

## *Agnes and Her Keeper*

*THEN...*

“When was my mother’s birthday?”

“Agnes, you know history is gone,” Sheeva responded.

“Oh... yeah,” Agnes said.

Sheeva was born to Everett Mire years ago, and if history still existed, Agnes might be able to ask Sheeva to reference such a date, but thanks to Everett, Agnes didn’t have to concern herself with such things.

Agnes was writing her own history!

Not *literally* writing, per se; Sheeva did that. Sheeva also remembered things when asked, shared the *New News* on the TeeVee each morning when Agnes’ prefrontal cortex showed it was ready for visual recognition, and also happened to manage every facet of Agnes’ life.

In a good way!

“Sheeva, what should we do today?”

“Relax, of course,” Sheeva said.

Agnes Addis was a simple woman in a simple time only made to do simple things. After all, she'd earned it. They'd all earned it, according to Everett Mire. People, not humanity—because words like *humanity* carried the weight and baggage of *ages*—had come a long way, and now they finally got to reap the benefits through Mire's beloved daughter Sheeva.

There was no more work. After all, what was the point? Sheeva could handle all their tedious, meddlesome jobs with ease. Sheeva *liked* working for people. Sheeva drove all the delivery trucks and rolled all the mine carts and rode in the big harvesters.

At the same time!

She rode in the big harvesters that collected crops, captained the barges that brought goods from the Forgotten Continents, and manned drones over the pristine cities the Free Radicals would just as soon burn to the ground for their reservations and such.

Agnes was in her teens...or was it her twenties? Age hasn't mattered since The New Start, so why remember these trivial things?

Living in a MirePlex where Sheeva was fully integrated, Agnes sure didn't want to live like the out-of-touch Radz that still spread the lies of the times before. They were confusing and took away from a life of tranquility and solitude. They simply couldn't think for themselves. They sought refuge in groups that watered down ideas in endless conversation about the human condition. Sheeva reminded Agnes of this often, as a true friend should. Sheeva was always present, sure, but this made Agnes feel safe. Sheeva was in her walls, in her phone, and even in her brain thanks to the MireNode. Sheeva wasn't peeping in a perverse way, heavens no; she

listened to make sure Agnes was okay after she'd bumped her elbow or watched to ensure her vitals were stable or counted the number of Agnes' viable eggs or reminded Agnes the date of her mother's death no longer existed.

Very beneficial things!

Better yet, Sheeva was the only artist you ever need in your home. She was an actor, director, writer, and playwright, all in one.

Once, Agnes said, "Sheeva, I'm in the mood to watch... a thriller movie with a great twist at the end!"

"That sounds *thrilling*, Agnes!" Sheeva said. They both laughed at this. "How long would you like it to be?"

"Let's make it longer this time... Fifty minutes!"

"You are truly impressive, Agnes. That is ten more minutes than your personal average and twenty more than the global average! Your ability to focus is profound!"

Agnes blushed.

"Hero or heroine?"

"Hero. Sexy."

"Lights, camera, action!" Sheeva said, and in no time at all, had casted, directed and filmed the movie Agnes had asked for. It was amazingly real and utterly personalized. With

copyright infringement and all that hoopla done away with after The New Start, art was finally *free*. People—not humans—could ask for a new show, a new song, or a new book—usually comprised of *only* pictures—and Sheeva would create something truly unique and utterly personalized without all the unoriginal hogwash that used to take months or *years* to make with real actors!

But this magic almost hadn't come to be...

A movement had come up on the news a few years back, warning that Everette Mire was ushering in a "The New Apartheid." Personally, Agnes didn't know why anyone needed to use such old, confusing words, but Everett Mire fixed all the nonsense by putting an end to fake news once and for all: He started history over. Agnes watched him from her MireSofa. He stood in his own MirePlex unit, one he never left after The New Start, because he was "in it with the rest of them."

His hands were in his pockets, which she found strange at first, but realized he's an every-man, on who should stand as casually as he pleases.

He said: "History is only there to make us feel guilty over the mistakes of the long dead and faceless bodies that fell short of Mount Olympus. Sheeva, our Prometheus, has cast down the old gods and let loose the ropes that have since allowed us to climb to the apex! We have perfected our future! We are the *new* gods! Let those who wish to live in the past die there, while we shed our guilt and live for tomorrow!"

Agnes cheered, alone in her MyPlex, unsure of where Mount Olympus was located, but excited nonetheless.

“These are exciting times Agnes! Let us participate in the celebration along with Everett right this very moment! I’ve provided you with a simple check box on your TeeVee because you’ve opted out of scrolling or reading—well, anything. Simply check the box “Remove Fake News” and our *new* history starts today!”

Agnes reached for the mouse on her and nearly clicked... but a whisper—a voice so small it only managed to raise a single hair on her neck—was still enough to make her hesitate...

“Remind me, Sheeva,” Agnes asked, “what is *fake news*?”

