and getting Mojave off his back at the same time. He held her hand in his as he asked the final question out loud.

"Are you with me?" Ali nodded her head and squeezed Simon's hand.

"Always." She planted a kiss on his cheek and sighed.

Simon erased the evidence from the computer screen as Ali opened the office door.

"Simon was right. The nanobots are here at the Pentagon." She pointed at the ever-expanding crack in the window. "We need to help evacuate the building and I need to get out of here all together for Immy's sake. Will you guys take the floors and sound the alarms?"

Mojave didn't hesitate. "Of course." Silent commands sent the androids into action. Speakers blasting at top volume, the androids issued commands to evacuate the Pentagon. Falcon flicked

desire.gashler@gmail.com

the fire alarm for good measure.

"Simon, you'd better meet me in the van soon." Ali kissed him goodbye and raced to the elevators. He hated knowing the nanobots were seconds from penetrating the window and infiltrating the air in the room. He would never see Ali again.

No time to think about death now. He needed to focus on the task at hand.

Logging into the nanobot launch program was simple. Simon had written the thing himself, after all. It was a quick GPS lookup to see the target nanobot attack zones. The White House, the Statue of Liberty, the homes of several high ranking government officials, and of course, the Pentagon.

He wished the commands he issued were instantaneous. Propagation from one bot to the next would take a few minutes at least. The window was now completely eaten away, the walls surrounding the window frame dissolved at the blackened edges. It reminded Simon of the way bouillon disintegrated in water, almost grain by grain until there was nothing left.

Simon coughed as he entered the coordinates for the BARF as the new geofence. He had to estimate the depth of the robotics floor, it would probably wipe out a few extra pieces of equipment but there would be casualties no matter how precise he was. Simon's fingers hovered over the "commit" button.

Destroying the central computer would eliminate the current android brain scans. Someone else would come along and take out their bodies, but Simon would be responsible for wiping out their minds. It would be the perfect revenge and justice for everything they put him through. Then why did he hesitate with his fingers on the key? Why did he feel sick to his stomach,

desire.gashler@gmail.com

knowing the androids would never be more than a passing blip on history?

If Simon redirected the nanobots to the BARF, there would be human casualties. People he knew. JaWei might be within the geofence, or Reggi. Could he really doom the rest of his coworkers to rid the future of androids?

Breathing was a struggle now. If he was unsure of his chance of survival before, it was clear now. He coughed up a glob of blood and spit it into the waste paper bin next to his chair. The reddish-brown liquid stuck to a side of the plastic liner. He had to make a decision. Them or us?

Simon remembered Mojave's laughter while playing androids vs humans. How he struggled to communicate with his creator when he was first born and his despair at losing so many of his brothers to experimentation. Those were real human emotions. And what had they done to deserve extinction?

Ali's voice filled his thoughts. "They took you away from your family and told you we were dead." But they had treated him with respect while he was with them, never denying him entry into their conversation or locking him in his room, even though they knew he was trying to kill their kind.

Mojave's voice was next. "You'll never be free, Simon, not until you learn to see which choice is right without foreseeing its consequences."

Stratford's voice was the last to fill Simon's head. "They are different. They are stronger than us. They could destroy us if they wanted to." But they hadn't tried any of those things. All the stories Simon grew up hearing about the First Strike were a lie. Simon had seen no evidence of an attempt to destroy mankind. On the contrary, they had intentionally stopped Stratford from

desire.gashler@gmail.com

killing the pilot of the ship Freedom and were risking their lives to help people they didn't know right this very second by blasting at max volume to evacuate the building.

Simon's mind told him to destroy them, but his heart said to let them live in peace.

His heart won. He couldn't destroy the brain scan artifacts. He had to destroy the real threat.

Stratford.

He was the one at the heart of all of this. He was the one who lied, attempted to murder innocents, kept the people of the world in fear of a threat which didn't really exist. He was the real monster.

Simon pulled out his cell and found the number Stratford had given him months prior; his personal line.

"Hello?"

"Stratford, it's Simon Mashman." Simon stopped to cough quietly into a tissue. "I'm here at the Pentagon and I know what you're doing with the nanobots. I have all the proof I need to put you in prison for a very, very long time."

The line was silent while Stratford digested the information.

"Now, don't be too hasty there Simon," the voice on the line was placating and calm, like a person would talk to a wounded animal. "I think there is something we could do to work this out, don't you? Where are you? Maybe we could talk this over like civilized men."

If Simon could get Stratford back in the building, he would be eaten by nanobots just as surely as Simon was. Was it worth it to see Stratford crumble?

"How close are you to my office? If you can be here in less than fifteen minutes, we might be

desire.gashler@gmail.com

able to chat." Simon prayed he would show.

"I'm in the parking lot, I can be there in five. Just don't do anything you might regret, Simon."

"You'd better hurry." Simon ended the call and slumped into the chair. He knew he was spent. The only thing keeping him hanging on was the hope of Tyson Stratford walking through the office door.

Mojave showed up in the doorway a few minutes later.

"Simon, what are you still doing here?!" He tugged on Simon's arm to lift him out of the chair. The cold metal bit into aching flesh. Simon winced in pain. "Everyone's out of the building. They sent me back for you because you didn't show."

"Mojave, I need to stay. Stratford's going to be here any second. If I am going to die from these nanobots, I want to take him down with me. I don't expect you to understand, or to stay with me."

