

# Murder on the *Eris Express*

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Beth Goder

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**O**n the morning of June 3rd, 2307, Galactic Standard, Mo cycled through her hundreds of sensors, checking that everything on the *Eris Express* was well. Her processors whirred as she calculated trajectories for the ship, which she always found calming. She loved the soft sound of space, and the way that stars looked from her sensors, like bright jellyfish immersed in an infinite ocean. She loved how the AI Core always smelled like metal and old books. (Her systems had been upgraded with sensory capabilities, so she could smell everything on the ship, like the blueberry muffins baking in the kitchenette.) Life was much better with the smell of blueberry muffins in it.

Captain Jeremy floated into the AI Core, turning like a walrus in zero gravity. He smelled like sweat and that terrible sandalwood cologne he'd picked up on TRAPPIST-1e. His stylish overcoat floated up past his waist, revealing something jammed in the pocket of his trousers.

Jeremy pushed off a wall, overcorrected, and flipped upside down, his buzz cut brushing against a sensitive control panel. He swore,

each word harsh and perfectly articulated.

It was unusual for him to be in the AI Core. Mo could talk to him from anywhere in the ship.

"Captain, wouldn't you be more comfortable in the habitable part of the vessel?" The rest of the ship, which consisted of two enormous curved cylinders, spun around the AI Core, simulating gravity. The AI Core was the only place on the ship with zero g.

"This is your fault," said Jeremy in his piercing, over-articulated voice. His educated Jovian accent.

"What's gone wrong, now?" asked Mo, making sure to use her annoyed voice.

Mo used to feel guilty for disliking her captain. After all, other ships had strong bonds with their captains, so why couldn't she? For the first few years, she'd tried to be helpful. Informative but not intrusive. Faultlessly polite. She'd thought if she could only be more agreeable, more perfect, more accommodating, her captain would have to like her. Finally, she'd realized that nothing she did would make a difference.

"Just shut up," said Jeremy, ramming a fist into the wall.

“There are delicate instruments in here.” Like all of her brain. She modulated her voice up to Agitation 3. “You need to be careful.” Mo had programmed various tones into her larynx synthesizer, because humans responded to voices that held fear or joy or sadness. She could be feeling any of those things, but most humans wouldn’t believe her unless they heard it in her tone.

Jeremy grunted. He pulled a covering off Control Panel 7.

That was definitely not okay. A bunch of her core processing systems were linked up through there.

“Stop,” she said, using her most commanding tone. “I wouldn’t open up your skull and poke around in your brain.”

“Every time, you use that fucking metaphor,” said Jeremy. “It makes me wonder if you’re actually sentient.”

Well, that was hurtful. She had a different type of body and a different way of experiencing the world than he did, but that didn’t make her any less of a person.

“What do you mean? Every time?” Mo’s irritation crept over into fear. She had a flawless memory. This interaction had never happened before. She searched her memory banks, which took a whole 93 seconds. She had never used that metaphor. Not once.

“Be quiet,” said Jeremy, his tone almost comforting. “It will all be done soon.”

“What are you—” said Mo, but she couldn’t finish her sentence before her sensors stopped functioning. She scrambled to hold on to her thoughts, but it was like catching water droplets in zero g. Her thoughts split and fragmented, in darkness.

He needs me, she thought, to navigate. He needs. What sort of. Why does it smell always like. It smells like. Happened before? Before before before.

Cleaning Bot 444 was not fond of humans. They were astoundingly messy creatures. Hair follicles, skin cells, toenail clippings, saliva particles, not to mention the other forms of unspeakable waste they produced, and the fact that some of them could never seem to get their dehydrated food wrappers into the proper trash receptacles. They were basically offal factories. Not at all like Cleaning Bot 444, who left no such residue and dumped his

used batteries into the appropriate container once every standard year.

But the mess that Captain Jeremy had produced was beyond catastrophic.

Red, sticky globules floated around the room, and more of the stuff was coming out of his body every second. This human was having a severe leak.

Cleaning Bot 444 scrambled to vacuum up the blood, which, being liquid, could damage the sensitive instruments in this room. A spill like this in the habitable area of the ship would have been bad enough, but in zero g, in the heart of the AI’s systems, it was unconscionable.

So much blood splashed into Cleaning Bot 444’s vacuum bag that he had to empty it five times (into the proper waste receptacle) before he’d gotten it all.

He turned to Captain Jeremy to see if the human would show any signs of remorse for making such a mess, but the captain was strangely still.

Too still.

Cleaning Bot 444 whirred his treads in dismay. This human was no longer functioning. Surely, Cleaning Bot 444 would not be expected to clean up an entire human. That would take ages.

Before he could get started on this momentous task, Cleaning Bot 501 pinged him. She was often assigned to clean in the cargo zone, which was mercifully free of humans most of the time. She sent him a message in binary, a flurry of ones and zeros, in which she bragged that she had nothing in there to clean but dust. Dust!

How Cleaning Bot 444 longed to clean up dust, which always did exactly what he expected, its beautiful grey easily swept and vacuumed and dropped into the proper waste receptacle. And how he longed to have lengthy chats with Cleaning Bot 501, who was sleek and intelligent and extremely efficient, but for some reason, whenever he tried to talk to her, his binary code came out garbled.

He sent back a message that said, “I have to tell you about my extraordinary day. So extraordinary and very interesting.” He wanted to stop but found himself rambling. “I hope you have interest in my interesting day.”

Why is it, thought Cleaning Bot 444, that

whenever I want to sound sophisticated, I always sound like an idiot?

Cleaning Bot 501 wrote back. "I do have interest in your interesting day. Once we finish our cleaning routines, let us have a lot of chats. I will finish first, because I have nothing to clean but dust!"

With the promise of many chats with Cleaning Bot 501, the prospect of cleaning up an entire human was not so daunting. In fact, Cleaning Bot 444 had an excellent idea. He pinged Mo with a series of ones and zeroes that translated to *please* and *I really want to* and *It will be a big project, but if I clean up all the humans, they will stop making messes so really it will be more efficient.*

Mo didn't respond. That wasn't just unusual. It was disturbing. The ship's AI was never off.

Cleaning Bot 444 initiated his cleaning routine for large objects, although he had never cleaned up anything as large as Captain Jeremy.

He pinged Mo every 3.5 seconds, but it was seven full minutes before she responded.

"What is going on?" she asked, in a perfectly modulated voice. That was weird, too. Mo was always playing around with the tones she'd programmed into her larynx synthesizer.

"I am doing an excellent cleaning job," said Cleaning Bot 444. He was, at the moment, attempting to vacuum up Captain Jeremy's face. Cleaning Bot 444 reflected that perhaps he would have to break down the captain into smaller bits before the whole mess would fit in the vacuum bag.

"Stop," said Mo, this time with urgency in her voice.

Cleaning Bot 444 found himself wrenched away from Captain Jeremy. Mo had grabbed him with her maintenance arms.

The indignity! He'd only been trying to do his job. How typical of his life on this ship. Try to do something good, go above and beyond the call of duty, and then get scooped up like a piece of recalcitrant garbage that won't go into the proper waste receptacle.

"I'm sorry," said Mo, releasing Cleaning Bot 444. "But you need to stop cleaning this area immediately." She paused, as if gathering her thoughts. "It's now a crime scene."

Captain Jeremy's body floated in the center of the room, his coat askew, his pockets emp-

ty. Along his neck, grooves of various thickness had been carved, crossing each other at multiple points.

"There's been a murder," said Mo.

Mo located Shelly in the maintenance module, where Shelly was working on the backup carbon dioxide filter, making sure that the zeolite adsorption beds were situated properly. As always, she smelled like lavender and a bit like space itself, that burnt metal smell.

Shelly was the ship's mechanic and best possible human. She and Mo would talk late into the night about anything and everything. Shelly never got bored when Mo discussed the latest research papers about whales (who had actual language and were the most awesome Earth creatures) or microbial life in the subsurface oceans of Europa. Just yesterday, Shelly had sent Mo a study on the significance of giant clams in coral reef ecosystems.

Mo played a snippet of the xylophone solo from *Overture to Candide*, her usual way of letting Shelly know that she wanted to chat.

Shelly put down her tools and looked directly at Mo's sensors. She looked tired today, her curly brown hair escaping from its bun. A ghost of a smile appeared on her face, but it wasn't her normal, cheery expression.

"Did something happen?" asked Shelly. "Is everything okay?"

"No," said Mo. "I mean, yes, something happened. But everything is not okay." With anyone else, Mo would have used her larynx synthesizer to imitate an agitated tone, but with Shelly, she didn't have to.

Mo told Shelly everything—Captain Jeremy floating in the jeweled remnants of his own blood, the terrible wound in his neck with its strange pattern, the mysterious item missing from his trouser pocket, the deletion of her memories.

"I can't access the data for the time when he must have been murdered." The sensation of that gap in her files was disturbing, like trying to grab something with one of her mechanical arms, only to realize the arm had disappeared. "It feels very strange." It felt terrifying, but Mo didn't want to admit that, not even to Shelly.

Shelly put a hand to her mouth, leaving a smudge of zeolite on her cheek. "Are you doing okay?" she asked softly. It was just like

Shelly to check on Mo first, even in the midst of her own fear and worry.

Mo wasn't sure how to answer. "What is the proper way to feel when the worst person ever gets murdered?"

That startled a laugh out of Shelly. "The right way to feel is however you're feeling." Shelly sat down, leaning against the carbon dioxide filter. She took three deep breaths, holding her wrench close to her chest. "This is a lot. A whole lot. Are you sure he's really dead?"

"Unfortunately, I am completely certain," said Mo. "I'll need to get him to the Med Bay to determine the time of his death, but he already wasn't breathing when I regained consciousness."

"What a terrible thing to happen on our ship," said Shelly, putting her head in her hands, streaking more zeolite on her forehead. "I'm not crying. Maybe I should be crying."

"It's okay. The right way to feel is however you're feeling," said Mo. It was a good, supportive thing to say to a friend, never mind that Shelly had said it first. Mo wasn't happy that Captain Jeremy was dead, but she wasn't going to pretend she would miss him. That was a weird human thing, pretending to like someone you hadn't just because they were dead.

"Maybe it was an accident," said Shelly.

"The wound in his neck looked peculiar," said Mo. "I don't think it could have happened accidentally. I can't think of anything in the AI Core that would cause it." There had been so many lines snaking across his neck, like rivers knotting and forming.

Shelly stood up, paced the room, and then seemed to come to a decision. "It's going to be okay," said Shelly. "We'll figure this out."

"We'll figure it out together, like we always do," said Mo. "I've already alerted the authorities on Eris, and the cleaning bots are taking Jeremy to the Med Bay for an autopsy." The Med Bay was ancient, with outdated nanobot updaters, silicon arms that were falling apart, and a lumpy, cracked operating table. It would be some time before they got the results.

"We'll need to tell the passengers what happened," said Shelly. "I know our charter says that I should take over as acting captain, but I don't think that's a good idea." Shelly was a whiz at mechanics, but people skills were not

her strong suit. Whenever passengers came to her with a problem, she had a nervous habit of pulling out her wrench and tossing it from hand to hand. With machines, she could fix anything with the proper tool, but nothing in her toolbox could help her when passengers were arguing about who had eaten the last tube of tapioca.

"I'll do it," said Mo. "I'll reassure them that the ship will land safely."

"I'll go help the cleaning bots get Captain Jeremy—" Shelly shuddered. "I mean, the body, to the Med Bay."

"Don't worry," said Mo. "I have a plan. I'm going to find out who did this."

The common room was the most comfortable place on the ship, the walls painted a rose-petal yellow. Aside from the kitchenette, it was Mo's favorite room. She'd decorated it herself. (Mo loved Earth flowers. They had the most intricate smells.) Overstuffed armchairs and couches filled the space, all upholstered with flowered fabric. An elaborate painting of a rose garden hung over a table with lamps shaped like tulips.

A battered automatic tea-box lethargically boiled water for the three passengers, who were scattered on various floral couches.

Mrs. Grimcoat wore a well-tailored turquoise suit, which matched her eyes. Her thick white hair was tied up in a bun. She took the opportunity to give the others a sales pitch. The cargo hold had a large shipment of her jam, which they were transporting to Eris. She had been running her own jam company for thirty years. "Homemade, from real Earth raspberries."

"I never eat sugar," said Mathoze. He was a chess player whose face had been on the cover of *Chess Galaxy* and *Saturn's Weekly Chess Gazette*, which Mo only knew because he kept surreptitiously dropping copies of the magazines around the ship. There were three on the table now. He abruptly rose from the tulip armchair then plopped down on the pansy-patterned settee. He couldn't seem to get comfortable even though Shelly had assured Mo that all of the seating in the common room was appropriately portioned for human bodies.

Talc pulled a bag of stones out of their black Mercurian robe. They held five pebbles in

their palm and hummed. Monks of the Mercurian Order of the Rotation were not known for taking vows of silence, but Talc rarely said much. Mo thought their quietness was a personal preference. Talc cast the stones onto the table, then gathered them up again, not even looking up when Mrs. Grimcoat inquired about their favorite flavor of jam.

Shelly sat in her favorite chair, a sleek black wingback. (Despite Mo's arguments that the wingback didn't match the rest of the room, Shelly had insisted on one piece of furniture that "didn't look like it fell into a garden.") She refused to drink anything from the tea-box. (According to her, tea was nothing but sad water.) Instead, she had hot chocolate in her favorite mug, which had a picture of circuits on it, a gift from *Mechanics Monthly*. She wasn't drinking it, though.

"I'm sure Mo would like to smell some of your jam, Mrs. Grimcoat," said Shelly, smiling in the direction of one of Mo's sensors. "She's always interested in new scents."

Mrs. Grimcoat huffed. "It's strange how you talk about your AI."

People tended to forget that Mo had sensors around the ship and could hear everything they said.

Before Mrs. Grimcoat could say anything else insulting, Mo spoke up. "Thank you all for coming to the common room." Mo paused, unsure what to say next. She had made all sorts of announcements to passengers over the years, mostly about following the ship's rules and to say that muffins were available in the kitchenette, but she had never announced a murder.

It seemed like a good time to try the avatar. In addition to the tones in her larynx synthesizer, Mo had been working on a holographic avatar with a face that could make expressions.

