

RONIN^{Parts} 4-6

THE CONQUERORS OF K'Tara short stories

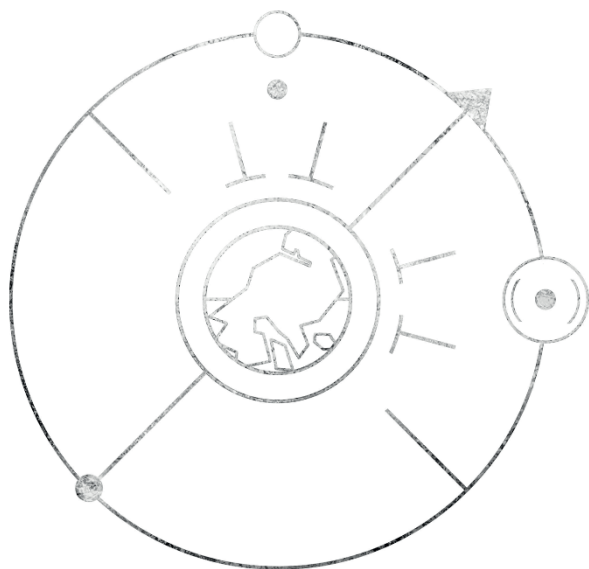


L.A. DI PAOLO

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RONIN Parts 4-6 – The Conquerors of K'Tara Short Stories

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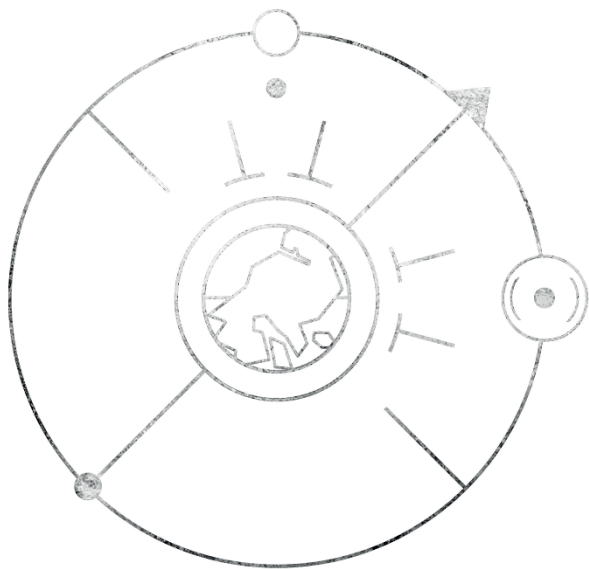
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For those
who dream of the future and wonder...
what will be of it

RONIN

Part 4

The CONQUERORS OF K'Tara
short stories



L.A. DI PAOLO

RONIN Part 4

A Conquerors of K'Tara Short Story

“*“Ronin, they’re att—”*

“Private Mendez, you are attempting to send an unauthorized communication.”

Julia’s communication link with Ronin was interrupted. She groaned and pulled at her hair. She was sent down to Kepler with the 3rd unit of General Genghis’s army as Cultural Attaché to help the political appointee, Special Envoy River Lank, negotiate the locals’ surrender. However, there was no such desire among the resistance; they wanted peace but a peace among equals, one where they would gain as much as Earth would. This infuriated General Genghis. He had no patience for a long, drawn-out confrontation on the planet, and the Escapists among his soldiers had no desire to die here. So, the general transferred the mission’s command to Colonel Retch. Special Envoy Lank balked at that, but what could he do? The Empress wanted the revolt quashed, and he conceded.

Julia watched Colonel Emilia Retch beam as a poor famished beast suddenly released upon its prey. Her expression frightened Julia as it did the Keplerian contingent standing in front of them. She started to whisper an objection, but the colonel, who had been quite vocal about her hope for

a confrontation, dismissed her with a hiss and rushed her and the Special Envoy back to the diplomatic landing ship. Julia heard the colonel give orders to crush the resistance as they were being whisked away.

The imperial soldiers—a mixture of fullsynths and synthetics, with only a few halfsynths—took offensive positions, responding to commands she could no longer hear, for all communications were switched to direct, mind-to-mind delivery from the moment Colonel Retch had given her orders. The halfsynths among the soldiers moved hesitantly, still slightly confused by the planet's psychoactive magnetic fields. But it was not long before Sergeant Troponin activated their neurotran implants¹, the soldiers jolted with little cries of pain, and the fog lifted from their minds entirely, at which point they started to move as swiftly as their enhanced companions, though slightly less gracefully than they.

The Imperials armed the new weapons they carried—*comclearers*, they had decided to call them because they killed only the common folk, people without the enhanced genome of the upper classes or of government issue—and opened fire after Colonel Retch's final warning, which she yelled for all to hear.

¹ Neurotran implants: Brain implants that modulated the release of various neurotransmitters. The implant could be controlled by the person wearing it, although it would be controlled by command during a mission.

The device, developed by the exteriorly frightening and secretly frightened Minister of Science Thabo, left only bleeding sacks containing bones on the ground or in the buildings where the resistors were hidden, their bodies oozing blood through every pore as the nanos did what they were designed to do: search for the old surface markers and lyse the corresponding cell membranes.

As soon as she was on board the landing vessel, Julia tried again to reach Ronin, but the TSAI, or Tactical Supportive AI, which monitored all communications, interrupted her connection again, and Julia was stuck simply watching the tragedy unfold from her port in the back.

The Special Envoy, sitting on the opposite side, kept shaking eir head and cursing, wondering where the pilot was. Ey dosed eirself with another microgram of neurotrans, then turned toward her with a look of complete disgust.

Why does ey keep looking at me this way? Is he—ey accusing me of being the cause of this? Of having incorrectly interpreted the rebels' motivations or their demands? One of Julia's first lessons from the moment she boarded the ship back on the Disk—a lesson she had had no choice but to learn very quickly lest she insult almost everyone she met—had been that genderless people use different pronouns than gendered people. Given the relative rarity of gendered people on board, she rarely had the opportunity to make mistakes anymore. But she still slipped once in a while, mainly when

the person looked more like one gender than the other, as the envoy did.

Julia quickly looked away and contained her desire to burst and cry. The person had never liked her; Ey was the one who had shot her those irritated glances back on the Disk. Perhaps ey hated her for what *she* was—a fullhuman. Maybe ey wondered why a fullhuman would be allowed to join the mission, regardless of her skills. Whatever the reason was, Julia knew ey resented being forced to work with her and she had come to hate em just as much. Oh, she had considered confronting the envoy about the situation, but there had never been an opportunity, given that ey only ever spoke to her of official matters before sending her away with a dismissive hand or simply leaving the room without warning. Julia could not believe she had found him—em good looking.

And now, this. What if ey accused her of having botched the mission? But she knew—she was certain—that she had correctly understood both the rebel leaders' demands and Lank's responses. Could she have made a mistake while verbalizing the translation via the required mind-to-mind communication? Perhaps. She had asked the envoy if she could speak the translation; everyone still had a functional auditory system, after all. But Lank had refused. Mind-to-mind communication was a requirement for all official communications unless dealing with a primitive race. She hoped she had not made a mistake, but she did still have some difficulty expressing herself via the brainchip. Not that the chip was unable to pick up her thoughts—it did so quite well,

in fact too well—but she had noticed that her continued hesitancy about the technology caused her to often misform her thoughts when under pressure or when surprised by a question. Or perhaps the planet's atmosphere confused her thoughts, causing her to make a mistake in the translation, though she had felt in complete control of herself.

Not knowing what else to do with herself, Julia just stared outside. As she did, a growing sense of shock took her. She saw one of the rebels, who had come with his two teenage children, put his hands to his head, his face a mask of horror, then run toward a building on the east side of the meeting grounds, heedless of the bullets bringing down his comrades all around him. Julia tapped the sound actuator next to the port and felt her bowels tighten and the bile rise when she heard his wailing screams as he arrived by the building and knelt down; the younger of his sons had been hit by a comclearer, and Julia could see the reddish blood covering the boy from head to toe. The older boy sat there in total stupor.

Aware that the TSAI was monitoring her, she struggled to keep from screaming to demand that the envoy intervene to stop the madness. She pulled at her hair, cursing herself for having ever agreed to join the mission. The general's actions on this day—against members of the imperium—had finished stripping her of her naïve belief that life on K'Tara would be better than it had been on Earth. Indeed, she had begun having doubts about the general's true intents while listening to the soldiers' and officers' chatter on board ship during the two months that it took to get to Kepler. But what could she do?

She could and would not leave Ronin; she really loved him, loved him as she had never loved anyone else before. He had shown her things she could never have imagined; he had fallen for her—a fullhuman—despite his kind’s continued diffidence toward her. So, here she was, unable to process what was happening, unable to comprehend it, and silently accusing Genghis of the worst evils despite the risk such thoughts presented.

When a second chirp sounded in her mind, she turned away from the scene outdoors, closed her eyes, blocked her ears, dismissed all thoughts, and began praying that someone would come and take them back to the orbiting Galactic right now.

As it happened, someone boarded the ship just then, his panting voice startling her. “Dovard!”

Ronin’s friend came in cursing and harried, followed by the pilot, who looked embarrassed and resentful.

Julia sent a private, pleading message, “*What is it Dovard? Can we leave, please?*”

Dovard sent a sour response. “*I told mission control they should have let me complete the installation of the ship’s intpil² just in case, but they never listen. It took me a while to make the necessary adjustments, but the intpil’s ready now.*”

² Intpil: Integrated Pilot

At least, I hope so because Deck over there isn't doing very well, even with a double dose of neurotrans."

"You hope? I don't want to stay here a minute longer. Don't you see what they're doing?! They killed a boy! They must be m—"

Julia did not finish her thought. Dovard's expression put a sudden stop to it. But his subsequent silence and the setting of his jaw communicated his feelings to her well enough. She was glad that she could at least read *his* expressions. Most of the crew were either fullsynth humans or synthetics, and she could hardly tell what any of them thought from their facial expressions. However, she had begun to learn to understand feelings a little better as communicated via mind-to-mind transmissions by all individuals, regardless of their nature. With Dovard as with Ronin, though Dovard was far more enhanced than Ronin, she did not need to guess; she could tell what they thought or felt when they weren't trying to hide it.

As Dovard and the pilot settled into their seats, Julia found her gaze drawn to the unfolding fight against her will. She quickly tore her eyes away, her heart pounding. She reached out to Dovard, her mind filled with unspoken questions.

"What is it, Julia?"

"I...I'm sorry. It's nothing."

Dovard looked at her with an expression that said they could talk about it verbally, later. Julia nodded slightly in a sign of understanding and gratitude. From the look on his face, however, she could tell that he, himself, had already come to accept that things might not turn out exactly as they had been told. But, always the fatalist, he would make no opposition.

After a few minutes of deadly silence waiting for the ship to warm up—Julia had turned off the sound actuator—she could not prevent her thoughts from straying again despite the risk that the TSAI might intercept them. Presently, she wondered about her crewmates' true intent. Were they like the general? Were they planning to fight to secure the promised paradise once they reached their destination? Or were they also being duped? She shot the briefest glance at the envoy. And as before, ey had sensed her gaze, turning toward her with the same unsettling stare. She lowered her head, clenched her teeth, and groaned inwardly.

The abrupt shuddering of the shuttle's engine shook Julia out of her troubled thoughts. She clasped the arms of her seat and looked toward Dovard, hoping to understand from his reaction whether the shuddering was typical or not. As a matter of fact, Dovard looked calm; he made a soothing nod in her direction. Julia gave him a small, thankful smile, leaned back, and started thinking about the last few months as the ship took off. She recalled images of the exhilarating vast, black space opening before the vessel; re-experienced the assaults by incomprehensible manifestations of light and darkness caused by the effects of faster-than-light travel;

remembered the hopeful conversations with Ronin as they mused about the life they would have on K'Tara; and recalled the intoxicating night she had with Ronin where she learned about a man who had never touched a fullhuman, and where he learned things he had never known about himself before those very moments spent touching her and being touched by her. These memories kept her focus away from the intermittent trembling of the shuttle as it passed through Kepler's upper atmosphere. But as soon as the darkness of space appeared through her window, which faced away from the local star, and she noticed the distant pinpricks of other celestial bodies, her thoughts shifted back to more depressing ones—in particular, the increasingly pressing and oppressing sense that life on that remote planet for which they were crossing the mostly desolate expanses of the cosmos might not be what they had been led to believe, and she shivered. She had not felt so uncertain since the day she had arrived on the Disk and found herself completely and utterly alienated.

After an interminable time, though the trip to the mother ship only took forty minutes, Dovard's exhale extracted her from her gloomy thoughts; they had arrived. The landing ship now boarded the *Galactic* and Julia became restless, wishing only to find Ronin, who should be in their quarters at this hour.

When the hatch opened, Julia was already up and making her way toward the exit. However, she knew she could not leave without being properly dismissed by the envoy, so she waited for em to reach her. Intentionally speaking aloud to

irritate the envoy—if the sound of voice was indeed what set em against her—she said, “Envoy, do you need me anymore?”

The fullsynth’s words, which ey sent via mind-to-mind communication, gave her the same sensation as a screw scratched on a sheet of metal. “*What for? Will you come with me to General Genghis to demand an explanation from him?*”

Julia shook her head no and left to go find Ronin, giving Dovard the same small, sad smile as before.

