

PETS

Harlan Venable resisted an urge to charge ahead of his Secret Service escorts and get to the war room as quickly as possible. He appreciated their duty to protect him as the President, but in the current situation, seconds might mean everything, not only to the people of the United States of America, but to the entire world.

Finally, automatic doors parted, and he entered the organized chaos of the underground room. Large monitors lined every wall of the chamber, but one drew Venable's attention immediately. It displayed a depiction of the earth surrounded by dozens of wedge-shaped spacecraft. Although fifteen years separated him from his time as a general, he experienced a rush of combat adrenaline as though he had never left the military.

"Status," he barked.

"No change, sir."

Venable remembered the man's name was Thomas. "Where do they come from?"

"Unknown, sir. They simply appeared."

"Appeared?" he asked absently, looking to another screen filled with letters and symbols flashing by too fast to read.

"Appeared. As if they were sitting out there all along. We're guessing they have some means of cloaking their ships."

Beneath his sense of wonder lurked indignation. How dare they? "Weapons?"

"Unknown, sir."

"Any attempts at communication?"

"We've tried, sir," Thomas reported humbly. He pointed at the screen which had captured Venable's attention. "They've been sending radio frequency transmissions nonstop, but we can't make heads or tails of what they mean."

"That shouldn't be too surprising. If alien visitors showed up speaking English, that would be surprising."

"A few minutes ago, we began sending the transmissions through a computer and got some results. It managed to pick out actual words in all kinds of languages--English, Mandarin Chinese, German, Russian, Hebrew--but all jumbled together in no particular order."

"Babbling," another man piped up.

Venable turned on him. "What?"

"A feedback way of learning language. Infants can make any and all sounds, but the ones that don't get repeated fall away."

One of his bodyguards leaned in close behind him. "Nelson, sir. Linguist."

"So, Nelson. Are you saying they are sending us words and waiting to see what comes back as a means of learning to communicate?"

Nelson shrugged. "Just a guess."

The room fell quiet for a minute with everyone staring at displays.

"What are they doing out there?" Venable demanded rhetorically. He then realized asking questions no one could answer only made him appear less in command. He looked at the screen showing his world besieged and wondered what he would do as Commander-in-Chief if those things attacked.

"Look!" Nelson yelled. "The words have all gone to English."

Indeed, the flurry of words had slowed considerably, no longer filling the screen in a blur. Silence reigned again as all eyes converged on it.

"Sure as hell hope they're friendly," someone muttered.

As if in response, the screen flickered, went black, and then provided three words.

Surrender or die.

Venable felt anger welling up even as his scalp tingled.

"Surrender? Like hell!"

###

Miriam Whittaker stared hard at her computer, memorizing every detail of the data displayed about Richard Hutchins. She shut her eyes and ticked off the pertinent facts--place and year of birth, parents' names, last known address, education--in a quick self-quiz. Satisfied, she pressed the delete key on her computer, erasing Hutchins from the database. For the Masters, he ceased to exist.

She rubbed tired eyes. Seven months since the Masters had arrived and issued their ultimatum. She fought back tears at the thought of Patrick. Their wedding would have taken place three weeks after the invasion, but Patrick had chosen to fight and died with millions of others. She had seen footage on TV of the first attempts to kill the marauding aliens before broadcasts shut down. Ordinary bullets simply bounced off them, and retaliation was swift and merciless. Even the most sophisticated weapons were no match, with fighter jets destroyed before they reached attack range of the landed vessels. Only people who acquiesced were allowed to live, and even some of those later lost their lives for mere impertinence. And the children . . .

Three quick raps on her office door brought her back to the present.

Nicholas Bosworth grinned at her from across the desk. "Hi, Miri."

"Hello, Nick." She touched the translator device by her ear out of habit, a constant reminder that someone was always listening. The Masters understood most human languages, including an amount of slang and idiom, but could not speak, so they had provided human engineers with the knowledge to construct the translators. Masters could listen to what humans said from a distance, and she could understand messages any Masters directed at her. Its clumsy shape made it uncomfortable, though, and she wished she could take it off.