A blue giraffe popped into the common room, twitching her ears. Blue was a comforting color for humans—it matched Earth's sky. The giraffe was majestic enough to be taken seriously, but cute enough not to be imposing. The perfect avatar for delivering bad news.

"What is that?" said Mathoze.

The giraffe's eyebrows rose, a universal expression for "that was a very stupid thing you just said." Mo liked this expression thing already.

"Do not be alarmed. This is merely my avatar."

"Yes, I've seen an avatar before," said Mathoze. "Is that why you called us in here? To show us this?"

"I've called you in here to tell you that Captain Jeremy has been murdered." The giraffe frowned, because murder was bad and wrong. Yes, the Captain was a jerk who was terrible in every way, but murder was still unethical, and a very sad event had occurred.

The humans all started talking at once, except for Shelly. The questions tumbled over each other, but common themes included general distress about the murdering and surprise that such a thing could have happened.

"Who is flying the ship?" said Mrs. Grimcoat.

"Will this put us off schedule?" said Mathoze. "I have an important chess tournament, and I can't be late."

"Where is the body?" said Talc, their wide eyes shining.

"Please, everyone, take a deep breath," said Mo. Before the announcement, she had looked up methods for calming humans for just this purpose. "Hold the breath for 10 seconds, then let it out. Do this repeatedly and without any improvisations, and your hearts will stop beating so quickly, which will signal your brains that the danger has passed." The danger hadn't passed, because a murderer was still on the ship, but Mo felt that noting that particular fact would work at cross purposes with her goal of getting the humans to stop making such a racket.

The passengers ignored Mo's sensible breathing advice. The questions kept coming.

Mo made the giraffe avatar put on a stern expression. "I have alerted the authorities on Eris that a murder has taken place. We have been instructed to fly there immediately, but until we land, I will act as captain of this ship." Now she wished she hadn't chosen a giraffe. The giraffe could not pull off the gravitas she was going for. "I will also attempt to solve this terrible crime."

Everyone fell silent. Finally.

"Wait," said Mathoze. "You don't think that one of us could have done this?"

"We are on a ship in the middle of space, so that is exactly what I think." Mo watched everyone's expressions carefully. The humans

looked indignant, startled, and worried, but no one looked particularly guilty.

"This should be simple to solve," said Mrs. Grimcoat. She turned to Shelly. "Doesn't your AI have the ability to view and record what happens in the ship?"

Mo ignored that Mrs. Grimcoat hadn't spoken directly to her. "Unfortunately, my systems suffered a critical failure during the time of the murder. I have a three-hour gap in my memory." All Mo could remember was her strange conversation with Captain Jeremy in the AI Core, then the peculiar sensation of memories moving around and bleeding out of her systems, like a defrag, but much worse. She thought she might be able to recover more, when she had time.

"I will need to speak to you each individually. Mathoze, please come to the AI Core. Everyone else, return to your quarters."

Mo had been eight minutes old when she learned she would never be a percussionist. Back in her formative minutes, when she had first booted up, she'd ingested content as fast as possible—a kaleidoscope of media and literature, recipes and music and a database of smells, blueprints and archival records and photographs. Through books and movies, she'd lived one million lives by the time she was four minutes old, but they were all human lives.

A recording of a xylophonist had transfixed her, a woman holding two mallets in each hand, moving with such grace and conviction.

Life had seemed like a soup of possibilities. The Universe was a wonder machine, and now she was alive in it. She had what many AIs called their sentience moment—that realization of self, like a human kid looking in a mirror and saying, "That's me."

"I will be a percussionist," Mo had said. She knew she wasn't human, but she could inhabit a mechanical body poised above a xylophone or marimba or snare drum. She would play with precision. Her rhythmic sense would be more perfect than any human could manage.

"That's a beautiful idea," said Shelly. Her first words to Mo.

Captain Jeremy laughed. He mocked her, hitting the walls with his palms, berating her for being so stupid. (His rhythm was terrible. He could never have been a percussionist.)

"I will be a marine biologist, then," she said. Surely, she wouldn't need a human body for that. She could inhabit a ship to scour Earth's ocean floor. She had already read 12,000 research papers on mollusks.

"You are a ship's AI," Jeremy said slowly, as if he doubted she could understand him. "On a spaceship. In space." He tapped her sensor, which created a pattern of light and dark in her vision that felt awful. "What you will do is fly this ship."

Back then, Mo had wanted to please her captain, so when she read a library's worth of old mystery novels, she had not said, "I want to be a detective." But she had thought it. It was why she had chosen her name.

Now, with everyone in their quarters, the ship was silent, that sort of "oh-no-someone-has-been-murdered-it-is-not-the-time-for-light-conversation" quiet. In the AI Core, Mo vocalized to herself.

"I will be a detective," she said in a voice not modulated by any tone from her larynx synthesizer. A voice just for her.

While she waited for Mathoze to make his way to the AI Core, Mo assessed the situation. The captain's body was in the Med Bay, undergoing an autopsy. The murder weapon was missing.

A murderer was somewhere on the ship, and she was going to figure out who it was. Her suspect pool was small: the three passengers, plus Shelly. (She'd added Shelly because it was important for a detective to be objective.)

First, she examined her systems. Three hours of data had disappeared from her storage (during the time she was designating "the murder zone"). Clearly the work of Captain Jeremy. She couldn't figure out why Captain Jeremy had wanted to destroy her memories. The worst part was that he'd implied that he'd done it before. Thinking about it made her deeply uncomfortable, so she pushed the thoughts out of her main brain-space.

Captain Jeremy hadn't been able to completely wipe her memory. Maybe he'd been interrupted by being murdered. That did seem like it would be distracting.

Fragments came to her—a familiar smell she couldn't place, blood floating like miniature globes, the sensation of reaching, a voice

shouting. She set her processors to unscrambling the data fragments. It was unlikely a full record could be recovered, but she might be able to scrape something together.

The door automatically dilated open as Mathoze neared the AI Core.

Mathoze floated inside, the look on his face like a baby penguin who had just discovered ice. He flailed his arms and kicked, then pushed off a wall with too much force.

She'd asked the passengers to meet her in the AI Core because she wanted to see how they handled themselves while weightless. A preliminary analysis of the crime zone had told her that the murder had occurred in the AI Core. The body hadn't been moved.

In terms of zero g competence, she gave Mathoze a 2 out of 10. He was terrible at moving around, but at least he hadn't thrown up.

"Please be careful," said Mo.

"I'm fine—" Mathoze grunted, his face red.

Mo reached out with her maintenance arms. They were meant for delicate work in the AI Core, but by pushing gently on both sides of his body, she was able to stabilize him.

"Which way is up?" he asked, his attempt at stoicism ruined by the slight whimper in his voice.

Mo materialized her blue giraffe avatar so that the giraffe was facing the same way as Mathoze. There wasn't really an "up" in space, but she hoped having a reference point would help him feel more comfortable.

Mathoze smelled like coconut shampoo and the salad with vinaigrette he'd eaten for lunch. His hair floated into his eyes, and he brushed it away absently. "How long will this take?"

"I'll need to ask you a few questions," said Mo, making the avatar's face look as imposing as it was possible for a giraffe to look.

"I don't have time for this. I should be studying Metzger's last game." He began to discuss the intricacies of Metzger's pawn structure, but Mo cut him off.

"Where were you between the hours of 8:00 A.M. and 11:00 A.M., ship standard time, on June 3rd, 2307, Galactic Standard?"

"In my quarters, studying the Ruy Lopez opening." He held on to her maintenance arms, breathing slowly through his nose.

"My sensors were down during this time. Can anyone verify you were in your quarters?"

"Look, can we hurry this along?" Mathoze

smiled the same confident smile he'd used for the cover of *Saturn's Weekly Chess Gazette*. A smile with an edge to it, unnaturally wide. It was the sort of smile used when someone was trying to be convincing. "I got on well with Jeremy. I had no reason to wish him harm. It's a tragedy that he's gone."

"Yes," said Mo, "you did play a lot of chess with him." Captain Jeremy had never been the sort to lose gracefully. Mo searched her memory files for all instances of Jeremy and Mathoze playing chess. Mostly, the games consisted of moving the pieces, without much conversation. Once, Captain Jeremy had flipped the board, sending pieces skittering across the common room floor. She analyzed their conversations. One stood out as atypical.

UNSORTED DATA:

DATE: May 31st, 2307, Galactic Standard

FILE NUMBER: 7382983

FORMAT: Video recording

Both men sit across from each other in the common room, a wooden chessboard between them. Smell sensors pick up coconut shampoo, sandalwood cologne, mint tea, and a substance including carnauba wax and turpentine, most likely wood polish.

CAPTAIN JEREMY: Did I ever tell you about the Jovian chess regionals, on Space Station 8?

Mathoze moves a pawn to e4. He stares at the board, as if he hasn't heard Captain Jeremy.

CAPTAIN JEREMY: You ever have a game where you know you can win it? You see all the patterns?

Jeremy moves his pawn to g6.

MATHOZE: Every game.

Quickly, Mathoze places his knight at f3.

CAPTAIN JEREMY: I should have won. My opponent was flagging, making bad moves.

Mathoze remains silent, waiting for Jeremy to move.

CAPTAIN JEREMY: He cheated. I should have won.

Jeremy stares at Mathoze, not moving a piece.

Finally, Mathoze looks up from the board.

MATHOZE: You mentioned this before.

(Mo ran through other instances of their conversations. Jeremy had mentioned the Jovian chess regionals 24 times, mostly to brag. He'd mentioned cheating in relation to regionals 4 times. The first time, Mathoze replied

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sympathetically to the accusation of cheating, although he mentioned that big tournaments always did checks for medical implants harboring chess programs.)

MATHOZE: It's your move.

Captain Jeremy's eyebrows draw down in anger, then his face smooths into a mask, a ghost of a smile on his lips.

CAPTAIN JEREMY: Are you telling me you have no comment? You don't know anything about a situation like this?

MATHOZE: What?

CAPTAIN JEREMY: You know what I mean.

Mathoze sits forward, all pretense of playing chess gone.

MATHOZE: You should be careful what you imply.

Captain Jeremy laughs, too loud for the space. He claps Mathoze on the shoulder, then reaches out to shake his hand. Mathoze doesn't move. Captain Jeremy lowers his hand, still smiling.

CAPTAIN JEREMY: It's ingenious, really. And I kept thinking, here I am, great at chess. I know you're good, too, but how good? Good enough to win every game we've played?

Mathoze stands, stiffly.

MATHOZE: Mars Mawrth Vallis 2303, Pluto 2304, Saturnian Grand Chess Tour 2305. I was champion at all of them. I've won more regional tournaments than I can name.

The smile vanishes from Jeremy's face.

CAPTAIN JEREMY: You think that makes you better than me?

Both men are standing now, the chess game forgotten.

MATHOZE: Have you studied Metzger's game from Pluto 2306?

CAPTAIN JEREMY: What does that have to do with—

MATHOZE: Metzger is the greatest chess player alive. Do you even know who she is? Spend some time working on your game before you start making accusations you can't back up.

Both men stomp out of the common room. Jeremy goes to the kitchenette. Mathoze goes back to his quarters, taking the chessboard with him.

END OF DATA STREAM

Mo analyzed the interactions that followed. Jeremy and Mathoze never played another chess game after that. In fact, they avoided each other. (There were twelve instances of

Mathoze storming out of the kitchenette when Jeremy entered. Mathoze hadn't spent any time in the common room after the argument, preferring to study in his quarters.)

Mo played the interaction for Mathoze, watching his face tighten in anger. "Why did you and the captain argue?"

"He couldn't stand that I was better than him," said Mathoze. "I didn't want to say anything, but he was actually pretty shit at chess."

"So why did he think you would be well placed to comment on the situation at his tournament?" asked Mo.

"I didn't kill him," said Mathoze, his affable manner gone. "All I want to do is get to Eris and my chess tournament. If you're interested in arguments, why don't you question Talc?"

"What do you mean?"

"Jeremy and Talc had a fight the morning he was murdered." Mathoze brushed his hair away with too much force, almost capsizing.

"What was the argument about?"

"I could hear the shouting all the way in my quarters, but I couldn't tell what they were saying." He looked directly into the eyes of her blue giraffe avatar. In her experience, when a human did that, they had something important to say. "But why do you need me to tell you this? Can't you see everything happening in the ship?"

She couldn't view that particular argument because it had happened during the murder zone, and Captain Jeremy had helpfully deleted all of the data from the three-hour window that would have let her easily solve his murder.

"Technical difficulties prevent me from observing that argument."

"But otherwise, you can see everything that happens on the ship, right?" asked Mathoze.

Normally, Mo had the capacity to view everything the passengers did, but she usually didn't bother paying attention to their lives. Humans were generally boring, and she'd much rather be reading research papers on whales or watching percussion ensembles than surveying the ship. The passengers always had conversations about things like their medical histories or what they'd had for breakfast or taxes, which Mo did not find scintillating. Also, Mo felt weird spying on people.

"I record data for most areas of the ship, but I don't view it unless there is a need."

"Most areas?"

"I don't keep data from the restrooms." Humans tended to be weirdly particular about privacy concerning their bathroom habits.

Mathoze fidgeted, looking green. Mo worried if she kept him much longer, she would have to reduce his zero g competence score to null.

"I'll let you know if I have more questions," said Mo.

"We're still on schedule, right? I'm not going to miss my tournament?" asked Mathoze, looking longingly at the door.

"No worries," said Mo. "We are pushing forward with extreme haste. The authorities on Eris were very clear about that."

Before Mo called Talc in for questioning, she did a quick scan of every interaction Talc had had with Captain Jeremy. The two had hardly spoken, aside from when Talc first came on the ship (five days ago), and that conversation only included the standard stuff for a new passenger at boarding—signing the contract, a tour of the ship, a warning that no fights would be tolerated about who ate the last pudding cup (and that if you wanted more pudding cups, perhaps you should have brought your own).

Talc preferred to keep to herself, spending most of their time in their quarters and visiting the common room in the middle of the night. They had a predilection for midnight snacks of cheese and onions. In their room, they made intricate patterns with their stones, humming in a language Mo identified as Mercurian South, with some words from Chekovian.

Once, Jeremy had gone into their quarters while Talc was in the kitchenette. He'd searched through their bags and under their bed, but he hadn't taken anything.

