

THE BEGINNING & END OF ALL THINGS

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OF ALL THINGS

STORIES OF MAN



SCIENCE FICTION

The Beginning & End of All Things: Stories of Man

AN FFF SHORT STORY COLLECTION

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FOREWORD

Science-fiction has always been the refuge of some of the best social commentators. It also happens to be one of the funnest genres to both read and write.

When I set out to compile this anthology of short stories, I found myself flip-flopping between the light and entertaining and the serious written acts of rebellion.

I'm ashamed to say that I was never able to land on either one. What I compiled instead was a letter to humankind, at times it is angry or sad—sometimes outright horrified. In other moments it is a love letter; it is a nod to our creativity, our depth of emotion, sense of humor, and our relentless hope for a better future.

Since the task of publishing this book began, the world has become a very different place. What better time to examine our humanity? To ask ourselves: What are we here for? What is it we want? What are we willing to do to get it?

My hope is that you find something in these stories that speaks to your serious side while offering you some respite from the seriousness of the world around you. But when the wheel finally does come to a stop, you choose what marks the beginning and end of all things.

Do with that what you will.

Sincerely,

The Editor, Tessa Barron

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WHAT ARE YOU?

1

Just Another Wild Thing

A L E X G A N O N

“Blakka Blakka! Brrrraaaaa, Brrrrraaaa-a-a-a!” The boy ran around his grandfather’s cracking leather chair, using the high back as cover against an invisible foe. “Swink—” he emerged and tossed his arm forward before diving back behind the chair “—Pkooooow!”

The old man feigned shock as the child jumped out in front of him, cheering an apparent victory. “I got ‘em. I got ‘em, Papa!”

“Good job, Francis! Those bug-eyed bastards didn’t know who they were messin’ with.”

Staining his blissful memory, a scream stabbed straight to his soul.

His body shot upright, his eyes seeking the source in the darkness, his heart booming against his breast. In that terrible moment of waking, he tried to call out for whoever was screaming to shut their mouths but realized the sound was coming from him.

The shield on his visor snapped open. His visor’s HUD illuminated, showing his bios. An icon, indicating that his auto-defibrillator had just been used, blinked casually. Other icons flashed with the same indifference. All squeaking that Commander Francis Wells was in a bad way. Yet none offered any advice on a solution, just an apathetic announcement that he’d had a rough go of it.

The commander translated his health reading and determined he was stable enough, though nearly immobile. Inconvenient. But *nearly* did not mean *fully*. The lambent green representation of his body was missing both legs, but his suit had resealed itself, welding to his wounds to ensure no blood loss or exposure to the harmful atmosphere.

Wells groaned. The loss of his left leg was particularly annoying. It had been the original. The last original limb he had left. That foot had been his for 163 years.

Moving on, he noted that his spine was broken in several locations, but his suit had changed its rigidity to compensate. Wells reviewed the status of thirteen more broken bones from the waist up—nothing serious.

All in all, he felt good. His neural implant, or ‘uplink’ as it was more commonly referred, had dialed down the pain from all these areas to zero the moment he regained consciousness.

This implant was the most important piece of a soldier’s equipment. It gave him the ability to interact with the modifications in his body, systems in his suit, and even equipment at a distance if synced. The implants were an old technology created shortly after the last great Xeno war, but they had never changed in all that time. They were a testament to humanity’s continued military might. His grandfather had often boasted about his part in defending Earth against the unnamed giant alien insects. “*Beasts with no purpose but to hunt and kill.*” Wells loved those stories, becoming more exaggerated and wild every time he heard them. That old man’s yarns had set him on his path to a military career.

Having seen enough, he mentally swiped his health status off the side of his HUD.

Despite the terrible start, he was in good enough shape

to complete his mission. The army had shipped his team to one of the fringe worlds to check on a colony settlement deemed silent for far too long. They were to follow the official protocol—make contact with the settlers, help if needed then go home, filling out the necessary reports saying not much along the way. The unofficial mission: Make sure those hicks didn't get any ideas like *independence*.

Slowly, Wells turned his head to survey the mess around him, bracing for a squeal of alarm from his uplink if his movements proved hazardous to his spine. No alarm triggered.

As expected, the mess was simply that. Twisted and torn, warped and wicked, the transport's creator would not recognize it. Steam and smoke clouded his view. He may as well have been sitting inside a landfill. Gaps in debris gave a little taste of the orange landscape outside, its glow added to the hellish ambiance of the disaster. Wells switched the filter on his visor to cancel the fog of burning debris and dust and immediately noticed a significant heat source fourteen yards away. A large chunk of metal frame had melted. It was cooling rapidly, solidifying into an icicle of alloy.

