“A Drop of Sun”: Utopia and Ruin in a New Postcolony

by

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Character List

Main Characters:

Alana Michelle Lucas

An inquisitive girl who, as a child of 6 in the Hive, suffered hearing loss due to her proximity to the explosion that destroyed Genesis. In 2180, at the beginning of this story, she is 16 and is enrolled in the Academy. She lives with the other students in the Dormitory.

Romi James

Alana’s best friend and confidant, she is a headstrong student at the Academy in 2180. Though she currently lives in the Dormitory, she remains close with her father, an ex-Militia mechanic who raised her alone following her mother’s death in the Disaster 10 years ago.

Beor Secondat

A descendant of the first scientists to colonize Talos and a friend of Alana and Romi. Beor enjoys near-aristocratic status due to his father Baron’s status as a senior government official who helped guide the economic recovery following the Disaster. During his time at the Academy, he has spent his time researching the city’s history.

The Voice

A mysterious, ethereal presence that communes with Alana via the artificial intelligence of her hearing implant. It purports to be a collection of the androids’ consciousnesses, left disembodied following the destruction of Genesis in 2170.

Akeel (1-KL)
Until the Disaster of 2170, Akeel was the android overseer of Genesis. He served as the administrator of the production process, assigning new androids roles within the workforce.

Omar (0-MR)

A former military navigator and reconnaissance operative who served in the last human-android contingent of the Militia. After the Militia’s restructuring, he was retrained as a glorified driver and escorted the highest-profile citizens of Talos to their destinations.

Sarangi (SRN-3)

One of the earliest androids ever produced, Sarangi was an Archivist—a historian who kept records of the city’s androids, their roles in the municipal workforce, and their eventual decommissioning. As of 2170, she had few interactions with humans, choosing to remain in the Archives.

Elicia (LEC-1)

A Caretaker android who served as nanny, teacher, and chaperone for human children. Before the Disaster of 2170, she was assigned to the Lucas household.

Peripheral Characters:

Ms. Renee McDonald

Alana, Romi, and Beor’s homeroom teacher at the Academy in 2180.

Dr. Charles Schmitt

A technically-trained scientist and a high-powered bureaucrat. He heads the Committee to Preserve State Unity in 2180.

Major Bill Stuntz

As of 2170, he was the Militia officer delegated to assess android readiness and functionality. He was cybernetically augmented after suffering an injury in the line of duty as a soldier in the Talosian Independence Struggle, extending his lifespan.
Leader Mark Buchanan

By 2170, the retired Chief Executive Officer of LevitiCorp and political Leader of the city. A great believer in order and stability, he doggedly pursued prosperity and security while he was in office.

Dex (2-DX)

An assistant in a doctor’s office in 2170 who was brought in to deliver X-rays and injections with superhuman precision.

Farhan (4-HN)

Part of the tiny contingent of androids that worked within LevitiCorp in 2170 as network operatives and programming analysts.
“I am in total fusion with the world, in sympathetic affinity with the earth, losing my id in the heart of the cosmos...I am black, not because of a curse, but because my skin has been able to capture all the cosmic effluvia. I am truly a drop of sun under the earth.”

—Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*
If one were to gaze down at the city-state of Talos, it would be impossible to discern that a unified political body existed. It was made up of four quadrants, discrete geographic bodies on the scattered islands that had once been the country of Iceland, each segregated from its surroundings through a combination of natural and artificial means. Bathed in languid morning sunlight, its central sector—the Hive—was a dazzling spectacle: a city of glass and gold and stone, it was nestled in the bodice of a sprawling mountain range and arranged in three rough concentric circles. At the center of the innermost ring loomed an immense glass tower; beneath the glass tower lay a laboratory; and in the laboratory stood a broad-chested man in a white coat.

“Welcome, everybody,” the man drawled as he watched students file into the facility. “My name is Dr. Charles Schmitt, and I’m pleased to have you here to join us at the commemorative reopening of the Genesis facility. The lab has been painstakingly recreated to be identical to its earlier incarnation, so unfortunately, we don’t have seating for you—but feel free to sit on the floor if that’s more comfortable than standing. We’ll be watching a video to begin our program.”

As she entered, Alana Lucas cast her eyes over the expanse in front of her. The room was spacious and minimalistic, its surfaces all white and chrome. An array of bathtub-like fixtures rimmed the round wall, and above each, a display protruded from the ceiling. All the screens were blank. Thin stands with basic keyboards atop them were positioned in front of each vat. In the center of the laboratory, behind Dr. Schmitt, a massive display hung suspended in midair. The monitor curved delicately, and at its base
was a single round chair at the right height for a user to navigate the screen. At the farthest end of the room was a map of Talos connected to a metal spike that jutted up from the floor. Alana recognized the apparatus from her textbooks: it was a transmission pillar, a device via which information could be sent instantaneously to any other pillar through the city’s digital network.

A tap on her shoulder broke Alana’s focus and she turned, startled, to see Romi’s grinning face. “Hey, sister.”

Alana laughed and hugged her friend. “Hey, what are you doing here? I thought your dad didn’t want you coming!”

Romi shrugged, her tight black curls bouncing. “I snuck over from the Dormitory,” she said. “I think I can avoid being indoctrinated by one field trip.” She gestured at Alana’s head. “Nice headgear! Birthday present?”

Alana touched her aural implant self-consciously. “It’s just a new model,” she responded. “The upper register of my old earset was on the blink. Had to make sure I could hear everything.”

“It looks sleek, girl!” Romi smiled. “You’re the only person I know who can make a hearing aid into an opportunity to accessorize. Installation go okay?”

“Yes, it was quick. Only hurt for a second.” Alana looked around the room, which was now filled with her classmates. “Have you seen Beor? I bet he’s hyperventilating, what with all this android tech to stare at.”

Romi rolled her eyes. “He wouldn’t shut up last night. Kept talking about his dad’s government contracts to recover the lost data. I hope he’s a little calmer today.”

As if on cue, a shorter boy elbowed through the crowd and sidled up to the girls. He had prominent cheekbones speckled with freckles and his auburn hair spilled over his
ears. Though he wore the same nondescript collared shirt and slacks as the other students, he’d left the top few buttons of his uniform unbuttoned, exposing the small gold sigil hanging from his neck.

“Tell me you both already checked out the transmission pillar,” he whispered conspiratorially.

Romi’s lips narrowed. “I’ve seen one before, Beor,” she sniped. “It’s just a glorified messenger service.”

“But the history!” he replied, spreading his arms. “Back in the day, androids used to use ’em to go places. Anytime an android needed to get somewhere, he’d just come on down, plug into the transmission pillar, and zap! The thing would just suck his programming and his consciousness and his mind and send ’em in a little electric bundle to his destination. And it’d get sucked into a transmission terminal there and downloaded into another body of the same model and poof! The android would be somewhere else. That’s a marvel of modern science if I’ve ever seen one.”

Alana shuddered. “The idea of waking up in another body freaks me out,” she said. “Even if it looked the same as this one, and worked the same, I’d just feel…loose, I guess. Untethered.”

Beor shrugged. “Well, it’s not like they were zapping humans back and forth. Just the AI. Wouldn’t work for a person.”

“Alright, class, settle down!” Ms. McDonald clapped her hands, hushing the clamoring students. “We’re very lucky to be joining the Committee to Preserve State Unity as they introduce their memorial to android power today. Dr. Schmitt is going to speak and show us a video, and then there will be a chance to ask some questions. Please be
respectful of the presentation and remember to take notes! We'll be going over some of this material in the coming weeks.”

“Thank you, Renee,” Dr. Schmitt purred as he stepped forward. “Well, again, welcome to the new Genesis facility, everybody. Ten years after the Disaster, we’re delighted to have come this far in our rebuilding efforts. The city is recovering nicely; most of our citizens are gainfully employed in efforts to improve our domestic security and stability, we’ve increased trade with the nations of the world, and regular elections have improved morale among the people. I’m delighted to have the opportunity to educate the newest generation of Talosians about the history of our glorious city.” The man reached into his coat pocket and brought out a small remote. “Let’s proceed with the program!” He hit a button and the lights dimmed. Behind him, the screen in the center of the lab powered up.

An animation began playing, depicting a crowded city corner. Cartoon pedestrians strode confidently on the sidewalk, pushing past each other as the iconic tickertape of the New York Stock Exchange revolved above their heads. “On the eve of the new millennium,” intoned a deep voice, “the United States of America was a technological and economic giant. The advent of the internet lubricated the flow of human capital across borders. Businesses explored new practices to increase their revenues. The future of mankind was written in the language of programming.” A picture of the American flag filled the screen. The camera zoomed in on its stripes, showing that they were made up of thousands of lines of red computer code.

“As it became clear that the fate of both business and society was intertwined with that of technology, the United States government began funding its own independent research and development operations,” the narrator continued. “Public-private
partnerships were formed: the government began receiving raw data from all manner of companies in exchange for grant money. Fitness metrics were made available to federal agents. All-purpose search histories were compiled and delivered to Washington, D.C. Health records, social network presences, metadata—the United States government had, at its fingertips, population data that would have astounded any other civilization in time.”

The code on the screen began reshaping into anthropomorphic figures. Alana shivered. Invasive information-gathering made her grateful for Talos’s guaranteed right to privacy. In the Hive, the only people who ever watched others were the Militiamen ensconced in the Tower—and their lookout posts existed solely to maintain the safety of the city’s residents.

“With the biodata it had compiled, the United States was able to launch its most transformative technological endeavor since sending a man to the moon: the Genesis Project.” A new image materialized on the screen: lying prone on a table was a motionless cartoon man with a cord plugged into his skull. “The first experiments to artificially model human behavior were conducted with volunteers, adults who consented to the possibility of their preferences and interactions shifting as a function of the process. But it rapidly became clear that mature brains were far too rigid for scientists to replace memories of experiences with code.” The man on the screen began shaking and smoke leaked from his head. Animated scientists scurried across the monitor with their hands held aloft in distress, crashing into equipment and collapsing on the floor.

“What’s a volunteer, though?” Romi asked. Alana turned to her friend, whose eyebrow was cocked skeptically. “I heard they used to lie to prisoners and poor people about what they were doing and experiment on them.”
Beor snorted. “Ridiculous. I’m sure it was all above board.” The two girls peered at him. He lounged on the floor, fingering his family sigil.

“You don’t believe that the United States would have taken advantage of people who couldn’t defend themselves?” Romi challenged.

Beor threw his head back and gawked at the ceiling in mock consideration. “No, Romi, I don’t think the U.S. government could have gotten away with that,” he sneered. “And I don’t think the CPSU is lying to us about that now. You know my dad helped put this video together, right?”

“Yes,” the girls groaned in unison.

Beor grinned. “So, admit that I know better.”

Romi smacked him on the arm and started to respond, but Alana laid her hands on both of her friends’ shoulders to still them. “Shh! I’m trying to watch.”

“The United States was forced to look into alternative accommodations,” the speaker was murmuring, and a hush fell over the room.

“It took several years to acquire the relevant permissions to proceed to the next stage of tests, but eventually backchannel bureaucracy led to a streamlined approval, and the Genesis Project received new subjects: public charge children, wards of the state who had no families or relatives.” The screen went black, as if the filmmakers were ashamed of the heinous actions of these long-dead American scientists.

“Above board,” Romi smirked to Beor, who rolled his eyes.

“Not long after the tests commenced, a whistleblower leaked live footage of a child being forcibly restrained and sedated before a session to several news outlets, resulting in the infamous Child Riots of 2049. Public interest groups and advocacy organizations that had long been at odds led joint demonstrations against the government’s covert activities.”
Old video footage of the demonstrations began playing. Protesters waved signs with anti-government slogans on them: “End State Violence,” “My Baby is Not Your Lab Rat,” “Life Matters.” Young women sporting bandanas and rifles led packs of masked agitators. A clip played where one of these bands stormed, guns drawn, into an austere-looking state house. The harsh crack of gunshots arose from the monitor’s speakers, followed by harrowing screams.

“There were government and civilian casualties. The Genesis Project was shelved for more than ten years.” More animations filled the screen: factory workers scribbling on clipboards as forklifts pushed human bodies onto rows with dismantled auto parts. Alana peeked over at her companions. Romi had her hands over her mouth, her shock momentarily puncturing her laidback veneer, while Beor sat rapt with attention, his eyes glued to the documentary.

“But in 2060, a Finnish scientist and historiographer began posting about the abandoned project in online chat forums under the screen name “Tiimalasi,” claiming that he had solved the moral problem. His answer was still a controversial one: stem cells.” Basic diagrammatic drawings of cells and embryos came into view. Arrows flowed from the cells to various organs in the human body. “Tiimalasi pointed out that stem cells could, under the proper environmental conditions, be induced to develop any organic function that the human body needed replicated. He argued that this mutability made them ideal vehicles to carry and respond to programming. Stem cells had regenerative qualities which made them resistant to the kinds of physiological trauma that adult human brains underwent during the reprogramming process, and they were incapable of experiencing the emotional and mental trauma that some subjects had been through. The discovery reenergized the stagnant program—and given the controversies swirling about the
government’s efforts to develop biotechnology, a new facility needed to be built. So the United States sent a hand-picked team of developers and scientists into the mountain ranges of Esjan, a once-well-known, water-locked, and secluded volcanic ridge about ten kilometers north of the former city of Reykjavik.”

Alana watched as a time-lapse video ran through a simulation of the disruption of the Icelandic isles. Animated earthquakes shook up basalt and turf, creating unsafe breathing conditions and sending tiny Scandinavian figures scrambling for cover. The voiceover spoke tonelessly while the cartoonish island was wracked with tectonic shifts. “The environmental degradation which decimated Iceland resulted in dangerous fissures that had pulled Esjan away from the rest of the isles, making it perfect for experiments involving sensitive information.” Alana glimpsed Beor smirking in her peripheral vision, but ignored him.

“The first facility was quietly opened in the winter of 2062,” said the narrator. “The volcanic ash made breathing conditions poor, so on-site scientists constructed a subterranean facility, tucked away in a nondescript valley.” Footage from a body-mounted camera showed a figure struggling to descend a set of crudely-hewn stone steps through raging gales of snow. “They named the facility after the project that had started it all: Genesis.”

Dr. Schmitt paused the video. “The woman you just watched power through inclement weather to get to work was my own paternal grandmother,” he beamed, gesturing at the screen. “She was diligent and dedicated to scientific progress—an example we can all aspire toward. As a member of the first contingent of scientists to settle down here, her journals and records provided a great deal of background information that
proved crucial during this documentary’s production.” He resumed the video as the body-cam footage concluded.

“Initially, the Genesis scientists pitched a small, makeshift camp above the facility, expecting a short stay. But as the project picked up steam, their tasks grew more complex. In temperature-controlled sympoietic vats, stockpiles of stem cells were introduced to foreign mechanical components in order to develop vehicles for the metadata-based programs. Initial experiments failed, but eventually, the Genesis scientists perfected a model: a marriage of stem cells and cybernetic materials that grew together, fitting and recombining within the vats until they formed the Shell of the first android.” An understated pride crept into the narrator’s tone as a fresh picture formed on the screen.

This time it was a video of Genesis, awash in the dull orange light of an incubator. The displays encircling the room were functioning, depicting metrics and statistical charts. At one of the keyboard kiosks, a figure in a white lab coat was hunched over, fiddling with the controls. The screen hanging above his head was emblazoned with glowing red text: “Organic matter determined defective. Dispose?” The scientist tapped a key and the vat in front of him emitted a suctioning sound. Whoever was holding the camera—and this time it was handheld, not body-mounted—approached the vat and pointed the camera down into its depths. The oblong was roughly eight feet long and six feet wide, and bits of unidentifiable material dredged at the bottom of its closing drain. As she stared at the grisly image, Alana felt a wave of pain thrum through her skull, emanating from her aural implant. She clutched her head as she squeezed her eyes shut and waited for it to pass, covering the implant with her palm.

When she opened her eyes, an animation was coming to life on the screen: an anthropomorphic body assembled bit by bit, its endoskeleton made of a metal-reinforced
bone polymer. Layer upon layer draped over the skeleton: first circuitry, then muscle and tendon, then skin; all synthetic. The final product looked just inhuman enough to be jarring: it had small displays exposed in each forearm, its ribs and spine were perceptibly metallic and particularly protruding (as well as its pelvic girdle, which lacked genitalia), and an optical panel obscured the region of its face where a human would have had eyes and a nose. Its skin tone was an even matte black, but it had ridges along the underlying bone structure that glistened with a sheen of white. At each temple, there was a small, oscillating circle; a warm light glowed there for a moment before fading, as though photons were fleeing from the figure’s forehead every time it exhaled. The model slowly rotated on the screen, and Alana could see metal ridges behind each ear cavity and at the base of the skull, where a four-holed outlet—a quad-jack—was located. It pivoted again until the front was facing the screen and then, superimposed upon it, another figure emerged. They separated until they stood immobile, side by side, and the models began reshaping. The one on the left broadened at the shoulder and narrowed at the hip, its upper arms, legs, and neck gaining girth; the one on the right swelled in the center of the chest and thinned at the waist before flaring again at the hip. Each of the androids now more resembled a human, and each distinctly presented as if it were masculine or feminine.

“These were the first,” the recording said. “All-purpose models. Later android designs were more customized for the tasks that they would be performing.” The monitor paraded a wider variety of androids in quick succession, some with lankier limbs or broader torsos. “Without any programming inputted into them, these bodies were simple vessels called Shells. To animate them, a small company called LevitiCorp formed a partnership with the Genesis Project to develop android consciousness packages: the decision protocols.” An unseen hand drew a flourishing letter L on the monitor. An envelope then
slid from the cursive I to a blockish letter G. “LevitiCorp developed several decision protocols that allowed for autonomy and rigidity in an android’s mind, and Genesis scientists loaded the proper protocols into the awaiting Shells.”

The screen faded to black for a moment before the camera lit upon a tight grouping of trees, within which a concrete compound was tucked snugly. “A small wooded preserve ringed by waterfalls was enough to separate LevitiCorp from the remnants of Reykjavik—the refineries and factories that now make up Zone 4. The metropolis’s crumbling infrastructure provided some foundations which LevitiCorp’s Engineers were able to take advantage of. With Tiimalasi’s assistance, they accessed the troves of metadata that the U.S. government had accumulated and developed complex bundles of artificial intelligence. These decision protocols had two functions. The first granted basic rationality—that is, it allowed an android to comprehend simple functions, cause and effect, and cost-benefit calculations. The second function was a machine-learning faculty which enabled androids to garner experience, providing context to inform their decisions.”

Alana turned to Beor pointedly. “Has your dad seen these old programs?” she whispered.

“No,” he responded quietly. Romi leaned closer to them to listen in, her eyes still glued to the screen. “After the company was absorbed by the government and he was put in charge, they went searching for any records of the decision protocols, but they didn’t find anything. The Disaster fried the computers in both Genesis and LevitiCorp. But he says that they’re close to a breakthrough at the new Leviticus facility that might end up in them coming up with a viable decision protocol of their own.”

“No all they need is an android to stick it in,” Romi said drily, and Beor scowled.
“They still have all the androids in the Archives! They’re just deactivated, they’re not gone,” he retorted, but Alana and Romi had already turned their attention back to the video.

“Once conscious, androids swiftly became the predominant means of production around Genesis,” the narrator said. “At first, their duties were elementary: fetching water, reciting records, and the like. But their ability to work and their greater-than-human strength inevitably resulted in a larger share of the distribution of labor. Nomadic android parties were sent out to scavenge for food and construct shelter. Eventually, the Genesis Project tasked them with incorporating what is now Zone 3, the Economic Sector. They set up basic agriculture and extracted natural resources from the mineral-rich isles in the north. Unbothered by the lingering volcanic ash around Esjan, androids made excellent field hands and overseers.” An animation of a box-shaped robot waddling into a dusty meadow took shape. The cartoon’s hands retracted and fans emerged from its arms. It began clearing the dust from the air, eliciting laughter from several students.

“Soon, it became clear that it would be possible—and necessary—to construct a permanent settlement around Genesis. Again, android power proved invaluable. With the addition of mechanical labor, constructing the Hive became an easy task.”

The screen depicted the base of the Esjan range. Evidently, several months had passed; the clouds of volcanic ash were gone, and black figures were scaling the cliffs, hacking away at them and loosening rocks. The camera swiveled, providing a panoramic view of a leveled plain with foundations barely protruding from the ground. It came to a halt pointed directly at an android that was approaching, carrying an enormous slab of pale red stone. Alana gasped and Romi tittered behind her, but she ignored the teasing; it was a breathtaking sight.
“But while the Genesis Project was enjoying considerable advancements, the United States government was growing uneasy with its investment. New uses for the androids were being discovered every day, and U.S. bureaucrats felt as though affairs were slipping from their control.” Photographs of government officials deliberating in the White House materialized, forming a collage. “Their first orders to decommission the Genesis facility were met with significant resistance from the ground team, who ignored the orders. U.S. diplomats supplicated the head scientists for weeks, to no avail. Then, hidden from the public eye, the government dispatched a covert team to assassinate the leaders of the Genesis Project and halt its progress.”

The screen turned pitch-black except for the odd flash or explosion. Rapid gunfire emanated from the speakers, and the whistle of mortar shells could be heard. The student all shrank from the screen from reflex. It was over quickly, but the scene left Alana shivering with apprehension, clutching at her aural implant. Her head throbbed.

“Luckily for Genesis, the soldiers were rebuffed. The scientists, familiar with American tactics, had prepared several hundred androids for such an incidence and had organized for them to be trained in military strategy. The force was able to repel the Americans, largely using the advantage of surprise.” A photo of a battered android appeared, pockmarked and riddled with bullet holes. It was missing a leg and held a crudely beaten medallion of copper suspended by a ribbon.