"What do you mean? Of course I'll stay. You're my friend, Simon. You're the first friend I've had in a really long time."

Simon finally felt the truth of everything the androids had done for him. The power that lies in seeing the world as it really is, of making decisions based on their goodness and not what you can gain from it.

He backed out a few screens and entered the command for complete self-destruction. It would only take a few minutes in this nanobot infested room for Stratford's lungs to be irreparably damaged. If he sent the self destruct command in time, Mojave could still, hopefully,

get away.

"Could you send a message to Falcon for me?" Simon was struggling to get a full breath of air. He hoped Stratford arrived soon, or he wouldn't be able to send the self-destruct signal.

"Could you have him tell Ali I love her, I didn't want to leave her, but it was the only way to send the self destruct signal."

An instant later, Mojave confirmed. "It's sent. I took the liberty of recording your exact speech so he can play it for her."

Simon smiled. What a world it would be if everyone was constantly recording everything.

Stratford arrived, slightly out of breath from traveling so quickly.

"What is this?" He stared pointedly at Mojave.

"This is what you deserve." Simon coughed up another ball of spit and blood and lobbed it straight at Stratford's face, hoping the spit contained a few nanobots.

Stratford wiped at the spit, then kept wiping. It wasn't coming off. Instead, it spread to encompass his entire left cheek before he realized he was wiping off his own skin.

"What did you do?" Stratford stared in wide-eyed horror.

Simon hit the button on the keyboard, sending out the signal. Within a few minutes, all the nanobots would terminate, but it would be enough time to finish off both humans still left in the Pentagon. Simon slumped across the keyboard. How would the world deal with Stratford's death? Simon hoped in some small way the return of the ship Freedom would reveal the lies at the heart of the Technology Regulation Acts, but he would never live to find out.

"Answer me! What did you do!" Stratford picked up Simon by the front of his shirt and

shook.

Simon's head lolled to the side as peace spread on his features. "I did the right thing." His eyes rolled back into his head.

Stratford dropped the body and scrambled for the door, but Mojave was faster, slamming the door shut and with a quick twist, crushing the doorknob in his powerful metallic grip.

Stratford pounded on the door, screaming for someone to open it.

With contrasting calm, Mojave walked over and knelt next to Simon's body, easing it into a more comfortable position and crossing his arms across his chest. Mojave sent the image to Falcon for Ali to see. Simon had died with peace in his heart.

The nanobots continued to eat at Stratford's face, removing his eyelid. Mojave could see the tongue and teeth through the hole in the side of his flesh.

"Help me get out of here! They will kill you too!" His panicked plea fell on deaf ears.

"There are hundreds of me. Thankfully, there is only one of you."

Mojave stood, a silent witness as Tyson Stratford's screams peaked and abruptly stopped.

Epilogue

Simon tried to scream but he couldn't find his mouth. Is this a dream? If only he could wake up. There was more pain than he had ever before experienced.

This isn't pain. It doesn't hurt anywhere. It was all the alarm and urgency of excruciating pain without any direction. He couldn't pinpoint a body part that went with it. But it was so annoyingly persistent!

desire.gashler@gmail.com

Was there some sort of pain drug in the tranquilizer darts? Time stretched without meaning. He was floating in a ball of sensation and directionless longing. He tried to kick but he had no legs. Everything was gone. He had no mouth. He had no eyes! He was trapped in his mind.

Help me!

Another indeterminate amount of time passed. He was sure it had been days since the first incessant pain-like emergency started nagging at him to do... what? He still didn't know.

What do you want? He strained to hear a response and for a brief moment, the urgency relaxed. Hey! Can you hear me? Go away! It did not go away. It continued to nag at his mind.

More days passed. Simon had now formed a ritualistic habit of connecting with the alarm signal. He thought he recognized it. It was sound. But why did it feel like pain? My ears are over... no, they've been gone for a while now. Are you sound?

The more he worked at it, the more he became certain it was sound. In fact, with the falling and the rising in the levels of urgency, he could tell it was music. There were several other signals mixed in with it. Separating them and giving them names occupied his mind. The one he decided to call prickles were the most bothersome of the signals. The music signal was the easiest to follow.

It didn't come easy. He had to work hard to connect with those signals. Otherwise, they nagged at his sense of urgency. There even seemed to be physical limitations to the rate at which he was able to make contact with the signals. All at once, something connected, and Simon recognized the sound.

Why is Beethoven's Fifth Symphony haunting me?

desire.gashler@gmail.com

The more he listened, the more certain he was. His mother had been a fan of the classics and all Immy's baby toys came with pre-programmed music boxes. It became crisper and clearer as he worked to hear what he knew it should sound like. After hearing it repeat for about the thousandth time, though, he thought he would lose his mind.

I wish they'd play something else. Who? Who did he wish would play something else? Doctors at the hospital? No, I'm a prisoner of the androids!

Simon struggled, disconnected from any other sensation than the music. The second feeling, the prickles, were like an itch he kept trying to scratch. Was his mind trying to connect to some external input or was it an output of some kind? Adjusting his thinking to output, Simon screamed into the prickles. He heard something other than the symphony. He heard a clatter and a scrape.

Without warning, the music stopped. An unfamiliar voice spoke to him. "Well done, Simon. It looks like you've figured out your auditory signal and the output control. I'm going to activate the connection to your voice now. You're not going to like it at first. Once we can communicate, I will help guide you through the process of using the rest of your new body."