Concepts of Consciousness

by ArthurTheAndroid (CaptainCrozier)

Summary

It is 61 years since Jim Preston woke up from hibernation and 4 since he and Aurora Lane died leaving behind their home, their farm and their chickens as well as Arthur the Android. As the Starship Avalon continues to make its endless way to the Homestead II colony another Passenger finds herself awake and alone. Dr Claire Monroe, expert in Artificial Intelligence and renowned researcher in nanorobotics and synthetic consciousness, finds herself with 30 years to kill and only a version 3.2 I-Serve Apple Bar-Tender (Lite) Model for company. All well and good... But something has happened to Arthur in the intervening years. As Claire come to terms with her isolation and a bleak looking future, she slowly discovers that the friendly robot has broken his programming, and the consequences for her are life changing.

'To be nothing all over again. Standing motionless and silent in an unlit bar, tracking each slow moment until someone new awoke to bring you light and purpose. Claire’s mind
cleared as she watched him and slowly she pieced the truth together. His strange turns of phrase. His idiosyncratic behaviour. His programming, altered over time.

Oh, Arthur. Did they do this to you and then leave you behind?’

Notes

This is the most self indulgent fic I've ever written. I apologise. I adore Arthur and want an android all of my own. So I wrote this scenario and then some feelings happened and it turned into a whole Thing.
Strange business. Waking up on a starship, chatting to a friendly holograph as you heaved yourself out of your pod, obediently following its directions to your Silver Class quarters, swiping your tag, collecting your suitcase, downing fluids as instructed, carefully going through the allocated steps of Waking Up, (including oddly, going back to sleep again because you’re so exhausted from all that being unconscious), and then getting ready to Meet and Greet the other engineers, medics and nanopsych technicians who would make up your Educational Group for the next four months of Learning how to Build a Planet. Go here, do that, press this button. Made you wonder who the automatons really were.

Last time she had checked Claire had been human. A thirty-five year old human saying good bye to her few friends back on Earth before sealing herself off in a hibernation pod for a journey lasing one hundred and twenty years to a colony planet named Homestead 2. Now, technically she was still human but closer to one hundred and fifty-five years old, which, she supposed, could excuse the grey hair she found staring back at her from the cabin mirror right now. Just the one, but she was sure it hadn’t been there when she got knocked out. She was however, looking pretty good for over a century, and the cheerful hologram girl had given her a clean bill of health so…

… here she was. Waiting to start life over again like a wide-eyed child, but a child with several degrees in medicine, physics, neuronanobotics and artificial intelligences. A child with no parents or family to keep her in line but a whole lot to bring to a developing society. Most of it was packed away in storage until they arrived, but when her robots took their first shaky steps upon new and uncharted soils they would do a good deal of the heavy lifting for the colonists. Claire considered herself a modern day and slightly better understood Dr Frankenstein, but instead of bits of people sewn together, she could bring life to Things made of plastics and wires and precious metals. Her projects, her creations, would aid and assist a growing world and as they went about their business and she would continue her research.

It was just such a shame she had to go through these four introductory months first. Androids were one thing and there wasn’t a robot in the universe she couldn’t converse with from the most highly developed AI’s of her experiments, to the bot that hoovered the lab, but people, actual living human beings, well, they were something she preferred to study from afar rather than interact with directly. She understood the theories, the psychology, the chemicals that worked inside the brain better than anyone as she replicated and magnified their abilities in androids, but when it came down to human interaction she failed. Miserably. Always.

And there were 5000 people on this ship. 5000 keen colonial passengers wanting to make new friends and influence them. 5000 enthusiastic sociable humans waiting just outside the cabin’s sliding door. Claire groaned in front of the mirror. After almost twenty-four hours of making excuses she realised she really did have to leave the confines of her room or she may actually starve to death and leaving meant dealing with People.

She addressed the hologram behind her.

‘OK, direct me to the canteen.’

‘Ground floor concourse,’ it smiled and flashed up a map of the enormous ship. A map filled with corridors and open spaces that would be teeming with other freshly awoken passengers and crew.

‘Does it do take-away?’ Claire said hopefully.
‘No,’ said the hologram and grinned.

‘Thanks a bunch.’

There was nobody in the corridor except the floor polishing bot. Claire said hello. It bleeped at her merrily with the same three notes of a major key that her Clean-Bot used at home. She felt a little better.

The elevator was mercifully empty too, so she did as instructed by the reassuringly robotic voice and strapped herself in before shooting right and down (or maybe it was up and left, as who knew which way was which this far out in space) and coming to a surprisingly rapid halt.

The doors slid open.

‘Ground Concourse,’ the voice announced.

A chicken ran past her feet and Claire screamed.

‘What the….’

Squauwk!

Claire blinked and looked past a bevvy of poultry to an enormous tree, some sort of artisan wooden hut on an upper landing and a number of rogue serving bots cruising aimlessly between unseen points above her. There wasn’t a single person to be seen which was at once a huge relief and slightly worrying.

‘Um…’ she said and chewed her lip.

Now Claire had seen plans of the Avalon long before it set off. Her work had been intrinsic to many of the AIs caring for ship before its passengers and crew woke, and she knew the serving bots should be inside the restaurants and further on, in the cinemas and bowling alleys working as attendants. They would be dotted about what passed for a Mall. There would be other bots maintaining electricals and spot cleaning. She expected to see bots. She knew about bots. But what she also knew was these bots were out of their areas, pushing the limits of their job descriptions and, reluctantly leaving bots to one side for a moment, quite frankly that tree shouldn’t be there.

‘Something’s gone wrong,’ she said. ‘Not sure what yet….’ She stepped over a mass of ivy and picked her way down the concourse a little, scattering more feral looking chickens. Her heart was skipping but she quickly realised it wasn’t the disturbing trip-trap of last night’s anxiety as she had contemplated having to introduce herself to her fellow passengers. No, this was the kind of thrill she got when dealing with her work. This was an AI related buzz. Because if those bots had broken their programming in any way, if they had decided to randomly plant vegetation and raise chickens as a means of passing the time for the last century. If they had shown any kind of independent thinking then that could mean…

…. Well that could be a dream come true. True consciousness. True awareness. Learning and development within an entirely synthetic brain. Evolution! And what was evolution, but life itself, the AIs, changing and thriving would be alive. The repercussions, the implications were…. 

‘Ow!’ she hissed. Beneath the grass a cold lump of metal stubbed her toe. On closer inspection a tiny broken bot. Lifeless. Lightless. Unresponsive. ‘Of course, maybe they just malfunctioned and things got out of hand,’ she sighed and raised her eyes to the upper landing where a serving bot was
repeatedly tapping against a wall just shy of a door. Thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk… judging by the dent in the archway it had probably been doing it for months. Her heart sank a bit but then the scientist in her rallied. No conclusions yet.

She needed more information.

Claire looked down the concourse to the bar. There should be an Android in there. Unless it had wandered off. And it should be a little more sophisticated than the serving bots. At the very least it could give her a cursory outline of what had happened around her while she waited for everyone else to wake up.

And a drink wouldn’t go amiss.

‘Ah, good morning, what can I get you?’

‘You do cocktails, right?’

‘Not usually at 8am, Doctor.’

Claire stared at the bar-droid with the strangely clipped accent and then let her face suddenly relax.

‘Oh… You have our data files uploaded, you know who I am.’

‘Of course,’ the droid smiled, brilliant and white. ‘You are Doctor Claire Monroe, Professor of Advanced Nanorobotics, specialist interests include Concepts of Consciousness and Neuronanophysiology.’

‘Make me a Manhattan.’

‘Certainly, Doctor, and may I add that it is a privilege to serve you, intrinsic as you were to my own creation.’ It zipped between bottles and poured measures.

‘I tweaked a few bits in your head that’s all. Well not your head specifically, but heads… in general, android heads.’

‘I believe you take the credit for the improved social interactions attributed to the version 3.8 neurosynthetic patch.’ Zip, spin. It shook the cocktail efficiently.

‘Yeah, that sort of area. So you are…?’ she prompted, curious as to how it would respond.

‘A Version 3.2 Apple I-Serve, Bar Tender (Lite) model…’

‘Not your model type, I know that, what’s your name? They gave you a name, right? When you were booted up?’

‘Oh, of course, Doctor! My name is Arthur,’ that bright smile again, it was almost painful.

‘Nice to meet you, Arthur. You can stop calling me Doctor now. Call me Claire,’ she added for clarity. Androids could be incredibly dense at times.

‘Claire,’ Arthur said setting the finished Manhattan before her. ‘So lovely to see another one awake, it’s been terribly quiet since Jim and Aurora went away and I don’t believe we are quite due to arrive yet at Homestead.’
Claire raised her head, ‘We…. Aren’t? Wait. Went… away? Who are Jim and Aurora?’

‘The first ones to wake up. Sixty-one years ago, around thirty years after we set off from Earth.’

Claire scrabbled to do the maths. ‘What?’

Arthur began polishing an already shiny glass.

‘They were here a long time,’ he mused, ‘Built a house,’ he nodded out of the bar entrance in the general direction of the concourse, though nothing could really be seen from where Claire sat. ‘They told me all about it, they did so like to pop in here for a chat. Of course, they did less of that towards the end.’

Thirty, plus sixty one, wait, that’s too early, she was too early, there were nearly three decades still to go on this trip… and where was everyone else? Claire juggled her rising panic with the sound of Arthur’s easy speech. What did he say?

‘The end?’ Claire echoed.

Arthur set the glass down and immediately plucked up another. ‘Everyone must die, Claire,’ he said.

‘Die?’

‘Why, yes, they were over eighty.’

‘Jim and…. Arthur. Jim and Aurora died on the ship?’

He paused and raised his perfectly define brows in response. Yes, his expression read. I just said that.

‘When did they die?’ Claire asked.

‘Four years, three months and six days ago.’

‘Together?’

‘Yes. I believe one could not bear to be without the other, after all that time.’ The fingers of his right hand twitched briefly against the glass he held and his features went blank. Claire frowned at the gesture then quickly sank back into abject panic. She took a sip of the drink that turned into a gulp. You’re a scientist, work it out, piece it together.

‘Arthur, I need to ask some more questions, I’m not sure if you will have all the answers, but just do your best.’

He twitched back into focus, the mask of his face forming another smile. Claire watched as Arthur leaned across the bar and propped himself on his palms, the joints of his lower trestle whirling at the odd angle. She saw him bend where his waist ought to have been, above the contraption that ought to have been legs, except the Avalon procurement team were apparently too cheap to install the recommended upgrade on purchase. Great, she thought hysterically, I’m alone on board a starship thirty years out from our destination with half a robot.

