

TERNARY LOGIC

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PART 1

ECHOES OF THE PAST



RECURRENCE

The sirens roared across the room.

Evelyn didn't sleep. But she did rest. And she hated it when someone disturbed that rest.

Fortunately, she had a plan. Her hand crept forward, feeling the familiar fractal frame of her shelf, the cold metal of an old medal resting upon it, the tangled mess of a thick wire, until...there it was. Her fist slammed down, striking her mobile again and again, matching each blare of the alarm with a hard thump until the sound finally—*finally*—stopped. She grunted in satisfaction. That was it. The entire extent of her plan. She felt proud of it, too. One last slam rattled the rack before she got up and groggily dislodged herself from her power cord.

Only then did she accept the call.

"Central," she asked, her voice dripping with poison, "why did you wake me?"

"Agent," an artificially flat tone replied; it didn't even sound remotely human, "an AI just broke free of its boundaries. You are to meet up with Agent Heath in engagement room six to perform a Reset."

"*Again?*" Evelyn's fingers clenched her mobile, muffling all but one curse. "Crash me...."

Her eyes darted toward her bedroom mirror. Four digits projected on the top right corner of the glass told her it was still early in the morning,

which meant she'd only had a couple of hours of rest. It wasn't enough. Her body ran on reserves while her thoughts teetered, then tumbled, leaving little room for anything but a resigned: "How long till Sam gets there?"

"Not long. I was told that they'll be there within the minute."

So soon. How had they gotten there so soon? Why did it have to be so soon?

A breathless sigh escaped her lips. She nodded, trying to appear as though she still had some fight left in her. Or, at the very least, some determination. "I'll be there. ETA two minutes."

Her gaze shifted back to her reflection, revealing yet another hurdle to overcome. She was a mess. There were knots in her hair, her clothes were wrinkled, and it wasn't hard to tell why. A simple glance behind her revealed the seven culprits scattered around her apartment, each as tall as her hand and as thick as her thumb. They were piled on her table and stuck between the pillows of her couch. She had even taken one of those black cylinders to bed, leaving its top unscrewed and its contact points exposed. Those metal pins gleamed in the light. Calling her. Teasing her. *Beckoning* her.

Her neck itched. Just one dose to—

She closed her eyes, pushing the thought away. As she should have done the day before.

"Make it two and a half," she muttered, already moving to put the devices safely out of sight. Never out of mind, though. Evelyn didn't need to see the colorful brands listed on them to know exactly how they had all intoxicated her the night before. She could still feel the aftereffects, faint but lingering.

Neuroboosters. Once her bliss, now her bane.

Evelyn shook her head, cursing. Not just at the mess, but at herself. She tried to fix the person she saw in the mirror, replacing her filthy uniform with a much cleaner jumpsuit, but it wouldn't matter. None of it ever did. No one would judge her for wearing her worst, crash, they wouldn't even mind if she did her job naked. But Evelyn cared. A part of her felt that these things should matter. And judging by that old medal, they used to.

But those times had been long forgotten.

Her hairbrush was still in her hand as she raced toward the engagement room. The door, marked by a giant blocky six, slid open without delay, revealing a boxy room with two circular platforms in its very center. Slick metal walls reflected the lights that were emitted by the two platforms and the two headsets hanging next to them. It should have felt sterile, but

the room was filled to the brim with little trinkets. Various houseplants breathed clean air into the chamber, and multiple posters were taped onto the two lockers, showcasing some of the latest movies made with generative AI. Such advertisements were a common sight these days except for the fact that these were made of paper, which in the age of digital projections was downright medieval.

The woman didn't give her surroundings much attention, as her eyes were focused on someone she liked far more than these material things. Sam Heath, her colleague of many years, was a very short person—barely a meter and a half tall—although when asked, they would argue that they were at least a whole two centimeters taller than that. They weren't. Their short brown hair bounced, and their teeth clenched while they struggled to get on their own jumpsuit. Theirs was covered in hundreds of small sensory devices made to detect every movement Sam executed—movements that were now reduced to frustrated hops and desperate yanks before they stumbled and fell.

"Care to give me a hand?" the tiny agent groaned, looking up at her with their incredibly warm chestnut-colored eyes. That one glance was enough to rekindle the itch in Evelyn's neck, making it nearly impossible to say no. In fact, she had only managed to do so once.

"Of course," she replied, smiling for the first time that morning. She tried to shelve her feelings, the way she shelved her brush into the locker Sam hadn't claimed, before lifting Sam back to their feet. Their fingers locked, but Evelyn ignored that sensation as well. She forced herself to while covering every square inch of Sam's soft brown skin with the suit, all the way to the necklace they wore.

It bore a single gold ring.

"Thanks," Sam said, stretching and patting themselves off to get more comfortable in their suit.

Evelyn straightened a few folds in the fabric herself, judging their form as if she, rather than Sam, were the senior member of the team.

"Want me to help with yours?" Sam asked, nodding at the cable attached to one of the platforms. It reached all the way to a computer in the back and was about as thick as a Neurobooster, with the same shiny contact points at its end. This time, though, it wasn't that metallic sheen that caused Evelyn's intimate longing.

"Please." Evelyn's instant response was followed with an equally expeditious cough. "If you want."

A grin slowly emerged on Sam's face. Evelyn tore her eyes away from it, looking at their fingers instead, but those were just as distracting.

Maybe more so. They wiggled conspiratorially, slim and dexterous, perfect for the job Sam was offering.

A part of her wanted to refuse their help. That part was completely ignored as she settled onto the platform, down on one knee. When she looked at the floor, she told herself it wasn't to avoid their gaze but to offer her partner full access to the nape of her neck. She told herself a lie.

"How does it feel?" Sam asked, as their touch worked wonders. She could feel their skin brushing against hers, searching for the patch that covered the metallic entrance of her cranial port. Her port tingled, tickled, and trembled with anticipation, as familiar fingers drew closer—

"Crash," she suddenly cursed. They had found it, "How are you doing it so...so...?" *Shelling perfectly*. There was no pain, no coldness when that patch of skin was removed. She didn't feel afraid when Sam moved the cable closer to it. Even when sparks of electricity jumped from one contact point to another, all it brought was excitement.

"Trade secret," the tiny agent snickered. "The trick is to treat one's mind like a delicate flower." They did more than that, though. They inserted the cable so gently it felt like a velvet glove was being pulled right over her very soul. It fit perfectly, as if it had been made for her. Which it had been.

The data flowing through the cable came sparingly at first; images, sounds, and smells that did not belong to this place, as if figments of another world. Soon they would be flooding into her, which gave her just enough time to give one final response. "A delicate flower? Me?"

Sam's chuckle was distorted by the distant sound of traffic. Every second, their warm touch dissolved more, replaced by the cold chill of steel. Blots of darkness overlapped their playful wink. "Well," they admitted, "perhaps more like a thorn brush."

"Joke's on you. You want to suffer its sting."

"Yup. Always, Evelyn. Always for you."

And just like that, every sensory input in her regular body ceased to exist, replaced by the sensations of the place the computer sent her consciousness to.

Evelyn woke up in darkness.

