



Epilogue

Dou wake up, groggy. You remember a strange flash... then another nightmare. The needle again, and the man whose eyes have seen too much.

You're not on the barren planet anymore, because it's floating above your head. You must be standing on the smaller world that orbits it – somehow. Your suit hasn't been breached, fortunately.

You turn around and stifle a gasp. A dried-out human body lies motionless in the grey dust. A woman, you think. She is wearing some kind of grey, body-length suit. Long, dark hair is splayed out around her head. From the gruesome state of her face, she's been here for a long time.

The face of the man from your nightmares crosses your mind, and whispers... “Hale. So, she teleported herself from Chichen Itza to the moon when we were fighting over the device, three years ago. It's fortunate I didn't go with her –”

Another flash fills your vision, removing the man from your thoughts. Your three companions are suddenly standing in front of you, but before you can speak, a sharp pain pierces your mind.

The nightmare man's face appears again, mouth contorted in horror. And then your world shatters.

You're in two places at once. You're standing in the dust with your crew – the moon? – and you're also thrashing against your bonds on a wooden table, kicking out at your grizzly captor –

One of your pairs of eyes sees Tif move toward you, a strange device clasped in one hand. “We're getting out of here,” she says.

“No!” screams the nightmare man. One hand, pale white, lets go of the amulet hanging from his neck. “Not while it's unstable!” But it's too late. Tif activates the device.

Everything goes black.

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Faegan opens her eyes, bewildered, sitting in the cockpit of the Freighter. Her mind tries to make sense of what just happened, and gives up.

But she's sitting at the controls, again. Just after the first flash. Waiting to hear from Tif, or Wentworth, or Captain Elite. Wondering where they went...

Thinking about leaving them behind.

She grimaces. She's absolutely leaving them behind. You don't get a second chance like this every day.



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She kicks the Freighter into action, and flees the ruined planet.

Faegan never thought about the Machine, or Earth, again.

* * *

You open your eyes, and reflexively test your eight limbs are still working. Yes – still there, and still bending at all three joints.

You cast off your custom-made suit and dump it on the floor before taking in your new surroundings. You're in a dimly lit room, filled with cabinets and old paper. Literal paper.

You sense another spacetime distortion, and guess what's happened.

You spin around, tail knocking over several stacks of thick paper boxes. Behind you, you recognise Captain Elite, strapped down to a table. Near him, a grey-haired man in a uniform mutters to himself, shaking his head, hands trembling as they touch something tied around his neck. Your acute senses tell you that whatever this man is holding is partially responsible for your current situation.

You stomp on over and cast the man aside easily. He tumbles over, face drained of blood.

Captain Elite is watching you. "Thanks, Wentworth."

You try a smile, but it doesn't come easily right now. "This is your home." You slice the Captain's bonds effortlessly.

Elite sits up, eyes bleary. "I think so. He said he was anchoring me in the future. Injected me with something to mess up my memories."

You pick up the discarded needle. The scent of the toxic traces inside is almost overpowering, so you throw it away.

"Memories won't come back," you say heavily.

Elite nods slowly. "I know. I'm essentially no less from the future than you, Wentworth."

"Better use my real name now."

The Captain laughs. "You know I can't pronounce it."

"It's easy. Plugh."

Elite nods again. "All right, Plugh."



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Suddenly, you notice something unusual about the pathetic man cowering on the floor. “This isn’t a natural form.”

Captain Elite frowns and stands up, with some difficulty. “A disguise?”

Already, the man is losing control over his shapeshifted form. Another face appears. You chatter loudly, and Elite gasps...

* * *

Captain Gem farewells her crew at the door of the inn, and says goodnight. The journey to Yorovash will be long, and they all need a good night’s rest.

As she makes her way back home, an unusual cry from a side alley catches her attention. Eyebrows raised, she stops, draws her sword, and peers into the shadows.

A woman is lying on the ground, crawling her way towards the main street. She is clothed in a bizarre orange full-body garment you don’t recognise – or at least, what’s left of it. It’s been torn to shreds, and is damp with patches of blood.

Still cautious, you move towards her. “What happened to you?”

She raises her head, painfully. She looks barely thirty, with exotic short blue hair draped over pale shoulders. “Don’t know.”

You stifle a gasp as you notice the thorns protruding from her ruined clothing. “You have needletree marks all over you. Who are you? You look like you fell into a needletree from the sky or something.”

“Can’t remember,” she croaks. “Just... sting.”

You sigh. “All right, ‘Sting.’ I’ll fix you up.”

Gem helps the injured woman to her feet. Some kind of device is clutched in her hands. “What’s that you’ve got?”

The woman looks down at it. “I don’t know.”

Gem shrugs, and turns back to the street. The woman hesitates for a moment, then smashes her in the back of the head with the machine.

A minute later, someone who looks just like Captain Gem edges cautiously out of the alley. She straightens her hat, looks up and down the street, and strides off confidently into the darkness.



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This specimen begins as a small, round, hollowed-out trunk with a single horizontal branch protruding lopsidedly from its top. Its adult form doubles in height, retaining only the top branch - the trunk splits and recedes completely on one side, and buckles angularly on the other, as a new branch protrudes from its base and lays flat on the earth.

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