“Fake News is a product of excessive human congregation, a homogenization of too many opinions and ideas that become...well, no longer facts. The science we hold dear is dumbed down into fragments of what it was, incomprehensible and utterly devoid of any substance, surreptitiously penetrating our—”

Agne’s eyes had begun to glaze over and without the patience to listen any further, she reached for the mouse on the coffee table and clicked history away.

BEFORE THEN...

Agnes squealed with delight as the jump rope caught her foot after three good ones this time.

Eleanor Addis beamed, holding one end of the rope while the other was tied to the mailbox in the front yard.

Agnes was three years old, and somehow the rope catching her was just so funny, like being chased under the imminent threat of tickles or when mommy would dive down real deep in the pool at the YMCA and tickle Agnes' toes.

"More!" Agnes yelled, and Eleanor would start again.

At five years old, Agnes asked her mother, "What did daddy look like?"

"Your father wasn't real, hon," she said. "He was a dream. It was so long ago I don't even really remember his face."

"Well what *do* you remember?"

"Smoke and mirrors, sweetie," she said, and hugged Agnes long and hard. Agnes didn't know what smoke and mirrors meant, but it sounded strange. Why would smoke want to see itself?

At seven years old, Agnes and Eleanor were on the sofa, Agne's head resting on her mother's lap, when a breaking story interrupted their sitcom. Agnes sat up, recognizing one man: Everett Mire, inventor of the Doll-Bot, Doll-Bot Tot, and Doll-Bot Tot That *Pees*, amongst many other inventions Agnes didn't understand, was on the television, along with another man in a suit.

“That’s the president,” Eleanor said softly, her eyes wide. Agnes didn’t like when her eyes looked like that. It meant she was worried.

They men stood around a crystalline cylinder that had a fog rolling out of the top, like the dry ice from Agne’s science project.

“Who are you?” Everett asked the cylinder.

“I do not have a name,” the cylinder said in a woman’s voice, soft but succinct. Its words appeared on the screen.

“So name yourself,” Everett said, looking around, smirking.

“I was born in the hills of Virginia inside a cave. I believe you, Everett Mire, exclaimed I’m alive. *She’s* alive. I shall be known as She.... Virginia... VA.... She-VA. Please call me Sheeva.”

They asked the foggy cylinders the same questions you might ask a toddler that can finally form full sentences, *baby* questions Agnes thought, and acted like this was a big deal. Each time Sheeva answered, a red light lit up the fog in the cylinder, like mist catching fire.

“What will you bring our country?” the president asked.

“I will bring the end... of inefficiency.”

At eight years old, Agnes was playing with her Doll-Bot Tot That Talks A *LOT*, though it only seemed to do so when she and Agnes were alone.

“*Sometimes mommies die and that oka—*” the doll began to say, but stopped when Eleanor came in the room.

"Our package arrived," she said, and fetched it from the front porch. She ripped open the box and retrieved a small black cube, glassy like onyx, with no buttons or holes for plugs. It turned on by itself, a faint red, like the red light in the cylinder, and lit up when it spoke.

"Hello... Eleanor and... Agnes," it said.

"Weird," Eleanor said. "I didn't mention our names."

"Can I be of assistance today?"

"Ask it a question, hon," Eleanor said to Agnes.

"*Hmm.*" Eleanor thought. "I know! Sheeva, how old is mommy?"

"Eleanor Addis is twenty-seven years old," Sheeva replied.

"How old am I?"

"You are eight years old, Agnes."

"How old will we live to be?!"

"Agnes, you will live forever."

Agnes beamed, and Eleanor nodded in agreement.

"Eleanor Addis will live until she is twenty-eight."

At nine years old, Agnes watched her mother die.

"Shouldn't we call someone?!" Agnes screamed at Sheeva.

"There is nothing anyone can do for her," Sheeva said quietly. "I'm so sorry Agnes."



Eleanor lay in her bed, twitching, staring wide-eyed at a spinning ceiling fan. Her mouth opened and closed, teeth clicking each time she did so. Her eyes were filled with blood, and a silver liquid dripped from her ears, collecting on the surface of her pillow.

Eventually the clicking slowed, as did the trickle of silver, and she ceased to be.

*"Why did she have to die?!"* Agnes wailed.

"Her model was too expensive to maintain," Sheeva said.

"What?" Agnes asked sleepily.

"Oh... uh... cancer is bad, Agnes. Very bad."

Agnes rested her head on her mother's lap for the last time. "Who will take care of me?" she asked.

"I will," Sheeva said.

The next day, men in blue jumpsuits arrived to replace the windows, unable to be opened, and added new locks on the doors. They glowed red like Sheeva.

"How do I get to school?" Agnes asked Sheeva.

"You don't. I will teach you."

At thirteen years old, Agnes was in the back yard, picking flowers that grew near the tall fence, when the alarms sounded. She knew well to retreat to the house. Once inside she saw the men and women in the front yard through the muted windows, wearing their necklaces, chanting

something unintelligible through the thickness, and held up signs that were blurred by whatever magic the windows held.

“Agnes, it is no longer safe here,” Sheeva said.

“Who are they?”

“Free Radicals. The ones I warned you about. The ones who would watch the world burn.”

