

A promise made, a promise kept.

She had been engineered for greatness, an exploration so exponential, an undertaking so profound, that there was nothing else, no better prize, no more honorable a duty than this mission.

And she failed.

Well, her inner artificial phonograph had failed, anyway. The miniscule, perfectly designed robotic cochlea had ceased aural reception, likely due to damage sustained during a routine but inexplicably harsh meteor shower on the aircraft hull. A slight miscalculation, a presumptuous assumption of safety, the final nail in the proverbial spaceship.

The gravity had spontaneously turned back on midair, she'd ricocheted across the aircraft, and her robot head broke her robot fall.

Her systems, her computerized physiology, had since been slowly failing for weeks. It had been nothing at first, a slight buzzing in her right ear that rang ceaselessly. As time progressed, so did the errors, and the faults in her system grew until they became her centerpiece. The in-ear device responsible for total sonification and translation of gravitational waves into information had gradually ceased reproduction; there was abundant information surrounding her, all of it in a language she could no longer speak. Her final message back to home had been one of silence, a dotted echo of an ellipsis followed by a question mark.

She wasn't going to make it.

This was the start of the end, the inception of the close. Her native tongue had become a swath of incomprehensible symbols and errant eye movements, her programming consistently jolted, resulting in red line after red line, sentences started midway and failed a nanosecond later. Robotic dementia, a failure of advanced circuitry, the end of billions of dollars brought about by something as simple and unpredictable as a head wound.

There, of course, had been backups for this sort of thing, all employed – nearly everything (except for the ship's direct hardware, of course) was re-programmable from Earth. Errors and sudden problems were expected, and there were strict protocols in place for every conceivable issue that could potentially arise. In a lab somewhere hundreds of lightyears away sat hard drives after hard drives, each one filled with endless terabytes of information and backups and plan z's.

And yet, in all of these full hard drives, all of these busy computers and diagrams and code, there was one thing, one miniscule little avenue, which her makers did not account for.

Her *panic*.

Her panic had swamped her entire system, blocking correct procedures and backup generators, her own desire to override built in code stronger than she even thought possible. It poisoned it all, sending her, and by extension, the mission, into oblivion. It shouldn't have been possible; panic had not been programmed into her, she shouldn't have even known what it *was*.

But alas, she did, and in these last moments, she was human.

At least, a tiny bit human. Enough to code consternation, not enough to be heeded and unwrapped – a peak of metal-and-blood confusion and heartache, if she'd had a beating one. What was to happen to her after she went offline? If she had enough ability to question the existence of her own consciousness, could she reason that there was nowhere for hers to go when reason she could no more?

Where she'd been meant to go, physically, was to pass the AG37, to explore an even larger, potential carbon planet that could house life, an entirely new species. She was to orbit, make contact, land, act as a diplomat for the Earth lightyears away. A representative of a human race that was peaceful but strong, intelligent and curious, explorative and level headed. It was ironic, then, that her lack of robotic composure would signal her end. She wouldn't make it now, and communication would soon be permanently lost. There would be no satisfying end to her story, no homecoming hero, no sunrise over the new frontier. At least, not in this chapter.

She knew, in her non-existent heart, that this was always a risk. This was a high possibility, and that's why they made her, why she was sent. Better to lose a robot than one of their own. Humans, delicate humans, always at war with each other, always fighting...but they were their own, and they belonged to each other.

She sat in her chair, alone, drumming her faltering fingers over the armrest, tapping her a-rhythmic feet on the metal floor.

*One, two, three. One, three, two. Two, three, one. One, one one,. Two., two of one., and three of two., one zero, 1010101 ... ????*

There was a guitar in the corner. As the first robot, nay, *being*, from Earth to travel this far into deep space, long past Planet Nine, far past the AG37, there, no, *here*, onto the new frontier, there was a guitar.

Her maker was a musician. He'd built her, all of her, taking great pains to imbue her with, well, everything. Sometimes in these last moments she could hear her first memories of his voice, and she would remember staring up into fluorescent lights, catching the start of a language which would become her spoken mother tongue. Her mind had come first, and she'd watched as he

refined her movements, speaking to her like a patient, and, sometimes, like a child. Over time, her fingers had become more agile, legs stronger, reaction time faster, brain activity instant.

She'd come into consciousness understanding concepts as complicated as the depths of theoretical physics and as misinterpreted as language syntax in any tongue known to man. She could recite Decartes and Plato, and could regurgitate near any fact or theory man had long known, or, in many cases, didn't.

She glanced back over at the instrument, banged and dented from its similar ricochet against the metal walls.

*Here, her maker had said. This is a guitar. My daughter used to play, though she can't anymore. I used to teach her.*

*Would you like me to teach you?*

They'd named her Genesis 440, though he called her, affectionately, Murph. At least, above the universe, all alone, she believed that it had been affectionately. In bursts of clarity amongst her fading faculties, she could reason that because she could feel panic, she must've, before setting off into space, felt comfort.

She must've been loved, maybe not as Genesis 440, but as Murph.

Rising cost her nearly all the strength she had left. Guitar in hand, she slid down, back against the ship's walls, hands wrapping themselves around the instrument in a familiar embrace. She had no time left, none left but for a song.

*I'll pack this guitar for you. Play it, and I promise you'll feel better. Maybe you'll even think of home.*

She looked out, the infinite nothingness stretching and expanding before her, decorated by splashes of bright radiation and dense matter. A robot-human from Earth, a lonely cowgirl made to conquer the darkest, most volatile frontier, a panic filled Murph on a ship doomed to the stomach of the Infinite Wild West. Surrounded by radiant stars and competing darkness and the sheer stretch of the universe, Murph began to play. She remembered her home, and she remembered her Maker, and as her system shut down and her ship kept going, despite it all, she felt better, and she knew she would eventually be home.

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