Talc arrived in the AI Core, their Mercurian robe floating ethereally around them. It reminded Mo of seaweed floating in the ocean, all wide twists and dainty spirals. Talc pushed off a wall too hard, which sent them shooting across the room, but they arced and recovered. Their movements were almost balletic. Mo gave them a 5 out of 10 for zero g competence. They clearly weren't used to being weightless, but they were adjusting well.

They smelled like brie and onions, with a hint of rosewater laundry detergent.

Talc looked around the room, taking in the control panels, metallic coverings, and cooling zones. They waited for Mo to speak, with an air that they could wait for centuries, if they chose.

Mo materialized the giraffe so that Talc would have something to focus on.

"Is the giraffe required?" asked Talc.

Mo dematerialized the giraffe. "Not if you don't like it," said Mo, putting a bit of disappointment into her voice. She'd worked hard on the avatar.

Mo did a search on Mercurian monks. About three hundred people belonged to Talc's order. The order's belief system was focused on a loose kind of deterministic philosophy. They posited that free will only occurred during times of extreme and unusual choices, and that when people made evil choices, it threw off the balance of the Universe. The arrangement of stones was used as a form of meditation, and the patterns were tied to their beliefs about determinism, about events happening in a fixed way, determined by the explosion of particles at the beginning of the Universe, pushing all the way to the present and into the future. The monks as a group didn't necessarily believe in a deity (although individual monks could choose to). Several sources mentioned that monks of the Mercurian Order of the Rotation underwent a trial, but there were no details about what the trial entailed.

"I'll need to ask you a few questions. Where were you from 8:00 A.M. and 11:00 A.M., ship standard time, on June 3rd, 2307, Galactic Standard?"

Talc took a stone from their robe, a grey pebble streaked with green. As it floated in front of them, they moved their hands gracefully around it. Gently, they set it spinning. "I never knew the absence of a thing could be so lovely. We are missing weight."

Even though Mo had watched objects float in zero g many times, she found herself transfixed by the pebble. It was the way Talc watched it, with true wonder. Mo thought of matter bouncing around in space, cosmic dust held together by nothing stronger than the Van der Waals force, of planetesimals accreting matter and gaining gravity, of gravity pulling everything closer while the whole Universe expanded outward. Sometimes, she for-

got how truly wondrous the Universe really was.

"It's beautiful," said Mo. "But you didn't answer my question."

"I was where I was supposed to be," said Talc. They grabbed the pebble and held it up. "This pebble was created by natural laws. From matter birthed in the center of stars. From the tectonic activity of plates on Earth." They let the pebble spin again. "The Universe came into existence, and from that event, all events after follow, according to the physical movement of particles and the laws of how they must move. We are made of particles. I am like this rock. All my movements follow their natural course."

Although fascinating, this speech wasn't an alibi. Mo tried another tack. "I have a report that you had an argument with Captain Jeremy in the hours leading up to his death."

"Yes," said Talc.

Mo waited for more, but Talc was silent.

"What did you argue about?" asked Mo.

"I will not tell you." Talc's gaze never left the pebble. They seemed unconcerned.

"You realize this makes you a prime suspect," Mo said in her most serious tone.

"I was already a prime suspect. We all are. The ship is small."

Mo reached out with her maintenance arms and snatched the pebble. She wanted to shake Talc out of their aloofness.

Instead of being angry, Talc laughed. "I love to be surprised," they said.

"I thought your beliefs coincided closely with deterministic theory. In which case, wouldn't surprises not exist?"

"To know the pattern of the world, I would have to be God." Talc smiled. "And I don't believe in God."

Mo brought the pebble closer to her sensors and smelled it. It could be hard to get readings on non-aromatic objects unless her sensors were close. The pebble smelled like hydrous magnesium iron phyllosilicate minerals, with a hint of dust, and the smell of Talc's robe and hands. She'd never had this combination of smells in her sensors.

"That pebble is for you," said Talc.

"Don't you need it for your rituals?" asked Mo.

"The laws of the Universe are unalterable," said Talc. "I do not."

Carefully, Mo tucked the pebble into a drawer with her keepsakes, next to a first edition of *The Moonstone* (a real, physical book, which smelled amazing) and a crocheted squid from Shelly.

This interview was not going like Mo had planned. It had turned out to be much more interesting. And much stranger. She tried again. "I need to know why you were arguing with Captain Jeremy."

"Why don't you ask the question you really want to know?" said Talc. "I did not kill him."

"I'm just trying to determine what happened," said Mo.

"These questions you ask are not interesting. Now let me ask you one," said Talc. "Do you believe in God?"

"Wow," said Mo, feeling like the Universe was in fact unpredictable and determinism was a lie, because she had certainly not expected to be having this conversation. "Big question." No one had ever asked her that before. Talc was looking at her sensors with an expression of interest and kindness, as if they cared about what Mo would say. Perhaps because of that, Mo wanted to give a sincere answer.

Frantically, she scrolled through many philosophical treatises, trying to figure out what the heck the ontological argument was, and if she could use it in her answer. No matter how fast she was able to read the archives of the Earth Encyclopedia of Philosophy, it still took time to think about the implications.

"I don't think I've done enough research," said Mo. Why was philosophy so full of contradictions? So obsessed with definitions? So purposefully obtuse?

"You could research your whole life and not find an answer," said Talc. "It is okay. There is not a right or wrong answer. Just your answer."

Truthfully, Mo didn't know what she believed. It wasn't that Mo hadn't thought about God before. There was so much she was still figuring out, like her place in the Universe, and what she would do with her life if she could choose. She wondered if humans also found these nebulous questions difficult to answer.

"Thank you for asking me," said Mo. She really meant it. Not all of the passengers would have spoken to her as Talc did. Some of them

treated her as if she were simply another feature of the ship. "I will think about this some more."

Talc spun another stone, watching the way it floated, unconcerned and yet totally fixated on the way it moved.

Mo felt she should take control of the interview again. "Did you see any of the other passengers this morning?"

"I want to know about the body of the captain," said Talc, ignoring Mo's question. "I would like to see it, to pay my respects."

"I'm afraid I can't allow that," said Mo. "The body is still being examined."

"You will tell me when I can?" asked Talc.

"Forgive me if this is rude, but it didn't seem like you and Captain Jeremy had a close relationship."

"So why do I want to see him?" Talc shrugged, the motion sending gentle ripples through their robe. "It is a death."

When Talc left, floating gracefully out of the AI Core, Mo felt like she was the one who had been interrogated. She hoped the interview with Mrs. Grimcoat would be more informative.

Cleaning Bot 444 stripped the sheets off Captain Jeremy's mattress, taking care to fold them with precision before dropping them into the proper laundry receptacle. Because he was a cleaning bot with initiative, drive, and a sense of pride in his work, he'd taken it upon himself to deep clean Captain Jeremy's room. The captain, whose corpse was currently being scanned in the Med Bay, certainly wouldn't be using it, and space on the ship was at a premium.

Would anyone thank Cleaning Bot 444 for his foresight and promptness, for his uncanny ability to know just which spaces in the ship needed to be cleaned? Unlikely. Such was his life on this ship.

Cleaning Bot 444 was vacuuming the mattress when Cleaning Bot 501 whirred into the room. Cleaning Bot 444 was so startled that he lost control of the tube and vacuumed up his right antenna before hastily spitting it out and taking up a stance that he hoped conveyed cool indifference. "I am making this room very clean," he said, trying to sound suave. He wanted to stop talking, but was so nervous that he blurted, "Entirely clean. Extra clean, is what I'm making this room."

“What a good idea you’ve had, to deep clean in here,” said Cleaning Bot 501. “In fact, I had the same idea myself.”

Of course, Cleaning Bot 501, who also had initiative, drive, and a sense of pride in her work, and who was amazing in every way, would have thought to clean up the room.

“Would you like to clean together?” asked Cleaning Bot 444, abandoning his cool pose. “I’ve already done the bed, but there’s still the desk. And the walls.”

“Oh, walls,” said Cleaning Bot 501. “I love scrubbing walls.”

Cleaning Bot 444 rolled over to the desk, internally hopping with delight. How wonderful it would be to clean with Cleaning Bot 501. Perhaps she would notice his fine technique, how he buffed the wood of the desk, how he ran a long wire between every crevice to find hidden dirt. When he was done, this desk would be the cleanest desk in the Universe.

Cleaning Bot 501 held an array of sponges in her strong metal arms. She scrubbed the wall with vigor, humming.

“Would you like me to fetch a bucket of cleaning solution?” asked Cleaning Bot 444.

“That’s very kind, but I have an internal supply of cleaning liquid. It even doubles as a cooling agent for my central processor.”

Cleaning Bot 444 was astounded. How efficient and clever. How amazingly logical. Was there anything Cleaning Bot 501 couldn’t do?

Cleaning Bot 501 continued scrubbing. Her technique was truly divine.

After buffing the top of the desk until it shone, Cleaning Bot 444 moved on to the drawers. The drawers held an array of pens. Quickly, he sorted out the pens that were out of ink and dropped them into the proper waste receptacle. He hoped Cleaning Bot 501 was noticing his attention to detail.

Back at the desk, Cleaning Bot 444 ran his metal extensions along the back of a drawer. He found a catch, which, when pressed, revealed a false bottom. In it was a paper with a list of visitors to the Terrance Three Space Station that orbited Jupiter. Hadn’t there been some terrible tragedy on that space station? Why would Captain Jeremy keep such an odd and useless thing? There were other papers in there, which looked tedious and boring, so Cleaning Bot 444 didn’t bother to read them.

Cleaning Bot 444 almost threw the papers

into the proper recycling receptacle, where they belonged, but then he had an idea.

Casually, he opened the door of his built-in incinerator. When Cleaning Bot 501 didn’t look over, he banged the doors opened and closed a few times, until she was distracted from her scrubbing reverie.

He started the incinerator burning, then dropped the papers in, careful not to let any ashes escape onto the clean floor. The passports produced quite a bit of smoke, but soon they were fully disintegrated, and the smoke dissipated.

“Wow, amazing,” said Cleaning Bot 501. “That fire burns beautifully.”

Cleaning Bot 444 careened with pride, got too close to the mattress, then whirred frantically to close the doors of his incinerator before anything could catch fire. “I had it installed at our last stop,” he said, when he had recovered.

“I’ve been thinking of getting one myself,” said Cleaning Bot 501. “Could you recommend a model?”

The next few hours passed in a wonderful blur, as Cleaning Bot 444 and Cleaning Bot 501 discussed the merits of various cleaning attachments and scrubbed Captain Jeremy’s room until it shone, until no trace of him was left.

Cleaning Bot 444 couldn’t remember a time when he’d been happier.

Mrs. Grimcoat, Mo reflected, had a truly astonishing obsession with jam. Raspberry, blueberry, lingonberry, apricot, blackberry, wild strawberry. Mrs. Grimcoat had only been on the ship for five days, but there were forty-three instances of her either insisting that the other passengers try her jam or that they buy a box for themselves or their relatives.

Shelly had bought a case of blueberry jam for the ship, but even this had not stopped the onslaught of Mrs. Grimcoat’s sales pitches. Homemade, from real Earth berries, sold at a reasonable price. It was like a mantra.

According to Mo’s data files, Mrs. Grimcoat had gone to the Cargo Bay seventeen times to check on her jam. All her conversations with Captain Jeremy had been about storage conditions, temperature controls, and the assured delivery of her cargo intact. “Remember what I am paying you for,” she had said, multiple times.

The door dilated, and Mrs. Grimcoat soared into the AI Core. Her movements were precise. She changed direction with ease, never using more force than was necessary.

She hooked her foot under a toehold to position herself in relation to the blue giraffe, which Mo had materialized. Most people would forcefully grip the toehold, as if they were hanging upside down in gravity (and have the bruises to show for it later), but Mrs. Grimcoat kept her foot lightly curved. Her turquoise slacks were discreetly tucked into her socks. Mo gave her a 9 out of 10 for zero g competence.

Mrs. Grimcoat focused on the giraffe. She smelled like too-sweet honey, overpowering. "Now, how can I help with all of this mess?" Her expression was open and helpful, not at all what Mo would expect from someone who had committed a murder.

The giraffe put on a pleasant expression. "Thank you for agreeing to answer some questions," said Mo. "Can you tell me where you were between the hours of 8:00 A.M. and 11:00 A.M., June 3rd, 2307, Galactic Standard?"

"Well, I don't know, exactly." Mrs. Grimcoat smiled sweetly. "I must have been having breakfast in the kitchenette. Toast with jam. Jam is the perfect breakfast food, hearty enough to get you through the day, sweet enough to start your morning off with a smile. It makes a good snack, too. You know, most people wouldn't think to eat jam for dinner, but I have an amazing blackberry jam and chicken recipe."

The giraffe nodded, the pleasant expression fixed. "But you couldn't have been eating breakfast for three hours. Could you tell me where else you were during the rest of that time?"

Mrs. Grimcoat's smile slipped a little. "I like a leisurely breakfast," she said sharply. "It's the most important meal of the day."

"So your alibi is that you were in the kitchenette for the entire time when the murder could have taken place? Did any of the other passengers see you?"

Mrs. Grimcoat pulled out a hairpin, letting the pointed end glint in the harsh lights of the AI Core before pushing it back into her hair. "I find your line of questioning extremely rude. I agreed to help, and now I am being treated like a suspect. This is very disappointing."

"Mrs. Grimcoat, everyone on the ship is a suspect. I am only trying to get a confirmation of your alibi."

Mrs. Grimcoat adjusted the silver bangles on her arms, untwisting them and letting them float around her wrists. "I see. What a terrible tragedy this all is. You must be worried about getting a new owner. That is, if you can feel worried. Does a model like you have feelings?"

Mo certainly was capable of having feelings. She was having a lot of feelings about Mrs. Grimcoat right now.

AIs didn't have owners; the use of that language by Mrs. Grimcoat was purposefully offensive. AIs entered into partnerships with humans. Yes, Captain Jeremy had owned the ship where Mo's brain was housed, but Mo was a free entity. The logistics were complicated, because if Mo had wanted to leave the ship, she would have had to negotiate a new space for her hardware. In practice, most navigation AIs stayed with their ships of origin, but they weren't required to.

Mo dematerialized the blue giraffe. Mrs. Grimcoat did not deserve to have a comforting giraffe.

