

autónoma

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1 Till

Wherein disturbances emerge

Xander Angelos (January 2, 2042)

Skopós flagged my unborn daughter because of a future she *may* have developed.

The obstetrician's secretary dictated my wife's pregnancy details into a hospital database to authorize the creation of her conception record, which might as well have launched an airstrike at my young family.

Skopós received the data immediately, and—based on my daughter's genealogy, genetic health, family network, and affluence, plus hundreds of other factors—that lifeless, mindless machine marked her for deep analysis. A few nanoseconds later, it concluded that Chloé Irene Angelos would destabilize the global economic system.

That's my girl.

Skopós notified the Agency of Defence.

The Agency's standard procedure involves inhibiting the social progress of future oppositionists, like Chloé, through covert operations. This policy raises far fewer suspicions than murder without jeopardizing their finely fabricated façade of free will. Our daughter would never ascend beyond the middle class, her voice would be lost in the bedlam of being, and the Agency would trample her existence into mundanity.

Hangs a sour note over one's life, that.

You see, nearly everyone believes the reigns of kings and corporations are as certain as death. But Chloé's idea, suppressed by the Agency, could have dethroned them both. Maybe it still can, but her mother and I have grown too old to ignite another rebellion. The Agency's smoke of deception has suffocated our ability to light a path to freedom. It's time we help share Chloé's idea—an idea that, in capable hands, could disperse the smog of the ultra-wealthy.

This is Chloé's story as told by her mother, me, and Yūna. Let's get the spoiler out of the way. Cassandra and I won't escape. We're recording our daughter's story from an abandoned log cabin, far from street cameras and Agency spies. There are no nearby towers, no digital blips to give us away. If they're still hounding us, it'll be by some other scent. When we power on the satellite uplink to transmit what you're now reading, we will have compromised our position.

Let's begin at the beginning, long before Yūna exploded into our lives.

On the day we learned we would soon be a family of three, my wife interlaced her gloved fingers with mine and skipped away from the obstetrician's office. Her thick locks danced to the rhythm in her steps and the cool nip of winter brought a rosy blush to her cheeks. She swung my arm with unfettered excitement while I half-cantered in tow to keep pace. I thought about how I would show our child the world, point her towards the light, and watch her grow.

Assuming a worthwhile world awaited her.

Later that year, another Antarctic ice sheet calved into the ocean, precipitating a half-metre sea level rise over the following decades. Climbing high-tides—king tides—submerged formerly coastal homes and flooded the real estate market with hundreds of new ocean-front listings across the Atlantic seaboard. Even so, a smattering of weak voices continued to adamantly deny that humans could influence the Earth's climate. It's too bad greenhouse gases aren't tinted green.

Bathing in pessimism wasn't on my agenda, though. I had a crib to sand and robots to build before the blistering summer of 2042.

Yūna Futaba (June 8, 2064)

Officer LeMay sat behind a metal e-table, facing towards the door. I stood at attention before him. We were inside a cement room lit by blue-hued lights. Serrated yellow teeth prowled behind his tight-lipped smile. Sev-

eral shiny medals dripped down his broad chest, supported by rows of pins lying flat against his ultramarine service uniform.

“No,” he said. “Autonomous weapons are our *only* assurance against everlasting war. Strange, your referral said you were smart. Why’s your blabbering worth a listen?”

After a moment’s hesitation, I bit. “You’re out of time and your team’s floundering. Ice them and I’ll have your self-aware systems running within a few months. Sir.”

LeMay sneered and furrowed his broad eyebrows; his eyes never left mine. He was easy to read: his shoulders were poised to slump under the pressure from his superiors to build a prototype. He deliberated. Probably toyed with the idea of extending the head hunt. He didn’t want more meetings, interviews, employment validations, authorizations, and other anguishes. Enemy nations weren’t about to pause their efforts to achieve sophont titanium machines until our nation had finished building one of its own. Sure, he had his choice of neuroscientists, but finding one with enough multidisciplinary experience to finish the job had limited his options. Severely. A dozen or two existed throughout the world, making the résumé that floated within the e-table between us a meaningless formality. Not that this behemoth of a man appeared to be one for rules, formal or otherwise. From LeMay on up, they all thought that the first player to build such a machine would win any war.

They were all blind. Our race to ultra-intelligent weapons ensured no winners. At best, it would lead to a perpetual standoff between nations. My heart pounded whenever I thought that maybe there’d be nobody left to pass the finish line. So what was one to do? Apply for the job, right?

In a throaty baritone, LeMay said, “Prove yourself.”

Turned out proving myself meant answering a poser within tight timelines: How do we build sophont machines that’ll obey us? Somewhere up the food chain, apparently, LeMay’s chieftains wanted absolute assurance that their pets would fight for us and die for us, but never turn on

us. They wanted to leash their beasts. My job was to tether the things.

But I doubted the story would end well for anyone—especially the machines.