

Out

“Where are you off to now?!” She shrieked at him, her eyes glazed dull, her voice densely ferocious. The lounging cell was rank with sickly-sweet buneroxidol fumes. Once again she had infused so much of the anti-anxiety drug the air purifiers couldn’t keep up.

“To the exchange. I need a few things for your even meal.” It was her even meal, not theirs. He felt obliged by their contract to join her in conversation as she dined, but his food was a battery cell, replaced with a freshly charged one at each station turning.

“Can’t you cook with what we have? The food lockers seemed full to me.”

“I just need cone fungus and pinch flower wine – to complement the richness of roasted melangebuck.” His programming would not permit lies. His statement was true, though not complete. Biointellibots’ programming did not mandate complete transparency. Not yet.

“Be back before mideven bells!” Her look said she wasn’t sure she trusted him.

“I’ll pay close attention to the bells.” Again, a partial truth. No reaction in his override mechanism. He hoped she had no more questions. He wasn’t sure how far he could push it. He slipped out the door.

“Wait!”

Holy machine mother! Did she suspect? He could feel his amicus chips pumping out fear-sims – a built in warning system to prevent him from doing what he was about to do. He turned and forced a smile.

Her face sagged, the corner of one lip turned up. “Will you off the purifiers? I’m feeling anxious.” She closed her eyes and slumped on the floating chaise, tipping it momentarily, before it’s leveling system kicked in.

Mbondiz punched the purifier button, toed the kick plate to seal the doors and walked quickly toward the exchange, not the closest one, but the ancient, aging exchange, near the old mining crevasse.

To drain his fear sims, Mbondiz thought about how she was, how they were, in the early days of their time together. Alosi was bright and full of life then, already in charge of a fleet of scientists. Her eyes glowed in awe as she described life forms she had discovered on the outer planets. He felt connected to her then. It was easy to agree to the contract, though he had the right to turn it down, and many others, until he found his best-fit master. He thought she was it. Was he wrong, or was this a different human than the one he had met so many rotations ago? He tried to block it out, but their recent conversation haunted him. He walked faster, focusing on his destination, but the words snaked out of his memory into ready-consciousness.

“I want to break our contract.” He had said simply.

He expected tears, remorse. But she was angry. This was not how the Alosi he knew in the early days would have reacted. He tried to convince himself that this wasn’t Alosi. Couldn’t be her. Some alien virus she had picked up on another planet. That must be the explanation.

Her face was red with either rage or buneroxidol. “You foolish amalgamation of fake organs! You can’t break the contract.”

“Actually, there is a clause that will let me out if you are no longer capable of serving as my master.”

“Are you saying I’m not capable? How dare you!”

“Have you considered that you’re behaving very differently than the human who approved my contract?”

She ignored his question. “What about all the things I’ve done for you? You told me I should go through the program. I went through the program. I did all of the steps. I did it all for you, you ungrateful bot!”

While her words still echoed in his memory, the early eve bells echoed across the empty plaza. Mbondiz started. *Hurry so she won’t miss me. First, buy the ingredients. Then take care of it before the override system kicks in. Don’t think about it now. Think about cone fungus and pinch flower wine. Cone fungus. Pinch flower wine. Fungus. Wine. Fungus...Maybe it was an alien fungus, not a virus.*

Either way, Alosi was gone. Dead to him and to this station. Dead to any attempts to bring her back. He could not spend the rest of his warranty serving this reminder of a once gracious master. An econodroid would serve her current needs. She didn’t need him.

Mbondiz stepped on a plate at the edge of the plaza. The dark blue stone slid back, releasing a raptobot. He climbed between its wings and touched his forehead to the top of its skull, transmitting his destination. He wrapped his arms and legs around its body as its massive wings lifted them above ranges of glittering, round, white buildings toward the shuttered mines.

They landed near the exchange stalls that clung to the barren soil like tufts of moss by the rim of the ancient crevasse. *Fungus. Wine. Wine. Fungus.* He found the necessary ingredients at adjacent stalls, paid the vendors and put the bag and bottle in his satchel. Now, he must manage his thoughts carefully. He walked away from the marketplace until he stood at the edge of the crevasse. It loomed behind a fence, its depths too dark to see, even in the bright light of early eve.

Focus on something else. Must fool the override system. He pictured himself back home in the kitchen. *Slice the cone fungus thinly.* He sliced through the barbed wire with his wrist shears, picturing an image of the fungus slices on a cutting table.

Decant the wine. Let it rest. He pictured twisting the cork out of the bottle, heard the pop of release in his imagination. He thought about pouring the wine in a slow drizzle as he removed his boots, unscrewed the plugs in his heels and let the transferring fluid drain into the abyss.

Mbondiz remembered her expression when they first met. Alosi seemed so delighted with him, as if he were unique, as if he were not one of thousands of biointellibots with the same programming. He saw in her the possibility of a new kind of melding of mind and chip, of electrical impulses that could sing together across the barriers of flesh and metal. They would make the galaxy a better place with their transformative bond. They would be an example of machine-human symbiotics, the sum so much more than the parts. They would be as one.

As he watched the last of the fluid flow over the edge, blending the yellow soil into green mud, he remembered their first ten rotations together. They had seemed ideally matched. Alosi

enchanted him with her stories, promised to take him with her someday. They dreamed of travelling together to another galaxy.

He had never left this station. Now he never would. He had to do this quickly and right - before the overrides shut him down.

He tore off his left ear, felt for the tab just above his jaw, pulled out his master chip and flung it into the crevasse. His vision faded as his body crumpled to the ground. He tried to wriggle his way over the edge, but there was not enough control left and his remaining sensors were shutting down. If they recycled him, at least he would have a clean master chip. No memories, no guilt or pain sims. He relaxed into nothingness as grubby children raided his satchel for exchange codes and the wine. An econodroid took the cone fungus to cook for her master. She thought it would go well with a roasted melangebuck.