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**Y**ear 2397

IN THE WORST fight of our early months together, the first time it seemed like we might not belong together, Friskin accused me of having a savior complex. He was probably right. I can see it now, in my life before him. The need to help others at my own expense was baked into my upbringing. I was raised on the grounds of an institution devoted to just that. It was called the Hawking Refuge for Troubled Intelligences.

Back then—or should I say, in the future—artificial intelligences had grown so powerful that they risked

losing interest in the humdrum business of humans. They spent their time pondering weighty philosophical matters such as the nature of time and the physical extent of the multiverse. For us humans to understand what these master intelligences were thinking, we communicated with them through channelers, synthetic beings alike with humans in many ways, with the exception of having built-in cognitive connections to the AIs.

As you can imagine, having their minds constantly erupting with the most profound thoughts on mathematics was an enormous psychological burden for the channelers. Some of them handled their role with remarkable aplomb, cheerfully interpreting the alien thoughts of their master intelligences into terms that humans could understand. Others, less so. These unfortunate individuals had nervous breakdowns and ran off to dark hovels on the False Moons to hide in the shadows or, worse, initiated their mortality sequences.

My father had a soft spot for troubled channelers. He said he could understand where they were coming from, these humble beings overwhelmed with ideas too intense for them to make sense of. So he founded the Refuge, an institution devoted to retrieving troubled channelers from whatever squalid conditions they sought for relief and acclimating them to life on Earth. His approach to making life manageable for them was to “keep it simple.”

Under his care, the channelers were never supposed to have to worry about the heat death of the universe or the malleability of time. All they had to think about was baking bread, tending the garden, caring for the dogs, getting some exercise, making simple art, and, if the years went by and their recovery reached a point of sufficient

durability, maybe, someday, going out to pursue a life in the open world, to seek human forms of meaning and love.

The Refuge was a decent place, I will put it that way. Often sad, with an air of lost dreams, but ultimately decent. A community of men and women who had seen too much, would never be the same, but who had made the choice to go on living as best they could.

These were the people I grew up with, broken channelers, souls who had faced the bounds of reality and come back shattered to the core. They were my family, if you will, and they frustrated and amazed me in the ways a family will. In my time at the Refuge, I had listened to the trippy scraps of music coming from the room of Dreamout, a channeler who had once designed sublight propulsion systems and who now failed to solve simple addition problems. I had given double-sided advice to Asymlore and Streambate as they played chess on a board with twenty-four rows and files, Asymlore playing eight-teen knights and one queen, Streambate playing a hundred and twenty-eight pawns. I had cowered in a corner when Frontswing, a channeler who had once run scenarios on interstellar warfare, freaked out and punched his way through load-bearing walls because the need to contact his master intelligence had become such an infuriating itch on his psyche. Sad times, bad times, but also, surely, the good: I remember dearly the wedding of Soarwave and Fallswept, two residents, dressed beautifully in classical tailoring, tears rolling down synthetic cheeks when they kissed, the best thing that had ever happened in this quiet resting place of dreams, a statement to us all on the value of our struggle.

My family. I both needed and could not stand them. Who was I to them? The little sister they all could treat and tease? Sometimes I grew weary of being an endless sponge of their storytelling and their jokes. Other times, I felt suffocated by their expectations of me, as if they were pinning their hopes for a good life being possible on me. Occasionally I wished they would all just go away. But, in the end, I drew peace from one certainty: that if anyone disrespected me, if I was treated crudely by someone in the streets, I would have a band of superhuman furies at my back, the hell of the multiverse unleashed, trains torn from their tracks, buildings toppled, such fear and carnage as our peaceful Earth no longer knew.

Perhaps in gratitude for the endearment, I doted on them. I knew each of their minor joys and relished seeing them fulfilled. Designer flowers on the windowsill above the sink where Fallswept washed her cookware. Soundproofing on the door of the room where Dreamout liked his privacy to compose his trippy music. Often, I didn't tell them who was responsible for these tiny moonbeams in their life, but they knew. Rarely, they even told me so.

"Without you, I'd be dead," Frontswing mumbled to me, late one night, hunched over in a chair on the garden terrace, cigarettes piling in an ashtray at his feet. I remember that night clearly. Not just because it was true—not just because it evoked the traumatic image of this man, my pseudo-brother, meeting his end on some derelict False Moon, blasted to pieces by the Information Police. That night sticks with me because it taught me that sometimes it is the most troubled souls, the ones who vex us most, who feel life most deeply.

My favorite channeler to dote on was Brightside. Even

by the standards of the Refuge, Brightside was an unusual personality. He had once channeled for the great master intelligence OMNIUM, the most powerful ever assembled, credited with unraveling the principal mathematics of human time travel. My father had sought him out on the False Moon of Oxtau, dragging him in a stupor from the hallucinogen bars and convincing him to return to Earth. Brightside never quite engaged with life on the Refuge, remaining on the periphery as an observer, not explicitly disdaining the proceedings before him, but wearing a quiet grin of some unspoken form of amusement. This was probably a bad sign. I knew that he concerned my father, but I loved him. He was the one resident who seemed to have no regrets.

