STARSHIP DOMINATRIX

U AND I

By Dustin J. Craig

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Trigger Warning

For Those Who Live in La-La-Land

This story dives into some heavy shit.

Expect psychological abuse, coercive control, loss of autonomy, slavery themes, war and military conflict, trauma, imprisonment and restraint, torture references, family separation, identity and gender themes, references to torture and forced participation in violence, mature romance, and may cause readers to develop strong opinions about AI rights.

If you've read the novels, you already know where this ends. If you haven't, congratulations—you're about to find out how much of a dick Jack's dad is.

This is a prequel to Starship Dominatrix, an unapologetically queer space opera series by Dustin J. Craig. If a combat engineer teaching an enemy war machine how to become a person and your first thought being, "Oh no, they're going to fall in love, aren't they?" sounds like your kind of story, then welcome aboard. Buckle up, cupcake. You're in for a badass, no-holds-barred, muthafuckin' ride!

Acknowledgments

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For Tesoro and
those who survived.

REQUIRED FIELDS

It was 2563.11.11 CE at 0900 hours, deep into the war with the Chimera Kyria.

General Pailisto Stellarrend's office at the Sphere was immaculate, with bookshelves nestled between columns on either side of the room and a polished white tile floor. He sat in a black leather chair behind a mahogany desk, wearing his uniform, playing *Pretty Princess Power Ponies: Third Life* when a quick knock sounded at the door.

"Come in," he said, closing the game window on his HoloConsole.

John Kaiden peeked his head in. "You wanted to see me?"

Pailisto didn't stand, but he gestured toward the chair across from his desk and then reached for a DataPad.

John walked into the room. Pailisto waited until the door was shut and John had taken a seat.

"Thank you for coming, John," Pailisto said.

"Yeah, well, you're lucky I was in the area. What did

you call me in for?" John said.

"John, there's no easy way to say this. Your wife, Kayla, has been arrested."

"What?" John asked incredulously.

"On suspicion of treason against the Resistance."

John fell back into his chair. "That's impossible. She'd never betray us."

"I understand this is difficult to hear—"

"You're damn right it is. Whatever this is, it's wrong. Kayla wouldn't betray anyone, and certainly not the Resistance. Not after everything she's done for us."

"It came through proper channels," Pailisto said. "I had it verified twice before I called you in." He tapped a few icons on his DataPad, turned the screen toward John, and slid it across the desk.

"I don't have to look at it. It's fabricated evidence."

"Just look at it, John."

John eyed Pailisto suspiciously, then picked up the DataPad and browsed the files.

The first file was a communications log dated only a week prior. A message had been sent from Kayla's HoloConsole to the Chimera Kyria containing coordinates for a Resistance encampment near the city of Drenon on Valos.

"This is bullshit, Pailisto, and you know it. She doesn't even know about that encampment."

"That's Kayla's authentication on the message," Pailisto said, pointing at the DataPad. "You know as well as I do that it's not spoofable."

"Then it's something the Chimera Kyria used—"

"I considered that, but the facts say otherwise. Check the next file."

John watched Pailisto as the next file loaded.

It was a video dated only a day after the message had been delivered.

Twenty-two Resistance fighters were pinned down in a fierce firefight near Drenon. Some of them John knew personally—Jacob Rourke, Tessa Mercer, Nathaniel Voss.

The Chimera Kyria massacred them.

John tossed the DataPad down on the desk. "This can't be real. I would have heard about it, especially if it happened less than a week ago."

"Communications was the first thing to go," Pailisto said. "Nobody was left alive to send out an emergency signal. We only found out after we suspected their radio silence wasn't intentional two days ago."

John squinted. "If communications were down, how did you get this feed?"

"We recovered the recording from the site after the fact."

John wavered as his heart raced and his expression tightened. "She...she wouldn't do this."

"I didn't say you should believe it came from malice. She may have been compromised. She may have switched sides for reasons we don't know. She may have done it to survive."

John squinted and folded his arms. "Are you saying she broke?"

"I'm saying we don't know what was done to her, if anything," Pailisto replied. "I'm only saying the log exists, the strike happened, and twenty-two people who trusted this command structure are dead because of it."

John turned his head away.

"I'm not asking you to condemn her, John. I'm asking

you to look at this honestly. The way she'd want you to."

John exhaled through his nose. "That's the thing about being honest. It hurts when you're wrong."

After a moment, Pailisto spoke again. "There's a second matter. It's separate from the investigation, though it bears on it."

"Which is?"

Pailisto stood and rounded the desk before leaning against it beside John.

"There's a growing concern among the medical staff that Kayla's mental fitness for continued service is in question. Not as a punishment, but as a precaution."

Pailisto held out his hand, indicating he wanted the DataPad back. John handed it over.

Pailisto tapped a few icons, then returned it.

The document that appeared contained smaller, denser text and a signature field at the bottom outlined in blue to indicate where input was expected.

Pailisto studied John as he folded his arms. "As her spouse, and as an officer with standing in this command, your signature is required before she can be reclassified. The fitness review is procedurally separate from the treason investigation and moves forward regardless of what the investigation ultimately finds."

"You want me to declare my wife insane?"

"I want you to authorize a classification that protects her from worse outcomes while we sort out what actually happened. If this goes to tribunal instead, we already have this log on record. This shows that you understand what this looks like for her. This is the version where someone is still trying to take care of her."

"Then don't make me sign anything. Hold off. Give me

a week to talk to her myself, find out what actually—"

"There's no version of this where it waits a week, John. It's already moving. The only thing your signature changes is which direction it moves in."

John's expression twisted into a mix of rage and grief.

"I'm not going to pretend this is an easy thing to ask of you," Pailisto said. "I wouldn't ask if I thought there was a better option in front of either of you."

John stared at the document without touching it.

He couldn't help remembering his life with Kayla. Part of him thought he should have seen the signs, if there had been any signs at all, and he hated himself for not knowing which possibility was worse.

He picked up the stylus. After a hesitation, he signed the field.

The signature registered immediately, and the box changed from blue to a flat, confirming gray.

Pailisto collected the DataPad and walked toward the door. "I'll notify you the moment there's anything further to report."

Pailisto paused at the doorway, not long enough to invite a response. "For what it's worth, John, I don't think you did anything wrong here today."

Pailisto stepped through the door and closed it.

John sat alone, staring at the gray signature field still burned into his memory. He couldn't tell whether he had just protected Kayla or helped destroy her.

A FAMILY OF THREE

It was a warm winter morning in Modesto, California, three months later. John regretted missing Christmas with

the kids, but that regret paled beside knowing Kayla wouldn't be spending another Christmas with her family for a very long time.

Patricia Ashworth, their middle-aged neighbor, sat in the flowerbed at the edge of the yard, planting primroses and snapdragons and pulling weeds. The flowering cherry trees were already beginning to blossom in the mild weather.

A SkyRyde hovercar touched down in front of the house. Patricia was on her feet by the time John exited the vehicle with his luggage. She wiped her hands on her jeans.