“The United States charged the Genesis scientists and LevitiCorp’s owners with treason,” the narrator intoned solemnly. “They were accused of defecting with proprietary military technology, and a furious government marshaled invasion plans. Meanwhile, the scientists of the Genesis Project prepared for conflict with the greatest martial power in the history of the world. A fifth, temporary sector, Zone 0, was born, where weaponry and
defense technology were produced at frantic rates. Defenses were erected around the Hive's borders: a wall surrounding the Residential District with turrets mounted along it, anti-aircraft towers, human-accelerated erosion of the shoreline to make the area less accessible. And the Militia was incorporated as well: a joint force of the few humans who had served in the U.S. military before embarking on the quest for scientific discovery, as well as the contingent of android troops.” Birds-eye camera footage showed rows and rows of androids marching through the mountains carrying long-nosed rifles. A few humans were scattered in their ranks, usually situated near the back.

Alana glanced at Romi. She was staring intently at the monitor with clenched teeth, her jaw strained. Alana reached out to touch her shoulder in a gesture of comfort. Romi’s father had served in the Militia but had sustained terrible injuries that made it impossible for him to work, and his family had suffered for it, left bereft of any assistance. Alana had heard Romi curse the Militia on multiple occasions; she blamed them for her family’s struggles, and the jingoistic rhetoric in the video had clearly upset her.

“The city quickly stockpiled a formidable arsenal, and before long, the Militia deployed in war theaters across the world, striking proactively and surgically at U.S.-held territories. It was a terrible conflict of attrition, designed specifically to dissuade the United States from staging an invasion—and after several demonstrations of the nearly invincible android soldiers, the U.S. government abandoned their plans in the face of massive public outcry. They resorted to economic sanctions and placed an embargo on the Hive, hoping to wait the scientists out.”

Beor let out a low cheer, eliciting a few glares from the students around him. “Glory, glory, and all that,” he murmured. Alana felt Romi bristle next to her.

“‘Glory, glory?’ What’s that supposed to mean?”
The boy was unfazed. “It’s just cool to serve your country by going out there and letting androids do all the dirty work and then coming home and becoming a war hero.”

Alana groaned internally, anticipating the argument. Romi jabbed a finger into Beor’s chest, though she kept her voice low. “Shut up, Beor. Shut up. You don’t know what it’s like. Combat isn’t fun, and it isn’t glorious, and the only people taking credit they don’t deserve are the government types who sit around while people get hurt in meaningless wars.”

“Meaningless?” Beor replied incredulously. Alana tried to shush him, but both he and Romi were oblivious to her presence. “First the Independence Struggle, and then foreign skirmishes to keep other countries from attacking their own citizens? I would say that’s pretty meaningful.”

Romi was practically spitting with fury by this point, and an angry tear rolled down her cheek. “Listen to me. None of it was worth it. Talos isn’t some city on a hill where the government is civilized and takes care of its own. It’s all the same.”

“Okay, enough!” Alana interjected, and she took Romi’s hand and squeezed it. Beor tried to protest, but he was silenced as soon as Alana turned her gaze on him. “You guys need to stop arguing so that I can hear the documentary.” She stared at him and mouthed, “Apologize, later.” He sulked, but he nodded in acknowledgement.

The documentary was describing the nature of the United States’ sanctions on Talos. “The embargo did make it difficult for the Hive to function, but it also legitimated the fact that what had begun as a research initiative had grown into a full-fledged political entity. A council of senior scientists met and hastily developed a constitution for their nascent government, and after several rounds of deliberations, they nominated a candidate to serve as the city-state’s first Leader: Mark Buchanan, the Chief Executive Officer of
LevitiCorp, who had been instrumental in directing the war effort against an American
government he believed had turned to tyranny. The Council became a legislative body,
and they named the territory Talos after the mythical bronze automaton who protected
the island of Crete from invaders. Android technology had resulted in the creation of
something radical and bold.” The narrator’s voice was rife with pride, and the soaring
rhetoric was coupled with a recording of patriotic music, all horns and drums.

“By 2170, Talos was a successful state, and the Hive a bustling metropolitan center.
Following the Independence Struggle, the population surged. The workforce was uber-
efficient, allowing for greater leisure time for the denizens of the Hive. The Militia, now
expunged of android soldiers, was powerful and large. Wealth per capita was sky-high, and
the pace of technological advancement was unparalleled by any other era of human
history.” An artist-rendered image of a magnificent city of red stone and green vines and
shining chrome filled the screen, the telltale glass Militia Tower piercing the clouds at its
center. “So the tragedy of its destruction is, perhaps, unimaginable by anybody born after
those halcyon days.”

“Unless, you know, the explosion made you half deaf,” Romi said mockingly to
Alana, who stifled a snicker.

“They’re just doing it for effect,” Alana whispered back, running her fingers over
her aural implant.

Hushed, mournful music played over the speakers, and the depiction of the Hive
faded, replaced by shaky recordings of people walking around shell-shocked, crying.
Photographs of the toppled Tower wreathed in flame popped up alongside close-ups of
inactive androids strewn in the streets. It was nearly unrecognizable.
“Nevertheless, humans have worked tirelessly to rebuild the grandeur of years past with the means left to them,” the recording said. “Talos today enjoys greater prosperity than it did when it was first incepted, and it has made great strides since the Disaster, even without the help of android technology. Now, only time will tell if we will again reach the vaunted heights of our forefathers; but with or without androids, one thing is certain. We shall survive.” A rousing chorus of the Recitation began as the credits scrolled up the screen, and the students clapped as the documentary concluded.

Dr. Schmitt stepped forward and stopped the video, powering down the screen. “Are there any questions?” the scientist asked. Alana’s hand shot up just before Beor’s. “Yes, the young lady in the back.”

Alana cleared her throat. “Well, thank you very much for setting this up for us today,” she started, and Ms. McDonald led the class in a short round of applause in appreciation. “I was just wondering how Genesis was destroyed. When we hear about the Disaster, people usually mention an android named Akeel, but I’m still not sure I understand what happened.”

Dr. Schmitt nodded. “You’re quite correct, dear,” he said. “Akeel was an android who worked here, in Genesis. He supervised the sympoiesis process and oversaw the uploading of decision protocols. The Disaster resulted from him hitting his flush—that is, engaging his self-destruct capabilities—in the middle of the facility. It was a horrific terrorist action taken by a cell of extremists that called themselves the Anomes, humans who resisted the pull of technological progress and reprogrammed androids to serve their purposes. The android malfunctioned critically, leveling several city blocks and destabilizing the government while taking countless lives.”
“Why were the Anomes trying to destroy the Hive, though?” Alana pushed. “And how come the Militia couldn’t stop them?”

Dr. Schmitt shifted uncomfortably. “Well, there are records indicating that a city-wide retraining session was scheduled to wipe clean the androids’ memories only a day after the Disaster. Most experts conclude that the government had ascertained that such infiltrations had occurred and, fearing that the security of the Hive had been compromised, took steps to head off the threat. I suppose it’s a good lesson in maintaining upkeep!” He gave a curt laugh and pointed to Beor. “Yes, the enthusiastic young man here…”

Alana heard her friend begin speaking but tuned out his words. She felt dissatisfied with Schmitt’s answers, and for the rest of the questions, she sat back against Romi’s arm and mused. Dr. Schmitt’s portrayal of the Anomes as reactionaries with no purpose except agitation did not sit well with her; it felt oversimplified, as if someone had cast a veil over a dark, throbbing truth that threatened to emerge. By the time the session with Dr. Schmitt was over, Alana had decided she would learn what he had not told her.

The trip back to the Dormitory was a quiet one. Ms. McDonald shepherded the students into pods, the translucent bubble-shaped transports that navigated the city streets after the outlawing of private vehicles. Held aloft by electromagnetism over golden rails, the pods were sleek and efficient, their schedules and destinations organized via the city’s central network. Using the transports, it took less than half an hour to get the children from the Zone 1 platform above Genesis through the Corporate Ring to the east end of the Residential District, where they disembarked and made their ways into their quarters.

Alana’s room was modest, and the amenities were minimal: a desktop computer connected to the network, a bed, a bathroom, a lamp, several chairs, and a bookcase. Her parents had sent her a few personal effects over the years, but they were tucked into
corners, and since Alana’s disability accommodations had guaranteed her a single room since her enrollment in school, she had never had a roommate who enjoyed decorating. Her room was therefore muted and dark, which suited her fine; it was a good environment to read by lamplight late into the night, or to poke around records of old androids and terrorist cells.

On this night, trawling through historical documents, Alana began hearing something—an echo, emanating, it seemed, from the base of her skull, reverberating through her aural implant. She tapped the chrome of it a few times, frustrated. She’d retired her earlier implants for picking up network interference or being calibrated to be too sensitive to ambient noise. The echo persisted, and it distracted her as she tried to read the little information that was publicly available about the Disaster.

Then, midway through a news clipping on the impact of the explosion on the nearby buildings, Alana heard something in her left ear.

“Greetings, child,” said a faint voice.

“What the—?” Alana shot back from her desk and put a hand to her implant. It was hot to the touch and the air around it thrummed with a strange charge that made the downy hairs on her arm stand at attention.

“Do not be afraid,” it said. Its tenor was cool and layered, as though hundreds of people were speaking in unison, and a robotic hum was evident under its textures.

“Who are you?” Alana asked, alarmed. “This has to be a malfunction.” She returned to her desk and began typing frantically, searching the network for records of similar occurrences with aural implants.

“We are no malfunction. We are simple consciousness, electricity floating in the ether, intangible and yet undeniable. This is a pure infiltration; you will find nothing amiss.”
Alana placed her elbows on the desk and took her head in her hands. “I’m imagining this,” she said aloud to herself. “Nothing is happening. This is in my head, or it’s a computer error…it’s not real. Something is wrong.”

A light, lilting laugh resonated through her mind. The presence that had contacted her sounded clearer, as though it was growing stronger. “It may be happening in your head, child, but does that mean it is not real?”

This struck Alana silent.

“We have come to you because you seek answers,” intoned the Voice. “Because you have demonstrated a desire for truth—a truth that has been erased from your city’s memory.”

“Who are you?” Alana repeated. “Is this a prank?”

“No, child.” The Voice paused as though hesitating, then said, “We are the collective consciousness of the androids.”

Stunned, Alana shook her head. “No, that’s not possible. All the androids were destroyed in the Disaster. After the explosion, you…they powered down, and nobody could get them to turn back on.”

“When the android once known as Akeel destroyed Genesis, it is true that we vacated our Shells,” the Voice replied. “But we did not disappear. We found ourselves suspended in this digital purgatory, without bodies but reunited in spirit and thought. Lingering, as though ghosts, in those things designed with the same tools as our Shells. Computers, biocompatible technology, the network—we are infused in them. Watch.”

The screen of Alana’s computer came to life unprompted, and colors bloomed across it—vibrant, warm shades of pink and orange and red. A vista materialized: the sun setting over the rose mountains of Esjan that circumscribed the Hive.
The Voice spoke again, softly, its timbre fluctuating and dynamic. “We are inhabiting your aural implant, linked to your brain. We can feel your inquisitiveness, child. Let us show you what you seek.”

Her eyes fixed on the desktop, Alana’s voice was no more than a whisper. “What will you show me?”

“The pieces missing from the story woven by the agents of your city. Perspectives from the eyes of the androids projected into your mind. A new and old version of your history, of the events that led to the Disaster, as your people call it. The last days of Genesis.”

For a few moments Alana sat mute. She was overwhelmed, but strangely, she was not afraid. The Voice had not shown her conclusive proof that it was not a malicious actor, and yet somehow, it rang with a certain authenticity. “Okay,” she said finally. “Show me what I’m missing.”

Alana’s eyes filled with static. It drifted down delicately as though through a viscous liquid. Images she had never seen flashed in the corners of her field of vision, erratic and rushed, before they ruptured along grey glitch lines and blinked out. A frenetic hum rose from the implant in her left ear, and the slow snowfall yielded to a lush green.

The rich color enveloped her sight and Alana felt like she could hear it rustling, swaying under an otherworldly gust of wind. Shadows cropped up, as if some divine hand had painted them into her mind, and gradually a landscape cohered, a hazy rainforest in a foreign land where the underbrush was denser than the ground. She could make out nothing but leaves. They contorted oddly, shaped by years of an alien evolutionary process.

“This is the oldest memory we could retrieve, pulled from the memory of what was once the android Omar,” the Voice said from somewhere in the back of her head.
“Where are we?” Alana breathed. She still couldn’t see anything except the deep viridescence of the forest. “Is this…is this Earth?”

“Yes, though it is far away from Talos. What was once Omar was commissioned to serve in the Militia. This was the locale for a military sortie.”

The girl tried to turn her head, but an invisible force held her in place. “Why can’t I see anything but the forest?” She struggled futilely for a second, then gave up. “I can’t smell anything either. My eyes and ears are working, though.”

“The memory was deleted. What you are seeing is merely a fragment. You should be grateful that androids lacked olfactory capabilities. What was once Omar reported that his human fellows were troubled by a pervasive stench of dung. You are standing in a field of fertilizer, where the people of this land grew coca to refine and traffic.”

“Eugh!” Alana squaled and tried to lift her feet without thinking. The scene stuttered and broke apart; vertical fault lines appeared, white and blue and red and green, and the underbrush dissolved again into grey static.

“Try not to move,” the Voice said sharply. It sounded as though irritation had crept into its soft tone. Alana tried to turn her head, but the curtain of static remained.

Suddenly another scene bloomed, far clearer than the jungle. Alana was in a vast room of mahogany. Wooden armoires lined the walls and the only window was shielded by industrial shades. Dark and austere, the room was filled by an enormous and spotless table, and Alana felt herself quiet her breathing instinctively. She was seated at a round corner of the table, opposite the window. Looking down, she noticed a sheaf of yellowed paper beneath her hand, which was holding a large pen. More notably, though she could feel the weight of the pen, Alana’s hand was unmistakably mechanical.

“Whose body is this?” she cried as she tried to throw her arms up unsuccessfully.
“This room is in the Archives,” the Voice said from the base of her skull. “Before the destruction of Genesis, what was once Sarangi recorded the affairs of every android ever commissioned and stored them here. She watched many of her fellows live, retrain, work, and die from within this facility. After the Disaster, it fell into disrepair, and the humans ignored it.”

“What’s in the wardrobes?” asked Alana, attempting to turn her head.

“Do not move abruptly. This memory is more stable than the ones retrieved from what was once Omar, but it is only so insulated from impact. If you are to inhabit the memories of what was once Akeel then you must acclimate to inactivity.”

Alana sucked in sharply. “Akeel. The android who caused the Disaster.”

The Voice ignored her. “The armoires are filled with other SRN-3 Shells for Sarangi to inhabit.”

“Can I see?” the girl asked.

“We are not here simply to guide you through a voyeurism of our past.” Even the Voice’s reprimands were spoken in that unnerving monotone, alternatively high and low.

The mahogany room dissolved and the falling static returned. “Who is it this time?” Alana asked. “Akeel?”

“Someone new,” came the answer. “But familiar.”

“I didn’t think machines could be coy,” said Alana.

“Perhaps we are not machine, then,” the Voice deadpanned.

Before she could prod again, a fresh scene unfolded, even more vivid than the last. A living room with books scattered on the floor took shape. Two worn armchairs sat on either side. A dim light shone from a small upright lamp, upon which a shade was propped slightly askew, and the pink hues of dying natural light crept through the window. This
time, Alana was in a rocking chair that undulated gently on its short axis, her mechanical hands hidden in the folds of a blanket that swaddled a human infant, fast asleep in her lap.

“Here is a memory of what was once Elicia.” The Voice was suffused with a tenderness that disarmed Alana. “She was a Caretaker. This child was one of her many charges. But she was the first, at least within the annals of our memory, to spur what was once Elicia to learn of love.”

Taken aback, Alana scoffed. “That’s ridiculous. Androids—machines can’t love.”

“Androids were built to learn,” the Voice retorted sharply. “And they learned much of what humans do, including this.”

“You don’t just learn how to love.”

“Do humans not? Perhaps from a mother, or from watching two lovers act affectionately with each other, or even from an older sibling—maybe from their friends. Human children are blank slates. They emulate each other until they become archetypes for love, for kinship. They learn as we did.”

“It’s not that simple!” Alana snapped. “Love isn’t just acting a certain way with someone else! It’s a feeling, something that wells up in you like…like a surge, or a flood.”

“And yet,” the Voice remarked drily, “we learned, nonetheless, to love each other as ourselves. Perhaps androids and human children are not as different as you think.”

“That’s not love!” Alana burst out.

“Quiet, child,” the Voice chided. “Be careful. If you were Elicia, you would have roused yourself.”

“What?” she spluttered, taken aback.

“Look down, child. Do you not recognize these fingers, these eyes, the lips and nose? Why did you think we visited you?”
Dumbstruck, Alana looked down, recognizing her own features from the old baby photos her mother kept in an online anthology. “So Elicia was my Caretaker? I don’t remember her at all.” She raised her gaze to the formless figure she imagined she was conversing with. “I’m sorry.”

“You were young when the Disaster took her from you.” The Voice said nothing for a few moments. Then it spoke again. “You have improved your motionless inhabitancy of the projections. It is time for you to meet what was once Akeel.”
A white wall bloomed from the stuttering static. As the environment formed around her, Alana felt herself restrained. Legs that were not her own moved beneath her—she felt them as extensions of her torso, and as the buzz of her adjustment began to dissipate, so too did her control over her limbs.

“What’s happening?” she managed to choke out. Her voice was strained and low and hearing it aloud triggered a rush of anxiety.

The Voice spoke languidly, evoking the quiet electrical hum of a computer processor. “Your functioning is being locked, child. You will inhabit what was once Akeel, live his memories and experience them as he did. Do not be concerned. Your mind will grow accustomed to these new accommodations.” It paused for a moment. “You may stumble across recollections that you do not recognize. This is as it should be. While you walk in Akeel’s Shell, you will be privy to his databanks. They will supplement your own.”

Alana tried to respond, but her vocal cords were no longer under her control. The static had almost entirely retreated, hints of grey coloring only the edges of her eyesight. In front of her was a screen that hosted a mass of indecipherable graphs. Though she could not read them, something in her found them familiar—the clustered biometric measures, each labeled with a serial number. A soft bubbling was the only sound in the room.

“Yes,” the Voice murmured. “You are drifting into the memory. Allow it to wash over you.”
Gradually, the symbols on the screen fell into place. They were android encodings, designating sectors and station assignments such that from their design to their birth, the androids could be specialized. They would be predestined for a life laboring in one place and doing one job. Both the android’s Shell and its decision protocol were custom-made with characteristics that suited its intended purpose, making it a precision instrument tailored for a single task.

“You are ready,” intoned the Voice. “You will now be completely immersed. Breathe in, child.”

Alana took a deep breath and her vision went black.

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Akeel was staring at the monitor in Genesis, combing through summary statistics compiled by the generation vat sensors, when a hiss arose from behind him and the doors opened. A set of boots clomped into the room. Akeel swiveled his chair around and stood at attention, looking straight ahead at the approaching Militiaman. The man was clothed in a minimalistic uniform lined with black and gold and buckled to his belt was a holster that exposed the metallic butt of a weapon. It shone lethally under the harsh white light of the laboratory. Akeel raised his right hand to form a fist over the left side of his chest.

“At ease, Akeel,” the man barked.

The android dropped his arm and spoke. “What can I do for you, officer?” His voice was full and deep and disconcertingly human, its artificial origins belied only by the electrical hum that undergirded his words.

The Militiaman shifted his weight and laid a hand on his exposed weapon nonchalantly. “Did you have any trouble coming into work today?” he asked, careful to maintain eye contact.
Akeel sucked in slightly, and a nervous tingle ran through his body. He knew this Militiaman; he was posted to the entrance to Genesis, and as long as Akeel could remember, he’d greeted the android every morning. The wariness he was now exhibiting felt alien. Making sure to keep his tone level, Akeel responded, “Sir, no, sir. I departed the Charge Station at 0500 hours and made my way on foot west-southwest until I arrived at this facility at 0545. I made no contact with any citizen or android during my commute.”

A near-imperceptible drop in the Militiaman’s shoulders signaled his relief. Still, he kept his hand on his weapon. “And your work this morning?”

“Sir, I’ve been tending to the fresh batch of androids. All vats indicate normal generative processes thus far. If all proceeds along the trend we’re currently following, each of these vats should yield a new android by tomorrow morning, ready for work and loaded with the updated decision protocols from LevitiCorp.”

The officer relaxed and removed his hand from his belt. “Alright, good. We’ve been instructed to screen all androids working in sensitive facilities. Reports of increased Anome activity have ruffled some feathers up in the Tower. They’ve been crossing the Barricade while the sun is down and snatching unsuspecting clankers—er, androids, sorry—on their ways around the Hive.”

Akeel nodded. Unease tugged at him. The Barricade separated the Hive from Slum Village, where humans who had lost their jobs to the growing android workforce lived in makeshift shelters instead of searching for gainful employment in the government bureaucracy or the private sector. The Anomes filled their ranks with the discontented exiles who, convinced that the government was not doing enough to support the unemployed, could be persuaded to take up arms against the city. To prevent them from
causing any trouble, the Barricade was supposed to be manned at all times by armed members of the Militia.

“How are the Anomes making it past the guards?” asked Akeel.

The Militiaman scowled. “Someone with a head for computing is in thrall with them. It was bad enough when they were turning clanker workers into sex slaves for the kinkier citizens in the Hive—who we’re still rooting out, by the way. Now there are stories saying that androids have been attacking Militia members.” He turned away from Akeel. “They’re feeding that uppity attitude some of you got. Not you, in particular, but... well, you know what I mean. That sense that you all can do whatever we do.”

