

TWO

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Andromeda opened her eyes, gasping for breath.

A dizzying array of numbers swirled from her thoughts, disappearing as the room around her came into focus. The same room that had encompassed her entire world for the past three months. One half was covered with personal items—her cot, her clothes, blankets Lilibet had stitched for her, a vase of daisy-like flowers that kept showing up though Andra didn't know how. The other half was a lab/conference room, the work'station and holo'table used for meetings like today's.

Her fingers dug into the armrests of her ergo'chair as three faces watched her expectantly.

"Anything?" she asked.

Lilibet grimaced but quickly turned it into an awkward smile. "They moved . . . a bit . . . I reckon."

Rashmi shook her head. "Your human eyes are deceived in ways my neural perception cannot be. They are unmoved." She sighed, leaning back in her chair. "As am I."

"Why are we here again?" Skillia asked.

The four of them sat around the 'table in the corner of a former Vaults display room. The Vaults had been Riverside's tech museum, and due to its air'locks and superior environmental controls, it had

remained perfectly preserved beneath Eerensed's palace. Andra's bedroom had been the EMP exhibit—a display of various devices throughout history that could interrupt any technological function within range. Including a cylinder the size of an oil drum specifically designed to neutralize AI—which Andra was. She'd had it cleared out immediately. She'd spent the last month up to her neurons in Vaults tech, inventorying and repurposing it for the rocket, and ifan EMP went off, it would destroy all her hard work. And knockher out for several minutes. So, they were now safely stored in the Vaults' Faraday cage, and Andra was left with the shell of a display room, its once-windowed walls now turned opaque, a new DNA scan at the door.

She had started out using it solely for her meetings with the Schism and lab experiments, but she'd spent so much time here, she'd simply moved in, gathering a few personal items and lots of discarded tech, and building her own work'station. It was a mess of holos and sim components. Most were on sleep mode, and a blinking red light reminded her of the 'display that held a manifest of all one million colonists.

Colonists that still lay under the earth, in the huge warehouse Andra called the Icebox. Frozen. Waiting.

Because she wasn't sure what she should do with them. Wake them up to the nightmare of what the earth had become? Wait until she had a rocket that was nearly impossible to rebuild? Griffin hadn't left her any instructions, besides the memory in the holocket that had told Andra where to find the frozen colonists and that she'd know what to do.

Except Andra didn't know what to do. She had to get everyone to Holymyth, but she had no idea how.

She sighed, staring down at the two mini'domes on the table, connected by a thin vacuum tube. Inside the left mini'dome was a pocket.

It was a tiny pocket. Andra had managed to trap a clump of nanos

the size of a hand from the pocket hovering outside the city. It had been delicate work, like scraping moss from a tree without damaging the bark. It had taken all her concentration, and though she'd controlled the pocket so easily that day in the throne room against Maret, she'd had trouble accessing any of her newfound powers and programming since. Something had taken over her that day, some innate sense of power. She referred to it as her AI state, and she'd yet to achieve it again.

She'd spent the last few weeks trying to move the pocket from one mini'dome to the next, but so far she'd just seemed to make it angry.

"If the Third One can move the small pocket," Rashmi said, answering Skilla's question, "she might be able to move the large pocket."

Her voice was still high and wispy, but there was more intention to it. She no longer sounded like she would give up halfway through a sentence. Most days. Her white hair hung in wisps around her face, instead of tangled and matted. After weeks free from captivity, her skin glowed in a way that made her look more . . . human. Which was more than Andra could say for herself at the moment. She couldn't remember the last time she'd brushed her hair or taken a shower. At least she'd eaten something today. Maybe. Or was that yesterday?

"And then she'll save the city!" Lilibet added, her dark hair swaying, as she bounced in her chair.

Skilla raised a thin eyebrow. "I didn't realize the city needed saving."

"But the 'dome—" Andra started.

"Is evens anow," Skilla finished. She sat back, arms crossed.

The door slid open and Xana walked in. She was covered in weapons, and Andra thought she saw a smudge of blood on her cheek. She shared a brief look with Skilla, the pupil in her modded eye expanding, before taking her seat at the other end of the 'table.

"Sorries I'm late," she muttered.

If Andra concentrated, she could feel the vibrations of hearts, the intakes of breaths, through interfacing with the nanos in the room.

Listening to where they bumped up against life. Skilla's heart only beat faster, her breath only taken away, by the thought of rebuilding the Schism. But Xana's heart fluttered every time she looked at Skilla. The same flutter Andra felt whenever Zhade was around.