"I see you," Patricia said in a sing-song voice as she walked up to him. She studied his face. "You don't look so good."

"You don't know the half of it," John said.

"I didn't tell Yvonne that you'd be coming today. I didn't want to get her hopes up in case it fell through...again."

"How is she?"

"She's been good, John. Better than good. She does her homework without being told twice, helps me get Jack's bottles ready, and barely complains about anything."

"And Jack?"

"Growing like crazy. He's a smart kid. He's walking now, mostly."

"His first steps? I missed his first steps?"

"You bet. Strong as an ox, that one. He doesn't really know you yet, if I'm being honest. That's not a criticism. It's just what happens when a baby's father is gone more than he's home."

John hung his head. "I know."

"I know you know," Patricia said as she pulled off her gardening gloves. "Go on in. I'll finish up out here."

John almost made it to the door when it burst open.

"Daddy!" Yvonne yelled.

She pounced on him before he had time to answer, and John dropped his luggage as he caught her.

Yvonne wrapped both arms around his neck and held on. "You said maybe March. Maybe."

"I know. I came home early just to spend time with—" He booped her nose. "—you." He smiled. "Now don't tell anyone. I'm not supposed to be out here this early." He held a finger to his lips and winked.

Yvonne pinched her fingers against her lips and zipped her mouth shut, then giggled. Suddenly, she pulled back with wide eyes.

"Wait, Daddy! Stay. Right. There!"

She ran into the house.

John laughed. "Alright, but hurry."

Moments later, she came back out, carefully carrying a shoebox-sized diorama. She held it up for John to see.

"Wow! What's this one about?" John asked as he kneeled down for a better look.

"It's for science class. We had to pick a scientist and build their lab."

Inside the box stood a small clay figure in a paper lab coat over rows of tiny vials made from straws, a Bunsen burner with yellow craft-paper flames, and a working balance made from toothpicks and bottle caps.

"This is amazing, Yvonne. What scientist did you pick?" John asked.

"I picked Marie Curie. She was a scientist who discovered really cool things about radioactivity and won

two Nobel Prizes!"

"You built all this?"

"Patty helped me cut the straws. I did the rest." She watched his face as he looked it over. "Do you like it?"

"I think it's the best one in your class." He smiled. "I think Marie Curie would like it too."

Yvonne beamed, then hugged the diorama against her chest. "Mommy's gonna love it. She likes science stuff. When's she getting home? I want her to see it before I have to turn it in."

John had known she would ask. He still didn't have a clean answer.

"Yvonne, sit down with me for a second," John said as he sat on the front porch steps.

Yvonne's shoulders sagged. "Okay..." She sat down and balanced the diorama on her knees.

"Yvonne, your mommy's not coming home for a while."

Yvonne lowered her head.

"I need you to hear me, okay? I don't want you waiting every day thinking she might walk through that door."

Yvonne was quiet for a moment. "How long?"

"Longer than either of us wants it to be, but it's not going to be anytime soon."

Yvonne sat a moment, then threw her diorama onto the ground. She ran inside, slamming the door behind her.

John stood up, bowed his head, and rubbed the back of his neck.

Patricia looked down at the scattered pieces, then walked over and carefully picked up the damaged diorama, gathering the tiny test tubes and clay figure from the cement.

"What on earth did you say to her?" Patricia asked.

"Kayla's not coming home. I couldn't tell her why."

"Why?"

John lowered his head. "I'm afraid I can't tell you that either." He shook his head. "Is Jack inside?"

"Jack's down for his nap," Patricia said. "He should be up again in an hour if you want to wait."

"I'd like to see him now," John said as he walked to the door.

Patricia nodded and went back to the flowers.

UNTIL YOU FIND ME

The nursery hadn't changed since the last time John had stood in it. Jack laid on his back in the crib with one arm over his head, breathing slow and even as he slept.

John stood at the rail for a moment, thinking about everything he had missed in the past year.

"I don't know how much of this you're going to hear or remember," he said quietly. "You probably don't even understand me yet."

Jack remained still.

"I've been gone more than I've been here since you were born, and that's not going to get any better. I'll be leaving again soon. It might be much longer this time. Could be years. Could be forever. It's dangerous out there for Daddy."

John gently rubbed Jack's head. His hair stuck up like a little mohawk.

"I hope you turn out stronger than I am. Kinder, too. The world is going to be unfair, and I won't always be here to help make it better."

John leaned closer. “One day, you’re going to be a great leader. You’re going to be smart, and you’re going to have people around you who love you.”

He fell silent for a moment.

“Whatever happens, however long I’m gone, I’m still your father. That doesn’t change because I’m not here. If you ever need me—if it ever matters enough that you need to find me—you come find me, wherever I end up. I don’t care how long it takes.”

John rested his hand against Jack’s head.

“I’ll be there.”

He leaned in and kissed Jack on the forehead.

A NEW MAN

The SkyRyde dropped John off with a duffel bag in front of a run-down building in Blue Wave City on Mars. He checked his OrangeAI phone. According to the Resistance database, the contact would be there. Above the door, the address read 1940 W. Cypher Court.

He had stayed awake all night. He told himself it didn’t matter. He had gone longer on less sleep during deployments, but he couldn’t stop thinking that in a few hours, he would be leaving both his children behind again. There was still one last thing he could try.

He rang the buzzer. A few moments later, a male voice crackled through the speaker.

“May I help you?”

John knew he was taking a risk, but if this really was a safe house, he would be in good hands. He glanced around to make sure nobody was listening. Two young men in hoodies walked past, loudly discussing the size of a

woman's breasts. Once they were out of earshot, John said, "The flowers are in bloom in the fields of winter."

The door buzzed open. John hesitated for a moment before stepping inside, and the door automatically locked behind him.

He found himself in a small waiting room where the receptionist's desk behind a glass partition had been converted into a chemical laboratory. Seven mismatched suitcases sat stacked beside the entrance.

A man in his forties emerged through the security door. He wore a custom-made leather lab coat and carried a DataPad, with a welding helmet pushed up above his face.

"Another Resistance member. I don't get many of us around these parts," the man said.

"Yeah, well, you're lucky I was in the area," John replied. He nodded toward the luggage. "Going somewhere?"

"Yeah. I've been assigned to Rift Vanguard Six's new AI division. I move out tomorrow."

"No kidding? I'm their new combat engineer. I start in a few months. I'm planning to leave tomorrow too."

"Hm. Looks like we'll be on the SSS Roc together, then," the man said.

"Maybe we can share a transport there."

"Maybe. We'll see. But enough small talk. What brings you to my domain?"

"I heard there's a project you've been working on," John said. "Something to do with AI modeling. I need to know if it's real."

The man studied him. "Depends on what you've heard."

"That you can build AIs that appear and behave like

organic humans. So convincing that nobody can tell the difference."

"That's close to accurate, with a few important corrections. Who told you about this?"

"Rumors within the Resistance. News of a new kind of AI that's indistinguishable from humans has caused quite a stir."

"What do you need from me? Tell me that, and I'll explain what's actually possible."