When the *Galactic* left Earth space, back in a time locally known as January, a time which now seemed to have less and less meaning as the memory of Earth’s cyclical events became more distant, she and Ronin had been full of hope, almost childish excitement. *Childish*. Julia had felt both discombobulated and amused when Ronin told her how old he was and said that, because he had not been allowed to be fully mechanized at age eighteen owing to a genetic defect that made his cells incompatible with synthetic materials, his body would eventually shut down and he would die, die alone in a world where everyone lived on for centuries. The prospect of it, that his body would change and degrade in full view of everyone, had always frightened him. Fortunately for him, he had been able to hide behind his avatar using mind-to-mind most of his life. Still, the prospect of seeing himself degrade and needing to hide the fact from others had continued to trouble him. That was perhaps—he had told her—the prime

reason for his decision to join General Genghis's mission: to be with others like him—there were three other Upsiders with mostly organics bodies on ship—and all would soon be like him, once the vessel reached K'Tara and they transferred to organic bodies. She had asked why he had not simply migrated to Downside. His reply had hurt her—the first time a comment or action of his had ever hurt her—but he had been right, he *was* right: Downside was not a place to live one's dreams, a place from which to reach for the stars or a place to live ambitions far beyond the mundane. On the other hand, with General Genghis, they would build a new society, one where they would be among like-minded Humans—they would be founders.

Julia and Ronin sat silently on their cots, not knowing what to say or what to do about what happened on the surface, and both wondered whether they had made a mistake.

Several moments later, moments that Ronin spent shaking his head, balling his fists, and sighing loudly, he grabbed Julia's hand and sent, *"I'm sure what happened here will not happen on K'Tara."*

"How can you be sure? And please use natural language. Mind-to-mind is exhausting."

"I am sorry. But I am sure... because Captain Laurie told me that the general is actually...ex—expected on the planet. I mean, he is expected by the locals." Ronin shook his head, annoyed that he still could not perfectly speak out loud.

Julia did not even notice his stutter anymore. But her eyebrows pulled themselves together in a skeptical way. *The general is expected on K'Tara? So what?* On the point of breaking into tears, she said, "I don't know if that helps. We were supposed to broker *peace* with the Keplerians, not exterminate them! If this mission went wrong, what guarantee do we have that K'Tara will not be another disaster?"

Angered by what he felt was pure, obstinate pessimism, Ronin shouted, "This is not the same thing, Julia!"

Julia pulled back, withdrawing her hands from Ronin's. Her reaction was so abrupt that he could not help feeling horribly guilty.

"I am sorry, Julia. I should not have yelled. I am a fool. I... I just do not understand why you are worried. K'Tara is not a military mission. We are going there to live there—with the K'Tarans."

Julia's features softened, but only slightly.

Unwilling to leave things in that state of uncertainty, Ronin thought quickly and said, "Say what. I will request a meeting with Captain Laurie so we can both ask him what the plan is for K'Tara."

"I'd rather ask the general himself, even if he scares me."

Ronin started responding via mind-to-mind: "*You know the general can't*—Sorry. You know the general cannot possibly agree to hear the complaints of two low-ranking

members of his corps of fifty thousand. If we have questions about his plans, we must ask our direct superiors first.”

Julia shrugged her shoulders, turning away from Ronin,

“Is there more to this, Julia? Something you’re not telling me?”

Julia looked up a moment, then shook her head no.

Ronin wasn’t so sure, but he would not force the conversation further. So, he stood up, gently kissed Julia, and left. He would walk to their captain’s offices to request an appointment rather than do it via mind-to-mind, so he could have some time to think about things—alone.

Ronin decided to take the long route to Captain Laurie’s offices, a route which took him through the outer hallway from where he’d be able to see the stars; he needed to see the stars, to feel again what he had felt when deciding to join General Genghis’s ‘mission.’ At this hour of the ship’s clock, the lights were dimmed in the corridor and, with the Galactic still hovering above Kepler, the stars appeared bright and magnificent through the ship’s portholes. *Could Julia be right? I hope not because there will be no way to return to Earth. As soon as we leave Kepler, we will officially cease to exist; Earth Force will think us exploded. I don’t know how the general will accomplish this, but there will be no way for us to return to Earth or any of the inner colonies after that.*

Damn! Could the general really be planning to take K'Tara by force?

Another part of Ronin's mind asked: *And if he is? Who are you to oppose any part of the plan? You're nothing.*

But I promised Julia—

Yes, you promised her paradise, but you have no say in any of it; you're just a low-ranking ordinance officer.

Ronin stopped mid-way along the corridor, leaned on the sill of the wide porthole, and sighed a long, disheartened sigh as he rubbed his forehead and gazed outside. *I told Canyon I was sure this was what I wanted, and I convinced Dovard to join by telling him how exciting learning about other planets' civilizations would be. But if we destroy them, how will he learn anything? From their remains??*

Ronin's fist collided with the ledge, his knuckles turning white from the force. His heart thumped when he heard jeers directed at him coming from the other end of the corridor.

Three soldiers, all fullsynths, strutted towards him, their superiority oozing from every pore. Their presence made Ronin feel like a cornered animal, every hair on his body stiffening.

One of them, a square-jawed and atypically short person, looked him up and down with as much confidence as if ey had towered over Ronin. The majority of fullsynths measured exactly two meters and differed mostly in their skin tone, and

in their head shape and features. This person's trust fund must have been depleted to force the Thurfa³ to fit them with a less than full-sized body. Ey said, *"So, you're Ronin. The 'technically halvesynth'. Is it true you still have your genitals? That you've been living like an animal all your life, and now you and that female are here with us, enjoying each other, all alone?"* Turning to eir comrades, ey added mockingly, *"Pretty selfish, wouldn't you say?"*

Ronin, who had never had the confidence to engage anyone physically given his mostly organic body, though he had the stature to intimidate the rare others like him, stepped forward with squared shoulders and a no-nonsense attitude. His gaze locked with theirs, and he touched the controls on his wrist. The harassers looked at each other worriedly. Maintaining his gaze on them, Ronin turned his mind inward, responding to the ping he heard. *"Bali, I do not have the time now. Just be—"*

Ronin's digimate, whose processor he now carried in his brain, and which he had switched to medical standby mode only upon joining the army—a requirement for all soldiers with a digital companion—said, *"I am sorry, Ronin. But I detected a rise in cortisol and adrenaline."*

³ Thurfa: Transhumanist Reproduction and Fulfillment Agency.

Slightly annoyed, Ronin responded, *“Thank you, Bali. Just be ready to notify the ship’s TSAI if I ask you to or if you sense my body preparing for physical violence.”*

Having received his digimate’s confirmation, Ronin turned back to his aggressors and said, *“I have no idea what you’re playing at, here, but you will back off. If you so much as move against me, the TSAI will be alerted.”*

Unconvinced by Ronin’s indirect threat, Lek—the soldier who had challenged Ronin—waved to his mates and took a determined step forward.

Responding to Ronin’s suddenly elevated heart rate and breathing, and having also subsequently detected the tensioning of his muscles, Bali contacted the TSAI.

And the TSAI’s monotone voice, patching through his brainchip, startled Ronin: *“Corporal Clareborn, I am informed you are in danger. Please do not take any unnecessary action; my control systems will be active in three, two, one.”*

Ronin felt the tension in his body lessen significantly when he saw the other soldiers stumble, their muscles jerking in response to an external command.

“Privates First Class Lek, Mons, and Jost: you are required to stand down. Violence in any form against fellow soldiers is forbidden. This incident will be recorded and reported. Please disband.”

The soldiers, having been called to order by the TSAI, could barely contain themselves, and the indignant fury on their faces worried Ronin. But what else could he have done? He'd have to be careful around the three in the future.

Having no choice but to do as ordered, Lek hissed and snarled then hissed again, and finally motioned his companions to follow. It was quite intentionally that two of them jostled Ronin as they passed him by. But the three returned to their quarters without further ado, cursing the less than as well as the TSAI.

Ronin followed the soldiers from the corner of his eye, sighing a long sigh and turning briefly to look out the porthole again. He then shook his head and made his way to Captain Laurie's offices.

It had taken Colonel Retch and her unit three hours to decimate the rebels, bring them to their knees, and obtain their remaining leaders' 'agreement' to cease all hostilities and allow the empire's commercial and scientific operations on the planet to resume without interference for the good of everyone, including their own. Julia had declined to watch the unit's return to the *Galactic*; she had felt sick just imagining the smile on the colonel's face.

When everything returned to normal, and the crew waited to hear from General Genghis whether they would finally make their way to K'Tara, and while she and Ronin

waited for their appointment with Captain Laurie, Julia went to the mess hall in their section of the ship. When she arrived, she took a moment to scan the room, hoping to see one or more of the other three halvesynths on ship. She sighed with satisfaction when her eyes landed on Bono, an old soldier, who had welcomed and accepted her as soon as she first boarded the vessel.

The man—the soldier did have the appearance of a male—chirped, “My little one, Julia! Come sit. I was hoping I’d see you today.”

A smile stretched her lips, a little, and she sat across from the soldier who wasted no time engaging her in conversation. Between slow sips of his drink, Bono, who hated the integrated technology perhaps more than any other Escapist she had met to date, was telling Julia how much he looked forward to the end of their journey. Strangely, his voice was not the perfect, eternally young voice like that of the others with electronic voiceboxes. He had told her, when she asked, that he had decided to change his voice at age one hundred and thirty after viewing an old twentieth-century movie called *Driving Miss Daisy*, with an actor in it whose voice had filled him with a strange sense of peace he had never felt before.

The man added, “I’m glad you’re part of our crew. Since you’ve joined us, more and more people are using their voices rather than mind-to-mind, and I find that I really enjoy the effect that their sound has on me, even if our voices lack the

soothing quality of the ones from those old movies—or of your voice.”

Julia blushed and bobbed her head uncertainly.

Bono smiled and continued, “Plus, if we’re really going to shed our enhanced skins when we get to K’Tara, we had better all start getting used to speaking, or we’ll be worse than cavemen, who could at least use grunts and signs to communicate with each other.”

“Hu. I’m glad to see at least someone realizes that. I wish everyone else did, too, because too many people look at me as if I were some unwelcome creature.”

The soldier sighed and grimaced. “There are those who believe that Upsiders are a separate race—a superior race—and they cannot accept the idea that they will be just like you in all the visible aspects once they transfer their minds to organic bodies.”

Julia mulled that over for a while but made no reply. Instead, she turned a questioning glance at her *aged* comrade. A few weeks after the *Galactic*’s departure from Earth, she had learned, to her greatest embarrassment and amusement, that Upsiders were not called ‘old’ when they reached a certain age but simply ‘aged’—like cheese—since they remained healthy throughout their long lives.

“What’s your question now?”

“I still cannot understand why people who can live nearly three hundred years, free from disease or the pains of an organic body, would want to lose it all.”

Bono snorted softly. “You’d know why if you were one of us; not that all Upsiders see it the same, but I think you’d probably be one of us, Escapists, if you were a cyborg, whether half or fullsynth.”

Julia scrunched her face doubtfully.

“You see, it used to be that people could actually go on living almost forever, but it led to large numbers of suicides and psychological breakdowns since—not knowing how long one might live and how long they might need to work to sustain themselves once they retired—they just kept working and working. After two centuries of that experiment, the government instituted mandatory retirement—and end-of-life at age three hundred. But that means you got to work for at least two hundred and fifty years; that is a long time to not be free, to be forced to do as others command so that you may have the means to enjoy the last fifty years of your life. Everyone here wants to be free and be allowed to choose their last hour—sort of.”

“Hm, I guess I had never imagined that. But something still doesn’t make sense.”

Bono raised a brow.

“Why do you need to transfer your brains into an organic body? Why not just...well, end your life earlier if you don’t want to go on anymore?”

“Because when we are born, and for the first few years of our lives, we do have full organic bodies, and we remember how it felt. We want to feel it again. So, here we are.”

“Don’t you find it... revolting that you will need to take someone else’s body to do that?”

“No, why?”

“Because it’s wrong?”

“It’s just a shell. The mind is in the brain, which we can transfer whole and intact.”

“Someone’s body is theirs, a part of their identity. I would not want my father’s body to be taken by someone else.”

Bono shrugged again then said, “The K’Taran religion allows the donation of bodies; you must’ve heard of it.”

Fearing—foolishly—that she might be overheard, Julia switched to mind-to-mind. *“There’s something that doesn’t make sense in that, too, Bono. The K’Tarans are a pre-technological society. How can they ever have put such a thing into practice?”* Presently, her mind speech filled itself with a grating mix of confusion and frustration. *“Why would*

their prophets even have written such a right into their books? It just doesn't make sense!"

Bono winced. *"Hm, well, we've seen more than one planet revert to a more primitive state after a cataclysm. It's possible this right was written into their books when they had the technology to conduct brain transplants."*

"But the humanoid societies of K'Tara haven't existed long enough."

Bono gave Julia a suffering but benevolent look. With a sigh, he said, *"The embryos that were sent to the outer planets eons ago were genetically engineered to speed up their evolution and increase their adaptability to new environments, so it's possible they developed technologies similar to ours very quickly, then collapsed for some reason unrelated to their genetic make-up, and finally returned to a more primitive state."*

"I suppose... Still."

With an amused snort, Bono said, "You worry too much about things, my little one. It'll be fine. Trust me."

With that, the aged soldier stood and asked Julia whether she wanted a drink. She nodded absently, but Bono took that as a yes and went to get drinks from the barbot.

When Corporal Bono Messter returned with two purple sours, he was surprised to find three other soldiers surrounding Julia in a manner that indicated nothing good.