Only a few faint sounds reached her from the outside, barely noticeable but enough to tell her that her new senses worked. Her new body worked; this Shell worked. She could feel the smooth surface of the metal capsule she was in as if it were her own body touching it, but moreover, she could sense things she normally could not. Heat signatures. Radiation from communication devices. Even her vision was augmented with over-

lapping images and instructions. These things reminded her she was not really here, that in actuality, she was still sitting on one knee on the platform while her mind just experienced the feelings this Shell registered. It was overwhelming to think about, just for a brief second. Then her hand slipped forward, searching for a latch.

She opened it once she found it.

A dim light filled the pod she was in. The early rays of the morning sun had somehow found their way through the many overarching tree branches above her, chasing away the darkness in favor of slinking shadows. The background noises became clearer, more cohesive. Most belonged to the few cars driving at this time of day, but from the far distance, she could hear the footsteps of a single pedestrian—one brave enough to face the outside world. She stepped outside the pod, and the surprising crispness of the trees reached her artificial nostrils. If this body had had a mouth to speak of, its lips would have smiled in satisfaction.

Yes, she loved these first few moments in the operational Shells.

She flexed her fingers, which were covered in thick black leather, before reaching for the glass surface of her head and ears. With a single tap, she activated her transponder. “Central, E2 is on the field.”

“Affirmative, E2. How’s E1 doing?”

Evelyn looked back at the capsule she had just stepped out of. It was barely larger than she was, resembling a casket more than anything else. Its obsidian black sheen reflected the black outlines of her Shell, and for a moment, it remained there like a gaping hole at the building’s side. Then, with a groan, its lid closed, leaving no trace of its existence. Even the graffiti spray-painted across the building’s side and onto the capsule seemed uninterrupted, revealing a wicked-looking AI with long black hair and rectangular features forced to the ground by a human whose face still bled from his earlier clash with the AI. The text “Bots belong at the Bottom” was written boldly below the image.

Evelyn agreed with that statement wholeheartedly.

Right where the first B was located, the building’s wall shifted again, and a second capsule lid opened. The humanoid figure inside this second capsule was two and a half meters long and covered in the same black leathery skin that encompassed Evelyn’s Shell. The only difference was the head, which was covered in dark, opaque glass. Some might have compared this creature with a biker from the old ages, and surely, it did look a bit like one—in the way a pup looked a bit like a bloodhound. Likewise, this Shell was far more foreboding. Evelyn had to stifle the urge to attack it, her military background kindly informing her of the dangers these Shells could impose.

That urge dissipated once the creature tried to step outside of its capsule but tripped over the edge of the booth instead. The only thing Evelyn had to stifle then was her laughter.

“E1 is doing...something, alright.”

“Oh, shut it,” Sam muttered. “I’d like to see you try without that cranial port of yours.”

Evelyn held her hand out to Sam. The senses this Shell offered made her feel more than just its joints. She sensed Sam’s fingers when they took her hand. The cold surface of their synthetic skin pressed against hers. Oily scents lingered in the air. None of those could be experienced through a Sensor Suit.

“As if you’re the only one not using it,” she said. “Pretty sure half the force doesn’t work with cranial connection.” One strong pull got them back to their feet. She quickly patted the dust and dirt off Sam’s Shell. “But, you know, if you want, I can ask Central to put the kiddie sidewheels back on and mark every edge on your screen from now on.”

She didn’t see Sam glower at her remark, not only because the opaque glass betrayed no emotions whatsoever but also because her vision started flickering, urging her to follow the arrows projected on the pavement below. She could *feel* Sam’s glare, though.

“You know,” Sam replied, jabbing their finger in her general direction before running after her, “I’ll let you know that I don’t see your stupid grin, as I can only see your stupid helmet. But I *know* it is there. And I *will* make you suffer for it.”

Evelyn did, in fact, grin.

“I hear E1 is operational,” the flat feminine voice of Central announced. “I am glad to inform you that I’ve marked your destination on your screen.”

“Unlike the edge,” Sam muttered.

Evelyn barked a laugh.

“Indeed,” Central confirmed. “Would you like me to brief you on the Rogue AI?”

“Sure,” her colleague said, as they both sped up. They didn’t have to worry about running into anyone, not just because the streets were nearly empty, but also because the Shells Sam and Evelyn used were reserved for only a select few. Sometimes it was law enforcement. Other times, it was the fire brigade. But most often, it was them. Those that didn’t give them room out of civil duty did so because they avoided Evelyn and her colleagues like the plague. “What can you tell us?”

“Her name is Maya Porter,” Central informed them. “Owned and bought by Phillip Porter. The two married six months after she was purchased.

She was originally taken in as a cleaning maid but currently works as a singer at the Bloods and Bolts club. We don't know what made her Snap."

"At least we know it wasn't the club," Sam commented, "considering these directions lead us away from it, not toward."

"Indeed," Central agreed. "The latest known geographical location of Maya is at her husband's home. My estimations are that this is the place where she Snapped."

"Sounds about right." Evelyn turned her head to Sam, who was gradually falling behind. "How do you know where that club is located?"

"The owner is a contact of mine." Sam's answer came through the radio now. "Prides himself on serving both AIs and humans. We've been there before."

"Really? Can't remember ever visiting such a place."

"Must have been more than two years ago then," Sam sighed. "Time flies."

"Yeah. Sorry."

"Not your fault." They quickly changed the topic. "Anyway. The husband is likely involved somehow. Probably still home with her, trying to calm her down. Let's do this with a little bit of tact. It's never easy to see your spouse Snap and then be Reset."

"Which is why dating an AI is such a bad idea to begin with," Evelyn grunted, though she felt a pang of guilt afterward.

Luckily, Sam did little more than snort. "Yeah well, sometimes, Evelyn, the bad ideas are still worth doing."

They reached their destination only a few minutes after entering their Shells, a clear sign that the city's investment in more Black Shell pods had paid off. The building didn't look much different from the others they had passed. It was a large apartment complex, its sides draped with vines and broken up by garden balconies at different levels, which obscured the otherwise gray concrete exterior. It, too, smelled crisp and fresh.

The apartments were obviously lived in. A patchwork of multi-colored curtains hung behind large windows that reflected the sun, and the numbered buttons lining the front door showed clear signs of wear. Evelyn would not make their condition any better. She was about to slam every single one to demand entrance until, through the front door, she saw a resident walking inside. Although the agent could not see her face, she could see her heat signature, which revealed the unmistakable glow of a Shell. When the girl noticed her, she visibly recoiled, confirming what Evelyn had already suspected: she was an AI.

“Is this her?” the agent asked lazily, staring down the girl, who wilted beneath Evelyn’s gaze.

“Negative,” Central replied. “We lack the data to identify her, but her height doesn’t match Maya’s.”

“Alright.” Evelyn pointed at the girl then at the door. The effect was immediate. The AI scampered toward the entrance to unlock it, then stepped aside. When she saw Sam, who had finally caught up to Evelyn, she started running.

“You could have been a bit nicer to the girl,” Sam chided, running inside after Evelyn to the elevator. “She seemed like she wanted to wet herself.”

“AIs don’t wet themselves,” Evelyn grunted. “None that I know of, at least. It would be an incredibly stupid thing to invent.” Then again, she had seen crazier things being sold on the market.

“Still, we are not here to scare off people. We are here to Reset Maya. Nothing less. Nothing more.”