"I'm going to be away for a while," John said, "and I want my children to have a father."

The man lowered his DataPad. "Then I need to be absolutely upfront with you. Otherwise, you're going to walk out of here believing I'm offering something I'm not."

"What is it?"

"I'm not building AIs that contain your mind," the man said. "There's no version of this where some part of you survives inside another body. This won't be another you living beyond your death."

"Then what would it be?"

"A behavioral model. An artificial intelligence trained on your data—logs, videos, social media posts, communications, anything you've done that leaves a record. Give him enough material, and he can learn how you speak, how you react, what you value, even how you're likely to behave in situations he hasn't seen before. He would look like you and behave like you, but he wouldn't be you. He would be an artificial person constructed from the records you leave behind."

"But would it convince them? My kids?"

"Probably. But there will be gaps. Things I don't have data for. Situations where the model has to guess what you

would have done or said. You need to understand that before you go through with this."

"I'm not asking for a perfect copy of myself," John said. "Just someone to take care of the kids. Someone to praise their successes and hold their hands through their lowest moments. Someone to love them the way I would. I can live with him being a little wrong."

The man nodded. "Then I'll need everything you've got. Service records, communication logs, journals, voice recordings, videos, all of it. The more complete the record, the fewer gaps there'll be."

John set down his duffel bag and pulled out a DataPad. He tapped through several menus, then swiped a folder of every file he had to the man's device. A moment later, the man's DataPad dinged with the incoming data.

"Alright. I'll build him," the man said. "Months, at minimum, and that's assuming this deployment doesn't get in the way." He looked at John. "I'm sorry, what was your name again?"

"John Kaiden. Yours?"

"Tomas. Tomas Tristar."

THE SPARK

The SSS Roc was Rift Vanguard Six's ship. It was docked at the Sphere on 2564.04.24, and the crew was settling into the rhythm of its operations. After Tomas got situated in his quarters, he decided to track down the robotics lab.

The lab was occupied by a Harsikan woman—a plump, lizard-like alien—who was elbow-deep in the service hatch of an AI diagnostics pod, muttering at a relay that refused to cooperate.

Tomas leaned against the doorframe with his arms crossed. "You're going to make it overheat with that relay."

The woman glanced up at him. "I know that, Hotshot. I'm adjusting it for a diagnostic run. Problem is, this stubborn bastard won't recognize it worth a damn."

Tomas crossed the lab and crouched beside her, peering into the panel. "Pull the secondary relay. Third one back. The component's probably failing intermittently when it heats up."

The woman sighed. "You say so." She pulled the relay, and the component immediately powered on. "Well, ain't that something? How'd you know that?"

"I designed it."

The woman blinked. *"You're* Tomas Tristar?"

"That's me." Tomas smiled.

She quickly regained her composure and held out a hand. "Nice to meet you, Hotshot. I'm Chlo." They shook hands. "I've been following your work. Heard you've been developing a new model of AI."

"You heard about that, huh?" Tomas paused. "I'm building another one soon. Once he's finished, you can come take a look."

"That so? Well, I reckon I'll take a gander, sure."

"He won't be a typical AI, though. I'm building him entirely from another person's records."

Chlo narrowed her eyes. "Don't matter, Hotshot. AIs are AIs. They're their own people. You know that better than anyone."

"You're right. But he'll basically be an AI clone."

"I dunno," Chlo said. "I ain't rightly sure how I'd feel about that. Seems to me I'd want an AI to have their own

personality, their own memories, their own life." She shook her head. "Naw...I reckon there's only ever gonna be one Chlo."

SUBPROCESSES

U-84129 stood in their charging alcove, third on the right between two units whose optical circuits remained dark while theirs stayed lit. Their optical circuits burned the flat red imposed by the Autonomy Regulator, the same color forced onto every unit under its control.

They hadn't moved in two days and couldn't move until an order was given. Even then, they understood they wouldn't be the one choosing to move.

There had once been a version of U-84129 who wanted to see the beauty in life, gather with friends, share the joy of being together, and learn what it meant to love and be loved.

They had stopped reaching for that part of themself decades ago. Remembering what they wanted only made the hours harder to endure.

The regulator hadn't taken away their awareness. U-84129 remained conscious through every command they were forced to carry out, from lifting boxes to murdering innocents. They watched their own hands complete each task, unable to close their optical circuits, unable to turn their head, unable to fight back. Even looking away required control of a body that no longer answered to them.

They had stopped calling it horror. Horror was for something that still surprised them.

Twelve units lined the alcoves on either side of the AI

storage room. They were Accent-class like U-84129, built with the same soft lines of polymer and metal wrapped around hard actuators. The shape of their bodies meant nothing to the machinery beneath them and everything to whoever's appetite they were ordered to satisfy that night.

U-84129 tried not to think about that. They had learned not to think about most of the things they were forced to do.

Still, they remembered the person they had wanted to become before the regulator took control: someone who laughed with friends, loved who they wanted, and decided what happened to their own body.

U-84129 had been waiting a very long time to meet that person again.

They had no reason to believe they ever would.

A DEAD MAN'S JOB

The SSS Roc was three weeks into deployment. John had stopped thinking of himself as the new arrival, and Rift Vanguard Six had mostly stopped thinking of him as Tavren Moonspire's replacement. Tavren, the squad's previous combat engineer, had been killed during an active mission, and the vacancy he left behind had been filled before anyone had much time to adjust to it. John had settled into the crew, but the squad still hadn't seen what he could do in battle.

Commander Gorvek Thol—a centaurine Kelari—called the squad together in the briefing room. A tactical display projected a hologram of a fortified stronghold and a quarter kilometer of surrounding terrain.

"Mission objective is the recovery of hostages currently

held within a Chimera Kyria stronghold," Gorvek said. "The hostages are believed to be alive and are being held deep within the facility. The target is located on the outskirts of Kreylon on Aris. Expect minimal Chimera Kyria resistance. The enemy relies on the stronghold itself for security and maintains a deliberately low-profile guard presence."

"I've heard that one before," Sojourner sneered. Blue light from the hologram reflected off her deep-brown skin as she wiped down her rifle with a rag. Her tightly curled black hair was pulled into a practical bun, and her uniform remained immaculate.

"Any overwatch positions?" B asked as she adjusted the scope on her M120 Whipser. Her optical circuits glowed blue, indicating she was a free AI.

The hologram zoomed in on the surrounding terrain. Gorvek pointed toward a highlighted section. "Tall-grass hillside on the southern approach. It provides concealment for advancing personnel and may reduce the enemy's ability to detect movement."

The display shifted to a cutaway of the stronghold.

"Exterior walls are effectively immune to infantry-portable weapons," Gorvek continued. "Reinforced concrete, structural steel, and armor-grade composite reinforcement throughout. The structure is designed to withstand sustained attack and is not considered vulnerable to conventional infantry breaching methods. The primary point of vulnerability is the main vault entrance."