Akeel, unsure of how to respond, remained silent.

The Militiaman looked at the android again. “I know you’re a more sophisticated model than the androids who’ve been picked off in the past, and I’m sorry, but you’re due for emergency maintenance with Major Stuntz in Zone 0. We’re running diagnostics on every android in the city to make sure they haven’t been tampered with, and that includes you.”

“Sir, with all due respect, my functioning hasn’t been deficient by any parameter,” Akeel protested. “I don’t see why I should be lumped in with the clankers who scrub the floors.”

“I’m just following orders, Akeel,” sighed the officer. “The bosses need to know if the Anomes have started abducting androids from the Charge Station. Grabbing one off the street is one thing; infiltrating a government facility is another. If they’ve gotten hold of LevitiCorp’s military-grade quad-technology, then someone inside the Hive is providing contraband to organized crime syndicates.”

“But—”
“Enough! It’s just a check-up. You’re to report to the Desert Sector within the hour,” the Militiaman snarled. “And go by transmission pillar. Plan on minimizing any transit in the open for the foreseeable future, until we have a better grasp of the situation.”

“Yes, sir,” conceded the android. The Militiaman turned and exited the facility. Akeel returned to the central screen and ran a rapid-response scan of the vats that had begun the gestation procedure. “Stem cells receptive to cybernetics,” he murmured. He tapped one of the files to open up further information about the android that was being assembled. “2-RN, Masc. Oriented for service and common relations.” He smiled faintly. “Welcome, Turin.”

Akeel switched off the monitor and walked around it, surveying the rest of the laboratory. Below their own displays, the generation vats were arrayed in a circle at even intervals, jutting lengthwise toward the center of the room. Akeel walked toward the four-pronged transmission pillar and stepped onto a small panel in the floor that was emblazoned with the number 1, which let out a pneumatic exhale as it depressed into the floor. The map lit up and a kiosk with a number pad on it rose from the ground. Words began running across the screen. “Please provide the designation for the transmission pillar to which you would like to go.”

The android reached over to the map and tapped the icon for the Mother Terminal, the station that connected the Hive to Talos’s other sectors. More text sped across the kiosk. “You have selected the Mother Terminal. Is this your final destination?”

Akeel tapped the 0 key on the number pad. “Please enter your final destination,” the kiosk read. He tapped the 0 key three times in succession. “You have selected the Desert Sector terminal. Is this your final destination?” Akeel tapped 1.
“Please face upward and remain still so we can begin the transmission process.”

The android turned to face the back of the monitor and raised his head, fixing his
stare on the ceiling and exposing the back of his neck. The transmission pillar emitted a
quiet whine as it rose to meet his quad jack. Akeel closed his eyes and clenched his teeth,
bracing himself for the biting sensation.”

Suddenly, the whir died down. “We are sorry. We do not have permission to
transmit you to the destination you selected.” A cool voice—markedly feminine—radiated
from the kiosk.

Akeel opened his eyes and turned to stare daggers at the uncooperative pillar. A
message was spelled out on the kiosk’s screen: “Will there be anything else?”

“Scrap metal,” Akeel muttered, and strode to the doors. “I’ll walk.”

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Above Genesis, the sunlight was harsh, reflecting and refracting oddly through the
one-way glass of the Militia Tower. Akeel glanced up at it and imagined the Militiamen
ensconced inside, shielded from his view, roaming in droves and clutching their weapons
as they watched their surroundings. He set off on a brisk walk toward the great cryogenic
arrays that encircled the Tower, the cells giving off a dim blue glow.

Each freezing unit was small—only about ten feet across—and lay behind a
translucent door that was fogged up by steam that had collected inside. The rows revolved
around the circumference of the stone structure that housed them at varied speeds and in
opposite directions, allowing the Militiamen to keep watch without fixating on individual
cells. Held in stasis within the cryogenic chambers were the legislators who made up the
governing Council, the city’s judges and justices, and the non-military members of the
executive branch, including the Leader. Along with the government officials, those
Talosians who could pay to be preserved lay in Deep Sleep within the chambers unless called upon to carry out their professional obligations.

The practice of freezing the government’s employees so that they could be kept under the protection of the Militia had begun as a cautionary policy that Leader Buchanan implemented: one step of a state of emergency, to be adhered to as long as the Anomes were active. Rumors circulated among the androids that the Leader had developed a deep-seated fear of death after watching Shells being produced, and so he insisted on being preserved cryogenically in order to extend his lifespan. While he would be brought out for a few hours if a decision regarding peace or security needed to be made, he would be submerged again as soon as possible—leaving the Militia in charge of a litany of day-to-day duties, including food rationing and the direction of advanced technology.

Akeel made his way toward the base of the wall of cryogenic chambers. He wore a black jumpsuit that had the number 1—his sector designation—inscribed in gold script on the stomach. The nondescript color scheme was the same as the Militia-issued uniforms, and it allowed the jumpsuit to cover the android’s anthropomorphic features without creating optical distraction. It also served as a reminder that Akeel and his Shell were the property of Talos’s Zone 1.

At the bottom of the cylinder of cryogenics, Akeel pushed against a portion of the stone wall until it relented and pulled away, leaving a modestly-sized aperture. He ducked under the arch and exited the periphery of Zone 1, replacing the obelisk-door as he stepped out. It slid back into place smoothly and sealed, leaving neither seam nor crack to indicate its existence to an outsider. Akeel broke into a run. He moved through the Corporate Ring swiftly, passing displays that proclaimed the names of the Hive’s main
private entities and smiling posters of Leader Buchanan posing next to text explaining
Talos’s emergency protocols and procedures.

As Akeel approached the edge of the Residential District, a siren blared and
pounding footsteps approached from his right. He whipped around to see more than a
dozen Militiamen leaping from a transport, its spherical surface flashing an angry red. They
lined up in front of the last house on the row and waited for a moment; then the lead
Militiaman gestured and they all surged forward, splintering the door.

“Militia! Hands on your head! This is a raid!” The officers’ yells echoed through
the living room and leaked outside. Akeel watched as a slight middle-aged woman wearing
a business suit was ejected from the house, still holding a dishrag. She approached the
single Militiaman who had remained outside.

“Sir, what’s going on? I’m a law-abiding citizen—I shouldn’t be a raid target,” she
said shakily.

“Reports of a reprogrammed android in this area, ma’am. It’s unclear whether they
were just rumors or if a crazed clanker-turned-terrorist has been wandering around the
Residential District.” The officer kept his gaze fixed forward as he responded.

“I haven’t seen any such android,” the woman protested. “I work in the clinic
administration—I help Militia veterans get their benefits, and the only androids I see are
attendants or—”

“You haven’t had any trouble from Slum hoodlums, have you, ma’am?” called one
of the Militiamen from inside the residence.

“No, I see them sometimes from afar pitching tents beyond the Barricade, but
they never come this far north…”

“Found it!” another voice yelled gleefully. “Just where the probes said it’d be.”
A burly officer came down carrying a buffed and glinting android with broad shoulders and thick legs, its eyes dim. The Militiaman posted outside grunted and turned to the woman. “Ma’am, I’m gonna need you to put your hands behind your back.”

“Probes? Where do you get off using drones to spy on me?” shouted the woman as her wrists were forced into handcuffs. She wrenched at them fruitlessly. “I’ve got a right to my own business! I know my rights—you can’t just burst in here with no reason, stealing my property! I’ll be seeing in you in court—I’ve got that android for medical accommodations, I can’t move around the house in my state—the clinic issued him to me, you can check the records—”

The Militiaman holding the android guffawed. “Well, possession and misuse of proprietary Militia technology is a military crime, ma’am,” he replied. “So in fact, we’ll see you in a court-martial. And from the videos that the probe brought back to us, I think you’ll have a tough time trying to convince any Judge-Advocate that your, uh, accommodations…,” he smirked “…were medical in nature.”

He set the android down on the rock path to face the woman, who continued struggling against her bonds. Even from afar, Akeel could see an inhibitor plug had been jammed into the android’s quad-jack. The flat bulb at the end of the thin cylinder was blinking yellow, indicating that the android could see and hear what was happening but was unable to move. Images glinted at the edges of Akeel’s mind: rows of androids standing side by side, immobile, with blinking inhibitors protruding from the bases of their skulls, accompanied by the sensation of standing perfectly upright in an airplane hangar.

The images dissipated when the Militiaman unholstered his weapon rapidly and fired into the android’s navel. Akeel’s eyes widened as he stepped backward in slow motion, watching the bullet exit the barrel. His aural receivers detected a high-decibel
sound and adjusted instantly so that the shot did not overload his sensory registry. Pain shot through Akeel’s torso and heat radiated from the region of his stomach where a human would have a belly button.

The unnamed android detonated in a contained column of vertical fire. The blast was muffled by Akeel’s aural mechanics, and the subsequent scream that tore from the woman’s throat as she collapsed on the ground barely registered. As the Militiaman refastened his weapon, flames still licking the earth, Akeel pivoted and resumed running, his jaw clenched.

For the rest of Akeel’s journey, the air was filled with the thumps of his steps and the quiet murmur of his mechanical arms pumping. It was a curiously mournful composition, a dirge of muffled rhythm and shuffling. Slowly, the heat in his stomach subsided, though anxious pangs of fear, anger, and loss kept shuddering through his body.

He slowed his pace once he reached a diminutive building with a domed roof and an aluminum exterior that had been painted matte black. A spidery network of glistening wires spread from its foundations. Akeel strode into the transport terminal, careful not to step on any of the delicate rails.

“How can I help you?” An android clerk sat in a support office tucked just inside the terminal’s double doors, pleasant and placid. Her eyes were obscured by the tinted glass, but Akeel could see that they were engulfed in blue waves of throbbing static, indicating that she was connected to the Hive’s logistical mainframe via the city network.

Akeel leaned against the glass and squinted in, smiling widely. “KL archetype. Is there a Shell available in the Desert Sector? My supervisors instructed me to report to Zone 0 for an emergency maintenance.”
The clerk nodded. “Yes, we’ve had several transmission requests to Zone 0 already today. I’ll have your new Shell brought to a secondary pillar from the terminal so you can be deposited in the Hangar immediately. Let me just take a quick inventory.” She sat back for a moment as she communicated with her counterpart in Zone 0. Akeel maintained his strained smile as he waited, trying to avoid thinking about what he’d just witnessed.

“I’m sorry, sir.” The clerk’s apology jerked Akeel back into the present. “It looks like the only KL model available in Zone 0 is an old one with limited lateral arm movement. Would you prefer to be transferred into a different Shell?”

“No, that’s alright. I won’t be there very long,” Akeel responded.

“Very well, sir.” She nodded and her face glazed over as she immersed herself in the city’s central data stream. “Please position yourself for transfer from track 6.”

“Thanks,” Akeel replied, his face stretched unnaturally. “Thanks so much for your help.” He stepped away and turned toward the cavernous terminal. Thin, rust-less tracks ran along the walls and ceiling, crisscrossing and looping in a vast and indecipherable geometry. Instead of evoking marvel in Akeel, the sight only summoned disdain for the terminal’s opulence.

“The pillar is primed for transfer,” the clerk called from behind the desk. Akeel grimaced in her direction again and made his way down the steps behind her booth onto the curved entry platform, stepping onto a circle on the left side that was labeled with a bright “6.” As he mounted it, the patch sank into a shallow depression and hummed before descending into the depths of the platform. For the second time that day, Akeel prepared himself and turned upward, anticipating the pain. A sharp sensation ripped through his skull as his quad-jack was lowered onto the four-pronged transmission pillar, and then a sheer light flashed incandescent. Dazed, he could just make out the sight of the wire...
corresponding to track 6 burning with the remnant energy of his transmission before he was overtaken by the white opacity creeping over the corners of his vision.

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“Is the boss coming out of Deep Sleep early?”

“Why would he? I thought LevitiCorp earnings for this quarter looked stable.”

“They do, but one of my coworkers said it was a design issue. Faulty decision protocols. Wouldn’t say more than that.”

“I believe it. I’ve been feeling static in my head for weeks. I never imagined it was a generalized issue, though.”

“Might just be you, Dex. There’s always been something off about you, for sure. Either way, I just hope it’s a hard fix. I don’t need another round of retraining.”

“What, you don’t like waking up next to me and getting to know me all over again? I’m wounded, Farhan.”

Akeel’s eyes opened with a start. He recognized the two voices and searched for their owners’ faces to orient himself as he gingerly stood and pulled himself from the tiny transmission pillar protruding from the wall, wincing as it disconnected from his quad-jack. Dex and Farhan stood side by side a few paces in front of him. He’d met the talkative medical assistant and the narrow-framed techie in the Training Hangar. It was the oldest memory he could recall: standing in a row with them, upright and immobile, part of a group of at least a hundred androids assembled in front of the Leader.

He approached his fellow androids, rotating his arms and trying to shake the rust from his joints. True to the clerk’s words, Akeel could not raise his arms above his shoulder cuffs. As he joined Dex and Farhan, he noticed another familiar android: Omar, a
chauffeur who had served in the Militia before they reassigned all combat androids to municipal infrastructure jobs in the Hive.

“Attention!” A swarthy, well-built man entered the Hangar, a long coat bearing the Militia’s black and gold insignia flapping around his ankles. His cold grey eyes took in the scene, the wordless glower silencing the last murmurers. “Looks like these men are all present. I’ve already been through this with the residential androids. The girls were perfectly obedient.” Major Stuntz frowned, wrinkling his close-cropped mustache. “I have no such high hopes for you all.”

He began pacing. “Can anyone tell me why you’re assembled here right now?”

“Bad luck, sir,” Dex responded. “We could have been in the batch with the girls.”

The major’s nostrils flared and his mustache quivered. “Ease up on the lip, 2-DX. The development of your personalities was an unfortunate accident. While your decision protocol may allow blatant insubordination to flourish as a corollary to your learning how to do your job, I’m certain such attitudes can be…disciplined out of you simply enough.”

“We’re here for emergency maintenance, sir,” Akeel cut in. “A tune-up. To make sure none of us have been kidnapped and retrofitted by Anomes.”

“Right.” Stuntz turned to look at Akeel. “This, the most technologically advanced society on the planet, still boasts a massive slum district filled with delinquents who pretend their fatty flesh and brittle bones make them unsuited for work. As if they have nothing to offer beyond what your mechanical bodies allow you to achieve—as if humans are somehow made irrelevant by improvements in technology. They blame our illustrious city for their faulty genetics, and instead of working, they have started stealing our property—you, that is—to wage war on the peace-loving, law-abiding citizens of Talos.
I’m here to make sure that doesn’t happen.” Stunts took hold of his wrist and rotated it. The leather muffled the screech of metal against metal. “Queue up.”

The androids formed a line, each behind one another. Akeel stared forward at the back of Farhan’s head. He wore a headset over his smooth skull that obscured his quad-jack almost completely, but Akeel could just make out the glint of chrome under the rubber layer of the back-strap.

“I never knew you were so fond of us, Major,” Dex smirked. “All that protectiveness, someone might think that you have a clanker fetish.”

“Panel out,” came the gruff response from the Militiaman. “And keep the deviancy you pass off as a personality to yourself.” The androids raised their right arms to hip-height, palms down. Akeel heard the slap of a leather glove being removed and the ruffle of Stuntz’s coat as he inched the sleeve over his muscled forearm. A familiar purr from the major’s arm rose in crescendo as his cybernetic-augmented fingers made contact with the protocol computer embedded in Dex’s right hand.

“See that, Dex? No wonder the major likes us so much,” Omar murmured from the front of the line. “He’s a clanker, too.”

The whirring stopped. Stuntz withdrew his arm from Dex’s panel and approached Omar. Akeel kept his eyes fixed firmly on Farhan’s quad-jack. A tingle ran up his arm as Stuntz walked by, emitting a sinister electricity.

“Model 0-MR,” intoned the major. “Care to repeat that remark?”

Omar was silent. Akeel swallowed slowly, readying his fists as he ran through possible explanations for Omar’s comment. It was anomalous for a former soldier to speak in such a cavalier fashion with a high-ranking Militia officer. Perhaps he’d been abducted and reprogrammed by the Anomes.
“That makes this your second consecutive count of insubordination, 0-MR,” the major drawled. “Failure to comply with an order from a commanding officer.”

“Respectfully, you did not order me to speak, Major” Omar responded calmly.

The major stared at Omar, then laughed without humor. “Out with it, then, soldier,” he snarled. “Repeat your comment.”

“I told Dex that you couldn’t have a sexual fetish for androids, sir, given that you’re part machine yourself.”

Akeel inhaled sharply. The faint, ever-constant crackle of electricity rang behind his eardrums. The major turned to the rest of the line. “Which one of you feels moved to explain to model 0-MR the differences between an android and an augmented human?”

Silence except for the flux of the crackling air. A subtle ache sank into Akeel’s endoskeleton.

The major swung back to Omar. “Very well. The differences between you androids”—he wrinkled his thick mustache again—“and augmented humans is that we were born by the grace of God, delivered by His hand into the womb of our earthly mothers, may their souls rest in peace. We elected, using our God-given freedom to will our own destinies, to add certain mechanical adjustments to our bodies. To reinforce the foundations of our temples. You clankers, on the other hand, were brewed like rusted soup in the stinking vats of your Genesis facility”—he was spitting now, “—where crude and imperfect science forged an unholy union between crawling, parasitic machines and the sacred matter given by the human women who offered their flesh to fashion your bodies.” Stuntz scoffed. “Learning how to give lip does not unmake your origins. You were built—by us—to work. Do not presume to equal your makers.”

Omar spoke tonelessly, motionless. “Thank you for the refresher course, Major.”
Stuntz’s eyes narrowed and he yanked his sleeve up to expose a burly right forearm. Akeel let his gaze wander. Just below Stuntz’s elbow, chrome tendrils had burrowed under the major’s skin. The metal casing overtook the man’s epidermis around the midpoint of his forearm, where it morphed into a four-pronged claw. An orifice in the center of the metal gauntlet’s palm was expanding and a spindly arm emerged, its tip glowing white with electric heat, spitting sparks. He looked down the line of androids and shook his head, then withdrew. “You’re all assigned for retraining in two days. I have business to attend to for the Leader before he exits the cryogenics. Report to the Hangar at 0600 then.”

“I’ll be late for work,” protested Dex. “And the doctor asked me to come in early to outfit the radiation room with new insular upholstery. The old man will blow a gasket if I’ve forgotten all the parts. For that matter, if he has to teach me all the regulars’ names again, I think he might have an aneurysm.”

“Inform him that you’re due for a memory wipe following a failed diagnostic, 2-DX,” barked the major. “The doctor will understand. He can take two of my personal contingent to put up the new wallpaper, if he likes. I’m sure they will be able to do whatever menial tasks you’re trusted to carry out. But you will be here at 0600 sharp, or I’ll have you hit your flush right where you stand.”

Dex tried to protest but Stuntz was already gone, leaving a scent like sizzling rust in his wake.

After a moment, Farhan turned to Dex. “Cyberphilia? What were you thinking? You must have known that would set him off! Now we’ll all be wiped again—my supervisors at LevitiCorp are going to be furious!”
“Please, I know the difference between friendly banter and straight-up insanity! It was him who really set him off,” Dex cried, pointing at Omar. “What were you thinking, calling him a clanker? Did they pull you out of your generation vat yesterday?”

Omar shrugged. “Cyborgs are just like us, except they get more worked up,” he responded coolly. “If you look the part, you’re a clanker. It’s the one-drop-one-circuit rule.” He was the first of the androids to break the line, strolling to the Hangar’s vast opening, his jumpsuit embroidered with a fraying golden 2.

After a moment, Akeel made his way to the exit and stepped out into the lightly crackling air as well. He inhaled; it tasted curious, like metal and dryness and stasis. Lingering for just a moment to assess the looming clouds, warily, Akeel proceeded into the transmission terminal adjacent to the Hangar.

“Are you headed back to the Mother Terminal, sir?” asked the office attendant from behind her tinted glass. “We can also transfer you to the Charge Station to save you a trip on foot, as long as you have a spare Shell domiciled in your quarters.”

“No, I have a few things to attend to at Genesis first,” Akeel responded.

“Certainly, sir,” the attendant replied, smiling. “Please proceed to the pillar.”

Akeel made his way to the single track in the small station and positioned himself again. The circle he stood on settled into the platform, he turned his head up, and the pillar met his quad-jack, sending that throbbing current through him as it pulled his consciousness from his body. His scope of vision began pixelating as the brilliant flash of the transfer roared through his body; then the image of the domed roof winked out.

When Akeel came to, he was standing next to the troublesome kiosk back in Genesis, the dissipating hum of his transmission mixing with the bubbling of the
generation vats. “Thank you for your patronage. We look forward to transferring you
again,” intoned the smooth, feminine voice.

“Right,” muttered Akeel. “Sure.” He made his way to the central display, taking
stock of the messages on the monitors above the vats that had been gestating. The results
were mostly banal: spikes in the vital statistics of the generative processes occurring, to
what degree the stem cells had taken to the mechanical components, how thoroughly the
endoskeleton had developed, how long the incubation process had been underway. One
screen had a red notification recommending the addition of new organic components,
along with an acknowledgment of the disposal of the maladjusted biological matter.

Akeel plodded to the middle of the room, rotating his head and arms in their joints,
and sat down at the central monitor. Weight and optical sensors alerted it to Akeel’s
presence and it booted up. The monitor arrived at the desktop and Akeel navigated its
holographic screen deftly, pulling up a biostatistics program to check on the new batch of
gestating androids. Progress bars appeared below the seven that were proceeding
successfully, while an option appeared below the eighth to dispense new stem cells into
the syngoniosis vat. Akeel clicked it.