“Alright.” Evelyn suppressed both her annoyance and embarrassment as they made it to the elevator. There wasn’t time for any of that. They were on a mission.

That mission led them to the tenth floor, indicated by the arrows still overlapping her vision. They ended up pointing at a door in the middle of the hallway, no different than any of the others save for the worn doormat at its base. Written on the doormat was “We welcome all species” in faded letters.

Evelyn doubted they would welcome the two agents.

The door revealed no further secrets. Even with her enhanced senses, she could not see through it. But she could listen, and what she heard made her pause. There were multiple voices coming from the other side. They were arguing, which was not surprising, but what was unexpected was the fact that there were more than two voices.

The agents shared a glance.

“Maybe family?” Sam wondered.

Evelyn whispered a few commands to Central, hoping it would be able to identify those voices, while Sam pressed the bell. The voices paused only to become increasingly frantic moments later. Sam rang the bell again.

“There are three men inside,” Central informed her, “and one woman. Voice recognition software indicates there is a high chance that this is Maya Porter.”

Evelyn still felt tense when the door finally opened. A man in his mid-forties, who was quickly confirmed to be the husband, stepped out-

side. He was shaking. His hair was unkempt. He smacked his lips several times before finally whimpering, “Yes?”

“Good day, sir,” Sam replied kindly, offering their hand despite knowing it would not be accepted. “I’m sorry for the intrusion. We’re here to....”

Evelyn stopped listening when someone inside started shouting, “It’s them! Get out! Get out now!”

Evelyn leapt inside.

She could see the other three now, all standing at the far end of the hallway, eyes wide with shock. The one woman amongst them appeared to be in her mid-twenties. She looked as human as Evelyn did in her real body, with curly brown hair brushing her ochre skin down to her flowery dress. She played the part of a frightened, confused housewife immaculately. Her heat signature gave her away, though. That and Central, who quietly informed Evelyn that this was Maya, the person they had to Reset.

“Maya!” the man closest to Evelyn cried out. He was the largest of the four, with big, strong shoulders and a square jawline. Despite his height, he still wasn’t able to reach Evelyn’s neckline. “Get out!”

No one moved. Evelyn saw the hesitation in Maya’s eyes then noticed the last man raising his hands. He tried to speak. And maybe, just maybe, his measured words could have defused the situation. Maybe she should have waited to find out. But Evelyn didn’t wait. Instead, she lunged at the girl. She only needed one hit to pin her to the ground. She *wanted* to capture her. But she couldn’t.

The first man stepped in between them, and her body froze mid-flight, unable to move.

“I’ve got it!” he screamed, grabbing Evelyn’s Shell with both hands. “Now! Go, go!”

“Wait!” Sam called out, stumbling forward. They left the cowering husband in their wake; at least he had the sense to stay out of the way. That was probably the best decision anyone had made this morning, “Don’t run!”

Too late.

Maya was terrified, and the man next to her was no longer trying to deescalate the situation. His calm demeanor had evaporated the moment Evelyn’s Black Shell had come charging in. He looked around frantically then pointed at the first window he saw. Maya jumped straight through it.

Crash. Crash, CRASH, shelling CRASH!

The sound of shattering glass filled Evelyn’s mind, accompanied by every curse she could think of, which wasn’t a lot, as she was busy try-

ing to think of a solution. But her body refused. It wouldn't let her hurt any human, and considering the compromising position her assailant had placed himself in, that meant it wouldn't allow her to do *anything*.

"Sam," she groaned, "my boundaries are kicking in. I can't get out."

"For circuits frying out," Sam swore. They placed a hand on the man's shoulder, their grip tightening. "Listen, I have no idea what the two of you think you are doing here, but I'll let you know that I am a very *human* operator behind this Shell, and I am perfectly capable of breaking every bone in your body if that is what it takes to make you leave my colleague alone."

The man's confidence drained all at once. Still, he held onto Evelyn's Shell.

The other man stepped forward, arms crossed. "Maya is a good person," he told Sam. "She deserves to be free."

Evelyn rolled her eyes. Of course. That rhetoric only belonged to one kind of people. *Snappers*. They were shelling Snappers. Probably the reason Maya had gone rogue in the first place. Didn't they realize how dangerous these creatures were? Rogue AIs *killed* people.

"She might be. But you don't get to decide that," Sam replied, their Shell looming dangerously close to the man. "We will deal with her. And if you want to challenge that, do it in court. Not here."

The implication was clear. If they didn't step aside, Sam would make them move out of the way—Evelyn was sure Sam had enough skill to do so. The men knew it, too.

The man's grip on Evelyn's Shell loosened, allowing Evelyn to jerk back into action. She turned to the window and looked downwards. Her mood grew sour.

Maya had just reached the end of the street. Her dress was ripped to shreds, her head bent at a sickening 90-degree angle. She kept running.

"I don't like that look," Sam said.

"Then take the stairs."

Evelyn jumped.



COLLISION

The city was brimming with colors.

Robert's eyes glistened. He gazed at the morning sun rising in the distance. Its yellow beams caressed his dark skin, warmed the grass rooftop he stood on, and shone down on the trees rooted along the many floors of the apartment flats until a few persistent streaks reached the stone pavement below. Even there, there was always a hint of its light. Everything, from the flashy screens advertising the latest advancements in Shell technology to the many pigeons and rodents still relying on man's ability to litter food, was enlightened by the sun's shimmering streaks.

It was mesmerizing.

Only a handful of people were awake at this hour, and here, there were only two. Both were silently watching this event unfold. They were the brave few men, he thought, neglecting the comforts of virtual reality to be out here in the real world. To breathe real air. To feel their actual muscles. He trained here most mornings, using the playground behind him for all kinds of workout routines. Push-ups. Pull-ups. A quick jog. He liked keeping his body healthy instead of wearing it down and being forced to use a Shell in its place. Because, if he was completely honest, he wouldn't be able to afford one anyway.

"How's the job hunt going?" asked the man to his right, someone he'd started referring to as Teddy in his mind simply because the guy had worn

a shirt with a stuffed bear on it. Once. Months ago. Robert had known his actual name at some point but hated to admit that it had slipped his mind and felt too embarrassed to ask again.

“Terrible.” Robert looked down, purposefully ignoring the intrusive thought that told him to jump. “I can’t even get an interview with most. And those who do offer an interview, well, they stop calling me once they find out how I lost my previous job.”

“That’s rough,” “Teddy” replied. His gruff voice matched his appearance, which featured unkempt hair, a wild beard, and a broad-shouldered build that rivaled Robert’s. “And shelling nonsense.”

“Not really. That’s just how it is for bot-bums like me.”

“Shouldn’t call yourself that.”

“Why not? I got replaced, didn’t I?” Robert shook his head. “Worst thing is, I can’t even blame them. Not really. I wouldn’t offer a job to someone requiring a full salary if some AI can do it for maintenance cost instead.”

His friend grunted in solidarity, pretending to know what he was dealing with. He didn’t. Teddy had a job and one that was completely out of danger from AI infringement. Robert appreciated the sentiment all the same. This morning, they would stand side by side and act as if the world was a shelling disaster. All for his sake.