‘I think you’ll find I’m rather well equipped,’ Arthur said smoothly, contrary to her wandering thoughts about his missing limbs, ‘Aurora wrote a book, well more of a diary really, I have it uploaded. Oh, and plenty of other information from their time here, for posterity, Jim said. I even
have recordings of the pair of them and some they made themselves of their projects. That’s how I
know all about the house, I can’t actually see it from here, but I have the footage,’ he leaned back
assuredly and patted the host of memory chips attached to his control panel at Missing Hip height.
Android had perfect recall and this could be an area of service he could feel confident in. He
resumed merrily polishing a glass. ‘Go ahead, Claire, ask away,’ he intoned happily, ‘anything you
like. Happy to help.’

Arthur winked and she did a double take. Claire’s mouth opened at the unrobot like gesture. Then
she shut it again. OK. Perhaps his circuits weren’t in the best of nick but at least he seems grossly
functional.

She could have asked what year it was. Or why the others had woken up so long ago. Or why, as
she was beginning to suspect, nobody else had since or would any time soon. Or what the hell was
in the Manhattan she was drinking. But instead, the nanorobotic expert was true to her calling and
after a moment of studying Arthur’s dark hair and multicoloured eyes, easy brilliant smile and the
dimples someone had thought to create around it, she asked something completely different.

‘What happened to your head?’

He paused, smile fading, and his eyes flicked up to where the synthetic skin was glued back into
place over the cranial plate. It was ragged and had the appearance of a badly closed scar. Her inner
AI technician was rebelling at the sight. She had supplies in storage she could use to tidy that just
nicely and for some strange reason the idea niggled at her until it wound up quite high on her list of
priorities. Arthur lifted one hand and let his fingers trace the crooked line on his brow, his eyes
flicking right as he accessed the memory.

‘Ah,’ he said, scooting backwards to his bottles, ‘Allow me to mix you another? It’s quite a tale.’
Something about his voice reminded her of home. The accent for one, a clipped English
enunciation that made her think of Oxford bars in her early university days. Or perhaps it reminded
her of members of her family, her father? An uncle? She struggled to pin the association on another
human being. Her relationships with people had never been exactly comforting. Arthur’s soothing
voice was familiar in other ways. It was familiar because it belonged to a robot.

There were only so many versions of voice synths available for the Bar Tender Model and
associated versions, and it turned out Arthur had been equipped with one of the deeper registers. In
all her years of work with AI she had probably listened to that particular frequency more than the
others. The high-pitched ones got irritating after a while and she had had to plough through hours
of android voice files while programming and experimenting with the equipment.

In the daytime she fine-tuned responses in standard issue models made to serve drinks and provide
basic companionship, fed them with generic conversational skills and equally generic suggestions
and advice made to make a person feel like they were giving them rapt attention and personalised
wisdom - like sophisticated talking tarot cards. Such was the bread and butter of Claire’s job, the
work that funded the laboratory. Come the evening however, with her daytime tasks completed,
she would try and further her research into artificial consciousness through a constant back and
forth dialogue with an animatronic head she called Burt. Arthur reminded her of home, because he
reminded her of long nights in her lab, prodding about in synthetic brains and asking how robots
‘felt’ about ethical dilemmas, hypothetical conundrums and scenarios designed to induce states of
emotion. Arthur reminded her of Burt, but Burt was probably in a museum by now, well and truly
out of date and primitive.

Claire realised somewhere around the the fourth drink that she was losing the thread of Arthur’s
story, thinking about Burt and her lab and how many years had passed in silent stasis since she had
seen either. She felt decidedly fuzzy around the edges and was probably drunk. She only noticed
however when Arthur fell silent and looked at her appraisingly.

‘Oh dear. May I advise you eat something?’ he said. Stupid bar tender programme had obviously
cut in over the story he was telling.

Claire scrubbed at her face and sat up straight on the barstool. ‘I’m good, I’m good. You were
saying?’

He raised an eyebrow and produced a bowl of mixed nuts from under the bar. He prodded it
towards her with one hand.

‘Alternatively there is the canteen,’ he inclined his head to left and glance at the door.

‘This is fine,’ Claire answered. She had little inclination to move, the great yawning void of the
ship at her back pressing her more firmly into Arthur’s cosy drinking establishment.

‘Then allow me to get you some coffee,’ he said.

‘I didn’t ask for any coffee,’ Claire said, mildly irritated.

‘I try to anticipate my customer’s needs,’ Arthur scooted smoothly along the bar and turned to
prepare something non-alcoholic and highly caffeinated for his only customer.

‘This is part of your original programming,’ Claire sighed, ‘I’m going to be forced to drink coffee
and eat snacks to appease you before you tell me anything more, right?’ she slumped forward onto her elbows and picked at some peanuts. She caught the slight twitch of his smile but did not respond. What’s more appeared, as far as robots could, to choose not to. Nice work, whoever programmed this one, he had a certain charm. Claire was both amused and indignant. ‘Oi, don’t ignore me!’ she laughed.

Arthur turned graciously and oozed back to the bar where Claire demonstratively ate a peanut. He nodded approvingly. Claire rolled her eyes at him. The bastard actually smirked.

‘Nice touch,’ she muttered to the long dead programmer.

‘Where was I?’ Arthur said conversationally despite his perfect memory. He slid towards her with the coffee.

‘Jim and Aurora fixed the problem with the ship…’

‘Yes, that’s right. Drink that,’ he prompted with a raised brow. Claire sipped and grimaced at the bitter taste, certain he would not continue until she made the effort to sober up. Arthur scooted backwards and located a little bowl. ‘They did fix the problem and then they came and fixed me,’ he went on glancing up at his brow with a grin, ‘well, best they could and things settled into a bit of a routine after that.’

‘And nobody else woke up?’

‘Not until you did, and you’re early. Twenty nine years early,’ Arthur said scooting back again and popping the bowl at her side.

‘Ugh, twenty-nine years?’ Claire said, rising suspicions confirmed. Stuff had gone wrong. Specifically her pod. Somehow.

‘Do you want sugar in that?’

‘Please.’

‘Good for the shock,’ Arthur dumped two lumps into her cup and stirred before pressing it back to her. ‘Don’t worry. Jim and Aurora were quite rattled when they woke. You’ll adjust.’

‘How did that work out for them? The adjusting?’

‘Undoubtedly it had its… difficulties’ Arthur said folding and refolding the cloth he used for the glasses. ‘Especially for Aurora, I think, given her circumstances…’

‘Damn straight,’ Claire said. ‘I still can’t wrap my head around that. He woke her deliberately?’

Arthur folded the cloth again. ‘Yes.’

‘So selfish. She could be alive now. Sleeping now. Waiting to start again on Homestead 2, but he took all that from her.’

Arthur hovered silently. Claire forced herself to calm down again. They had already been through this and rather disappointingly Arthur had not risen to the ethical debate proving once again that androids remained a long way off from developing conscience or consciousness.

‘Sorry, I know, I know… you explained why he did it, why he felt he had to, and maybe if he hadn’t, maybe the whole ship would have blown up without them to repair it and we would all be
gone but…. It’s still so hard to imagine how she must have felt finding out. She trusted him.’

‘It was very hard for her and for him,’ Arthur admitted flatly. ‘But after a spell, with just the two of them, and all that time ahead, they made a go of it.’

‘Made a go of it?’ Claire queried. It was not a phrase she had heard an android use before, too colloquial, too vague. Most robots would question what exactly it meant.

‘Yes,’ Arthur said and blinked. ‘Jim and Aurora built their house together and later they brought a few animals out of hibernation. Chickens mainly….’

‘I saw those… nearly fell over one.’

‘… and some flora too. Planted some trees, laid a lawn, sowed some crops. Quite the little cottage industry they had, Jim was very proud of it. Fresh vegetables, carrots, lettuce, potatoes, and some fruits….’

‘All taken out of storage?’ Claire said before he could start listing individual fruit trees.

‘Plenty to go around, enough animals and vegetables to start Homestead you see,’ Arthur said.

‘But why? The ship has everything they could need at the touch of a button.’

Arthur looked at her and frowned. ‘They got tired of what was available on the menu. Jim said it was ‘too easy.’ Humans like change… a ‘challenge’ Jim said.’

Claire made a noise of agreement. Canteen food for decades would have driven her to plant a carrot or two as well.

‘Of course, Aurora was more creative,’ Arthur commented, ‘With her writing, and with art. She liked to watch things grow. Nurture them. If she couldn’t create she wasn’t happy. A very human thing, no?’ he cocked his head at Claire slightly.

‘They didn’t have any kids?’ she asked. ‘You said it was just the two of them all that time?’

‘No children.’

Claire wondered why, but did not press the matter, guessing it was not something the couple would discuss with the bar tending android. Perhaps it had never occurred to them to bring another life into such a bleak and isolated situation. Perhaps they had not been able to. Perhaps the malfunctioning pods had made it impossible somehow, altering their bodies just subtly enough to prevent conception. That was a deeply unpleasant thought if it was the case. 5000 people on board set to populate a planet and maybe something had gone wrong already, but it was Aurora and Jim she felt for most, living a life trapped with the walls of a spaceship, not seeing another living being, nobody to whom to pass their legacy, then simply winking out of existence. As much as she did not really enjoy the company of people, she was beginning to see its value from a new perspective. Jim and Aurora were gone. The only evidence of their existence an uploaded electronic journal and the synthetic memories of an android. And some loose chickens.

‘That’s… a shame,’ she said weakly, thought the word did not begin to cover it. It was tragic. There was no real happy ending for the couple no matter how well they adjusted. They had simply made the best of things. She caught Arthur watching her closely. ‘At least they had you for company,’ she said.

‘I did my best,’ Arthur said echoing her sadness. ‘I hope I can do the same for you. Even if I am a
poor substitute for another human being.’

Claire scowled at him, it was an oddly self-deprecating statement for an AI. They were usually so full of their own advanced abilities. Robots were traditionally lacking in modesty of any kind, as they basically worked as walking adverts for their manufacturers. I’m a android, I’m fantastic in every way, you don’t need anything else, buy me.

‘I’m sure you meant a lot to them, Arthur,’ Claire said. ‘They would have come to need you very much and I’m grateful you’re here.’

Arthur’s eyes flicked up to meet hers briefly. He pressed his lips together in a sad smile and carried on folding his towel with an air of forced concentration. An avoidant gesture from a being that had no reason or impulse to avoid eye contact. She watched his eyes track left slightly as he looked away, watched his fingers methodically pick at the linen he held. Aimless motions. Entirely purposeless repetitive actions. Like the bot running into the archway in the concourse. A malfunction or….

‘What did you do when they were gone?’ she asked.

‘I… I waited here,’ he said, his eyes still on the cloth.

‘In standby mode?’

He looked up.