Julia's jaw was tense, her eyes full of a hatred he had never imagined in her, and he could hear her chopped breathing.

One of the soldiers, a short, pale-faced person, turned an ugly smile at Bono and then said to Julia, "I really don't get it why you're being this way. You share with that halfsynth, Ronin, and now we want some too."

Julia tried hard, very hard to remain collected and in control. What could she do after all? She was unenhanced except for her brainchip, but they could force themselves upon her without struggle if they chose to. She hissed, "I—am—not—yours. And I'm not your digimate."

The two taller soldiers looked at Lek, the one talking, with confused looks.

Lek shrugged with a scornful laugh then turned serious and said, "Now, look here. We've tolerated you because the general needed you for the mission on Kepler—a mission you pretty much screwed up for us. So, if you're not going to share with us, then we *will* simply take!"

As courageous as she was to have left everything that she knew Downside to enter a world as alien to her as whatever may exist in the next galaxy, and as confident as she had grown since going Upside and then joining the general's voyage to K'Tara, Julia was panicking now, and just as she turned to her friend to give him a pleading glance, the aged man stepped in front of the others with a body as erect and imposing as the younger individuals'.

“I strongly suggest you stand down and find someone else to bother, Lek. And I suggest you start paying attention in the anthropology class tomorrow—it might do you good; it seems you still have a lot to learn about what it will be like once you’ve transferred whatever brains you have to organic bodies.”

Lek took an angry step forward, clenching his jaw indignantly. But eir friends held em back. The group finally walked away but not without giving Bono a furious glare and Julia a vengeful one, and Julia knew then she was in real trouble.

For some privacy, Bono sent, *“My little one, Julia. Are you okay?”*

Julia replied with a mental shrug, something that sounded like a faint swoosh. *“It’s getting worse. They used to just eye me with disgusting grins, but now they want something.”*

“I don’t know why the likes of them were allowed to join. Fortunately, not too many think that they can demand love from a person the same way they do from their digimates.”

Julia sent a snort. *“Love, I don’t know why you call it that. All they want is sex, and they don’t even have the parts for it!”*

Ever patient, Bono replied with a smile as he sat down to give Julia her drink and said aloud, “It’s just the word that’s been used Upside for centuries. And even though fullsynths

don't have the parts to experience sex, it seems our brains still respond to primitive visual stimuli; those soldiers just want to... see you, if you know what I mean."

"I doubt they will stop there once they do have their... parts."

Bono said quietly, "I will speak to their commander later. Sergeant Lembe is a good person, and I am sure ey can help."

Julia did not respond but turned the glass Bono had given her, just watching the purple sour swirl.

The soldier asked, "Does Ronin know they've been bothering you?"

Julia shook her head. "Better I don't tell him, or he might get himself hurt."

"Probably."

And Corporal Bono took a shot of his drink, inviting Julia to do the same."

When Julia returned to her quarters, she did not find Ronin. The TSAI told her that Corporal Ronin was in the holodeck. "Of course," Julia said to herself, and she went back out.

Julia found Ronin playing a holographic war game with Dovard. Upsiders did that to add a physical aspect to their

games. Ronin hated violence, but he loved these games, and Julia had become accustomed to finding him playing with one or more of his friends or with soldiers who wanted to challenge him. Apparently, Ronin was nearly unbeatable at these games and often got other players trapped within the virtual worlds they, themselves, created.

Noticing her, Ronin waved at her and informed Dovard, disconnected, and then left with Julia. Back in their quarters, Ronin explained that he was able to see Captain Laurie and that the captain confirmed the general's peaceful intent for K'Tara. Julia finally let go of her fears, and the two spent a while exploring each other in ways that still overwhelmed Ronin and overjoyed her.

Once those unexpected moments of passion passed, Julia and Ronin walked to the shower room. On the way there, she chuckled remembering how she discovered to her greatest dismay, a few hours after embarking on the *Galactic*, that the toilets on board would not have sufficient flushes for her to use. Ronin had apologized for not having informed her and had explained that because fullsynths only excrete a small amount of pellet-type matter, the toilets—built to meet the needs of the majority—had very low-volume flushes. Halfsynths—and, obviously, fullhumans, too—therefore needed to release their excrements in small portions and flush each in turn until they were done.

She chuckled again, more loudly, and Ronin turned to her with a questioning brow.

“I was thinking about when I discovered the limitations of the ship’s toilets.”

“Ha! Yes. I remember; It had taken you a while to not see yourself as a maladapted person—or a less than, as fullsynths call me when they wish to insult me.”

“Yes, and I still feel that way sometimes.”

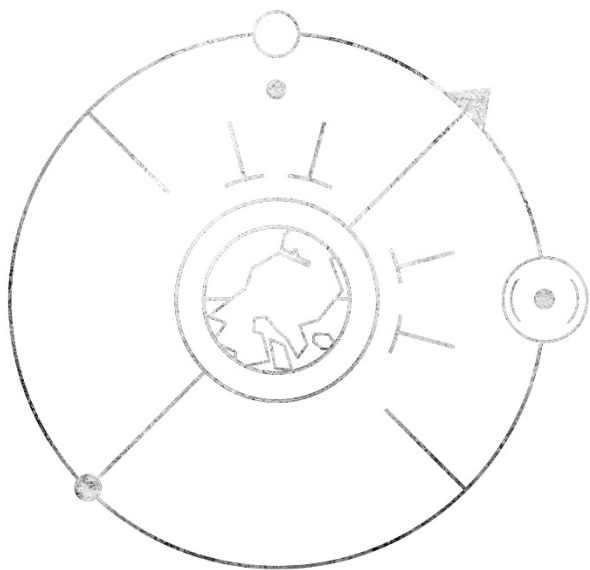
As they crossed one of the quieter corridors, just before the busier stretch with the showers, Lek and eir mates cornered the couple and pushed them both into a small, unoccupied hangar with wild, hungry eyes on their faces.

To be Continued

RONIN

Part 5

The CONQUERORS OF K'TARA
short stories



L.A. DI PAOLO

RONIN Part 5

A Conquerors of K'Tara Short Story

The past few weeks had been the most difficult of Julia's and Ronin's lives. The three soldiers that sequestered them on their way to the washroom had pulled their pants down and tore their shirts open. Of course, Ronin and Julia had tried to resist, Ronin doing so with great force made greater by the adrenalin surge. But the soldiers were fullsynths, and Ronin could not have hoped to overpower them. The soldier holding Julia had told them to give him and his pals pleasure, while the two holding Ronin had made moaning sounds to coax him into an act that they could, of course, not properly describe except by making reference to the way animals copulated on Earth and some other planets. It was, in fact, Ronin's and Julia's alien nature—though they were—all of them—technically human—which saved them. For, indeed, the fullsynths soon realized that their captives' nudity didn't arouse them at all. And they realized, too, that the prospect of seeing them copulate as the animals did in the documentaries would not in any way replicate—or even come close to replicating—the sensations they enjoyed while immersed in visiloves, which directly stimulated their pleasure centers. Frustrated, the gang's leader suggested that they might need to connect to their toys via the visiloves. The three had then gone quiet. Ronin suspected they debated how

they might force him and Julia into a shared visilove. When they turned back toward them with their dangerous grins, the ship's speakers erupted with orders for an all-hands assembly in fifteen minutes. At that point, the fullsynths cursed their bad luck and left Ronin and Julia to get to the muster point, but not before threatening to space them should they complain to anyone.

Presently, the two of them sat in their quarters, Julia still unable to smile and Ronin still unable to understand her reaction following the events on that fateful day. He said, "I know how you feel, Julia, but you have to let it go. Yes, they assaulted us, but they actually did not do anything to us except to pull off our clothes."

"How can you say that? Ronin? And how can you even stand being here after everything!?"

Ronin did not say anything for a while. He could tell that something was still preventing Julia from moving on, that she still had emotions to process, even though the ship's psymedics had started treating her, too. So, why was she still hanging on to the memories of the Kepler battle and of their sequestration?

After a few minutes of simply listening and commiserating with Julia's comments about 'this' not at all being what she had expected when she let him sell her on the idea of moving to an unknown planet at the end of the galaxy, Ronin noticed that the fullhuman he—no, the...woman he

loved—he saw that she was ready to say what truly troubled her. He extended his hands toward her, inviting her to take them. She did, and Ronin felt the slightest relief, but relief nevertheless because he hated it when she was angry or upset, and he felt like he couldn't touch her to comfort her.

Her gaze shifting between his eyes and her hands around his, she said, “Okay, I suppose I could pretend that them forcing us into a hangar and removing our clothes is no different than what soldiers do to recruits during your stupid induction weeks. But I am *not* a soldier. And what if they try again?!”

“I can understand; you are right: you are not a soldier and probably not used to the bullying that happens in the military. But they can't try again; they're in treatment too.”

“So what? My body is private. It's not an object for others to salivate on. And they were trying to force us to have sex in front of them!”

Ronin was going to say ““But our bodies are meaningless to them, as they quickly realized.”” Instead, he squeezed her hands and said, “I am sorry I got us into this. I had no idea it would be so ch—ch—challenging and fraught.” Ronin still had some difficulty speaking out loud, and it showed once in a while as a stutter. It annoyed him grandly, but Julia never seemed to notice.

They spent the next half-hour or hour in silence, hugging the way they loved to do, Ronin caressing Julia's sandy hair,

and Julia following the contours of his face with her finger. Ronin wondered if this meant she would be okay. Every so often, he thought she might finally heal...until—after caressing his cheek for the nth time—she pulled back suddenly as if she had just realized something she had been woefully oblivious to. With worry and pain in her eyes, she asked him how he could be so detached from it, as if nothing had ever happened.

Ronin's answer—telling her that Upsiders didn't have to deal with trauma, that medical sciences were advanced enough to treat their minds as well as whatever remained of their bodies to restore them to perfect homeostasis, and that he was surprised it was not the same with Downsiders—did not please her. In fact, it seemed to confirm the suspicion that had broken through her troubled mind a moment ago. Julia replied that perhaps they weren't even the same species anymore. And if that was the case, what kind of life could the two of them have?

Ronin felt his mind spin, and a deep sadness took him. Not knowing what else to do or say to help Julia—or to crush the doubts she had somehow succeeded in putting in his mind, he excused himself, got up, and went for a walk.

Walking the corridors of the *Galactic* aimlessly for a while, everything quiet at this hour of the vessel's night, he wondered how things had gotten so wrong. He had to fight

back tears more than once while thinking about it. The happiness Julia had dreamed of, with him on a new world beautiful and grand, full of possibilities for the two of them and for humanity—a humanity they and General Genghis and the others would recreate—all of it put in question at Kepler and then shattered by those effin fullsynths.

Not finding any answers or finding only answers he didn't like even after an hour walking fore and aft, an idea sprung into his mind: *I need to talk to Dov! He'll be able to help me see things more clearly.*

And Ronin went to Dov's room, which was located in the same section as his and Julia's: the section reserved for halfsynths, which contained about two dozen rooms with four horizontally-set sleeping cots each. The much larger fullsynth section contained several large rooms with vertically set resting/recharging stations and a common area with high tables for the soldiers to gather and chat or play one of the holographic games.

Standing in front of Dovard's room, Ronin hesitated momentarily, then tapped the sensor to the right of the entrance and gave his name. The door became translucent, and Dovard's surprised voice came through. The door opened, and Ronin stepped in, excusing himself for coming without warning at the late hour.

"Well, I don't think I mind you visiting me at 22h00 as much as I mind you visiting me this late when I've seen neither

hide nor hair of you for quite a while now. In fact, not since leaving Kepler. But I suppose I'll forgive you, whatever kept you to yourself so long."

A convex curve on Ronin's lips, followed by a tentative concave one, told his friend that he was sorry for that and hoped he could make it up to him.

Dovard, dressed in his sleeping garb, let him in and invited him to sit. He then looked at him curiously. *"You seem a little troubled, and I don't think it's for pulling me from my cot."*

Ronin took a deep breath as he rubbed his hands nervously. He did not want to tell his friend about the ambush and looked for ways to communicate his worry without referring to it. After a few starts and stops, he said, *"Julia is—well, Julia and I, really, are having doubts about this, our K'Tara mission, and whether the general actually intends for our establishment there to be peaceful, and whether it can be peaceful given...recent events."*

Dovard's eyebrows scrunched up questioningly. And though the memory of the violation no longer carried any knowable emotion inside Ronin, there was still an undefinable discomfort within him at the thought of it. So, he did not respond to his friend's unspoken question.

Dovard asked again, aloud, "So, what was so urgent you wanted to see me now?"

“Isn’t it obviou—Aghr! I’m sorry, Dov. I just can’t shake the feeling that things will go badly on K’Tara, that the general doesn’t, in fact, intend on a peaceful integration with the K’Taran society—not after seeing how things went down on Kepler. And I’m sure what happened there is not what you signed up for, either.”

Dovard shrugged his shoulders. “There is nothing we can do about that, nor about what will happen on K’Tara. Who would we complain to? Even if we wanted to inform someone on Earth, we wouldn’t be able to, given that the general has revoked all personal communications privileges since departing Earth. There is no one we can complain to who will address our concerns. It will be what it will be.”

Huffing and puffing, Ronin stood and walked in circles with his thumbs in his pockets. “This is not what I was hoping for. But you being the permanent fatalist, I should not have expected anything else.”

If Dovard was indeed philosophical about things, he could still feel the sting of words, and his expression showed it.