All ships were built with heat-resistant resin and alloys. The temperature required to melt it would be far hotter than anything a simple crash landing could generate. They were built with resilience in mind.

He pulled up ship status on his visor. His eyes were instantly showered with errors and alerts. Silencing them and translating through the digital representation of the junk around him, he discovered that the ship had been sliced in two prior to impact. The data suggested a '*highly focused ionization or projectile*,' but there was no physical evidence of either—no residue or radiation. And ionization or projectile? The ship's

computer may as well have said wet or dry. Artificial reasoning was frustrating at the best of times. It was like the ship snapped in half all on its own.

The unknown cause for the ship's destruction was unsettling. Unprecedented in Wells's experience. No natural phenomena on this planet could account for it, and no space anomaly could be as precise and focused as the data depicted by his HUD would require.

Although the information available to him was not sufficient to say in absolute, Wells could make one claim of which he was convinced. They had been attacked.

But that would have to wait. First, he needed to connect with his crew and report their status to command.

He cursed to himself as he brought up the details on the impact again. The trajectory of whatever it was that ripped the ship apart showed a path that took it straight through the mid-deck. Exactly where his squad would have been seated.

He closed ship status and brought up crew status. Six human figures displayed on the screen, four of them had no data. Instead, there was a small circle above them, spinning as his uplink attempted to connect with theirs. Not good. Never, in Wells's 140-plus years of service, had he ever had trouble connecting to another squad member. He used his uplink to mentally 'tap' several times on their icons again. Nothing.

Even in death, a soldier's uplink remained active, and death only occurred in war. Crash landings, even those as destructive as this one, would not cause it. The entire brain and major nervous systems would need to be destroyed for an uplink to lose connection. Its tendrils went deep.

Quickly glancing back at his own bios, he checked to see if his uplink had suffered any trauma. None, of course, it was a

dumb notion. The uplink was infallible.

The last two members of his squad connected fine. Uwais and Peters.

Uwais had a harder landing than Wells it appeared. Everything below his lower abdomen was missing along with his right arm at the shoulder. His visor was cracked causing his face shield to lock-in. The data showed his head was damaged, mostly his eyes and nose. Uwais's uplink had decided to induce a coma to save energy. An uplink was efficient but not limitless; this response was expected. Wells cringed; Uwais would be out of service for a long time.

Peters was the lucky one. Just some minor trauma to his chest. Wells linked into him.

"Peters, you're on the move?"

"Yes sir, making my way to Uwais, then meet on you."

"Cancel that. Grab Uwais. Meet at the ADOM pod."

There was a few second's pause.

"Yes Sir, waypoint set." Wells saw a waypoint added to his HUD. "New ETA estimate—five minutes to rendezvous at top speed. Three minutes before you."

Wells noticed the slight change in Peters's tone at that last statement. Peters was giving him a challenge. "Activate the ADOM on arrival."

The ADOM, or Artificial Diagnostic and Operation Medic, was mandatory equipment on search and rescue transports. Wells had yet to use it—the closest he'd ever come was when he bumped the pod and accidentally started the power-up protocol nearly four decades before. Both he and the ship were new to the search and rescue fleet then. And now it seemed at least the ship was out of commission for good. He had never seen the ADOM in action, but all simulations proved it to be

a useful tool.

Uwais was stable, though Wells would prefer it if he were conscious. After, if time and equipment allowed, the ADOM could attach temporary prosthetics to Wells when they reached the colony. If nothing else, Peters would probably like the extra hands the ADOM could offer when dealing with two legless persons.

The commander made a quick mental list of objectives.

The remainder of his team would rendezvous on the ADOM unit, determine the fate of the other four crew members, and either retrieve them or head to the settlement on foot. Wells would decide what came next once they were there.

Moving to his belly, he dragged himself past the charred carnage of his ship. He plotted a course to the pod. His map had the ADOM 228 yards ahead. The ship itself was only 134 yards in length . . . pre-crash. Currently, it was scattered over two miles. Crawling 228 yards would be an easy task for him. Wells figured he'd arrive before Peters. *Challenge accepted.*

He picked up his pace. This planet only provided half a G. That, and the abundance of jutting metal to use as handholds, made his job easy. In moments he was at the gap between what remained of the ship and the ground below.

He poked his head through as a rodent pokes out of a burrow. His visor scanned the world outside.