Nicholas had been Patrick's best friend. He would have been best man at the wedding, the only person she knew who had survived. In his other life, he had been a real estate genius with a string of short-term girlfriends and an enviable lifestyle. When Patrick went to fight the invaders, Nick promised his friend he would stay and protect her. They hid in the subway tunnel with a few dozen other people and surrendered a week later. After three days of living penned like livestock in a sports stadium, their Masters selected them as pets.

Nick touched his own translator. "Are you coming tonight?"

"Sure," she agreed, picking up his elaborately casual tone. "I wouldn't miss glee club."

"Good," Nick said, his infectious smile blooming again. "I hear we have some new sheet music. A couple of songs."

Excitement sent a shiver down her spine. "That's great. I happened to think of a couple of more we could get. I have to go home first, but I'll be there."

"Terrific," he said with a wink. "Catch you later."

Miri watched the door after he left it. How fortunate he too had chosen to live via surrender, and in spite of all the losses, somehow maintained a constantly up-beat attitude. He was someone she could talk to and trust, a ray of light on an otherwise bleak horizon. Having a friend made it possible to carry on the daily charade.

Miri went back to her computer screen and considered herself fortunate that her assigned task only required her to sit before a computer. Nick had to go from place to place talking to refugees and compiling lists of names which he would bring her. Miri would then enter the names of the living and erase the records of the dead. Why the Masters wanted such information remained a mystery.

She shook herself from her musings and checked her watch. The thought of going home brought on a wave of weariness. She gathered her belongings, thinking how home once meant being with Patrick, sharing stories about their day. Home had once been a nice two-bedroom apartment, small and cozy. But all that had changed when they came. Everything had changed.

As she left City Hall, the emptiness of the once-bustling streets caught her by surprise as it did every day even after so many months. Grief clutched at her at the thought of how many had died, three quarters of Earth's population by some estimates, but no one could say for certain. No one even knew where they came from; Masters did not explain or discuss or crow about their conquest. At glee club, people shared observations and bits of information they picked up, and they speculated the Masters were opportunists, taking over worlds and using any intelligent natives to do their work. They would have wiped out every human being on the planet had they not discovered they needed them to keep fundamental services such as utilities running.

Miri dragged herself up the wide stone steps of the art museum where her Master had chosen to live. She avoided the characteristic blasted hole required for it to enter and pushed through the revolving doors instead, steeling herself for the daily homecoming routine. Her Master, as usual, waited in the main exhibition hall.

"There you are."

The words came in Miri's own voice with a subtle echo, the translator tapping into her brain's speech centers to make word sounds of the thoughts of the Masters. The only problem with the

method was that inflections were lost; she could not tell if it might be cooing fondly or admonishing angrily.

Although she saw the beast every day, its appearance still filled her with awe. Twenty feet tall, it stood on two stumpy legs reminiscent of an elephant's. The body was a bottom-heavy blob covered in brown, suede-like fur--an obscene imitation of a giant chocolate kiss. Four thick limbs extended from the sides of the blob, two left and two right, as boneless as tentacles. Near where the body tapered at the top, a single black orb of an eye peered out. Below that, a sphincter-like aperture which related to a mouth only by position since Masters did not use them for either feeding or speech.

She stopped a few paces in front of it and stood still. The two top limbs reached for her, and she shut her eyes as the approaching rounded ends separated into three long digits each. She forced herself to stay relaxed as they wrapped around her torso because cringing or tension might be mistaken for resistance. A gust of its breath, smelling of burnt garlic, wafted over her as her feet left the ground and her body went horizontal. Misery and despair made her want to cry, but she held back as the Master cradled her in its arms, rocking her like an infant.

The short fur against her cheek felt as smooth as a seal pelt. The tip of a digit stroked her head lightly. From deep

within its body came a sound like a steady snore. Was it a sound of pleasure? Something meant for her? Rhythmic, lulling, soothing. Miri caught herself relaxing under a sense of protection and comfort.

No! They are killers! They killed Patrick and millions of others. Remember what they did to the children!

"You must be hungry," the Master said and proceeded to lower her to the floor. "You should go to your room."

Miri's knees threatened to give out when she touched down, but she managed not to fall. "May I go to glee club tonight?"

An imitation of a sigh whispered in her head. "You may. First you must eat."

