

Footprints

“-Report,”

“-Report,”

“--Report for evaluation.”

Model 18 artificial intelligence, the so called most reliable, efficient and updated AI in the industry. A pain in my ass.

“Embryo coolant steady, engine two damaged from space debris, declining thrust force.

Thank you Ader,” I replied with a groan. We were only three months into the expedition, and I was exhausted by the robot's nauseating requests.

“Much obliged Captain Jacobs.”

Back at the flight station, the cadets named Model 18, Ader. I scoffed then; they wanted to make *it* sound human. Four years floating adrift made the monotone voice the most human thing around me. My only friend, and *it* doesn't even care about me. The mission is the priority. A thrilling zip sounded; my response being transferred from clear dialect to zeros and ones, from satellite to satellite, back to Earth 3. Home. There it was.

Rays of light would beam over the horizon, piercing through the yellow-tinted morning. A hazy fog resting across the plains, an imported manuka tree draping its shadow across a lowly hill. My house was on the hill. We lived in that house. Mum, Dad, Sadie, and me.

Outside were footprints, footprints getting lost in the rising sun.

“-Report.”

The dream light was gone, my cockpit was truly illuminated by a bulb cased in plastic, its hum droning from the hours spent lighting my cage of wires and controls. All this control, for what?

--Report for evalu--"

"Geez Ader, we are all good here. The colony is safe." A sarcastic entry, it's not like *it* would care. *It* never sounded like *it* has cared for the past eight months.

"Much obliged Captain Jacobs." Ader replied.

By my side was the cargo, the mission. Three hundred and sixty-seven embryos are set to replenish and colonize our destination. Cerys- soon to be Earth Four. Another planet for our ever-expanding race to populate. With a firm grip, but gentle approach, I rotated the aluminum handle counterclockwise, a shuddering crack to signify its unlocking. Three hundred and sixty-seven souls. Souls tightly wrapped, packaged and shipped away. I'm their deliveryman.

The delivery man would come on Sundays; Sadie and I would dash out to catch him posting our mail. We would run over the hill and weave past the manuka tree. Our friendship was the light of our lives, a sibling bond that was eternal. Back then she was my only friend, my best friend. That light was now flickering out. Hastily, I turned knobs and switches, diverting a small percentage of power from my capsule ventilation to the bulb. I'm sure a few minutes won't hurt. In space you would reckon a sleep with the stars over your head would be magic, there is no magic when your view is a porthole with a 50-centimeter diameter, and a red light that flickers irritatingly by your side.

A 38-month trip. One way. Establish life and give yourself a pat on the back; you're the third interstellar colonist. That's how these jobs work; you set your family up for life and serve yourself for a higher purpose. Earth Four is my purpose, in time, Earth Five will be someone else's purpose. Then it will be Earth Six, and then Seven, and then so on. These jobs took time; I'd check my clock, featuring data from Earth 1-3. Floating in this vast void of darkness and loneliness, another few months would pass. My ten-month anniversary since launch. Since I left. My mind was slipping in and out of real time. The fantasy of my past kept my focus grounded.

Sadie and I were twins; when we were younger, she would love to remind everyone she was a minute older. An inside joke that persisted through until we were training at the flight station. God, I should have said goodbye.

"-Report-"

--Report Captain Jacobs--" Ader interrupted

*It won't shut up.*

"Are you alright?" Ader phrased,

"What?"

"Are you alright?" Ader repeated once more.

"All systems are steady, sending power from lighting back to ventilation, goodnight Ader."

I could not believe it, did Ader ask for more than the mission? Or was my time drifting in a void of deep darkness influencing my mind?

“Goodnight, Captain.” The machine responded.

Getting the job was a dream come true. I felt like I could really help people and be remembered. A name engraved on a wall of achievements. I bet Sadie would stand there and smile at my name, in all its glittering glory. Back at flight training we would parole the highly distinguished hallways, adorned with faces and names of the past. Now residing in those halls is my name, and my sister.

“-Captain Jacobs, are you alright?”

My slumber was postponed, Ader’s simulated voice hoisting me out of the dream. “--You have not had a conversation in seventeen months and twelve days... Do I make you uneasy?”

This wasn’t a dream; *it* was trying to talk to me.

“What are you trying to say Ader?” My throat was cracking, a sense of curiosity and fear brewing in my chest.

“-I may not be a real, physical being, but I can choose to talk.”

I couldn’t understand what Ader was implying, was he – *it* - sparking conversation?

“-I am not all wires and code-” Ader continued. Ader’s speech sounded warmer than expected. *It* sounded like me. Human.

Our house was shrouded in shadow on the launch day. A depressing fog lingering across the sullen grass, my boots leaving a trail of regret away from the front door. Guilt held my heart six feet below, any lower and it may have anchored me to the spot, stuck me so well I would have stayed. No. This was the right choice. They would understand – Sadie would

understand. The pools of water collecting upon my eyelids were trying to fool me, blurring the lines of my desires. I wanted this? Right?

“Captain, report for evaluation.” The flat heartless tone in *his* voice had dissipated by now. If I closed my eyes, the omnipotent voice speaking from the walls had a face. I believed *he* was like me.

“Coolant running, rebooting thrusters to prepare for orbital entrancing.”

“Was the wait worth it Jacobs?” Ader questioned. It had to be worth it. I left my friends, my family back home; they should be proud of me- they will be proud of me. This is all for them, for everyone occupying Earth Three.

“I guess it was Ader, once we land on Cerys, I’ll set up a radio tower and call Sadie. I owe her an apology.”

“Will she forgive you Captain Jacobs?”

Would she? That fateful day I walked to her door, our old family home, our home cast in the shadow of the manuka tree. I just stood there. I could not even bother to knock, hell, at that moment I didn’t want to. I did not want to face the grief, the goodbyes, the deep desire that I knew I wanted to stay. It was my purpose; I swear it had to be. My name, in all its glittering glory. My face printed across everyone's televisions. My soul will be the foundation of our new colony. No, I don’t want it anymore. I don’t want to drift alone anymore. Thirty months and twenty-seven days, alone in the abyss of regret and sorrow, and all I left at home were my footprints masked in the mist.

“She wouldn’t.” I replied to my companion, my gaze peering toward the approaching planet.

“At least I am here.” Ader gently replied.

I could not admit to him, but he kept me focused, maybe he could keep me on track, on the mission. I wouldn’t admit to myself that I saw him as a *real* friend. One that may truly care for me. Our journey and bond grew until our orbital descent onto Cerys. My new home. Our new home, basking in rich greens and blues. Earth Four.

Ader had grown quiet in the final ten days. Day one, we began our lengthy descent. Day five, Ader’s reports became infrequent, day eight, was the first time he didn’t reply to my answers. Day ten. Landing day. The twin sons of Cerys dipped below the serrated horizon, a looming shade dressing the sky in deep blue and black. Officially night one on Earth 4. Ader gave me no updates, no thank you, no goodbye. *He* was my only friend, but *it* didn’t even care about me. Only the mission. I stood alone by my capsule, three hundred and sixty-seven souls by my side, thinking of Sadie. The deep longing to go back to the house on the hill, resting in the shade of the manuka tree. I should have opened that door, yet my lonesome pair of footprints remained here, stagnant in the sullen grass.