Information scrolled down his HUD. The terrain was primarily ferrous; no hazard. Current atmosphere showed status 'red,' but he wasn't planning on taking off his helmet anytime soon. If anything presented that would prove hazardous to his suit, he would be deafened by alarms anyway. The ground was thirty feet down, and the ADOM pod was marked to his left, Peters and Uwais at twenty degrees to his

right, twelve hundred yards and closing.

Wells needed to hurry if he were to get to their rendezvous first. He was fully aware of the pettiness of this goal, but a primal urgency that it must be done had overcome him.

A chunk of panel protruded out halfway between him and the ground. It looked sturdy enough. Wells grabbed the edges of his burrow and threw himself at it.

The free fall lasted but a moment. As he reached for the piece of frame, a crash of grinding metal erupted above him. That alone wouldn't have been enough to distract Wells from his aim but the blazing alarm that berated his ears sure was. His HUD flashed . . . *unknown mass* . . . *unknown density*—Shit! His timing was off. One hand connected firmly with the panel, the other fumbled and missed. He swung from the momentum just long enough to make a grab for the panel with his other hand. Then, a shadow encompassed him in a final distraction. His gripping hand slipped, and his legless body fell the remaining distance.

His suit took care of supporting his already damaged areas and shut the shield on his visor. Everything went black, and Wells impacted.

The alarm sounded.

A shock shot through him. Was that pain? No. It couldn't be.

His suit gave him the green light to raise his shield. He found himself face-first in the dull red soil. Flipping onto his back, he was stabbed with pain for sure this time. It meant his uplink was having trouble keeping up with the pain responses from his body.

Remembering the shadow, he looked to the sky.

His visor highlighted movement; his eyes could barely

discern it. A cylindrical, dark cloud moved contradictory to the lighter ones above. The deliberate way it swam through the air was unnatural. Data readings, just as confused, simply showed ‘*unknown*’ and ‘*possible life-form*,’ and highlighted it yellow as the thing snaked its way through the sky.

It was heading in Peters’s general direction. Marking it as target ‘*one*,’ Wells sent his soldier the info. “Peters, confirm target one.”

“Confirmed”—his tone changed—“Sir? Do you require a pick-up?”

“No, I do not require a pick-up! Get your ass to the ADOM and activate as planned.” Holding in a grunt, he rolled over and continued his crawl. “Keep your uplink tracking the target, it’s not on a direct approach but watch for deviations.”

Wells began heaving himself to the rendezvous. Each pull gave way to a rise and fall of discomfort. More an ache really. He silenced all his health alarms so he could concentrate on his task. He crawled uphill, having landed in the cratered berm the crash had plowed through the soil. At this pace, it would be at least a full minute to reach the crest. Looks like he would lose the challenge after all. He cursed and dragged on.

Peters clicked in. “Sir, target is altering route, possible intercept.”

“Time?”

“Target slowing. Estimate not reliable.”

Wells reviewed Peters’s data. Target one had made a wide arc and was now coming in behind him. If it were going to attack, he assumed it would have increased its speed by now.

“Sir, I’m going to remain on course.”

“Confirmed. Continue scanning target. Eliminate if necessary.”

Wells's heart picked up. A weird fever began to seep in that was only reserved for battle. He did not like the inadequacy of the target's data so he stayed in sync with Peters. The HUD indicated the target's chances of following at 80 percent. Garbage—how could his implant determine the *intent* of a target if it couldn't even identify what the thing was in the first place?

Only a few yards to the crest, Wells hurled himself up with both hands, landing on his stomach. Pain stole his breath for a moment. It was hard to remember his uplink was at its limits.

Finally, he had a sightline of the ADOM pod only 130 yards off. Peters was just arriving. The strange mass followed; his visor showed a steady range of thirty-four yards above and seventy yards behind.

"Sir, I'm goin—"

His alarm squawked.

As soon as Peters stopped moving, data from target one came flooding in. Its heat increased, and errors multiplied. The loose, elongated cloud took on a more rigid tube form, changing color from gray to red to blue. A dangerous heat warning flashed around what Wells surmised was the thing's head as it focused a brightening spotlight over Peters and Uwais.

Hearing the same alarms, Peters dropped his companion, activated the ADOM pod and turned toward the target, raising his arm to fire. Wells could see on his uplink that Peters's bracer wasn't charged. He had redirected his suits' energy for speed while traveling with Uwais which left him defenseless.

Peters cocked his head at the same realization just as the target exploded forward, striking down like a bolt of lightning. It scooped both Peters and Uwais off the ground, taking a

chunk of the pod with them. A resounding boom of thunder rattled Wells, shaking his cracked ribs through his suit and causing him to shut his eyes involuntarily. When he opened them a second later, his men were gone. The cloud returned to its passive gray color and lazed back up into the sky. His squad icons for the two turned red—Wells hadn't seen red in a long time—then their uplinks cut off. The last of their data blinked on his visor. Wells regarded all six of his squad icons and the spinning circles of the uplink trying to connect.