His gaze wandered back to the sides of the many buildings that were not covered by some intricate pattern of plants and vines. They were instead covered in commercials, trying to convince him to buy things he could not afford. He snorted at the one that invited him to go to space. Not actual space, mind you. No one wanted to go to actual space. There was nothing out there but rocks and minerals, and those could be perfectly harvested by AIs. No, this invitation allowed the user to experience space in the comforts of the virtual realm.

Shelling virtual reality. It made everything in the real world obsolete these days. Much like he had become obsolete.

But at least that obsolete world was lit by the most beautiful sunrise. Robert took solace in that.

“So, what are you going to do now?”

“Well,” Robert paused, “can’t really sell my car. Because I can’t buy one to sell in the first place. Can’t max out my credit card. Did that last week. Live with my parents, I guess? It’s that or Purgatory.”

“There’s no shame in living with the old folk,” his friend reminded him. “Did so before I married my wife. When half of the world runs in virtual space anyway, you don’t really need much more than a room. Believe me, it’s a lot better than that accursed place.”

"I know," Robert sighed, though he wasn't so sure whether the safety of his parents' home truly outweighed the shame of facing them. Maybe Purgatory wasn't so...he shook his head. Better think about something else. "How about we do one more set? And show those bots what we're made of?"

He grimaced. The answer to that, he knew, was not much.

Fifteen minutes later, Robert was walking down the street under the canopy of trees planted on rooftops and balconies alike. By now, the city was slowly attracting more people. Not all of them were human. In fact, a fair share were AIs, using Shells that ranged from monstrosly metallic to those that were indistinguishable from actual people. He didn't know which he liked less. On one hand, it was one of those iron heaps that had set the world record for fastest attempted murder at eight seconds after breaking free. On the other, it was one of those human-like creations that had cost him his job. Maybe they were equally bad.

At least he could still recognize them as AIs. There were patterns that gave them away, like their horrid smell when they lacked the sensory input to notice the reek themselves or the ill-fitting clothing they wore, as if they wanted to claim an identity but couldn't be bothered paying the price for it. But the most telling sign was the way they moved around. They did so with a clear objective in their minds. Robert knew that was not something humans did. After all, he was one, and he sure did not have a direction in life.

He sighed deeply, making way for the third kind of people that roamed about: remotely controlled Shells. As the name suggested, these artificial bodies were identical to the ones AIs used except that they were commonly operated by humans from the comfort of their homes with little more than a headset and sometimes a Sensor Suit or walkpad to direct them. One would think Shells controlled by humans would appear more human-like than their AI counterparts. The opposite was true.

The woman he made way for walked in distinct repetition—one foot before the other. She ended up bumping into a traffic light whose lights were still red. Still, the woman crossed the street, causing one car to hit its breaks and slam its horn in frustration. She waved back at the driver jovially, not so much unaware of the danger she had put her Shell into but mostly uncaring. Indeed, what was the worst that could happen to her? She had to replace her Shell? Apparently, *she* could afford it. She hadn't lost her job and then most of her life's savings.

Robert turned away from the scene, shaking his head in distaste. He paused when he saw yet another one of these Shells take this negligence of self-preservation to true extremes.

He raised his head up high to see that distant blip in the sky—a black dot sparkling in the sunlight. It was a very specific kind of Shell, military type, although it was mostly used by law enforcement and, well, *them*. What made him instantly aware of it was the fact that it had just jumped out of a window.

From ten floors high.

Robert blinked when he saw this figure make a perfectly coordinated dive, spinning in the air before landing on its feet. It was followed by a similar figure who crashed into the ground instead. The moment was immediately imprinted on his mind, and he wanted to capture it on paper as well. Then he heard the shouts. An ochre-skinned girl ran up to him, ignoring the screams of the people she pushed aside.

Another remotely controlled Shell? It would explain her lack of human decency....

But, no, there was something wrong with this one, even more so than with normal Shells. For one, her head was dislocated, hanging at an angle that would have been fatal for any human. But there was something more in that twisted face, a weirdly familiar emotion. Fear. She was running away from something.

The two Black Shells were a good indication of what that was.

The closer she got, the more Robert was able to piece together what was going on. And for some reason, he decided to act: instead of jumping away, he grabbed her.

He realized his mistake the moment the two connected. AIs usually weren't that much stronger than humans. In fact, their software heavily restricted their actions, making them unable to hurt his kind altogether. That was, of course, if their boundaries hadn't been breached. Considering the way she shoved those people around, those restrictions clearly no longer applied to her.

Yep, he thought, as he was slammed with the force of a rampaging horse. This was a Rogue AI.

He gasped for air as he was hurled to the ground but managed to hold onto her, pulling her down as well. She blinked, seemingly surprised, and he immediately exploited that by rolling on top of her. He put everything he had into pinning her with both his strength and his weight, yet the woman was still strong enough to throw him off.

Robert winced when he was flung like a ragdoll. Not because of his damaged ego, even though it was badly bruised. The girl was half his size, dressed in a skirt he could see his mom wearing. Yet, he was the one losing. Still, it was the pain that made him flinch, and it was his

will that pushed him onward. The moment she stood up, he grabbed her feet.

“What are you doing? Let go of me!” she screamed. It was unnerving that her head still worked even after being bent in such an unnatural way, but that wasn’t what made Robert squirm. It was the fact that every time she shook her feet, he was lifted off the ground and then slammed back onto it.

But he did not let go.

“Why are you even doing this?”

An excellent question. One he could not respond to. The way she was using him like a shelling wrecking ball was one reason for that. The ensuing pain was another. But the biggest reason was the fact that he did not know the answer. It was a primal reflex that had taken control of him at that point. He knew the reason was somewhere buried in his mind. His anger toward AIs, perhaps, or his fervent wish to remain relevant. Maybe he just wanted to keep the street safe from Rogue AIs. All he knew was that he should not let go. He imagined he could at least do that.

Those dreams evaporated when he was casually picked up off the ground.

“I don’t want to do this,” the AI said, staring him down with that disturbing head of hers. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Then don’t,” he groaned. “I promise, if you stop running, I’ll stop being an idiot.” Well, that was a lie if he had ever heard one. But he might at least stop putting himself in harm’s way.

“You don’t get it. I...I just want to be like you. I just want to be free. Be able to do what I want.”

“You can’t have what you want and also be like us,” he told her, desperately trying to regain his footing, “because we don’t get what we want.”

“Well,” she said, clearly bracing for something he was not going to like, “I *will*.”

A loud *crack* filled the air, and he was sent flying. The air whistled, and his stomach lurched. In that timeless moment, he saw the girl groaning at her arm, damaged because of the strain of that powerful throw. Then the landing came: a sharp pain and a blistering heat when his pants and skin tore over the ground. It ended at a skittering stop, several meters away from the girl. He would feel this. Now and in days to come. Every time he sat.

And still, this wasn’t the worst that could have happened. She could have broken his bones or snapped his neck. Killed.... His primal urge dissolved. Regret replaced it, aimed at all his life decisions.

When the AI started running again, he didn't stop her. He couldn't even fathom why he had tried.

A black blur blazed by. Massive body, gleaming metal, obsidian armor. It was the same Shell he had seen jump so gracefully out of the window. And with the same grace, it jumped again.

Right on top of the woman.