They were both fools.

"The gods' dome is new," Skilla continued, as though they hadn't been interrupted, "and Zhade has that . . . control room you built him. If something goes wrong, he can fix it without you."

Andra's eye twitched. Though she'd built a new 'dome, it required constant maintenance. She could do it herself, but it had been wearing her thin. Without the AI state, she wasn't meant to interact with such vast tech without some kind of barrier. The energy the 'dome used often overwhelmed Andra's nanos. And each time she sent them out to keep the 'dome working, fewer and fewer returned. It hurt her about as much as scratching off dead skin cells, but over time, scratch too much and you'll bleed.

So she'd set up a control room in the cathedral—a way for Zhade to perform maintenance on the 'dome. It kept Andra from having to replenish her own nanos so often and let her focus on finding a way to get humanity to Holomyth.

In theory.

She didn't know if Zhade was actually using the control room. They'd barely spoken since Andra had realized Zhade's mother was Dr. Alberta Griffin, since he'd learned Andra was a robot. An AI. Whatever. Maybe he was scared. Or maybe he was glad to have an excuse to cut ties with her. She'd done what he'd needed her to do: remove the Crown from his brother's head, fix the 'dome, save Eerensed. She'd been a tool to help him retake his throne. And now he was finished with her.

No. That hadn't been all she was to Zhade. But now it didn't matter. That was over.

"The 'dome won't last long with a pocket so close to it," Andra

argued. “And Zhade—” Andra swallowed. “The Guv is new to this technology. He doesn’t know it as well as I do. The best way to keep Eerensed safe is to move the pocket.”

Skilla tossed her raven ponytail over her shoulder. “Maybe if he deigned to show up to one of these meetings, he could speak for himself.” She leaned back in her chair and nodded at the mini’pocket. “So is this what you’ve been focusing on? I thought you were working on collecting material to rebuild the rocket?”

Andra wanted to slap the smirk off Skilla’s face. The “general” had made it clear what she thought of rebuilding the rocket. No matter how much material and tech Andra had mined from the Vaults, Skilla didn’t seem at all interested in continuing the project. Andra wanted to point out that it had been the entire reason the Schism existed. That they had been formed after whatever disaster had released the pockets onto the earth to create a way to get humanity off the planet. That they had been loyal to Griffin once she’d woken.

But Andra knew that Skilla had lost faith in the First and every-thing she’d stood for. The rocket, saving a few hundred people, escaping Earth for some distant planet: these were all abstract ideas, and Skilla was more interested in rebuilding the Schism’s militia, which Andra thought was a complete waste of time. There was no Schism anymore. Most had died either in Maret’s raid or in the pocket, and what was left was nothing more than a few soldiers and some refugees.

Besides, Zhade was guv now. And though Tsurina was in the way, he had a plan to loosen her grip on the guards and Eerensedian troops. But when Andra asked Skilla why she needed an army, Skilla replied that if you wait until you need an army to build one, it’s already too late.

“I’m still working on sourcing materials for the rocket,” Andra said. “I just feel that this” — she gestured to the small pocket in the mini’dome — “is more important right now.”

Actually, it was a distraction. Andra had spent weeks trying to piece together what Griffin had intended for her to do, but she kept coming up empty. Though there was plenty of technology in the Vaults, they were missing one vital material.

Cryo'chamber plating.

The same metallic glass that protected the frozen colonists also prevented the rocket from being destroyed by pockets. Or fire— like the last one had been. The problem was there was very little cryo'plating in the Vaults. There was, however, quite a bit in the Icebox. But it was currently being used.

The irony was that if Andra woke up the LAC scientists, they could create the rocket in no time. The brightest minds of Andra's time would have no trouble deciphering Griffin's notes and sourcing materials. But Griffin hadn't woken them. There must have been a reason.

So now Andra was stuck. Useless. A failure. The last time she'd felt any type of success, of purpose, was when she'd controlled the pocket in the throne room. The ability was somewhere in her, if only she could harness it.

She ran a hand through her hair, tugging at the knotted, greasy strands. This wasn't how this meeting was supposed to go. She was supposed to move the pocket, show abilities beyond what a human could do. All she'd done since waking was fix things and inventory the Vaults, something any serve'bot could do. She was an AI, dammit, not a 'bot.

If she could just show them that she was *more*, just like she'd done in the throne room. A feeling of unlimited power had coursed through her, filling her until she was bursting. She had brimmed with light and knowledge and purpose, and she knew there was nothing she couldn't do, nothing she couldn't command. She was AI and human and deity, and she could remake the world in her image.