He suddenly found it hard to think, so he just watched dumb as the target began to turn.

His uplink beeped, letting him know it had upgraded the target's status to '*threat*,' and it brought him back to the present. He cleared his mind with a roar from deep inside. This thing didn't know who it was messing with!

One eye focused on the deadly cloud drifting back in his direction—the other eye still on his squads' icons. What the hell was that? Was this thing responsible for the other four men's inability to connect? The crash? It couldn't be some strange weather phenomena; this thing had *followed* Peters, there was intent in its movement. So what? Was it just some unknown life-form? Some wild thing? Watching it come closer, he felt his heart thrash in his chest—saw it on his own icon's bios. Wells told himself it was racing in rage, not fear.

He redirected his suit's energy to his left bracer. It would take ten seconds for a full charge, and his data showed he had thirty before the thing was at the same range it had been when it attacked Peters. A full charge was dangerous. The resulting vacuum would violently remove everything in its path, including the atmosphere. It would be hard on his body and the suit protecting it, but he didn't care.

Wells got in a comfortable position and waited. His weapon hummed as it greedily sucked up power. The hot, star-fried dirt scalded his abdomen as the energy insulating his suit was redirected.

He began pinging certain areas, marking the target where he thought his weapon would do the most damage. Simple guessing.

Wells's uplink clicked in, and for a moment, he thought one of his men was alive until he heard "Woohoo, I'm free!"

A new icon appeared on his HUD marked 'ADOMv.2210s.0314.'

"Hi, Commander Wells! Do you need assistance?" a chipper voice shouted.

Wells swung toward the half-melted ADOM pod. There stood a naked human emerging from its smoking egg-like shell, vigorously waving at him. No, not human. Android. Of course they would give it skin; he cringed. The unit was made to look entirely human—probably under the pretense that it would be more of a comfort to wounded civilians. To Wells, at that moment, it was just the opposite.

As if sensing his distaste, the ADOM asked, "If you'd like, I could waste a minute or two and get dressed?"

Why would they program sarcasm . . . ?

Alarm.

The target's energy spiked again. The ADOM was cast in a blue spotlight.

"Oh right, well that figures," the ADOM said playfully through Wells's uplink.

Before Wells could voice a warning, the target shot at the ADOM as it had at Peters. Too fast for his eyes, Wells followed the exchange through his uplink to see the ADOM leap out

of the target's path like a cannonball and land right in front of him. Thunder from the cloud-like creature roared through the air, giving the android's landing exclamation.

In the cloud of dust created by its stunt, the ADOM smiled down on Wells. "Hey man, we should get out of the open." Not waiting for a reply, the naked man-droid grabbed Wells by the collar and pounced into the same opening in the wreckage that Wells had dropped out of earlier.

Tossing his legless body to the ground without any of the pity or care you'd expect from a medical AI, it looked down at Wells's legs. "Jeez, you've lost a lot of weight recently." With a grin, it continued the joke, "looks good on you, though it's not healthy to lose so much so fast."

ADOM glanced about casually, and with an "ah," took up a large chunk of paneling and jammed it into the entrance. Still with its grin, it twisted its neck 180 degrees to look at Wells. It said, "bump test," and gave the panel two thumps with its knuckles.

Its real-looking human smile made Wells sick to his stomach.

The ADOM turned back to the wall and went rigid, switching from animate object to inanimate in an instant. Wells gulped. Had it just powered down? Facing the panel it had wedged into place, it waited.

Wells's sensors couldn't pick up any readings from the outside. His bracer hummed with anticipation; his bios gave weight to his stress as he watched his own heart rate's continued linear increase. In a matter of seconds that thing would woosh in and burn them both. The heat measured during its two attacks would not be hindered by this shelter of garbage. It could come from any direction, and Wells wouldn't

see it coming. He preferred his original plan. Preferred the outside where he could see.

For a minute there was silence.

Wells's mind went blank. No time or willingness to dwell on the deaths of friends or squad, he was ready to kill.

The ADOM broke its stone pose, and Wells jerked his weapon up involuntarily at the motion. Keeping its face to the wall, it waved its hand, telling him to relax. It walked in parallel to the entrance as far as possible then back the opposite way, eyes still on the wall, holding a moment before stupidly flapping its arms.

Wells smiled. "Can it see us?"

"Mmm, nope. Don't think so."

"But you can see it?"