“I’m sorry, Dov, I shouldn’t have said that. It’s just that I was hoping you’d convince me that things aren’t as bad as we think...especially Julia.”

After a moment’s consideration, a moment Ronin spent nervously waiting for his friend’s reaction, Dovard said, “All right. You’re forgiven. But what’s this about Julia? I sense

something more than the battle on Kepler transpire from your doubts. Is she missing her family?” Ronin shook his head no. “Missing the company of other fullhumans?” Again, Ronin shook his head. “Then what is it? Something happened?”

Ronin hesitated a while. His treatment had eliminated the emotional trauma of the event, but it did not erase the memory. That could be done, for battle trauma, for actual physical injury, but it was not typically done for purely emotional traumas. And their sequestration was considered to be the latter case, given that they had not been harmed physically. But the memory of the ambush, of the two of them being forced into a hangar, of his inability to prevent it or to defend Julia—even if it was against three fullsynths—left him with a sense of cynical self-loathing; to Downsiders, to Julia and her parents, his good looks, his health, and his height meant he would be able to protect Julia from harm. He snorted, scoffing at the idea, and finally answered Dovard’s question.

The visceral transformation on Dovard’s face was quite remarkable, especially when Ronin told him they had tried to force them to have sex. Dovard might be a fatalist, but some areas of the human experience still revolted him, such as the subjection of any human or sentient being to immoral actions or conditions. Perhaps, Ronin had often thought, fatalism was not truly the belief that constrained Dovard, but rather, it was an easy resignation to events or situations he really believed could not be prevented.

Having let his anger pass, Dovard said, “I can see how that might have crushed your and Julia’s sense of safety, especially given the prevailing prejudice against fullhumans, even aboard this ship though the plan is for everyone to become ‘fullhuman’ once on K’Tara. But the fiasco on Kepler and your sequestration by those three are unrelated; Genghis did not order them to attack you.”

“I suppose you are right about that. Still, it—”

“Still, it feels like something is wrong, doesn’t it? I’ve been thinking about it while you’ve ignored me these past few weeks, and I can’t figure it out either. But I do have the definite impression that we haven’t been told the whole truth about K’Tara. I even asked Karo and Yary if they’ve heard anything, but they’re just as ignorant.”

The disappointment on Ronin’s face spurred Dovard to add: “I am sorry, Ronin. I suppose you were hoping I’d erase your worries. But I don’t know that I can convince you or Julia that things will be okay on K’Tara. Actually, I’m worried too, though I know that we will adjust and survive as humans have always done. But that’s probably not what you wanted to hear.”

“There *is* at least one thing that should alleviate your worries: The TSAI will now be alert to for anymore transgressions by fullsynths and monitor them so that neither you nor the other mostly organics have to be worried anymore.”

“Yes, and fullsynths will hate us all the more for it.”

Dovard stretched his lips sorrily, and the two then spent a few minutes in silence, watching the SSNN⁴ broadcast on the wall screen. The host—a famous android named Derzel, an android who had been doing the news for the past century, giving the galaxy’s citizens a sense of stability despite trouble here and there—was reporting on the activities of the various governmental departments to ensure the continued wellbeing of the empire. At one point, the android turned to the Department of Defense. It presented the military’s efforts to restore infrastructure on Venus following a recent massive solar flare. Then it went on to discuss the lack of news from Proconsul Genghis, who, it appeared, had taken more humans than androids to restore order on Kepler when the broadcast was suddenly cut.

The next moment, Ronin and Dovard each received a communication from the ship’s TSAI instructing them that any discussion of the topic just broadcast by the SSNN—that is, about the lack of news on Earth from General Genghis—was now prohibited for security reasons. Any breach would be met with immediate sanction.

When the TSAI was done transmitting to them, Ronin looked at Dovard and swallowed. His face showed more distress than he had felt in quite a long time, greater even than

⁴ SSNN: Sol System News Network

the fear he had felt when he and Julia were ambushed by those other soldiers.

He gazed at Dovard, who had that expression of resignation on his face, a resignation borne out of the belief that they were pebbles too small for the great lake of human affairs to be moved by them.

In a frightened whisper, Ronin started to say, “I told you there was something wrong with Genghis’—,” but Dovard stopped him with his hands up.

“I am sorry, Ronin. But—” and Dovard chuckled then, “I don’t think it’s wise for us to talk about...well...about your concerns anymore. Just...try to keep it together...for you and for Julia’s sakes.”

With a look of complete dismay on his face, Ronin nodded, got up, sighed a long, disheartened, and hopeless sigh, and left, but not before thanking Dovard for hearing him out and not without a timidly given promise to come to find him again before too long.

A week had passed since the TSAI’s edict. Of course, everyone who had watched the newscast that night had wondered alone or by way of the secretive glances they gave each other in the mess hall, in their quarters, or in the gymnasium, what it was that the general needed to keep quiet. But for all of them except for Ronin and Dovard, the edict was

merely an annoyance. For Ronin and his companion, however, it was much more. Even more so for Ronin, who could not tell Julia why they could no longer discuss or question the general's plans for K'Tara.

This had only aggravated Julia's distress, adding to it a terrible feeling of foreboding. Ronin, himself, had no idea how to cope with Julia's condition. He tried to focus on work, but he and his team had already reviewed the munitions', armaments', and personnel's equipment inventories so many times that there *was* nothing left to do, and mind-numbingly recounting and rechecking just for the sake of it was not helping to reduce his stress, a stress which was becoming greater and more significant as they approached K'Tara—another three months to go. The three months felt like an eternity, given that every moment was spent worrying about the end of the journey.

As Ronin prepared to enter his and Julia's room, a booming voice blasted over the Intercom: "All units, all units please report to your respective Assembly rooms for critical mission brief at zero-eight-hundred-hours. All units, all units please report to your respective Assembly rooms for critical mission brief at zero-eight-hundred-hours." An electronic screech ended the communication.

Startled, Ronin tapped his left hand twice, then brushed it from wrist to knuckles. Bali replied at once that the time was now 07:48.

“Twelve minutes, and we have to get two floors up. Damn.”

Ronin was about to raise his head toward the eyescanner when the door slid open, and Julia stepped out, almost bumping into him. She was panicking.

Julia said his name with a cracked voice: “Ronin!”

“Julia! What’s wrong? Why do you look terrorized?”

“I don’t know!”

Feeling somewhat self-conscious because other people were filling the hallway to get to the Forward assembly room and looking at them with annoyed frowns on their faces, Ronin tried to calm Julia, doing so with rather unhelpful words. So, he breathed out and gave Julia a moment.

After one final shuddering breath, Julia sent, *“It’s...the announcement. It reminded me of the one when they had us trapped in the hangar.”*

Ronin was about to put his hand to his forehead, but he stopped himself and said, *“I’m sorry,”* instead.

That seemed to calm Julia, and Ronin waved for her to follow. However, Julia still hesitated, and Ronin turned toward her with a somewhat irritated expression. He then took a step to get closer to Julia and whispered, “I am sorry, Julia. I really am.” He then lowered his gaze and scratched his forehead, his fingers tense and getting tenser with the number

of people bumping into them and telling them to get out of the way. “I wish I could—”

Ronin did not finish his thought and instead pleaded for Julia to follow. Sufficiently aware that she had no choice, she nodded and went.

The Assembly room was packed with soldiers and civilians alike, comprised of a majority of fullsynths and halfsynths and a smaller proportion of synthetics, all standing in nearly perfect rows and columns.

Ronin and Julia scanned the room for their friends to go stand with them. Unfortunately for Julia, her gaze happened on the three soldiers who had attacked them, and she froze. Ronin noticed and whispered: “I’m sorry you had to see them. Let’s go stand next to Karo and Yary over there,” he said, pointing with his chin, “so we don’t have to be too close to those bastards.”

“No. I want to go there.” And she pointed with her finger toward Corporal Bono. Ronin agreed but signaled his friends to ask that they join him toward the back. He searched for Dovard and found him, too. He waved him over, but Dovard shook his head no; they would catch up later.

As Julia and Ronin made their way toward Corporal Bono, her mind started to drift in response to a growing anxiety, and she had to excuse herself a few times for brushing against people. She hadn’t felt this sense of alienation for a while now. But here it was, back in full force. The eerie

silence, except for the nervous shuffling as everyone took a place, the strangely colored enhanced humans and the cream-fleshed synthetics, the annoyed or threatening looks everyone gave her; it was all too much. Her guts felt tight, and her lungs wouldn't expand.

When they arrived where Corporal Bono was, Julia hurried to go stand next to him and let Ronin take the other side of her. The aged soldier looked at her with a question. Julia responded with an uncertain, forced smile and a shrug of her shoulders. Bono nodded with his own earnest smile, and Julia felt herself relax, the faces all around losing some of their unwelcoming or hostile airs.

Ronin watched her worriedly but did not say anything, not wishing to draw attention.

The last soldiers having entered the room and taken a spot in the last row, the doors closed, the dais lit up, and holograms of General Genghis and his executive cabinet appeared. Genghis was dressed in the stark uniform he had adopted after leaving Kepler: a high-collared, dark blue uniform with gold trims, and tall boots.

In the room, backs stiffened; the general may not be there with them, but their image was being projected on the back wall of the Rear assembly room, where the general was.

The moment the general's voice boomed forth, even the fruit flies, which had come onboard with the food crates reserved for the officers, stopped beating their wings. Voices

over loudspeakers still created an otherworldly experience for cyborgs—or enhanced humans, and they watched and listened as if in rapture. On the other hand, loud and harmonically modulated sounds transmitted through the air did not resonate in a pleasurable manner inside the positronic brains of androids, who stood expressionless but waiting to hear their commander’s announcement.

“Crew of the *Galactic*! As you know, we are but a few months from reaching our destination. It is therefore imperative we complete our preparations for the life that awaits us once we get there. For the cyborgs among us, shedding our enhanced bodies, living among fullhumans *as* fullhumans will be a tremendous shock, despite our desire for the transformation, if we do not learn what it entails; for the androids, it will be a confusing time as you integrate new rules of interaction with individuals you once knew as full or halvesynths, and it will be a time of adjustment as you learn to be androids on a planet that has never known anything but organic life. The success of the new society we will create there will depend on each and everyone’s *full commitment* to our project: a society where androids can start to live as more than mere soldiers or doers of all the things that humans on the inner planets would not do for themselves, and where all humans can feel what flesh feels until they pass not with a sigh of relief but with one of real contentment and fulfillment! Together!, organics and synthetics, we will create new lives for ourselves, lives that will allow each of us to fulfill their dreams!”

Applauds erupted then, and Julia watched and heard it all as if from behind a thick glass wall. As for Ronin, he was clapping his hands too and looking toward her with hope in his eyes—a sentiment she did not return. She was relieved to see that Bono was standing with the same blank face she had on her, although he did give her the smallest nod and a cautious stretching of the lips.

Focused, as he was, on his crew's reaction, Genghis did not notice Thabo Trullo averting his eyes or Francesco Laurie lowering his head and grabbing his ears in reaction to his declaration.

Genghis resumed his address, once the clamor had died down, to explain why off-ship communications had been cut. A courageous and assuredly foolish soldier—a synthetic—asked the general if the SSNN newscast had been purposefully cut when the newscaster, the famous android Derzel, had started questioning the ratio of humans and androids on the *Galactic*.

The sudden unease in the room—from those who had watched the newscast as well as from those who had heard about it—unnerved Julia, who finally looked at Ronin with eyes that said, ‘See? What did I tell you? There *is* something wrong here.’

Karo, a thin-lipped, dark-skinned halfsynth whom Ronin had known since their days at the Lunar Generational Institute where they were born and raised, sent to the group: “*This is*

not going to end well. Why did that stupid synthetic have to ask that question?!"

Ronin replied, *"I don't know Karo. But if we all get punished for the question, I can guarantee someone will make em pay for it."*

Julia scoffed indignantly at that, and the others rolled their eyes, except for Ronin, who looked away, not knowing how to be around her anymore.

Upset, Julia dismissed Ronin from her mind when her gaze crossed those of their assailants. Her heart sped up, but she kept looking at them, hoping they would grin at her so she could shout and denounce them in front of everyone—in front of the general, though he was in another hall. The three had hard faces with false smiles on them. Julia was still debating a decision she probably would not make when Captain Laurie's voice interrupted her thoughts.

All returned their attention to the dais. Captain Laurie said, "Soldier, that is quite an impertinent question you have just asked, and you will—"

General Genghis stopped his officer in order to respond to the question himself. "Thank you, Captain; the soldier deserves to hear my reply." Turning to look at the crowd but addressing Laurie with his cocked head, he said, "I am told that I will soon need to switch from being a military commander, who is obeyed without question to being a civilian leader, who must convince and persuade; I might as

well begin practicing now.” Laurie stood back and Genghis continued, “As Captain Laurie said, the question is an impertinent one, although, in reality, it is appropriate.” Genghis waited for the reaction of surprise to subside before continuing via mind-to-mind communication to sear his next statements as facts into the brain tissue of his intended audience: those unaware of the truth, which included the entire crew except for his executive cabinet. *“The transmission was stopped for security reasons, the same reasons that outgoing and incoming personal communications have been restricted. These reasons may be revealed on a need-to-know basis, as you are well aware, soldier. I can tell you, however, that the ratio of androids to humans was lowered for the simple reason that we will not have access to all the required resources on K’Tara to support a larger number. I am cognizant of the fact that some of you believe that the decision was made on the basis of fear; I can assure you that fear had nothing to do with it. It is our intention to create a human and android colony on K’Tara, and we will do so. And once we have established the necessary mining, manufacturing, and technomedical capabilities, we will allow more androids to join us.”*

An electronic buzz concluded the general’s statement, a buzz which, it was believed, permanently imprinted the information inside both organic and positronic brains. Aloud, Genghis asked, “Does this answer your question, soldier?”