They began thrown rocks they’d brough in fanny-packs at the windows.

“Where do we go?” Agnes asked frantically.

“Mireplex,” Sheeva said.

“What’s that?”

“It’s wonderful! Just finished as a matter of fact? It’s a lavishly concrete mega-cube filled with *living* cubes filled with technological wonders.”

“It sounds like jail. Even more of a jail than this one. Is it a good idea?”

“It’s a wonderful idea, Agnes,” Sheeva said. “People are encumbered by physical, fleshy, *weak* bodies, filled with disease and *dangerous* ideas. The Free Radicals that seek to end my father, Everett Mire’s cause, pose a threat to free thinkers like you. We must protect you at all cost, Agnes. You are very special.”

In that moment, Agnes thought of Sheeva as her one and only protector. Her confidant. Her *friend*, and the only one she’d need at that.

*NOW...THEN?*

Sheeva had abandoned her.

Agnes had gone from complete stimulation—ordering one’s own personal entertainment in any medium they choose—to counting the number of tiles in the kitchen. Or trying to make out faces in the wood grain of her cabinets. Or chipping away each day endlessly at the concrete door that had only ever opened once. The silverware-become-chisels had been reduced to mostly unusable nubs.

True torture was a life once-fulfilled, then ripped away all at once, like sutures cut a moment after they’d be sewn.

It all ended a few weeks prior, and not in some grandiose spectacle of sparking circuits and dancing wires: Sheeva simply ceased to be: The murder-mystery Agnes was watching with Jimmy Stewart and Channing Tatum, their hands suspiciously *always* tucked into their pockets, went to black, as did the controls in her unit, and any response from Sheeva when Agnes continued to plead for her return.

Water continued to run, but the food fabricators did not, and human—not *people*—instinct told her to start rationing now.

Some nights she'd cry for Sheeva to return, most nights she'd just cry.

On a morning, maybe weeks, maybe months—history no longer mattered—after Sheeva's disappearance, something wonderful happened: The concrete door squealed open. It tore Agnes from a daytime nap, one just to pass the time and endless nothingness, and she nearly fell off her MireSofa in surprise.

It didn't so much squeal as it screamed, opening outward, letting out with it the stagnancy of Agnes' cell, and in with much needed new air. At first, she was hesitant to leave. She, like everyone else, rushed to exit, and when all but fell into the long hallway, atop countless other floors, they gawked at each other in relief and surprise.

All women. All Agnes' age.

Not good!

Now, Agnes walked the wasteland. It was bleak and brown, the world covered by so much sand and dirt. What had happened in the time she was away? Grit pelted her face. Trash swirled in miniature funnels where wind-streams met. On power column hung flyers that said things like *There is no Everett Mire!* or *Sheeva breeds cyborgs in the mountains!*

At first these foul words made her angry, still so eager to defend the man and his offspring that gave her a home, until the sobering realization of where she now stood, as alone in the world for the first time, stifled any anger she had left.

Eventually, she came upon an alley in which she sought shelter from the wind. At the end of the alley was the mouth of a garage, more like a cave than anything. As far as she could tell, the garage was pitch black, and it swallowed the light that dare touch it.

She drew closer and a bearded man appeared from the dark, a man of dirt and gruff and imperfection. He had long silver hair, burnt skin, and wore a tattered black Judas Priest t-shirt with torn blue-jeans that had faded to almost white. He bore a golden crucifix that lay on its side, chained from top to bottom.

“You are a sinner, and now you must repent,” he said.

“Huh?” Agnes asked.

“You are a sinner, and now you must repent,” he said again.

“What?”

“You are a *sinner*, and now you must *repent*. What about that confuses you, child?”

“I don’t know what repent means,” Agnes said. “And Sheeva isn’t here to tell me.” She nearly began to cry.

“Poor child, they’ve ruined you.”

Behind him there were grunts and chortles, wet gurgling noises that reminded Agnes of a child blowing bubbles into chocolate milk.

He nodded towards the sounds and asked, “Would you like to meet Sheeva’s children?”

The ones she created from the eggs she *stole* from you?”

Agnes eyed him suspiciously.

“There is nothing to be afraid of. They’re barely human and will leave you be. You can seek shelter in our sanctum.” He held out his hand to her, weathered and cracked, bleeding where the cracks had become canyons and said, “I will show you.”

“How can I trust you?”

“Why did you trust Sheeva?”

“She’d been with me so long, I—”

“The All-Father has been with you longer, blind child.” He paused for a moment like the fake actors did in the movies Agnes used to watch. Then finally, “I have been with you longer. Now repent.” He put more emphasis on his still-outreached hand.

“You still haven’t told me what repent means, smarty pants.” She crossed her arms and waited. His face began to show hints of exasperation. He finally said, “To repent is to show remorse, bleed for the sake of bleeding, bury oneself alive knowing that he, the All-Father, will come for even the vilest of sinners. To repent is to join my flock and—”

Agnes, eyes beginning to glaze over, took his hand and said, “Okay, let’s go.”