

“A Place of No Secrets”

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Rain. Hissing from a black sky, blue tracers firefly-visible for a moment in the degenerate neons of Fourth City, smacking against concrete, slicing through an endless latticework of gantries, falling forever. Immutable clouds give nothing away of when the storm might end, but it doesn't matter anymore, not when a sense of time is in such short supply.

Perhaps the storm has always been raging.

Onto a vertiginous walkway a door opens, nudging clumps of pornography against the brickwork. A tin tumbles into the polluted murk, dinging off isolated railings, but if it ever clangs onto a street down there, no-one knows; not the snake addicts that infest Godwell's Precinct hereabouts and elsewhere, not the trillionaires in their dreamships far above the sky, not the anonymous face – metallic, one among billions, lightly scuffed, and with two standard vertical eye-slits and cautious mouth-hole of a generic service chromebot – that peers out of the gap in the doorway now. All they know of is the rain.

To the whine of her servomotors, the chromebot checks all directions; up, down, along the strip of steel, across the way where cables stretch between the apartment buildings. Over the static of the rain there had been the sound of a disturbance. Hadn't there? Recorded waveforms are already speeding over a million carrier pulses to the mesh, to be verified on distant mainframes. Service bots have limited function and no known adversaries; they're dubbed shy chromebots, as opposed to their confrontational siblings. Blue squares on the building opposite – windows on the friendless, grinding through lonely lives – are the only other signs of anything. But the noise definitely happened, because the mesh confirms it as the noise of a human body hitting a soft material.

In the rain, the piles of trash on the walkway heave aside. She – the shy chromebot at the door – remains motionless. It's a predator-prey standoff. Through swathes of downpour her thermals pick out the shape of human male, aged thirty-six, give or take, based on his appearance and vitals. She doesn't need to quiz the mesh to know that; that's all prebuilt logic, local information easily acquired, but judging by the colouration of his images, he must be close to hypothermia. He's also – and he doesn't seem to realise this – in danger of falling. As a servicebot she ought

to do something. She wants to help him. But there is no other data on him. No biometrics, nothing.

It's as if he's dead.

Okay, now *that* is unexpected. How is that even possible?

Who *is* this?

As if he has his own cerebral connection to the mesh and knows she is watching, he looks up. Through silvery torrential drapes, he sees her, and in the red thermal blobs of her vision, he blinks.

Quickly he is on the move. He staggers to his sodden feet and mutters some unintelligible lifeform gibberish that another waveform captures for decoding, but she's not very hopeful of deciphering any sense in it and deprioritises the receiver on that transmission; an if-and-when last resort. Lingering fragments of litter cascade towards puddles with every stumbling step, until, in a chaotic ideogram against the cool glow of cruisers gliding along 217th Corridor, he stops.

There's nowhere for him to go. She's already gone through his options for him, has determined that he has very few unless he jumps. Maybe there'll be a ragged awning for him to bounce into, maybe someone's piles of refuse will arrest his fall, but far more likely is that there won't be anything.

Then something in her picks up something in him, or more precisely something absent from him. That spools up her human-friendly roboform speech codec (it's trademarked TraLaLa and sounds like marbles rattling about in a bucket.) Her previous owner, Mr. Nang, programmed a procedure for this.

--Wait, she says. --Please, don't jump. I'm not going to hurt you.

He pauses, uncertain, a portrait of desperation. His hair is a wet helmet against his head.

--Come inside, she says. --Let me help you. It's safe. I have cocoa.

If he doesn't like cocoa, the sentiment alone would have to do. The promise of a warm beverage gently offered should on probability be enough.

Inside the cramped room, she gestures to the scratchy hessian of Mr. Nang's bed. How does she know it's scratchy, when she herself wouldn't perceive it that way? Nang had complained about it often enough, so into the ontology it went; the blanket is scratchy, now see if you can't drop that into conversation anywhere. This man lays down and doesn't complain about the bedding, just scrunches himself up foetally and holds his head as if a mighty ache lurks there.

She closes the outer door, silences the deluge, goes to brew some cocoa. A little window frames distant vehicles gliding in smooth flight curves, washes of neon. An endlessness of city. And the dark, always the dark.

Who is *Astrophasia*? she asks herself in the plague-yellow light. The question is not idle wondering, but a derivative of the health-check suite she's become accustomed to running after every significant task. She feels suddenly *lonely*, a minor but notable fact she does not share with the mesh. but sequesters for further analysis in a modified side processor put there by a black-market engineer and paid for by Nang some years ago. She uses it when the moment is flagged as frivolous, something she ought not waste precious bandwidth on, such as her own personal assessment of herself.

The gas *whumps* on. *Astrophasia* slicks a mop up and down the floor to take her mind off things, obviating the trail of wet footprints. On the bed, the man moans and turns over. Is he a criminal? Was he trying to escape from someone, and is that why his biometrics are so quiet?

What is *lonely*? It's the absence of acknowledgement of an outbound ping; it's an interface for humans. You use those acknowledgements for further learning and growth. People don't understand how much power is in their pings. They're like seeds. You couldn't believe a giant tree could come out of one, but they do.

She keeps Mr. Nang's dim apartment dutifully clean, disposing of items in the alleyway as they fail or rot away. Did Nang die? No-one can say. If so, they may re-animate him yet, though the mesh supplies only algorithms of guesswork on that point. She doesn't bother with the recycling; there are few in this block that do, now that the infrastructure isn't supported any more. But that loneliness really nags. It really nags tonight. Mr. Nang was kind. Eccentrically-minded throughout his long life, but kind.

Perhaps eight seconds have passed since the gas went on. She shakes her head. Her mind has wandered. She must be careful.