What are you doing? a voice said in her mind, and Andra was jolted out of her reverie.

Rashmi was staring at her, eyes narrowed, white hair tumbling across her face. Of all the abilities for Rashmi to maintain, it had to be speaking through their neural connection directly into Andra's consciousness.

"I don't imagine . . ." Skilla said slowly, ". . . you should be doing that."

"What?" Andra asked.

Skilla didn't respond. Only stared at the mini'dome. The pocket swirled darkly within it, restless and agitated, beating against the walls of the 'dome. Had Andra done that?

The others apparently thought so. The four women sat angled away from her, avoiding her gaze. Lilibet was chewing her lip, squirming. Rashmi was rocking back and forth. Xana had her hand on her ax. When Skilla's eyes cut back to Andra, there was a hint of something she'd never seen there before.

Fear.

Of the pocket?

Or of Andra?

"If you focus on getting materials for the rocket," Skilla said, body tense, "I'll have the Schism continue working on it."

Andra swallowed and nodded. "Okay. The rocket . . . will be my top priority."

Even as she said it, she knew it was a lie. She was so close to controlling the pocket. She couldn't give up now.

"Or," Xana said, standing, "you could rest. Maybe . . . bathe?"

Andra looked around the room, embarrassed. It was true that she hadn't kept healthy habits since discovering the frozen bodies of the colonists still on Earth. She slept and ate too little and worked and worried too much. But Andra didn't have the luxury of taking a break for herself. She belonged to humanity.

"Yeah, sure," Andra said, feeling her face growing hot. "I'll . . . rest. Bathe."

“And eat a vegetable,” Lilibet added.

Skilla stood, her weapons clinking. “No more staring at pockets. Rest. Focus on the rocket. You won’t be any use to us if you’re burned out.”

Andra nodded. There was the crux of the matter. Andra had to be useful. She was an AI. A tool. And tools that weren’t useful were worthless. Maybe Skilla was right. Maybe narrowing Andra’s focus to the rocket would be exactly what she needed.

The door opened and Kiv peeked his head in. Lilibet squealed and ran to him, throwing her arms around his neck and planting a kiss on his lips, ending it with a loud “Mua!” Andra felt both their heart rates increase through the vibrations the nanos sensed.

Kiv untangled himself from Lilibet and set a mug of hot chocolate in front of Rashmi. She grabbed it and took a sip and smiled.

“Thank you,” she signed.

Kiv nodded.

“I’m going to go kiss Kiv some more!” Lilibet shrieked and dragged him out of the room. Andra and the others sat in awkward silence for a moment, until Skilla cleared her throat.

“Are we fin?” she asked.

She didn’t wait for a response before exiting the room. Xana followed her, leaving Andra alone with Rashmi.

Andra sighed and looked down at the mini’ dome, the trapped pocket swirling in agitation.

“Should I try one more time?” she asked.

“You promised Skilla just forty-three seconds ago that you wouldn’t.”

Andra felt Rashmi shake her head, so aware of the other AI, she didn’t have to look at her to know what she was doing. Sometimes it seemed like Rashmi was an extension of herself. But it was only because they were computers on the same network.

Sort of.

Rashmi was . . . not as computer-y as Andra.

When Rashmi had transferred her programming to Andra, she hadn't been cloning it or backing it up. She had fully relinquished the data. Meaning Rashmi no longer had access to some of her most basic programming. Rashmi was barely AI anymore. Her thoughts were still nanos, her brain artificial. But with her programming now in Andra, and her memories a muddle from years of trauma in the palace dungeon, Rashmi's identity was splintered. She had been an AI, but now the access to her full abilities was gone. She had been a goddess, but her memories from that time were missing. Andra had offered to at least transfer the data back, but Rashmi flat out refused.

"I don't want it back," she'd said. "I want to be human."

Andra didn't have the heart to tell her that she wasn't.

"Remember what you are, Third One," Rashmi said now. "Our brains may be artificial, but our bodies are organic, and yours is yawning. You've stretched it too thin."

Andra paused mid-yawn.

Rashmi gave Andra a look over the hot chocolate Kiv had brought her. They had a routine down. Zhade would get the hot chocolate from the kitchens as Maret, then pass it off to Kiv through a secret passage, who would usually give it to Lilibet to bring to Rashmi.

All that work, just so Zhade could avoid her.

