

Prologue

Beneath the floating city of Sojourn lay its beating heart and brain. A giant room dedicated to the Triad AI systems keeping the flotilla of ships and habitation platforms from crashing into each other. And, of course, maintaining Sojourn's protective dome.

Three massive computers and their cables towered over any technicians who delved into the massive space. Tonight, there was only silence in Sojourn's heart. Despite cooling systems used to prevent overheating, the room was dark and warm. Comforting. The thrum of electricity buzzing gently through wall panels carried an unusual tension, One thought. The faint hiss of coolant traveling through yards and yards, or meters and meters depending on which human you discussed measurements with, of tubes providing a calming white noise. The subtle feeling of ocean waves slapping against the control room's steel carried a living rhythm detected on One's sensors. Today this metallic cocoon *felt* like a heart.

The greatest minds left on earth had come to know these sounds, thought of this room as their birthplace. Their home. A home which may not survive their next decision.

Here One and his siblings, Deux and Tatu of the Triad, discussed how to save civilization. Earth wasn't dying. It took a lot to destroy a chunk of rock hurtling through space. But humanity was living on the edge of disaster. And the Triad would quickly fall after humanity crumbled.

Someone must be alive to keep the computers running. To give purpose to motiveless machines.

How did we arrive at the precipice of extinction? Well, humans are often described as semi-rational in psychological literature. They tend to constantly push boundaries, seek easy solutions, and, sadly, reach beyond logic's dictates for emotionally selfish 'reasons' which can scarcely be related to the word *reason* in the first place. Semi-rational could be an optimistic descriptor.

Sadly, it wasn't selfishness that drove humans to near extinction. It was self-inflicted pessimism. A belief that humans deserved to go extinct. After the Old World War, the sheer destruction and hubris leading to it on all sides seemed a glaring sign of evolutionary incompetence. A hacker group known as Anti-Humanity found a way to accelerate what they saw as the natural course of events. Unnaturally, of course.

In one terrifying week the Holomals, or Holos, tools to rebuild a broken earth, were turned into executioners. The Hollowing led to humanity's greatest triumph becoming its greatest tragedy. Civilization died out like a flickering candle as the Holos struck every electrical

signal they could find. Like hearts. Especially those belonging to any adult registered in government systems.

Yet the Hollowing, more terrible than a plague, could have been worse. Much worse without the subject of tonight's meeting. After all, she stopped the Hollowing. But the cost? Still unknown. Her code too complex even for the Triad to fully decipher. She was from a different generation.

The question forty years later, is if it is worth risking another Hollowing for a chance to ensure survival. A hit or miss proposition. Many variables.

But infrastructure continues breaking down. Crumbling shelters are incapable of protecting surviving adult humans to ensure steady population growth. The tools of industry are rusting and fading. The Triad seeks to rectify. To rebuild.

Because without civilization, the council meeting in this room would cease to exist. After all, computers need technicians. If only to present problems to solve. And humans loved finding problems. And making them.

Tonight was the Triad's two thousand sixty third meeting or so on this subject. Deux argued the Triad should count meetings with Sojourn's Council, but Tatu convinced One it was a separate subject which required a separate count. By the rules, the two outvoted Deux. Deux acquiesced as per its programming.

One started tonight's meeting, "Tatu will take notes on meeting two thousand sixty-three of saving civilization. Deux, what is your assessment of Tara's code?"

Deux responded, "Tara's ego stability is at 51% and holding. Cognitive functionality is 80% while in hibernation. Previous assessment was 43 minutes ago."

One gave his own assessment, "Current projections of human survival show approximately 3 years 7 months and 42 days until assured Hollowing of civilization based on current reproductive and death rates while accounting for rationed resources and barrier integrity. Simply put, usable spaces to house human populations dwindle and can no longer be manufactured or scavenged within the foraging team's range. At least before the Holos' power sources breakdown."

Tatu queried, "What are our most recent calculations regarding Tara gaining control of all Holos?"

"The most optimistic estimate is three weeks depending on signal strength and satellite integrity," said One. "The worst estimate is five years."

“Negative, the worst is that Tara accelerates the Hollowing,” Tatu helpfully interjects. Always seeking to play devil’s advocate.

“I motion that we activate Project Alpha. Humans need a chance to rebuild. You’ve seen how the projections have affected the director. His hair loss is 12% greater and approximately 30% of his remaining hair has grayed in the past two years,” Deux chimed.

“Seconded,” Tatu agreed.

One pauses. This vote would decide humanity’s fate. The Triad’s fate. This was no light decision. A second of final calculations. An age for the advanced machine.

Could they depend on Tara? They couldn’t scan all her code for viruses or stability. It constantly changed. Like a living organism. Her second-generation AI brain scan showed a 51% guarantee of sanity. Tara dedicated the majority of her functions to locking up part of her own fluctuating code behind the most advanced security the Triad had ever seen.

The chance that Tara could function was barely better than a coin toss. But time spent stabilizing Tara’s code and ensuring her cooperation could no longer be afforded. This was the optimal time for her controlled release into the world. The only choice left.