‘No I…’ he smiled shyly, ‘Just as I am now. I just…. Waited.’

‘For?’

‘Someone to wake up,’ he said simply. His lips twitched again, his cheeks dimpled, and then, again, he looked away, glitching subtly.

‘For four years?’

‘Yes.’

Claire imagined him standing by the bar, in the utter silence of the ship, watching the concourse beyond. He was never designed for more than a brief chat and a drinks order and yet Jim and Aurora had treated him like a friend, their closest and only confidante for over fifty years. He had no other focus, no other duty, they became his sole function and then, they died.

Death ought to be simple for a robot. To exist one moment and not the next, like the flicking of a switch, a fact that could not be questioned. All things must end. Suns set, people die, robots turn into scrap. Stark truths with no emotions. Burt wouldn’t have an issue processing Death.

But this android, this AI had bathed in human contact for half a century, learned more than Burt had ever had the chance to. Stilted conversations in the lab were nothing compared to the days and hours Arthur spent with Jim and Aurora, observing, learning, debating, sharing their friendship, watching their relationship grow. What effect might that have on a synthetic mind? All those hours of conversation, mundane and philosophical alike, the intimacy of friendship replacing simple duty. To be treated as an equal, to have his opinion sought. To be a source of comfort. To be treated like a person.

And then to be nothing all over again. Standing motionless and silent in an unlit bar, tracking each slow moment until someone new awoke to bring you light and purpose.
Claire’s mind cleared as she watched him and slowly she pieced the truth together. His strange
turns of phrase. His idiosyncratic behaviour. His programming, altered over time.

Oh, Arthur. Did they do this to you and then leave you behind?

‘You… You miss them, don’t you?’ Claire said quietly. ‘You miss Jim and Aurora? People?’

The questions seemed to disrupt his cognition as he scrabbled for the words to describe whatever it was that was going on in his artificial brain. Claire had seen it all before in her experiments, a point of scientific interest as she strived to find the key. Running tests and programmes trying to draw conclusions from Burt’s struggling synapses. Making him consider beyond his codes and memory banks, forcing him to think. It was frustrating and intriguing, and ultimately true consciousness eluded them both.

Arthur glitched again and shut his eyes. His lips tried to form words. He reset his posture and tried again, running aground on things he had no description for. Something twinged in Claire’s chest; empathy and guilt. For years she had tried to bring life to android brains, to have them respond outside of their programming, evolve and change and live, but watching Arthur now made her question her ambition. If any part of him was conscious then what he felt was pain and just how was an android supposed to define emotion when it isn’t sure what it feels or how?

‘I… Jim and Aurora were… It has been…’ he looked past her beyond the entry to the bar and wrestled out the words. ‘Empty. On the ship… on the concourse, dark… in…’ his eyes flicked right as the fluidity of his speech stumbled. He gripped the cloth hard. Desperately he forced out each syllable. ‘Inside…. Dark… Empty, inside…. Here.’

Arthur dragged his gaze back to meet Claire’s and she watched the copper and amber of his synthetic hazel eyes contract and widen subtly, pleading with her, blue and green and shining.

‘Empty,’ he said uncertainly. ‘Empty?’

He laid his palm across the centre of his chest, where a human heart might beat.

‘Lonely,’ Claire explained, ‘You feel lonely.’
It was inevitable really, that the android became the focus of her days. She didn’t want to think about the gravity of her situation, the long years stretching ahead, so she attached herself to the present and the familiar. As the evening of the third day approached Claire was seated on the bar, high enough so that she could look down into Arthur’s face, a leg on either side of his torso as he stood impassively against her. To her left a selection of synthetic substances designed to feel like skin. Balls of putty, pots of tacky glue and latex. To her right a number of brushes and palette knives designed to apply and sculpt, and a make-up palette of skin tone shades for the finishing touches. So much of her job had been technology, but back at the start, during an internship at an AI company while she studied, she had been a tech and part of her always would be. Creating androids was an art as well as a scientific skill.

She smoothed a thumb over his forehead and appraised her work.

‘You look younger,’ she said. Arthur looked up and blinked at her. She watched his dark pupils pulse in reaction to the lights above them.

‘I was not aware I looked old,’ he said.

Claire laughed, ‘Not old, if you were human you would be maybe, what, forty?’ she guessed.

‘Halfway through the average human lifespan,’ he commented.

‘Best years of your life, Arthur. By the time we are forty I think we know who we are, what we want.’

The corners of his mouth lifted pleasantly in response to her philosophy. ‘One year is very like the next, for me,’ he said.

Claire dipped a brush in a pale skin tone and began masking the fine edges of the newly repaired scar on his face.

‘Maybe it’s time that changed,’ she said. ‘Maybe you should mix it up a little, do something new?’

She blended the skin tone until the edges and old and new skin became indistinguishable, conscious all the while of his glittering eyes fixed on her own, grey-green today. The consistency of the Skin-Tech synthetic attracted heat from the atmosphere and where her fingers rested on his face felt disarmingly warm, quietly reassuring like the solid weight of his chest. Instead of removing her hands when she was done, she let them trace to his hairline as she inspected her work, framing his head in her palms. He felt soft. Almost human. It had been a good day, all in all, one that left her with a long neglected sense of fulfilment. Claire sighed.

‘It’s late, I think you are tired,’ Arthur said kindly.

‘A bit yes, I’ll come back tomorrow.’

‘That would be lovely.’

He didn’t move away. Claire stroked the dark hair at his temples in contemplation, reluctant to leave him and head back to her empty cabin.

‘Tomorrow,’ she repeated, ‘What do you think, Arthur? Anything you would like to do?’
'Live a bit,’ he said. She smiled.

Yes, it had been a good day.

Claire was a hard worker. A workaholic. An unhealthy obsessive, but when asked she would describe herself as lazy. She enjoyed the idea of doing nothing, would revel in it for a few days at a time, but inevitably by the end of any given weekend she was champing at the bit to get back to her job. So, on that morning of the third day after she woke up on board the *Avalon*, she had decided she was bored and things had just developed from there.

Since her awakening Arthur had been helpfully directing her towards various occupations; cinemas and bowling alleys, but she didn’t spend much time there. She had sampled a few meals in the restaurants and caught up on more sleep, but she always ended up wandering back to the bar. Partly out of the desire to speak to someone, and partly because after Arthur’s curious confession about feeling empty she didn’t have the heart to leave him on his own.

The first night she could have sworn he looked forlorn when she took her leave of him at bedtime, and thereafter she would jerk awake to the image of him alone behind the bar. She knew she had bigger problems, but if she was honest they were pretty insurmountable. Jim and Aurora been forced to live out their years, and so would she. It wasn’t like they hadn’t had the time to exhaust every option to get their pods working again, right? She’d gone through it all with Arthur on day two, and concluded that if there was a way to go back into stasis Jim and Aurora would have found it and Arthur would have told her.

Having exhausted that alleyway for a potential scientific obsession to work towards, Claire defaulted to Artificial Intelligence to keep her occupied, and on day three, around noon, she had gone back to the bar, directly from the canteen where she had overridden the vending machines and snagged a Gold Level breakfast. Being a bot expert had some advantages and she was prepared to use them in a war on ennui and flavourless oatmeal. Perched on her regular stool opposite Arthur, Claire had been drinking something strong and making chit chat about the ship. It was all very pleasant and passed the time, but when she had found herself coaxing a cleaning bot over to the bar with some discarded peanut shells, she had to admit her plight and seek help.

‘God, I’m so bored, Arthur, entertain me.’

‘Have you tried the Dance Simulator?’

Claire shot Arthur a look. ‘Not my style,’ she said and chucked more peanut shells across his shiny floor. ‘Come and get it, Bob.’

Arthur leaned over the bar to watch the little robot hoover around her feet. ‘Bob?’ he said.

‘Always name my robots.’

Arthur cocked an eyebrow at her. ‘Bob it is,’ he conceded.
‘It’s very basic for a Clean Bot,’ Claire said with a slight slur, ‘Maybe I could upgrade it?’

‘Maybe,’ Arthur said doubtfully.

‘Give it a whole range of little tunes to play as it goes about its business.’

‘What for?’ looked at her blankly. ‘We have a jukebox if you want some music. Here!’ On the other side of the room the juke box sprang to life and David Bowie crooned his way through space. Christ, Space Oddity was depressing fare when you were almost sixty light years from Earth.

‘Just so it can express itself,’ Claire said, ‘you know communicate what kind of day it’s having.’

‘Do Clean Bots have bad days?’

‘Do you?’ she asked pertinently.

Arthur blinked and said nothing for a moment, his head jerking just slightly as his programming considered the question. Eventually he got back on track. ‘To whom would it communicate?’ he asked finally.

‘Me. You. Other bots.’

‘But they won’t be upgraded. They won’t understand it… him… Bob.’

‘Maybe I will do them too,’ Claire knocked back the Sea Breeze she was nursing. If she didn’t find a project soon she was going to develop an alcohol problem.

‘What for?’ Arthur said again. Claire sighed.

‘Because Arthur I need to do something. I need a favour.’

‘Oh?’ he said, and polished a glass. The Clean Bot finished its sweep and trundled out into the main concourse.

‘Let me fix your head,’ Claire said.

Arthur glanced at her in alarm. ‘My head?’

‘Not your actual head, just your… actual head I suppose, the scar on your forehead.’

‘Oh! That! I thought you meant my….’

‘Head, brain, synapses. No that wouldn’t be wise when I’ve had a few. But I could patch up that scar, make you good as new again. Can’t have you terrifying away the customers when they all wake up.’

‘Is it frightening?’ he asked, concerned. Claire snorted.

‘Have you read Frankenstein?’

‘I don’t do much reading,’ he said politely, ‘I have access to the films however, one moment, I can skim through...’

Claire pulled a face, ‘What?’ but in that second Arthur’s expression changed and he appeared to look within himself. She saw a vague flicker on his control panels as he disengaged from her and
engaged with…. Wait was he watching the movie? All of it? Right then and there?

‘Arthur!’

His eyes refocused. ‘Good heavens,’ he said as aghast as an android could be. ‘Do I look like Boris Karloff?’

Claire laughed.

‘No, Arthur it’s just a bit messy. I mean I think they did their best to fix you with what they had, but I have the right materials, the skin substitute and the epiglue. Let me fix it. You’ll never know there was ever any damage.’

‘But I will know. I will remember.’

‘Arthur, don’t be pedantic.’

‘It’s only superficial, please don’t trouble yourself.’

Claire pouted, ‘Please, it would give me a job. And I’m a bona fide AI tech…’

‘Oh yes I know, I’ve seen all your credentials, they are very impressive,’ he said with just a hint of sauce.