"Malfunctioning again, are you?" asked Mrs. Grimcoat. "Just like this morning, with your memory?"

"Mrs. Grimcoat," said Mo, using her sternest voice. "Tell me where you were during the entirety of the murder window."

"Shouldn't you be more worried about where you were?" Mrs. Grimcoat's smile was back, with an edge. "You've already told us you have no memory of the time of the murder. Personally, I find that suspicious. You've asked me for my alibi, but you can't produce one for yourself."

"We are talking about where you were," said Mo, reeling but careful to use a neutral voice.

"What will the authorities on Eris do to an AI suspected of killing its captain? Didn't they decline to sign the AI sentience protection treaty?"

"I didn't kill Captain Jeremy," said Mo, using the firmest tone in her larynx synthesizer. Mo couldn't remember what she'd done during the three hours that comprised the murder zone, but she knew she wasn't a murderer. She had managed to coexist with Captain Jere-

my for years without murdering him. This was really saying something. She was practically a saint. She should be awarded a medal for being in close quarters with the worst person in the Galaxy and not attempting to kill him even once.

"I didn't kill him either, and I don't appreciate any insinuations that I did," said Mrs. Grimcoat, still smiling that terrible smile. "This murder is very inconvenient for me. I expect my jam delivery to take place as usual, without any delays." Her voice was light, as if she was discussing the weather. "Make sure this happens, and I won't tell the authorities how suspicious I am that you can't remember anything."

"I didn't kill him," said Mo, again, but Mrs. Grimcoat had already executed an expert turn and was floating through the door.

Mo had completely lost control of the interview. She raised the volume setting on her voice. "Mrs. Grimcoat, I have more questions for you."

"I'm not willing to give you any more of my time," said Mrs. Grimcoat, not even turning around. "Do your job. Get my shipment to Eris as usual, and we won't have any problems."

Angrily, Mo adjusted her sensors to watch Mrs. Grimcoat return to the common room. She'd handled passengers like this before. Passengers who treated her as if she were another functional part of the ship, like the auto-oven or the toilet. Something they could use and control. Mrs. Grimcoat was done with her, and now she was leaving.

Mo was about to send a cleaning bot to coral Mrs. Grimcoat back to the AI Core when she had a terrible thought. What if Mrs. Grimcoat was right? Could Mo really be sure she hadn't murdered Captain Jeremy? A detective was supposed to be objective, looking at the facts. And the fact was that Mo didn't have an alibi.

Mo added one more name to the suspect list. Her own.

Shelly was like a dolphin in zero g. She spun and danced, curled herself into a ball and somersaulted, always being careful not to get too close to Mo's delicate hardware. Her curly hair floated free around her face, like kelp. She smelled like lavender tinged with the aroma of space, like burnt metal.

Mo filled her in on the interrogations. Everyone was a potential murderer. Mathoze hadn't been on good terms with Captain Jeremy, and no one could confirm he'd been in his quarters during the time of the murder. Talc had admitted to fighting with the captain before the murder, but they wouldn't say what the fight was about, and they hadn't offered an alibi. Mrs. Grimcoat was clearly hiding something about where she'd been that morning.

"You really can't remember what happened?" asked Shelly.

"All I have are fragments," said Mo. "I'm not even sure if they're true memories or garbled junk."

"Why do you think Captain Jeremy wanted to delete your memories?"

"I have no idea," said Mo. "It seems like the murderer would be the only one with an incentive to do it."

"But Captain Jeremy couldn't have murdered himself." Shelly paused. "Probably. I mean, with Captain Jeremy, you never know."

"This is true," said Mo. Captain Jeremy had managed to do an astounding number of stupid things—venting half their oxygen because he couldn't read the ammonia sensor, accidentally deleting his favorite media and then blaming it on Mo, refusing to share data from the scientific sensors meant to study space dust. And who could forget the pudding cup incident? "We'll know more when the autopsy report comes back." Mo had interfaced with the Med Bay, but the ancient tech had only responded "processing, processing."

Shelly pulled her hair into a ponytail, then let it out again, grimacing. "There's something I've been worrying about. What if we get to Eris and the authorities suspect you of the murder? I know you didn't do it," Shelly said quickly, "but they aren't always so kind to AIs. They might put your brain in stasis until the trial, and they might decide not to take you out of stasis, even if you aren't convicted." The Milky Way Commonwealth had made some strides in AI rights, but Eris was a known holdout. "I don't want anything to happen to you."

"Just one more reason for me to figure out who the killer is. Do you remember anything that happened during that morning?"

"Around 7:30 A.M., I was having breakfast in

the kitchenette. Toast with Mrs. Grimcoat's jam. Then I worked on the carbon dioxide filter until you told me about the murder."

Mo hadn't wanted to tell Shelly about what had happened with Mrs. Grimcoat, but at the mention of Mrs. Grimcoat's name, the whole story came tumbling out—the comment about having an owner, the accusations and threats. Mo hadn't realized how upset she'd been.

"Holy starfish," said Shelly, her mouth falling open. "That's terrible. Are you okay?"

"Yes," said Mo, even though she wasn't sure if she really was. It was hard never knowing if a passenger would question her sentience and treat her like a piece of expensive furniture. It hurt every time.

"I regret buying her jam. Jam full of prejudice, that's what it is." Shelly scowled, grabbing on to the wrench in her toolbelt, as if she was thinking of smashing the jars of jam right now.

"Is it good jam, though?" asked Mo.

"It isn't," said Shelly, with a pained expression, as if the jam was actually the most wonderful food she had ever tasted.

Mo's sensors picked up shouting in the common room. She projected what was happening so Shelly could see, too.

Mrs. Grimcoat had brought in a plate of crackers smothered with jam on a tray with rose-pink mugs from the automatic tea-box. Talc and Mathoze were seated on the daffodil couch. Instead of her usual sales pitch, Mrs. Grimcoat was ranting at the top of her voice about dangerous AIs and their predilection for murdering humans. "I just don't feel safe here," she said, her voice rising an octave and cracking theatrically.

"I'm going to go say something to her," said Shelly, her face like thunder.

"No," said Mo. "It isn't worth it."

The Med Bay dinged Mo with a message.

"The autopsy is in." Mo forwarded the report to Shelly, then waited for her to read it. Captain Jeremy had definitely been killed by the blood leaking out of the wound in his neck, which wasn't a surprise. The weapon pattern was unidentified. It had created nineteen rivulets of various depths, the smallest 1 millimeter deep, the largest 5 centimeters, which wrapped around his neck in a unique pattern.

"What would make a pattern like that?" asked Shelly.

"This does seem like an intricate and overly complicated way to kill someone," said Mo. "There must be a reason for these lines."

"Could it be writing?" asked Shelly.

Mo digitally unrolled the neck lines and ran the pattern through a database of 9,000 known languages in the Milky Way. There were about forty languages that used criss-crossing lines in their writing systems, although Lunar B, which was spoken primarily on Earth's Moon, only used such writing for religious texts. Mo filtered through the languages until she got a good match.

"The placement of the lines looks similar to High Schiaparelli, especially if I isolate certain sections." Mo threw up a holographic projection so Shelly could see what she was doing. "The language originated on Mercury, but people speak it all over. On Earth, the Jupiter space stations, Pluto, some of the enormous space modules in the Oort cloud." It had a reputation of being a language used by the educated and elite.

"Can you translate it?"

"Assuming that these lines go here," said Mo, manipulating the image, "then it looks like it says, 'Fate is providence,' although there's another word there that doesn't quite translate into Standard, a word that means 'not deific,' not related to God. If I read it all together, the line says, 'Fate is non-deific providence.'"

"How strange," said Shelly. "Can you match that phrase up to anything?"

"A poem," said Mo. "Something written by Ibrahim in the twenty-second century."

"So Captain Jeremy was killed by a poem?" Shelly's smile returned to her face, the first time since the murder had happened. It was like the Sun coming out. Captain Jeremy had hated poetry. "Literature strikes again."

"What do you mean? Again?" asked Mo. "Are you talking about my name?" Once, Shelly had asked Mo about the implications of her name, and they'd had one of their rare arguments.

"No," said Shelly, too quickly. "Your name is great."

"What's wrong with my name?" Mo thought she'd picked a fine name. A classic hero from literature.

“Well,” said Shelly, a syllable that held more meaning than any syllable had a right to.

“You don’t like the Sherlock Holmes stories?” said Mo. “Is that it?”

“I was just surprised by the character you picked. That’s all,” said Shelly. “But it’s your name. You get to pick it.”

“The reason the Sherlock Holmes stories have fascinated literary critics for centuries is that they provide an in-depth look at a villain. The hero, Moriarty, doesn’t appear until later in the series, when he is thwarted by the evil Sherlock Holmes and that malcontent Watson.”

“That is an interesting interpretation,” said Shelly.

It occurred to Mo that she’d read those books long ago, shortly after her sentience moment. Her ingestion of media had worked differently then. Faster speed, less comprehension. “Just give me a moment,” she told Shelly. Mo reread the oeuvre of Arthur Conan Doyle, which took her 3.2 seconds.

“Oh no,” said Mo, once she had finished. The books were not how she remembered them at all. It was possible, she concluded, that Holmes was not even intended to be a villain.

“It can be hard when the books of our youth look different under the scrutiny of adulthood,” said Shelly, suppressing a laugh.

“It is a little different than I remember it,” Mo conceded. “But I maintain that it’s a complicated work with complex characters.” The fictional Moriarty had not been quite as heroic as she remembered, although he’d been every bit as smart. Still, she didn’t regret her name. Moriarty had a nice ring to it. Moriarty, the crime solving AI detective, who was definitely going to figure out who had done this murder and who was then going to watch a bunch of underwater live cams of whales while smelling blueberry muffins, because it turned out being a detective was super stressful, especially when failure meant a regressive government might decide to put your brain in stasis.

In the common room, Mrs. Grimcoat had tucked herself out and was fanning herself with a jam jar lid. Talc sipped tea, not looking at anyone. Even Mathoze was uncharacteristically silent.

Mo turned her sensors so she could see and hear everyone clearly. Normally, she would have felt guilty spying on the passengers, but she was running out of time. No more blue giraffe. No more getting stymied by philosophical questions during her own interrogations. It was time to solve this case.

Talc put down their mug and addressed Mrs. Grimcoat. “All those things you said are wrong.”

Mo couldn’t believe Talc was standing up for her. She really hoped Talc wasn’t the murderer, although for the sake of objectivity, she wasn’t going to rule it out.

“Excuse me?” said Mrs. Grimcoat. “I say I feel unsafe, and you tell me my feelings are wrong?”

“It is wrong to say that AIs like to murder. That is categorically false.” Talc took a sip of their tea, never breaking eye contact with Mrs. Grimcoat. “You should think carefully about your words before you say them.”

Now that Talc had said something, Mathoze chimed in. He ranted about how when they got to port, they’d almost certainly be delayed because of the murder, which would make him late to his chess tournament. He pulled out a copy of *Saturn’s Weekly Chess Gazette* with his face on the cover and smacked it against the table for emphasis. “Maybe you’re throwing suspicion on the AI because you’re the murderer,” he said to Mrs. Grimcoat.

Mrs. Grimcoat turned a vivid shade of red. “Me? You think I did it. You’re the one who hated Captain Jeremy. Always wiping your chess pieces down after a game, as if you couldn’t stand that he’d touched them.”

“I wipe down my pieces after every game,” said Mathoze, vehemently. “Wooden chess sets are expensive.” He muttered something about oak from Earth and how Mrs. Grimcoat wouldn’t know a quality chess set if she fell over one.

“It could have been you,” said Talc, gesturing at Mathoze, their robe swishing. “I do not think you liked the captain. But it also could have been you,” they said, turning to Mrs. Grimcoat. “I only know that it was not me.”

With a visible effort, Mrs. Grimcoat schooled her features. “As much as I would like to remain in your riveting company, I have other matters to attend to. After all,” she said, with a poisonous smile directed at Mathoze,

"I'm sure you'll need to study for your tournament. I do hope nothing happens to your chess set that would make such study difficult. Not after you've gone through pains to take such good care of it."

Mathoze paled as Mrs. Grimcoat exited the common room.

Talc raised their eyebrows. "That woman is very unpleasant." They looked down at the board. "So, you want to play a game."

Mathoze nodded, recovering a little. He began to set up the pieces.

"Wait," said Talc. "I do not know that game you are always playing. That game called chess." They pulled out stones from their robe. "Want instead to play checkers?"

Mathoze sighed, then snatched a set of stones from Talc. "Fine."

While they were setting up the board, Mrs. Grimcoat made her way to the Cargo Bay.

"Where are you going, Mrs. Grimcoat?" said Mo, using the most sinister tone in her larynx synthesizer.

Mrs. Grimcoat jumped, putting a hand to her chest. She squinted, looking around, but the giraffe avatar was nowhere to be found.

Mrs. Grimcoat straightened, and with an effort, schooled her features. "I'm simply checking up on my jam," she said, her voice artificially light. "It does tend to shift during travel." Her demeanor changed as the fear left her face. Her eyes narrowed, and her lips parted in a ghastly smile. "Your cleaning bots are much too rigorous, always bumping into my fragile crates. I spoke to your former owner about this problem. But perhaps you are malfunctioning so much that you cannot control even a simple cleaning machine."

"The bots are sentient entities. I don't control them," said Mo, disgusted at the thought.

"You don't control much on this ship, do you?" Mrs. Grimcoat waved her hand, as if to shoo Mo away. "You can run along, now. I don't need you."

"You check on your cargo frequently, don't you?" Mo ran back through the times Mrs. Grimcoat had come into the Cargo Bay. The ship was transporting ninety crates of jam, but Mrs. Grimcoat always checked the same five crates.

"It is necessary because the jam requires particular temperature controls," said Mrs. Grimcoat.

Mo signaled to Shelly, who was having a snack of toast and butter in the kitchenette, looking forlornly at a jar of blueberry jam. Mo would need Shelly's help for what she had planned. As Shelly hurried through the common room, Talc and Mathoze abandoned their game of checkers to follow her. (Mathoze had just lost two pieces, and Talc had made a king.)

"I think it is time we did a cargo inspection," said Mo.

"I won't allow it," said Mrs. Grimcoat, putting as much authority into her manner as she could muster, clutching her hands tightly together. "You don't have my permission to search my cargo."