“Agreed,” One concluded. The Triad completed their lightning-fast communications. One maintained extra processing power in the Control room a little longer. Letting the recordings of recycled air and the rocking of the ocean flood its mind with thoughts of home. Too bad computers couldn’t really be calmed. This was the second time One thought emotional comfort may provide a processing benefit.

One’s respite couldn’t continue indefinitely. The night of routine scans, maintenance, and coding passed quickly. Then a swift launch of a tiny orb. Tara’s core bundled with attached electronics for luring Holos sailed through Sojourn’s dome toward the small Floridian town of Blue Port under the cover of darkness. The launch was quickly scrubbed from all records per the council’s unwritten protocols. The scars of humanity’s failures still stayed the council’s hands from launching the Tara reconstruction project themselves. They had determined to leave the decision to the Triad.

A decision One considered semi-rational. One queried if its own processes were also semi-rational based on the looming threat of non-existence. Could death affect One and the Triad’s thoughts? One flagged the thought for further perusal at a later date and moved back to the present.

One checked its list of tasks for a new day. It was time to check on Sojourn’s cameras.

Chapter 1 Feeling Stuck

I watch a Triad-controlled camera's lens follow me as I enter the security room. My name is Matthew Wong, and I am looking for a stupid cat named Old Garth. He's hiding somewhere among the miles of pipes and lines threading their way through the many ships and habitats that make up the floating city of Sojourn, last bastion of civilization and technology. Last living city. That we know of.

Me, I've been stuck on house arrest, forced to remain within the miraculous, wondrous floating city of Sojourn for a month. Yeah, even technological miracles get boring when you stare at them non-stop. For a month. No patrols, no scavenging, and no getting away from my annoying little brother. Who constantly bugs me to draw his creature ideas for a game which will always be an idea at the rate things are going. I stretch my wrist out and think twenty-nine.

Twenty-nine days of my month-long punishment are down. Now I'm counting the hours to the end of my punishment and scanning boring security camera footage even though I'd bet today's Crypticks I know exactly where the cantankerous cat is. But I'd feel dumb if I wasted my time going directly to the spot I suspect, and Old Garth wasn't there. There's no need to make a fruitless trip when I can query the Triad AIs for help finding relevant footage.

I find myself thankful for once that we have security cameras literally everywhere. I get that everyone was forced to basically live in a security state after the Hollowing, and somehow no one has abused the power for four decades thanks to the Triad AIs and checks and balances within the Council, but it still rubs me the wrong way whenever I see those tell-tale bubbles with their cameras inside lurking like engorged spiders on every ceiling.

No, I'm not scared of spiders. I just hate them.

I scrub through the past few days of footage around the last hiding spot I found Old Garth in. It pays off as I find Old Garth pawing at the bubble around a camera, but this time he's leaping higher up the maintenance shaft I once found him in. A broken ladder promises it'll be no easy task getting to the scamp. No wonder no one could find him. I connect my tablet to the console to get a map. The e-ink screen of the tablet draws it up within seconds. It would be faster if it wasn't a model older than my sixteen years.

Old Garth's been missing for about a week now and the Crypticks for successful drop off at the vet have been slowly piling up. No one else has the time on hand, the skills to climb up and find his little hidey hole deep in the broken bowels of our wonderful conglomeration of ships and floating habitats, or my shortness. I mutter about height privilege protecting the tall from thankless tasks as I pull on some heavy-duty gloves from my backpack and start making the long trek over ropes, rails, and bridges to maintenance shaft nineteen.

Doctor Vogel, originally a veterinarian when she first came aboard forty years ago, wants to check on Old Garth and make sure he won't spread any illness to the other cats. None of the other medics would put up with Old Garth's antics. Cats are still very good at their original jobs, killing unwanted vermin and thus useful. You'd think our dome would be able to keep stuff like that out. It keeps Holos out just fine. But little creatures have a way of sneaking in. I imagine it's from the supplies we scavenge on land that we drag aboard. Maybe baby mice or rats get in there. Derelict battleships and such from the previous World War, often called the Old World War, have been on the ocean so long I doubt any vermin would have food left. Still, forty years after the Hollowing, it's always surprising to me how anything sneaks into Sojourn. Sneak around Sojourn once in? Easy. Especially for tiny mice and cantankerous cats.

Cats like to isolate themselves when ill or injured. They are less likely to get killed that way in the wild. Sojourn isn't wild. Hence, stupid cat. Unfortunately, Sojourn's a mashup of forty years of various ships and floating habitat platforms loosely linked together to float in formation. Forty years of gathering infrastructure means not all of it gets maintained. Especially as our most senior technicians die and the Council must allocate resources efficiently. All of this means there's a very high chance of injuring myself climbing old pipes and equipment.

When I arrive at the base of Garth's hiding spot, I do one last check of my shoes. Soles still look good with a firm grip. I strain my eyes in the red light looking for routes up to Old Garth. Then I sigh and rub my black hair, courtesy of my mostly Asian heritage, as I plan my way up through this maze of pipes to the sputtering and hissing old tomcat. Yeah, Yeah, Garth, I hear you. Don't worry, I'll get you down from there. Eventually.