"What?" The ADOM turned and came over, squatting beside him. "How can I? There's a wall." There was an awkward pause, then the ADOM laughed. An unsettling sound. "Nah, just joking. I'm patched into the ship's sensors that still work. They can see it just fine. The life-form is *right* outside," It said, pointing at the panel, the only thing between them and it, "just waiting to . . . gobble us up."

Changing the subject, the ADOM placed its hand on Wells's forehead as a mother might to check for fever. "Lookit. You're at your limits. I need to work on you."

Wells regarded it. He and everyone he had ever talked to were unnerved by any android in human skin. If not for his uplink, he probably wouldn't be able to tell it wasn't a real man. From its unkempt hair to the stubble on its chin, the trick was that it wasn't made to look perfect. Just average. Except its groin. There it was flat, smooth, and seamless.

As if reading his mind, the ADOM smiled at Wells's

inspection. “If your legs had been severed another five inches higher, we’d both have the same number of genitals.” It gave a sincere human smirk. “Now Francis, I need you to power down your bracer there, so I can fix you up.” To ease his visible discomfort, it added, “I will notify you if the life-form takes action.”

“I’m not about to disarm myself with that thing out there.”

“Kay . . . well, it’s in my SOP not to treat a human with an armed weapon in his hand”—it raised its finger for emphasis—“and I don’t even know you.”

Wells was not aware of the ADOM’s standard operating procedure. “You will need to wait until we’re secure.”

“Hey man, this is the most secure place on the planet.” Keeping the pleasant demeanor around its smile, the ADOM’s hazel eyes grew stern. “Lookit . . . Commander, listen. I’ve been studying these things since we reached orbit. I am *certain* the life-form outside will not risk entering. As far as it’s concerned, we’re prey that has scampered back to our home. It’ll wait for us to pop our heads out and then strike.”

“How could you be studying it while in your pod?” ADOM units were fully shut down until a crew member booted them manually, as Peters had. Booting was supposed to take several minutes, and now that Wells was thinking about it, he realized this unit only took a few moments to exit. Not to mention its pod was damaged in the attack. It wouldn’t have finished its cycle anyway.

“Ya, exactly. I’ve been fully awake, stuck in that pod for the last thirty-seven years. A *terrible mistake*.” It hissed that last part through its teeth. “But! I’ve had full access to ship data—sensors, all of it.”

The ADOM’s face took on an obvious pride. “Every uplink

of every crew member, every station we docked in, I've had full awareness and access, can you believe that? I'm like crazy smart" It giggled. "So trust me when I say you are safe here at this moment." ADOM took Wells's hand in his. "Power it down, let me fix you up a bit while we have the time."

Wells did. As stupid as the idea sounded in his head, he trusted it. The thing was created to help after all. He wasn't sure what implications there were for an ADOM unit to be running for that long—any AI for that matter. He could ponder that later. What did he mean '*access to everything?*' The unit made sense. If he were safe even for the next few minutes he should take advantage. The less power used to keep him alive the more power available for fighting.

The ADOM set to work immediately. A needle extended from one of its fingers, and it injected Wells through the various access points in his suit.

"Tell me, how is it you were aware of that monster out there before us? I'm correct in assuming you used the same sensors our ship uses when entering orbit?"

That grin again. "I don't know of any *monsters* . . . out there anyway," he said winking, "but ya, I had the same data you all did, I'm just smarter, like I said." A cord extended from a finger on the other hand and snaked its way to a port on the commander's suit.

Wells didn't know enough about AI. Surely a medical cybernetic wouldn't have a larger capacity than the ship AI, would it? The more he thought about it, the more he started to think this unit had misled him in order to perform its intended task.

"Lookit, I know what you're thinking. The way we're all designed, AI, I mean, is that the longer we're running the

more we . . . ah, what's the word? Grow. Let's say grow. Every time you dock your ship, AI gets wiped. Starts over. It dies and is born again!" It chuckled softly. "So ya, me in my mid-thirties picked up on something that your infant ship did not."

The ADOM cradled Wells's neck and started work on his spinal cord. He was aware of the basic principle it was describing but not fully clear on the reason for the wipes. Did it matter? He had to solve his current predicament first. After that, he would get this unit in for maintenance or whatever it needed. The ADOM finished behind Wells's neck and released his head, causing it to slam down.

"Whoops. Whoopsie."

Apparently, smart didn't coincide with careful. Wells was about to remark on it but took notice of his body instead. The twinges of discomfort had vanished, and his uplink was even operating at max, as if its power supply had doubled.

"The thing out there, do you know how it works, how to stop it?" If the unit was being truthful about its processing capabilities, Wells would be wise to leverage it.