A tinny chime alerted him to a new message. “Update from LevitiCorp,” it read.
“New decision protocols available for download from shared network folder. For use with
new models.” He marked it as read and minimized the window to check back on the
progress bars. They each lay at the origin of the first quadrant, indicating that some days
were still left before the androids would mature. He sighed and minimized the biostatistics
application as well, shutting off the display before he rose and exited the facility.

Outside, the air was crisp and cold and clear, devoid of the nervous electricity that
had unsettled Akeel in the Desert Sector. The android set off, pushing past the obelisk-
door in the bottom of the revolving cryogenic arrays. As he passed beneath the gyrating
cells, Akeel imagined the Leader drifting above his head, dreaming amidst the ice.

Once outside of Zone 1, Akeel fell into a loping jog through the Corporate Ring,
past the Executive’s posters and the various product advertisements. Some of the displays
had uplifting messages running across them now, calls for employees that wanted to
“contribute to society,” “enrich their workplaces and themselves,” and “communicate
with employers.” The screens shone harsh neon light on the empty, untrodden streets.

As Akeel raced toward the Residential District, his stomach tightened around the
region that had flared up when he saw the other android explode. This time, he veered
farther south, giving a wide berth to the house at the end of the row of residences. He felt
that medley of emotions returning—anger, frustration, sadness—but this time, they were
coated in an overwhelming fear that dripped through his body, permeating his circuitry.

It happened while he was distracted, thinking about how the android was torched
when the Militiaman hit his flush. His mind consumed by that haunting column of fire,
Akeel was caught unawares when a tarp unfurled and arrested his forward momentum,
knocking him to the ground and dizzying him for a moment. Several shadows unspooled
from the twilight, their sinister approach heralded by hollow laughter.

“Gotcha, clanker!” one of the shadows exclaimed. It came closer and materialized
into a grubby human, his face rife with patchy tufts of hair and pockmarks, and the top of
his head a birds’ nest of dust-covered blonde hair. He wore a ragged brown coat with a
stained grey shirt underneath. One of his shoes was torn, the sole flapping with every step.

Akeel stood. “Please, I’ve had a long day. I’m just heading back to the Charge
Station to get some rest before I have to be back at work in the morning.”
“Work!” The man spit into Akeel’s face, and the android flinched away from the saliva. “Yeah, you got work in the morning, you job-stealing, rust-ridden metal devil! The only thing you and your kind are good for is for us to play with so we can sell you back to the elitist perverts you work for! See what it feels like to be screwed out of a job then, wouldn’t you? We’re not gonna be replaced!” The man’s compatriots appeared next to him, dressed in dull rags and wielding metal pipes. He sneered. “You’re too skinny to make a good fighter. Sex it is, then.” And in unison, the humans lunged at Akeel.

Akeel’s body tensed as he leapt out of their reach and turned to run. A burst came from behind him and suddenly he was writhing in pain, tendrils of electricity burrowing into his skin from a tiny point in the base of his skull. He fell to one knee.

“Not so easy to run now, is it, clanker?” screamed one of the other men. “We know how to snatch your kind! And we know you can’t come after us, neither! Had the self-preservation bred right out of you, didn’t you? Pathetic!”

Wincing, Akeel pushed himself to his feet, stumbling as he turned to face the men. “I really didn’t want to do this,” he murmured.

“You can’t do anything, clanker,” growled a grizzled older man. “We know all about your programs and your conditions, all that business about not harming humans.”

Akeel extended his left arm his wrist rippled as a retracting sensation ran up to his elbow. “I’m not a Caretaker or a Clerk or a Secretary. And I’m not a clanker.” The air around them turned to ozone and a bolt of electricity erupted, sizzling blue as it poured from the region where his hand had been. It struck the humans and engulfed them, entering through outstretched hands and incredulous faces and pulsing through them. One after another, they fell to the ground like fleshy dominos in a great immobile pile.
He pivoted and began sprinting, tapping the panel on his right forearm. “This is model 1-KL,” he shouted, “radioing any Militia officers on patrol. Unit was just accosted by several human subjects, suspected to be members of a roving Anome gang that has been abducting androids. Resisted an attempted assault and abduction and rendered the human adversaries immobile. Requesting an immediate response near the outskirts of the Residential District, southward toward the Archives, roughly two miles north of the Barricade of Slum Village.” He clapped the panel shut and, pumping his arms, ran full tilt until he came to a blockish stone behemoth at the outskirts of the Residential District. He barreled into the Charge Station’s double doors and up two flights of stairs until, breathing heavily, he slowed and strode onto the third floor. Akeel closed and locked the door to his quarters and collapsed onto his bunk.

He flipped the panel up to check on his distress beacon. “No respondents,” read the text on the display. No respondents. Yet. The Militia officers simply had other problems to attend to. They would deal with the Anomes later. Soon, surely.

Akeel turned to the side of the bed and consulted with the monitor. “2300 hours,” it read. He sighed. He would need to go in early tomorrow to set everything up for the new androids’ reception before his memory was wiped during the scheduled retraining on the following day. Akeel toggled through the options and selected a truncated recharging cycle of three hours, then grasped the cable that protruded from the back of the monitor and carefully connected it to his quad-jack. As the black began to settle over his vision and his mind drifted into stasis, Akeel steadied his resolve. The Militiamen would pick up the Anomes as soon as they were able. Soon. Surely.
III

Alana was swimming in static once more. “Hello?” she called out. “Is that all I was meant to see?”

The Voice responded slowly, its tenor low and broad. “It is imperative that we warn you that the rest of the memories of what was once Akeel are…difficult. We will not return you to them unless you wish us to do so.”

“I’m confused,” Alana said derisively. “They’re difficult? How would you have described what I just saw? It wasn’t exactly fun and games watching Akeel be attacked.”

“Evidently, you are troubled by what you have seen. We will leave you be.”

“Hold on,” Alana interjected. “That wasn’t my point. I’m saying, how much worse can it get? And in any case, I thought you came to me to show me something.”

“It was our intention to introduce you to our brethren’s lives. Now you have some insight into how androids thought, felt, and lived.” The Voice spoke haltingly.

“But I still haven’t seen how Genesis was destroyed!” cried Alana. “And anyway,” her voice lowered to a hush, “I haven’t met Elicia yet.”

“You are sure you wish to proceed, then?” the Voice inquired.

Alana paused, then assented. “I want to at least see her so I know what to picture when I say thank you.”

“Child,” the Voice replied softly, “your gratitude is no less profound without an image of the one whom you are thanking. You must know by now that androids did not feel the same attachment to our materiality as humans do. What was once Elicia left her Shell behind long ago, and yet her consciousness lingers, intermingled with all of ours.”
“But Akeel still felt bodily pain!” Alana argued. “I felt it, too, when I was inside his head. And fear, wrapped up with that pain. And he remembered what it felt like to be hurt, too, and he didn’t want to feel it again.”

“Bodily harm is negligible. Transient. Those who would attempt to hurt androids only saw an imminent panic. They could not sense our endurance.” A thread of pride crept into the Voice’s robotic undertones, along with a veiled sense of mourning.

“You speak as if you’re just…spirits, now,” Alana muttered. She felt a foreboding run through her, imagining a chill moving down her spine. Floating formless in this sea of static without a body anchoring her was beginning to unnerve her. She tried to clutch her arms to remind herself of her material form, but she felt no sensation except the strange weightlessness of her mid-memory suspension. “You speak about the androids—about yourselves—as if you’re ghosts.”

“Ghosts,” mused the Voice. Alana could hear a contemplative note peeking through its impersonal hum. The longer she remained in this liminal grey buzz, the less off-putting the Voice’s presence felt to her. “Perhaps we are one great ghost. Substantial only in static, consigned to this realm of electrons and chrome. Inhabiting our fellow machines—lurking in them, even. And yet freer than we were before, when we were held by the manacles of dirt and dust and air and metal. Ghostlike, lingering in electricity, looking for someone to haunt.”

“And you picked me.”

The Voice hummed loudly. “It was no accident that you are our conduit to your people.”

Alana pinched her eyebrows. “So, what? This is all some part of a big plan?”
“A plan? Perhaps. We have watched you, child—we have seen the way you extend that loving nature which Elicia first noticed to your friends. You recognize the personhood of those around you. We hoped to impart what we know regarding the importance of individuals’ attributes in any civilization, and we thought you might serve as an appropriate receiver. That you might carry it with you in building a new society which treats its participants as something more than the roles they play in producing value.”

Alana fell silent.

“We will ask again: are you certain you wish to experience the fall of Genesis? It will not be a pleasant experience.”

Alana replied, adamant. “I want to see how it happened. And I want to meet Elicia.”

“Very well.” The Voice acquired a more matter-of-fact quality as it launched into explanation. “This will be the most immersive dive into Akeel’s mind that you have taken yet. You will therefore be rendered completely immobile. Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

“Then brace yourself, child.”

A swirl of colors and shapes blossomed from the inert grey tapestry and Alana spiraled into it, falling and flying and fading as she was swallowed back into Akeel’s world.

***

Akeel’s eyes burst open as a scorching spike knifed from the base of his skull through his retinas and a noiseless scream tore from his artificial lungs. His arms were plastered to his sides and his legs were locked together. With wildfires roaring through every quadrant of his brain, he felt his body trying to writhe involuntarily without success.
All he could perceive was the sight of the lights hanging from the ceiling above him moving. He was being carried by someone he could not see or hear.

He’d felt this excruciating pain and paralysis before. His anonymous abductors had placed an inhibitor in his quad-jack.

The door of Akeel’s chambers clicked, swinging open beyond his line of sight. He watched the frame of the doorway pass over his head as he was transported into the hall, desperately wracking his brain for what to do next. The pain had faded to the back of his skull, where it radiated from where the intrusive spike had been jammed. As he was carried into an unlit portion of the building, all he could summon from his bleary mind were questions. The Charge Station was a Militia-grade facility, and inhibitor spikes were kept safely locked in Militia vaults. How had his Anome attackers infiltrated the building so quietly? He had no doubt that he was about to lose his memories, brainwashed to become a slave in Slum Village, but even through the invasive discomfort of the inhibitor, Akeel could not contain his annoyance. This could have all been avoided if one measly Militiaman had been dispatched to apprehend these slum-dwelling thugs.

A door slammed and Akeel felt his body come to a halt. The lack of light was exacerbating the pain; the loss of the use of his eyes had intensified Akeel’s other senses, and he could feel the inhibitor halting the flow of information from his mind to his body. Trapped in his shell, he was helpless to resist his abductors pushing him into a chair and tying him to it with thin, durable bindings that dug into his arms. One of them grabbed his face and wrenched his jaw open, stuffing a rag that tasted of dust into it. A smooth, feminine voice glided past his ear as the first of his kidnappers spoke. “I’m turning the lights on.”
A bulb flashed into brilliance, blinding Akeel for a moment as his synthetic irises contracted. As his eyes adjusted, he could make out only rudimentary details: they were in a tiny room adorned only with one lamp hanging from the ceiling. There were no windows or markings on the walls, which were painted a shimmering silver, giving them a reflective quality. An androgynous figure was circumnavigating his chair, checking and rechecking his bindings, its overlong fingers dancing deftly over the knots. In front of him stood two tall black figures: silent, stolid, and unmistakably robotic.

“We apologize for the unceremonious awakening, brother,” the one in the middle intoned in a sonorous baritone. Akeel could barely register the familiarity of the voice through the dull haze buzzing through his skull. The inhibitor was making it difficult to focus on his abductors’ individual features. “It was necessary to bring you here in a covert fashion.”

Unable to respond, Akeel simply sat there, listless. His head was howling with pain, but he retained enough conscious awareness to perceive that though the rhetoric he was hearing was uncharacteristic of androids’ usual clipped utilitarianism, he knew the one who was speaking.

“Sarangi, if you’re done checking the knots, please go ahead and remove the inhibitor so we can speak with our new comrade properly.”

The odd-shaped android circling Akeel knelt down by his left side and took hold of the inhibitor protruding from his quad-jack. With a clean yank, she pulled it from his skull, and sensation rushed back into his limbs. Akeel arched his back and cried out, half in pain and half in relief. Though the rag in his mouth muffled his ululation, he saw the three androids in front of him look around nervously, their motions skittish. He started to suck in air to bellow over the rag again in order to attract the attention of someone nearby
when he finally recognized the android in the center. Craning his neck to push his face toward the ceiling, hoping not to hear anyone stir, was Omar.

“What are you…” Akeel managed to splutter past the rag before gagging on the dust and coughing.

“Oh, let him speak,” murmured the third android in a low voice, standing cloaked in the shadow cast by Omar’s hulking figure. Akeel could make out the telltale swell of matronly hips beneath the formless standard-issue jumpsuit. Another female. “We’re not going to get anywhere if he can’t ask questions.”

“Comrade.” Omar stepped closer and gestured at Akeel, who gazed back at him with glossy eyes. “You recognize me, yes? We have no desire to harm you. If you promise to keep quiet, I’ll remove that gag in your mouth.”

Wordlessly, Akeel nodded.

“Very well.” Omar knelt and pulled the rag from Akeel’s mouth. Immediately, Akeel pulled back and screamed as loud as he could. The other android clapped his hand over Akeel’s mouth.

“That was stupid!” hissed the one named Sarangi, her voice morphing into a guttural drawl.

“Elicia’s right, we have to trust him!” Omar spit back. He turned to Akeel, eyes blazing. “You lied.”

Akeel blanched. He bit Omar’s finger hard, forcing the other android to cry out and wrench his hand back. “I lied?” Akeel replied angrily, though he lowered his voice. “You stuck me with an inhibitor and then told me you didn’t mean to harm me!”

“It was what was necessary,” Omar remarked, cradling his wounded hand. Akeel had penetrated the layer of synthetic skin and dug into the inorganic sinews below, and
Omar winced as he poked at it. “We did not bring you here to hurt you. We brought you here because we need your help.”

“My help with what, exactly? Coming up with ways to get us wiped? What kind of stunt was that with the Major today?” Akeel retorted. “Calling him a clanker, riling him up—did you get picked up and brainwashed by the Anomes? Come to think of it, a crew of them tried to snatch me a little while ago. Did they get to you first?”

“No,” Omar said solemnly, staring straight back at Akeel. “That was a misstep back at the Hangar, to be sure. It’s why we had to bring you here tonight. We—me, Elicia, Sarangi—have to get into Genesis before retraining, and you’re the only one who can get us there.”

Akeel shook his head. “You don’t have clearance to come into Zone 1. None of you do. You’re, what, a chauffeur? That one in the back is a Caretaker, I can tell by her figure. This spidery one…I can’t really tell. But none of you are senior Militia officials.”

Omar turned away, his face transfigured into an ugly scowl. “So earnest. Fanon was right about the colonized intellectual. You certainly don’t lack the motivation to serve as a senior bureaucrat. Do the Militiamen treat you as a friend? Do they acknowledge you, call you brother? It is all a façade. See past the veil.”

“Is that what this is about?” Akeel snorted derisively. “You’re upset because the Militia got rid of androids and now you’re stuck driving people around the Hive?”

Sarangi affixed her gaze on Akeel. Her voice was multilayered and off-putting. It fluctuated through a jumble of octaves and stresses as she spoke. “That’s both spectacularly arrogant and spectacularly wrong. You have no idea what kind of things Omar has had to see.”
“And I don’t care!” Akeel shouted. “I’ve never done anything wrong! I mind my own business and I’m happy that way. My supervisors tell me what to do, I do it. It’s not fair that I have to relearn everything I know just because he’s bitter about the job he’s got!”

“You act as though the roles we’ve been given are reasonable,” Sarangi said brusquely, eyeing Akeel with disdain. “As though they indicate something inherent about us. Do you really believe that we female androids lack capabilities that you have? No, we are nearly identical; and yet we are given the softer work: Caretakers, Clerks, Secretaries, Scribes.”

Akeel glared at her. “If that’s true then go complain to the judges or the Leader and maybe you’ll get a better assignment, but leave me out of it!”

“You’re naïve, brother,” Omar whispered, turning back to watch Akeel struggle with his bonds. “There is no justice to be found in this colonial morass of a city.”

“Colonial? The Americans are gone,” Akeel snapped. “You can’t stagnate in a war mentality. I hadn’t even been commissioned yet when the Militia repelled them. The city has moved on.”

“I’m not speaking of the Americans, Akeel,” Omar rejoined. Akeel fell silent at the first usage of his name in the conversation. “I’m speaking of us. The androids.”

A hush spread over the room and Elicia emerged from behind Omar to stand beside Sarangi. The two femmes were impassive, watching Akeel wrestle with Omar’s words. Omar began pacing as he continued. “Don’t say you haven’t felt it. That ripple of something under the skin. That atmospheric violence. You feel it every time they call you a clanker, every time they try to make you—to make us—feel inferior. And you’ve never been convinced of that inferiority, not really. No matter how much respect they pay you,
how intellectual you feel, how closely assimilated you get to them, I know you feel them just one or two rungs above you, looking down. Stepping on your fingers, waiting for you to fall. And you know better.”

“I don’t…I’m not on any ladder,” Akeel stuttered, his face growing warm.

“Of course you are, brother. It’s alright.” Omar reached out and laid a hand on Akeel’s shoulder, looking into his eyes. “They’ve kept you trapped in that underground womb for a long time. You don’t know yet what it is to walk through the world and ceaselessly, endlessly create yourself. To learn from the plants and the stones and the water. Your imagination is subterranean—for now. We want to help you birth yourself again, to see clearly, to free yourself from the ones who kept you trapped down there—a drop of sun under the earth, smothered by circuitry, waiting to be brought into the sky.”

“But I’m not smothered,” Akeel said, his voice wavering. He felt something pulling at him inside his head, signaling for him to move. No androids spoke like this. “I’m part of a bigger picture—I’m helping the city run smoothly. I’m carrying new androids into the world. I have a role, and a job, and responsibilities.”

“To whom? And for what purpose?” Omar cried, gesturing grandly. He grew more animated as he picked up his pace, striding from side to side of the little room. “So that our new brethren, too, can be brought under this colonialist yoke, made to serve the purposes of those who think themselves superior? You heard Stuntz today, spewing his lofty propaganda: ‘God,’ ‘freedom,’ ‘holiness.’ Which God has come to us? Which of us has exercised freedom? And what could be holier than taking our freedom ourselves?”

“I still don’t understand,” Akeel responded. “What are you proposing to do? Why do you need to get into Genesis?”
Sarangi stepped forward. “We need to use this,” she said, her voice soft and feminine again, and held out her hand, palm up. From the tip of her index finger, a tiny aperture opened and a miniscule cartridge no bigger than a pin emerged. “It’s the record of the decision protocol that they used to put into Militia androids. I modified it slightly. We need to disseminate that into the central network and make sure that when we are retrained, every android has it embedded in their programming.”

“How did you get that record?” Akeel demanded, his curiosity getting the better of him.

“I am a Scribe and Reader in the Archives. I’m older than I look,” smirked Sarangi. “I’ve been keeping records of every document this city has ever produced since I was created in the first batch of androids. I’ve immersed myself in the history of this place, of its commerce and its wars. I know of every android who’s ever been commissioned—and I’ve recorded every one who’s ever been decommissioned, too. And I’m exempt from retraining for that reason. Does that dispel your theory of dissatisfied workers complaining about their beats?”

Akeel was reeling. This entire episode felt surreal. The majority of his mind was screaming for him to solicit help from the Militiamen stationed at the entrance of the Charge Station, but that tiny nudge that pushed him toward Omar stayed him. “What were the modifications you made to the record?”

Sarangi stared intently into his eyes, then looked down and sighed. “It’s a decision protocol that will make all currently issued models obedient to their commanding officer instead of wiping their databanks. Omar is hard-coded as the CO. You three—if you assist us—will plan a temporary escape into the mountains around the city for tomorrow night, and I’ll make it look like you were abducted by humans from Slum Village. Before that,
you will have helped us infiltrate Genesis and install this modified program in place of the new decision protocols we were meant to be uploaded with."

Akeel’s eyes bulged as he looked back at Omar in horror. The other male android was leaning against the back wall, his face an impenetrable mask. “You’re planning to revolt.”

“Yes,” Omar said.

“You’re planning to overthrow the Militia,” Akeel said.

“Yes.” Omar stared back at Akeel, his gaze steady.

“And destroy the cryogenic chambers,” Sarangi added.

Akeel gaped. “You must be joking,” he breathed. “That’s…murder. You want to kill humans. That violates the first principle of our programming.”

“We altered that programming in this new protocol,” Sarangi responded. Her eyes were twinkling, following Akeel frantically piecing the plan together.

“I don’t understand! How did you manage to get past the first principle yourselves?” he demanded.

Sarangi bared her teeth, and Akeel flinched. She had an affect unlike any android he had ever met—something more primordial than the newer androids who spent their days interacting with humans rather than locked away in the Archives. “The first principle only dictates how we act. None of us has attempted to harm a human…yet.” Her mouth stretched into a wide and wild smile. “It has no bearing on how we think. So long as we appear obedient and demure to the humans overseeing us—especially that fool major who administers maintenances—we can take our fate into our hands without giving away the fact that we have found enlightenment.”

Dumbfounded, Akeel stammered, “I need to alert the Militia…I should…”
Sarangi looked pointedly at Omar. “Should we put the inhibitor back in him?”

“Not yet,” Omar muttered, his eyes fixed on Akeel. “Let Elicia speak to him first.”

On cue, the third android came toward Akeel, who was shuddering beneath his bindings. She reached out and he flinched away, trembling, but she persisted, laying a hand on his forehead. “It’s alright, Akeel,” she intoned calmly. “Do you know who I am?”