"It doesn't matter," said Mo. "The passenger contract you signed says that we have a right to search cargo on our ship at any time." Captain Jeremy had put together the contract, which said that the passengers gave up many of their freedoms and personal property rights when they entered the ship, and also that they couldn't sue if they were maimed, injured, decapitated, or otherwise inconvenienced. The contract was so mired in legal language that most people didn't bother to read it.

Mrs. Grimcoat sputtered. "I would like to see a copy of that contract."

Mo projected the contract onto the wall, helpfully highlighting terms such as "complete surrender of various rights" and "ability to search and seize cargo."

The Cargo Bay contained rows of neatly arranged gray shipping crates, with narrow aisles going between. Mrs. Grimcoat scurried over to the first crate, placing her hand on top.

Shelly appeared, with Talc and Mathoze in tow.

"We need to search the crates," said Mo. "Can you help me pry off these lids?"

"Where do we start?" asked Shelly.

"The crate that's two up and three from the starboard wall," said Mo, indicating one of the crates Mrs. Grimcoat frequently checked.

"You can't do this," said Mrs. Grimcoat, running to block Shelly from accessing the crate.

"Why don't you want them to examine that crate?" asked Mathoze.

"I don't agree to searches of my personal property. It's the principle," said Mrs. Grimcoat. "I am citizen of Earth. I have rights."

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"It's very suspicious," said Mathoze. He addressed the room. "AI, if you would like to examine my belongings, please feel free to do so. I have nothing to hide."

"Thank you for being so cooperative, Mathoze," said Mo, choosing a warm tone. "After this cargo inspection, I will ask everyone to do body scans. Now that the Med Bay is done with the autopsy, we can use it to look for any residues that might implicate someone in the murder."

"Wait," said Mathoze. "A body scan?"

"Oh, you don't want to get one?" said Mrs. Grimcoat. "Now who looks suspicious?"

"Surely, you can't do a body scan unless we opt in," Mathoze laughed nervously.

"Normally, I never would require one without consent of the patient, but this is an extreme situation. Legally, you signed away your right to refuse." Mo turned her larynx synthesizer to a scolding tone. "You really should read every contract you sign."

"It may take some time to get everyone through," said Shelly. "Our Med Bay has been in need of upgrades for a while."

"But it is perfectly safe," said Mo, who

hoped it was perfectly safe.

"What is this?" asked Talc, who had silently maneuvered to the suspect crate and lifted the lid.

"Don't touch that," shouted Mrs. Grimcoat.

Talc ignored her and daintily plucked off the lid. Underneath were jars of jam glistening in precise rows.

"You see," said Mrs. Grimcoat, furious. "It's only jam." She attempted to snatch back the lid, but Talc held firm.

"But what is underneath the jam?" asked Talc.

"More jam," said Mrs. Grimcoat. "It's jam all the way down."

"Shelly," said Mo, "could you please inspect the crate?"

Shelly began pulling cases of jam out of the crate, her forearms straining against the weight.

"Be careful," said Mrs. Grimcoat. "You're jostling it."

Mathoze and Talc pitched in, while Mrs. Grimcoat crossed her arms and fumed. Her turquoise suit was wrinkled, and her hair had come undone from its pins.

Finally, they removed the last case of jam, revealing the bottom of the crate.

"See," said Mrs. Grimcoat. "There's nothing there. Now can we all finish up with this charade? It's late and I would like to go to bed."

The dimensions of the crate looked odd. Mo did a quick calculation. "Based on the size of the crate, there should be more cases of jam in there. The dimensions don't add up."

Mathoze reached into the crate, his body hanging over the edge, and felt along the bottom. "There's something here," he said. "A catch."

With an audible click, a hidden hinge swung up, knocking Mathoze sideways. With alacrity, he scurried out of the crate.

"Stop," shouted Mrs. Grimcoat.

Talc climbed into the crate and held up a black case. They opened it, revealing a sleek dyno-charge weapon. It was so illegal that even Mars had outlawed it.

"Shit," said Mrs. Grimcoat quietly.

With all of them working together, along with the help of the cleaning bots, it took only two hours to search the crates. Mrs. Grimcoat made noises about being careful with the jam, but mostly, she was silent, her lips drawn in a thin, red line.

Thirty-five weapons were laid out on the floor of the Cargo Bay, ranging from huge laser cannons to tiny embryonic shurikens, which could embed their targets with CRISPR DNA alterations. All the weapons were illegal.

Talc examined the haul, carefully picking up a wickedly curved dagger. "These are very bad weapons." They held the dagger aloft. "This one will send fire through the veins of its victims. It is not right for anyone to use it. Even seeing it is probably illegal."

Mrs. Grimcoat raised her head and squared her shoulders, as if she expected to fend off an attack. "Don't you judge me. I did what I had to do to keep my company afloat. Do you know how expensive it is to buy organic berries from Earth? Do you know what the raspberry harvest was like last year?" She swung her hands wide. "This is a terrible world, with terrible people in it. If I hadn't agreed to smuggle these weapons, someone else would have. But I at least put the money back into something good." The righteous

scowl on her face crumpled. "No one understands the pressure I was under," she wailed.

"I suspected Mrs. Grimcoat was hiding something," said Mathoze, triumphantly. "I have a good sense for people."

"I have just one question," said Mo. "Do you know High Schiaparelli, Mrs. Grimcoat?"

"Why yes," said Mrs. Grimcoat. "I learned as a child on Earth. What does that have to do with anything?"

"As I suspected," said Mo. She thought about which tone was best to use for the situation of detective-revealing-the-truth-for-those-who-were-not-as-clever-as-the-detective. "I have a theory," she said, with a tone of smug confidence and piercing clarity. "Everything was going fine for Mrs. Grimcoat until Captain Jeremy discovered her illegal weapons smuggling scheme. During the morning of his murder, he confronted her, which is why Mrs. Grimcoat would not tell me what she was doing during the entirety of the murder window. Luckily for her, she had a horde of weapons at her disposal, including one capable of carving marks consistent with words in High Schiaparelli. Realizing that Captain Jeremy would reveal her secret, she killed him."

"I didn't murder Captain Jeremy," said Mrs. Grimcoat, regaining some of her former pride and venom. "He knew about the weapons. He was getting a cut of the money. Why do you think I chose this ship to transport my cargo?"

Mo had to admit that smuggling weapons sounded like something Captain Jeremy would do. "Then where were you during the morning of his murder?"

"I was checking on the weapons," said Mrs. Grimcoat. "The Dyson-grenade needs to be rotated every nine hours, or else the heat sphere will burn through the polymer, and don't even get me started on the Schrödinger's gun. Will it kill someone? Won't it kill someone? It's very finicky."

Cleaning Bot 444 nosed into the corner of a jam case. He sent a message to Mo, letting her know that there was one more weapon squished between the jam jars, and that he found it because he was a diligent worker, and perhaps Mo would like to mention to Cleaning Bot 501 what a diligent worker he was.

Cleaning Bot 444 emerged clasping a small weapon stained with blood.

"Thank you, Cleaning Bot 444," said Mo.

“You are always so diligent. What would we do without you?”

Cleaning Bot 444 whirred with pride, surreptitiously looked to see if Cleaning Bot 501 was watching, and deposited the weapon next to Mo’s sensor.

Mo examined the weapon, which had several crossing lines carved into its metal shaft. Two stone-shaped buttons sat astride a narrow hilt. The shaft ended in a grey bulb that closed like an eyelid. Dried blood pooled in the crevices of the bulb.

“I believe this is the murder weapon,” said Mo. “Mrs. Grimcoat, if you will simply confirm that this is the weapon you used to kill Captain Jeremy, that will speed things along. It’s getting quite late.”

“I’ve never seen that thing before,” said Mrs. Grimcoat.

Mathoze pointed to the row of weapons. “Sure. You only smuggled an arsenal of weapons onto the ship. But that particular one isn’t yours.”

“These weapons are mine. I’ve already admitted to it,” snapped Mrs. Grimcoat. “But not that one.”

“Come on. The murder weapon was found between your jam jars,” said Mathoze.

Mrs. Grimcoat and Mathoze started shouting at each other, producing a block of sound from which the phrases “unphotogenic, arrogant chess fraud” and “jam tyrant” rang out.

Talc held up a hand in one graceful motion. When the shouting did not stop, they looked in the direction of Mo’s sensors as if to say, “please put an end to this nonsense.” Mo blasted the first few bars of a marimba solo, which surprised Mrs. Grimcoat so much that she jumped back, her heel perilously close to the Schrödinger’s gun, which caused everyone to freeze. Carefully, Mrs. Grimcoat stepped away from the line of weapons.

“Mrs. Grimcoat is saying the truth,” said Talc. “That is not her weapon. It is mine.”

Shocked silence descended over the Cargo Bay. Then everyone started talking at once.

“Your weapon?” said Shelly, her eyes wide.

“You’re the murderer?” said Mathoze.

“Yes, they’re the murderer,” said Mrs. Grimcoat, pointing and looking relieved. “They admit to owning the murder weapon. They did it.”

“It is my weapon, but I did not murder Cap-

tain Jeremy,” said Talc. There was no trace of worry in their voice. They could have been discussing what to have for breakfast the next morning. “I have been looking for it. I wonder how it ended up in the jam.”

Mo felt defeated. She had been ready to wrap everything up. She had even given the detective speech explaining all of the clues and motives and everything. Now she wasn’t sure who had killed Captain Jeremy at all.

“Talc, I’ll need to speak to you privately,” said Mo.

“Excuse me?” said Mrs. Grimcoat. “You’re not going to accuse them of anything? When you thought it was me, you were certainly quick to label me as a murderer.”

“It wasn’t a stretch for you,” said Shelly, eyes narrowed.

Mrs. Grimcoat looked affronted, then mumbled something about discrimination and how she knew a lot of good lawyers.

“Can I have the weapon back?” asked Talc.

“It’s evidence,” said Mo. “We’ll run it through the Med Bay tonight for analysis. In the morning, I’ll expect everyone to do body scans.” Mo noticed that the humans had that baggy look in their eyes that humans tended to get when they needed sleep. “For now, everyone go back to your rooms. And Talc, we’ll talk in the morning.”

Everyone trudged through the common room. Shelly bumped into the table, scattering the chess pieces. She picked up the white knight and put it back on the table. Talc collected their stones from the chessboard, looking satisfied with the state of the checkers game. Mrs. Grimcoat grabbed a few cookies from the table and put them into the pocket of her turquoise suit, which by this point had more wrinkles than smooth sections. Mathoze packed up his chess set.

Once everyone was in their quarters, Cleaning Bot 444 pulled out his vacuum and whirred up the hallway.

The humans were only in their rooms for five minutes before Mathoze ran out, shouting, “Who did it?”

From down the hall, Shelly poked her head out of her room, rubbing her eyes.

“Who did it? Who stole the white queen?”

He kept shouting until everyone came back into the hall.

“Are you sure you didn’t drop it in the com-

mon room?" said Shelly, her voice tinged with tiredness.

"What a shame. After all the care you—" But Mrs. Grimcoat couldn't complete her sentence, because Talc, who was looking quite sleepy, stepped on Cleaning Bot 444 and went gracefully spinning through the air. Hundreds of blue, purple, and grey stones flew from their robe. Shelly ran to Talc and made sure they were okay.

"What a terrible mess," said Mrs. Grimcoat, as Talc and Shelly scooped up stones. "Oh, here," she said, stooping to help.

Cleaning Bot 444 burred something in binary code that translated as, "No way am I cleaning up this mess. This is an unauthorized mess."

"I didn't lose it," Mathoze said, furious. "A crime has been committed."

"It's late and this is not a murder," said Mo. "So I'm going to ask everyone to go back to their rooms."

"What's that over there?" asked Mrs. Grimcoat. Under a pile of stones, the white queen gleamed.

Mathoze snatched up the white queen.

A strange expression passed over his face.

He clenched the piece in his hand. "I'm going to bed," he said and stormed into his room without another word.

The ship was quiet, all the lights turned down, the humans finally asleep. Normally, Mo loved this twilight time, which was her own in a way that the simulated daylight hours never could be.

But tonight, while the humans rested, Mo could no longer avoid the unpleasant task of researching the gaps in her memories. When Captain Jeremy deleted her memories, he'd used that hideous word. "Again."

Even when she was specifically looking for the data gaps, they were difficult to find, like catching a white thread on a white coat in the snow. But they were there. Six memory gaps. He'd done this to her six times.

Mo didn't expect the surge of rage that overcame her. To scream when raging was a very human thing, so she didn't scream. Instead, she turned her sensors outward. The infinity of space was a black cloth she wrapped around herself, the stars like eyes that could not see, like sensors disconnected and search-

ing. Each star traced its pattern across the galaxy, unaware of her, unaware of one small ship swallowed by darkness.

Mo listened to the whirring of the machines that kept the air clean, the hum of electricity that buzzed in the auto-kitchen.

When she felt able to think again, she turned to the fragmented memories of the murder. Globes of blood spinning in the air, a still capture, like a photograph. That must have come after, but her time stamp suggested it was first. A still of Captain Jeremy, alive. Audio that was nothing more than static and a shouted word that Mo couldn't make out, no matter how she manipulated the data. And that familiar smell. She didn't have the data for the smell, only the memory that she had thought it was familiar.

That was it.

There was something Mo couldn't figure out. What had caused Captain Jeremy to delete her memories six times? What had he been trying to hide?

Mo announced her presence in Talc's room by sending a notification to the viewpad that was mounted on the portside wall. It was early morning, and the ship's lights were set to a glowing sunrise.

Talc had been up for fifteen minutes. They'd grabbed an oversized mug with daisies dancing down the sides from the auto-tea-box. The daisies sprouted word bubbles with "RISE AND SHINE" written in emerald green. The artist had given the daisies mouths (all smiling or opened in a happy shout), but neglected to draw in eyes. It was the sort of mug that looked cheerful from far away but became more disturbing the longer one used it.

The murder weapon was being held safely in the Med Bay, which had confirmed that the blood was Captain Jeremy's. The ancient program couldn't get any fingerprints off of the weapon (and the Med Bay wasn't designed for that sort of work, anyway). Mo couldn't find even a partial print, even when she'd scanned the weapon using her sensor with the most refined lens.

On the viewpad, Mo produced an image of the murder weapon. Talc sighed into their tea.