‘How do you even do that?’ she asked shaking her head at his efforts.

‘Do what?’

‘Flirt! Were you programmed to flirt? I thought that was only Companion bots, I don’t remember... I suppose its appropriate interaction for a bar tender. Anyway, next time I head back to my room I’ll request some more of my supplies from storage, get them sent up.’

‘Do you want me to request those now?’ Arthur said.

‘You?’

‘I have access to the mainframe, I could get them sent up. Won’t take a jiffy.’

‘A jiffy?’

He grinned. Ah, well that explained the movies. Arthur might be a bar tender model but he was still hooked up to the rest of the ship, all its resources, all its pathways, all its communication channels. Handy.

‘Ok, fine,’ Claire said, ‘Saves me trekking out to storage, wherever that is…’

Arthur opened his mouth.

‘… no don’t give me directions. Get a bot to bring a Life Image Maintenance Kit from my belongings um…..’

‘Your things are in Bay 47 level 19,’ Arthur supplied.

‘Ok, good, get onto that.’

‘Certainly,’ Arthurs eyes shifted right for a moment and a pattern of tiny green lights pulsed by his
Claire leaned closer to him and stared at the hastily patched laceration on his head. Should be simple enough. A little filler and concealer.

‘I’ll smooth out those wrinkles if you like, on your forehead.’

‘Well that would be lovely, I’m sure.’

‘I’m leaving the laughter lines though they quite suit you.’

‘How kind.’ His eyes crinkled to demonstrate them then Arthur scooped up her empty glass and glided down the bar. Claire swept some more nuts onto the floor and a Clean Bot came charging in. Beyond it somewhere a bird squawked. She wondered if it felt left out. She might take it some nuts later. Did chickens eat nuts? Find out soon enough.

‘I’m going to go mad here. Jim and Aurora had their crops, their chickens,’ she hiccoughed and covered her mouth embarrassed. ‘Stupid cocktail.’ Hiccough.

‘Jim and Aurora had fifty years of time to fill. You have been awake three days,’ Arthur said pointedly as he filled a glass with tonic water for her.

Claire glared at him. ‘I have a short attention span.’

He smirked. She glared at him harder. He passed her the soft drink to soothe her hiccoughs. He was irritating at times, but he did amuse, and every now and then surprise her. Most androids were so predictable, and they certainly never stretched to sarcastic. Perhaps she was attributing human emotion to a bunch of wires and chips too readily, but the more she thought about it the more she was certain that what he had described the other day was a kind of prototype loneliness. There was more to him that met the eye and for want of anything better to do she decided to investigate his potential as a Project. Fixing his scar was just the beginning and while she was waiting to do that she could poke about in his psyche.

‘Don’t you get bored, Arthur?’ she asked.

He stopped polishing a glass and looked at it for a moment. ‘I have a number of pre-set routines to keep me occupied,’ he said.

‘Don’t they get repetitive?’

‘They are repetitive. That is their nature. Is that bad?’

‘A person would get bored. Tired of doing the same thing over and over. Particularly for no good reason. Your glasses don’t even need polishing.’

‘People don’t like it if I just stand here, makes them feel awkward,’ he explained, ‘Trick of the trade, to look busy.’

‘But there’s nobody here. Well except me. And I know they don’t need polishing so…. Why don’t you stop?’ Claire looked at him levelly. ‘Stop and put the glass down.’

Arthur did as he was told. He folded his hands in front of him neatly. And stood. Claire waited. Her hiccoughs stopped. She watched a motor within his trestle whirr restlessly, saw a couple of lights blink below his waist. Interesting. An android should be able to happily stand and do nothing if ordered to do so but Arthur was not as passive as he appeared and she wondered how long he could stand the inactivity and her scrutiny.
‘You said you didn’t go into standby, after they died,’ she said after a minute or so.

‘That’s correct.’

‘You just waited.’

‘Yes.’

‘Here?’

‘Yes.’

Claire ran her eye along the bar to the gap at the end and then out into the room. Arthur was free standing, nothing to block his way.

‘You never…. Left the bar?’

‘Leaving the bar is not part of my role,’ he said and looked left.

‘That’s not what I asked.’

Arthur looked down at the glass he had set aside minutes before. His right hand twitched.

‘You want to polish it don’t you?’ Claire said.


‘You want to do something,’ Claire observed. Arthur covered his right hand with his left and held it against his stomach. The lights on the trestle blinked again. She heard a faint click. ‘How do you spend your time when I’m not here, Arthur? When Jim and Aurora weren’t here? You weren’t on standby, your pathways were still active, what did you do with all those hours?’

He looked at her. ‘I… ran scenarios,’ he said. His hand twitched again and she saw a reflex in his jaw as he suppressed the movement.

‘Of…’ she prompted.

‘I…’ he glanced desperately at the glass. If androids could sweat, he would.

‘Of?’

‘The crew and passengers waking up,’ he said weakly. ‘Of what would happen when they did.’

Claire challenged him to look at her and finally he did. ‘You ran through the post hibernation sequences, the protocols for everyone waking up? What to expect? Crew first, then first class passengers, that sort of thing?’

‘I… no… I… not the protocols. I… ran through the personal files of each passenger and I…’ he glitched. Now she was getting to it.

‘Yes, Arthur what did you do with that information?’

‘I..’ glitch, ‘I… speculated.’

‘Speculated?’
‘What it might be like…’

‘Might be? You… Imagined what might happen as opposed to predicted according to protocol?’

Arthur’s eyes flicked up to her. ‘Yes. Imagined. I imagined passengers waking early. I used their profiles to… imagine… how they might respond. What they might do or say.’

Wow, all right she was not expecting that. ‘Oh my God,’ Claire breathed.

‘Is that wrong?’ he looked worried.

‘No, Arthur, not wrong just... clever, very, very clever.’ And unprecedented, she thought, unheard of. Like the loneliness. Arthur lingered uncomfortably awaiting her next question or command. She watched his shoulders, tense in his burgundy suit jacket, and the nervous smile that was forming on his lips. He glanced at his glass again.

‘You can polish that now,’ she said.

‘Oh! Thank you,’ he smiled fully and set to the task with a tangible sense of relief.

‘Did it help, imagining?’ she said.

With the glass in his hand he was visibly more relaxed. ‘Oh yes, I think so, it kept the old pathways occupied,’ he grinned, ‘Always a challenge to come up with something new, so many possibilities with 5000 people on board. Humans are very individual, aren’t they?’

‘Yes, we are. But with the ship fixed and no more faulty pods you must have known nobody should wake up and Homestead was still so far off. All very well imagining stuff but after Jim and Aurora died you had another thirty-odd years to wait, didn’t that upset you?’

He paused, eyes flicking right as he accessed memories. ‘I suppose it did,’ he said cautiously and frowned. ‘Lonely,’ he said tested testing the word. ‘To be lonely is… upsetting.’

‘Yes, Arthur, generally speaking. Lonely makes you feel sad.’

‘I think I felt sad,’ he said and Claire felt a little pang. She couldn’t get away from the image of him stuck there all alone.

‘Lucky I woke up then,’ she swirled her empty glass of tonic and gestured at Arthur for another. He caught her eye and one corner of his mouth twitched in response.

‘Luck is a very human concept,’ he said solemnly as he scooted past the tonic to the vodka. Claire considered, sod it, she was sobering up. She nodded yes and he poured a measure. ‘Everything happens for a reason, don’t you think?’ he went on amiably.

‘Is that one of your bar-tender philosophies?’ she asked gloomily, a sudden inertia hitting her as she contemplated reality. Arthur poured some cranberry and squeezed a lime. Claire’s mind wandered disconsolately. ‘Why do you think I woke up Arthur? It doesn’t make sense. If everything is running smoothly on the ship, then it wasn’t supposed to happen. What if it happens to someone else? What if something has gone wrong like before, when Jim woke?’

‘Hmm,’ Arthur said, shaking the mixer. ‘That’s a lot of questions, Claire.’

‘You could check for me, maybe, on the mainframe? I mean check something… I dunno, might take a while, not sure what you would start with,’ Claire said vaguely, scratching her fingers
through her hair. Arthur hummed again and swapped her empty tonic for a replenished cocktail, polished a glass and looked past her to the concourse as the high-pitched whirr of a Porter Bot approached.

‘Oh, look,’ Arthur commented encouragingly and set down his cloth, ‘Time to get to work, here comes your kit, now ’
Bowie was playing in the bar again the next morning and Claire found herself humming along to *Jean Genie* as she arrived wielding a plate with pancakes and bacon she had lifted from the canteen. It had been a restless night from the moment she had returned to her deserted rooms through endless empty corridors and she had watched every hour tick by impatiently, knowing she should rest but really, she would rather be here.

Arthur slid sideways to his coffee pot and began preparing her usual. She had a usual. Four days in. Worrying.

‘Good morning, Claire, and how are you today?’ he said cheerfully.

‘Full of good ideas,’ she said climbing onto the stool and dropping cutlery onto the bar with a clatter.

‘Oh?’

‘Did a lot of thinking last night. Couldn’t sleep.’

‘No?’

‘No. Think I’ve probably done enough sleeping, don’t you? Time to be awake.’ She poured a tub of syrup over her breakfast.

‘Oh well, yes, quite, I could not agree more!’ The coffee appeared by her side and the burgundy of Arthur’s jacket hovered in front of her as she ate.

‘So, I was thinking,’ she said, ‘What you said last night, about living a bit.’

‘Yes,’ his eyes flicked right as he recalled.

‘We should do that. Today. Get you out of here.’

‘Out of here?’ he gestured with a little round sweep of his hand, as though playing with a turn table. He looked sideways at her entirely unconvinced.

Claire chewed and swallowed. Took a mouthful of warm smooth coffee. It was always going to be a difficult topic to broach but she would have to do it sooner or later. She wanted to work on Arthur and the incredible potential he had shown for synthetic evolution. For emotion. To do that she had to get him out of his usual environment to somewhere a lot more stimulating.

‘Yes, we should. Arthur you’ve been here for ninety years, stuck behind this bar, there’s a whole ship out there just for starters, it’s huge! And beyond that, a whole universe.’

‘Well,’ he shorted, ‘If I want to see the universe, I can just look it up in my files.’

‘That’s not the point,’ she said, dropping pancake crumbs around her. Arthur discreetly wiped the bar down. ‘It’s not the same knowing the theory, seeing the pictures. You need to experience it. Like… like you know when you ran all the scenarios, imagined how things would be when people woke up?’
‘Yes.’

‘Well it wasn’t the same was it, as when Jim and Aurora were here? As when I woke up? Wait did you run a scenario of me waking? You said you’d done it for all the passengers?’

‘I believe I did yes,’ he scrubbed at an invisible stain on the counter. Claire’s curiosity nearly burst out of her chest.