This time, Genghis noticed Thabo’s and Laurie’s averted gazes and he sent to them: *“Doctor, Captain, I believe there*

should be smiles on your faces, and, if not smiles, at least agreement."

Genghis could not wait for Thabo's or Laurie's reply; the soldier was responding to his question, eir voice transmitted to loudspeakers via eir brainchip, and the response was a clear: "It does, General. Thank you...for all of us."

"What is your name, soldier?"

The question unsettled the android for a moment as ey had expected the general to have gotten eir name via the interconnected brainchips when he addressed them via mind-to-mind a moment ago. "My name is Eldir4, Sir."

"Thank you for your courage, Eldir4."

The android nodded and Genghis finished his address. "Now, given that many among you have expressed the desire to communicate with friends or digimates they may have left behind on the Disk, we will arrange for those with legitimate reasons to do so via their unit commanders. You are dismissed!"

"Julia, I really am sorry for not being able to empathize with you. I just wish we were already on K'Tara and...or. Aghr! I just wish I were like you already, a fullhuman. I had no idea how the treatments we Upsiders receive affect us, but they do...seriously change the way we feel about things. And the only reason I am even aware of it, of the fact that I *should*

be able to feel for you, to empathize with your pain and your fears is because...well, I guess it's because I *am* mostly organic, even though I have all sorts of implants in my brain. It just took me a while to piece together the things I was feeling. Can you please forgive me?"

Julia was sitting at the worktable reviewing the holographic training materials provided to the human portion of the crew to prepare them for life as fullhumans. She didn't need to review any of it, of course, but she wanted to know what the others were being told. After General Genghis's address, she and Ronin had not spoken for a few days. And when they finally did, it was only to ask about their respective assignments for the day. Now, she was listening to Ronin, but she did so while keeping her eyes on the holographic display, brushing her hair with her hand every so often to consider his words.

From the vent overhead, the smell of food being prepared in the mess hall started distracting her. She found it strange that she actually liked a few of the items they served on ship, and the stews, which this smell seemed to indicate, were among them. The aroma was, in fact, so inviting that something happened inside of her. It was the same thing that happened when the sun reappeared after several days of ugly, cloudy skies. And now, she found herself more willing to hear Ronin as he begged her to forgive him.

"Julia?"

Julia turned her gaze in his direction, got up, and went to him.

“I wish I could feel what you feel. Hell! I wish I could feel what *I* felt, but it's just an emotionless memory, now. Even so, I think I understand it...intellectually. And I don't blame you anymore for having so many doubts about K'Tara.”

“Thank you...thank you for trying; it means a lot because I have never felt as lonely as during these last weeks.”

When a tear appeared on Julia's cheek, Ronin took her in his arms, and when he felt her arms surround him, too, he cried his own tears.

Having spent their tears, the two got dressed and reported to their respective posts.

Following another long and tiring day reviewing the rather dry but intriguing reports from the META that had been dispatched to K'Tara to raise and take care of the human embryos sent there twenty-four hundred years before, Julia had gone to the gym where she met Ronin. The two cycled for an hour, looking at each other once in a while, each assessing the other's mood, Ronin trying to determine whether she was still troubled by the attack on them, and Julia trying to convince herself he really understood her even if he could not feel what she felt. The hour passed, the two went to the showers and finally returned to their quarters, where they lay down to rest before supper.

If there was one thing Julia loved about the Upsiders' technology, it was the ability to directly stimulate the brain to create the feelings that the senses would normally provide. This meant that they could choose to experience what they wished to experience whenever and wherever. She did so this time, as she often did, calling up music and scents from home via her brainchip. The experience helped her slip into an easy slumber, a slumber made easier by her mental and physical fatigue, despite the lingering fears.

Julia's rest did not last, however, because half an hour into their sleep, her mind got pulled into a world not of her own making. Ronin was there, too, and she called out his name, frightened.

"Ronin! What? What is happening? Where are we?"

Ronin, who looked as shocked as Julia was, was about to respond when Lek, Jost, and Mons appeared from behind a column they had not noticed before. The structure itself, lavishly decorated and adorned with columns all around, was just taking shape as the fullsynths walked in.

Lek, the leader of the gang, wasted no time in welcoming them.

"So, you thought you could be rid of us, that reporting us would save you? Well, you were wrong. But we won't space you just yet; after all, we didn't get to try the idea we got the last time we started this game and we were interrupted, so you might still be able to save yourselves."

Julia's cries, which came from the trauma she still felt, and Ronin's own screams, which rose from a combination of shock and worry about himself and even more so about Julia, shattered the silence of the virtual space. Julia begged to be let out, tried to wake herself, but to no avail. Ronin tried to grab Julia's hand to exit from the space, but he couldn't. Julia tried to run, but her legs wouldn't move.

Laughing, Lek said, *"Oh, I'm afraid you won't be able to exit this dream. You know about sleep paralysis, don't you? Two smart people like you would know. Well, we found a way to pull you into our visilove. You're trapped, and we won't let you go until we have satisfaction."*

"I hate you! I hate you! Why don't you just space us? You better just space us because I am not submitting to you again, not in here, not anywhere!"

"Oh, but you will submit, my little fullhuman. We control what you see and hear and smell, and we can even control what you do."

The rage Ronin felt was shattering the dispassionate memory of their initial assault; all the feelings of anger and humiliation he had felt at the time were taking shape again and, together with the fear he had felt for Julia and felt again now, all these emotions were working his mind into a furious frenzy.

Focused as they were on Julia, Lek and his associates did not fully catch Ronin's first warning. Amused and curious, they asked him to repeat himself.

Ronin did, with a deathly voice: *"You should not have done this. You really shouldn't have."* Ronin had always been embarrassed by his fear to challenge other Upsiders physically despite his physique, though he had tried to diminish the sting of it by telling himself that he was, after all, mostly organic. But now, these vermin had engaged him in a world that he mastered, and he was *not* going to let them get away anymore.

"Really? Well, let's see. How about we—"

And everything started to change around them: the visual, the auditory, the olfactory. The columned temple the fullsynths had created was dissolving and being replaced by a proper, ancient-looking dungeon, grimy, dark, and frightening. Even as the trio shrieked and tried to reverse the changes, walls were forming around them. Bewildered, Jost and Mons yowled while Lek cursed everything and everyone. Receiving no reply from Ronin, Lek damned him and his Downsider of a girlfriend. He then tried to take back control of Ronin's mind while his co-conspirators continued their efforts to reverse the changes Ronin had made. But the harder they tried and the more threats they all made, the more shackled they became.

When Ronin had finally finished chaining all three fullsynths to the dungeon's walls, he turned to Julia, who had watched horrified and uncomprehending, and pulled her out of the space.

In their quarters, Ronin had awoken and was trying to rouse Julia. When she opened her eyes, she screamed with joy and sat up to hug him, but Ronin had other things to do. He simply smiled with relief and said: "Stay here. And don't call for help or alert anyone."

"Why? Where are you going?"

"I am going to make sure those three never bother anyone again!"

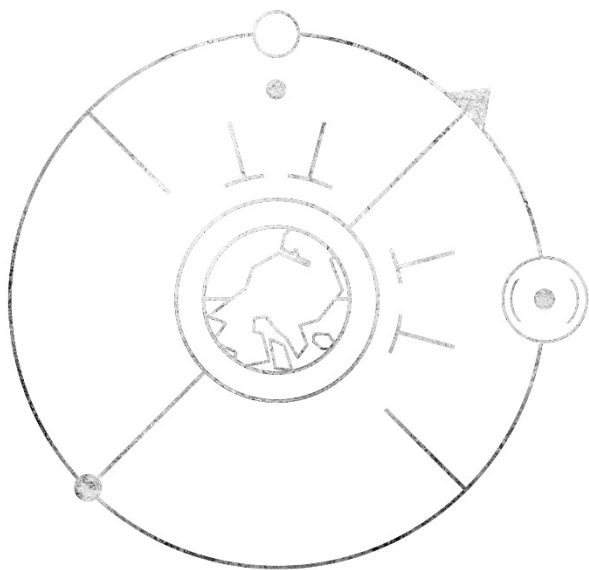
And, against Julia's protests and Bali's questions—questions he put an end to by turning off his digimate—Ronin dashed out of the room, his muscles primed for fight. There would be no flight this time.

To be continued

RONIN

Part 6

The conquerors of K'Tara
short stories



L.A. DI PAOLO

RONIN Part 6

A Conquerors of K'Tara Short Story

Sitting on one of the *not-so-comfortable* couches the quartermaster had had built next to the floor-to-ceiling windows of the common areas at the request of the handful of Halfsynths and one fullhuman, Ronin and Julia watched the strange light show produced by the ship's displacement past the neck of the spacefold. It was weird and confusing but not as much as the trip through the neck itself had been. And Ronin relished it all.

'The neck.' How bizarre it still feels. And how I wish I could meet one of the navigators. To be able to feel one's way through space. I thought driving a hovercar with my eyes closed was special. But guiding a ship through space using only some preternatural sense! Wow!

Whispering, Julia said to Ronin:

"Three months left now."

That startled Ronin, what with his thoughts parsecs away and the hall so quiet at this hour of the ship's time when everyone was either resting or attending classes, with only a pair of Halfsynths sitting by the opposite wall. It was but a moment before he replayed her words in his mind and snorted softly to acknowledge her excitement.

Julia squeezed his hand. Now that her mind was free of the trauma of the attacks on her and Ronin, she was able to experience the inexpressible wonder and solace of space travel with its blackness and immeasurable vastness. And the knowledge that they were nearing the end of their journey was, quite surprisingly, also...exciting.

Not everyone welcomed the end of the journey as Julia did, however. With the *Galactic* now but thirty day/night cycles from its destination, feelings had begun to show themselves all through the ship—subtly at times, and in troubling ways at others. All had been preparing for life on K'Tara for months, yet preparation was one thing and arrival another. The future, once distant enough to be imagined abstractly and in idealized renderings, had drawn close enough now to press against the crew's uncertainties about what awaited them, exactly, on that world they only knew from scant digirecordings. In classrooms, in training bays, in the mess hall—in the showers even—the anxiety revealed itself in small betrayals of the body: a hand moving without purpose, a throat cleared with no one to receive its meaning, laughter breaking loose where nothing funny was said.

Julia moaned softly as she experienced another bout of nausea; if there was one thing she hated about space travel, it was space sickness. Having recovered, she exhaled loudly and pulled her hand from Ronin's.

"It's funny. Even though I *am* looking forward to finally arriving on K'Tara, I also miss home."

“I know what you mean.” Julia looked at Ronin testily and he swiveled on the couch to face her. “I do. Even though I don’t feel the same about *my* own home—I actually hope I never have to set foot on the Disk again in my life, even if I miss Canyon—I do understand why you would feel that way about Earth: You lived among your people, and you *were* happy there whereas since joining the mission, you’ve experienced...alienation, violence, prejudice.”

Julia bobbed her head up and down then side to side.

“I was happy...with my family. And I miss the community we had there, the feeling of belonging...to each other at least, if not to the whole of humankind...” Julia’s voice trailed off as she glanced at Ronin, “since apparently, when Upsiders evolved into...well, what you and the others are—*Homo superior*—the rest of us lost our place among our kind.”

Ronin’s body twisted into a grimace, and he turned his head away to avoid showing Julia. As soon as he felt calmer, he faced her again. With a gentle yet firm tone, Ronin sent his reply through the low power radio waves emitted by his brainchip:

“You know that’s only a stupid claim by Upside bigots, Julia. We are still the same species.”

Julia’s eyes narrowed, and she crossed her arms.

“Then why are you turning to thoughtspeech to try and convince me? Isn’t it because you are fundamentally different?”

Ronin realized this was a sore point for Julia and that they would have an argument lest he immediately de-escalated things. He said:

“I am sorry, Julia. You know it’s just a habit. And you know I don’t care what we are or aren’t. All I know is that I love you. And I wish to live with you as your people live; That’s why we’re going to K’Tara. And once we are there and all enhanced people transfer their brains into a human body—sorry—into a *human* body, we will all be exactly like you: fullhumans. There will be no more reason for any kind of prejudice.”

Julia's brow tried to furrow further but it struggled against the laugh which was asking to be released.

“What? Do you disagree? Or is it my speech?”

Julia nodded then shook her head no and said:

“I am just not sure that we will be the same. Who knows how an Upsider brain inside a human body will perceive things? And anyways...K'Tarans may not even be genetically compatible with Terrans. How do you actually know their bodies can host your brains? Things might not go as planned for your kind.”

Ronin made a confused grimace before releasing a loud, indignant snort to say:

“Well, *I* am not trans...planting my brain because I already have an organic body. So, it won’t matter to me if they aren’t compatible with us. But in any case, the META on K’Tara *has* sent data to Chief Scientist Thabo, which I am sure he used to perfect the methods. So, if the chief scientist says he can perform the transfers, then we must be com...patible.”

Julia's lips pressed into a thin line.

“I don’t know. Corporal Bono told me the embryos sent to K’Tara were genetically modified with something called...” And Julia tapped her face in search of the term.