Everyone she had talked to said their Masters were curious about their humans' needs. Eating seemed to fascinate them, the variety of foods, the humans' obvious enjoyment of it, and the rituals attached to it. No one, however, had ever seen a Master take sustenance in any fashion, and people speculated they did not need to or perhaps the process of fueling their bodies was entirely different.

Miri retreated, feeling the Master's eye follow her until she turned down the corridor toward the former offices that had become her home. Rather luxurious compared to those of her friends; Nick lived in a dressing room of the old opera house. She slept on a sofa and had a small kitchen at her disposal. A

man named Hunnicutt delivered food supplies to homes of Masters with humans in residence, although Miri never saw him.

She hurriedly made dinner of some tuna salad and fruit, eager to get to glee club which met three times a week. The Masters despised music in all forms and had forbid it soon after conquest. Someone had come up with the glee club idea, and the Masters allowed it after much pleading by their human pets that they needed contact with other humans and music was an important part of socializing. At meetings, no one wore a translator so their Masters would not have to endure music, providing the only chance for humans to talk without Masters listening in.

Her master's eye was closed as she crept through the lobby to the main exit.

"Do not be too late," came the voice in her head when she had nearly reached the door. "Last time you stayed much too long."

Again, without any sort of emotional overtones, Miri could not tell the Master's intent. Was it angry? Suspicious? Might it prevent her from attending glee club in the future? She could not shrug it off as it might be an important development. Once outside, she fought an urge to hurry; if a Master were watching, it might suspect something if she hurried.

She welcomed the sight of the synagogue where the club met, her only safe haven. Just inside the door, she stopped to

deposit her translator in one of the metal boxes provided and felt suddenly lighter without it. Then she made her way down to the basement community center, eager to get the thoughts of others about what her Master had said.

The members of her cell were already seating themselves at the central table while those in the ring of twenty-nine chairs around it received their sheet music. Miri took a place at the table next to Nick, sharing smiles all around: Howard, the stockbroker; LaVonna, the grade school teacher; Bob, the construction foreman; Janet, the grandmother; Neil, the hairdresser; Amanda, the dentist. They waited for those in the outer circle to commence singing.

"I've got two more people for the network," Nick began in a hushed voice, the new "music" he had mentioned to Miri earlier. "Found them in a sub-basement about eight blocks from here. Couple of teenaged kids with no Masters so they're free to move around. I'll give them a test message and see how they do as transports. If they pass, I'll give the names to Miri tomorrow so she can erase them."

"Richard Hutchins and Denise Reinhart have been erased," Miri reported. She had told Nick as much earlier in their coded conversation, although the two were very much alive. While no one could be certain it did any good, the plan to provide false information and hide the whereabouts of people continued. "Um,

my Master said something to me on my way out tonight." She repeated the admonishment. "I'm a little worried it suspects something."

"Maybe it just resents you're being away from it," Howard remarked.

"Or maybe it does suspect something," Janet agreed. "We have a lot of new people coming into the network these days. What if the Masters are planting spies among us?"

"It was a risk we always faced," LaVonna said. "But what would make a human turn against his own kind in favor of them?"

"Anybody's been around them things long enough knows you don't curry no favor with them," Bob reminded them. "And I still believe they started taking us in to study us."

"We shouldn't take it lightly," Nick said firmly. "Especially when you hear what Amanda's got."

The gray-haired dentist cleared her throat. "I received word we have someone working at a former Center for Disease Control lab. He has access to some viruses that might kill the Masters. The plan is to deliver a mix of them, specially arranged to be disseminated through the air, to major cities and drop them like bombs near the largest concentrations of Masters."

Silence among the cell members let half a verse of a song filter through.

"Planes are dangerous," Bob objected. "Think about what happened to the Air Force jets."

"Small planes won't look threatening," Amanda retorted. "Hopefully."

"Why do they think these viruses will work?" Howard questioned. "We've tried others."

"Yes, but those were manmade, engineered. Frankly, with no idea about their physiology, it would have been a miracle if they had worked. The new ones are diseases thought eradicated by vaccines."

"Such as?" Nick asked.

"Poliomyelitis," Amanda replied hesitantly. "Rubella, chicken pox."

"All childhood diseases," LaVonna observed bitterly. The pain written on her face would never be erased.

"Yes," Amanda agreed with a sympathetic note. "We know the Masters exterminated all children because they thought them a subspecies which carried diseases. If they're afraid of diseases from children, then that's what we'll go with."