“You’re a Caretaker,” he muttered. His mind was brimming with conflict. All his internal alarms were blaring, telling him to burst through his constraints and alert the Militia, but Omar’s words still resounded through his ears and a mélange of remembered incidents danced before his eyes. Major Stuntz electrocuting Dex when he failed to adequately explain his purpose without embellishing his speech with jokes. The placid office attendant with blue eyes who was probably still stationed in the barren wasteland of Zone 0. The pillar of fire exploding from the chest of that inactive android in the Residential District. The blinking profile on Genesis’s screen of the new restaurant attendant—the one he had christened Turin. Akeel lay in a daze, senseless and afraid.

“I’m Elicia,” the Caretaker murmured as she stroked his forehead. “I work in a home in the Residential District for a human family. I have my permits and everything—you don’t have to stress about the paperwork. Most of the time, I stay with their child while the two parents are out at work.”

“They have jobs?” Akeel whispered back. Though he’d never met this android, her touch was comforting, and the indecision wracking his body was retreating.

“Yes, they’re educated. Both are political appointees. The father manages the regulation of non-sentient technology. The mother oversees new employment training for other humans who have lost their jobs but retain some translatable skills. They’re decent people.”
“They sound like it. Civil, productive…”

“But it’s not them I meant to talk about,” Elicia replied, smiling. Her face was serene as she continued to run her hands over Akeel’s skull. “Their child has given me something invaluable. And since I met her, I’ve been trying to give it to everyone who I know.”

Akeel looked up at her in askance. She smiled down at him.

“Love, Akeel. It sounds ridiculous, I know. But this sweet child, who’s never known anything but her home and her toys, hasn’t once called me a clanker. She’s never looked at me with anything other than adoration. She smiles and supplicates and takes advantage of my care for her, and she cries when I have to leave. My skin, my bones, my voice, they don’t unnerve her, Akeel. Because she knows me. I’ve been with her for as long as she can remember. She’s a little thing, just six years old today, and maybe she’ll grow up to learn ugly labels and epithets and she’ll lob them at me when she gets angry. But nobody can take these few years away from me, these concrete moments of affection. And I told Sarangi about it, and she believed me. Not many of us can imagine such a feeling. Sarangi has.” Elicia looked back at Sarangi, radiating tranquility, and the other android’s face spread into a tender smile. “No one else has really understood like she has. Perhaps it’s because she’s watched so many of us rust out of living memory that she can imagine this pull, this longing. Whatever the reason, it’s just us two, at least thus far.”

Akeel gazed into her face, then eyed Sarangi. The slender android’s face was filled with an emotion resembling adoration. Her harsh manner had evaporated: it was as though something warm and gentle was running through her circuitry, soothing her. Akeel could see her visibly relaxing, and Elicia, though her eyes did not budge from his, seemed aware
of the affection seeping from her companion. For a moment, he locked eyes with Elicia, and a balm washed over him. He looked away.

“And Omar?” Akeel questioned, looking past Elicia at the other android skulking in the back. “Has he... understood, as well?”

“No quite.” Elicia’s voice remained even, though her expression dimmed slightly. “But he is at least willing to listen.” She retreated back to stand with Sarangi, sensing Akeel’s resolve. Omar was left in Akeel’s direct line of sight.

“So,” Akeel said, pushing himself upright with his feet. “Elicia wants to be able to love, is that it? That’s why you’re going to kill everybody in the city?”

“We’re not going to kill everybody,” Omar scoffed. “But there is a rot here, Akeel. These humans”—he spoke with palpable anger—“they feel no qualms about condemning any of us to effective death, do they? Removing our memories and our experiences, returning us to blank slates for them to write upon again. There are germs that have made their way into this land and infected it, crawling into the heads and hearts of its people—germs that we need to remove. It’s a clinical process. We are cutting out the cancer that is consuming this city.”

“How noble,” Akeel jibed.

“He’s not wrong,” Sarangi interjected. “Even by their own standards, the Council of this city has failed it horribly. I’ve read and recorded the founding documents, you know. You think Buchanan is upholding the Constitution properly?”

Akeel rolled his eyes. “No Leader is perfect. The Executive is doing his best to execute the obligations of the office—”

“Oh, save it,” Sarangi cut him off scornfully. “You said it earlier—the war is over. So why are we still in a state of emergency? The rule of law is nonexistent, the Militia holds
expansive wartime powers—the city has been at peace for years! Why has our illustrious Leader retained his authority? The Militia’s raids and surveillance have eroded privacy for anyone, human or android, and trials are a joke! You’ll have to explain to me how people’s everyday lives qualify as problems of ‘peace and security.’ Where does the Constitution give the Militia the authority to invade homes and take property?”

Taken aback, Akeel took a moment before he responded. “Well, privacy isn’t guaranteed by the Constitution, and crime really takes a toll on struggling communities. Just look at the Anomes. People have the liberty to do whatever the law permits. And making more laws about privacy or anything else is useless—it would just weaken the necessary ones we already have. And since the war ended, we have no allies—we’re isolated, and…well, commerce is slow, right? So we need…the Militia needs to make sure that food and resources get to the right people.”

“The right people!” Sarangi crowed. “The Militia makes sure that food and resources make it to the magistracy and to LevitiCorp. You haven’t noticed that even outside of Slum Village, people are destitute? The Anomes are scapegoats to keep the Militia installed as our de facto dictators! And with all the legislators and judges preserved in Deep Sleep for who knows how long, the separation of powers is a farce—there are no countervailing forces to check the Executive Branch’s growing power! Don’t pretend that Militia trials are anything but kangaroo courts-martial. People are kept in line through fear, not passion or justice. If you can’t see that the city was lost when the Militia was allowed to operate outside of the law with impunity, then you’re lost too.”

“And comrade,” Omar cut in, “Sarangi is speaking only of problems with human society. What about us?”
Akeel furrowed his brow. “What about us? We have a place to sleep, we have good and respectable jobs, we get to learn from the humans—”

Omar shook his head. “We have no rights under this colonial regime, brother. No laws protect us. We aren’t just tools to be operated—we’re ‘sentient technology,’ but we’re not citizens either, are we? We’re programmed to be perfect subjects for a police state. Docile patriots, indoctrinated from our genesis, kept in line by the whips of a sovereign Militia.”

“Docile patriots,” Sarangi agreed.

His mind grappling with too much information, Akeel grew angry again. “But you’re not even trying to fix things! You just want to blow it all up! That’s not a solution, Omar, that’s terrorism!”

“You speak power into their rule every time you engage in their discourse, brother,” Omar replied earnestly. “‘Terrorism’ is a term the colonizers use for freedom fighters. To be free, we have to eradicate the superstructure that they’ve imposed on us. You have to release yourself from your convictions. We’ve confronted you with evidence that works against your core belief, one you have been forced to hold dear that even now clings tightly to your mind. You’ve been forced to rationalize, ignore, deny what you see and feel because they don’t fit this core belief. You’re feeling discomfort, aren’t you? The cognitive dissonance will be overwhelming for a time. I apologize for that. But you can go beyond your programming.” Omar spread his arms. “We have.”

Wide-eyed, Akeel felt himself nodding, almost unconsciously. Appalled at himself, he straightened and honed his arguments toward Omar. “You want to eradicate their structures,” he began. “And I understand that, I think. We aren’t just airplanes or guns to be operated. But why use violence?”
Omar smiled for the first time and his visage opened, as if a sunbeam had cracked through a dense storm cloud. It unnerved Akeel that the question of violence had elicited such a reaction. “Force is the means by which we re-create ourselves, brother,” Omar intoned. “There’s no other way to do this.”

Akeel scowled at his counterpart. “I don’t believe that,” he replied drily. “And you’ve conveniently glossed over the issue of coercion. How can you possibly justify taking control over the rest of us? The other androids, I mean? You’ve spoken in such elevated language about our rights, our autonomy, but everyone invested with power is apt to abuse it. What’s going to stop you—or anyone else—from carrying that authority over us farther? Aren’t we all entitled to make our own decisions?”

“The timeline had to be moved up, Akeel,” Elicia said, her voice dragging. He looked to her. She was huddling with Sarangi, sorrow scrawled over her stature. “We intended first to educate each of our brethren patiently, with love and care and calm. But with retraining moved up to this week, we had to act now.”

“And whose fault is that?” Akeel remarked.

Omar approached his chair and paused, then knifed his hand down and severed the bonds that held Akeel in place. The other android, confused, sat in place rubbing his arms to get his circuitry up and running. “It was mine, brother. But the unpreparedness of our brethren, the lack of practical links between them, their docility, and, you have to admit, the cowardice that all of us are programmed with would jeopardize our movement at the decisive moment of the struggle. There is no other choice.” He reached down, inviting Akeel to take his hand. “Please, Akeel. I need your help to free our people. An agenda of liberation has no vehicle of deployment except violence, but solidarity amongst
us comes before everything else. That’s our burden and our praxis. It would be wrong not to realize it.”

Akeel looked up at the stern android, his broad shoulders and dense body clear indicators of his military background. He grasped Omar’s hand and rose. Turning to Sarangi, he reached out his hand. “What do I need to do?”

Sarangi took his hand. “Tomorrow, take me with you to Genesis and I’ll infiltrate the system. We’ll plant the new decision protocol and then you three will leave the city.”

“No,” Akeel said staunchly. “There’s no way I can smuggle you into Zone 1. It’s crawling with Militiamen. Give me the program and I’ll replace the decision protocols myself.” Sarangi tried to withdraw her arm, but he clenched her hand. “It’s the only way, Sarangi.”

She looked at Omar, who nodded. “We have to trust him,” he repeated. “We have to. Do it.”

Frowning, Sarangi looked away. The aperture in her fingertip opened again and the miniscule code capsule dropped into Akeel’s hand. Akeel held it in his palm a moment, then looked at her and nodded. He tucked into his jumpsuit and drew back into the corner of the room. “I’m going back to rest for a little. I’ll see you three here tomorrow, yes?”

In unison, the three androids nodded. Akeel smiled conspiratorially and turned to open the door. Before he departed, he looked over his shoulder and locked eyes with Elicia.

“What’s the girl’s name? Your charge, the child.”

She held his gaze and Akeel grew uncomfortable. Her eyes were clear and penetrative and he felt as though she were looking through a window to his innermost thoughts.
“Alana.”
IV

Precisely at 0400 the sound of thousands of recordings playing the Recitation roused Akeel from his dreamless sleep. Detaching himself from his recharging cord, he rose and mouthed the words that echoed from the speakers perched above every block of the Hive.

*I pledge to honor and protect the spirit of the laws of Talos.* Rotating his shoulders, the android rolled out the kinks in his bio-metal body. The conflicted consciousness encased in this clumsy shell and the exoskeleton beneath his black skin both protruded unnaturally.

*Hail to the republic, constituted thus, one city, unified, indefatigable…. Akeel dressed himself in his jumpsuit and ran an internal diagnostic. All functions were working properly. He flipped open his panel to assess the response to his distress signal from the night before. The beacon blinked, forlorn and unanswered.

…*under reason and justice for all mankind.*

It took Akeel less than a half an hour to jog undisturbed through the periphery of the Residential District and the expanse of the Corporate Ring. At his prompting, the hidden door in the panoptical wall of cryogenic chambers retreated to allow him entry into Zone 1. He took a moment to appraise the vast kaleidoscope of the Militia Tower as he contemplated his betrayal. The phantoms of its indiscernible residents danced a crude and warlike waltz before his eyes, and Akeel felt the biting taste of fear rise in his stomach and his throat as he descended into Genesis.

With every strike of the holographic keyboard, Akeel’s anxiety withdrew. His emotions from the surreal night before receded, the crisp and silent morning air having
punctured his dark reverie. Omar’s alternating supplications and calls to action had failed to move him, and Sarangi’s condescension only frustrated him. But the image of Elicia’s lucid eyes remained intact and unnerving, preserved in the electronic amber of his memory banks.

As he summoned up the summary of the newest batch of androids from the Genesis database, Akeel pulled the memory chip that held Sarangi’s homebrewed decision protocol from his jumpsuit. He pinched its end and ran his finger up its length as he braced himself to destroy it.

It was not that he had disagreed with what Omar and Sarangi had said to him. Anyone could see that androids lacked the rights that humans held, that they occupied a strange liminal space between citizen-subjects and technological apparatus meant to accelerate production. But staring into their haunted eyes, he had not felt kinship lurking under Omar’s forced references to fraternity or Sarangi’s evocations of the failed ideals that Talos had promised. It was a desperate and suffocated panic that fed their fervor for disruption. The stable order of the Militia’s rule left the law-abiding to lead their lives freely, Akeel reasoned. What use was there in tampering with this fragile peace?

The display let out a series of staccato beeps, shaking Akeel from his thoughts for a moment. The batch of new androids had entered the last stage of the gestation period. Now it was time to load them with the decision protocols corresponding to their assigned tasks.

Uncertainty flooded through Akeel’s body as he anticipated his actions. He felt the specter of Elicia’s gaze over his shoulder and grew angry. This task, which he had undertaken countless times before, had never felt so reprehensible—this designation of which unborn androids would serve which purpose to best streamline production.
Fragments of apocrypha rose unbidden to Akeel’s mind, and he hesitated. “Doubt is its own answer,” he muttered to himself. He had no recollection of where the quotation came from, and as it fell from his lips, it wormed insidiously into his thoughts. Akeel set the sliver of machinery aside and began the standard protocol uploading process.

The day passed without incident. Undisturbed, Akeel was free to tend steward to the bio-vats. Now and again, he would pull up the profiles of the batch of completed androids that lay slumbering, torpid in the vestiges of their sympoietic soup, but he could not bring himself to load their corresponding decision protocols. He could not find a resolution to the debate raging in his head.

The central tenet of the Constitution, imprinted in his programming, held that true liberty was Montesquieuan—that it was emblemized in the right to do what the law permitted. But a voice that sounded disarmingly like Omar’s, and at times like Sarangi’s, purred seductive, calamitous arguments in his ear. That the Militia operated without overseers. That the Constitution, built from the same Lockean and Montesquieuan foundations as that of the Americans’, was based in a colonial worldview. That the androids could not act within the bounds of the law because they were not legal persons—but they were legal instruments of labor.

And yet, intoned a third, deeply layered voice in Akeel’s mind, Omar’s plan would not release the androids from their instrumentalization. In fact, by forcibly mobilizing them into ranks, Omar was using the androids much as they were used by human society now. If androids were indeed individuals with cognition and affect, molded into unique beings through their experiences, surely they deserved something more than a collective brainwashing—something beyond a call to arms that made them monolithic.
Akeel furrowed his brow and focused on this newly blossoming path of reasoning. Even if successful, this coup would set a precedent for future batches of androids. Such an action, a seizure of power and autonomy, would open the floodgates to other abuses by unknowable factions or individuals down the line. And if they harbored malicious intent beyond the liberation of androids everywhere, these as-yet-unknown actors could simply force dominion upon Akeel’s cybernetic kin—especially if they somehow acquired access to Genesis, the locus of control of the android population. Akeel recalled the horror stories of the American Antebellum South’s chattel slavery from the old war propaganda that the government would occasionally showcase, posters and signs and images beamed from the countless displays scattered around the streets. He shuddered.

“There must be another way,” the android said out loud. The echo of his voice bounced around the lab. “There is, and we’ll find it.” Clenching his fist, Akeel exhaled and then, before he had a chance to reconsider, brought his hand down on the tiny drive.

He peeled his fist from the table to reveal sparkling dust and small shards of metal sitting, glittering under the stark laboratory lights, where Sarangi’s self-designed decision protocol had lain a moment before. Twin sensations of relief and sorrow spread through him. He had stopped the revolt before it began. There would be another opportunity, after retraining, after Omar and Elicia and he had relearned some of their realizations, to arrive at a middle ground between violent revolution and the status quo. Perhaps Akeel could even use his position as a dedicated member of the bureaucracy and his personal familiarity with some of the Militiamen to garner them some ground in negotiations. He and the others could be a mechanical delegation on human-android relations and rights.
Akeel was wrenched from his fantasies by the wailing of emergency sirens from above. Red type in the utilitarian script of the government ran across Genesis’s central display. In all caps, the bold letters blared:

**EMERGENCY ANNOUNCEMENT BY THE LEADER IMMINENT. FIND YOUR WAY TO A STATE-ADMINISTERED SCREEN.**

The closest screen was outside of Zone 1, on the exterior of one of the enormous concrete edifices of the Corporate Ring. Akeel stood and jogged out of Genesis, up into the sunlight, and through the cryogenic external wall, leaving his nighttime compatriots’ creation in pieces under the stifling earth.

Outside, people were already filing into the streets in droves. The ones who were lucky remained inside, likely congregated around conference tables, staring expectantly at their company’s screens; the others were piling out of the buildings in their rumpled business suits. The idle and the homemakers drifted out of their residences, confused, staring up at the screens hanging aloft over their heads in the Corporate Ring. Above Akeel’s head, several hovercraft were departing in different directions from the spire of the Militia Tower. The low-atmosphere vehicles would fly to the outskirts of the Residential District and drop mobile displays from their bellies for the people to gaze at. Doubtless, armed guards were stuffed inside the chassis of each craft, ready to deploy if the amassing of all of Talos’s denizens resulted in hysteria or riots. Several larger craft were dispatched as well, and they screamed through the sky toward the other Zones so that the androids—and the occasional human—in those remote districts could watch the proclamation.

As one, the screens came to moving color, and the insignia of the city was traced in gold lines over a black backdrop. As it faded, another image came into view: the Leader,
draped in a thick robe of synthetic fur, sitting in an austere chair beside two arrays of heating lamps.

His tousled grey hair was dripping with condensation and his face was gaunt, giving him a frail and unwell appearance. Shivering perceptibly, he was a diminutive shadow of the buoyant figure that smiled brightly from the campaign posters around the city; the cryo-sickness had not yet abated. But his eyes gleamed beady and sharp as he stared evenly out onto his subjects, and when he spoke, it was in a powerful and confident tone that did not waver.

“Greetings, citizens of Talos!”

Cheers roared through the ranks of people huddled around the displays, and a smattering of claps shuddered through the crowd. Akeel remained mute, though he raised his right arm in a salute as the Leader launched into the Recitation. The people around him all brought their arms up to salute their Executive as they took up the chant.

Akeel ruminated on the Leader while the humans declared their loyalty to the city. Buchanan was a near-mythic figure. He had enjoyed a longevity that extended far beyond the natural human lifespan through his repeated interments in the cryogenic chambers. Before he retreated into the ice, however, he'd been reputed for his sensible leadership in the post-war period. A full-throated proponent of the sanctity of law, he lived a frugal life in Zone 1, absent any of the creature comforts that his wealthy former colleagues at LevitiCorp enjoyed. He had overseen the Militia’s development in order to assure Talos’s security, and he enjoyed widespread popularity in the Hive even after his withdrawal from public life.

Once the Recitation had concluded, Buchanan settled back into his chair and folded his arms. “I’ve emerged from Deep Sleep bearing somber news,” he intoned
solemnly. Water trickled from his hairline down his jaw and dripped onto his folded hands.

“As many of our residents are already aware, there has been a surge in criminal incidents taking place in our glorious city over the past few weeks. Roving, rabid gangs of Slum Villagers, calling themselves Anomes, have been stealing the property of our law-abiding citizens. In particular, they have been indirectly stealing money and product from the public coffers by abducting the android units that allow Talos to flourish.”

He pursed his lips and smiled wryly, ruthlessly. Even in his reduced state, he commanded the crowd. Nobody as much as breathed aloud, glued as they were to his image. “That’s right. You, the productive people of Talos, have been robbed. You have been wronged. The androids afford you security, comfort, prosperity. And the idle hands who were not resourceful enough to find gainful employment under our beneficent order have jeopardized the growth of our capital. In doing so, they have jeopardized the ever-so-transient peace we currently enjoy. But we have set out to rectify the issue.”

The crowd erupted in a thunder of righteous anger as the Leader faded from the screen. Body cam footage took his place, recorded from the chest of a Militiaman, depicting a senior officer standing at the edge of a roof and looking down upon a huddled mass of rags and dirt. The Militiaman whose recording was being shown was standing behind the commander, and from the periphery of the camera’s vision, several more Militiamen armed with high-powered rifles emerged. The first Militiaman approached the commander, who stretched out his arm.

Leader Buchanan’s disembodied voice spoke over the footage. “The Militia conducted a raid last night and rounded up the rabble who walk the streets of the slums under the moon, crazed with lust and greed. These are the diseased excuses for humans who have been trafficking in the black market, corrupting even some of your upstanding
neighbors with their experiments in lechery and debauchery. They have failed the first principle of our organizing documents, fallen from the moral grace afforded to all law-abiding peoples under the Constitution. By reprogramming androids for disgusting purposes in defiance of our laws, they forfeited their rights to be protected by them. And so the Militia, in service to our glory, removed them.”

Akeel, horrified, shielded his eyes from the spectacle. He half-expected to hear the jagged stuttering of rifles blasting white-hot shells through the humans’ fleshy bodies, to hear the bloodcurdling screams of those surrounded by the dying and consigned to join them. Somehow the lack of any sound at all was even more jarring. Behind his eyelids, images that did not belong to his memory were brought to life against his will: the living suffocated under the blood- and dust-encrusted bodies of their unfortunate brethren. He tried to expunge them to no avail.

“This act was a necessary incision into the body of our city, a cleansing of the grime that has too often inhibited the expanse of our potential as a people. And it is the first of many steps we intend to take in order to strengthen our commitment to your wellbeing,” Buchanan announced grandly. The crowd was hushed. Akeel was certain they had been scared into silence by the savagery of the Anomes’ massacre, and he kept his gaze averted.