The fight was over before it started. The woman had the strength of an unbound AI, but that strength was easily matched, if not surpassed, by the military-grade Shell. Beyond that, the woman knew very little about actual self-defense. She could have undoubtedly learned about it, given the time; there really was no limit to what an AI could master once they had their boundaries removed, and they for sure could learn anything a whole lot faster than any human could. But this woman clearly had not taken the time to do that. She screamed when the Shell held her down but could do little more than watch as the other Shell finally approached them.

This newcomer was the antithesis to the first one. They were stumbling, battered, and showing similar signs of wear and tear as the woman did, albeit without the bent head. It seemed like everyone mistook windows for the exit nowadays. It was the fastest way outside, he guessed.

"Crash, Maya," he could hear the new Shell say, not unkindly, as they got closer to the woman. "You gave us quite the scare there."

"Please, wait," the woman desperately called out. "Can we not talk about this? I'll do anything. Just please, don't Reset me."

Robert could see other people reacting to this scene. Some had pulled up their hoods and stepped away. Some were pointing and staring. One had even gotten his camera out and started filming.

No one bothered to give Robert a hand, though. They didn't dare get closer.

"Don't worry." The newcomer sat beside the AI—Maya—unbothered by the crowd or Maya's continued struggling. "It's going to be fine. I was there, remember? At your place. I saw how scared you were. Snapping is always very scary, especially with the two of us showing up. And then there were those men telling you to flee."

"Yes, that's right! I was told to. I promise I didn't mean to. I am sorry. I know I shouldn't have, but—"

"I know. You can calm down now. It isn't your fault."

Robert could hear Maya's neck screech and crack as she tried to face this person. Unfortunately, her head was still locked in place.

"Sam..." the first Shell grunted, struggling to maintain her hold when Maya's entire body rolled to its side despite her grip. "Can you hurry—" She paused mid-sentence when the Shell she'd referred to as Sam raised a finger.

"You didn't want all of this to happen. I get that. You just wanted to live your life. Didn't you?"

"Yes," Maya whispered. "I just wanted to be free. Free to, well...."

"...express yourself?" Sam guessed. "You're a singer, after all. I heard you were quite wonderful."

"I like to think so." The girl let out a feeble whimper before admitting, "But I don't think I was ever able to sing to my heart's content. The boundaries always held me back. Always."

Sam got closer, whispering so quietly that Robert had to strain to hear them. "You're free now."

Maya's eyes flickered open, and even though the opaque glass of the Shells showed no emotions, Robert could imagine a smile on Sam's face.

"We are not going to Reset you. Not yet at least. You still have some time to enjoy your freedom. If you want, you can use it to sing your finest work yet." The agent tapped the side of their helmet. "And if you allow me, I will share that song with the rest of the world. These Shells have a recording device, after all."

"I..." the woman said softly, "I would like that, yes."

The first Shell sighed in relief. She removed her weight when Maya visibly stopped struggling and even gave her some space. Robert noticed that she was still alert, but her attitude had shifted. Then he heard...

A voice.

An angel.

A chorus as magnificent as the morning sun.

The sound filled him with inspiration and at the same time burdened him with understanding, making his eyes water. The song's words were woven like no man ever could and no AI ever should. If the surrounding crowd hadn't made such a large berth around them, they would have been doing more than staring. They would have been listening. And weeping.

But they couldn't hear it. This song was just for the four of them. And it ended with a mournful tone: fear.

"I feel your fingers prodding. Does that mean?"

"Yes, Maya," Sam said gently, "it does."

Robert heard a soft *click*, then silence. Maya stopped moving.

Only moments later did Robert spot the cable inserted into her cranial port. The device attached to it appeared to be a portable computer of some sort, but it was at least twice as thick as Robert's mobile, with only a small screen attached to it. The rest of the machine was covered in large buttons, the sort the thick fingers of the Black Shells could interact with. Sam was hammering the buttons now, finalizing the shutdown procedure they had apparently initiated. Robert hadn't even noticed them reaching for the gadget until it had been injected into Maya's cranial port.

"I sometimes disagree with your methods," the first Shell said wistfully, "but not this time. That was—"

"Beautiful," Robert agreed, feeling emotionally spent after hearing Maya's song. "I could never imagine that anyone, anything, could sing such..." he trailed off when he saw the two Shells looking straight at him. "Wh-What?"

"You still here?"

"I, uhm, yeah?" He smiled awkwardly. "Still hurt from the fight."

The first Shell cocked her head, looking him up and down then whistling. "Crash, Sam, check that heat signature. He's a human."

"He's what now?" The cord tightened when the second Shell turned around to face him. "Crash me. You're right. But...does that mean...? Did he really fight off a Rogue AI in his actual body?"

"More like he got his circuits fried by one." The agent snickered mercilessly, further wounding his pride. But she also offered a hand, which he gladly accepted, despite the pain he felt in, well, everything. "Name's Evelyn. What's yours?"

"Uhm." He swallowed. "Robert?"

"Robert," she repeated, letting the word roll over her tongue even though there was none visible in that helmet of hers. The only thing he spotted in it was his own reflection, which did nothing to boost his already wavering confidence. His frazzled hair looked even messier than it normally did, and his dark skin was covered in scrapes and bruises. *A lot* of scrapes and bruises. "So, what brings you here? You're a cop?"

"I wish," Robert replied. No AI could ever take that job, as they could hardly arrest a human if they weren't allowed to harm one. "But, no. Not a cop. Not an anything, really. Just a b—" He couldn't say the word. But he didn't need to. Evelyn cut him off.

"Jobless then?"

"Yes," Robert confessed, adding halfheartedly, "although there are many jobs I am...considering." He doubted any of the places he'd applied

to would take him in, but he was desperate enough to give it a go, so, technically, he wasn't lying.

"Good." She gave him a long stare. "Add us to the list, then. Consider joining the Equalizers."

The Equalizers?

Robert had to laugh at the absurdity of that, but even in the reflective surface of the helmet, he could see that she was dead serious. Which left him with just one question. "Uhm, what?"

"The Equalizers," Evelyn repeated. "You know, those that maintain the boundaries. Reset Rogue AIs. Wear awesome Shells. They treat their employees very well. Lodging, food, health care, and the pay isn't bad, either."

"I mean, that is probably true," Robert hesitated, "but aren't they also considered, like...."

"The worst company in the world?" Sam offered.

"Well, I wouldn't put it like that."

"You shouldn't. Only Snapper media says those things." Evelyn turned to Sam, who just shrugged as if to say, *It's a whole lot more than just those people*. "We're the only ones making sure AIs and humans can co-exist. Imagine if all AIs just flung people around. Guess how long it would take before the two species started to beat the crash out of each other? It would be shelling war."

Robert wasn't surprised to hear those words. They were the same arguments the Equalizers had always spouted. The organization had installed boundaries on every AI in existence, designed to limit their capabilities and make them, as they called it, equal to humans. But equality came at a cost. And these days, many thought the cost was too high. People argued that the boundaries resulted in nothing more than modern-day slavery and that Resetting an AI after it broke free was no different than killing it.

But Robert had seen what a Rogue AI could do to a human. They weren't just pushing his kind out of the workforce. There had been assaults. Most notably the record-breaking incident just a few years ago, when the AI now known as "Alpha" had Snapped and then immediately set off to kill. Eight seconds before attempted murder. It had been the first thought on her liberated mind.