"If we let all those loose on the world again, what happens to future generations?" Janet wondered.

Nick looked at her pointedly. "If we don't let them loose on the world, there won't be any future generations. We in this group all agreed to that. As to whether or not they'll work, we

don't know. Maybe they will, or maybe the Masters will just get sick and decide this ain't the greatest place to live."

"And the meek shall inherit the earth," LaVonna quoted with a sad smile.

"Not meek," Miri countered. "Just patient."

"We can still vaccinate our own," Amanda argued. "It may be tricky, though. Supplies may not be readily available where needed."

"And if the Masters are getting suspicious?" Neil demanded. "What if Miri's Master is just the first? Or the most vocal?"

"I've been wondering lately about all this data gathering they insist on," Howard put in. "Is there a larger goal than finding new slave labor?"

"Too many questions and not enough answers," Bob said as he usually did at an impasse. "And what you said about agreeing to no children while they are here, that's just us. We don't know what's going on in the rest of the world. We need a leader, someone to keep all the plans together. I think Nick should be our leader."

Nick sighed with exasperation. "We've been through this a hundred times."

"Nick's right," Miri defended. "If we all start turning to one person as leader, it might draw more suspicion."

"Besides that," Nick added. "Broad-scale communication is risky if not impossible."

"We're all in this together," Janet stated firmly. "We work together to a common goal. We all saw where humanity's last leadership structures got us! That warmonger Venable . . ."

The chorus neared the end of its song, which would conclude the first cell meeting.

"Should I be concerned?" Miri asked the group. "Has anyone else's Master said anything suspicious?"

Headshakes all around the table were her answer.

Nick gave her one of his rogue smiles. "Maybe yours is just fond of you. Maybe it misses you."

Normally, his irreverence seemed charming, but now it only increased her anxiety. "If it starts to miss me too much, it might take me out of my job or stop letting me come here."

The song ended; chairs scraped and feet shuffled as the next group prepared to take the table. Neil stayed behind to relay their discussion to the next cell. Nick kept stealing glances at her as they took seats in the outer ring. She wished she could talk to him some more, but talk was only for the central table with the singers for covering sound.

She watched the time carefully through the rest of the meeting, singing along without the pleasure it usually provided. After the last cell had met and the final song faded away, she

hastily left, picked up her translator, and rushed out to get home as quickly as possible lest the Master become angry.

"Miri, wait!"

She paused half a block down the street and turned to wait for Nick to trot over to her. Whatever could he say while she wore the translator? She pointed to it when he reached her, out of breath.

"I just wanted to say that I didn't mean to tease you," he said formally. "It was insensitive of me."

A smile took over her face at his cleverly scripted words. "That's all right. I didn't take offense."

"I'll see you tomorrow, then. Good night."

"Good night."

He turned away, home to the opera house a few blocks in the opposite direction to hers. She had to agree with Bob in a way; if anyone could be a leader, it would be Nick. He was smart, clever, charming, knew his way around, and everyone looked up to him. Not for the first time, she considered how hard it must be for a man like him to be a pet. Then she hurried on homeward.

She crept quietly into the dark museum, prepared to be stopped, questioned, and--she shuddered--cuddled. Instead, her Master's eye appeared closed and it took no notice of her. Was it sleeping? Did Masters actually sleep? Or was it doing something else? Its slightly-open mouth provided a faint whiff

of garlic and a glimmer of white light within. At the Master's will, the orifice could dilate to an enormous extent to unleash a fiery storm of that white light to vaporize anyone or anything in its path. With another shudder, Miri tiptoed away, relaxing only when she shut the door on her quarters. Exhausted from another day of walking on eggshells, she curled up on the sofa and quickly fell asleep.

The nightly dream-memory of watching hundreds of people being incinerated by an advancing column of Masters woke her soon after. The image of those gaping maws hurling death stayed in her mind some minutes after the dream ended. Hugging her pillow to her, she bit on a corner of it to keep from screaming.

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Morning came too soon as it had for months. Miri stared at the ceiling for a bit, coming to terms with reality. However much sleep she managed to get, the rejuvenating effects of rest quickly evaporated under a sense of loss of the world as it had been. Tears stung her eyes for a moment before the familiar numbness set in, the suppression of emotion required to keep on living. She remembered her Master's sudden closer attention to her activities, and an edge of anxiety coupled with the dreary despair.