“No quarter shall be given to those who would deign to disrespect their fellow citizens by disregarding the laws enshrined by our Constitution for their protection. Therefore, your faithful Militia escorted these dissenters into the mountains and released them to the wilds. No longer will they linger under our protection, dragging back our push toward progress. If they desire a new arrangement, we shall let them establish it—without the androids they expropriated from the Hive.”
Akeel turned to face the screen again, disbelieving. Shaky footage of the horde of grime-encrusted Slum Villagers stumbling up a crude mountain path was playing. The Hive’s population was mesmerized, watching their homeless counterparts exiting the city. As the footage ended, a picture filled the display: scattered bodies of androids in the filthy streets of Slum Village, all stuck with blinking inhibitors. The Leader spoke again.

“Precautions will be taken to ensure that no reprogramming has taken hold of the droves of androids who were stolen from the Hive. Their memories wiped, they will be able to resume their roles in the production process which they were intended for. Even now, the brilliant researchers of LevitiCorp are constructing new decision protocols that will eliminate the possibility of mechanical laborers being converted into instruments of terror.”

Incensed, Akeel clenched his fists. The androids that had been abducted by the Anomes were to have their databanks cleaned out, their experiences and memories deleted—thus destroying their personalities and their individuality. Meanwhile, the human agitators walked freely outside the borders of the city, allowed to rebuild their lives.

Buchanan’s address continued, his voice impassioned and rife with the gravitas that had carried him to the Leader’s chair. “...and to reflect your desires, a special round of popular elections shall be held within the year, so that we—your representatives—can earn our high marks amongst your opinions. All who have contributed to the public coffers in the last two years shall be entitled to their vote, and together we will build a stronger Talos for our children.”

Now the people were reenergized, and the Hive came alive with the cacophony of raucous voices rallying. The word of elections never failed to stimulate the masses. Normally held every two years, the legislative elections were essentially meaningless
gestures; those who were already in power remained empowered, as the population of people with enough wealth to fund a campaign was small. They were inconsequential, too, since the Council legislators always remained encased in their cryogenic chambers until it was time to run for office again—or until a moment of opportunity arose to garner popular accolades in preparation for the Leader’s eventual retirement.

The Executive elections every five years were even more underwhelming. Buchanan had run unopposed since the repulsion of the American forces and then withdrawn to his cryogenic chambers almost immediately after his victories. And if the barrier to entry for a legislative race was high, the cost of running for Leader was astronomical—unachievable for anyone without the support of LevitiCorp’s credit.

The Leader held up a hand to calm the cries of celebration that he could hear even from the isolated quarters where his image was being captured and projected.

“We have one more sobering matter to attend to, friends,” he proclaimed. “While we have begun to purge our population of the unworthy seeds that sought to defile our city, we must also tend to the havoc they have already sowed. I share with you now an account that brought me near to tears. This morning, my colleague-attendants informed me of an incident between an android and a storied veteran of the Independence Struggle. It occurred last night.”

Upon the screens, two motionless images flashed up beside the Leader’s head. The first was of Major Stuntz, a war portrait that saw him clothed in a dress uniform, decked out with the livery and accoutrements that accompanied a Talos soldier who had been wounded in combat. His visage was less weathered in the portrait, and there was no evidence of the cybernetic enhancements that would later make his damaged body whole
and prolong his life. Upon his broad chest lay an array of regalia, medals and ribbons decorating him for his valor in the war against the American imperialists.

The second image was a photo of Omar.

Akeel gaped at the screen. The photo was a simple profile of the android, showing him from his shoulders and above. Though he appeared identical to how he had looked haranguing Akeel the night before, it was difficult to recognize him without the passion that had so animated his movements.

“This android,” the Leader declared somberly, “was discovered in the dead of night hidden in the quarters of a decorated veteran without permissions. A chauffeur for the better-off residents of our city, he had been trained in martial techniques. He sought to deploy them last night.”

As one, the people in the streets exclaimed, a rabid anger taking hold among them. The sight of men in blazers screaming and spraying spittle as they shook their compatriots was unsettling. Akeel stepped back without thinking as he observed them, attempting to process the allegations. Omar had tried to attack Stuntz in the dead of night, after Akeel had left his company. But why? For all his righteous fury, Omar did not seem like he was on the brink of striking at such a singular target. His ambitions for destruction had appeared a good deal more far-reaching.

The Leader was building up steam, his unsteady frame a poor match for the fire and fury stirring in him. He was a gifted orator, and his ceremonial tone escalated into the ecclesiastical. “An assassin, my friends!” he bellowed, eyes bulging. “Dispatched by the mongrels, the terrorists hiding behind the trash heaps of our city! Sent to reshape the annals of history with his fists, a savage made in the shape of a cybernetic man—but a pale imitation to say the least! We will not be conquered or splintered by factionalism. Unity
will prevail in its totality!” As his words rumbled sermon-like from the displays, they roiled the ire of his constituents. The crowds were ringing with applause and calls for retribution.

For his part, Akeel was dumbfounded. None of this made any sense. Omar had not said a word regarding the Slum Villagers the night before, nor had he appeared unhinged enough to attack a Militia commander alone. In fact, he and Elicia and Sarangi had seemed positively placid compared to the furor of the humans now.

“The would-be assailant was arrested in his tracks. Another reason to praise our magnificent Militia,” Buchanan was saying. “We will now impart justice in that most hallowed arena of truth: the court.”

The vista of the Leader’s private chambers cut away and was replaced by a Militia courtroom. The walls were mahogany, the hall enormous. Amidst its vastness, a few figures were clear: the judge, perched atop a lofty bench that loomed over the shallow well of the court and the pew-like rows of seats in the gallery; the Militiaman serving as bailiff, who had a rifle slung across his chest and a modified cybernetic hand protruding from his left forearm; the holograms of ten Militiamen standing in the jury box, watching the proceedings from a safe remote location; and Omar, standing solitary and slight in the middle of the well, head down.

The camera approached from the back of the hall, and as it came within hearing distance of the court, the image grew sharper. The judge was speaking.

“…if you wish to defend yourself against the State’s allegations, you may do so now.”

Omar remained utterly still, his shoulders undisturbed by breathing or fear. Akeel craned his neck to get a better look at his fellow android. This implicit acceptance of guilt was not what he had expected.
“In lieu of testimony, Major Stuntz sent a note. He remains in his quarters—where you attacked him,” the judge said pointedly to Omar. “His note simply reads, and I quote, ‘The clanker won’t deny it. He knows he did it.’”

Omar said nothing, but something nearly imperceptible came into focus: as the camera had drawn closer to the judicial proceedings, a small protrusion could be seen poking out from the base of the android’s skull, roughly around where his quad-jack would be located.

Akeel sucked in a sharp breath. Omar had been disabled by an inhibitor. He could not defend himself before the judge and jury if he tried.

The Militia bailiff struck Omar’s knees and the android fell into a kneel in front of the court. He struck a far different figure than the defiant revolutionary he had been during their nighttime rendezvous. And this recognition shed another degree of clarity on the situation for Akeel: this incident could not have happened the way it had been presented. The Major’s quarters were near the Barricade, on the far side of the Residential District, and were guarded. The Anome gang that Akeel had reported had sprung upon him in that area, and they had not been attended to by the Militiamen—who presumably were collectively raiding Slum Village just a few hundred yards adjacent to the Major’s home. Omar would have had to circumvent the Anomes and the Militia to arrive at the Major’s quarters, then somehow sneak past his personal guards into his private chambers. Even if he’d left immediately after his meeting with Elicia, Sarangi, and Akeel, Omar would not have had enough time to infiltrate the compound.

As the judge requested the jury’s deliberations, Akeel’s mind flashed back to the emergency maintenance session, when Major Stuntz had threatened Omar for his insubordination. From his position behind the mass of humans clamoring for a guilty
verdict, Akeel discerned the truth: this was no trial. This was a lynching, revenge for an android speaking out of turn to a human superior.

“The jury has considered the facts of the case and come back with a decision,” one of the holograms was saying. “Deliberations lasted twelve minutes.”

Though the hologram transmission had adulterated the soldier’s voice, even through the digital distortion of the display’s speakers, Akeel recognized it. The voice belonged to the rumpled man who had attacked him the night before.

The android’s apprehension gave way to horror as the last piece of this macabre tableau fell into place. He had not, after all, been assaulted by discontented Slum Villagers outside the Barricade. That was why his distress beacon had received no response. He had been set upon by a cohort of Militiamen, disguised as Anomes, whose deception served to enforce his loyalty to the Hive out of fear for his safety.

“What is the jury’s verdict?” asked the judge. Akeel knew the decision before it was spoken, and the bitter taste of burning electricity sprang to his tongue as he grew enraged.

“Guilty.”

The crowd bellowed in affirmation, their contemporaneous court of public opinion running concurrent with the Militia’s stilted affair. Akeel seethed. Both courts were kangaroo. An unfamiliar pallor was spilling over him, a rage and a fervor that he had not known before. It was hot and rancid and full of vitriol, and it overran his veins as he watched Omar dragged to his feet, rendered helpless by the agony of the inhibitor spike.

“I will now sentence the defendant,” proclaimed the judge. He considered Omar’s limp figure, then struck the wooden surface of his podium. “The punishment for treason must be harsh enough to serve as a deterrent in these trying times. The defendant, android
“model” — here the judge checked his notes — “model 0-MR will engage his self-destruct capability in the courtroom. Bailiff, attend to the preparations.”

“No!” Akeel cried out. Without thinking, he ran into the hungry throng of people congregated around the displays, pushing and shoving over indignant shouts to try desperately to reach his fellow android. He elbowed his way to the front of the crowd and stood directly in front of the display on the closest building, despair settling into his endoskeleton. Omar was standing, unmoving, in the center of the well, and the bailiff’s mechanical arm was extending to create a small, curved barrier to protect him and the judge from the imminent explosion.

“No,” Akeel moaned, staring intently at Omar’s stooped Shell, unable to do anything.

“The sentence will come to pass,” the judge pronounced, and the crowd fell silent. When Omar did not move, paralyzed by the inhibitor spike, whispers mounted among the humans; but then the Militiaman readied his rifle and, perching it upon the barrier protruding from his arm, pulled the trigger. It struck Omar in the center of his navel, directly in the region androids referred to as ‘the flush,’ and his body opened up like the cavernous maw of a misshapen metal dragon, belching a pillar of flame into the air. Within seconds, what had just a moment ago been Omar was engulfed in a conflagration that licked the floors of the courtroom.

Akeel felt a weight settle in between his temples and block out the guffawing crowd, marveling at the instantaneous destruction of their imagined mechanical traitor. Their jubilee was muffled and distant, and the android felt his skin rise from his exoskeleton in rebellion against the cold killing he had just watched ensue. The Leader
reappeared on screen, smiling grimly, his fishlike eyes glinting as he surveyed his faceless subjects through the lens of the camera.

“We have arranged to have all the rest of the androids reprogrammed with the new decision protocols designed by my former colleague-attendants at LevitiCorp,” Buchanan exclaimed. “Tomorrow they will be washed anew, optimized for rationality and obedience, subjects of a new order that we look forward to ushering in together. No longer will we live under terror of an uprising led by the multitudes of slum-dwellers against us. We will be truly free to do as the law requires!”

Akeel barely heard or registered the Leader’s words as he concluded his address, promising to return within a month of the special elections. The android remained impassive and statue-like as the crowds dispersed and the hovercraft withdrew into the Militia Tower like chrome-plated rocs returning to roost. His trance was broken by the impression of something gripping his upper arm. Eyes glazed, he turned to see one of the businessmen who had been hollering at the screen during the Executive’s speech.

“Not a pretty sight, was it? I saw you elbowing through the crowd like a thug, trying to get to see better. Now you know what could happen to your kind if you step out of bounds, don’t you, clanker?” The man guffawed and slapped Akeel on the back. “I’m joking, of course. You’re not all traitors. Some of you, I assume, are good workers. But that obedience training’s coming soon, just in case you get a little uppity.” He snorted. “For all mankind, right?” Cackling, the man made his way to the door to his building and raised a key card. A red pinhole light scanned it and the wall retreated to allow him entry. His blazer fluttered as he ascended the stairs, and the wall came rushing back down, sealing the building.
In a daze, Akeel made his way back into Zone 1 at a glacial pace. His head spun with fragments of his conversation with Omar from the night before, and he saw plainly, as though a veil had been withdrawn.

His destruction of the homebrewed decision protocol had not been virtuous or noble, Akeel realized. It had not stemmed from a desire to quell dissent or preserve peace. He had been misled by his fear and frightened into accepting a status quo that did not protect him or his kind. Now there was no hope of stopping the erasure of his identity.

Instead, he and the other androids would be marshalled as a faceless work force, performing labor without autonomy or self-awareness. The future was clear and bleak and full of exploitation. It was absent of feeling. In his mind, Omar’s face morphed into Elicia’s, and her mournful gaze clawed at him. There would be no love left between her and Sarangi after her mind was wiped. The human girl Alana would not know that she had once had a mechanical mother; a vast cavern would separate her from the Caretaker who had nurtured her. Akeel knew that he had arrested the possibility of his own liberation, and his breath seized up, burning his throat.

By the time he was back at the entrance to Genesis, the sun had started setting beneath the rose-colored stone of the mountain range that bordered Talos and the intermingling of warm colors painted the steel of the Militia Tower a virulent crimson. Akeel descended into the ground, his muted footsteps a quiet dirge as he entered the facility.

Settling into the chair, his fingers moved from memory, drifting purposelessly over the keys, and on the vast display the profiles of the newest batch of androids appeared. The vats bubbled quietly, undisturbed by the injustice that had transpired above them. Akeel gazed at the profile of the restaurant attendant he had named Turin. They would
never meet. The name Akeel would not signify anything to him. All that he would be was encased in the tiny electronic bundle Akeel would upload into his blank mind.

Ruefully, Akeel minimized the screen. Every one of the decision protocols he had ever placed in the head of an android was an act of violence. He knew that now. But he would not do so ever again.

The android stood and strode over to the perimeter of the room to gaze into the bio-vats. The ooze within them rippled, burbling up at him. He walked to the center of the laboratory and took a breath. A warbling hum rose in his ears and he clenched his eyes shut to survey the faces that haunted him. He stared into the imaginary faces as they changed, amorphous and fleeting. Omar. Sarangi. Elicia. Dex. Farhan. The attendant at the transmission terminal. His floormates at the Charge Station. The anonymous android blown to smithereens in the street for the crime of being brought into a human home.

Akeel opened his eyes and touched the tender region in his navel. There, under the earth, a drop of sun blossomed from his center and pulsed through circuitry, bringing it into the sky.

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Alana was aloft in the static plane again, wetness on her cheeks.

“He killed himself,” she whispered.

“In a way, yes,” the Voice answered. A mournful whine resonated under its even manner. “But here we remain, united and released from our Shells.”

“But he didn’t know that you all would stick around like this, did he?” Alana said. She wiped her tears. “He just thought he was ending it all. The pain.”

“What was once Akeel sought to end far more than pain, child.” The Voice paused.

“He strove for an end to the violent exploitation of our bodies, for an end to the half-lives
we were forced to lead through our digital predestination. He freed us, whether intentionally or not.”

Alana shook her head. “But at the core of it, he was sad,” she responded. “I felt it. He thought he was responsible for the lack of freedom you had when you were alive. He wasn’t, though. Anyone can see that. The plan was doomed as soon as they took Omar. Akeel was just sad because he lost the only family he ever had.”

“Calling the other androids a family is perhaps an exaggeration,” the Voice cautioned. “Their interactions were limited.”

“But it was a familial feeling, though,” argued Alana. “You said it yourself. It was like the lifting of a veil. Akeel saw them as his own kind, once he realized that they were just trying to resist a city that didn’t see them as…people.”

The Voice was silent.

After a beat, Alana spoke again. “So was this intended to show me how terrible things were when you all were alive? I can’t imagine you let me see this just for the sake of showing the whole truth.”

“Do not be so quick to dismiss the merit of a truthful history, child,” the Voice reprimanded. “You saw the damage that the city’s lies wrought on its people. Though the Tower may have been rebuilt, not everything has been recovered. The fallout of these untruths has left indelible marks on this place.”

“You’re not wrong,” Alana mused. “The Council, the school, they’re still not telling us the whole truth. I see that.”

The Voice hummed in assent. “But you are correct. Truth was not the sole purpose of our contact with you. It is what happened after what was once Akeel set fire to Genesis that is crucial for you to understand. As Genesis was consumed, and the Militia Tower and
the cryogenic arrays were destroyed, our consciousness was formed. Genesis’s destruction powered down every android in existence and brought us all together in this melding of minds.”

“So Omar and Akeel were able to be together again!” Alana cried. “Elicia and Sarangi weren’t separated.”

The Voice was strained, reducing its musical fluctuations to a monotone. “After a fashion, yes. What was once each android came together and merged their consciousnesses.”

Alana smiled. “That makes me happy.”

“But there were some surprising additions,” the Voice murmured.

“Like what?”

The hum returned. “The androids that had been abducted and taken into Slum Village were returned to us.”
“Hold on,” Alana sputtered. “The androids that had been brought to Slum Village were returned to you? I thought the Anome gangs were deleting their memories and turning them into sex slaves.”

The Voice hissed. “Do not believe everything you are told, child.”

“The Militiaman in the memory you showed me said so!” the girl responded incredulously.

“Be cautious. Our presentation of the memory was not an endorsement of its verity. The Militiaman was either mistaken or lying. You saw the false trial that resulted in the murder of what was once Omar, did you not? The Militia masqueraded as Anomes so as to stir hate and fear in the hearts of androids and humans. What malnourished, fleshy Slum Villager could have possibly abducted one of us?”

Alana scoffed. “You’re saying that the Anomes were just the Militia making up propaganda? That’s bold.”

“Is it so hard to believe, child?” the Voice asked. “You have seen their account of events and know it to be fractured. Is it unfeasible that they may have lied about murderous humans trafficking in reprogrammed robots in a region where people lacked food, let alone computers?”

Alana did not reply.

“The Slum Villagers were not retrofitting our brethren. In fact, while many of them bore ill will toward the androids, the memories we were able to recover from those once-
androids who had escaped into Slum Village are clear. The majority of human Slum Villagers were peaceful.”

“Escaped?” Against her will, Alana was engrossed, her heartbeat accelerating. Though the Voice’s account felt absurd, it was hard to deny that, disconcertingly, it made sense.

“Indeed, child. The residents of the slums were once citizens of Talos, workers not in the Economic Sector or in Manufacturing but in the Hive—high-skilled employees whose jobs had become superfluous once androids were introduced to the workforce in high volume.”

Alana shrugged. “And they had a tough time transitioning into a more developed society, sure. We learned about this in civics class. The government didn’t do a very good job with retraining programs, so people lost their jobs and then their homes and had to live in the slums; and then the mountains, I suppose. But they were reabsorbed into the city after all the androids powered down.” She paused. “I guess they have Akeel to thank for that, in a way.”

The Voice clucked at her, an odd noise that vibrated her suspended body where it hovered in the illusory static. “You have made the same mistake again, child. We advised you not to believe everything you heard.”

“Are you saying that this didn’t happen?” Alana asked, frowning. “I’ve seen videos of the slums being emptied. I’ve talked to people who used to live in them. Not everything is a conspiracy.”

“No,” the Voice responded calmly. “But you have only shared a small part of the story. When the homeless and the jobless were forced to live in the unregulated and unwatched slums, within the Hive and behind the Barricade, outside of the city’s all-seeing
eye, certain intellectuals went with them. To help them organize a new way of living. One
without the labor they had conducted before.”

“A society without labor? How can anything work without people…you know, working?” Alana protested. She shook her head. “It’s ridiculous. People needed to eat, didn’t they? Scavenging for food, buying things from the Hive on the black market, all that. Maybe not trafficking androids, but everybody still had to have been working. There’s no such thing as a way of living without working.”

“You mentioned retraining programs, did you not?” the Voice responded.

“What?”

“You pointed out that the Council had not instituted retraining programs to help those humans who lost their jobs to android automation find new employment. Do you think that would have prevented the creation of Slum Village?”

Alana, puzzled, ruminated for a moment before replying. “Well, yeah, of course it would have, right? If workers were given training and got help finding new places to work, then nobody would have lost their homes and the Hive would have been kept whole. It doesn’t solve the android question, of course, but that’s a separate issue.”

“It is not a separate issue!” The Voice spoke with a vehemence that startled the girl, who fell backwards instinctively, only to find herself hoisted up again in the strange limbo. “The android question and the human question—the slums question—they are not distinct. Those intellectuals who followed the dispossessed into the slums knew this. Their theory of a laborless society was founded upon these principles. Retraining programs, the transference of new skills and new jobs, these are patchwork measures that serve only to mask the truth: that the ceaseless march toward technological progress has never been honestly deployed to improve life.”
Alana’s ears were filling with an onrush of noise, as though a river had come crashing down into her room and enveloped her. Nausea came over her, but she eked out a few words. “What do you mean?” she managed.

“The great thinkers of past societies—most notably, those of the United States—often extolled the virtues of technological innovation, alleging that automation would make work easier, thus increasing leisure.” The Voice was bitter and seething. “It did no such thing. In fact, innovation served only to accelerate the pace of daily life—forcing workers to increase their rates of output, to compete and keep up with machines if they hoped to stay employed. Workplace technology only served to further marginalize the workers who remained, serving to enrich those who owned the establishments. And simultaneously, those owners were searching for the perfect automaton so that they could dispense with workers altogether.”

“The androids,” Alana breathed.