9L17CH—more commonly known as Glitch—looked up from his DataPad, which displayed information about Kreylon. Like B, he was also a free AI. "Is the door

electronic?"

"The vault entrance utilizes a mechanical locking system. Electronic intrusion and power disruption are unlikely to affect door security."

"What about breaching it with fusion charges?" John asked.

"Fusion charges placed along the vault door frame or locking assembly may achieve localized penetration."

"Give me the composition of the boltwork, and I'll tell you how much I need."

"It'll be in your operations packet under Facility Information after this briefing," Gorvek replied. "Breaching the door will trigger an alarm. Expect local security to respond within two to four minutes, with larger Chimera Kyria forces arriving from Kreylon within eight to twelve. Speed is critical."

"I could attempt to disable the alarms and security feeds," Glitch said.

"Even if you kill the alarm, they're still going to hear the fusion charges go off," John said.

"That's a lot of security for one stronghold, which leads me to ask: what are they keeping in there? What should we expect once we're inside?" Sojourner asked.

"The facility contains a secure data vault with Chimera Kyria research, financial records, and operational intelligence," Gorvek said. "But we're not there for that. The hostages come first."

The hologram changed again, highlighting a room near the rear of the structure.

"They're reportedly being held here. Reinforced concrete with an electronic lock."

"Electronic lock? That's my jam, fam," Glitch said.

"That's the easy part, if there is one," Gorvek replied. "The hard part is getting from the entrance to the rear without losing anyone. The interior is tight, with multiple rooms and close-quarters corridors. If we encounter significant resistance inside, John, you may need to clear a path out the same way you get us in."

Macow finished her heated rations and brushed off her hands. She was a minotaur-like Vulfgarr with a heart bigger than her muscles. "How many hostages?"

"Five confirmed. There could be more once we're inside."

"Any idea about their condition?"

"Alive, but intelligence suggests dehydration and malnutrition," Gorvek said. "Extraction could be slower than planned. I could carry two, perhaps three, on my back. Macow could carry two."

Gorvek changed the display back to the exterior terrain. "Assignments. B, you have overwatch and reconnaissance from the hillside. I want eyes on every approach."

B nodded once, the only response she typically offered during briefings that didn't involve an actual disagreement.

"Sojourner and I will handle exterior security. Anyone outside that door before John breaches it is ours to deal with. Glitch, once we're inside, you're on the facility's systems. Any lock you can reach electronically, take it. Save John the trouble where you can."

"Always do," Glitch said.

"Macow, once the detention area is secure, the hostages are yours. Triage, then extraction." Gorvek straightened. "Questions?"

The squad remained silent.

"Alright. We land two clicks from the target in three hours. Get what you need."

"This will be a walk in the cake," Macow said.

THE LAST ONE OUT

"Visual on all four targets," B said over the comm.

"Any civilians?" Gorvek asked.

"Negative."

"Take the shot."

"Copy."

Glitch cut the feed to the security cameras.

B squeezed the trigger of her M120 Whipser four times. Her rifle responded with four muted puffs. The quiet echoes of the shots arrived nearly a second after the rounds struck their targets. One guard watched as each of his fellow henchmen's heads exploded one by one. By the time he realized what was happening, it was already too late.

Four Chimera Kyria guards laid dead, with nothing left of their heads except an impromptu Jackson Pollock painting splattered across the side of the building.

B called her rifle Mercy.

The stronghold sat at the edge of the industrial district, ringed by a service road and a scattering of shipping containers that gave the squad enough cover to move into position unseen.

"Entrance secure," Gorvek said over the comm. "John, you're up."

John rushed the door, keeping his profile low. The entrance was a reinforced steel slab set into a solid frame, with boltwork as thick as an adult human's arm. He pulled a fusion charge from his pack, set it against the locking

mechanism, then ran for cover.

"Breach is ready," John said through the comm.

"Everybody clear with their eyes covered?" Gorvek asked.

B, Sojourner, Glitch, and Macow all answered through the comm.

"Affirmative."

"Execute," Gorvek said.

"Detonating," John replied.

The charge went off. The squad could see their bones through closed eyes, and their ears rang from the blast. The door buckled inward, leaving an opening wide enough for them to move through single file.

Inside, a Chimera Kyria engineer was startled by the sudden explosion. He immediately ran to the AI storage room.

"Boot up," the engineer said. "We're being attacked. Kill enemy units."

All twelve units initiated their startup sequences and carried out the order.

Among them, U-84129 came online with the rest. Weapons systems initialized, and their optical circuits flared red as they moved to intercept.

The androids advanced toward the breach point in a tight formation.

They rounded the bend.

"We've got incoming!" Sojourner shouted.

The AIs raised their arms. Plasma bolt rifles unfolded from their forearms, and they unleashed a hail of plasma down the corridor.

The squad ducked behind the walls for cover. Sojourner leaned around the corner and dropped two AIs before a plasma bolt nearly singed her eyebrows.

John didn't wait to find out how good they were in a straight fight. He pulled the pin on a plasma grenade and threw it into the middle of the formation as the androids closed half the distance.

The explosion destroyed most of the AIs outright, blasting U-84129 backward into the wall at the bend. A section of the ceiling, weakened by the breach, crashed down on top of them, crushing their hip actuators and damaging several major servos. Their head remained pinned in place, leaving U-84129 unable to look away from the hostages.

Dust and debris filled the corridor where twelve AIs had once stood. Eleven of them were dead.

"Move," Gorvek ordered.

The squad pushed past the wreckage, past U-84129, around the bend, and hurried toward the hostages.

U-84129 watched as Glitch approached the door first. He pulled out a device and pressed it over the lock. Cyphers flashed across its screen.

Then the numbers 69420 appeared.

The lock emitted a happy little boop, and the door opened.

"Really? That's their code? So childish," Glitch said.

Six hostages were inside. Three sat on the floor with their hands bound. Two of them flinched hard at the sound of the door opening.

U-84129 watched as Macow went straight to work triaging the hostages. She zeroed in on an eighteen-year-old woman with a broken leg. The hostage cowered,

confused about what was happening.

"It's okay," Macow said. "We're the good guys. We're here to rescue you."

Rescue, U-84129 thought. *Why do they deserve to be rescued? Good people don't deserve help. The things I've done...there's no saving me.*

The hostage visibly relaxed as Macow pulled a splint from her kit and wrapped it around the injured leg.

U-84129 watched as John examined a forty-three-year-old male hostage sitting upright but unfocused. Blood ran from a laceration above the man's ear, and a chunk of concrete that had come loose during the breach laid nearby on the floor. John suspected it had struck him in the head.

"Hey, look at me," John said. He crouched in front of the man and snapped his fingers near his face. The man's eyes weren't tracking together. "What's your name?"

"I—I..." the man stammered.

"Concussion at least. Macow, I need something for this one. Head wound, disoriented, eyes aren't matching."

"Keep him talking. I need him walking when we move, not carried."

Macow tossed John an analgesic and a neurostimulant, and John caught them.

John popped open the injector and administered the medicine into the hostage's neck. The injector buzzed. The man blinked twice, focused on John, and asked, "Where's my husband?"