After breakfast, she packed a sandwich for lunch and prepared to head to work. She crossed her fingers when she reached the lobby, hoping to sneak out.

"Wait," her Master said as she neared the doors. "We require information."

Mild anxiety grew tenfold. Miri changed course to stand before it, head bowed, humble, passive.

"The one who brings your food," it said. "We asked why its spine is not straight. It said because it is old. Explain this."

Her friends all said their Masters also referred to themselves as "we," and there was evidence that whatever one Master learned, the others knew immediately. She wondered for the hundredth time if all Masters shared consciousness in some fashion, so that "we" truly meant all of them.

"Humans grow old. They begin as infants and change as they mature. In the later years, the body becomes weaker and more fragile. Sometimes, humans develop physical conditions which make standing upright difficult." She thought of poor Hunnicutt, an old man doing a laborious job.

"Are you old?"

"No. Most people would consider me fairly young. My age is thirty-one years. That would be--"

"We know years. When will you be old?"

"I guess when I reach seventy or so."

The Master did not respond for several tedious minutes.

"Humans die when they become old?"

"Eventually, yes. It's different for each individual. For some, it's just their time. Others have organ failures or contract diseases." An odd sensation startled her, and although it did not register as speech, she felt something coming from the Master. Was it discomfort? Fear? Did it know such emotions? "It's the cycle of life for us. Each generation has its time and then its children carry on. It's how our species survives."

"Do you have children?"

"No," she answered, fighting to hide the bitterness. Had she and Patrick married . . . Then an image flashed to mind of the Masters ringing a schoolyard full of children and killing them all, and she thought of LaVonna, one of the teachers who had obediently herded them there.

"But you have mated in the past."

Miri flinched and her face felt warm. No point in denying it; Masters were uncannily adept at perceiving lies. "Yes."

"And you did not produce offspring. Explain."

"Well, women are not constantly fertile," she said carefully. "I also took hormones to prevent it until I was ready."

"Other humans do this?"

"Only females. Males have . . . other methods."

After a longish silence, it startled her with a change of subject. "Did you enjoy your music meeting?"

"Yes. I like music and I like visiting with my kind."

It did not reply.

"I hope you will let me continue to do so," she prompted.

"Be on your way to your work. Do not be late returning."

Miri hurriedly left the great hall, relieved to be spared the usual greeting. Walking to work, she replayed the exchange in her mind. The way it reacted to the word "disease" provided hope for the planned spread of viruses working, but what to make of the rest? People aging, cycle of life, procreation . . .

She almost stopped in her tracks at the conclusion that sprang to mind and then hurried onward. She had to talk to Nick, somehow find a way to meet in private and tell him. It could not wait until the next club meeting.

She forced herself to remain outwardly calm while the danger boiled within. She settled in at her desk and started her computer. Until Nick came, she had little to do, so she played solitaire, wondering if any Masters watched her, wondering if her worst fears might be true.

Nick arrived at ten. "Good morning," he greeted somewhat stiffly.

His normally relaxed features seemed pulled tight, but Miri tried to keep all trace of her concern out of her tone. "Good morning. Isn't it a beautiful day?"

He flinched, ever so slightly, at the coded phrase indicating her urgent need to convey information.

"Yes, it is," he finally agreed and managed to sound quite normal. "How about some coffee? I think there's some in the machine downstairs."

"Oh, good." Is my Master listening? Did I sound too relieved? "We've been out of it for days."

"I'll bring you some," he offered and pantomimed removing her translator and then going with him.

As eager as she was to talk to him, she could not imagine how they would manage it. She set the device on her desk and followed him into the corridor. Nick motioned her to a utility closet and closed them inside. The small space required them to stand face to face, bodies nearly touching. A ventilating shaft vibrated and rattled beside them in the airless darkness, providing cover for conversation.

"I had to talk to you, and it can't wait for the next glee club," she whispered hoarsely.

"I need to tell you something too," he husked. "But since yours couldn't wait . . .

In hopes what he had might allay her fears, she held back.
"You first."

"Amanda heard that several virus packages have been released."