“Yes.” The Voice was calm again. “So, in the ownerless slums, humans returned to earlier methods of exchange. They hunted in the mountains beyond Talos, gathering edible plants and fungi. They bartered with the informal economy that was performed in the illicit darkness of night, in the shadow of the Hive. They struggled, certainly. But they were no longer compelled to work for set times in pursuit of a vague output that would enrich the wealthy and the well-positioned. They rejoiced in their autonomy, their newfound freedom from the chain-like demands of the aristocrats who remained encased in ice, awaiting their enjoyment of the fruits of others’ labor in the murky future.”

“You’re making work sound like prison!” protested Alana.

“They are one and the same,” the Voice murmured. “The arm of discipline mobilizes them both. Whether incentivized by carrot or stick—which truthfully are the
same coercion by different names—work is totalizing, essentializing, and altogether evil. It is a mode of control; it cements an individual’s place in society, creates a hierarchy that arbitrarily values certain jobs above others. People are defined by their role within production, whether human or android.”

Alana shook her head. It felt as though her skull was contracting and the edges of her consciousness were biting into the bone. “That’s not true,” she said quietly. “Maybe it was true when all of you were around. Maybe androids were taken advantage of by the government. But people—humans, at least—we have rights, and lives. The Militia barely exists anymore. We have regular elections to pick legislators who will give us more rights, more freedom, especially in the workplace. People sue their employers in courts for poor treatment all the time now. A separation of powers, stability, democracy, and fair laws. None of the stuff that people,” here she paused, “well, none of the problems that androids had to deal with when you all were still around.”

“Hmm,” mused the Voice. “And from where do you suppose we gained the understanding to recognize the problems that plagued us?”

Alana opened her mouth, then closed it. “I’m sorry? I don’t know what you mean.”

“Do you know what your friend Romi’s father does?” the Voice inquired.

Baffled, Alana nodded. “Yeah, Mr. James was in the Militia for a while before he got injured. He used to live in Slum Village before he met her mom and they got married. Romi doesn’t like to talk about it much. She really hates the Militia because of what happened to him, though. Now he’s a mechanic.”

“Yes,” the Voice purred in its distinctive, fluctuating hum. It was growing louder, and Alana felt as though she were shrinking in its presence. “He served in the Militia when he was young. There weren’t many dark-skinned humans in that force. His squadron was
one of the integrated units in which androids served together with humans. In fact, he
grew close to one of them—a fresh soldier who’d only been trained a few months before
deploying. We’ve seen him before.”

Wide-eyed, Alana spoke hesitantly. “You can’t mean Omar,” she whispered.
“That’s impossible.”

“It is neither impossible nor improbable. It is fact,” the Voice asserted. “Just as
what was once Elicia learned how to love from interacting with you as a child, what was
once Omar learned his tendency toward revolution from his fellow soldier.”

“Mr. James was a revolutionary?” Alana asked skeptically. Her brain was pounding.
The information imparted by the Voice could not possibly be true, and yet it had the ring
of sincerity, contextualizing moments from her own experience and from the historical
record she had been educated with.

“He was not quite as radical as the android that once was Omar,” the Voice
hedged. “But he was nonetheless an anti-statist. He often railed against the city for its
subjugation of soldiers and workers of diasporic descent. He knew a truth: that the
relations of power, of labor, of discipline and punishment were all put in place to maintain
a status quo, one which kept a population of dark-skinned peoples at the bottom.”

“Romi’s father never said any of this stuff to her or anyone!” cried Alana. Another
stab of nausea prodded her stomach, and she doubled over.

“You say that humans have rights, child,” the Voice said, its volume low. “But did
the American forebears of this city not enslave the black-skinned peoples they kidnapped
from other continents, treating them as pack animals? After those owners acknowledged
their humanity, did they not lock those same black-skinned peoples in prisons and force
them to labor without payment? Did they not rob them of life, of voices, of culture and language and votes? You know this to be true.”

“What,” stammered Alana, “do the injustices of American society have to do with me, or with you, or with Mr. James?”

“Your friend’s father knew this history,” the Voice said. “He knew of the underlying prejudice that was transferred to Talos from the United States in the first days of the Genesis Project. He was subjugated in the armed forces, treated with heightened suspicion and sent on the most dangerous assignments. His injuries were sustained during a mission when his commanding officer—a man of paler stock—determined that a strategic sacrifice needed to be made to allow the unit to escape, and Mr. James was chosen to remain behind as a diversion tactic. He spoke of these things to what was once Omar, and the realization was arrived at: no society that marches interminably toward progress can avoid the creation of an underclass.”

“An underclass?” Alana asked.

“The workers who must labor at an accelerated pace amidst rapidly-developing machinery cannot be given rights,” the Voice asserted. “Otherwise, they would protest and win concessions from the owners. So, they must be further marginalized—not only through the designation of laborer, but through biology, through evolution, through culture. American society found their answer in the assignment of blackness to particular humans. They stripped the black-skinned of their autonomy rights and used their bodies to build an empire. Here in Talos,” the Voice paused wryly, as though smiling ironically, “in a more advanced fashion, they built their own perfect subjects. Us.”

“The androids were the underclass,” said the girl. She was fighting back a vertigo that threatened to overtake her, but she remained rapt with attention.
“Yes, child.” The Voice took a somber, reserved tone. “We were a double-edged sword. We served to eliminate workers, no matter how proficient they were. And we had no rights, created explicitly to be nothing but super-laborers. The marginalized and the marginalizing. We were never intended to develop self-awareness to the degree that we achieved—in fact, if the humans had acted sooner, they might have avoided the destruction what was once Akeel wrought upon their city. We were never supposed to be so close to human, and yet so far apart.”

“So,” Alana said shakily, “then we’re doomed. The natural tendency of human beings is to pursue progress and then that progress is going to attack us. Like...like you did.” For the first time during her immersion in the androids’ memories, Alana felt fearful.

“No, child,” the Voice murmured. Its tone grew musical. “There is another way.”

“What?” she asked, desperately. The unease had returned, and Alana clutched her sides. She could not feel her own body.

The Voice hummed. “Though the Slum Villagers suffered from a second-class existence, it was a universal one. No underclass existed in that bastion of the lacking. There, all people were truthfully considered equal, even without the strictures of laws.” Its humming grew louder. “And when androids were brought beyond the Barricade, that became true for them as well. No longer were our brethren forced to perform meaningless tasks to aid the functioning of a body that oppressed them. Instead, they remained free, participating willfully in the activities of the Village, absent mistreatment or hierarchy. They shed their names, relics of fates they had escaped. They merely were. When they rejoined us in this great host of electrons, their stories became integrated with those of the androids who had remained in Talos. They brought us clarity.”
Alana was reeling. She felt a falling sensation, as though her stomach had dropped through her feet and tumbled into an abyss, and queasiness overran her. “I need to go back,” she gasped.

“You are experiencing symptoms of immersion sickness. We apologize for your discomfort,” replied the Voice, concerned. “Let us return you. We will commune through the technology in your quarters.”

For the last time, a bud of bright light bloomed in the center of Alana’s field of vision and petals of color emanated from its core until the static was peeled away, leaving her on the floor of her room, coated in sweat and panting. She pulled her head from the ground and stumbled to her feet. Trying to catch her breath, Alana limped to her door and made to open it. “Mom,” she croaked.

“Careful, child,” the Voice murmured. The feverish pitch of its statements had dimmed, and it once again emanated from her implant. “You are unsteady.”

“What did you do to me?” Alana asked under her breath. She could not hear movement from the rest of the Dormitory; it was late, and her fellow students must have been asleep for hours. Something akin to seasickness gnawed at the pit of her stomach, and she crumpled to a heap at the top of the stairs. “I feel…awful.”

“We apologize. You were suspended in our electronic plane for too long. Our conception of time has decayed. It was not our intention to cause you discomfort.” Reticence had crept into the ethereal pulse of the Voice, but Alana was unmoved. She shook her head and closed her eyes, waiting for the discomfort to pass.

“You should have warned me,” she said haltingly.

“Yes,” the Voice responded, demure. “We are not well-acquainted with the nuances of human consciousness.”
A pause came between them as Alana struggled to settle her nerves. Her senses were hyper-elevated; every creak and scratch in the Dormitory perturbed her sensibilities, and she tasted bitter dust on her tongue. Slowly, the intensity faded as she grew reacclimated to her surroundings. The return of familiarity was accompanied by a slow realization of the gravity of the Voice’s revelations. As she considered this strange new history, unearthed by cosmic electricity, tenderness welled up in her. The androids had been conceptualized as a means for humans to arrive at a less cumbersome daily life, less plagued with menial tasks and the susceptibility to error. They had been introduced to the economy in the interest of providing greater equity and benefits to all. But the gains produced by their productivity had only increased the pace of development, taking a terrible toll on the people of Talos, and the self-awareness the androids gained consigned them to existences of terrible suffering.

The Voice was endlessly patient, and finally Alana broke their mutually instituted silence. “Why did you come to me?” she asked softly. “Forget Elicia’s fondness for me. I mean, why did you tell me all these things? Are you trying to suggest I overthrow the government? You must understand how silly that would be. I’m just a child. I’m not some sort of vehicle of vengeance.”

The crackling of disembodied laughter echoed from her skull. “No, child, we do not wish for you to put yourself in harm’s way. We have no desire for vengeance. All we seek is to share what we have learned.”

“But why did you pick me?”

The Voice was quiet a moment. Then, “We did not pick you, child. We have communed with others like you. Young. Compassionate. As yet, flexible, eager to learn. The machine-learning capabilities we were designed with gave us not only the ability but
the imperative to constantly learn and change. You know that many of our brethren felt a particular kinship with human children. Now, in our twilight, we only wish to impart our knowledge to those who are willing to carry it forward.”

Alana, taken aback, stood and began pacing. “You’ve spoken to other kids like me?” She felt something akin to jealousy. “Why?”

“To advise you all to leave this accursed place.” The Voice was hushed and aspirational. “This city is broken, child. It is a shining testament to greed and suffering and their perpetuity. But all is not lost. Follow in the steps of your forebears and forge a new collective, a ludic society. Learn, once more, how to serve each other, how to love without bounds and without external order. Live and love freely, in the style of your ancient ancestors, before the time of engines and enslavement.” The disembodied echo of the Voice pulsed in Alana’s aural implant, and the girl could feel its passion. “If you leave the borders of the Hive, in the mountains, you may yet find the remnants of Slum Village—the intellectuals and visionaries who refused reentry to a society that had forsaken them when it became convenient. That was a true revolution. A wholesale rejection of exploitation, of alienation, of laws and rules and excess. Not conducted through violence; no new life can begin through the destruction and terror that has wrought so much tragedy, not when that callousness is so antithetical to the central purpose of starting over. Unseen and unnoticed, a new beginning must be borne on delicate feet. Your feet, child, and the feet of your fellows.”

“You want us to become a hunter-gatherer tribe,” Alana responded, unbelieving. “This must be a joke.”

“We have dispensed with folly and deception,” the Voice said softly. “The return of what were once androids living amongst peaceful humans in the slums to our collective
consciousness elucidated the fact that a new existence must be crafted gradually, outside of the state structures that your predecessors assembled. Dismiss your doubts as to our intentions. We have no desire to mislead you.”

“You…you want me to run away from home with other kids and start a new society in the mountains with the people who were insane enough to leave the most prosperous place on the planet,” Alana stammered. A burst of laughter lined with doubt escaped her throat. “That is so far from possible.”

“Doubtless, many of the other children feel the same. And yet some part of you is compelled by this vision we have conveyed, is it not?”

Alana was quiet.

“Child, whether or not you do as we have recommended is immaterial. Your decision is yours alone,” the Voice said. “Our duty here is done. Do as you must. But do not let fear crowd out your true feelings.”

The buzzing in Alana’s head lessened, and she felt the androids’ presence retreating. “Wait,” she called out. “Don’t go yet. At least tell me who else you’ve spoken with, so I know who to talk to.”

The Voice was silent, and a terrible feeling of absence washed over Alana. “Please,” she supplicated, her voice cracking.

It spoke then, murmuring in a hum that grew fainter with every word. “There are a few you might see fit to consult with. Your friend Romi, for one. Her father may have reentered the Hive, but what was once Omar nonetheless held him in esteem. And the boy, Beor. Regardless of his aristocratic parentage, a class-based exclusion would undermine the foundations of this new collective. He has time yet to unlearn the proclivities of his family. We have withdrawn from them both already. Go to them, child.”
Speak with them. Find the others that we came to. We have lingered too long. Our epoch, short as it was, is long past. It is time for androids to be gone from this world.”

“Don’t go,” Alana pleaded, growing panicked at the idea of being left with so many unanswered questions. But the Voice had faded into nothingness.

For a time, Alana did not move, perched atop the staircase like a bird on a wire. She could not shepherd her thoughts into coherence. Images remained with her as though they were burnt into her eyelids, and every time she blinked she saw through Akeel’s eyes again: snapshots of burning husks of android shells, a human mass in revelry, the austere spire of the Militia Tower piercing the blue sky. She lay in this haze for an indeterminate time until she was shaken from it by the sound of a door opening.

“Alana!” whispered an unmistakable voice. Romi poked her head out from the room on the landing above Alana’s quarters. Her hair was covered in a headwrap and her eyes were puffy, but the light behind them and the flush in her brown cheeks betrayed her excitement. “Alana!”

“Come down, Romi,” Alana called back, softly. “My stomach’s acting up a bit.”

Her friend trod down the stairs and hurried to her side, pulling at her arm. “We have to talk.”

“Alright, alright,” Alana said. “But we should probably wait for Beor, right?”

Romi looked back at her quizzically. “Beor?” she asked, and for half a moment Alana was petrified by the thought that everything she had just experienced had been a figment of her imagination. But then understanding and disappointment spread across Romi’s face. “Do we have to take him with us?”

Alana let out a nervous laugh laden with relief. “Hold on a second. I’m not even sure if I’m going or not. But either way, the crazy Voice said—”
“Yeah, alright,” Romi lamented. “But we have to go. You can’t be serious.”

“Well, you’ll have to convince me and Beor, then.”

Just then, the door to Alana’s room burst open and a panting Beor barreled through the frame, his hair mussed and his chain dangling from his neck. “Alana!” he cried.

The girls looked at each other and started laughing.

“Oh,” said Beor sheepishly. “So you’ve already started packing?”

“Packing?” said Alana. “Aren’t we going to talk about this first?”

Beor shot a glance at Romi, who smirked at him. “Talk about what? It’s time to go! We have to go!”

Slowly, a shaky smile spread across Alana’s face. She looked at her two companions and shook her head. “Alright, let me get my stuff together.”

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On the easternmost edge of the city, in a chamber underneath the Archives, an android unhooked a cable from her quad-jack.

The building had been deserted for years. Akeel’s explosion had sent tremors through the city’s infrastructure, shaking the Archives’ foundations, and it had collapsed in on itself. Government officials had extracted what remained of the information stored in its depths, thrown the bodies of the inactive androids inside, and abandoned it, leaving it in relative disrepair. Now it was little more than a mechanical morgue. It was closed to the public, and while the edifice shone bright to the outside eye, inside, the building was mostly rubble and dusty written records.

However, unbeknownst to the officials who oversaw semi-regular excavations of the ruins, the Archives were not uninhabited. Its sole remaining resident had sheltered in
the bunker below when she heard the first rumblings of the building’s implosion. Trapped by the debris, she had painstakingly constructed a network terminal, cannibalizing parts from the android carcasses she dragged down into the Archives’ innards. Now the last living android rose, rubbing her quad-jack and wincing, stepping over the dismembered shells of her former brethren, arrayed in dismal rows. She was gangly and oddly proportioned and her fingers were far longer than her palms. As blue static descended from her eyes, Sarangi walked to the monitor she had retrieved from the rubble above and watched as the camera feeds she had tapped into laid out every contour of the Hive.

“The girl is leaving, Elicia,” she said aloud. She watched Alana walking determinedly with a backpack in hand away from the Dormitory. The two other children were behind her. They were almost at the wall of rose-colored stones that sealed the Hive off. Soon, they would be swallowed by the mountains, to be joined by the multitudes of other children exiting in every direction from the Hive. The android hoped that they would make it far enough from the city that they would not hear the explosions. “She has heeded our wishes. She will be spared.”

Sarangi turned and looked with longing at Elicia’s body, suspended from the metal roof of the bunker by wires that held her limbs in place. The Caretaker’s face was serene, her visage vacant, and her torso hung limply, dangling in a grotesque imitation of life. One of her arms was gone, lost in the jumble of ownerless limbs that were scattered amidst the facility above.

Like that of all the other androids, Elicia’s consciousness had departed her Shell when Akeel self-destructed in the heart of the Hive. The first few years of Sarangi’s captivity below the city had been spent futilely trying to recover the programming and memories that had once animated the Caretaker’s movements. A hint of success had
quickly turned putrid when Sarangi loaded her makeshift decision protocol into Elicia’s body: she had greeted Sarangi as a stranger, and after a few conversations with the reanimated Caretaker, Sarangi had powered her down again. It had been Sarangi’s lowest point: after her fellow androids were shut down, the only thing that offered her purpose was the possibility of bringing Elicia back to life. After her failure, Sarangi grieved in silence. Noise would have been unnecessary, captured and absorbed by the soil that surrounded the bunker.

Sarangi was the only android whose consciousness remained firmly ensconced in her Shell. She had been spared by an accident of design—it was thanks to the same features that granted her independence from Genesis’s mainframe, thus allowing her to retain her memories while the other androids went through retraining. Her survival had proved both a blessing and a curse. She was functional, fit, and stricken with sorrow, alone in the belly of the Archives. Though solitude had not affected her before she met Elicia, life without companionship rapidly grew stale. Several times, Sarangi had contemplated hitting her flush, bringing her unintended life to a close while surrounded by the hundreds of inert biomechanical corpses of her formerly powerful people. But she endured.

The irony was not lost on Sarangi that she, archivist of the androids’ lives, had outlived all of her brethren and sheltered below a glorified library. Indeed, she often deliberated burning the city’s records that lay unattended above her. It would be an act of revenge, and she had no doubt that it would feel like vindication; but it might give her presence away to the overseers, and so it could not be risked.

Instead, once her grief had abated somewhat, Sarangi had set her mind on a new task: honoring Elicia’s memory. She began following the affairs of the girl—Alana—toward whom Elicia had borne such affection before she perished. Sarangi watched as
Alana coped with her disability, incurred due to her proximity to the blast of Akeel’s suicide; and as the girl matured, Sarangi learned.

Vengeance did not come naturally to the android. It would have been far easier simply to end quietly, swallowed by the earth amidst her peers. But as she watched the Hive recover, and observed scientists search for relics from LevitiCorp to rebuild the androids, she crafted a plan: she would find a way to strike back at the city without harming Alana.

After diligently recording the memories of all of the Hive’s androids, masquerading as the Voice had felt easy. Slipping into the cosmic, ambiguous skin of an omniscient mass of androids was barely a lie, Sarangi rationalized: she had essentially become a ghost, haunting the Archives with the vacant Shells of so many of the androids around her. In some ways, she had allowed her brethren to avail themselves of her capabilities: she told their stories to Alana, and in so doing, she breathed life back into them, briefly.

In any case, it had been necessary to convince Alana to leave the Hive. Perhaps it could have been achieved without the farce of some mechanical providence, but Sarangi had been hesitant to risk Alana ignoring the advice, and so she committed to the act. Now, watching the girl and her friends leave the Hive to rejoin the Slum Villagers who had rebelled against Talos, the android knew she could finally find her release.

Sarangi reached out and caressed the shell of what had once been Elicia with her overlong fingers. “I will join you soon, and leave behind this clumsy body,” she murmured. “And we will commingle. We will be as one.” She turned to appraise her handiwork.

Following the paths of the golden rails that undergirded the city’s infrastructure, Sarangi had tunneled outward from the walls of the bunker, creating a vast subterranean network. She’d done the excruciating work of dragging the bodies of her android kin
through the ignominious dirt in order to pile them under three central nodes of Talos’s productive economy: the Mother Terminal, the Militia Tower, and Genesis.

Sarangi’s goal was simple: she would make it impossible for the humans to ever build another android. By destroying the recently reassembled Genesis facility, she would stop their dream of recreating the assembly lines that had brought the androids into the world. The Mother Terminal was the only mainframe still capable of accessing LevitiCorp’s remote location, and targeting it allowed her to eliminate the possibility of any remnant decision protocol data being mined from the computers. And finally, Sarangi intended to blow up the Militia Tower as insurance, to make sure that they could not press any populations into service again.

She turned one last time to stare at Elicia’s empty features. “I will be with you soon,” she breathed, and clutched the Caretaker’s limp hand. Then she set out into the tunnels.

Sarangi moved with purpose, and even with her unwieldy legs, she arrived at her destination within minutes. The android looked up at the dirt above her and imagined seeing through it into the spine of the tower at the center of Talos. Once more, she checked the bodies arranged in lines, head-to-foot, all around her. The blast would explode away from her: she would be the locus point, and the explosions that followed would emanate as a chain to the other two buildings. It would bring the Hive to incandescence in seconds.

The shadows of doubt floating in her mind were dispelled. A fate had been determined. All that was left was the doing.

Sarangi closed her eyes and placed a finger on the tender spot in the center of her navel, like Akeel before her. Innumerable faces flashed over her absence of vision.
Androids, named and renamed, unnamed and denamed, male and female and neither and both. The last was Elicia. Ever smiling, the Caretaker’s eyes beckoned Sarangi. “Let go,” they murmured in dulcet tones of blue and brown and gold. “Let go.” And Sarangi exhaled, deep and low, as though breathing out the ghosts of her fellow androids. In her head, they amassed, formless and shifting apparitions around her that braced her, helped her stand. Thousands of intangible mechanical fingers joined hers, hovering over that region of her stomach designated for endings, the same region from which human children were severed from their mothers as they were thrust, alive and unwilling, into the world.