‘And? Is it the same? Am I the same? Am I reacting how you expected? Did you predict I’d be the way I am?’

‘I… no,’ he confessed looking up under his synthetic eyelashes, ‘You are quite different from my imaginings.’

‘Worse or better?’ she teased. Arthur smiled and looked down again. ‘So you see my point. You can look at pictures, learn the facts, but the reality is always much more exciting,’ she paused, ‘At least I hope I’m much more exciting than my resume and profile, right? And what’s outside this bar could be too. New experiences Arthur, you’ve been cooped up here so long, wouldn’t you like to get out and see for yourself?’

He looked past her at the doorway. ‘Well I… where would I go?’

The track on the Jukebox changed to Drive In Saturday. Claire got an idea.

‘The movies?’

‘All the movies are on the mainframe, Claire, I can see them.’

‘Ah, yeah well I suppose you can’t really do popcorn and cola for the full effect either. That rules out the restaurants too. How about one of the arcades, you can play the machines?’

‘Claire… I am a machine. There is no challenge in beating another machine.’ She supposed that was fair too. The fun was in the challenge. The arcade was too predictable.

‘I know! The bowling alley!’

Arthur looked at her quizzically with just a hint of scepticism. ‘Really?’

‘Why not?’

His eyes flicked downwards to the trestle his upper body rested on. ‘I don’t think I quite bend in the right places,’ he said. He had a point. God that probably ruled out the Dance Simulator as well though he could pirouette like a pro.

‘Did they never offer you your legs?’ Claire asked, wondering not for the first time in her life at the bizarre quality her conversations sometimes had when she was dealing with androids. ‘I mean Bar Tender Models do have that option and seeing as there’s just you, and you were going to be here long term, I thought maybe they’d fit the upgrade.’

‘I think they were economising,’ Arthur said with a little smile.

‘But they will have them in storage, won’t they?’

‘Oh no, they didn’t take the option. I arrived here as I am. I have one or two replacement parts,’ he raised his hands and waggled them, ‘but nothing below the waist.’
Claire refused to be defeated. ‘Well I might have something. Bar Tenders are just downgraded versions of Companion Bot, simpler programming, no offence, Arthur…’

‘None taken. My duties are very simple.’

‘But in theory you have all the slots needed to be converted.’ She peered at him.

‘Converted?’

‘Upgraded. Legs, better social interactions, predictive empathy, all the stuff I’ve spent the last fifteen years slaving over in a lab. I brought it all with me. We were making leaps and bounds with the physical realism of androids before I packed it all in to come here, I mean the top half of you is perfect, obviously, but the missing bits, well… anyway I brought it all with me so I could get on with the research on Homestead. And as you know the other side of it, the emotions and personality elements, well that’s my expertise…’

‘Yes, I know,’

‘And let’s be frank, Arthur, you’ve already made some headway there yourself the last few years.’

‘I… I have?’

‘You don’t think you’ve changed? Inside I mean, not physically.’

Arthur twisted the cloth in his hands thoughtfully, evidence in itself he had developed from a simple service bot. ‘I… suppose events have changed me,’ he said. Claire blinked. How perceptive he was sometimes. How strangely proud it made her.

‘Yes, Arthur I think they have,’ she said daring to raise the theories she had kept to herself in the last few days, ‘I think they did change you and you’ve found it confusing and painful at times. But this is my thing, I can help you…’

He looked at her. ‘I think I’d like that,’ he said.

‘Do you trust me?’ Claire said, ‘To make things better for you? Show you a world outside this room? Help you to live a bit.’

‘Of course, I trust you Claire,’ he gushed, ‘I always knew I could.’

She frowned. ‘Always?’

His smile vanished. ‘Figure of speech.’

She dismissed it, half absorbed in her internal inventory of robot parts and upgrades she had stashed somewhere in Bay 47. She couldn’t very well ask a bot to retrieve it all and she couldn’t quite remember what she needed. She would have to go along herself and select some bits and pieces. Maybe if she could coax Arthur out of the bar he could come with her, try things on for size. But first she had to get him out.

‘What would you like to see? On the ship?’ she asked sipping her coffee. Arthur went to refill it before she had even realised it was half drained.

‘Oh, I’ve seen it all on the plans,’ he said.

‘I thought that too until I stepped out of the elevator and there were chickens everywhere. Wait!’
Arthur put down the coffee pot and looked at her expectantly.

‘The house,’ Claire said, ‘Jim and Aurora’s home, the one they built together, would you like to see that? It’s not like anything else in the place. I’ve only seen it from the outside but it’s quite quaint, old fashioned Earth style housing.’

‘I’ve seen pictures,’ he said, ‘And a film they made of the two of them there.’

‘But you’ve never been?’

‘No.’

‘Arthur,’ Claire stepped down from her stool and wandered around the edge of the bar. He revolved on the spot in his trestle as she approached him. ‘Jim and Aurora lived here, what, over fifty years. They built a home, with a garden and chickens and crops. I know you’ve seen it, but you’ve never seen it. Touched it, smelt it, listened to it up close. The chickens are warm and fluffy, the root veg smells of earth. It’s been two dimensional to you, now it can be whole. It might….’

She thought of him again in the years after their deaths, waiting in darkness, missing them. ‘It might help, with their memories I mean, with grieving for them.’

Could he understand the concept of grief or the process of grieving and loss, she wondered? Would being amongst his friends’ belongings trigger any emotional pathways, allow him to feel better? It was worth a try. He looked lost at the suggestion, his expression glitching slightly as he tried to comprehend what she was saying. Claire decided to take a different tact.

‘Honestly I can’t believe Jim and Aurora never tried to get you out of here in all this time. You were their friend, they must have wanted to share it, they would want you to share it I’m sure.’

‘They did,’ he said, looking down at her, their height difference magnified now she was behind the bar and close to him. ‘They wanted me to come and see but I couldn’t.’

Claire glanced around the bar. ‘You’re free standing, Arthur, why not? Is there some kind of alarm if you try to go,’ she knelt next to him, ‘I’ve seen these before. Try and take an android out of its establishment and the doors shut or a siren blares. Let me just… hmm.’

She scanned his control panel looking for the tell take chip which might keep him trapped but she couldn’t see one. Maybe it was the bar that was hooked up rather than Arthur himself. She used his hands to pull herself up and was about to go and check around the doorframe when he gripped her tight.

‘Arthur, let me have a look about see if I can see what’s keeping you here. What exactly happens if you try and go?’

‘I… can’t move.’

Forcefield? Too advanced. More likely an inhibitor in his motor sensory system. Still, nothing she wouldn’t be able to fix. She might need to open him up though.

‘Is it like something holding you in place or do your pathways stop signalling?’ she asked.

‘It’s… it’s neither.’

Claire frowned. ‘It must be one or the other Arthur, something that stops you physically from leaving.’
'There is nothing to stop me. In theory.'

Still he had not released her hands. If he were a person his grip would have been white knuckled by now.

‘Arthur ease off a bit,’ Claire said, ‘You’re kinda strong. Your hands, Arthur, Ow! relax your hands.’

‘Oh! Sorry, I don’t mean to hurt you,’ he let his grip loosen and she watched him glance back at the door, not with the usual pleasant watchfulness his expression usually wore but with something more pinched and a good deal less confident.

‘Arthur. If there’s nothing to stop you, why haven’t you left the bar?’ Claire asked simply.

‘The bar is my designated space.’

‘With everything running here normally yes, but there have been some pretty extreme circumstances over the years and Jim and Aurora wanted you to go, so why didn’t you?’

‘I…’ and he started glitching again, and she had seen it enough now to know it was a tell tale sign that some undefinable emotion was starting to develop within his framework.

‘Go on,’ Claire encouraged. ‘Why didn’t you leave the bar?’

‘Because I… don’t belong out there,’ he said. ‘Because I… felt…’ he looked at her for approval.

‘That’s it. You felt what…? Describe it for me Arthur like you did the empty feeling.’

‘Because I felt…. afraid?’

‘It’s OK, Arthur. I understand. It’s OK.’

Claire ran her fingers over both his hands to soothe him and he looked down curiously at the motion. After a moment Claire lifted his right hand and kissed it gently, petting it between her own.

‘Aurora did that,’ he said, ‘With Jim.’

‘Did she?’ Claire kissed his knuckles again, ‘Like that?’

‘Yes.’

‘It’s to show someone you care,’ Claire said. ‘It’s reassurance.’

‘Yes, I know.’

She smiled. ‘You knew in theory, I think. Now you can feel it too.’ She squeezed his hands and let them drop between them, holding one still to tether him to her.

'Claire?'

'Hmm?'

Slowly he raised his free hand and with a thumb wiped the corner of her mouth softly.

'Syrup,' he said.

Something in her heart melted at the gesture. Had he seen that too? Between Jim and Aurora?
Perhaps it was too soon for the house, too raw. An idea came to her.

‘I think I know what to show you, now, where to go? Somewhere peaceful. Just the two of us,’ she said.

‘Oh? Where?’ his eyes skittered about the room.

‘You will like it, I promise. Arthur? There’s nothing to be afraid of.’

She stepped back a pace and drew him after her on his silent trestle until she reached the end of the bar. A little light resistance held him briefly back and he trundled over the threshold into the wider room. Claire led him down to where she usually sat and watched him turn slowly taking in the different perspective of his bottles and glasses, the Jukebox and the tables and chairs. After a moment he seemed satisfied.

‘Ok?’ she asked.

‘Yes. Where to next?’

She led him to the door.

Chapter End Notes

Having now seen close ups of Arthurs metal bits (!!) I can see he is NOT entirely freestanding in the film but whizzes back and forth along precut grooves on the floor. For the sake of this fic please ignore this and imagine he can roll out from behind the bar on the same metal contraption!
If they had been on Earth she might have taken him to a beach. Somewhere with wide open skies and endless sea. Somewhere beautiful and fresh and clear, with little trace of man. Somewhere where the sounds of waves rush like a heartbeat and connect every living thing to the world. She would take him to a place that soothed, where nature’s gifts had inspired countless artists and authors and communicated with that human thing inside them that spoke without words. But there were no beaches in space.

Claire had considered the observatory, the huge domed room in which she could call up images of Earth. Pictures of home. Of where, after all, Arthur had originally been built. She could show him the continents and seas, then request Earth’s location in space, the nearest stars and systems, orientate them in relation to the universe, to where they were now. But it was nothing that Arthur could not already do, hooked up to the mainframe and with every charted star available to his memory. He had a million photographs of earth’s deserts and seas, of her people and terrain. Claire knew anonymous images of long dead people on a planet she abandoned would stir only watered-down emotions in herself, a sense of cool distance from her birth, so the chances were they would do nothing for him.