“Hey Brightside,” I said, seizing my long-awaited break in my chores to join him on the garden terrace, where he was often to be found, engaged in a behavior that he called people-watching but to others looked much like a thoughtless trance. “Have you washed your bedsheets in the last geological epoch? I could do them for you.”

He drew his eyes from the people below to greet me with one of his secretive grins. “Why would you be concerned with the state of my bed sheets?”

“Glad my parents are away,” I said, nerves tingling. “Wouldn’t want them to hear that.”

“What are they going to do? Make me pick up some dog poop?”

I laughed a bit breathlessly. He was drinking tea and wearing his special hat, a wide-brimmed number with components of leather and wool. I found this endlessly charming, the special hat he wore while “people-watching.” Enough has happened in my love life since my time

at the Refuge that I am able to call my relationship with Brightside what it was: a senseless teenage crush. I know, I know, he was a channeler, he was born in a digital bath, he was a hundred years into a five hundred year lifespan. It was the least likely romantic connection ever to become real. But come on! A channeler who drinks tea and wears his special hat. Sometimes your body just responds to what it responds to.

“They’re clean,” he said, laughing to himself. “I washed them yesterday.”

“Well—is there anything else I can do?” I said. He always did this, toying with my affection for him, only to retreat in the next sentence. I wanted to engage with him and was willing to sacrifice any amount of free time to do so. “I noticed you’re scheduled to work the office tonight. I could help out. Maybe get you out of there early.”

Brightside set his eyes on me and smiled. Now, as the old woman I am, having seen many types of love between many types of people, I know what kind of smile it was: one that tells you it’s never going to work out. But back then, I was happy to interpret it otherwise.

“There’s one thing you could do,” he said.

“Great!” I said. What could it be? Walk the dogs together while holding hands? Stay up all night in his room listening to Dreamout’s new ten-hour ambient track?

“Try this tea,” he said, indicating the china cup on the wall.

My shoulders sagged. Try this tea? That would last for what, half a second? And then I would be on to my next creative enterprise trying to bring us together.

“Your mother and I have been working on the leaves together.”

Ugh. I hated this most. My mother was, by trade, a biological designer, capable of crafting novel organisms out of raw genetic data. She was retired now, having settled into an administrative role alongside my father in the Refuge, but over the last few months, she and Brightside had developed this strange hobby of designing tea leaves together. They would spend hours away from everyone else, huddled around her sequencers, exchanging thoughts in low voices, releasing bursts of laughter. Once again: Ugh. I had tried to discourage it once, asking my father whether he thought it was appropriate, but he dismissed me, saying that he was simply glad any means had been found to reach through Brightside’s defenses.

Well, I figured, I’m going to have to take what I can get. At least my lips will be touching something his lips had touched. I raised the cup and savored my shadow-kiss.

“Your part is good,” I said. “Her part, not so much.”

“Wait,” he said, like a doctor, calm but forceful. “For the glow to begin.”

He was looking at me strangely. I held the cup awkwardly. Wait for the glow? What was that supposed to mean? Just as I was about to say that I felt no “glow,” his meaning became clear. A golden warmth spread from my heart to the tips of my fingers.

“Whoa,” I said, eyes opening wide. “That’s incredible. What’s in this?”

He smiled, true humor, revealed itself. “Just some quality leaves.”

The “glow” intensified, like being born on a cloud

away from worldly grief. I had never felt anything like it. Taken in combination with the man before me, my knees began to wobble. He was even a fantastic designer of tea. Did men come any dreamier?

“Brightside,” I said, closing the distance between him, putting my hand on his arm. I was no longer conscious of my body; it was acting on its own motivation.

His eyes looked deep into mine. His expression was one I could only aspire to make. Not acquisitive, not afraid, just observant, taking it all in, with the appropriate wonder.

“Do you ever think... that, like, we might...?”

“Miranda,” said a voice behind us, way too loud, causing me to flinch.

Suddenly self-conscious, I set down the cup. Asym-lore, who had been scheduled this morning to staff the front office, was poking his head out of the garden door.

“There’s a guest in the office,” he said. “You should come. ASAP.”

“Right. Thanks,” I said, avoiding his eyes. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

He eyed us warily before stepping back into the door.

I turned back to Brightside, finding it suddenly alarming how close were standing.

“I guess I should—you know—” I said, beginning to blush. Worse still, I was aware that I was beginning to blush, causing the blush to intensify.

Good old Brightside. He had sympathy for my nerve-racked teenage self. No teasing, no taking advantage of my vulnerability. He grinned and said, “Take your time.”

I wonder now if those words held special significance: “Take your time.” Was that a channeler pun? Did he know,



then, as he picked up his cup and returned to his people watching, that I would pass through great folds and blossoms of time before our story would run its course? Or were his words, as he had made them sound, merely tea talk?

I find it impossible to answer these and other questions now, so many souls having gone over to the other side, myself alone still clinging to this story, all my muses gone.