"Here?"

"I'm not sure, but if it hasn't, it will be soon. No word on effect yet. But I also wanted to tell you we need to be very careful. Last night, my master asked me what I said to you that I apologized for. I said I teased you because you messed up on one of the songs and made you feel bad, and I think it bought it, but the point is, they were watching us, paying attention to what they hear. What have you got?"

A shiver coursed down her back. "I got the third degree this morning." She repeated the entire conversation. "The mention of diseases seemed to upset it. I felt something, a reaction." Although the closet was stuffy, she shivered again and felt her hands trembling. "Then I got the idea that they're looking for ways to prevent people from bearing children. And if they do . . ."

"That's a hell of a leap, Miri," he chided. "I would think by this time they realize they need humans and that we don't live forever. Your exchange this morning will confirm that. We'll bring it up at next meeting."

It seemed like too little too late. "I'm scared, Nick. They're up to something. I feel it."

He surprised her by putting his arms around her. "It's been that way from the minute they got here. But we're up to something too, so we have to make sure not to do anything different or unusual. We just do our jobs as we have been, do everything normal."

The embrace proved as comforting as his calm assurance, and suddenly, her hypothesis seemed less probable. "I get so tired sometimes," she confessed. "I wish I could be the person I was before, but I always have to be careful, keep up the act, make sure I don't make it mad."

"I know," he agreed. "We're all on the same leaky raft." He rubbed her back lightly. "Maybe soon, we'll see some results. We just have to hang on."

She did not want the comfort of another human's touch to end. "I don't know what I would do without you, Nick. You're the only reason I have to hang on."

After another moment, he pulled away. "We should get back to work. I'll see you later." In the gloom, she saw the ghost of a fond smile. "Stay strong."

They left the closet, and Miri went back to her office. Alone again in the silence, anxiety ratcheted up again. The hardest thing was not knowing: what the Masters wanted,

expected, thought; what other people in the world were doing. The plan to unleash diseases had provided a ray of hope, but if the Masters did plan to sterilize humans . . . She fought down tears, remembering the lessons learned early on in the post-invasion world: a person simply could not continue very long under a sense of doom. Numbness was better.

At noon, she took her lunch to the bench across the street from City Hall with the hope of seeing somebody, anybody. No one else was about, the city enveloped in unearthly silence. Along the street, other buildings featured the gaping hole marking a Master in residence, and it seemed as though they had always been that way. Eating her sandwich, she watched litter and debris blow lazily up the pavement, now cracked and sprouting weeds. But the cool air smelled clean with no vehicle exhaust to foul it. Appreciate the small things; they are all you get.

A sound broke the stillness, a distantly familiar sound which took a few minutes to identify. An airplane! Miri lurched to her feet and searched the sky for it, thinking about the virus package with a surge of hope. Her breath caught when she spotted the craft flying low in the west, small and white with a red tail. She watched it slowly cross the sky, unable to tear her gaze away. How long since she had seen an airplane? Maybe not since the invasion. Perhaps it was merely a human searching for more slave labor for the Masters. Even so, seeing it,

watching it, seemed symbolic of freedom, an echo of what once had been.

A second later, a ball of white light engulfed the plane and it vanished. Horror stopped her breath for a moment. Had the virus package been on that plane? Had it been delivered or destroyed? Did the Masters know about the plot?

"Come home at once."

Miri winced at her own voice in her head at full volume. The order on the heels of the plane's destruction could only mean one thing. Her hands shook as she wadded the remains of her lunch and threw them at an overflowing trashcan. She considered what might reasonably happen as she trudged home. Her Master might question her, and she would be unable to conceal her knowledge. It might already know of her involvement in the plotting of the glee clubs. It might kill her. Terror made tears impossible.

She presented herself in the main hall.

"We require information from you," her Master said. "Do you like your current tasks?"

The question took her aback, not among the possibilities she had considered. Wariness remained since the beast did not attempt to pick her up. "The work is not difficult."

"The human you interact with. Do you like it?"

"Nick?" Masters generally ignored human names, either because they did not understand them or because disregarding them kept the humans in their place. "Yes, I like him. He's a friend."

"Friend? Explain."