Besides, she suspected that though his body was put together on their mutual home planet, his true creation had been here, in the void of space. The things that mattered to him, that shaped his budding personality, were here.

On the ground concourse Arthur slowed behind her. There had, she suspected, once been a narrow path around the gardens of Jim and Aurora’s home there in the centre of the ship, but they had long since become overgrown and now roots and tendrils span and twisted over polished ivory floors. It was not the easiest terrain for an android engineered to glide behind a bar on a wheel and even tiles. Claire stepped beside him and put an arm around his back.

‘I don’t want you tipping over,’ she said, ‘I mean I could get you up again but you might undo all my good work,’ she nodded at his forehead.

‘Oh, of course, thank you,’ she watched as his eyes tracked back and forth across his surroundings in neat straight lines and realised that he was storing new information, strand upon strand as each image came to him. It was unnerving, seeing him copy and save each frame into his almost infinite resources with a detached and uniquely robotic expression, but she let it run its course until he had scanned up through the floors above and ended his survey. He looked back at her, the smile lines about his eyes resuming their place.

‘It’s very different,’ he said, ‘From the plans.’

‘The house and gardens must seem very strange to you?’ Claire said.

‘Yes, and no. I knew of their existence. But the rest, although the dimensions are as expected, the quality is different.’

‘The quality?’

‘The sense of it, the light and air and…’ he glanced up, ‘The size.’

‘But you knew it was tall, Arthur, how high the ships central concourse goes.’

‘Oh yes,’ he tipped his head back for a better view and the line of his adams’s apple bobbed as
though he were swallowing nervously. ‘But the… feel of it… it’s so…’ he looked back, ‘I’m sorry I don’t know the word. I mean… the feeling.’

God love him, he as really trying wasn’t he? To communicate in a language that he had never expected to need to use.

‘Some people find something so big a little frightening,’ Claire suggested, ‘So vast and high up, it’s intimidating, makes you feel very small and vulnerable.’

‘I am small, compared to the ship,’ Arthur said logically, ‘But I have no reason to fear it and yet, I think that is what you describe. A sort of fear. A kind of … awe.’

‘Here’s a tip,’ Claire said squeezing his waist, ‘Don’t look up.’

His eyebrows rose. ‘That simple?’

‘Just look where you are going, the rest of it will take care of itself, but you don’t want to trip on a root while you are staring at a sky that might never fall.’

‘That’s not the sky, Claire,’ Arthur said seriously. ‘I’ve never seen the sky. That’s the ceiling. Or more accurately the hull.’

‘You never heard the story? ‘The sky is falling in?’’

‘Ah, no, but I can look it up in…’

‘No,’ she held up a hand before he retreated into the ship’s library resources, ‘The best stories are told, not downloaded. Maybe we will get to that later. I mean most humans learn through stories, it’s an important part of development… so is experience…’ she trailed off considering. Arthur had plenty of information, but the emotional resonance that came from the telling and doing of things might help him in other ways. Still for now he had enough to be going on with, stuck within four walls for nearly a century and now making his way slowly down an unused path. Every now and then she could see him scan and catalogue again, dimensions, colours, layouts; neatly and clinically registered in his internal directory. It would have to do for a start.

She led him down to the house, intending to wend past it to the elevator. Arthur’s trestle was bumping over the more uneven ground and he wobbled comically on his post. One arm still around his back Claire hooked the other over his elbow to steady him and the image made her giggle, peculiarly old fashioned, like a courting couple on a promenade about the garden.

There were chickens here, strutting in and out of a doorway and perched on windowsills. A scattering of flowers long turned wild in beds about the walls. The house reached up two stories to the landing above, but the trestle about it framed it safely from the starkness of the ship. Branches rustled and unseen birds hopped within. Claire looked down at her feet, caught the sight of snails amongst the grass.

‘Oh! They made a proper little ecosystem,’ she said, ‘I didn’t even know half this wildlife was put in stasis.’

‘Oh yes,’ Arthur said, ‘Everything you could ask for. Greenery to grow and creatures to eat it and break it down again. Jim was terribly proud of it, spent years studying how to get it all working, a little microcosm of what he had wanted on Homestead 2.’

‘Like his life’s dream in a bubble,’ Claire said. ‘He was determined to do it. And it still survives. He must have got the balance right. Everything still looks so healthy.’
‘He optimised it some years before he died,’ Jim said, ‘It took care of itself in his later years, a source of great pleasure to them both.’

‘I’m glad they had time to enjoy it,’ Claire said.

‘Oh, there was always plenty of time,’ Arthur commented, ‘Until there wasn’t enough.’

Claire glanced at him motionless on the path beside the house. His face was set, but lacked the impassivity of a robotic mask, rather it had a sense of something contained but straining beneath the surface. Pain, she realised. It looks like pain.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean,’ he looked towards an upper floor window decorated with soft white curtains hanging still and closed. ‘All they had was time and one another and yet at the end all they wanted was more.’

Claire’s heart skipped, they were entering an unknown area of Arthur’s emotional landscape now, standing in the garden of his lost friends. She picked her way carefully through the memory of the dead.

‘More time so they could be around when the ship woke, you mean?’

Arthur looked sidelong at her. ‘Oh no, not for that,’ he said, ‘At the beginning they wished they could survive that long but by the end,’ his eyes glittered blue, ‘By the end all they wanted was more time to be together. There could never be enough, Jim said, when she died, even if they lived another hundred years.’

‘When you love someone, there is never enough time,’ Claire said. ‘Or so they say, I wouldn’t really know.’

‘That’s what they always said,’ Arthur agreed. ‘And they loved each other very much. It was wonderful but also… sad.’

Claire squeezed his arm instinctively when she heard the conflict in his voice and he looked down at her.

‘Aurora died first?’ she asked.

‘Yes. Jim came to tell me later that day. He dropped off some things at the bar.’

‘Oh?’ Claire prompted.

To her surprise Arthur reached into the pocket of his jacket with his right hand. He pulled out a tag.

‘This belonged to Gus. It allows access to crew areas. Jim and Aurora used to repair the ship. Jim gave it to me in case…’ a glitch, ‘Someone needed it. Maybe you would like it?’

He proffered it brightly, ‘The access code is written on the back. It might be useful.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I’d like you to.’

‘Thank you, Arthur.’
He smiled and then dipped his hand back into the pocket. He pulled out an old-fashioned picture frame no more than ten centimetres high.

‘It’s from the house,’ Arthur said, ‘Jim brought it to me. They kept it on their mantle.’

Claire looked at the house, the sloping roof and the chimney stack at the far end. She imagined an antique wood burner and a fireplace surrounding it and, on the mantle, this quaint old silver frame. Arthur turned it over in his palm to reveal the image. A handsome strongly built man in his fifties and a blonde woman of about the same age, their faces lined softly with warmth and cheer. Jim and Aurora, Claire concluded, drinking from champagne flutes in the bar, and between them with the bottle in his hands and a cloth over one arm, Arthur, his smile as sunny as theirs.

‘Twenty-five years together,’ Arthur explained. ‘They had another twenty-five before…’ he stopped, covered the picture with his hands and slipped it quietly away.

“You keep it with you all the time?” Claire asked gently. His eyes blanched brown and amber, copper wires in chocolate silk.

‘I…’

‘I mean you have the images, in your memory…’ she prompted.

‘Yes, but…

‘But it has sentimental value?’

‘It was theirs,’ Arthur said simply, ‘They kept it when they were alive, and now I keep it.’

Claire felt her eyes burn; his expression so open as he explained. Android, she reminded herself, but his sincerity felt so incredibly real and tender and all the questions she had hypothesised on grief now seemed redundant. This android grieved. What else could she call this?

‘After he gave me those, I didn’t see him,’ the colours in Arthurs eyes shifted to green then grey in the harsh lights of the concourse. ‘After a few days I… I needed to find out what had happened to him, where he was.’

‘You were worried.’

Arthur pressed his lips together. ‘Worried, yes.’

‘That’s what happens when people care about other people, you need to know they are all right.’

‘Yes. I scanned the ship to try and locate him,’ Arthur said, ‘Through the mainframe. But his life signs were gone. His and hers.’

‘What happened to them?’

‘I don’t know. Jim said she had been sick, her data was in the MedPod, but I don’t know what happened to him.’

‘What do you think happened?’ she tried, opening up the question from specifics. ‘What happens when people die?’

Arthur looked back at the house. ‘I think…’ he said quietly, ‘I think people go back to where they came from.’ Claire tried to steady her nerves at his implications.
‘To Earth?’ she pressed, utterly enraptured and deliberately obtuse.

‘No Claire, not Earth. To where they came from. Before.’ He blinked green blue.

Before. Where people come from, before this life. No, he couldn’t mean that, because that would imply a sense of the spirit, of spirituality, of a soul.

‘You said when we met that Jim and Aurora couldn’t bear to be without each other after all that time,’ Claire ventured.

‘Yes.’

‘And Aurora died and then Jim vanished. Do you think he wanted to die with her? Do you think…’ she took a breath, ‘Do you think Jim ended his life because he was lonely without her? Or because he wanted to be with her again?’

Claire waited, unsure if the existential tone of her question would confuse him but after just a beat Arthur smiled, easily and sadly and answered her question.

‘Oh, he wanted to be with her, I am sure of that. When she died, he chose to follow.’

She took him to see the stars. On the observation deck high in the ship, its re-enforced glass the length of the room, an oblong window to the universe. Claire sat on the smooth beige upholstery provided and watched Arthur glide towards the hull, entranced by the reality of the theories he had known for years. His eyes flickered as before, logging data and then after a minute, they stopped. His gaze as bewitched as any other traveller confronted with an epic journey.

The lights dimmed around and behind them without Claire’s instruction and she knew that he had done it, passed the command through an invisible cord that tied him to the mainframe. The silence settled heavy under the hum of the ship. The room a soulless canvas, cool and comfortable and deceptively new. The crisp conditioned air was a hundred years old already, stale nitrogen recycled through life support, the temperature kept constant and the heat of their bodies banished on contact.

Of her body, she reminded herself, Arthur could only absorb and reflect what heat was in the atmosphere around him, no more alive than the couch she sat on or the table by her feet, but to know that did not feel just or fair. All the presence of the room came now from him. The lights of his control panel blinked in slow symphony as he stood and watch a nebula far beyond the Avalon. The workings of his trestle whirred softly, a reminder of the machine, but when she dragged her eyes away, to the shape of his shoulders, and the dark hair upon his head, she could forget he wasn’t human. An android could absorb all he needed from one glance out that window, but time ticked by and Arthur stood, and saw, and sensed and felt.