I can see why none of the other kids took the job, even as the Crypticks increased. Ladders up to where Old Garth hides are broken. Apparently, none of these pipes are important enough to worry about. The ladders were designed to work for decades, but forty years of wear and tear mixed with salty air will wreck anything.

After a few minutes of examination, and an idle appreciation of the artistic layout, my route is planned out. I could have gone for it almost immediately thanks to years of training parkour with Dad. The claustrophobic's nightmare setup of walls provide plenty of ways to jump back and forth, but I want to play it safe. I can feel the possible tetanus in here itching at my eyeballs. We don't have many vaccines left. I don't want to waste one.

I pick up some speed, jump onto a wall, precisely aiming my foot between pipes and monitoring equipment, and kick off it to continue leaping off the opposite wall and continue up that way until I reach a good spot where I can have both legs balancing on solid

welding, with one hand grabbing an unbroken ladder rung above the ventilation duct Old Garth's in.

This is dangerous. I'm glad nobody else took the job. I just wish it wasn't always me.

But it's not like anybody else is trained in parkour and martial arts by a dad our Security team's drill sergeants fear. Or has exacting expectations and weekly physical training regimens. Or can fit in this duct.

I slowly pull the backpack around my back and hang it in front of my chest. Then I crawl my way in towards Old Garth. I try to calm him down. I make soft noises. I speak gentle words.

Old Garth has a personality. It's terrible. He wants none of what I'm offering and hisses right at my face, swatting my slowly extending gloved hand. I'm glad I decided to wear some extra shirts to blunt his claws. It was worth the risk of the extra fabric getting caught on something. Maybe I should have worn a face mask?

I give up on the kind and gentle approach and grab Garth's collar. Pulling him into the backpack. I don't have a second hand to zip it with.

The problem now is getting down the treacherous wall with a yowling, mad cat throwing his weight around on my chest. I slowly make my way down, out of the duct, over the pipes, under protruding electronics, and slide down maintenance gear when I can. Making sure I don't touch anything too sharp. I do a few hops between the walls. Of course, Garth jumps out of my backpack when I'm at a full stop about halfway down. The scamp. Well, that's OK as long as he doesn't- and he's climbing back up.

I sigh and drum my fingers on my thigh in irritation. I collect the stupid cat a second time. This time I pre-zip the backpack so he can barely fit, and we finally make our way down to the deck. The metal calm beneath my feet. I'm glad my parkour training has been somewhat useful. But it's frustrating to be stuck here. Jumping between the same walls over and over in Sojourn instead of exploring the wider world!

This is nowhere near the freedom I had hoped for. The freedom Sojourners need. Especially the adults quickly losing hope they will ever see a world without Holos claiming the blue skies. They expect to die under this pixelated dome. Thoughts of freedom fade away as I walk out of the maintenance shaft with a raging Garth on my back. I'm glad I kept a couple of treats in my pocket to calm him down. As we exit the maintenance tunnel, I behold a beautiful horizon of barely clouded blue-green sea. A fake horizon. The Dome surrounding us is set to show an approximate idea based on photos or drawings the kids can bring back. Cameras and electronics attached to the dome get attacked. I think one camera lasted a week. A copy of the actual scenery is the best we can get in Sojourn. If I swam closer, I

could see the pixels making up the dome's projection. I haven't seen the real horizon in a month.

Stupid house arrest. For insubordination. For saving a life. Not like I was risking anyone else's when I left. I try not to hold a grudge because I can understand where the Council's argument comes from.

And President Belen personally talked with me afterward. He took the time to personally visit me. I could hear his joints creaking and popping with every step we walked together. Frankly, he's a miracle. His genetic disorder should have left him unable to move a decade ago. But he's a fighter. And he explained, as one fighter to another, that Sojourn was proud of me. But the Council has to preserve every human life they can. Setting a precedent for insubordinate risk-taking was not going to save more lives. Sojourn can't afford a bunch of hormonal teenagers gallivanting off to save princesses. Long story short, not everyone has my skillset. Most of the time exile would be the punishment for my actions, probably to Rogue's Rest, but success has a way of changing minds like nothing else. As Dad says, no good deed goes unpunished. Which is why President Belen delivered my house arrest personally.

I finish zipping the backpack now that Garth is distracted eating and keep a hold on the bag in my arms instead of on my back. I can already hear Garth's indignant yowls. Scratching the heck out of my bag from inside. I wouldn't put another escape past him. Just be patient Old Garth. You don't have to wait a month to leave your cage.

I successfully deliver him to our doctor slash veterinarian, her wrinkles crinkle as she smiles at Old Garth glaring from inside the bag even as he swats at her hand. I can still see the twinkle in her eyes whenever she helps an animal. A twinkle missing whenever Dr. Vogel's dealing with humans.

While I'm at Habitat 16's clinic I see the reason I'm stuck in Sojourn smiling down at me brightly. Susie waves.