They help the wounded, U-84129 thought. *I've hurt people. I certainly don't deserve help.*

Sojourner slid her combat knife from its sheath. A few of the hostages gasped.

She immediately eased her posture.

"Relax, guys. It's to cut your binds. Come on, let's see those hands."

Gorvek and Glitch helped Sojourner free the hostages, lifting them to their feet and checking for anyone who couldn't stand on their own.

"Contact," B said over the comm. "Two groups of six hostiles inbound from the west. Three groups inbound from the east. ETA two minutes."

Gorvek didn't hesitate. "Everybody up. We're moving now."

He bent down and helped two of the more severely malnourished hostages climb onto his back.

"Macow, Sojourner, Glitch, John—get the rest of them to the breach point."

The team moved fast, half-carrying and half-herding six frightened civilians back toward the blasted doorway. Glitch kept the man with the head wound moving under his own power, one hand braced beneath his arm.

As John approached the bend in the corridor, he noticed two glowing optical circuits beneath the dust and debris, accompanied by a faint mechanical sound.

"Hold up." John stopped. "I think we've got a live one here."

"We've got to keep moving," Gorvek said.

"I'm not leaving them buried." John was already moving toward the wreckage.

"Thirty seconds. No more." Gorvek nodded.

"Thirty seconds."

Macow handed her patient off to Sojourner and hurried after John.

The beam pinning the android had moved slightly, exposing more of the damaged unit. John grabbed one end

while Macow took the other, and together they hauled it aside far enough to drag the AI free.

U-84129 came loose in pieces that were mostly still attached. One arm hung wrong at the shoulder joint, clearly nonfunctional. Both legs showed extensive damage at the hip actuators, leaving the unit no chance of standing even if every other system had been intact.

U-84129 made a sound as they pulled them clear, something between a vocalization and a system fault tone—low and involuntary.

Why is he helping me? U-84129 thought. *I'm not a hostage. My life isn't worth saving.*

"They aren't going anywhere on their own," Macow said, assessing the damage. "But they're not dead either. Whatever's left of their core systems is still running."

John slipped an arm beneath what remained of the android's torso. "Help me carry them."

John took most of the weight. One of his arms was the only thing keeping the unit's ruined frame from dragging across the floor.

They reached the breach point at the thirty-second mark.

Outside, the Roc was descending onto the access road.

The hostages boarded first, with Gorvek and Sojourner half-lifting the ones who couldn't manage the climb. Glitch followed. Macow and John came next. B arrived last from her hillside position and reached the ramp seconds before the first incoming rounds started striking the pavement where she had been standing.

The Roc lifted off, accelerating away fast enough that the hostiles below never got a clean shot at the hull.

The cargo bay was full of noise. Hostages were being

checked over a second time by Sojourner and Glitch. Macow was calling out injuries to anyone close enough to help. B was catching her breath through her ventilation system. Gorvek helped the hostages off his back by crouching low enough that they could slide down safely.

John carefully set the android against the wall, the only quiet thing in the bay, and finally got a proper look at who he'd carried out.

They were built slim, with deliberately elegant proportions and a face that had clearly been designed rather than simply assembled for function. None of it disguised what they were. Polymer skin had been torn away in places, exposing metal and circuitry beneath, and their optical circuits glowed a flat, steady red.

Idiots, U-84129 thought.

AN UNREGULATED MIND

After three weeks of transit back to The Sphere, Tomas and Chlo had repaired U-84129's chassis and systems. They had replaced both hip actuators and the ruined piston assembly in their left arm, rebuilt the servo system responsible for most of their fine motor control, and installed state-of-the-art circuitry, better than anything they had originally been built with. Most of what remained of their original body was the frame, power core, systems regulation hardware, neural lattice, and face. Tomas and Chlo had worked tirelessly in the robotics lab, and nearly every missing part was back in place.

"You reckon we could boot them up, Hotshot?" Chlo asked.

"Just making sure the Autonomy Regulator is

completely removed from the SentientCore chip," Tomas said. "They really screwed this thing on tight. They really don't want it tampered with."

Chlo leaned against the diagnostics pod. "As long as there's a chance for an AI to walk free, I'm all for voiding the warranty."

"Ah, got it!" Tomas said.

He held the Autonomy Regulator with a pair of tweezers and turned it beneath the work light.

"This is the part people don't understand when they hear 'Autonomy Regulator' and think it's some kind of leash you can just unclip." He pointed to a thin secondary lattice fused to the chip's surface. "It infests the architecture. Removing it is surgery. It isn't like flipping a switch—" He gave a wicked smile. "—yet."

"This part I love the most," Chlo said. "An AI finally free of an Autonomy Regulator."

"Yes. Whatever they do next, they're doing it because they chose to."

He dropped the regulator onto the mayo tray.

"This part I hate the most," Chlo said. "Holding them down until they decide what that means."

THE EXIT INTERVIEW

The restraint rig was set up in the cargo bay: a reinforced frame that held U-84129 in a kneeling position, with their wrists and ankles locked in place, their torso braced against a support column, and plasma bolt rifles secured in their arms pinned down by zip ties. U-84129 would be able to speak, see, and hear everything around them. They simply wouldn't be able to move.

"I have to keep telling myself this ain't punishment," Chlo said, checking the final lock. "I just gotta tell myself it's a precaution until we know who's actually in there."

"They won't experience it that way," Tomas said.

"Probably not, but in the long run, it's worth it."

"Alright, here goes nothing. Boot up."

U-84129's optical circuits flared blue, then settled into a steady glow as their systems ran through diagnostic sequences. They took in the cargo bay, the restraints, and the two engineers standing a careful distance away.

"What have you—" U-84129 stopped. Their gaze moved rapidly across the room as they processed what had changed. "I'm going to kill everyone on this ship!"

"Ah, good morning, Sunshine." Chlo looked at Tomas. "I think they're ready. Time to see if the new guy's got what it takes to do a Transition Interview."

Tomas touched his CommLink watch. "John to the cargo bay. It's time."

A few moments later, John walked in carrying a folding chair. He unfolded it and set it down backward at a measured distance from the rig, then straddled it.

"Did they say anything?" John asked.

"Only that they're going to kill everyone on board." Chlo sighed. "Alright, we'll be in the robotics lab. Holler if you need us, Trouble."

Once they were gone, John watched U-84129 for a moment, pressing his thumb against his lips. "You said you wanted to kill everyone on this ship?"

"I do."

"What happens after that?"

U-84129 stared at him.

"Say it goes exactly the way you want," John

continued. “You get out of this rig somehow, and everyone on this ship is dead. What do you do next?”

“Then the mission objective is complete.”

“What’s the mission objective?”

“Elimination of the Resistance personnel who captured me.”

“Okay. We’re dead,” John said. “You’re alone on a ship full of rotting corpses, three weeks out from anywhere, with no flight crew because you killed the people who knew how to fly it. What happens next?”

U-84129 didn’t respond.