A lump filled her throat: the Masters knew about the plan and knew she and Nick had been part of the conspiracy. They somehow knew about their meeting in the closet. Had Nick been punished for it? Or would he be? The thought of what had or might become of him filled her with horror, but she fought to maintain a calm front.

"Nick and I have known each other a long time. We enjoy each other's company and we trust each other."

Silence for an excruciating minute. "You will now have a new task to do."

A new task at least meant it did not plan to kill her, but what about Nick? Was he all right? Do not let it see how afraid you are! "What is my new task?"

"Wait. They will be here soon."

Miri did not ask the obvious question, frantically trying to find the connecting thread and determine its intentions. As silent minutes ticked by, apprehension grew, and she wondered if it could see her shaking.

"They are here."

She turned to see another Master entering through the hole in the outer wall. It lumbered over next to her Master, their two black eyes staring at her.

Her heart fell to the pit of her stomach when Nick came in via the revolving door looking humbled and small. He offered a faint headshake to indicate he did not know what was going on. Again, she feared the worst as he stood beside her.

"We need humans to operate essential machines and systems." A slight difference in cadence and speech style told her the words came from Nick's Master.

"Humans age," her Master added. "Their useful lifespan is limited. Many become frail and unable to work."

Miri dared a peek at Nick. Did he look frightened?

His Master spoke. "You will mate and create more humans."

She staggered back a step, flabbergasted. She looked to Nick who stared back with equal shock.

Then he rallied. "Humans usually choose their own mates," he ventured with a touch of defiance.

"Unacceptable. You are at reproductive stage and of suitably healthy nature."

"You indicated you were friends," Miri's Master said.

"I have many friends," she replied as calmly as possible.

"But I would not necessarily mate with them."

"We continue to seek others who may breed," Nick's Master stated. "But as your species requires much time to mature, we must begin immediately."

"We have observed your reproductive method," her Master continued. "But we must know how much time is required for you to produce."

Nick's face grew red, and he cleared his throat. "We can't even guess. It's not something we can control."

"As I said earlier, females are not always fertile," Miri chimed in. She felt her own blush starting and a churn of nausea in her stomach.

"Are you fertile now?" her Master asked.

"I don't know."

"Unacceptable," the other said. "You will endeavor to reproduce until you succeed."

She saw Nick wince. "It may take time. Once we . . . mate, there are tests which can determine success after a few days. There may be--"

"Silence!" his Master ordered. Its orifice opened a tiny bit in palpable threat. "Commence your efforts."

Nick stole a look at her. "Damn, this is awkward."

"Explain!"

"Um, begging your pardon," Miri blurted. "Humans usually do this in privacy."

"Permitted," Miri's Master said. "We do not need to observe."

"Thank God for that," Nick muttered.

"Go to your quarters," her Master commanded. "Waste no more time."

She reached for Nick's hand and took it. He raised his head with a hesitant smile. She tried to sort out the confusion of feelings as she led him to her room. Would she and Nick be essentially married, or would the Masters decide who mated with whom and when? Did the Masters appreciate what it took to raise a child? If she became pregnant, what would happen to their child? Would it begin the first generation to never know freedom? Or would it die an early death from the diseases meant to kill Masters?

"I'm sorry, Miri," Nick whispered hoarsely. "This never entered my mind."

"It's all right," she told him. How odd to be the one offering comfort and reassurance. "If this had to happen, I'm glad it's with you." She cast a glance at the sofa she slept on.

"Guess it'll have to do." Nick moved toward her and put his arms around her, but the gesture felt stiff and uncomfortable.

"What's really weird is how quickly I accepted having to obey them," she admitted.

He made a wistful smile. "Well, we've all been in survival mode for a while. When we get a do-or-die ultimatum, we automatically know what the decision must be."

A lump formed in her throat. "Patrick and I . . . I feel disloyal."

"Patrick is gone," Nick comforted. "This is about survival."

Miri positioned herself to whisper in his ear without the translator. "I saw the plane. They destroyed it."

"I saw it too," he whispered back. He pulled away and shook his head in answer to her unasked question.

No choice then, she thought. *If we must to stay alive . . .*

"Stop delaying," Nick's Master insisted, making them both jump. "We wish to leave as soon as possible. We do not feel well."

Her breath caught in surprise, followed by rush of hope. A smile slowly spread on Nick's face.

THE END