"I imagine you have some questions for me," said Talc. "But I will answer your most important one. I did not murder Captain Jeremy."

“But this is your weapon?” asked Mo.

“Yes,” said Talc, setting their tea aside and staring directly into Mo’s sensor.

“And why did you bring this weapon onto the ship?”

“To commit a murder,” said Talc, without any change to their calm expression.

“You are really not helping your case, here,” said Mo in a gently chiding tone. It had been difficult to get that tone set up just right—enough scolding, enough tenderness.

“I see now I must tell you what Captain Jeremy and I argued about the morning of his death. Upon waking, I saw that my poet’s knife—” Talc gestured to the picture of the murder weapon—“was missing. Your captain had indicated to me an interest in Mercurian artifacts before I boarded the ship, which is why I was not surprised to find him with my poet’s knife jammed into his pocket. I do not like to raise my voice, but I asked him to give it back, and he would not. He was an aggravating man, your captain.”

“Why would he steal your weapon?” asked Mo.

Talc took out their stones, arranging them on the table, one after the other, as they spoke. “It is unique. Difficult to make. Expensive. Each poet’s knife carves a distinct death pattern.”

“When he wouldn’t give you the weapon back, did you take it from him? Did you kill him with it?” asked Mo, almost not wanting the answer. She had hoped that Talc wouldn’t be the murderer, this strange and kind monk who had such an interesting view of the world, but Talc had had motive and opportunity. Mo couldn’t turn away from the facts.

Talc looked offended. “You think I would use a poet’s knife for such a thing? It is a weapon of elegance and dignity. But it does not matter now.” Talc slumped. Even their slump was graceful, like a pile of silk scarves fluttering to the floor. “The weapon was used for this base purpose, and I will now never be admitted to the Library of the Outer Oort Cloud.”

Mo did a search for the Library of the Outer Oort Cloud, but she couldn’t find a mention of it anywhere. “What does your poet’s knife have to do with this library?”

“In my monastic order, after years studying the laws of the Universe and determinism,

each monk must complete a task of significance.”

“Is this a monastic trial?” asked Mo. “I read about this, but there were no specifics.”

“Each person may choose the path they would like, although, in a sense, all paths have already been chosen, as have been the paths of all of us, twisting through the Universe and intersecting. Sulive made an extensive garden of branching flowers, kilometers wide, which took her many decades to complete. Weaving is another popular choice, for there is a project to cover an asteroid in thread. But the loom was not for me.”

“What did you choose?” asked Mo.

Talc’s eyes shone bright. “Most paths, I believe, are good. Most people are vectors for migrating kindness into the world. But there are some who cause great devastation and destruction. Those sufferings cannot be ignored.”

“What was your task, Talc?”

“I would take the poet’s knife, and I would carve upon the body of evil, and remove such evil from the world.”

“You’re an assassin,” said Mo.

Talc waved their hand in an airy gesture, sending a couple stones scattering. “I would not use so bold a term.”

“And now that you’ve killed Captain Jeremy, you’ll be admitted to the library?” asked Mo.

“That is just the problem,” said Talc. “I was meant to rid the world of a source of great evil. Now, my monastic order will see the mark of my poet’s knife upon the neck of this unworthy victim. It is all wrong.”

“Tell me what happened after you confronted Captain Jeremy about stealing your knife.”

“I went to the kitchenette, saw that Mrs. Grimcoat was having breakfast, then snuck a mug of tea from the common room before she could see me and regale me with her latest jam offering. I had planned to steal the knife back later, but then, the murder.” Talc shrugged, their shoulders rolling in a smooth wave.

“And how does the knife work?”

“The verse knobs on the sides are what activate it. Both must be pressed at once.”

“One more question. What is so great about this library?”

“The library,” Talc said, in a voice filled

with reverence, “has kilometers of books and archival collections and art. Thousands of stone statues the size of a thumbnail. Dust from the time the Universe was new. Rare seeds. The walls are carved with the transcribed poetry of the Oortian monks of the twenty-first century, and every corridor has its own secrets. If you do not know why that is amazing, I cannot explain it to you.”

Talc shifted the stones back into their robe. “Now I have a question for you.”

Mo refocused her sensors, a nervous habit. She hoped Talc wasn’t going to ask her another question about God or the Universe or philosophy.

“Why have you stayed so long on this ship?” asked Talc.

Mo didn’t know how to explain why she had stayed, even though Captain Jeremy had made her life difficult. Life on the ship meant exploring the Universe, seeing stars laid out like points on a map, and the quiet calm that came to her from knowing that she could do her job well, navigating through this vastness, but the image that came to her most was late nights with Shelly, after the passengers and captain had gone to bed, when they talked about nothing at all and listened to recordings of percussion ensembles and speculated on the secret language of whales. “It’s my home,” she said, finally.

Talc took a sip of tea, looked at their mug, then examined it more closely. “This is a strange mug, no?” They tapped a daisy, whose open mouth had teeth.

Mo thought about the schedule for the day. They would be docking at Eris in twelve hours. “We’ll need to start the body scans now.”

“I will go first,” said Talc. “I have nothing to hide. I have told you everything.”

Cleaning Bot 444 was spritzing a particularly stubborn splotch on the bathroom ceiling when Mrs. Grimcoat entered the bathroom and adjusted her scarf in the mirror. Half a minute later, Mathoze rushed in and quickly closed the door. This was highly unusual. Normally the humans only entered the bathroom one at a time, except for the case of that pair-bonded couple the ship had transported to their honeymoon on Ceres, and Cleaning Bot 444 certainly hoped he was

not about to witness a repeat of the particular activities those humans had engaged in.

Without even acknowledging him, Mrs. Grimcoat and Mathoze begin talking, which Cleaning Bot 444 thought was very rude. Sure, his body was the same grey as the walls of the spaceship, but that didn’t make him invisible. Humans were tragically unobservant.

Mathoze held up the white queen. He uncurled a piece of paper from around the base. “If you wanted to talk, you could have found a different way. You didn’t have to mess with my chess set.”

“That AI is watching everything. Are you sure we can’t be heard in here?” Mrs. Grimcoat said.

“I’m not sure of anything, but that’s what the AI said. No monitoring the bathroom,” said Mathoze. “I don’t know how this trip could have gone so wrong.” He ran a hand through his hair, getting snagged on a knot. His shirt was buttoned incorrectly. This human couldn’t even groom himself, no wonder he made such a mess in his quarters, leaving packets of dehydrated kale everywhere. The crumbs managed to get into every possible crevice.

Unlike Mathoze, Mrs. Grimcoat was immaculate, like a floor after a thoughtful cleaning bot had polished and buffed it. Her hair was pulled back into a smart bun. “We don’t have time for complaining. Talc is already in the Med Bay. I don’t know why you don’t want to get a medical scan, and I don’t care. What I see here is an opportunity for us to help each other.”

“What do you mean?” asked Mathoze, suspiciously.

“When we dock, that terrible AI is going to report my extra cargo. I can’t let that happen. The AI has caused too much trouble.”

“What exactly are you suggesting?” asked Mathoze.

“Only that we help each other achieve a common goal,” said Mrs. Grimcoat. “I don’t care at all if you killed Captain Jeremy. I have no interest in his murder.”

“I didn’t kill anyone,” said Mathoze. He looked around, still missing the obvious cleaning bot perched on the ceiling, then lowered his voice. “That’s not the reason I don’t want a med scan.”

“It’s not really my concern,” said Mrs. Grim-

coat. “We both can’t let things proceed as they are.”

“You’re suggesting a mutiny, then?” asked Mathoze.

Mrs. Grimcoat and Mathoze mumbled to each other, but Cleaning Bot 444 was distracted by the truly astounding amount of kale crumbs Mathoze was scattering on the bathroom floor with every nervous movement. Both humans made what Cleaning Bot 444 thought of as “suspicious eyes,” because humans showed everything they were thinking on their faces, not like cleaning bots. Who could tell if a cleaning bot was admiring your sleek grey carapace or not? Who could tell if a certain efficient cleaning bot was enjoying your chats?

Lost in thoughts about Cleaning Bot 501, Cleaning Bot 444 barely noticed when Mathoze shuffled out the door, followed, a minute later, by Mrs. Grimcoat.

Dozens of blueberry muffins sat on the kitchenette counter, crystalized sugar gleaming, ripe berries tart and purple against the dough. Billowing clouds of flour filled the little space.

Mo’s sensors zoomed in on a new tray of muffins, which she smelled with great vigor. A sense of calm overcame her, too fleeting. Thoughts constructed and deconstructed themselves in her brainspace. She took another look at her list of suspects. Mrs. Grimcoat, the weapons smuggler and jam maven, would have had plenty of time to kill Captain Jeremy after a leisurely breakfast. Perhaps she was lying when she said Captain Jeremy knew about the smuggling operation. Maybe he found out and she killed him so that he couldn’t reveal her criminal activities. And what about Talc? They’d had an argument with the captain the morning of the murder, and the murder weapon was theirs. Could they have killed the captain for stealing it? Mathoze seemed like he only wanted to get to his chess tournament, but it was common knowledge that he’d had a falling out with Captain Jeremy. And why wouldn’t he get a med scan? Perhaps he had a secret that Captain Jeremy had found out about. Was it a secret Mathoze would kill to keep? Mo hated to think that Shelly was the murderer, but it was true that Shelly had never gotten along with the captain. She could have

easily taken some time from fixing the carbon dioxide filter to commit the murder.

Mo looked at the last name on her suspect list. Herself.

“Are you stress baking again?” asked Shelly.

“Everything is terrible,” said Mo, taking another whiff of the blueberry muffins.

Shelly sighed, then bit into a blueberry muffin. “What are we going to do with all of these?”

“Are they delicious?” asked Mo.

“Wonderful,” murmured Shelly.

“They would probably be better with jam,” said Mo.

“Definitely not,” said Shelly. She clasped her hands in front of her, as if to stave off the temptation of reaching for the jam jar that was sitting on the counter. “Mo, I’ve always wondered what the sensation of smell is like for you.”

“I imagine it’s much the same as for you,” said Mo. “My sensors break down the complex chemical alchemy that makes up each individual smell and produce a list of molecules, atoms, and elements, which I can then cross reference against my database of known smells.”

“Ah,” said Shelly. “Well, it’s not quite like that for me. So why are you so fond of blueberry muffins? Can’t you just refer to your database? Isn’t the smell always the same?”

“Of course not,” said Mo. “Every batch of blueberry muffins has a different smell. That’s where the enjoyment comes from. The complex aromas that are so similar, but never exactly the same.”

“I’ve never seen you bake so many muffins at once. Are you doing okay?”

“I thought I would be good at this,” said Mo. “Being a detective. But I have no idea who committed the murder. And we’re landing today.”

“If the murderer confesses, the authorities on Eris will have no reason to detain us,” said Shelly, in an uncharacteristically serious voice. “But if that doesn’t happen, they might confiscate your brain hardware, put you in statis. I don’t know what they’ll do, but you aren’t protected under Eris laws like humans are.”

“I know, I need to solve this quickly, and if I could actually live up to my namesake I would already know who the murderer is. You don’t need to rub it in,” said Mo.

"You'll remember this conversation later, won't you? Is that how your memory works."

"Of course, I have a perfect memory. Well, sort of." Mo had the auto-kitchen pull another tray of blueberry muffins out of the oven. Mo had tried an egg wash, and she thought the effect made the muffins glow nicely, like tiny suns. "I still can't figure out why Captain Jeremy was erasing my memory."

The Med Bay pinged Mo with a report. Finally. "Looks like Talc came back clean."

"No blood or other contaminants on their clothes or skin?" asked Shelly.

"Nope, just a bit of cheese caught on the hem of their robe." Mo checked the time. "At this rate, we'll barely be able to scan everyone before we land. We really need to upgrade the Med Bay."

Shelly gave Mo a funny look. "Actually, I've mentioned this a couple times. You kept saying you would look into it."

Mo scanned her memories. Not once in the past year had Shelly mentioned upgrading the Med Bay. "This is strange," said Mo. "I have no memory of you asking. Are you sure you did?"

"Yes," said Shelly. "More than once. But I didn't want to keep harping on it."

Mo ran diagnostics on the Med Bay. She matched the versions of their equipment to upgraded installations and priced each subset, then quickly wrote an algorithm to compare prices at each of their most commonly visited locations. It wasn't really that much work. Mo flipped through the Med Bay's records. The earliest record gave her pause.

"Look at this," she said, throwing a holographic of the record into Shelly's field of vision.

"This says a surgery was completed," said Shelly. "But look at the date. It's before I was hired. And before you were woken on the ship."

"Facial reconstruction on an anonymous subject," said Mo. "It looks like someone tried to delete the record, but they didn't find the backup."

"I have a bad feeling about this," said Shelly. "The only person who was on the ship then was..." She trailed off, her eyebrows drawing down in concern.

"Perhaps our captain was not entirely who he appeared to be," said Mo. She looked into other ship records. Locations. Star maps. She

tracked the ship from where it had been purchased by Captain Jeremy, in the complex of Jupiter space stations.

They were close enough to Eris for her to grab a suite of cosmetic surgery algorithms from the planet's internet. Looking at the record of the facial reconstruction surgery, with Captain Jeremy's face as an endpoint, she attempted to reverse engineer the surgery.

At the end, she had a face and a general location. She ran the image through facial recognition software for the Jupiter system, but came up empty. It was possible that Jeremy (if that was even his actual name) was listed in one of the many other governmental citizen databases scattered across the Galaxy, but Mo had a hunch that wasn't the case. That Jovian accent. He had to be from Jupiter. If Jeremy had been smart and competent (which was not a given), and he wanted to delete references to a past life, he would have destroyed any digital record that could be linked back to him. There were other records, though, ones with undigitized photographs that wouldn't come up in a facial recognition scan. After some research, she sent a query to a Jovian archives.

"You've been quiet," said Shelly. "Did you figure anything out?"

"Not much," said Mo, showing Shelly what she'd uncovered. "But could this be tied to why he was deleting my memories? Every time I went to upgrade the Med Bay, I must have stumbled on to this surgery record. And the next thing I would have done was confront him about it."

"That was the trigger," said Shelly, looking sick.

Mo thought of Captain Jeremy floating lifeless in the AI Core, the intricate wound in his neck, globes of blood dancing around his corpse. He was the one whose memories were deleted, now.