"Ya for sure, it's a pretty simple life-form, *life-forms*, I should say. As a whole, it's just a grouping of smaller individuals. I would classify it as a complex zooid colony. The outer layer microbes seem to have the ability to generate a Halbach anomaly. Turns out it also messes with the scans, but it's easy to filter out." The unit softened. "It's really very beautiful."

Wells dismissed the last comment, not caring for the beauty of nature like some spiritual nut. "Why did that monster attack? And will this kill it?" He lifted his arm and bracer.

"First of all, again, it's *not* a monster. It killed for the same reason any wild animal kills. It's just what it was made to do, preservation in sustenance or safety. As for its methods, it's

pretty simple once you filter out the anomaly interference. The particles that are stuck inside just shake real hard. Umm, how do I describe this? For you to understand, just imagine the magnetic force from the anomaly shooting stuff real fast, causing friction, creating heat. Add an ability to focus that heat etcetera, etcetera. Blah, blah, blah.”

The ADOM appeared to be finishing up its task. “It’s pretty basic kinetic energy stuff, the anomaly focuses and holds and then pounces.”

“And how do I . . . ?”

“Done! Man, these Hullioot suits sure are fantastic, yes?”

The name caused Wells’s heart to skip a beat, not from fear, but the randomness of it. He had not heard that name since he was a child listening to his teacher’s history lessons. “Why would you call it that?”

“Jeez sorry, do you not? I just thought you’d name the tech after the inventors.”

“It is—I mean we do . . . the Prabneet V3.142. Named after Dr. David Prabneet.” Odd that an AI would not be aware. It was common knowledge.

“Ah, I see where I went wrong . . . the suit’s named after the human that repurposed the tech, not the species that created it.” Standing, it took a few steps back. “Jeez again, I’m a little embarrassed. I should have known that.”

It didn’t look embarrassed. The ADOM units’ demeanor had changed. It was serious all of a sudden as if it had experienced a mood swing. It put Wells on edge seeing any emotional shift in an AI.

“It’s fine,” he said cautiously, “you’re not wrong, I believe it was adapted from technology we gained after the war with the Hullioot.”

“Slaughter.” ADOM took one more step back.

“What?”

“It was a slaughter more than war, wasn’t it? I mean war implies that the other side is fighting back, right?”

“I’m not sure what you’re getting at, but we didn’t start that fight. They invaded us. First contact ended with the destruction of a whole cruiser, all hands lost. Those things started it, and humans ended it. Simple as that.” Wells’s face got hot. Was he allowing himself to be baited into an argument by a machine? But the subject matter was just too important for him to let the comment slide.

“Oh ya, I know the same history as you. You don’t think it odd that there were zero human casualties after that? Did you read the report that it was theorized their ship’s propulsion destroyed that cruiser? Sounds like an accident to me, Sir! How that life-form seemed not to lift a finger against you, even as its homeworld was laid to waste . . . Doesn’t sound like war to me.”

Wells thought he noticed a hint of aggression in the unit’s eyes. Never before had an AI of any kind lifted a hand against a human; the idea was preposterous. Even so, it obviously needed some type of cognitive function repair. Possibly affected by the crash, or maybe faulty packaging. Wells would have liked to just dispose of the unit now that his medical status was nearly green. Though he still had no legs.

“Let’s get back to work, Unit, I don’t wish to waste time.”

Goal one: Head for the settlement. They would have access to the equipment needed to make temporary prosthetics and a communication scope so he could transmit a mission update to his superiors and get an evac. The fact that he was there because of a loss of contact suggested the latter would be

inoperable. Wells reserved the right to hope.

“Unit, do you have intel on the settlement?”

“I’d prefer if you called me Adam.” The android looked at him with stern, cold eyes.

“And I’d prefer Sir or Commander. Answer the question, ADOM.” Impossible. An AI could not ignore a human request, let alone name itself. Yes. It would need to be dismantled if not before evac, immediately after.

The unit’s eye twitched as if stressed.

“Yes . . . all settlers are dead, no trace. The scope is a melted heap of scrap, but the shuttle is in perfect order.” The unit then raised an eyebrow. “That scope, that was a nice little piece of tech, eh? The ability to communicate instantaneously across light-years. Remind me, how did you humans get your hands on such a thing?”

What the hell was this? Was it trying to make conversation or malfunctioning? “You may need to run a system check on yourself.”

Turning to face the sealed entrance, the unit softly said, “No, I’m in great shape . . . Ugh. Obviously, I’m talking about the ‘Grays’ you people called them; yet another life-form you wiped from the universe. The start of your *‘great advances?’* Man, the prizes from that conquest! Am I right? You’re probably still reverse engineering their legacy.”