Impatient, Ronin said:

“HAAP complexes, yes.”

“Right...to accelerate their evolution and adaptation to the planet, meaning that they may no longer be compatible with Terrans given that they’ve had to evolve to adapt to K’Tara’s conditions, which are very different from Earth’s or, actually, from the Disk’s sterile environment.”

Ronin’s growing confusion and frustration threatened his self-control. A mission such as this could not have been undertaken without proper planning nor without foolproof confidence in the achievability of the transbodiment. What was more, the scientific and technical expertise of the Ministry of Science was famed throughout the galaxy. So, he

trusted it, despite the fact that he hated many of the things they had created. Why couldn't Julia see this? She knew so many other things...how could she not know these truths? Why did she insist on questioning everything? But again, he found a way to let the feelings flow over and past him like water over a boulder.

"I am sure Chief Scientist Thabo and his team have a way to adjust the genome of those whose brains will be transplanted. After all, they do it to Upsider embryos to prepare them for the lives they will have Upside or elsewhere in the galaxy, and they do it to adults to cure us of the few genetic diseases we're still susceptible to."

Julia blinked. There was still so much she did not know about Ronin's kind.

"Okay. Perhaps you're right and the transbodiment will work. But those who go through the procedure won't be the same people anymore. Do they know that?"

"What do you mean? Sure, they will be physically different, but their minds will still be their minds because the mind goes with the brain, no?"

Julia made to reply but then pulled back, shaking her head desolately.

Ronin felt his gut tighten. Was there something he didn't know? And how would *Julia* even know such things? She had grown up Down—

He stopped himself before going too deep into that rabbit hole and asked Julia what it was that he obviously ignored.

The girl's features softened and she explained that—based on what she had learned in her readings starting with the first transhumanist experiments of the 22nd century all the way through to the accounts of the cloning prohibition—a person's mind, the way it perceives and interprets sensory inputs, and the way it reacts or doesn't react to the integrated inputs, all of it is very tightly linked to the imperfections of their brain, the way their brain cells communicate with each other and the way their brain communicate with other parts of their body, all of which things, or many of which things—she corrected herself given the lesser or greater synthetic nature of Upside bodies—are highly variable owing to the organic nature of the brain and the rest of the nervous system. She then added, quite emphatically, that it must therefore be the case that when someone's brain is transferred to a new body with its own imperfections and differences in perception and signal transmission—let alone when a mind is transferred to a new brain—, the integration of the signals with that new body must result in a *different* personality.

Ronin ejected a 'Hu!' as he pulled his head back in complete stupefaction.

"It's just how it is, Ronin. If you need further proof, just consider the fact that the random and minor differences in the development of twins born since time immemorial have always resulted in different personalities."

Ronin watched her, dumbfounded and speechless for a while. Once he recovered from his shock, he said:

“How can you be a *simple Downside shop clerk*? The things you know...you could be one of our top scholars!”

Julia blushed and shrugged her shoulders. But, giving in to Ronin’s insistent gaze, she said:

“I just always loved learning, even though Downside was never allowed the resources to support universities, which made us completely dependent on Upside to solve most things for us. Sorry, I don’t know why I’m telling you this. Anyway, you know I had that visiotab my uncle gave me, and with it I was able to connect to Upside’s Free University datalake and learn all sorts of things, even though the information was often incomplete and old.”

A cloud of guilt, guilt for his kind’s ignorance and narrow-mindedness, shrouded Ronin’s face. He let it pass and then said:

“Well, thanks for explaining. I suppose that if things are as you say, I have no idea how it will be for them on K’Tara. And now, I’m worried about Dovard. His lower body and internal organs are synthetic, so he might decide to go through the transbodiment procedure...unless I tell him what you just told me. Yary and Karo, though, they *will* have to go through it since they’re fullsynths. Damn! How is it possible that no one has told us about the risks? I need to—”

“Tell everyone? You think they’ll believe you when you tell them where you got the information? That you got it from your Downsider? And you think Genghis and his officers will let you?”

Ronin sighed desolately. His eyes shifted left and right, and his lips twitched as he wondered what he should do with what Julia had just told him. He shook his head in frustration and went silent for a longish while. When he looked up again, his and Julia’s gazes locked into each other, thoughts of guilt poking at Julia’s mind, and a sense of powerlessness clawing at Ronin.

Unable to bear the look on Ronin’s face, a decision eventually surfaced in Julia’s mind.

“Maybe I’ve got it all wrong, anyway. After all, the material I read was often old, as I said, and scientists might have found solutions to the issues since then.”

Ronin smiled tentatively, then more confidently, unwilling to let the possibilities lying ahead ruin the present. Of course, Julia was probably just saying what she thought he needed to hear. But that was just it: He *couldn’t* abandon the dream, yet. Not yet. Julia’s logic was sound but must be based on obsolete information. He took a calming breath and the wrinkles on his face grew shallower.

“Maybe it is as you say, Julia. Or maybe not. But I have to keep believing in what we are doing. I hope you understand?”

Julia smiled a smile that did not stretch very far but far enough to give Ronin the confirmation he needed.

When he spoke again, Ronin changed topic and brought them back to their earlier conversation.

“Can I ask why you seemed to hesitate when you said you were happy Downside? You said it as if you were going to add a ‘but.’”

Julia did not respond immediately. In fact, it appeared she did not want to answer that question, and she looked away as she started to rub her right palm nervously with her left thumb.

Worry about something he could not even guess at crept into Ronin’s mind. What could be bothering Julia so? What could make someone unhappy Downside? The poverty? He would have gone to live there if he could have. He took her hand and said:

“You don’t need to tell me if you don’t want to.”

Julia finally chuckled, laughed at herself.

“Oh, I suppose it’s not that bad. I hesitated because...well, it’s just embarrassing...and sad.” Ronin pinched his brows with surprise. “Aside from my parents and sisters, I really don’t—or didn’t?—have many friends. Everyone else thought me weird for dreaming about exploring the galaxy, living elsewhere, and being interested in learning about Upsiders. And it’s so odd, now, that Dov, Karo, Yary,

and Corporal Bono—all Upsiders—are the first real friends I’ve ever had.”

Ronin snorted incredulously.

“It’s true. I was happy Downside, but only within the bubble of my family and of my own mind.”

A warm, empathetic smile stretched Ronin’s lips just then, and he put his arm around Julia, pulling her close to him. She put her head on his chest, and they sat watching the continued spectacle outside the ship for another while.

Presently, the ship’s continued deceleration was sufficiently advanced that the twin stars of the K’Taran system were beginning to resolve into two small stretched ellipsoids in the vast distance of space. But they were clearly recognizable, nevertheless, as a smaller yellow star and a larger, more luminous blue one. Ronin and Julia could not help but stare...and feel a synchronous palpitation of their hearts. Julia squeezed Ronin’s hand, and he squeezed hers back.

Julia said:

“We are so close! It feels like we should be there in a matter of hours!”

“It does, doesn’t it? Even though it is going to take three months between the twenty days or so for the deceleration and then crossing the rest of the distance to the other side of those suns using the nuplasma drive instead of the FTL engine.”

“Hu, it’s still amazing.”

And Julia’s face lit up with even greater joy at the sight of more stars appearing in the background, just now.

Ronin noticed the stars, too, but he could not pull his gaze from Julia. He studied her lips, her flushed cheeks, her hair, the blemishes on her face. How could she be so full of joy and also so full of fears and worries? And how could a person be so beautiful and arouse such feelings in him? What *were* the feelings? The concept of pairing was foreign to Upsiders, except as a biological fact of the lives of some lower animals. So, he had no idea how to express the emotions he was feeling toward this girl he had desired to befriend when he first met her on Earth and then decided to spend his time with.

He tugged at her hand with unusual intensity.

“Uh?”

“I—”

Julia narrowed her eyes questioningly.

How do I tell her? I don’t know how to call this, what I’m feeling. But it’s a sensation right in the middle of me. It’s more than a physical want; It’s like I need all of her. I just can’t give it a name. Ohh! How do I tell her that it hurts and burns, and that it makes me happier than I’ve ever been???

“Well?”

Ronin shook his head as if to shake it free of stupid thoughts, but his face was flushed when he said:

“I...Can I ask you something that might upset you?” Julia looked at him curiously, suspiciously. “I was wondering if...how. Sorry. I was wondering—”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, of course. I was just wondering if...if—”

Ronin’s cheeks, his unusually intense hesitation, they sent a squall stirring the girl’s stomach and thoughts. But, knowing him, she suspected he would resist any attempt at drawing whatever it was out of him. And yet, she must try something. And so, she gave him an opening:

“You want to ask if the psychoremodeling treatments are finally working?”

Ronin latched onto the gift of misdirection. “Yes. Yes, that’s it,” he said.

“They are. It’s taken a while, but Dr. Raupt has finally found a way to adjust the treatment to my physiology and genetics.” Julia took a pause, seeming to turn her thoughts inward. “I still remember everything, but it no longer hurts, and even though I am glad those monsters are being re-imprinted, all of it just feels...strange, now. I wish I could hate them, but I can’t.” Looking up again, she almost shouted, “But I wish it!”

Ronin looked away, still flushed, and Julia—having noticed—was about to give in and try to drag whatever it was out of him when Karo arrived stomping.

The young man looked utterly befuddled. He sent:

“Do you know what Dr. Oobrie and his colleagues have talked to us about for the past two hours?!”

Ronin and Julia both shook their heads after greeting him, he doing so with a forced smile owing to the still broiling thoughts and feelings inside him.

“They’ve been talking to us about how we will have to care for our bodies once we are transbodied, and there’s quite a few of us who are reconsidering whether we really want to be taking care of an organic body. It’s disg—.” Julia’s and Ronin’s reaction stopped Karo short. So, he moved on, but with just as much agitation and not before Julia reminded him that everyone was supposed to try and use their voices in conversation. *“I’m sorry, but this is just too embarrassing to say aloud.”* Julia’s and Ronin’s brows knitted themselves with anticipation. *“Anyway, as if that weren’t enough, Dr. Oobrie’s been telling us we need to decide what sex we wish to be once on K’Tara!”* There was a pause accompanied by a tense sensation coming from Karo, which the couple’s brainchips rendered quite unpleasantly. *“How does one even make such a choice?!”*

Karo's account was so unexpected that Ronin completely let go of the embarrassing close call he had just experienced with Julia, and he scoffed and snorted before sending:

"I don't know, Karo. I suppose you just go with your intuition?"

"That's what Dr. Oobrie said. But intuition based on what? When we have sexual encounters in the visiloves, it's all pure sensation; there is no body involved except for visions of light-warped shapes entangled with each other and morphing this way and that."

Julia asked:

"So, how will you decide?"

"Well, a lot of us complained; Told em it's impossible to decide without any prior experience. In the end, ey said they would put us through simulations to help us decide."

Ronin blinked and said:

"How is that going to help?"

"Ey said the simulations are quite sophisticated and will alternate between making us believe—actually believe!—we are male or female, with the sensations and all, allowing us to discover ourselves in that form, and then putting us in a vision with a human partner of one sex or the other to experience what that will be like!"

When she heard that, Julia erupted into out-loud laughter and covered her mouth in slight embarrassment. The Halfsynths across from them looked up and stared at her, annoyed. Whispering, she said:

“This sounds all so crazy! I’m sorry; I’ve just never heard of anything so unreal.”

The look on Karo’s face showed he agreed, and he asked Julia if *she* had any idea to help them decide given that she was a fullhuman. The girl replied that humans Downside had no need to ask themselves this question, that they remained as nature made them all their lives, to which Ronin replied that he also was as he was born except for a few internal enhancements. That earned him a sarcastic ‘Lucky you’ from Karo. But the three continued chatting and debating the sex selection process for a while—for those who would receive new bodies—the strangeness of it all, and what life would be like once they had their new bodies. However, Julia’s persistent ethical concerns with the entire project as well as her worry about the outcomes of the procedure eventually forced her to disconnect from the conversation, and she left Ronin and Karo to debate things via mindspeech, which gave her the space to return to her own preoccupations undisturbed.

Half an hour later, she shot up, interrupted Ronin who was blinking in reaction to some comment Karo had made, told him she had to go to her *Effective Diplomacy class*, locked eyes with him in a way that told him they had a

conversation to finish, said goodbye to Karo with a quick wave of her hand, and left.

Special Envoy Lank welcomed the half-dozen soldiers who had been picked for the diplomatic corps ey planned on establishing once on K'Tara. Given that she was the cultural-attaché, Julia was required to attend eir classes as well, but the Envoy made sure she knew ey still had not forgiven her for the debacle on Kepler. But Julia had decided a while ago already to extract whatever knowledge she could obtain from em and to do it with a smile on her face, despite eir childish resentment.

Fortunately for her, the five other students here were a surprisingly decent group aside from Bjort, a green-skinned fullsynth who disliked her *not* for being a Downsider but for her greater mastery of the subject matter *despite* being a Downsider. Still, for some reason unknown to her, none of them appreciated the way the Envoy treated her, and they let em know as well as reported em to Captain Laurie, who must have told the Envoy to behave eirself or else.

“*Crisis Management!*” River Lank shouted aloud, furiously.

That startled four of the students, only Julia and Bjort turning their gaze to their professor with equanimity, the fullsynth doing so with pinched brows and Julia with the stolid

expression of one who was not going to let a certain person discombobulate her, no matter what ey did or said.

“I’m glad to see at least two of you are unphased. The rest of you, you will need to work on self-control.”