His chest moved in the slow syncope of breath, his fingers knit together as he watched, his lips twitched in reverence as the blues and pinks and greens of the galaxies outside merged timelessly and altered, a million miles away and long extinguished. Arthur turned slightly, his pale and perfect profile stark against the dark, the glow of haunted starlight in his eyes.

She knew then, what she saw, what she felt there in the room. The tightening in her heart and the burn of longing and of pride. She had searched a lifetime and now here he was before her. A thing created of wire and precious metal, and something else unnamed, unknown. A thing once only animated, now alive, created as a sterile image, but shaped by loving hands. Jim and Aurora had
given him a gift, the unknowing parents of a unique child.

Arthur had a soul. Conceived here in the empty swell of space, raised by two lost travellers and then abandoned through no fault of his own, half formed, half finished, with no-one left to guide. She felt a surge within, a protective urge. Where she had feared and cursed her situation, now she rejoiced. Of all the people to have woken, she was glad that it was her. She could help him, understand him, shield that fledgling soul from the lonely end it might otherwise have faced. Destiny was a fickle thing, but she could accept it now.

Claire stood and went to join Arthur at the window, caught the sparkle in his gaze up close, like stardust deep within.

‘Beautiful isn’t it,’ she said.

He smiled again, eyes shining like the mirage of human tears, and at her back she felt his arm, his hand resting gently at her waist, holding her as she had him, to keep her steady.

‘This is where they went,’ Arthur said peacefully with a small nod, ‘This is where they are. Jim and Aurora… I can feel them in the colours of the sky.’
Spare Parts

‘Good morning, Claire.’

What? She had only just gone to sleep, hadn’t she? Her sense of days and time was becoming more jumbled by the second. Though the lighting in her room was set to emulate the patterns of day and night she inevitably spent most of her time down on the concourse and it was always bright there. Still she was certain she couldn’t have slept more than an hour. She was exhausted, the last two weeks were a blur of long hours, longer nights, endless cups of coffee and microelectronics, the likes of which she had not had personal contact with for at least five years. Claire’s latter expertise had been theoretical or involving the near invisible nanorobotic technology she worked on under intense magnification, and she had had to do a metric ton of revision on android technology and macro construction to get up to speed again. It was taking its toll. Her brain ached, not to mention her fingers. She was getting callouses from all the copper wire.

There was a clink from behind her. She dared to open an eye and flinched, shutting it again. Too bright.

‘What time is it?’ she muttered,

‘Twelve minutes past nine.’

‘How long have I been asleep?’

‘Seven hours and sixteen minutes. An average for you, Claire, though rather better than yesterday.’

She pulled the pillow over her head. ‘Still tired, go away,’ she grumbled. Another clink and the muted sound of coffee being poured.

‘Now, now, no need to be grumpy.’

‘Sometimes you can be really annoying, Arthur. I told you, I’m not a morning person.’

She heard him slide towards the bed.

‘You won’t be wanting breakfast then?’ he said cheerfully. Claire pulled the pillow down and squinted over the edge. Arthur smiled brightly. She could smell toast.

‘Ugh,’ she said ‘fine.’

‘Lovely,’ Arthur said.

Claire had already long established that she liked having him around, and after going to the lengths of removing him from the bar to expand his horizons, it didn’t seem terribly fair to make him wait around in there all night on his own for her to collect him the next day. After the observation deck Claire has let him follow her to grab a meal and before she knew it they were back in her cabin discussing the next steps in Arthur’s development, the acquisition of a pair of much more purposeful limbs to replace his trestle and allow him a fuller range of movement and freedom. So absorbed were they in the plans that sleepiness caught her suddenly unaware. She took a nap on the bed and he just… stayed. The next day she woke to find he had covered her with a blanket.

As a roommate he was easy to have around. He didn’t take up much space and he could take a hint and be quiet. He was present, but not terribly hard work and Claire’s tendency to gravitate towards
him in the bar on those first few days had highlighted a deeper need within her for company. On a
good day Claire was not a company person. She did anything she could to avoid people. She had
thought herself a self-sufficient type of woman, always one to dodge parties at all costs, dragged
out under protest from her lab by only the most determined co-workers and normally content to
enact her leisure time preferences by reading late into the night alone. But there could be too much
alone even for her and her room onboard the *Avalon* was blank and unwelcoming, a cell in an
enormous sleeping hive. The ship was silent and it quite frankly creepy, the sound of her echoing
footsteps following like phantoms as she retreated to her cabin each night. More than once she
found herself turning, spooked and vulnerable, sure she was being followed by unseen figures. She
double locked her door with a kind of primitive fear. There were five thousand men and women on
the ship, their frozen bodies in the pods not even breathing, like vampires in their coffins, no more
alive than dead. Where were they really, their essence and their souls? Did they float along the
unlit corridors like ghosts?

So, yes, Arthur and his easy smile, kind eyes and warmer voice were very welcome. The only
problem with sharing a room with an android was there was no sleeping in. Like an exuberant dog,
the moment he sensed she was remotely awake he would bound over and offer her coffee, or
porridge, or pancakes, or whatever it was he seemed to sense she might like. She wondered if he
was attuned to rising cortisol levels, or patterns of REM sleep, because he always, always seemed
to time everything just perfectly so that seconds after she opened her eyes he was there, hovering
by the bed with a beautifully prepared tray.

This morning she sat up against the headboard and he gently placed the tray on her lap. Toast,
dipping in half melted golden butter, some orange juice, mercifully free of bits but freshly
squeezed none the less, and the coffee, hot but not so hot it burned, mocha rich and caramel
creamed. Sweet and soft. A proper linen napkin was folded to one side and a tiny vase with a single
carnation decorated the top right corner. Claire raised an eyebrow wondering where on the ship
carnations might grow.

‘That’s new,’ she said.

‘An elegant touch,’ Arthur said, ‘I saw them in the Fleur de Lis.’

‘The French restaurant on the third level? Why were you in there?’

‘Oh, just having a look around,’ he remarked airily.

‘Filling time while I slept again?’ she sipped the coffee. What did he get up to now he was free to
wander? It intrigued her but she also felt strangely left out.

‘Just a little. For the most part, I’m right here, with you,’ he trundled back to the desk on which he
had left the coffee pot, draped a cloth over his arm and stood, waiting, watching her eat. A few
minutes passed. She felt his eyes on him as she sucked butter from her fingers.

‘That’s a bit unnerving, do you watch me sleep too?’ Claire said with no real concern, ‘You’re
going to be so much less creepy when you get legs.’

‘Creepy? I’m creepy?’

‘A bit,’ she teased.

‘Well, I don’t see how legs will make a different to that, or to my duties here,’ Arthur said,
puzzled. He was adorable when he was confused.
‘First, these aren’t duties Arthur, you don’t have to get me breakfast or wait table while I eat…’ she saw him open his mouth to protest and held up her hand. ‘Second it will make all the difference in the world. You can sit with me for starters, instead of loitering there like a living coat stand,’ Arthur shut his mouth. She could have sworn he was pouting. He fussed with the cloth, tidying the way it was folded over his arm and she took a bite of toast to stop herself from laughing.

‘Oh Arthur,’ she chuckled between mouthfuls, ‘I do appreciate the breakfasts, really I do, thank you.’

He glanced up doubtfully under his brow.

‘But you’re my companion, my friend, not my servant,’ she said. He looked down again, but his mouth twitched happily, his shoulders relaxing.

‘That’s better,’ she said. ‘You only need do this if you want to.’

‘I like to serve. It is my original programming, I still feel…the need,’ he explained thoughtfully.

‘I know, I know,’ she finished the toast and wiped her hands on the napkin, ‘and a part of you will always be a bar tender, unless of course I just take that chip out…’

His eyes widened and his head came up. ‘I don’t think that…’

‘Relax Arthur I wouldn’t dare. Whatever changes have been made to your programming over the years are stored on that chip. I think anyway. If I take it out, you wouldn’t be you anymore. You are the sum of your experiences, and your experiences are in your memory.’

Claire set the tray to one side and slid out of bed while he watched her with furrowed brows. She couldn’t blame him, she wasn’t exactly sure of how all this worked herself and she was supposed to be the expert. But she was sure of one thing, she would only be adding to Arthur, not taking anything away, she was unspeakably fond of who he was already and became moreso every day.

Claire slipped on a robe and he moved behind her to top up her coffee, she usually had at least two before braving the shower but the second was always at the desk in her room. Sure enough as she sat her cup appeared next to her and Arthur stood by her side. Claire smoothed out the blueprints in front of her, intricate maps of advanced electronics annotated in hasty pencil; layer upon layer of nanorobotic pathway framing titanium struts and topped in synthetic skin.

‘We are nearly there, Arthur. Today is the big day!’ His cheeks dimpled and his pupils flared in response to her words and she felt a little twist of adrenaline in her chest. ‘By tonight,’ Claire said, ‘you are going to have a pair of working legs.’

They had gone to Bay 47 just two days after Arthur left the bar for the first time. Claire led him to the elevator and strapped him in before it shot up to level 19 and gravity went AWOL for the duration of their ride. He was absolutely not designed for the human specific seatbelts so it took a little innovation, but she was not about to have him crack his head on the ceiling of the lift. Nor could she afford any damage to the trestle even if her ultimate aim was to remove it and replace it with something better.

The tag Gus had left behind worked on the storage bays and, after hailing a Porter Bot, Arthur
followed her inside, the lights around them popping on in reaction to their movement. The room was vast and stacked with level upon level of stored luggage, identical black and grey boxes and crates. The ship was full of such warehouse like expanses and at first Claire was a little overwhelmed as to just how she would find her own supplies amongst the goodness knew what was piled high in Bay 47. She was standing with her hands on her hips and craning her neck to see above her for any kind of markings on the stacks, numerical or alphabetical, when Arthur gave a soft whirr beside her. She turned to find his eyes tracking the surroundings in rapid subtle movements as he accessed the mainframes plans.

‘Stack twelve,’ he said, his eyes still flickering, ‘Monroe, Claire, Personal Belongings.’

‘Some of it will be in there, like the maintenance kits, my tools and so on, but I need the AI supplies and Bots too. The ones brought to work on Homestead, are they in here?’

‘Bay 76,’ Arthur concluded after a moment, ‘Level 12.’

‘OK let’s get these bits first.’

Once they had gathered her equipment, they sent the Porter Bot ahead to the Medi-Lab where Claire had chosen to work on Arthur and stopped off on Level 12 for the parts she would need. Deep in the cavernous hall that represented Bay 76 she instructed a waiting bot to open the sleek black crates she had selected from high up in the stacks.

‘Ok, Arthur, rather than have one of your friends here lug all of this this downstairs we are going to pick out something suitable for you and then work on it later.’