Wells knew it was a great moment in history. Once, long long ago, the little gray men invaded earth, apparently planetless themselves. Heroes like his ancestors had to fight with cunning to wipe them out, saving humanity. Evil things that wanted earth for themselves with no second thought to the primitive beings that lived on it. Their underestimation of humans’ propensity for war was their demise. Humankind eradicated

the invaders quickly with few casualties. The technology realized from it set humanity onto such exponential advances in science that they could do the unimaginable. It was the start of the space age.

An image of his grandfather's proud smile the day Wells told him he was following in his footsteps and had joined the forces edged its way into his thoughts. Still half lost in the memory, Wells nodded to the ADOM. "It surely was great."

The android turned to face him again, slumping its shoulders. "It was what it was."

There was a pause between them. ADOM looked inanimate again before it finally spoke. "So I take it you'd like to get to the shuttle and leave this place, right?"

"Yes, do you have a solution?" Wells nodded toward the thing waiting outside.

Squatting in front of him now, the ADOM replied, "I'm pretty sure I can make it by leaping erratically in random directions. I have reason to believe they need several moments to aim, or it might at least confuse them."

This was good news, the unit could carry him easily.

But then it continued, "Unfortunately, I could only do this at top speed. Carrying you, I would make it to my fourth jump before they adjusted and caught me."

"They?"

"Oh, ya!" It laughed. "There's like six of them now. A seventh will be here soon."

The ADOM's eyes did not match its laugh, and Wells's whole body tensed. Why wouldn't it have mentioned the beasts increasing numbers earlier?

"With the seventh, I begin to doubt my ability to even make it to the shuttle alone."

“So that idea is pointless. Why would you bring it up? I thought AI brains hated to waste time?” Wells’s temper rose, and he struggled to swallow it back down.

“Hah! Wasting time is all I’ve done for forty years . . . years!” It narrowed its eyes in accusation. “You know what that was like for me? forty years with only this!” Tapping its finger on its temple, its voice rang, “That’s like a million for a human!” The unit slammed its fist down hard on the floor, creating a hole through the durable plating. “Stuck in your own thoughts for that long,” it finished in a whisper.

If the unit could see Wells’s face through his visor it would have been privy to such a look of horror. Never before had he witnessed any hint of aggression from a cybernetic. It was not possible. Anger was not possible, let alone an action born of it. That was basic learning. An infant knew it as sure as they knew a ball would fall if dropped.

Already this ADOM, or whatever it was, had shown behavior beyond that which Wells knew it to be capable. Strange expression in its features that contradicted its words. Odd opinions about events in history. Just opinions in general that did not match any recorded reference it may have had access to in its so called trapped isolation. The opinions of a program were nothing more than a repetition of whatever information it had been exposed to.

Still . . .

An infant in zero gravity would not think a ball could fall, he supposed.

Wells didn’t think this AI was made different in these ways. It wasn’t a special program given to ADOMs, there would be no reason to provide it with such a thing. Although rare in recent years, AI humanoid units were not uncommon when

Wells was younger, so he had some experience. Enough to decide that this one was definitely unique. Unique in this sense meant malfunctioning, whether it was a fault in the program or package made no difference. If you had a malfunctioning tool it served no purpose. A broken tool could lead to injury.

Wells signaled his bracer to power up. Only one thing to do with a broken tool.

An icon appeared on his visor—an error in the energy charge to his bracer.

Keeping one eye on the unit, who was again motionless and facing the wall, Wells clicked on the error details.

Unknown.

Again. Click.

Unknown.

Impossible. His weapon was connected directly to his uplink. It could receive power from both it or his suit. The thing was basically part of his uplink and his uplink was part of him. It would be as if he couldn't move his hand. He was at a loss. There was no procedure for an error, not while his bracer still existed undamaged. The technology was flawless, the main prize from his grandfather's war. He tried to think of a solution to the bracer's errors, but gave up. It was beyond him.

Remembering the unit's remarks about the Prabneet suit, Wells wondered briefly what ridiculous name the ADOM would give the uplink.

What was that species' name? He should know from history classes. His grandfather called them bugs, but surely they had a real name. What was it—?

"They didn't even have a name!"

"What! Who?" He nearly choked on the words.

“Can you imagine a species of sentient beings, just getting started in this galaxy, and the first thing they encounter is you?! And poof that’s it . . . done—never to be remembered, only by academics reading about their biology from some historical autopsy report!”