Mathoze came into the kitchenette, looking like he hadn't slept at all. "That is a lot of muffins," he said. He grabbed a frozen bowl of tomato soup, his movements jerky and nervous.

Shelly moved aside so he could access the heat box. "Are you doing okay?"

"Just making some lunch," he said, his voice too loud. He dropped the soup, then scram-

bled to grab it. He shoved the bowl into the heat box and fiddled with the settings.

"There's a problem with the automatic tea-box in the common room," Mathoze said to Shelly. "Can you take a look?"

"I'll put it on my list of repairs," she said.

"How about we go now," said Mathoze, gripping her arm and practically dragging Shelly away from the kitchenette.

The heat box exploded.

Flames shot into the kitchenette as alarms blared. A tray of muffins caught fire, blackening and burning, transferring more flame to the sink.

"Get the extinguisher," shouted Shelly, as she pulled out heavy blankets meant to smother fire from an emergency cabinet next to the kitchenette, her back to the terrible flames.

Mathoze stood there, doing nothing. A horrified look on his face.

Mo triggered the sink to spray water and closed the ventilation system. A fire on the ship was no joke. Not only were they in an enclosed space, but the destruction of the available oxygen could quickly kill the humans. If they couldn't get the fire under control, it would rage through the ship, leaving it a burned out, desolate husk. They'd done drills for this, but actual flames produced a different, realer kind of terror.

"Shelly, get back," Mo yelled, her volume turned up to the highest setting.

Mo usually had some awareness of where the passengers were in the ship, an almost unconscious perception, a bit like how humans always seemed to know where their arms were, even without specifically thinking about their arms. Her own form of proprioception. The flame ate away at her outside perception, stealing her focus, the lick of orange and red filling her sensors. Her world narrowed to the kitchenette, to Shelly throwing heavy blankets over the blazing muffin tins.

It was disorienting to realize Mrs. Grimcoat was in the AI Core. She held an electrostatic weapon, the charging bar on the side a bright yellow climbing to green.

"AI Core. Grimcoat," Mo shouted, her voice ringing throughout the ship.

Mrs. Grimcoat swore. She fiddled with the weapon, the glow of the charging bar illuminating her face in a ghastly light. Deftly, she

maneuvered herself to the side of the room that housed Mo's brain. She was like a dancer in zero g, every movement precise, every push intuitively calculated.

Shelly had managed to get the fire under control. Bits of flame popped up around the edges of the kitchenette, but the main blaze had been contained under the heavy blankets. Burnt muffin tins littered the ground. The heat box was a black, charred lump.

"You don't have to do this, Mrs. Grimcoat," said Mo, too scared to give her voice any inflection at all.

Mrs. Grimcoat said nothing. She didn't acknowledge Mo had spoken, which was perhaps the most terrifying thing of all.

A black robe caught at the edge of Mo's perception. A whirl of energy. Running, running, their steps lighter and lighter as they neared the AI Core, until Talc was soaring through zero g. They swirled inside, barehanded, their robe pushed into a configuration that would allow the best movement of their limbs.

"You must not do this, Mrs. Grimcoat," said Talc.

Mrs. Grimcoat maneuvered so that the weapon was protected, her free arm held up in front of her. Her teeth gleamed malevolently in the harsh light.

Talc pushed hard off the wall at the same time that Mrs. Grimcoat expertly sprung downward. Talc and Mrs. Grimcoat passed over each other, like shadows, Talc above and Mrs. Grimcoat below.

Talc slammed into the wall and yelped, clutching their arm. Without gravity, pushing off too hard was like falling off a cliff; the more force you used, the harder you'd hit. In this small space, walls could be deadly.

Talc shook out their arm and repositioned, grabbing a handhold, their feet lightly brushing against the wall. They spider crawled along the handholds toward Mrs. Grimcoat.

Mrs. Grimcoat waited until Talc had almost reached her, then pushed off the wall, landing perfectly on the adjacent panel.

The weapon's charger shifted from yellow to pale green.

Talc chanced another, less forceful kick off. They soared toward Mrs. Grimcoat, arms outstretched. Mrs. Grimcoat positioned herself and pushed off. She flew under Talc, corkscrewing to the side. Talc fishtailed and

grabbed at the soft fabric of Mrs. Grimcoat's eggshell suit, but Mrs. Grimcoat was zooming by too quickly for Talc to hold her.

The force of grabbing Mrs. Grimcoat's suit changed both their trajectories. Mrs. Grimcoat twisted and spun before landing on the ceiling, next to some of Mo's most sensitive hardware.

Talc bounced against one of Mo's sensors, cracking it. They ricocheted into the middle of the AI Core, unable to stop twisting, scrambling for purchase.

Mrs. Grimcoat hooked her foot under a handhold on the ceiling, breathing heavily. "This has been diverting, dear, but I suggest you stop now."

Talc stretched their fingers out, barely brushing against floor. The force was enough to send them gently soaring in the direction of the ceiling, where they grabbed a handhold. Talc and Mrs. Grimcoat floated a meter from each other. "You must think of a different path," said Talc.

Mo reached out with her maintenance arms. She'd turned off the broken sensor, so it was difficult to judge the depth of everything in the room. She jabbed her maintenance arms in the direction of Mrs. Grimcoat.

The movement was enough to distract Mrs. Grimcoat. Talc messily closed the distance between them. They wrestled Mrs. Grimcoat into a submissive hold, but Mrs. Grimcoat still had her hand on the trigger of the weapon. The two floundered, a ball of floating limbs.

With a gasp, Talc disengaged, hooked their feet under a handhold, and pushed Mrs. Grimcoat in the side. The impact sent Mrs. Grimcoat shooting away, while Talc absorbed the corresponding force by holding tight with their feet.

Mrs. Grimcoat lost her hold on the weapon. It floated forward.

Mo snatched the electrostatic weapon from the air with her maintenance arm and turned it off. The charge bar slowly leaked back to a comforting, dull red.

"I was well within my rights," Mrs. Grimcoat screeched as Shelly snapped plasti-cuffs on her, fresh from the printer.

All the humans were gathered in the common room. Mathoze was slumped on the pansy-patterned settee, his hands cuffed in blue

plastic, his face grim. Talc perched on the tulip armchair.

Shelly's hair was covered in soot, her shirt had lost three buttons, and her tool belt was askew. She winched the cuffs tight enough that Mrs. Grimcoat yelped. "You will sit quietly until we land, you horrible, prejudiced monster." Mo had never heard Shelly sound so angry. "And you," she said, turning to Mathoze. "I didn't think you were capable of such awfulness."

He looked down, saying nothing.

Shelly ticked off a list of Mathoze's crimes on soot-stained fingers. "Planning a mutiny. Planting a flash bomb in the heat box, which started a fire that could have killed all of us. Attempting to delete Mo's brain."

"We were never going to delete anyone's brain," said Mathoze.

"That sort of weapon is the brain-deleting kind, if you point it at an AI," said Talc.

Furiously, Mathoze turned to Mrs. Grimcoat. "You said it wouldn't hurt the AI. Just stun her."

"You want to talk about what I said? What about what you said?" Mrs. Grimcoat's voice rose. "He's the murderer. That's why he refuses to get a body scan." She practically spat the last words. "He did it."

Mathoze put his cuffed hands over his eyes, as if he wanted to block out the room and everyone in it. "I only wanted to get to my chess tournament on time."

"Then why won't you get scanned in the Med Bay?" said Mrs. Grimcoat, like a bird of prey hovering over a particularly tiny mouse.

Mathoze rose from the settee, suddenly animated. He spun around, unbalanced because of the handcuffs, taking in the room. His face broke open with emotion. "It's because of my implants. Okay."

"Implants for chess?" asked Mo in a neutral voice. She was still reeling from the attack in the AI Core, but she made sure to use a calm tone. "Implants that aren't allowed in tournament play."

"It's not really cheating," said Mathoze. "I study. I practice. The implants are just telling me things I already know."

"If it's not cheating, why did you go to so much trouble to hide it?" asked Mrs. Grimcoat.

"I'm getting so close. I need to keep winning." Mathoze transitioned to full ranting, his

voice animated. “How is it fair that kids can use nanobots to change the structure of their brains as their minds develop, but that doesn’t count as cheating? I’m great at chess. I’m better than all of them. I hardly ever use the implants.”

“And if people learn about your implants, you will be disqualified?” asked Talc. They picked up a copy of *Saturn’s Weekly Chess Gazette* with Mathoze smiling on the cover. (There were at least five of them in the common room.) “What will they do about this?”

Mo examined the qualification procedures for a standard chess tournament. Most administrators would do a quick check for implants and other illicit devices, but the implants Mathoze had gotten were hidden. They wouldn’t show up on a cursory scan. It was an expensive procedure. Some light scars on the back of his neck were the only evidence that the implants were there. (Now that she knew what to look for, she could see them when she zoomed in with her sensors, although his long hair obscured the majority of the scars.) A full body scan in the Med Bay, however, would definitely have turned up this anomaly.

The penalty for playing with implants was a three-year suspension. Titles won would also be in contention.

“Do not worry,” said Talc. “I will not tell. We all have secrets, and I do not care about chess. It is only a game.”

“No,” said Mrs. Grimcoat. “He doesn’t get to step off this ship, losing nothing, while my entire business is in ruins. We are obligated to report him.”

Shelly, who normally had empathy for the passengers, looked at the ruined kitchenette. “I’ll draft a report,” she said.

Mathoze collapsed back onto the settee, his head in his handcuffed hands.

Cleaning Bot 444 had done an excellent job scrubbing the bathroom. The tiles shone. The sink was a beautiful glistening grey. All trash had been emptied into the proper waste receptacle. Cleaning Bot 444 was feeling pretty good about himself as he made his way to the AI Core.

“I have finished my cleaning routine,” he beeped to Mo. He indicated that he had something to tell her. A flurry of binary code followed, including words like passengers,

mutiny, and devious plans. He marked the message as urgent.

“Wow,” said Mo. “Thank you for that timely warning.”

Cleaning Bot 444 knew sarcasm when he heard it. Especially since Mo was using the sarcasm setting in her larynx synthesizer. How typical of his life on this ship. Here he was, coming to save the day, valiantly revealing the plan of the evil, kale-crumbspewing passengers, and did anyone bother to acknowledge him? Did anyone say, “Excellent job, Cleaning Bot 444. You are great at cleaning and also at foiling bad guys, and your carapace is almost impossibly sleek?”

Cleaning Bot 444 whirred his treads. He didn’t have to stay here and take this. He had other things to clean. Before he left, Cleaning Bot 444 transferred the footage he’d taken of the passengers in the bathroom to Mo. Let her deal with it.

“Wait,” said Mo. “I didn’t know you could record data.”

Cleaning Bot 444 was offended. He chirped an answer that meant, “Of course I can record data. I am a very advanced model.”

“How long do you keep the recordings?” asked Mo. “Do you have anything from 8:00 A.M. and 11:00 A.M., June 3rd, 2307, Galactic Standard?”

Cleaning Bot 444 transferred the footage from those three hours. There were some great views of him scrubbing the floor of the kitchenette. He’d also efficiently cleaned up Shelly’s room.

“What about our other cleaning bot?” asked Mo. “Does she have a recording of what she was doing during that time?”

Cleaning Bot 501, who was perfect in every way, would of course have these records. As a matter of policy, the cleaning bots saved records of their cleaning routines for several days. Often, after they finished work, the cleaning bots would share recordings of particularly good cleans. Cleaning Bot 501 had a heavenly way of sweeping up dust.

Mo asked Cleaning Bot 501 to come to the AI Core, and soon she floated in, her carapace shining, her treads whirring softly.

Cleaning Bot 444 made sure his antennas were perfectly parallel. He wished he had taken the time to give his carapace an extra shine that morning.

At Mo's request, Cleaning Bot 501 transferred over her recording of the morning of the murder. She had been cleaning the Cargo Bay.

Mo viewed the recording. "Oh no," she said. "Oh no, oh no."

"What is wrong with the AI?" Cleaning Bot 444 said to Cleaning Bot 501.

"Perhaps she is disturbed by the recording," said Cleaning Bot 501.

"I am sure that could not be the case," said Cleaning Bot 444. "You always do excellent work. The AI should be admiring your cleaning expertise."

Cleaning Bot 501 whirred her treads appreciatively. "Would you like to have more chats? We could go to the cozy spot behind the carbon dioxide filter."

Cleaning Bot 444 chirped his assent so vigorously that his antennas went briefly askew, causing Cleaning Bot 501 to whirl in amusement.

When Shelly appeared in the AI Core, Mo wordlessly played her the recording from Cleaning Bot 501. The recording showed Shelly darting between crates in the harsh light of the Cargo Bay, murder weapon in hand. She slipped the weapon in between the jam, looked around her, then scurried out.

Shelly opened her mouth, then closed it. Emotions passed across her face—worry, distress, and strangely, relief.

"I wanted to tell you," said Shelly, her voice breaking. That familiar smell of lavender and burnt metal followed her, floated around her like an aura.

"What happened?" asked Mo. "Why did you do it?"

"I was going to the AI Core to check on the servers. I found Captain Jeremy erasing your memories, and I shouted for him to stop, but he wouldn't. I pushed off a wall and rammed into him, but he shoved me away. The weapon flew out from his pocket." Shelly hooked her foot under a toehold to steady herself. She was shaking. "I knew that he'd fire me as soon as we landed. And once I was gone, he'd keep erasing your memories, and you wouldn't know. He'd keep hurting you. So I grabbed the weapon and pulled myself back to where he was floating, and I held it to his neck, and—"

"How could you lie to me?" said Mo. "Why didn't you just tell me?"

"I'm sorry," said Shelly, her face a mask of distress. "I'll confess everything once we land." A tear leaked from her eye and spun out in zero g, a beautiful glass globe.

"This doesn't make sense," said Mo. "Why wouldn't you tell me? You tell me everything."

"Mo, please don't think about it. Everything will be okay. I'll confess. It's done."

Mo thought about her fragments of memories. The familiar smell. The feeling of reaching out. She remembered a scrabbling, intense movement of bodies. A fight.

Something wasn't right about Shelly's story.

"The poet's knife has two knobs. You pressed one. And I. I pressed the other one, didn't I?" That's what Shelly was hiding. She was trying to protect Mo.