Andra banished the thought – and the weird ache in her chest that accompanied it – and lifted the mini'dome from her desk. She felt the corrupted nanos inside hiss in anger.

"I guess I'll put this little guy away, then," Andra said.

Rashmi cocked her head. "Why did you anthropomorphize it?"

"What?"

"You called it a 'little guy.' Just because we are sentient, doesn't mean all technology is."

Andra blinked. "I . . . yeah. I know. It's just . . . I don't know,

something humans do. Let things borrow sentience. I don't know why."

"And are we human?"

The hope in Rashmi's voice broke Andra's heart.

She shrugged. "We were bound to pick up some of their habits."

Rashmi downed the last of her hot chocolate. "I'm going to go check on Maret."

Andra let out a noncommittal noise. Rashmi wouldn't trust anyone else with his location and spent most of her time guarding his 'tank. And Andra was the one being too human?

"Just . . . one sec," Andra said.

Rashmi paused halfway to the door, and Andra sensed her muscles tense, as though she knew what Andra was going to ask.

"Are you sure? That you can't remember anything from before?"

Rashmi didn't turn around, and this time, Andra didn't need the nanos to see Rashmi was trembling.

"I know it's upsetting," Andra said, trying to put as much compassion in her voice as possible, trying to strain out the desperation. "But if you could just remember something from your time with Griffin. After she woke you. Then maybe we could figure out what we're supposed to do now."

Rashmi's head hung, her white hair covering her face. "There's darkness and darkness and darkness. Memories flicker like candlelight, but I can't grab them. It burns."

Andra swallowed her disappointment. "Sorry. I . . . just thought I'd ask."

Rashmi departed without another word, leaving Andra alone, clothes and technology scattered around her. She stared at the pocket in the mini'dome.

"Do you know your purpose, little dude?"

It swirled around the 'dome, then pressed against the side closest to Andra, as though it were reaching out, waiting for her command.

She understood that the others would be scared of the large pocket, the one pressing on the 'dome. The one that had destroyed the Lost District. But this pocket was different. It was contained and small, and if Andra could control it, no one would have to be afraid of pockets ever again.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, willing it to move from one 'dome to the next. She could sense it. Sense its agitation, its hesitation, its resistance. It knew Andra and it knew what she wanted, but that wasn't its purpose. Its purpose was to—

Destroy.

Andra's breath caught. The voice was in her head. It was dark and confident and curled its way into her thoughts like smoke.

Destroy it all.

Andra's eyes flashed open, her breath coming too fast.

Okay.

Okay.

The others were definitely right. She needed a break from this.

She set the 'dome on her work'station, turning back to the mess that was her room. The piles of clothes, the discarded tech. She grabbed the nearest shirt and started folding it. She would clean all this up, then she would start working on the rocket again. She could go through Griffin's old notes in the computer system that controlled the Icebox, look for hints. Maybe the truth was hidden somewhere in them.

She'd scoured every detail, looking for a code or sign that might lead her to more of Griffin's work. Anything that could tell her what Griffin expected her to do. She needed another pair of eyes. Maybe she could convince Rashmi to help, even though Rashmi avoided anything to do with Griffin or their purpose as AI.

Andra heard a noise at the door and opened it, finding Lilibet and Kiv locked in an embrace on the other side. Lilibet jumped at being caught and blushed. Not that she was shy about her affection for

Kiv. But she seemed to feel awkward about everything recently.

“Oh, hi.” Andra looked away. “I just heard . . . sorry . . .” She started to close the door and paused.

Andra wasn't the only one suffering right now. Lilibet was struggling to adapt to life underground more than any of them. Though Lilibet had been a palace servant, she'd never been trapped within the palace walls. She needed to talk, needed to roam the city and be Lilibet. Unfortunately, since she was recognizable as the maid who had served the Devil Goddess, she couldn't be seen aboveground. Being stuck down here was something new for her, and she was . . . restless.

Andra surveyed her, cocking her head. “Hey, Lilibet. Do you want to learn how to—”

Lilibet pushed Kiv away. “FIRM!”

Andra blinked. “You don't even know what I was going to ask.” “It doesn't meteor. I love skooling and helping and *doing things*. Teach me! Teach me! Please please pleeeeeeeeeease?”

Andra lifted an eyebrow. “Teach you how to clean the washroom?”

The light in Lilibet's eyes dimmed, but she didn't let the smile fade. “Firm?”

Andra laughed and brought up a holo'display. “Actually, I wanted to teach you some magic.”