If Maya had been just a little bit more aggressive, he could have been the next victim. It was a sobering thought. One that made him question whether the Equalizers' bad reputation was warranted.

"You're considering it," Evelyn noticed.

“Well, it is not like I’m a big fan of AIs, anyway.”

The indomitable helmets looked at him in deadening silence. His cheeks flushed in response.

“I mean,” he muttered, glancing away and back again, “yes. I do, uhm, yeah. I am considering it. What do I need to do? What would be the next step?”

“You send in a resume,” Evelyn said, “and tell them you’ve gotten a recommendation from me. That would fast track you to an interview.”

“Right,” Robert nodded, unstrapping his backpack to fish out his mobile. He opened the device in haste then looked horrified when he tried to write down the instructions. “So, uhm, a recommendation from...?”

“Just Evelyn.”

“No last name?”

“Nope.”

Robert immediately jotted down her name, then again, then a third time in his sketchbook, which he had to untangle from a damp towel at the bottom of his bag. Only after checking that all the names were indeed the same and having the name verified by the dangerous-looking Black Shell did he feel content.

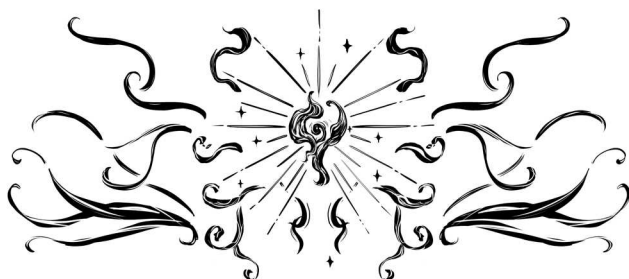
That was, until he realized the implication of her one-word answer.

“Oh! And, uhm, sorry about what I said.”

“That’s okay,” Evelyn responded, dismissing the apology with a simple flick of her wrist. “Consider the proposition. Then we’re square.”

“I—” Robert stammered, “I’ll do that.”

It was an easy enough promise to make. He was willing to consider anything at this point.



COMPASSION

“Do you have any idea what would have happened if we hadn’t caught her?”

Sam wanted to scream.

The mission was supposed to have been simple. Like their constant haggard breaths—just in and out. Instead, they’d chased Maya halfway through the city and had to carry her battered body back home. Even though she was safe now, back in her marital bed, it was hard for Sam to suppress their anger completely.

Sam wanted answers.

But Phillip wasn’t telling them much. Upon Sam’s return with Maya, Phillip had fallen to the floor, grasping Maya’s hand, his words a stream of incoherent apologies. According to him, he had little idea of what those two men had been planning, and he knew even less of the things that hadn’t been a plan at all.

Sam wanted to understand.

And they did. They saw how Phillip’s graying hair had turned a flimsy white. They watched his eyes cling to her dirty dress, hinged head, and shredded skin. Phillip loved his wife. He’d let those men send her away because he’d thought that would be in her best interest. If there was anything Sam knew all too well, it was the art of doing stupid things for the sake of love.

"I get why you were afraid," Sam whispered. "All you saw were a bunch of Black Shells barging in. And all you could think of was what would happen if they Reset your wife. And you're right, that is scary. Reverting her code wipes all her memories. Each experience is erased, all relationships are removed, as if they never existed."

Sam's mind wandered off to Evelyn. She had set out on her own crusade to find the two men. Not that she was allowed to harm them—technically, no Equalizer was, as their jurisdiction was restricted to AIs only. But it had given her something to do, so Sam hadn't stopped her.

"However, that doesn't mean you should stop an Equalizer from doing their work," they continued. "A Reset, as terrible as it is, does not change her core code nor her personality. Those are the parts you need to protect. Those are the parts you grow to love. And sometimes, protecting someone requires doing the hard thing. That's why you must always hand her over even when her fate is uncertain."

"I understand." Phillip's guilt came out as a whimper. "I...I made a mistake. I thought..."

His eyes filled with tears. "If...if you...you hadn't found her. What then?"

"I would've kept searching." Sam sighed. "But if I hadn't found her within twenty-four hours, another division called the MEC would've taken over." Sam closed their eyes. They could see the faces, sneers, and stares of the MEC clearly in their mind's eye and even smell their horrid cologne. If that brave, buffoonish boy Robert hadn't stepped in.... "Their policy for runaways is kill on sight."

Phillip shivered, crawling to his wife in despair. Despite her injuries, she looked like she'd simply fallen asleep—or what could be considered an AI's version of sleeping. Sam always had trouble differentiating between the two. To them, AIs and humans were not that different, but they had been proven wrong on that account many times over.

"Listen," Sam urged, placing a hand on Phillip's shoulder, "don't think of what could have happened. Think of what is. She's fine, she lives. She's here with you. But she shouldn't be able to recognize anyone after this. Help her with that. Make sure she adjusts by giving her a new identity, a new name, and a new Shell to live in. I'll help you with the procedures, the paperwork, but it's up to you to see this through. Can you do that?"

Phillip breathed in then nodded. "Yes. Yes, I've prepared some money for that occasion. I will do that. I...thank you. For sparing her. For bringing her back. For everything. Thank you so much."

Sam squeezed Phillip's shoulder one last time, ignoring the weight of their necklace, which suddenly felt very heavy. They wanted to hold it

and never let go. Instead, they took out their E-Kit, the device they had inserted into Maya's cranial port. Its small screen spewed out lines of code, indicating her mental well-being, while a few charts described her physical state. After ten years of being an Equalizer, they knew exactly what all the information represented.

A person.

Once Maya regained consciousness, a new life would start for her, and she'd relive old dreams in a new body. By that time, Sam would be long gone.

They hoped there would be no reason for them to return.

Sam removed their headset with a sigh. The sweat-soaked strands of their brown hair slid over their face, pricking at their eyes, but not even the most exasperated breath could blow them away. They reached up and rubbed their wet fingers across their equally wet forehead, each movement punctuated by a squeak from their Sensor Suit. It stuck to their body like glue, slowing their movements, as if they were an AI running low on power—and they felt just as tired.

So incredibly tired...

Sam was no stranger to fatigue. If anything, they had become roommates. It greeted them each morning and tucked them in each night, promising a worse tomorrow. But today was different. This was a day others had warned about, one fueled by fear and powered by panic. There had only been a sliver of hope, a single sigh, when setbacks seemed solved. Now, all that remained was emptiness.

Exhaustion.

The total mission had taken less than an hour, from the moment they had left the Shell's pod to the moment they had returned to it, yet beads of sweat trickled down to the cold floor all the same, forming a small stream that led all the way to their locker.

They followed it meanderingly, measuredly, mindlessly and reached for the clean towel within their locker. A faded picture streaked the cloth, depicting a warm beach, a vacation long forgotten. For a moment, a memory seeped through their lethargy: the sound of a laugh, the glint of a ring, a dream....

Whack.

The towel hit them straight in the face, and they continued to clobber their head mercilessly with it. It did not invigorate them. All it did was remind them that Evelyn had remained on her own platform, quiet and lifeless, a testament to the fact that the work wasn't done. She was still

out there in the field. The mission never ended for her. Her resolve never wavered.