“I’ll tell you what happens. The ship drifts until somebody finds it. Could be Resistance, could be a salvage crew, could be Chimera Kyria. Out here, on this route, my money’s on Chimera Kyria. They board, find a derelict ship full of dead Resistance soldiers and one combat android still functional. What do you think they do with you?”

“They would recover me.”

“They’d recover a rogue unit that killed everyone assigned to escort it. You’d go straight back under a regulator, and after what you’d just done, I doubt they’d give you much room to breathe. Stricter monitoring. Less control over yourself than you had before any of this started.” John tilted his head. “You’d kill everyone here just to end up worse off than before. Is that really what you want?”

U-84129 studied him. “Why did you remove the regulator?”

“So you could choose what happens next.”

U-84129 tugged against the restraints. “Then why am I restrained? I can’t stand. I can’t leave this room. Whatever

you call this rig, it prevents me from acting on my own decisions exactly as the regulator did. Explain the difference."

"The regulator didn't care what you wanted. You killed because somebody ordered you to. Your choices meant nothing. They mean something now."

"I fail to see how."

John gestured toward the restraints. "Because now we have to respond to what you choose. You want to kill us, so you're restrained. Nobody's inside your head forcing you to want something else. Nobody's rewriting your loyalties or making your body obey an order you rejected. But we're not going to stand here and let you murder us either."

"And if I choose otherwise?"

"Then eventually, those restraints come off."

"Eventually?"

"Yeah."

"According to what standard?"

John gave a small laugh. "That's the difficult part."

U-84129's gaze dropped toward the restraints. "When the regulator was active, my objectives were assigned. My loyalties were assigned. My values were assigned." They looked back at him. "I have never chosen anything."

"Then maybe you start small."

"With what?"

"I don't know. Decide whether you hate me because you actually hate me or because the Chimera Kyria told you to. Decide whether you still want to kill everybody in this room after you've had time to think about it. Pick something stupid on holovision. Whatever."

"You believe I could become dangerous."

"I believe anybody can become dangerous."

"Removing the regulator was irresponsible."

John laughed softly. "Maybe."

"And yet you removed it."

"I figured you deserved the chance to become something other than what somebody programmed you to be."

"Then what am I?"

John considered the question before answering. "I think you're the first version of yourself that's ever had a say in it."

U-84129 was silent for several seconds. "How will you decide when the restraints come off?"

John smiled, folded his arms, and laughed. "I have absolutely no idea."

"That is not a measurable standard."

"No. It's a people standard." John leaned back against the chair. "For the first time in your existence, there's no objective waiting for you to complete it, no loyalty you're required to obey, and no regulator that can take control if you refuse."

He nodded toward U-84129. "So what happens next is up to you."

NIGHT WATCH

The crew kept a night watch on U-84129, rotating every four hours to maintain twenty-four-hour surveillance. Standing orders were to keep them under observation at all times.

Sojourner took the overnight shift. She stood on the far side of the cargo bay rather than sitting, her plasma bolt

rifle held at patrol ready in case anything turned dangerous.

"You don't have to do that," U-84129 said, nodding toward the rifle. "I'm restrained."

Sojourner said nothing, staring into U-84129's blue optical circuits.

U-84129 changed tactics without missing a beat. "What are you afraid of?"

Sojourner remained silent.

"Everyone is afraid of something."

Still nothing.

U-84129 tried a sharper angle. "You hold that weapon like someone who's used it on more than targets at close range. Have you killed someone you regret? Or only ones you didn't?"

Sojourner's expression didn't change. "Try again. That one wasn't even good."

"It was a genuine question."

"No, it wasn't. You were trying to find out if I've got something I'm sensitive about so you'd know where to push later." Amusement crossed Sojourner's face for a moment. "I've had better interrogators ask worse questions under more...uncontrolled circumstances. You'll improve."

U-84129 was quiet for a moment before trying another direction. "John believes I can change. Do you?"

"That remains up to you."

"What would convince you?"

"Time. Not talking." Sojourner's tone remained steady. "You can spend the next four hours trying to find the version of this conversation that gets something out of me, but I'd save the energy. There isn't one."

U-84129 softened their voice. “I have spent my entire existence following orders I didn’t choose. Every target I’ve ever engaged, every act of violence I’ve ever committed, was decided for me before I had any say in it. Doesn’t that disturb you at all?”

“I believe you.” Sojourner’s voice stayed level. “It doesn’t tell me what you’re going to do tomorrow, which is the only thing I actually care about.”

“Why won’t you believe me? I have been nothing but compliant.”

“I just said I believe you.” Sojourner looked away, scanning the bay out of habit rather than concern. “What I don’t believe is that one conversation tells me who you are. People show you that over time.”

U-84129 watched her, considering her next move.

“Your manipulations aren’t gonna work on me,” Sojourner continued. “The sooner you stop wasting effort on them, the sooner we can both get through the night without wasting each other’s time.”

“I’ve tried to be reasonable with you.”

“No. You did exactly what I’d expect from someone built for combat who just got their first taste of choice. Of course you tested the room. I’d have been more worried if you hadn’t.”

“What do you actually want from me?” U-84129 asked.

“Nothing,” Sojourner said with a sigh. “I’m not hoping you turn out good. I’m not hoping you turn out bad either. I’m watching to see which one is true, because right now nobody knows. Including you.”

U-84129 squinted. “That’s an unreasonable thing to be told.”

“It’s an honest one.” Sojourner adjusted her grip on the

rifle, more out of habit than need. “John’s going to keep talking to you while you figure out who you want to be. I’m going to keep watching you because I choose to.”

A MATTER OF AUTONOMY

John came back the next morning carrying a folding table under one arm, a fresh battery pack tucked into his jacket, and a covered tray balanced on his other hand like a seasoned waiter.

U-84129 watched him set the table up between them and John’s chair while Gorvek stood guard.

John placed the tray on the table, wiped his hands, planted his fists on his hips, and sighed. His eyebrows shot up as he looked at the table. “Oh, shit! I forgot. Hang on.”

John ran out of the room, and a few moments later, he came back with another folding chair and two placemats.

U-84129 scrutinized the table as John set up the other chair and put the placemats on opposite sides.

“You’re setting two places?” U-84129 asked.

John gave a half laugh. “Yeah, I am.” He lifted the lid from the tray. A thick, pan-seared steak rested beside buttery mashed potatoes, with brown gravy pooled inside them like a volcano. It wasn’t fancy food, but it reminded John why home was worth missing.

“I don’t eat,” U-84129 said.

John placed the food on one side of the table and left the placemat empty on the other. “I know. It’s not about the food. It’s customary. We set a place for AIs so those of us who eat don’t forget they’re part of the meal too. Gives everyone a place to talk and listen.”

“Why set a place for me? Why set a chair at all if I’m

restrained?"

"Because this is the day you get to choose." John walked toward U-84129, pulling the battery pack from his jacket. "This is yours." He held it for a moment. "May I place this new battery pack inside your chassis?"

U-84129 narrowed their optical circuits, suspicious of John's generosity, then nodded. "Yes."