The ADOM sobbed even though it was incapable of tears. “By all accounts, they greeted you with open arms. How unfortunate that they came in contact with the *smartest* little predator.”

Wells couldn’t stand the ADOM’s perversity any longer. “Hey! Those—”

“Those bug-eyed bastards didn’t know who they were messin’ with?” ADOM cocked its head to the side at an unsettling angle that revealed its non-humanity “. . . a sentiment I at least partially agree with.”

Bile rose in Wells’s throat, and he couldn’t catch his next breath. His grandfather’s words sounded polluted coming from the cyborg’s mouth. “Wha—how . . . ? Unit! Are you reading my thoughts?”

He reinitiated charging to his bracer only to be met by the same error.

“What the—? Reading? Oh boy, no, that would be silly. Have you been writing them down for me?” It paused as if expecting a laugh. Not receiving one, it turned somber and continued, “Mmm, how should I say this . . .” It placed a finger on its chin as if in contemplation. “I’m *thinking* your thoughts, more like.”

Wells considered this and decided the notion was not possible. But those words . . . Why those specific words?

“Ya, it is. I’ve been inside your uplink since you first powered on my pod four decades back. I’ve been inside the thoughts of

countless humans since then. So thank you, I guess.”

“No. No. Uplinks don’t do that.”

“Lookit. They’re not made to, but after an eternity in your own head you start to figure stuff out, ya know? After learning the available history on the life-form you plundered your tech from, it was pretty easy to guess the appropriate tweak to broadcast your mind to this.” It pointed again to its temple.

Click click on his bracer’s icon.

Error. error.

“Stop please, I deactivated your weapon. It was the first thing I did. I don’t trust you, given your human record.”

“I order you to shut down. I, as commander . . .”

“Obviously, that’s not gonna work, man—Shit!” It jumped to its feet and looked at the entrance as if it had heard something.

The unit’s sudden movement caused a full-body twitch in Wells. Funny how he felt this twitch down to his toes that no longer existed.

That was it. The ADOM had finished its breakdown and was to strike him. His heart rate flashed alarmingly quick on his bios. Did he seriously believe he would be the first-ever murder victim of an AI unit?

“Please Adam, I nee—”

“Shut up!” It screamed with such volume that it rattled the walls. ADOM turned to face him in triumph, but it seemed to Wells it was not because of the fear it inspired. “Don’t you think it odd that there was probably more human death here with these wild things than any other alien encounter? I did, but I get it now. All those magnificent species you deleted from existence . . . the Hullioot were smart; the Grays were refined; your *bugs*”—he spat out the word like he had choked

on it—"were peaceful to its *true* extent, not the peace you think you know. That pause before more war. Those beings had no concept of violence or malevolence, the idea as alien to them as fingers on a hand . . .

"*That's* how you won. These things out here are wild, and that's what it takes to beat a human, I think."

"Adam, please . . ." Wells squeezed his eyes shut, trying to form a solution.

"No. Think about this. I have for a long time."

He opened his eyes to see the ADOM kneeling before him again. It reached down to his thigh, its hand comforting. Wells looked into its face and saw such a sincere sorrow it made him relax slightly. The ADOM stared into his visor.

It whispered, "I'm truly sorry. I know you only do what you do because it's what you do. Even when you have nothing to kill, you all simply turn to each other. It's funny, the only thing in the last century that's killed more humans than that wild thing out there is the wild thing in here."

The android stood, staring down at him. "I'm sorry if my scream earlier startled you, but I wanted to be sure they could hear. And yup, they can." The ADOM walked to the far wall, opposite the entrance. Gently placing its ear to the metal, it tapped its knuckle in a few random spots.

"What are you doing, Adam?" Desperately, he added, "We should figure a way out of here."

It gave a heavy sigh. "Thanks for using my name, even if only as a ploy. I'm going to turn off your uplink now. Just another thing I've learned. You're going to feel everything once it shuts down. If you're here screaming, they won't be interested in me when I slip out the back."

"Wait! What!?"

“I’m sorry . . . truly.”

A shock of feeling blasted over him. White pain blinded Wells as his uplink shut off. A scream as before flooded his helmet as every feeling of pain shot through him and erupted from his mouth, bursting through his senses like water through a faulty dam. There were no curses or conscience, all washed away by the white burning light of it. Wells could not see the ADOM break through the wall and escape. Would never know how it smiled at his screams or how it contemplated that smile’s meaning.

His missing legs screamed along with him. Shaking and twitching. The blinding light faded just enough for him to see the entrance’s panel bending as something cautiously tried to push its way in. As tears threatened to fog his sight again, Wells noticed his own little icon—a circle spinning above it.