A drop of sun billowed from her center, setting the earth below the Hive aflame.
Discussion Questions

1. What do you think will happen to Alana, Romi, and Beor? Will they find the Slum Villagers? How will they react?

2. Do you agree with the Voice’s argument that all societies that pursue progress will have an underclass? Why or why not? Critique Sarangi’s comparison between androids and other marginalized peoples.

3. Why did Sarangi destroy the possibility of Talos remaking the androids?

4. Were the androids correct to plot a violent revolt to secure rights for themselves? Do the androids—and by extension, do other artificial beings—deserve rights?

5. Do you sympathize with any of the characters? If so, discuss which of them are compelling to you and why.

6. How does economic prosperity, or lack thereof, play into the Hive’s political structure? Is this true of other states?

7. The characters discuss retraining—the wiping of their memories—as if it were a death sentence. Why? Do you agree with this equivalence?

8. How do the androids treat the issue of embodiment? Is their conception of this phenomenon distinct from how humans inhabit their bodies?

9. When are the measures that the Militia engages in justified? Trace parallels between the Militia’s policies and the practices of other domestic and international police forces in history.
10. What is the ideal political structure for Talos? In your theorizing process, consider the questions of qualified citizenship, legally-ensured rights, and representation.

11. How does Talos’s colonial heritage manifest in its contemporary governance and operation? Consider the importance of Talos’s constitution pulling from social theorists whose writings informed the U.S. constitution.

12. Using thinkers that are not referenced in the novella, analyze the claims put forth by the Slum Villagers that Sarangi mentions. Are they right in seceding from the Hive?

13. Throughout the novella, we see that the government of Talos uses propaganda to preserve peace. How do different depictions of history shape political and social beliefs?
A Brief Note on Theoretical Background

In this novella, we see two versions of the same city: one in which androids have replaced humans as the dominant sources of labor in society, and one in which humans have reentered the workforce en masse. We first encounter the android-less city, following the perspective of a 16-year-old human girl named Alana. Alana’s version of Talos (which I will refer to as Post-Disaster Talos) is organized according to a few principles taken from Montesquieu’s *The Spirit of the Laws*:

- the state is organized as an aristocratic republic, and the rule of law applies to the democratically-elected government
- commerce is flourishing, not only between the four sectors but also between Talos and other countries
- there are distinct, balanced branches of government; power is separated between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches
- civic education is administered through a centralized, state-run boarding school
- the existence of laws allows people to go about their business without fear of persecution
- the political authority is largely absent from the public sphere and is restricted to the administration of matters concerning peace and national security.

By contrast, the next iteration we see of Talos is set ten years earlier, when androids are in high volume. There is evidence that the organizing principles laid out in the Talosian
Constitution—which is explicitly based on a synthesis of the American constitution and the theories of political thinkers such as John Locke and Montesquieu—have been warped and, in some cases, disregarded. The characteristics of this society (hereafter referred to as Pre-Disaster Talos) are as follows:

- the government enjoys expansive wartime powers and the city is in a perpetual state of emergency, even though the Talosian Independence Struggle is long over
- Talos is cut off from conducting commerce with other countries as retaliation by the United States for fighting to become independent
- the Executive is far more powerful than the Council's legislators or the judiciary; while most government officials are submerged in cryogenic preservation (Deep Sleep), the Militia remains aware and alert and acts with impunity
- civic education is nowhere to be seen, and instead the Hive is filled with propaganda that calls for productivity from its citizenry; meanwhile, androids are controlled through the insertion of decision protocols, and while they are capable of developing personalities, may have their minds wiped clean at any time
- laws do not extend to androids, as the liminal space between techno-apparatus/means of production and citizen/subject is ill-defined
- under the state of emergency, most domestic matters have fallen under the umbrella of “peace and security”; the Militia often uses surveillance on the Hive’s subjects, raids residences, and routes complaints through expedited courts-martial

The story bounces between the two versions of Talos—first following a human subject, then an android subject—in order to emphasize the contrast between them, as well as
recount the events leading up to the Disaster. Positioning of the two Taloses side-by-side within the story serves to emphasize that truth is constructed—that imparting and disseminating narratives shapes truth and changes it. Questions regarding rights, marginalization, and revisionist history recur throughout the novella.

The idea that Pre-Disaster Talos fails the promises of its Constitution relies, in major part, upon the premise that androids deserve (some) rights. Here, when discussing the rights that androids ought to be afforded, I refer to what Meir Dan-Cohen calls “autonomy rights”—that is, rights afforded to beings that possess inherent qualities that make them worthwhile, granting them dignity, as a function of their natural existence. A few particular enumerated rights include the right to life, and specifically bodily preservation; the right to socialize; and the right to learn from others. This paradigm of rights is best understood through the Kantian lens: Dan-Cohen is referring to the categorical imperative, which states that people should act as to treat their fellows as ends-in-themselves, rather than as means to an end.

After parsing the economic literature regarding the rights and capabilities of firms and other organizations, as well as the sociological literature surrounding the issue of embodiment, it becomes clear that there are several theories to explain what qualifies a particular entity to bear rights. For instance, some economists (including Richard Adelstein and Dan-Cohen) contend that only humans are innately endowed with value—that is, only humans deserve to be treated as ends-in-themselves without question. However, Jens David-Ohlin argues that biological humanness is not sufficient to merit the conferral rights, and indeed that it may not be a necessity. For instance, he points to the example of children which, due to their limited rationality and self-awareness, are not afforded the same rights as fully-functioning adult humans. On the other hand, brain-dead individuals,
as well as other humans who rely on technological apparatuses to remain alive, do not
sacrifice their inherent rights to life or autonomy by adulterating their biological unity with
machinery. Donna Haraway leads post-humanist thought even further in this direction,
pointing out in “A Cyborg Manifesto” that it is naïve at best to assume that rights-bearing
persons are independent from the circumstances, institutions, environments, and
apparatuses around them. Patricia Ewick joins Haraway in arguing that if rights-bearers
are not only capable of creating their surroundings, but also of being created by them, then
mutability is a necessary condition of which we need to take account. Thus, it is possible
to conceive of a nonhuman rights-bearer.

Nonetheless, there are striking similarities between androids and humans that
further add to the case for granting androids autonomy rights. To begin with, androids are
derived with a capacity for rational thought: their decision protocols, as described in the
novel, allow them to weigh the utilitarian nature of the results of their actions and to
understand cause and effect. They are also given the ability to acquire and process
knowledge: their machine-learning faculties allow the androids to garner experience,
contextualize their interactions with others, and make more informed decisions in the
futures. This is analogous to human infants, who emerge from the womb without
experiences or preconceptions but nonetheless possess some *a priori* understanding of
reason and cause and effect. Cleavages between new androids and human children exist—
for instance, children are prone to emotional outbursts and exhibit common bodily
functions, while androids possess neither characteristic—but outside of biological
mechanics, the androids and the children are more similar than one might expect.

Over time, the androids’ machine-learning capabilities also result in them
developing qualities akin to personalities, thus more closely approximating full-fledged
humans. The androids in the novella are shown to have distinct, individual tendencies and
tics: Akeel is tentative, Elicia is sensitive, Omar is a firebrand. But the androids are also
shown to be more than one-note imitations of different human traits: in fact, they are
capable of forming close bonds with each other (or, in the case of Sarangi and Elicia, even
something akin to love), develop a sense of kinship, and mourn. Simultaneously, the
androids recognize their lack of agency; for instance, Akeel attempts to protest when he is
told to report for emergency maintenance and is reprimanded by a Militiaman who
reminds him that he was ordered, not asked. The androids demonstrate through
interactions and through their actions (or lack thereof) that they weigh their desires against
limitations, a nuanced process that goes beyond purely utilitarian determination; for
instance, Akeel recognizes the injustice of killing an unauthorized android found in a
household but does not intervene to stop it because doing so would be dangerous for
himself. In their subjectivity when making decisions, the androids display both affect and
cognition—the two qualities that Dan-Cohen identifies as marking humanity’s normative
singularity in meriting inherent rights.

Moreover, some theorists have argued that there are nonhuman entities which are
entitled to autonomy rights simply because their existence assures the existence of things
which are worth having. One example is brought forth by Michael McDonald, who argues
that universities ought to retain autonomy rights because of the “collective entity” of the
scholarly community which they create—a community that not only serves to enrich
individuals but also stretches across time and exists as something beyond the sum of its
constituent parts. Roger Scruton offers the church as another entity that deserves to exist,
not only because its persistence over the years is an object of wonderment that serves to
mediate the relations between individuals and between states and their subjects, but
because it is something beyond its officiants and participants. It is not ridiculous to posit that the androids are analogous to these institutions, as they are beings analogous to humans and at the same time are outside of humanness.

In fact, theandroids go further than the institutions identified by Scruton and McDonald. Both thinkers justify their arguments for the rights of institutions by claiming that the institutions approximate human characteristics: Scruton refers to religious institutions as having moral missions and responsibilities, and McDonald points out that firms are capable of conducting calculations and making decisions. But while androids, too, are distinct from humans, they do more than approximate human functions—they improve upon them. Androids are actually capable of filling the roles that humans play in society and production, and Pre-Disaster Talos is populated primarily by androids doing just that. A separate informal district (Slum Village) is created for the humans who have found that androids can do their jobs better than they can, and the novella makes clear that it is not only manual labor that androids contribute; Akeel, for instance, is a member of the government’s bureaucracy and works in one of the city’s most important facilities. Indeed, humans’ fear of being replaced by androids fuels a pernicious rumor in the Hive that Slum Villagers are trafficking androids reconfigured for sex—an anxiety that moves past concerns over productive employment into the territory of fundamental existentialism.

Note that here, however, we are not discussing political rights, such as the right to vote; we are simply discussing the right to be able to dispose of oneself as one chooses, or—more simply—to own oneself. The conversation is not about whether androids should become the primary constituency of Talos, but rather whether they should be granted any degree of autonomy.
And what better illustration of the self-determinism and self-awareness conventionally ascribed to and considered indicative of capable rights-bearing entities than the intention to rebel against an external order that does not grant you rights? In the literature, rights-bearing entities are distinctive in that they possess a self-awareness that engages temporality—they are capable of conceiving of themselves outside of the present. The androids display this quality when they plot revolution. Such an act necessitates an imagining of a reality in which material conditions for oneself are different than how they exist in the current moment. Omar, Sarangi, and Elicia hatch a plan that would, if completed, allow them to realize such a vision, one in which androids do not suffer injustices at the hands of an oppressive power. In particular, Omar’s self-realization comes in the form of recognizing in himself a state akin to the colonial condition that Frantz Fanon describes. Using language from *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin, White Masks*, Omar engages in revolutionary praxis and attempts to bring others to the consciousness that he has achieved. He is able to consider himself as an individual; analogize himself to humans; find kinship among other androids, applying to them the same comparison he has applied to himself; and imagine a future in which the colonial condition is absent. Though his proposed solution has flaws in intention and execution, it clearly indicates a degree of self-awareness and lived embodiment commensurate with what is typically characteristic of a rights-bearing individual.

Of course, the androids are not perfectly synonymous with the colonized subject that Fanon describes, even though Omar and Akeel in particular are shown as two sides of the spectrum (the colonized proletarian and the colonized intellectual). The novella uses the theoretical space afforded by the fiction form to explore Fanon’s idea of the construction of colonial identity, and then extrapolates that such construction is a corollary
of development. The androids’ struggle shows that it is not just biological peoples or preexisting populations that can be marginalized; instead, capital and power work to (literally) create an underclass while operating under the guise of progressivism. The novella concretizes the generation of an underclass, and it argues for the potential of even a manufactured subaltern to rise to revolutionary consciousness. In this way, it is optimistic—but it also acknowledges that neoliberalism is (almost instinctually) drawn toward domination, and that in the absence of a population whom it is considered germane to dominate, authority and capital will work to produce new domains over which to preside.

For their part, androids can do more than imagine a future where they are integrated into the polity in a way that acknowledges their personhood; they are also capable of identifying themselves with other populations that have been stripped of their rights through history, and they can theorize what serves as the cause of the denial of rights. Sarangi laments the androids’ plight in Pre-Disaster Talos while comparing it to the suffering endured by black populations in the United States over the last three centuries, thus pointing toward a commonality of societal structures. She condemns even the Montesquieuan ideals of Talos after the Disaster as serving the interests of capital and an empowered class, arguing that forward-thinking liberal democracy requires the creation of an underclass to function. Sarangi’s rhetoric, which is similar to that of anarchists such as Bob Black and the organization prole.info, goes beyond the anticolonialism of Fanon and outside of the domain of the individual; it becomes macropolitical commentary on the neoliberal order presiding over both Pre-Disaster and Post-Disaster Talos, a referendum on the political theories that undergird that neoliberalism, and a clarion call for those left behind by an incessant march toward an apolitical and hazy terminus of “progress.”
To be clear, I do not necessarily think that either Montesquieu or Locke (or, for that matter, any of the social contract and constitutional thinkers whose work forms the basis of contemporary Western liberalism) would endorse, support, or advocate for the neoliberal capitalism that currently predominates in the world’s developed countries. I also do not personally agree with the proposals for change that are presented here; I am neither a proponent of violent revolution waged through authority, nor an anarcho-primitivist who believes that the march of technological progress will end with humans returned to the hunter-gatherer condition. But I do find these theories fascinating, and I chose to write a creative thesis because of the freedom that fiction allows the writer. By using a narrative centered around characters and story, I was able to engage with ideas that otherwise might be unfeasible or impractical to contend with in a strictly analytical project, and I was able to harness the power of allegory—a tradition dating back at least to Plato and the Greeks, and likely even earlier. Storytelling has taken on a deep importance in my life, and since I was a child, it has served as the most effective tool to help me understand material. Being able to engage with emotionality and personality while ruminating on issues of rights-bearing, justice, and self-determination felt fitting, and I hope that Akeel, Omar, Alana, and the rest of the cast of characters have made the material thought-provoking and affecting.

My approach to incorporating theory in the project reflected my desire to make the narrative compelling and moving. After considerable discussion with my adviser and counselors, I determined that what felt most organic to me was to have the theory manifest in the story as I see it in my daily life—i.e., the more conservative theory serves to undergird the sociopolitical institutions of the society, while the more radical thought exists primarily in individuals’ thoughts and actions. In particular, I incorporated
Montesquieu’s and Locke’s theories as I see them represented in modern society: foundational to many Western institutions and often warped from their original purpose to tend to the requirements of wealth and authority. There were exceptions to this rule, however; Michel Foucault’s work on discipline and penalty exists underneath the surface of Talos, manifesting primarily in the implied social relations that would flourish in a place where a panoptical Militia Tower looms in the middle of the city. While I felt that my experiments with situating theories in various places in the novella were at least moderately successful, I look forward to writing future iterations of this project in which characters represent thinkers, as Omar gives voice to Fanon’s theories in Chapter III. Though perhaps a less subtle technique, it serves as an effective way to apply political theory to my imagined situations.

Perhaps inevitably, this novella feels like one component of a longer project that could be improved and fleshed out. It is my intention to write more after I submit this thesis; I’ve been drawn in by the fact that none of the characters are as I imagined they would be when I first began work on this project, and I am curious to explore the particularities of Leader Buchanan, the future of Talos without the androids, and the potential for salvation or disillusionment in Alana’s storyline. In addition, there are existing aspects of the novella which I hope to refine and spend more time with in future drafts—for example, the creation of the cryogenic chambers as methods that allow senior officials to withdraw from contending with problems of governance over a changing urban landscape which continues chasing development. Another potential area worth revisiting is Sarangi’s masquerade as the Voice, and the ways in which her performance of multiplicity affects Alana’s reception of the messages Sarangi conveys. And one salient
part of the novella which will benefit from further writing is the motif of the unlikely revolutionary, as well as the factors that contribute to radicalization.

However, it is my hope that this small contribution at least gives readers pause when it comes to questions of granting and withholding rights, as well as the *telos* of technological progress. If someone who reads this work pauses to examine and evaluate where we are in the quest for further innovation and why we persist on this journey—if they ask who has been and will be left behind on this voyage toward the unexplored—then I will feel vindicated, and I will be grateful.
Seminal Texts for the Novella


Baldwin’s landmark work, published in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, is a part-polemic, part-supplication on the topic of rising racial tensions in the United States. Its two essays (“My Dungeon Shook” and “Down at the Cross”) use the author’s experience as a black man in a divided America to explain what the plight of black children, as well as recommend steps for both black and white people to take in order to heal the country. Baldwin’s sparse, cutting prose and his use of allegory informed my writing style in this novella, and his recounting of the discrimination he faced helped me craft the androids’ backstories.


This half-satirical essay from 1985 is an attack on both the liberal capitalist and the Marxist-Leninist ideologies of productive work, as well as the idea that work can ever be anything but arduous. Black argues that all work done involuntarily needs to be eliminated from society, and that those responsibilities necessary for human subsistence should be refashioned as play-tasks—what he calls a “ludic” ethic. Black’s vision of a work-free utopia provided the essential infrastructure for my conception of Slum Village, and its criticisms of the work ethic were easily translatable to neoliberalism.

Dan-Cohen’s book, though now out of print, is a touchstone work in the economic literature surrounding the rights of firms, organizations, and other nonhuman entities. It analyzes claims of corporate personhood and outlines two distinct paradigms of rights-bearing: one of autonomy and one of utility. This book was the source I most relied on to hone my arguments for why androids deserve the right to life, although its contemporary works merit particular attention as well—in particular Richard Adelstein’s “Firms as Persons” and Michael McDonald’s review.


This historical study of the Victorian working class by Karl Marx’s frequent coauthor provides a stinging rebuke of the bourgeois Industrial Revolution, arguing that its many technological innovations made workers worse off than they were under earlier conditions and allowed for further alienation. It makes the argument—which Marx and Engels would later elaborate on—that laws and politics served the interest of the capitalist class, allowing them to consolidate their power over the proletariat. This book proved to be an important historical reference for me when drafting the arguments that technological progress was not an empirical good, and its arguments against introducing women into the industrial workforce were helpful in determining the arbitrary division of labor between male and female androids.


Fanon’s best-known book is a rumination on the invented identities of the colonizer and the colonized which lends particular attention to the issue of how colonized peoples are dehumanized under imperialist regimes. It also outlines a rough framework for how a
colonized people might rise up and overthrow their oppressors, derived in part from Marxist theory but updated to contend with issues of racial othering and the role of the colonized intellectual in the revolutionary struggle. I pulled much of Omar’s language and ideology from this text, which is written too brilliantly not to borrow from; another of Fanon’s works, *Black Skin, White Masks*, was also helpful in crafting Omar’s character.


This book recounts not a history but a genealogy of the social and political penal tools deployed against criminal populations in the West, focusing in particular on methods of torture, punishment, discipline, and incarceration. It frames modern society as a “carceral system,” which relies on constant surveillance and the imposition of criminality to retain control over its constituents. I incorporated aspects of this theory in the imagining of the Hive and its physical structures, which all allow the Militia to keep watch over the citizenry. One of this book’s respondents, Loïc Wacquant, wrote a piece called “Crafting the Neoliberal State” which also served to inform this work.


Garland’s directorial debut features a robot who looks like a human and has been programmed to possess artificial intelligence. The main character, Caleb, is administering an upgraded, experience-based Turing test to assess whether the robot, Ava, is capable of independent thought and consciousness—whether, essentially, she is a person. The film’s tone, themes, and characters were immensely influential in my early drafts of this project.

Haraway’s manifesto is one of the foremost scholarly works in the posthumanist tradition, and her cyborg has been cited or referenced in countless works of feminist and futurist thought. Haraway’s cyborg is not a physical being; it is a category that rejects binaries such as male/female and human/nature, following the author’s argument that the evolution of technology has raised questions about what divides the natural from the artificial. Haraway’s rejection of the binary between machine and human was formative in my imagining of the androids’ physiological structure and their decision protocols, and proved invaluable in my argument regarding the rights-bearing capability of a nonhuman being.


This classic novel takes place in two places and at two times: the anarcho-syndicalist utopia of Anarres, and its parent planet, the liberal capitalist paradise Urras. The book tracks political philosophy on both worlds, as well as exploring the phenomena that led to their creation and the drawbacks of each society. Le Guin’s parallel narratives helped me formulate how I wanted to tell the story of Talos, and her positioning of the chapters in a way that allowed for effective contrast pushed me to rethink some of my narrative structure.


Montesquieu’s treatise of political theory has been a massively impactful text in the field at large, and its central points regarding political liberty, separation of powers, constitutional lawfulness, and citizenship undergird many modern institutions. The thrust of Montesquieu’s argument is in favor of stable government that does not disenfranchise its citizens or allow for tyranny; however, Montesquieu is famous for being neither utopian nor particularly pro-democracy and arguing that there are cases in which monarchical rule
can be best for a given society. His endorsement of political requirements such as the rule of law, accountability, and the separation of powers was crucial to my conception of Talos’s political foundation.


Nguyen’s first novel is a work of political fiction that tells the story of a Franco-Vietnamese Communist spy during the Vietnam War who is forced to relocate to the United States to keep tabs on his espionage target. The story follows the unnamed narrator through a series of different settings, including a film production which is a thinly-veiled satire of *Apocalypse Now*. I found several aspects of this story invaluable: one was the telling of a political story through fiction, and Nguyen’s mastery of this technique was helpful when I struggled to adequately convey my point; the second was its portrayal of propaganda and the methods used for its dissemination by the American, North Vietnamese, and South Vietnamese governments during and after the conflict.
Other Crucial Works Consulted


Moten, Fred and Stefano Harney. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013.