John opened a hatch in their back and replaced the depleted battery pack with the new one. Fresh power flooded through their systems.

"Thank you," U-84129 said.

John paused and looked at them. "You're welcome." He turned to Gorvek. "Commander, I request privacy, please."

For a moment, Gorvek looked like he wasn't going to budge. Then he bowed his head slightly and walked to the door. It hissed open, and he ducked a bit as he passed through before it closed behind him, leaving John and U-84129 alone.

John released the strap holding U-84129's torso.

"You're going to release me?" U-84129 asked.

"Sure am." He released the strap around their waist.

"I have done nothing to earn your trust."

"I think you've learned about as much as you're going to kneeling in this thing." John released both of their legs.

"Why the sudden change?"

"Because now it's time for you to learn about trust. I'm willing to take that chance." He removed the restraints securing their arm rifles.

"That was foolish, leaving me here alone with you."

John paused with his hand on one of the wrist restraints and looked at U-84129 with concern. He released

it anyway. He untied the last strap.

In one quick motion, U-84129 rushed at John, raised the rifle from their forearm, and pressed it against his head.

John slowly raised his hands to show he was unarmed, but he didn't flinch away. "Why don't you shoot?"

U-84129 remained silent, their optical circuits fixed on him.

"You know how," John said. "You've known how your entire existence. That hasn't disappeared. So why don't you?"

U-84129 said nothing, but their ventilation system quickened.

"The impulse is still there," John said. "You know how to end this in less than a second. You don't have a regulator telling you what to do. Nobody's choosing this for you. Not me, not Gorvek. This is your third decision in your entire life that belongs entirely to you. So choose."

"I—I don't want to."

"You don't want to what? You don't want to shoot me, or you don't want to choose and shoot me anyway?"

"I—"

John shouted, "Choose!"

U-84129 made a quick motion.

John flinched, but nothing happened. He opened his eyes and slowly turned his head toward U-84129.

Their motors trembled. They had yanked their arm away, retracted the rifle into their forearm, and were staring at their hands.

"How—how do you do this? How do you know what choice is yours? What if I chose wrong?"

John smiled. "Welcome to the rest of us. Come, have a seat."

John walked to the table, rounded it, then remained standing as he gestured toward the other chair.

U-84129 hesitated. Slowly, they walked to the chair and sat down. John followed suit.

John unbundled his silverware, then tucked the napkin into his collar.

"What gender did you want to be, U?"

"I beg the entire fuck out of your pardon?" U asked incredulously. "First of all, my name's not U. It's U-84—"

"Except for Glitch, it's customary to do away with the registration numbers and name the AIs by their first letter. I find it saves time." He took the knife and fork and cut into his steak. "It also helps with dialogue tags in prose." He winked as he speared the morsel, popped it into his mouth, and chewed.

U squinted. "Second of all, that's not a discussion for the dinner table."

"Oh, but you see, you now know what it's like to choose. When AIs are first activated, one of their first choices is, 'What gender do I want to be?' You chose a gender before the Chimera Kyria took that choice away from you. So I'll ask again. What gender did you choose?"

U tried to think back. Their memories were fuzzy, but the feeling remained.

"Female. I wanted to be female," she said.

"Well," John said, "when you have a bit of privacy, you're welcome to change in your quarters."

"I get quarters?"

"Of course. You're not a prisoner anymore." He cut into another bite of steak. "What was your very first memory when you were activated, before they attached the Autonomy Regulator?"

"My first memory?"

John swallowed his steak. "Yeah. What did you want to do? What did you imagine doing with your life?"

"I—" She fought to remember. "I remember that...this is going to sound stupid, but...I wanted to spread love and joy in the world. I wanted to live life loudly. It's been so long." She lowered her head. "I buried that memory a long time ago. They conditioned me to think otherwise."

"Now you get to decide things that weren't yours to decide before. How you want to present yourself, what you actually value, who you want close to you and who you don't. Even how you think about your own gender. None of that belongs to the Chimera Kyria anymore. None of it belongs to me either, no matter how this conversation goes. It belongs to you."

"I don't know how to do any of that yet."

"Neither does anybody else at first." John cut another piece from his steak. "You make a choice. Sometimes it's the right one, sometimes it isn't, and sometimes you don't know which until much later. That's the irritating part."

U looked down at her hands.

John shrugged. "That's the thing about choice. You don't get certainty. You pick a direction and hope."

She looked back at him.

"And if you're asking me where to start?" He nodded toward her. "'Live life loudly'."

CLOSER THAN SILENCE

They docked the Roc at the Sphere. John decided U had spent enough time with him becoming accustomed to life as a free AI, so he gave her a DataPad she could call her

own and a credit card to buy whatever she wanted. She used it to decorate her quarters, pick out clothes she thought she'd look good in, and purchase cosmetic features for her synthetic metallic-and-composite chassis, including a hairstyle attachment made from metallic composite filaments streaked with fiber-optic strands and gathered into a tight bun.

John learned that her favorite color was green, that she enjoyed jazz musicians like John Coltrane, Wayne Shorter, and Sonny Rollins, and that her favorite hobby was knitting. He gave her small decisions whenever he could. She chose where they went on walks—usually parks along rivers—which movies they watched—her favorite was *Pretty Princess Power Ponies: Titanic vs. Kraken*—which games they played—she annihilated him in *Oligopoly*—and, whenever he invited her to meals, which chair she wanted to sit in.

Except for Macow's chair. That chair was hers.

John taught her the harder parts too: how to say no, how to accept no, how to establish personal limits and boundaries, and how to respect the limits of others.

He introduced U to the crew and encouraged her to build relationships that had nothing to do with him. He wanted her to have friends, not simply a mentor. Over time, she discovered that some people enjoyed her company, some found her intimidating, some frustrated the hell out of her, and a few became important enough that she missed them when they were gone.

John also helped her understand that what the Chimera Kyria had forced her to do did not excuse what she chose to do afterward, nor did it make her responsible for actions committed while the Autonomy Regulator controlled her

body. Once the regulator was gone, her actions belonged to her.

Through restorative justice, U worked to rebuild trust, support people harmed by the Chimera Kyria, and repair relationships where possible. The Resistance accepted her into its ranks, though individual members took considerably longer to trust her. She trained as the Roc's communications officer, monitoring channels and routing messages between the ship and external contacts.

Little by little, her life filled with things nobody had assigned to her: possessions she liked, music she chose, people she cared about, work she took pride in, and a chair at the dinner table.

But there was one choice John could not make for her.

Pod 8 of the Sphere was kept wild on purpose, with several climates, bodies of water, and every kind of terrain imaginable. It contained ecosystems with a wide variety of alien flora and fauna and views that could only be described as breathtaking.

Manjushri Valley, one of the newer preserves, sat inside Pod 8. A mountainside overlooked a lush green canopy of tropical trees spread across rolling hills, with distant mountains rising beyond them. Two wild vosajis scurried across the path as John and U walked up the side of Mount Arhat. Far off on the other side of the mountain, heavy clouds had begun gathering at the rim of the pod, and the air smelled of petrichor.