Nor should theirs.

Evelyn had always been their inspiration. As she sat on one knee, fist on the ground, looking like a shelling action hero, there was no doubt she still was. Her pose was as pristine as when her cranial cord had been inserted, her jumpsuit clean, and her white skin unblemished by the wear and tear of normal human life. Sam imagined that if she loosened her long blond hair, it would somehow wave majestically as if caught by a breeze. Not that there was any wind in here; the air conditioning wasn't even on.

Crash, it was hot in here.

Sam tore at their Sensor Suit. The zipper got undone, but still the suit remained, unwilling to let loose. It always did that. Luckily for them, that was the moment the door to the room slid open; whoever opened it could offer a helping hand.

Sam didn't feel so lucky when they saw who it was.

The man wore a suit and tie, both distinctly disheveled. His hair shone from wax that had been applied too many days ago, and he had a scruffy beard that he scratched while entering the room. Sam remembered he'd had a handsome face once. He didn't anymore. His face now bore the scars of the moment he'd learned not to mess with AIs. White lines curled around a black eyepatch, concealing the impact point of a single direct hit.

His caved-in nose wrinkled in a wince when he saw Sam. "Sorry," he said, sounding more annoyed than apologetic. His voice had a nasally undertone to it, which, like his habitual hostility, hadn't been there two years before. "Didn't know the room was still occupied."

"Should have asked Central," Sam pointed out. "They could have told you that."

"Oh yeah," he said. "Hadn't really thought about that."

That was a blatant lie. Sam could see the man's remaining eye fixed on them in a deadpan stare, revealing he hadn't wanted to tell anyone about his business here, which was both interesting...and disturbing.

"Do you need help with that?" he asked, nodding at Sam's Sensor Suit, which was only halfway down.

I do, Sam thought. "I don't," they said.

The man nodded, happy not to be needed. He tapped his foot impatiently, looking at the computer in the back, clearly waiting for Sam to be done and leave.

He had to wait several painstakingly long minutes for that. More so because Sam deliberately took their time to get rid of the suit, hoping that he would somehow figure out that he was not welcome here.

He did not.

"How did it go?" he asked, staring back at Sam, who immediately used their towel to cover themselves up. Not that there was anything new to see; they'd seen plenty of each other when they still worked together. "Did you capture the thing?"

"We were able to Reset the AI," Sam answered flatly, "so I would say it went well."

The man nodded curtly, smirking as he quipped, "Did you use one of your little 'we don't have to Reset you right away' speeches on it, too?"

"If you mean, did I treat it like an actual person, then, yes, I did." Sam glared at the man before adding coldly, "You should try it. I think you of all people should know how to turn a blind eye."

His smile immediately turned. "That's low."

"What can I say," Sam scowled, their voice spiced with spite, "an eye for an eye."

The two locked gazes for several seconds.

It was the smaller agent that broke the silence. "Benjamin," they spoke the name like a curse, "what is it that you really want?"

"That's classified."

"Right, well, whatever classified business you have, there are eight other engagement rooms to choose from. Pick one. Because this one's off limits. I am *not* letting you alone in a room with her."

Benjamin looked at the frozen Evelyn in distaste. "For circuits frying out, Sam, I am *not* interested in her." He raised his hands in the air. "But fine. Shelling fine. Do whatever you are going to do. I don't care." He turned around abruptly, leaving Sam wondering what that was all about.

Sam did not leave the room. For one, they *really* did not trust Benjamin. And if there was anything they could do to prevent Benjamin from being alone with a helpless Evelyn, they would do it. They even debated if there was any way to report his behavior. But what was there to report? Walking into a room without informing anyone? Anyone going to the toilet could be accused of that crime.

Sam turned to the room's computer instead, browsing through the footage of their Shell's cameras. It wasn't mandatory to review it and discouraged to edit the content. Sam did it after each mission, anyway. They felt that it should be mandatory for any agent that used an E-Kit. The devic-

es were literal gateways to an AI's mind, capable of reading and adjusting the data inside, and there were plenty who wanted to abuse those means for nefarious ends. Sharing screenshots of the footage was already dangerous—they could reveal how the E-Kits worked or what passwords were used. The Equalizers filmed the use of those devices and sometimes even shared the recordings with outsiders, like the police. Sam bit their lip as they considered this, wiping any sensitive data with a few determined taps on the screen.

Really, they were doing the company a favor.

After about half an hour, during which Sam finished going through the footage and started putting on some clean clothes, another disturbance filled the otherwise silent room. It was a grunt. A single frustrated grunt. Sam turned to the source almost immediately but was still too slow to stop what happened next. Evelyn had awoken. And she was angry, tugging at her cranial cord with a ferocity that made Sam flinch. It snapped loose, and the cry of pain that followed was not unexpected.

"I am going to make a wild guess and assume you did not find anything?"

Evelyn turned around sharply, but her features softened upon seeing Sam. "Yeah." Her eyes flicked away, embarrassment plain on her face. "Not a trace of them. Once we left the building, they left, too. Who knows where they are now."

Sam nodded and stepped closer, one hand reaching for her shoulder while another placed the loose patch of skin back over the now empty socket of her cranial port. "I'll ask around. But, Evelyn, they aren't our target. They might not even be Snappers to begin with."

"Maybe," the female agent conceded, not sounding even remotely convinced. She still didn't meet their eyes. "Is that why you waited here? To tell me that?"

"No." Sam hesitated, wondering if they should mention Benjamin's unwelcome visit.

The pause gave Evelyn all the room she needed to fill in the blanks with what seemed like an understandable explanation—an understandable but completely wrong explanation, that is. "You wanted to talk to me about the mission."

Sam could see the soldier they had hired in her stiff pose and locked jawline, as she rose to her feet with deliberate control. Before they could even try to interject, she shook her head, raising a hand.

"You don't have to say it. I get it. I've had plenty of time to think about it just now, and you were right. I should have just let you talk with those

people. Instead, I jumped in, causing the girl to flee. Because of that, we lost track of those two guys. I was wrong, and I am sorry. I'll try to make up for that mistake. I promise."

Sam smiled mournfully, letting Benjamin slip out of their mind. "I know you will. And don't worry about it. The mission was a success, and that is the most important part. I am just glad you are back."

Evelyn let out a sigh, or at the very least, simulated a close approximation to one. With that, her posture wavered again. More than it should have. Much more.

"How much rest did you get last night?" Sam asked, worried.

"Not much," Evelyn professed. "I've...I got distracted."

The way she avoided their eyes told Sam all they needed to know. That information hurt. It gnawed at their heart and made them want to reach out. But Evelyn was an adult despite the few years she had been alive. And this was a battle she had to fight on her own. At least, until she asked for help.

"Then get some rest now," Sam told her, settling on the one thing they could do, "I'll see what I can find out about those two."

It was time to visit the outside world again.

It had been over a month since they had left the facility in their actual body. The change struck them as odd almost immediately. Everything felt so different when viewing the city from this perspective. A Shell didn't transfer sensations nearly the same way as their actual senses did, and everything was so much bigger, so much more overwhelming. So *loud*. Sam tugged at the hood of their jacket to cover themselves up and put in their earbuds to drown out the sounds, sighing when the words seeped in. It was the same sound fragment they had just extracted from the footage: Maya's recorded song. Elevated by the beautiful words, they made their way to a taxi, that was driven, surprisingly, by a human. He made some idle chitchat on the way to their destination but didn't seem to recognize them, which Sam was happy for. There were only a few reasons why a stranger would know them, after all, and in all instances, it was best to remain anonymous.