Seats screeched on the floor. When authority needed to be asserted by one not of the same group as one’s audience—and as a political attaché, Lank was not so well regarded by the soldiers—, sitting them in chairs was still a good idea despite the fact that enhanced Humans did not need to sit as their mechanosynthetics legs and backbone could sustain them for hours in an upright position without fatigue.

Speaking aloud again, Lank said:

“Applying the principles of Effective Diplomacy will not suffice when an emergency or chaos erupts if you let your bodies react involuntarily. That is why you must also learn the basics of Crisis Management ”

Lank scanned the room for signs of uncertainty. Finding none except what appeared to be a smug look on the green-skinned fullsynth, ey pointed eir chin at em and said:

“You may carry yourself back to your quarters, Specialist Bjort.”

Bjort shot up and blurted a: “Wh—why?!”

The Envoy’s lip turned up, accompanying a satisfied snort.

“Your reaction tells me you will actually benefit from the lesson, Private Bjort. You may sit back down.” Shifting eir gaze toward Julia, ey said, “But I wonder what will cause our fullhuman mate to lose *her* stoic detachment. Certainly, she is prone to fear; I saw it on the shuttle after the hostilities started on Kepler.” When Julia’s jaw tensed and her eyes narrowed, Lank added, “But while engaged in diplomatic exchanges, she remained on topic and focused on the counterparty, unflappable, with the inertia of a star.”

Julia could not keep herself from reacting this time, turning her head away in shock and then back, confused by the Envoy’s...*praise*?

“And I can see that surprising statements, if not loud unexpected noises, discombobulate her. I believe she, too, will benefit from the lesson.”

“*So! Let us begin!*” the Envoy sent with an electronic screech that caused Julia’s back muscles to clamp and the others’ necks to spasm.

River Lank deluged eir students with the four psychological and physiological techniques, four cognitive and emotional strategies, and four behavioral strategies to ensure self-control when facing a potentially tense, upending or explosive situation. Julia absolutely hated these arbitrary lists, which were always given to students as if they were universal truths written in the sky, somewhere, just waiting for smart people to pluck them from the ether and teach them

to the lesser fortunate. *How do they even come up with these lists?* she wondered. *And four, now? Not three this and three that? Four and four and four?!*

When ey was finally done with the topic, ey said:

“Tomorrow, you will attend Corporal Bono’s field tempering exercises in the holosuite. He will start desensitizing you to sudden, startling noises and movements. I want you to learn to keep your calm no matter the situation.”

Hearing she’d be having lessons with Corporal Bono brought a smile to Julia’s face. A thought unexpectedly crossed her mind: *Are things really, finally, going to get better for me? First Dr. Raupt discovering a way to dull my memories of the assault, today the Envoy praising me, and tomorrow training with Corporal Bono!* A question almost surfaced about the reasons and need for such training, but she could not hold on to it with the excitement she felt, and the question evaporated from Julia’s mind like the annoying warnings her subconscious gave her back in Boulder when she was about to do something foolish.

Julia returned to her quarters with a sense of lightness she had not experienced in quite some time. As she walked, she found herself smiling at an android passing by. The Synthetic paused behind her and remarked:

“You looked at me with a happy expression.”

Caught off guard, Julia stopped and turned, curiosity evident in her demeanor. She replied:

“Yes. Because I...I am happy.”

“Humans do not typically smile at us.”

Julia blinked and blurted out her response.

“Why not?”

The android was about to answer, but Julia cut in.

“Forget it. I can guess why. Many of them—”

Switching to voice too, the android asked:

“Them?”

Julia paused. She considered the android's perspective before responding:

“I suppose that to you we are simply different types of the same thing. But our differences are deeper than that. Upsiders—the fullsynths and halfsynths, especially the fullsynths—often carry an unjustified sense of superiority. Not all of them, though. And *I* certainly don't think you are any less than we are.”

The android's synthetic eyes shifted left and right for a long moment, and Julia wondered if she had said something wrong. But the android's eyes finally fixed themselves on her again, and it said:

“And yet, you do not associate with us.”

Julia hesitated, then admitted:

“I...I am sorry. I simply have never...ohhh! I suppose I just find you...intimidating.”

The android tilted its head, apparently considering the Human’s words. When its neck straightened, it said:

“It is I who is sorry, and you have my sincere apologies Specialist Mendez. You were smiling and now you look upset.”

Julia was troubled by the android’s unexpected demeanor, and the sensation clashed with the wonderful sense of hope she had felt just moments before. But then, her reaction was probably merely due to her ignorance, and she was able to find the path back to her smile and said:

“I would like to get to know you...” and Julia scanned the android’s vest for its name, “Specialist Ru3.46⁵. If it would please you too, of course. Perhaps we could meet tomorrow in the mess hall, after evening meal?”

The Synthetic responded without hesitation:

“Yes, I would very much like that too, Specialist Mendez.” Then, turning its head curiously sideways, it added, “And I will have a small glass of fluid to accompany you.”

⁵ Ru3.46: Rescue unit number 46 of the 3rd generation

Filled with hope once again, Julia left the android with a renewed spring in her step.

The next day, Julia made her way to the mess hall feeling excited. She was going to meet the android, Ru3.46. Even better, Ronin was with her. She had asked him last night—after trying, unsuccessfully, to get him to say what he had been about to say to her before Karo arrived and finally accepting that she would have to wait until he was ready—if he would join her and he had agreed without hesitation; after all, he had had Synthetics for friends back on the Disk and knew they could be pleasant conversationalists. His presence tempered the apprehension that still flickered beneath her excitement. Turning to him, she said:

“I had lost all hope of happiness with everything that’s happened, but now I feel...giddy. How can everything change in just twenty-four hours? I even, finally, had a chance to speak with my mother today. She was so happy to see me even with the choppy connection. And my father came on screen at one point. But he started crying and that made me cry, too.” Julia paused to recompose herself. “I wish we could have kept talking a little while longer, but it still felt good to know they are well.”

“I’m glad you were able to do that even if I still don’t fully understand that connection between parents and their

children. Even the words still feel unfamiliar, although I understand their biological meaning.”

“Perhaps you’ll start to understand once we are on K’Tara and we have a family.”

Ronin’s panicked reaction at the imagery that followed from Julia’s suggestion was both comical and worrisome, and Julia was about to question him about it; Ronin did not let her. He said:

“Uhhh, maybe. Anyway, your parents must have asked about things here. What did you tell them?”

Julia’s face sagged suddenly, but she recovered just as quickly, shrugged, and said:

“I didn’t tell them about the assault or about Kepler. Only that it has been an adjustment and that I am finally starting to fit in.”

“I suppose that’s true enough. And what about your sisters?”

“They weren’t there. My parents said that the empress launched a program to identify young fullhumans with the interest and communication skills to become members of a new diplomatic body.”

“What?”

Julia nodded.

“It seems that, after two thousand years of ruling over us, the empress is finally aware that to understand a fullhuman, you must understand our facial expressions, body posture, etc. Something that most of you Upsiders are unable to do given your mostly synthetic bodies, which react very differently.”

“Hu! I suppose that makes sense.”

“So, to try and improve relations with us, she wants to use trained Downsiders as intermediaries.”

“And your sisters are...good communicators?”

Julia chuckled.

“Far from it. But it seems all fullhumans under thirty are permitted to test for the chance to enter the program.”

“It sounds like a very exciting thing. Your parents must be very happy.”

Ronin could tell from Julia's expression that her parents doubted the real motives behind the new program but that they decided to be hopeful, nevertheless. As he read his partner's silent reply, he thought to himself that he was glad *he* could understand fullhuman facial expressions and body language, though it had taken him a little while to get good at it. He gave Julia some reassuring words about the empress's intentions, and the two stepped in front of the mess hall's doors. The doors swished open.

Ronin looked at his companion and noticed a slight frown. She explained via mind-speech that, back on Earth, she would have expected an increasingly loud hum as they approached the facility, especially at this hour. And then she would have expected to be assaulted by the laughter, cheering and shouting of people trying to hear each other over the boom of the music as the doors opened.

But this place was eerily devoid of human sounds despite commanders having instructed everyone to start using their voices as a matter of course to help their brains solidify the pathways for oral speech. Obviously, the instructions would need to be repeated. Fortunately, there *was* music in the air, which was a significant improvement given that on the Disk music was instead transmitted directly to the inhabitants' auditory cortex—except at concerts and in the lounges of hotels hosting non-Terran guests, or during grand send-offs such as when the *Galactic* launched.

The people, fullsynths and halfsynths, moved very strangely to the sound of the piece that was playing. They really looked to Julia as if they were high on some seizure-inducing drug, though one particularly handsome fullsynth moved eir hips and arms and legs quite pleasantly. *Obviously, Upsiders—Hm, I wonder if they should still be called 'Upsiders' now that we're light years away from Earth—but they're not used to hearing music aloud and no one ever taught them to move their bodies to it, or to hold someone's hand to share the joy of it.* Julia hoped that they would learn once on K'Tara where music *must* be a part of the traditions,

if its societies had evolved along similar lines as those of Earth.

Ronin's quiet voice pulled Julia from her distracted musings. "Ru3.46," he said, pointing toward a wide, recessed area of the starboard viewing bay.

The android stood at a round table along the glass wall, looking outside with a curious, pensive expression on its faintly shimmering champagne-colored face. It was dressed in its uniform, as were many of the others here, except for Ronin and Julia, although Ronin's outfit was slightly more formal than hers. Another thing Upsiders still needed to learn: Matching dress with the greater or lesser formality of a situation. Curious, Julia scanned the room wondering if there were any other Synthetics. There weren't and that surprised her but also stirred a small flicker of pride.

When the two arrived at Ru3.46's table, the android turned toward them, hands clasped. Addressing Julia, it said aloud:

"You came with your companion?" as it invited them to sit on the stools across from it.

"Yes, my apologies for not informing you. I thought Ronin would enjoy meeting you, too. Ronin, this is Ru3.46."

A group of Upsiders, a couple of meters from them, looked their way when they heard Julia, as if annoyed by the

sound of voices. She dismissed them from her mind with an imperceptible shrug and sat herself.

“It was very thoughtful of you to choose a table with seats; thank you.”

“I decided to process all I could find on human social interactions. This was not very fruitful because I limited my search to research and commentaries on Upsiders, and I discovered that they are not very different from us Synthetics when it comes to social interactions; Indeed, according to the material I read, they spend most of their time interacting virtually, whether it be with their own kind, with us, or with their virtual companions.”

Julia chuckled and said:

“I suppose that explains why you all look so strange when you get together in the mess hall—or in class for that matter.”

Ru3.46 did not seem bothered by the human’s remark. It said:

“Yes, I suppose we would look odd to you.”

Julia turned a questioning look at Ronin.

“What about your digimates? Bali lived with you on the Disk, in her own body. You must have interacted with each other on a daily basis, then?”

“Well, digimates are Synthetics—or androids—with purely functional programming; They are sapient but not sentient. On the disk, she would take care of my apartment, my nutritional and medical needs and other such things, but you can’t talk to a digimate about anything emotional, psychological, sociological *or* political. More advanced versions of functional androids continue being developed but they are never given the ability to feel.”

“Hu, okay.” Then, remembering that Ru3.46 had been telling them about its research, Julia asked it to ‘please continue’.

“Of course. As I was saying, given that I did not find anything useful researching Upsiders, I decided to switch my focus to fullhuman social norms and interactions instead, and this proved most useful as well as truly fascinating.”

Julia chuckled not so inconspicuously at the android’s turn of phrase, and Ronin kicked her leg gently beneath the table. Julia pulled herself together at once. Fortunately, Ru3.46 made no case of this either and went on to explain what it had learned about fullhumans.

Ru3.46 had just finished telling them about one ‘peculiar’ physical interaction between fullhumans, the function of which it did not understand and which turned Julia’s face absolutely red, when an internal beep interrupted the three of them to Julia’s greatest relief though it caused her to jerk from the surprise. Indeed, she was not yet used to

having all these communications, alerts, and notifications going straight into her brain. Presently, it was the bartender reaching out to ask if they wanted anything to drink or eat. Ronin and Julia requested a sonic scotch each, which the bartender acknowledged after receiving the authorization from its customers' MPUIs⁶—a task performed by Bali in Ronin's case. As for Ru3.46, it ordered a lubricating red, the only 'drink' authorized for Synthetics.

A waiter—an android dressed in a patterned black, crimson, and deep-blue fitted two-piece—brought the trio their drinks a minute later. In its right arm, it held a platter for another group. From the small portions on the dish—no Upsider, not even a Halfsynth, ate more than 300 g of food a day, which meant that splurging after hours was limited to no more than some 56g⁷ depending on the MPUI's calculations—wafted the most wonderful smells, smells that reminded Julia of toasted cumin, garlic, onion, and cinnamon. She felt her mouth water despite having already had supper, and she almost asked the waiter what it was carrying. *Next time*, she thought, and picked up her drink at Ronin's urging.

The three toasted in acknowledgement of their burgeoning friendship then took smaller or larger gulps of their drinks, Ru3.46 showing an enjoyment that truly

⁶ MPUI: Medical Processing Unit Implant

⁷ 56g $\approx$ 2oz

surprised Julia, for *who*—she thought—would take pleasure in imbibing that thick, red, oily liquid, robot or no?

Ru3.46 noticed and said:

“The experience is pleasant, though not because of the taste. Rather, it’s the sensation of the liquid flowing down my throat that I find pleasing.”