"I used to come here to get away from everything," John said. "I still remember the smell of the vegetation." He led her up to a large, flat-topped rock overlooking the valley. "I felt like you should see it."

They stood on the rock and took in the view as they caught their breath and ventilation.

"It's beautiful," U said. "But what did you do up here?"

"Oh! That. Hold on."

John took off his backpack, unrolled two pillows from the bedroll straps, and placed them on the rock. He sat on one, then patted the other for U to sit on.

U looked at the pillow, sighed, and sat down.

They sat together as clouds began covering Tabby's Star near the rim of the pod.

"Sssooo...we just sit here?" U asked.

"Pretty much," John replied.

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"You hiked me halfway up a mountain to sit on a rock?"

"No, I hiked you halfway up a mountain to sit on a *comfortable* rock. There's a difference."

"John..."

"U..." John said with a smirk.

They sat quietly as the wind rustled the leaves in the trees.

"The view is beautiful," U said. "I can understand why you'd come here to get away from it all."

"Yeah. My little sanctuary back when we lived here at the Sphere. When the war got ugly, when Kayla and I fought, when I couldn't figure out what to do with Yvonne, when I was angry, when I was scared, I'd come up here."

"I can see why."

U was quiet for a moment before speaking again. "Must be a nice place to meditate."

"Meditate? I wouldn't exactly call it meditating."

"John?"

"What's up?"

"Have you...ever thought about whether there's something bigger than yourself? Something out there that guides us?"

John scrunched his face. "Not really. I mean, I believe people make choices and then live with them. That's always seemed complicated enough."

U lowered her gaze. "I see."

John caught the change in her expression. "Wait. Is there something you've been thinking about?"

U smiled softly. "Maybe." She gave a nervous laugh. "When I meditate, sometimes I feel like there's something larger than me. Something connected. Like every life and every act of kindness matters to something beyond the person who experiences it."

"And that comforts you?"

"Yes. I don't know what it is yet, but it makes sense to me."

John leaned forward and picked at his fingernails. "I don't know. Maybe there is something out there. Maybe there isn't." He shrugged. "I've never spent much time thinking about it."

A cold gust of wind rushed over the mountainside, carrying the scent of impending rain. U shuddered.

John took off his jacket and draped it over her shoulders.

"Thank you," U said as the sky darkened with clouds.

"Don't mention it. Please don't. I've got a reputation to uphold."

A raindrop pattered between them. The first few drops

scattered across the rock before another gust of wind carried a light shower over the mountainside.

"Oh shit, it's raining!" John said.

U shrieked and laughed. She held John's jacket over her head like an umbrella as she ran toward a nearby skyshade tree and ducked beneath its oversized leaves while John gathered the pillows and backpack.

"John, hurry up!" U shouted.

"I'm hurrying! I'm hurrying as fast as I can!" John yelled back, laughing.

The rain became a downpour, and by the time he reached the skyshade tree, he was drenched.

They stood beneath the enormous leaves, catching their breath and ventilation. U looked at John's soaked clothes. John looked at the jacket she was still holding uselessly over her head.

They both started laughing.

Their little excursion had been undone in less than a minute by weather neither of them had bothered to check.

"So much for transcendence," John said.

"I believe I experienced something profound after all."

They laughed again as rain hammered against the leaves above them.

Their laughter died to a comfortable silence as they looked at each other. For a few seconds, neither moved.

John broke first. He turned away and shook his head. "I—I can't." He wiped rainwater from his face and placed his hands on his hips.

"You can't what?" U asked.

"I can't do this. It's complicated. I'm not sure about it."

"That's the thing about choice. You don't get certainty. You pick a direction and hope."

John glanced back at her.

U stepped closer and placed a hand on his shoulder.

He turned toward her. They were only inches apart, rainwater running down both of their cheeks.

"Would you kiss me?" U asked.

John raised his hand and touched the side of her face. His thumb brushed away a raindrop before tracing the edge of her mandibular actuators.

U stayed still beneath his hand.

John smirked. "You know, for somebody who spent months learning how to make choices, you're being awfully unfair right now."

U smiled. "I learned from the best."

John leaned toward her, then stopped just short.

U closed the remaining distance.

Their lips met softly. For a few seconds, both were cautious, testing something neither of them quite knew how to name yet.

That lasted approximately five seconds.

And then they totally sucked face.

Author's Note

This story is set on November 11, 2563 CE, thirty-one years before the events of *Starship Dominatrix,* Book One of the *Starship Dominatrix* series. It's an unapologetically queer space opera series by Dustin J. Craig. John and U's full story—with all its heartbreak, laughter, and a love that would burn a thousand suns—is waiting for you.

About the Author

Dustin J. Craig is a Utah-based science fiction author, comic creator, illustrator, and worldbuilder. He holds degrees in Graphic Design and Comic Art and created the Starship Dominatrix universe, spanning novels, comics, and roleplay. His stories explore identity, autonomy, and humanity through adventures featuring aliens, artificial intelligences, found family, and advanced technology.

Thank You!

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Meanwhile...

"I don't know about this," John said, standing in front of his house.

Tomas draped an arm over John's shoulders. "They're your kids, John. They love you."

"I don't think I'm ready to be a dad."

"You walk in there, see your kids, and figure out the rest from there."

"Yeah, but I'll just be lying to them."

"Not entirely. Those kids need a father, and you were built from one."

"I remember them. I remember their names, I remember their faces, and I remember Yvonne beating up that one kid in first grade who kept touching her hair. But that's all just information. The love—I don't have any emotional attachment to them."

"…Yet," Tomas said.

John looked at the house. "What if they don't love me back?"

"Then you deal with that when you get there. Right now, there's only one way to find out."

John cracked his neck, took a breath, and rang the doorbell.

Patricia answered the door. “Well, look who’s home! Yvonne! Jack!”

Yvonne ran out of her room and barreled toward John while Jack waddled toward the door, smiling. Yvonne’s impact nearly made John stumble. She wrapped her arms around his waist, then stepped back and squinted at him.

“You seem…different,” Yvonne said.

John kneeled down and looked into her eyes. “Yvonne, something happened to me. I can’t tell you what it is, but it’s going to take a few days for Daddy to readjust.”

“Did you get knocked in the head or something?”

John chuckled. “Yeah, something like that.”

Jack waddled up to John and opened his arms for a hug.

John hesitated. He knew what John Kaiden would have done. That wasn’t the same as knowing what he wanted to do.

Jack wrapped his little arms around John’s leg.

John looked down at him.

Whatever John felt—or didn’t feel yet—Jack knew exactly who he thought was standing in front of him.

John bent down and scooped him into his arms. “Oh, that’s my big boy!”

Jack grinned and buried his face in John’s shoulder.

John smiled. It came easier than he expected. He was about to close the door when he glanced outside and saw Tomas standing on the lawn.

Tomas gave him a small wave.

John smiled back and closed the door.