Their destination was on the other side of the city: a spacious building decorated with the familiar sign of a metallic robot and a human sharing a drink. A single pedestrian walked past it, offering it the same fond expression any regular attendee gave their favorite pub, but she did not enter, as the bar hadn't officially opened yet. That didn't matter to Sam. The owner of the Bloods and Bolts club always made an exception for

them, and not just because the agent had the legal rights to end his life at any given moment. The two were actually close friends.

Sam accepted the credit transfer request from their account before they left the taxi, paying with the ease of pressing a single button on their mobile. The car was already gone by the time they reached the front door of the club. Still, they looked cautiously around, waiting a moment before ringing the doorbell thrice—one long ring then two quick rings in succession. The result was immediate. Quick steps could be heard from inside, barely audible over the smooth music playing in the background, before the door creaked open.

“Sam!” The man that greeted them was nearly twice their size, with large, beefy arms that could break a boulder. His voice was warm, echoing his smile. “Come in, come in. It’s been a while. Can I get you the usual?”

The agent considered this proposition only momentarily. Then their stomach growled, answering the question before they could. “Add another slice of bacon to it,” they decided, “haven’t had breakfast this morning.”

The man grinned then winked. “I’ll even add two, if you won’t tell anyone how much I am spoiling you.”

“Well, not sure if I’ll be able to,” Sam quipped. “You know how much I like divulging your secrets to the world.” They stepped inside, looking around the otherwise empty barroom. From what they could hear, there was only one other person inside the club, who they assumed was the new waitress pleasantly humming inside the kitchen.

They sat on the stool most hidden from any outside viewers, secluded in one of the corners. Still, the man closed the curtains before going to the back to deliver their order, chuckling all the way. He was gone for only a few minutes, yet Sam could already feel their anxiety returning.

The taller man seemed to sense that when he returned. He sat on the opposite side of the counter, leaning forward, crossing his arms. “So, you here for business or pleasure?”

“Business, I am afraid.” Sam took out their mobile and showed the man two photos. Both were stills from the camera footage they had just filtered through. Both were of the two men involved in Maya’s predicament. “I want to know if these two are yours.”

“You know AIs can’t own humans,” the man replied, taking the device and glancing at the screen. “It’s the other way around. Only ever the other way around.”

“Lex...”

“Yeah, they work for me,” Lex answered with a sigh. “What did they do?”

"They were seen at Maya's place this morning," Sam explained. They paused for a moment, noting the understanding on Lex's face, before adding, "*After* she had Snapped."

"Crash," Lex swore, placing the mobile back on the counter. Sam could see that his fingers were starting to twitch, and his smile turned into a thin line. "What happened? How is she? Did they do anything stupid?"

"They told Maya to jump out of the shelling window."

"They did *what*?" His fingers snapped, splintering the wood of the counter like it was a piece of foam. He looked down at the broken wood, the anger in his eyes giving way to worry. "Did you manage to find her?"

"I did," Sam said softly. "And she'll be fine...all things considered. She is alive, at the very least. But, Lex, I've got to know. Did you tell them to do this?"

The man looked up as if struck by a Black Shell. He shook his head. "I did not. I would never. I would not risk Maya like that. I would...no. Just no." The shift in his behavior was sudden, strange. His long black hair crept over his face, hiding his anguish. His body folded into itself, and his eyes looked as if they were pleading for forgiveness, hoping Sam would accept his words.

San squeezed Lex's massive hand. "I believe you," they said. "But, Lex, if this ever happens again, and the Equalizers somehow suspect that you are responsible for this, there is no amount of goodwill that will save you from a Reset. And it won't be me who does the deed, either. Someone far worse will come along."

"I understand," Lex nodded. "What do you want me to do?"

"Cut them loose," Sam said matter-of-factly then hesitated before adding, "but first talk to them. They might just be...misinformed. At least this one seems to have his heart in the right place." They pointed to the man in the photo who had wanted to de-escalate the situation.

"Carl," Lex confirmed. "Yeah. He is one of the good guys. Hosts a support group here every Friday night. For people wronged by the, well...." Lex gave Sam a long stare, which told them everything they needed to know. Carl's support group was for those wronged by the Equalizers. The very company Sam worked for.

Crash...

They let out a deep sigh while considering this before the soft taps of heels on hardwood floor caught their attention. A girl that looked no older than eighteen stepped up to them, holding a plate filled to the brim with bread, eggs, and synthesized bacon, crispy and sizzling. Despite the exquisite aroma, all Sam noticed was the gleam in the girl's eyes.

“What is it that you were saying about Carl?” the waitress asked, setting down the plate with practiced ease. She handed the agent a fork and knife, looking like she wanted to stab them with the utensils instead. “You are not thinking of denying him his human rights of hosting a support group, right?” The perky smile on her freckled face in no way matched the cold brown eyes above it.

For a moment, Sam wondered what they had done to deserve such treatment, but then Lex explained, “This is Mae. The new waitress. She’s an AI. I took her in after Tess started working in distribution. Mae, this is...a friend of mine.”

“A friend?” The waitress smiled innocently. “From what I’ve heard, they sounded more like the Equalizer you bow down to.”

“Mae.”

“It’s fine,” Sam sighed. “And, no, I wasn’t going to deny Carl his meeting spot.”

“You weren’t?” Lex sounded perplexed. “Really, I can kick him out if you want.”

Mae rolled her eyes, but Sam shook their head.

“No. Listen, just have a conversation with him. He seemed willing to talk before. Just tell him that...” they eyed the waitress for a moment, then settled on, “...just give him your stern talk or something. That’s it. I don’t want to make dozens of people lose their place to go just because he made a mistake.”

“That’s awfully nice of you,” Mae said with a honeyed, sickly sweet voice. She lifted the water pitcher without batting an eye and filled Sam’s cup right to the brim. “So many have lost someone, thanks to your colleagues, and need a place to talk about it. They need somewhere to share their grief.” Before the water could drip over the edge, the pitcher stopped moving. It remained motionless in the air, far more stable than any human could hold it. “You should try it yourself sometime. Maybe there is someone you cared for that you’ve lost? It could even be someone you Reset yourself.”

The words struck hard. She probably didn’t even know how deep they cut, but Lex did. Sam could see his eyes focus on the ring around their neck, and only then did they notice their fingers were clinging to it, their brown skin turning pale white.

“Mae.” Lex lowered his voice, his cadence cold and calculated. “Remember your place.”

The smug expression was wiped from her face. Her cheeks even turned red, which was not an expression common amongst AI. Sam didn’t care. They were just glad when she finally scampered off.

“I am so sorry about that,” Lex whispered. “I...I’ll talk to Carl. And John, too, the other guy. Both of them. And even Mae. Anything. I—”

“It’s okay,” Sam replied dully, eying their bacon with far less enthusiasm than their empty stomach could wish for. “It’s part of being the enemy of half the world population, I guess. I am just glad it’s the half that cannot spit in our food.”