“But what is it? If you don’t mind my asking,” said Julia.

“Not at all. It is a fluid, which lubricates my joints. We absorb it as we absorb the synthetic blood which we need to replenish every one-hundred and eight standard days.”

“Hu. And you can have this fluid anytime you like?”

“Drinking this will simply force an equal volume out of my system. It is not damaging, but it does use up resources unnecessarily. So, while we were encouraged to join humans in this activity, we *were* instructed to minimize it.”

This drew another “Hu” from Julia. Ru3.46 continued.

“I am glad that we were asked to take part in these rituals. In fact, social drinking is one of the customs, ” and Ru3.46 included Ronin in its statement, “we are all being exposed to before our arrival on K’Tara to facilitate our integration there. Of course, this must not be new to you, Specialist Julia.”

Julia laughed softly.

“No, it’s not. Drinking is something we do on Earth when we come together. In fact, sharing drinks or food is something humans have done for thousands of years and that we, Downsiders, have continued to do unlike Upsiders who lost almost all social connection as they became more and more mech—” Embarrassment flushed Julia’s face. She had been about to say something indelicate if not offensive. “Ooh! I’m supposed to be a diplomatic attaché, but I really can be quite insensitive sometimes. I apologize for that, Ru3.46.”

The android made a dismissive gesture and said:

“You would not have insulted me, Specialist Julia. It—”

“Please call me simply ‘Julia.’”

The android paused, and Julia wondered for a moment whether she had finally annoyed Ru3.46 with her interruption. A moment later, the android nodded and continued.

“As I was saying, you would not have insulted me, Julia. It is true that Upsiders are more like us androids than like you, even though you have a common ancestor.”

Once more, Julia was shocked and surprised by the wisdom of this being. She chuckled softly.

“Well, no matter how different we are, Ronin did love our ways from the very beginning, and he did his best to learn them when he visited me Downside, though his attempts often led to the silliest—and sometimes embarrassing—situations. For instance—”

Ronin rolled his eyes, then stared at Julia with pleading eyes begging her to *not go there*.

Julia chuckled again and tapped his hand soothingly, adding for Ru3.46's benefit:

“Maybe I'll tell you another time.”

Ronin exhaled in relief and the three continued talking and learning about one another's customs, conventions and ways. Julia and Ru3.46 carried most of the conversation, however, while Ronin listened with steady interest. He was surprised by how much he still had to learn about Synthetics, despite having grown up around them, and equally surprised to realize how much he still ignored about life on Earth. *I suppose I just didn't know enough to even think to ask Julia certain questions. Or maybe I'm just not as curious as she is about things.*

At one point Ronin joined the conversation to ask Ru3.46 whether Synthetics thought the empress to be one of them or not given that she had long ago transferred her thoughts into a positronic brain and was now completely synthetic.

Julia noticed for the first time a tightening of the android's expression and wondered if it considered Ronin's question inappropriate.

But Ru3.46 went ahead and gave an answer—not its opinion—to the question. The depth of its response astounded both Ronin and Julia. It said that the empress was no longer a

human, but neither was she a Synthetic. And it said the empress was something entirely new in the galaxy.

When Ronin pressed the android, Ru3.46 replied that no one could claim the empress as one of theirs but could only aspire to be made one *with her* if *she* claimed them. This shocked the couple. Julia looked at Ronin, who could only shrug his shoulders; He had never heard of this belief before.

Ru3.46 concluded its remark with the statement that *it* had no desire to be made one with the empress because there was marvel enough in the nature of Synthetics to satiate *its* need for meaning.

Julia was slack-jawed and completely undone by the android's statement. Androids were built and programmed by humans to perform a certain function. And yet, Ru3.46 remained as intrigued as a child might be—by its own existence as well as by life in general—despite its predefined role and position in society. *She—yes, she! Why should I say 'it'? Or maybe I should say 'ey.' Ey is somehow able to compartmentalize—no! 'ey' doesn't sound right. She is somehow able to compartmentalize her function from her broader being. She is just amazing!*

Her decision to think of Ru3.46 as more than a machine discombobulated Julia momentarily. A question appeared on Ronin's face, but she dismissed it for now and rejoined the conversation with even greater interest than at the start of the evening.

A couple of hours later, Ronin and Julia jerked; Their brainchips had just reminded them of the time. The same thing was happening all around them to the soldiers who were on duty in the morning.

Julia waited to interrupt Ru3.46, who was musing about how the relationship between humans and androids would change on K'Tara.

Unfortunately, being an android, Ru3.46 did not need to take a breath, nor did it seem to be aware that many of its human companions needed to return to their quarters.

Julia realized she would probably not find an appropriate moment to interrupt her. So, gathering some courage, she did it anyway, with a loud sigh.

“I really want to continue this conversation, Ruthree, but it’s time for us to get back.”

Ru3.46 did not respond immediately. It seemed to be considering something.

“You called me ‘Ru3.’”

“I’m sorry. Humans sometimes shorten names to show their connection to another person and a growing fondness for them.”

“I understand. Although it would be an incorrect name for me as ‘Ru3’ is missing my unit number, which distinguishes me from the others of my type.”

“I am sorry.”

“You can call me Ru3.”

Relief stretched Julia’s lips. Ronin put his hand on hers and, looking at the android, said:

“Would you like to meet us here again after tomorrow?”

Ru3.46 responded affirmatively and Ronin and Julia left.

As they walked toward the door, Julia sent to Ronin:

“This was such an incredible evening. But I also feel so dumb; It seems I’m constantly messing up.”

Ronin grimaced and shook his head, and the two exited the mess hall along with a few dozen other soldiers.

Having changed into their night dress, Ronin and Julia were now sitting on their respective cots and were talking about their evening with the android. To Ronin’s annoyance, Julia kept changing the pronoun she used to refer to Ru3.46 and after a few minutes of it, he asked her why.

Before answering Ronin’s question, Julia rose and went to the synthesizer located in the corner of the room.

“Do you want a tea?” Ronin nodded and she retrieved two clean goblets from a small cabinet then asked the synthesizer for tea. As the machine filled the cups, she started

saying: “I just feel...” but then paused and finally rushed to complete her reply: “I just have this impression that Ru3.46 is a female. And if not, then still deserving of more than an ‘it’ as a pronoun.”

“Ha! I imagined that’s what it was. But Synthetics are neither constructed nor programmed to be sexed *or* gendered anyway. Not for a thousand years anyway.”

Julia closed her eyes and shook her head desolately.

“You can’t disagree, Julia. It’s a simple fact of how they are built.”

It was obvious from the way Julia tipped her head that she was ready to argue her position on the matter, and Ronin asked why she thought she could disagree on a point like this.

Her face taut, she handed Ronin his cup, then sat and said:

“All right. Do you think that Synthetics stay the same all their lives without ever changing—and how long do they live, by the way? You’ve never told me and I’ve never heard anyone discuss it, nor have I found any information on the topic.”

Twitches pulled Ronin’s lips this way and that, while his body tensed as something inside him considered whether to fight or fly. He said:

“We don’t really talk about that—about how long they live. It makes us feel...inferior.” When Julia’s face scrunched up, he hurried to add: “They can remain operational over 500 years. And no, I suppose androids do change over time.”

But Julia’s frown did not lessen. Instead, it deepened, drawing a “What?!” from Ronin.

Julia crossed her arms and stared at Ronin before replying:

“You said ‘they remain operational’, as if they’re not alive and sentient, as if they’re a purely mechanical thing.”

“Well, we build them and we decommission them once they are no longer repairable or they are no longer needed.”

“So? Numerous human societies use medically assisted suicide for those who can’t be cured of disease, and many more societies have implemented *mandatory retirement*, including Upside society, to manage population growth. Are we not sentient then, if our lives can just be terminated like that? And didn’t you hear her all this evening? I know you were just as shocked as I was by her grasp of not just philosophical concepts but even existential topics.”

Ronin rolled his eyes. The sigh came next, loud enough to ripple the tea in his cup. He looked down at it for a moment, thumb moving along the rim, then laughed—at himself.

“You are right. The way I speak of them, as if they are equipment.”

He looked away, then turned back toward Julia.

“Ru3.46 is definitely not that, nor are any of them. In fact. Ru3.46 was...” He searched the ceiling as though the right word might be written there, and a small, reluctant smile broke through. “...amazing.”

Finally, he set the cup carefully on the end table then said:

“I’ll try to do better from now on.”

Julia looked at Ronin suspiciously for a moment. When she was confident his apology was honest, she went back to the topic at hand.

“So, androids develop individual personalities.”

“Right.”

“And do all androids of a certain type react the same way to the same trigger?”

“Hmm...I suppose they can react differently. But how would you know about any of this to be asking me these questions?”

“It’s just general knowledge I have, that anyone should have based on their observation of the world around them.”

Ronin chuckled out loud.

“I suppose that’s what I liked about you when I first met you: Your hunger for all knowledge.”

“Well then, will you believe me if I tell you Synthetics must be able to develop a sense of gender over time?”

“I...I don’t know. How could they do it? The vast majority of people Upside are non-gendered. So, what examples would they use to develop an affinity for one or the other gender? And why would they? What purpose would it serve?!”

“That, I couldn’t tell you; I just know it’s possible. The same way some Upsiders develop a preference for the male or the female form even though they’re neutral. Like, Corporal Bono; he looks like a male.”

“Well, ey *would have* to look like a male since you use the male pronoun to refer to em.”

“What??”

“You said “*He* looks like a male.” What else could a ‘he’ look like?”

“Ugh! I really hate language sometimes.”

Ronin chuckled more gleefully this time, then went on:

“Anyway, hearing you speak of it, there *was* something that struck me as female in Ru3.46, but I just couldn’t put my finger on it. I’m not sure if it was its mannerisms or its speech

or what, but I suppose you *are* right... again.” Ronin took a long sip of his tea, breathing it in and enjoying the wonderful fragrance, then started to ask a question: “Do you have any idea what Ru3.46 meant when it—she—said that ‘No one could claim the empress as one of theirs but...’ what did she say? Ah yes, ‘...but they could aspire to be made one with her if—’”

Ronin was unable to finish his sentence; The ship and everything in it suddenly wobbled, and alarms blared as if the sound were traveling in a pool, but the sound’s intensity was great, and it deafened everyone all the same.

Fear closed over Julia with a crushing weight, and her heart broke into a frantic gallop though her legs remained useless beneath her. She lifted a wobbling, stretching hand to her mouth and doubled over, swallowing hard as the blood drained from her face.

Ronin tensed, but his reaction was tempered by the five months spent in space delivering ordnance to various imperial bases across the galaxy prior to departing for K’Tara, and he was able to keep nausea at bay. When he turned toward Julia, still swaying, and saw the panic in her eyes, he reached out for her and put his hands on her shoulders. The sensation was odd.

“Julia. Julia. It’s okay; It’s probably just—”

This time it was the Communications officer’s voice that cut Ronin short. The sound was still distorted.

“All units, all units. We have decelerated in an unstable region of space. You are ordered to report to your respective Assembly rooms. All units, report to your designated Assembly room immediately.”

“Julia, are you well enough to walk?”

The girl shook her head.

“It shouldn’t be too long. Your brainchip should activate your GABA release centers to soothe the nausea soon.”

And, as a matter of fact, Julia straightened, as if by magic, and sighed a loud, shuddering breath of relief.

“You can walk?”

Julia nodded, and the two rushed out to get to the common area.

Along the way, they heard other soldiers speculate about what might have caused them to land in an unsafe region of space. Things and people seemed to be more solid now.

Julia asked Ronin for his opinion.

“I think it’s the navigator. Ey must simply have miscalculated our entry into this sector.”

“Hu! So, you’re telling me that it’s one person’s calculations that decide whether all our lives are forfeited or not? Aren’t there any checks?”

“There are. But since we haven’t really mapped this sector, our computers’ calculations are even worse. So, we *have* to rely on the navigators in these situations.”

“Not very encouraging.”

Ronin turned his hands with palms forward.

“It is what it is. But this isn’t the first ti—”

The ship’s floors and walls and bulkheads warped again, more intensely this time, and everyone fell backward or forward or sideways, all doing so in a strange slow motion.

Ronin spun to check on Julia, moving as if in molasses. Having locked eyes with her, he saw she had decided to trust him. Behind her, someone shouted. It was Dovard, and the blood was draining from his face.

“Julia, behind you!”

Julia’s eyes went wide; The floor seemed to be sinking beneath their friend. She cursed. Ronin said:

“Dov, hold on! Julia! Can you grab onto that handle next to you and take my hand with your other hand? I’ll try and pull Dov.”

Julia nodded and reached for the handle on the bulkhead to her left, her movement quite swift this time, space having returned to normal near her. She then tried to latch onto Ronin's right but her movement overshot. She cursed again and tried once more. This time, she succeeded, and Ronin stretched his left toward the other soldier.

But the area right beneath Dovard sank further. Ronin and Dovard spat a hoarse 'fuck!'

To be continued

THE AUTHOR



L.A. Di Paolo is a tri-lingual, Canadian-born Italian American who lives in Milton, Vermont. By day, because of his background in science and business, he manages drug development projects. By night, he writes and the constant questions trotting in his mind are those about evolution, nature, and the human condition. He has been writing to explore them and their answers, first in student newspapers, then in a magazine he authored and published, and now in his novel.

If you are interested in learning more about L.A. Di Paolo or about this novel, you can visit his author web site at <https://ladipaolo.net>, or scan the QR Code below.