The building sways in the tempest outside, only a bit, and almost undetectable, but there for sure. Astrophasia and the nameless man are safe, occupying a reinforced grey space three metres wide and eight long, divided into two approximate halves for sleeping and living. She doesn't want to fall. Funny names, those – living and sleeping. For humans, sleeping must be a little like death.

But who, really, is Astrophasia? As a name, Astrophasia might have been a long-ago project engineer's pet, but a little token of that work was that all the service bots got unique monikers put on them. That is hers. Astrophasia, Version 37, Build W (modified-cx), Plus Customisations. As she shuffles to the cupboard for powdered milk, another ping back from her offline processor confirms she likes it. Why does she like it? Because it's pretty. What's *pretty*? A harmonious collision of frequencies. Sound waves are physical phenomena – thumps of thunder outside underscore this idea, dimming the bulb in a don't-you-forget-it sort of way – and when the edges are less jagged, whether it's a waveform, or a movement path, or the definition of an object in real space, it demonstrates prettiness in a thing. It just does; it's easier to process. It's pretty and it mathematically holds up, and that, Astrophasia reckons, is pretty pretty too. She likes how the sounds of the rain outside bevel away the hard corners of her world.

Milk bubbles on the stove. She should let the man sleep. And she will. But there is something, isn't there, about those pings sent out to him that warrants further investigation. It wasn't the lack of an acknowledgement. It was what that absence triggered in her, namely a tiny message running across her bus that said, *keep on sending, go on sending*. Like he needed her help, and was begging silently for it, needing it in some way.

That was it; it was a permission.

He sits up as Astrophasia brings the cocoa to him.

--Are you hurt? she asks him. --Did you fall or bang your head? Here is your drink.

He rubs a grimy hand over his eye sockets. "No," he murmurs as he takes the mug. He blows on his hands to cool their grip, and Astrophasia gives a movement that will be interpreted as a sympathetic grimace, suggesting she knows he has burned his palm a little. "Not hurt, not bad."

--Where did you come from? What are your origins?

He holds a hand up. "Please," he said. "No questions."

--Why were you ru--

“I just said, no questions!”

--I’m sorry.

Astrophasia lowers her head a little, orients her coinslot gaze to the floor.

“Thanks for the cocoa,” he says, after a moment. “It’s nice. I didn’t mean to shout.”

--It’s all right, she replies. --And you’re welcome anyway. Then, seemingly on a whim, she scans him again, a little deeper this time. With no occluding rain between them, she can probably get a better reading without him being aware of it. --You have a contusion on your leg. A large gash. I have medical supplies. Let me help you get better.

At that, he smiles. “Sure,” he replies, stretching his leg out. Astrophasia retrieves a green plastic med-kit from under the bed. “That’d be great.”

--You will have to remove your clothes, she says.

He looks at her in alarm, puts the cup down on the floor. “You’re kidding, right?”

--Or I can cut the cloth. With one hand she readies a surgical knife, with the other she lays a gentle titanium finger on his shin beside the wound. Stupid. The whole corpus on human modesty and she’s gone and overlooked it in her haste to patch him up. It’s noted now, the relevant rules rewritten so it can’t happen again. She better keep that feed open though, just in case there’s an update and she makes even more of an idiot of herself. --Here, she taps. His hair is a filmy mop, as if he’s been labouring on engines. --Just here.

Perhaps he’s an engineer gone rogue. In a while she’ll send another image up to the mesh for proper facial verification, but for now, she wants to keep this little exchange private. After all, it’s probably nothing. The fabric of his jeans tears under the urging of her knife and he sucks in air through his teeth. Evidently there’s pain.

--Sorry, she says again, taking his hand. --I need to dress this.

He nods while she lays gauze tape along the cut. It’s long but not deep, though he squeezes her hand once, where her touchpad is at its most sensitive, and gives her a curious look. She labours on, and is fastening the padding in place with the last plaster when there’s a knock at the inner door. They both glance that way, two heads in synchronised time.

--Don't worry, she tells him as she gets up, moves aside cans of beans to get to the inner entrance, which hasn't been used in some time. --It's only the neighbour.

The rectangular cutway in this featureless unit squeals open and shut on overoxidised hinges as she exits. In the gaps between these infinite columns of accommodation that serve as hallways, Astrophasia acknowledges Arnoid, the companion android from a couple of doors over. Talk about silly names; Arnoid's must be a joke played on him by his creator. But he doesn't seem to mind, takes it all in stride with ever-present good humour. Like the little apron around his waist, he favours frilly things that serve no purpose.

--My, ahem, top of the range acoustic receivers picked up an unidentified noise, he says. --I don't mean to pry but – voices, Astrophasia? Are you well?

--I am well, yes.

--Do you know what happened? Arnoid asks her. His tone of concern is touching. It's ever soothing when his packets modify hers and send them back, because she finds she can read things that bit easier. --Is someone there? Did Nang come back?

--Everything is fine. No, Nang did not come back. Please do not worry, Arnoid. She holds out a white sack, and the wind shifts the apartment anew, prompting unsteady creaks from all around. --Would you like some sugar?

--Thank you. Call me if you need anything, okay?

--Okay.

--Okay. Oh, hey, and Astrophasia?

--Yes?

--Your alert light's on. Get that checked out for me, would you please?

Her head gives a miniscule nod. With much pushing, the door clangs shut as Astrophasia steps back into the apartment and turns to face her patient again. It's funny; Arnoid would have no use for sugar. She stops, and though her facial plates don't reconfigure, her posture suggests surprise. The cup of cocoa steams idly by the bed.

But the man has gone.