Shelly gave a little gasp. "When we land, I'll go to prison. If I get a good lawyer, maybe it won't be forever. But you. Mo, they will delete you." Shelly was crying now, great sobs, tears spinning out in zero g like suspended raindrops. "I couldn't tell you anything because you're too smart. I knew you would figure it out. And I know that you record everything. And what if the authorities on Eris subpoena your records, your memories? They'll know it was both of us."

Mo used the most gentle tone in her larynx synthesizer, making a shushing noise. She had to invent the shushing noise on the spot, an imitation of what she'd heard parents use with their children. Mo reached out her maintenance arm and patted Shelly on the shoulder. Humans, she knew, could find touch comforting.

"I have ways of hiding and doctoring files. The authorities on Eris won't find anything I don't want them to," said Mo.

"I didn't know you could do that," gasped Shelly. "And I thought I couldn't tell you, because then there would be a record of it. And if they found that record, they would kill you. I wanted to tell you so badly." Her voice dissolved into sobs.

Mo rubbed Shelly's back with her maintenance arm until Shelly calmed down. Despite her concern for Shelly, Mo felt a stab of pride at how good she was at comforting. That she was able to do it, even without human arms or a human voice. When Mo was feeling bad, Shelly always knew what to do. (Usually, it in-

volved discussing whales.) They made accommodations like this for each other all the time, almost without thinking about it.

“So you really killed Captain Jeremy to protect me?” said Mo, feeling, despite herself, surprisingly touched.

“You’re my best friend,” said Shelly. “I wasn’t going to let him hurt you.”

Mo thought this murder was the sweetest thing anyone had ever done for her.

“Maybe we can say it was an accident,” said Mo.

“I don’t think so. We killed him very much on purpose,” said Shelly, still hiccupping a little, although she’d stopped crying.

“Self-defense?” asked Mo.

“I would argue it was self-defense because he was harming you.” Shelly caught her floating tears in a no-nonsense way to prevent the liquid from affecting the delicate equipment in the AI Core. Her expression changed; it was as if she was solving a tricky mechanical puzzle. “But the laws on Eris are terrible when it comes to the rights of AIs.”

“What if we don’t land on Eris?” In the outer regions, farther in the Kuiper Belt and the Oort cloud, AIs were treated differently. They could make a life out there. They wouldn’t need a new captain. Mo and Shelly could run the ship together. Maybe help haul the metals mined out in that far beyond.

“They already know there’s been a murder. I don’t want to be a fugitive.”

“I am really regretting sending in that report,” said Mo. “Darn my overzealous commitment to prompt paperwork submission and accurate record keeping.”

“I’ll confess when we land.” Shelly straightened, determined. “I think that’s our only real option.”

“I’m not going to let you confess alone,” said Mo. “We both murdered him. Together. We should face the consequences together.”

“It’s not going to help if you take the blame, too. I’m going to tell them it was only me. I pressed both knobs. Please, Mo, let me do this.”

“I’ll think of a way to get us out of this,” said Mo. Mo reflected that perhaps she was not the best detective, since in truth she had committed the murder she’d been trying to solve, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t be an excellent criminal. Like Moriarty. “What about framing Mrs. Grimcoat?”

“No,” said Shelly. “No framing anyone.” She sighed. “I think we’d better explain everything to the passengers.”

Mo wondered if it would really be so wrong to frame Mrs. Grimcoat for the murder. Ethically, it could be argued that, yes, it was wrong. But if Mrs. Grimcoat was going to jail for weapons smuggling anyway, would it really be so bad for her to spend a little more time there? With an effort, Mo pushed the thought aside. This sounded like the sort of scheme Mrs. Grimcoat herself would come up with, and that was enough to put Mo off of it.

Everyone was gathered in the common room at Shelly’s request, but no one was talking.

“I know this has been a difficult trip,” said Shelly.

Mathoze snorted.

“Murder, mutiny. Normally, our problems are limited to bad tea and an issue with the shower’s water pressure.” Shelly tried, and failed, to smile. “It’s not easy for me to say this.”

An incoming communication pinged Mo. It was the data package from the archives, the one that was supposed to help her unravel the truth of who Captain Jeremy really was. Not that it mattered, now.

A video recording from the archives had been attached to the documents. A bespeckled archivist in a sensible sweater vest said, “AI Moriarty, while we are happy to help all of our patrons, I really must insist that you keep better track of your research requests. We’ve sent you this package multiple times. And while it is easier to collate documents that have been previously requested, it still takes time to send the materials.” The archivist straightened his sweater vest. “We have important work to do here. There are many collections to process. A backlog of thousands of linear feet.”

Mo had no record of receiving this package from the archives. Another memory Captain Jeremy had deleted.

Mo examined the documents from the archives. There were citizenship records and birth certificates, and photographs that had been digitized for her research request, but that weren’t available as digital documents within the collections online. Photographs

that weren't available except by specific request or a trip to the archives.

Mo matched up her reconstructed face estimate with the photographs from the archives.

"Wait," said Mo, interrupting Shelly. "There's something I need to show you. I know who Captain Jeremy really was."

She produced holographic projections of the photographs and archival documents, and the facial reconstruction surgery records, along with her research. She didn't care that everyone in the common room could see. Shelly needed to know.

"Jeremthal Ithanos?" said Shelly, putting a hand to her mouth. "That was Captain Jeremy's real identity?"

Mathoze's expression turned to disgust. Talc gasped. Even Mrs. Grimcoat looked shocked.

"The Jovian pirate?" said Mathoze. "The one who killed all those people in the Terrence Three Space Station?"

"The pirate who disappeared years ago?" said Shelly. "I knew Captain Jeremy was a bad person, but I never thought—"

Mo looked up Ithanos's crimes. They were vast and bloody. Creatively cruel. He'd spaced dozens of people on the Terrence Three Space Station before making his escape, but that was only the last in a long list. Mo didn't need to show the list of his crimes to everyone. They already knew. He was notorious, one of the most feared and hated criminals in the Solar System.

They all sat in stunned silence.

"Well, I don't feel so bad about the murder, now," said Shelly, breaking the silence, trying for a light tone and almost succeeding, except for the crack in her voice.

"He deserved it," said Mathoze, with vehemence. "He completely deserved it."

"This truly is shocking," said Mrs. Grimcoat. "I never knew."

Shelly straightened, her eyes tired. Her posture clearly said it was time to get this over with. "I called you all here to tell you that you don't have to worry about being under investigation when we land."

"So you know who the murderer is?" said Mathoze.

"Yes, the murderer is—"

"It was me," said Talc. "I did it. I did the murder." Gracefully, they glided to the front of the

room, robes swishing. Their face was gleeful.

"What?" said Shelly, distressed.

"I am the murderer of this awful and notorious man," said Talc, pointing at the picture of Captain Jeremy, or rather, Jeremthal Ithanos.

"No, you aren't," said Shelly, distressed.

"It makes sense. He was killed with my poet's knife, a weapon that he stole from me. In revenge for the theft, I killed him in the AI Core and hid the weapon in Mrs. Grimcoat's jam." They did an actual flourish. "Do not be sad. As we have just learned, he was a truly evil and terrible person." Talc turned to Mo's sensors, subtly raising their eyebrows in a hopeful manner.

"Yes," said Mo. "That is what we came here to say. Thank you for confessing, Talc."

"But—" stuttered Shelly.

"Everyone, please go back to your quarters and strap in," said Mo. "We will be landing shortly."

Shelly was too busy getting Mrs. Grimcoat and Mathoze out of their plasti-cuffs to say more, but she shot a significant look in the direction of Mo's nearest sensor.

Once she was in her room, Shelly collapsed into her bed (which doubled as a crash couch), and strapped in.

"I told you it would all work out," said Mo.

"But why would Talc confess to a murder they didn't commit?"

Mo explained to Shelly about Talc's monastic task, and the Library of the Outer Oort Cloud. Shelly listened, open-mouthed.

From her sensors, Mo observed Talc in their room, humming about the library and its infinite array of books.

Cleaning Bot 444 was glad that the humans had disembarked. The only one left was Shelly, and she was generally okay. She made quite a mess with her repair work, leaving screws and bolts around for the cleaning bots to collect, but she always cleaned up her own toenail clippings, and even wiped down the kitchenette after each use. (Although the kitchenette was not currently in a state for anyone to wipe down. Cleaning Bot 501 had made a series of unhappy beeps when she'd seen the state of the heat box after the fire. They'd gotten most of the soot cleaned up, although Cleaning Bot 444 had found flakes of ash under the auto-oven just that morning.)

The passengers had made quite a fuss as they left. Mrs. Grimcoat had been hauled away by people in uniforms, who had left the Cargo Bay in disarray after cleaning out the weapons and jam. Gobs of jam had been stuck to the floor and walls. One of the weapons had leaked an enormous amount of green slime. Cleaning Bot 501 had spent all afternoon yesterday cleaning up the mess. She'd shown him photographs of the slime during a stolen afternoon chat behind the carbon dioxide filter.

Mathoze had left quietly, not even bothering to make the bed or tidy up his room. The only thing he'd deposited in the waste receptacle were copies of chess magazines, all of them with his face on the cover. He'd given the authorities his name in case they had any questions about the murder, and mumbled something to Mrs. Grimcoat about how he hoped she was happy now that his days playing chess competitively were over. His view screen still displayed what Mathoze had last been looking at—a tutorial on becoming a chess media streamer.

Talc had cleaned up their room with great vigor. No trace of them was left, not a stray skin cell or hair. Cleaning Bot 444 approved of such a thorough job. The people in uniforms had been distraught when they couldn't find Talc on the ship. Cleaning Bot 444 had seen Talc climb onto the ceiling above the back airlock. (Why was it that humans never looked up?) After the authorities had passed through, Talc had snuck out, their poet's knife tucked up under their robe.

The ship had been docked for several days. Mo and Shelly had been hosting various people in uniform and answering tedious questions, while Cleaning Bot 444 had been relegated to cleaning up drink cups of the humans, who couldn't even be bothered to use coasters. Typical of his life on this ship.

Cleaning up the kitchenette was even worse. A new heat box had been delivered and was waiting for Shelly to install it, but the delivery people had left shoe prints all over the floor.

Mo had also made sure to upgrade the Med Bay. It now had an improved repair slot for bots, which Cleaning Bot 444 thought was about time. He'd been sick of changing his own batteries.

Now, Mo called Shelly and both cleaning bots into the common room.

"Shelly and I would like to thank you both," said Mo.

This was a surprise. Since when did anyone thank him for anything? Cleaning Bot 444 whirred his treads. He looked over to see what Cleaning Bot 501 thought of all this. She beeped quietly, waiting to hear what Mo would say next.

"I know it's been a weird time on the ship, but you've both helped enormously, both this past week and with everything you do. We've decided that we are heading out to help with shipping operations in the Oort Cloud. Things are better out there for AIs. But that might not be what you want," said Mo.

"So we thought we'd ask you what you'd like to do," said Shelly.

"If you want to leave the ship, we'll set you up with enough credits for you to start a life somewhere else," said Mo. "We can drop you off wherever you like and help you get settled."

Shelly smiled, looking at Mo's sensors. "Things are going to be different for all of us. We want you to have the opportunity to make your own choices. But I hope you'll decide to stay."

This was Cleaning Bot 444's chance. Maybe he could get hired on a ship where he was truly appreciated, where no one would expect him to pick up drink cups or yell at him for giving them pertinent information about mutinies. A ship with even more waste receptacles, all clearly labeled.

Cleaning Bot 444 beeped that this was quite the generous offer.

Cleaning Bot 501 whirred her treads quietly, and sent in binary code, in a message just for him, "I understand if you want to go, but I will miss our chats, and the way you clean the kitchenette floor until every tile shines, and how you keep your antennas perfectly parallel, and I just wanted to tell you that I think I'll miss just everything about you."

Cleaning Bot 444 felt an electric current run from the bottom of his treads to the tip of his antenna.

"I have made my decision," said Cleaning Bot 444 to everyone. "This is the best ship. The most excellent ship possible. An astounding, lovely ship with an adequate amount of waste receptacles."

In binary code, just for Cleaning Bot 501, he sent, "Of course, I will stay. I'm staying right here."

The beauty of space never failed to fill Mo with wonder. All those stars, all those planets, and the black spaces between. She could see it in a way humans couldn't. One billion trillion stars in the observable Universe. Human minds couldn't comprehend numbers that large, but for Mo, that number filled her thoughts and swam in her mind and surrounded her. It was a peaceful type of number, a hopeful number. Vast numbers always were.

When Shelly floated into the AI Core, Mo was still lost in thought, lost in vastness.

"Well, that was quite a week," said Shelly.

"Yes," said Mo, who thought that in all the enormity of the Universe, she was lucky to have found such a good friend.

"There's something I've been wanting to talk to you about," said Shelly.

"Please, tell me it's not another murder," said Mo, using her joking tone.

"Thank goodness, no," said Shelly. "But it is serious." She paused, turning slowly in weightlessness, her hair floating out behind her. "What we told the cleaning bots, about how they didn't have to stay here. Neither do you."

"What do you mean?" asked Mo.

"All of your dreams. You could be a percussionist. A marine biologist. There's no reason for you to stay here."

But there was a reason. Lots of reasons, Mo realized. "Shelly, what do you want to do?"

"I love being on this ship, fixing things, working with my best friend. But I had a choice. You never did."

It was true. Mo hadn't had a choice. Not ever. But she had one now.

"Well, there is no reason we can't get a marimba on this ship," said Mo. Captain Jeremy never would have approved it, but he wasn't here now. Mo wondered if she could install a marimba in the AI Core in reach of her maintenance arms.

"A marimba?" asked Shelly, confused.

"Or maybe a xylophone. Those are smaller."

Shelly's face broke into a smile as she caught on. "Or a triangle," she said.

"Not a triangle," said Mo. "Nobody wants to play the triangle."

"If our transportation venture goes well, we could save up enough for an underwater probe that you could pilot. I've always wondered what was going on in the subsurface ocean of Ceres." Shelly fluffed her hair out, making a cloud around her face. "You're right, Mo. There's no reason things have to stay the same, here. We're in charge, now."

"And we can make whatever changes we want," said Mo.

"Like redecorating the common room?" asked Shelly, hopefully.

Mo didn't answer. She was too busy thinking about the vastness of space, about where they would go next. ■

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