

Fuchsia Thought

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Hamid floats. The marbled surface of Jupiter hangs in the distance. It looks close enough to touch.

His radio crackles.

“Hamid, where in the void are you?” It’s Cynthia. She sounds irritated – more so than usual.

Hamid sighs and keys his mic. “I’m out here running diag, realigning the lens battery. You want we slam head first into something because Damien can’t do his job properly?”

“Just get back here, now; we’ve got company.”

The line goes dead and again Hamid is drowning in silence, the sounds of his body unnaturally loud; the idling engine of the meat vehicle.

He checks the neurable is still wrapped around his ankle, then tugs on the polyplastic umbilical that tethers him to the asteroid. Hamid doesn’t know the asteroid’s sequential number, but they’ve taken to calling it *Libertatia*.

Inside, Hamid removes his helmet, breathing in the vaguely sweet, dank air flowing from the greenhouse. He grabs the handholds and pulls himself through the hollow asteroid, past the greenhouse, farms, rec and living areas, and lab.

The control room is in frenzy. Klaxons in three different tones are blaring and the war light is rotating in the designated-roof. The other six controllers are already connected to the neural network. Floating, their thick grey cables tangle together like rat’s tails. All but Cynthia have their helmets on, oblivious to his arrival.

Cynthia turns her head and her fuchsia locks drift in zero-g. “Don’t just fucking gawp at us, Hamid; plug-in.”

“What’s happening?” Hamid asks, uncoiling his neurable and plugging into the stack. As the pins connect he sees it all in a flash of light, noise and data.

Rhineheart-Palmer frigate leaving Earth. Long-range scanners picking up live munitions. R-P Rockhampton HQ transmitting a hack attempt on tightband.

Damien pings at Cynthia in burnt orange. [*I told you we’d been skimming too much off the top. We ceased being economically feasible two months ago. I’m surprised they waited this long.*]

Hamid feels his throat swallow dry.

[*They would have come regardless – we were due for an inspection. At least this way we’re ready to leave.*] Cynthia’s words flash through Hamid’s brain in the same shade of fuchsia she dyes her hair.

[*Nearly ready.*] Hamid adds in stark white text. [*Calculations aren’t finalised.*]

[That's why we're all here, brother.] Doog never unplugs, so Hamid has never heard his voice. *[Take control whenever you're ready.]* His words are pale green and drift like smoke.

Hamid checks and confirms – unfettered neural access to the six. From some place far away he feels his body exhale a long breath. There's a choking sensation building behind his nose and eyes.

He sees their childhoods, the traumas and the joys. He sees virginities lost, given and taken. He sees fears and fetishes. He feels the force of all that processing power, but those cycles have faces and names and dead pets they still miss.

[What are you waiting for?] Fuchsia again.

Hamid has a firewall there, ready. He leaves it down.

As their myriad histories pour into his mind, his is filtering through into them. Hamid hopes they stop and see his orphanage childhood and rough adolescence before they reach his job interview.

In his mind's eye, Hamid is sure Ms. Rhineheart looks more toad-like than she had in person. Big lips, wide mouth, large eyes too far apart. Maybe she'd take the comparison as a compliment; cane toads were hardy survivors who devoured everything in their path. There's a reason why they're the only reptiles left in Queensland.

[You came here to sabotage us?] pings Sadi, their pilot. IRL she's soft-spoken, a hesitant conversationalist, but her lightning neural reflexes mean in the stack she always gets in the first and last word.

“You had the plug installed out of your own pocket?” Rhineheart had asked.

“I didn't want to find myself indebted to any one corporation while I was still young.”

[They wanted a way to get out to Kuiper, to see the seeding operation there.] Hamid offers.

[And probably sabotage it.] Pale green. *[Don't want people leaving the system – smaller customer base, decreased profits.]*

“It seems we're indebted to you, Mr. Dafarsi; you've increased the efficiency of our inbound trajectories by nearly three percent. You've always worked alone, yes, even though you have the link?”

“I guess I've never done well with people.” Hearing himself speak those words, Hamid thinks he sounded proud of that. How quickly things change. The toad had nodded and smiled.

[Why tell us now?] Fuchsia. [All you had to do was botch the trajectory and they'd have caught up; given you your paycheck and a flight back to Earth.]

[I've never had friends before.]

[You still don't, not after this bullshit.] Orange: Damien.

[I didn't expect to be accepted. I didn't expect for this to feel like home, for you all to feel like family.]

There is something approximating silence in the neural net, but Hamid feels them searching his recent memories, establishing the truth of his words.

[Watch me calculate the trajectory if you don't trust me, but let me get us out of here.]

[Do it.] Fuchsia.

Hamid feels their consciousnesses floating nearby, but pushes them away to focus on the trajectory. He opens the half-finished calculations and his vision floods with fuchsia, greens, blue, orange and red as their minds help his fill in the gaps.

He releases them from his neural hold.

[Took you long enough.] Cynthia transmits to the group, but she lingers to privately thank him – keeping her kindness close.

Hamid smiles inside his helmet.

[Trajectory looks good.] Sadi.

[Yeah.] Fuchsia. *[I trust you, Hamid. I can't speak for anyone else, though...]*

The others stay silent, but Hamid sees a hesitant acceptance flash through the net.

[You've got the trajectory now, Sadi; take us out of here.]

Hamid feels the pull of gravity as the thrusters kick in and start pushing them towards the stars.

He wonders what they'll find out beyond Kuiper, he and his friends.

End