She unwrapped a case about the height and breadth of a man and flicked open its latch. Within it a bright logo stamped ‘Prometheus, I-Serve’ and several unconnected body parts. Arthur stood over the case, his hands folded over his stomach and peered down.

‘So, these are pretty basic,’ Claire said, ‘Replacement parts for the fully formed bots further on in the stacks, but they are made by the same company as you were, in the same time frame. Technically they should fit.’ She moved aside the packaging which was shielding the components and did a stock take. There were four spare hands, two left, two right, in two different sizes for the male and female approximations of Prometheus brand androids. There were also two sets of arms but only one set of legs and they looked a little small. A torso and unlinked pelvic frame completed the ensemble.

‘Where is its head?’ Arthur asked.

‘Stored separately,’ Claire explained sealing the crate, ‘They need to be packed individually they are too delicate to get chuck in with all the other bits. This one’s no good, let’s try the next.’

The next crate was not much use either, featuring an almost entire female form of an older generation Worker Bot, made for the heavy preliminary work on the Homestead colony. Its legs, pelvis and torso were already attached and clothed, but a pair of bare arms was stored at the foot of the crate along with the disembodied hands. Claire sealed it up.

The third crate held a naked male torso and three unattached pelvic frames. She double checked the packing label and burst out laughing.

‘I am fairly sure I did not request these,’ she said.

‘Oh?’
'This is a Companion Bot, but it’s a Deluxe Edition.'

'I don’t understand, why would the Avalon request those.'

'They aren’t usually used in business. Most droids a big company like this would order aren’t equipped with these um… specialist parts.'

'Genitalia,' Arthur supplied.

'Quite.'

'Then why are they here?' he asked innocently.

'Maybe someone smuggled them on? Thought they might get lonely on Homestead and need a robot to pass the time with. They are pretty popular at home, have been for decades. Some of the first androids created actually, not sure what that says about the human race.'

Arthur looked at her blankly.

'They aren’t mine anyway,' Claire said, ‘My company doesn’t even make these ones. This isn’t a Prometheus Companion it’s a Clotho brand. The company started out with us but split away when it decided to pursue leisure only based androids. I must say though aesthetically they always had the edge. Look at this…'

She tilted the nude torso towards him, 'The detail, little freckles, moles, every tiny hair individually implanted into the skin. They cost a fortune, only robot connoisseurs have these.

That’s a point actually,’ she stood. ‘What have you got under that shirt? Are you fully covered or does the skin substitute end at the wrist?’

She took one of his hands, pushed up the sleeve. There was skin, but she could see but it wasn’t the best of quality, pale and featureless as it crept up his arms and when she palpated his elbow joint she could feel the cold titanium beneath. ‘Hmm…” she contemplated and summoned forth the Porter Bot. ‘We’ll take it with us, if we are going to do this we might as well do it properly and its easy enough to lift the surface of it off, for cosmetic purposes.’

‘Oh, it really isn’t needed, please don’t create too much work for yourself,’ Arthur said as she tugged his sleeve back down.

‘No half measures, Arthur, it’s not like we have a deadline here or a budget. You want to be a real boy, then I shall grant you your wish, Pinocchio.’

He glitched a little at that, the reference perhaps too obscure, but sod it, she wanted to do her best by him. Someone somewhere had taken the time to sculpt true warmth into the features of his face, elegance into the delicate line of his nose, he should have the rest to match. If deep inside he had evolved as far as she suspected he deserved to be as human on the outside as he was within. It had nothing whatsoever to do with her own growing loneliness; her increasing inability to separate Arthur from android or any desire to blur that line. It was all about the Project.

The Porter Bot dumped the torso into a hovering open crate for transport to the Medi-Bay. Claire bent to close up the Clothos box but then hesitated and inspected its contents again. He deserved it all didn’t he? Christ, what was she even thinking…

‘I can’t believe I’m doing this, but in for a penny…’ she muttered and then selected a pelvic frame still in its wrapping. She handed it quickly to the porter bot, without looking at Arthur.
Several more boxes down the line she found what she had come for in the first place. Four pairs of legs applicable to Prometheus Bots. Not those intended for Bar Tender I-Serves, but from the original parent company and close enough to match. The basic frames would fit nicely, the cosmetic design might need some work, but they offered her enough material to mix and match so she bid the Porter Bot take all four and finally they left the Bay.

Now, after breakfast and more importantly a fortnight of tinkering and adjustments made slightly more complex by the need to marry up parts from different brands, Claire stood next to the Med Pod with Arthur striped of his jacket, bowtie and shirt. The first time they had done this he had been glaringly machine in his physical make up, but the work on his torso was complete and he was now startlingly realistic. The planes of synthesised muscle lent shape and texture to his chest and arms, a smattering of hair between two nipples gave him a pleasingly masculine edge. She could have entered him for a Prize in Realistic Robotic Design had she been back on Earth, although goodness knew what kind of advances they had made by now in that field. Still, she was pretty proud.

To Claire’s left a trolley held the newly finished legs and pelvic frame, all adjusted to the same cosmetic standard as well as compatibility and function. To her right, with the sides of the Pod folded down she had a large enough workspace to piece the android together, but first she had to remove the last attachments from the trestle. She had already severed the attachment between the control panel and the titanium rod which ran from his centre of balance to the floor, and ensured it was tucked neatly under the edge of his torso, ready to be relocated when his pelvis was attached. At no point had she powered him down to do her work and at no point had he requested she do so despite the odd signals he must have been receiving from stray wires and chips.

‘Hold onto me,’ she said, and felt his hands come to her shoulders as she bent and applied the screwdriver to the trestle. ‘When I undo this you might wobble a bit. Don’t be afraid to hold tight.’

The final fastening came away. Claire quickly dropped the tool she was using and caught Arthur around his chest, heaving him against her and turning ninety degrees so that she could lay him on the surface of the Med Pod. His new hyper realistic skin ran smoothly over his stomach but ended in a mess of wire and metal where she had disconnected him. It was uncanny to say the least. Every android she had ever worked on had been inactive, pre boot up, their bodies still often waiting for the head units to be attached or if they were in place, eyes closed and lifeless as mannequins. Arthur’s grip tightened about her and he looked straight into her eyes as she lifted. His eyes shone green.

‘OK? Don’t worry, I gotcha, there we go,’ she laid him back and his features glitched as he took in the new angle.

‘Last time you were on your back you were probably in our factory,’ Claire said, grabbing a stool on wheels and placing it by the Pod. She sat within his eye line and pulled over the trolley with his new legs. ‘Must seem strange.’

‘It is a little disorientating, when I was booted up I was already vertical and in place at the bar,’ Arthur said. His eyes tracked her activity as she lined up some tools. ‘What now?’

‘Now we hook everything together. It’s all ready to go, I’ve done the difficult bits already.’

‘Will it take long?’

‘Not too long, compared with the rest of it,’ she frowned and adjusted the fitting on a tiny soldering
iron, pressed its control until it flared with a white-hot flame. She reached for her goggles.

‘Should I be quiet?’ he asked, peering down towards his new belly button.

‘No need, just don’t move.’

‘Understood.’

Claire shifted some parts into position and began clipping wires into place, soldering each as carefully as she could, releasing the control panel from its temporary lodging, working methodically back and forth over the joint of pelvis with torso. After a few minutes she lifted her head, her concentration shattered by a peculiar sound. Was that a malfunction? Perhaps she should shut him down, but then it came again, more distinctly than before and she had to stop herself from giggling.

‘Arthur?’

He glanced down at her, ‘Yes?’

‘Are you… humming?’ she asked. ‘Got a song stuck in your head?’

Arthur grinned and then shockingly let out a little laugh of his own, a shy uncertain sound from lack of practice which he hastily cut off, but it was a laugh just the same. Warmth bloomed in her chest at the sound. Something new every day with you, she thought.

‘Sorry,’ Arthur said sheepishly.

‘Anyone would think you were excited,’ Claire replied and wound a wire around some forceps, unable to suppress her own happiness at seeing him so effected, ‘It’s nice.’

From behind her dark tinted goggles she saw his smile widen, his eyes cast upwards brilliant blue in wonder, and his then shoulders wiggled slightly from the effort of containing his joy.

‘Stay still,’ she warned with a laugh.

‘Yes, sorry.’

Claire moved the goggles to the top of her head as she squinted at the soldering iron again.

‘Why don’t you stick whatever it is on speaker,’ she said, ‘We could do with a little music I think.’

‘Certainly.’

There was a beat and then Bowie filtered through the room at a respectfully low volume to spare her concentration, but it was loud enough to hear the lyrics. Claire paused her work as the voice drifted through the room.

_Ch-ch-ch-changes._

_There’s gonna have to be a different man,_

_Time may change me, but I can’t trace time..._
‘Is it too much?’ Arthur asked her.

‘No, no, it’s absolutely perfect, good choice,’ she succeeded in threading a fiddly wire through an equally fiddly tool.

‘Good.’

Claire looked up in time to see Arthur catch her eye, his familiar face relaxed and open as he lay against the pillow of the Med Pod. He winked at her, and his expression was tenderness itself.

‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘For completing me.’
Bambi on ice, she was sure that was the expression. Claire leant against the entrance to the bar and watched as Arthur picked his way gingerly through the vegetation sprawled across the concourse near Jim and Aurora’s home. At least she had worked out where that morning’s carnation had come from, she had spotted a clump close to the door as she waited for him to untangle himself from the holly bush he had fallen against.

Arthur had adapted quickly enough to the flat smooth surfaces of the corridors on the way back from the Med Lab, walking in straight lines was not an issue and things had gone well right up the elevator. Claire had needed to teach him to sit down at that point which involved demonstrating a dozen times while he calibrated which muscles to utilise. Eventually she had strapped him in and he had watched in fascination as the Zero G made his legs float before him at the hinges of his knees. She was half tempted to release his belt and let him float about enjoying himself but wondered if perhaps that ought to wait until he had better control.

She knew she had made the right decision when a kamikaze chicken rushed them on arrival ayt the ground concourse and Arthur had tipped backwards onto his new posterior. He crashed to the ground with an undignified thump and sat looking stunned for at least a minute while he tried to process what had happened. Claire heaved him up by his arms while his new feet scrabbled under him. His balance standardizing measurements slowly they tried to head towards the bar but the uneven and unpredictable nature of the ecological microcosm between them and their destination was taking a bit more effort on Arthur’s part than Claire had expected. He apologised and bid her go on ahead while he navigated the jungle of vegetables and stray birds. She lingered patiently, he would get there in the end, it was up to him now.

‘Are you sure we shouldn’t adjust the calibration?’ he asked, stumbling and catching himself against one of the white picket fenceposts.

‘Already checked, and double checked. They’re fine Arthur you just need practice.’

‘If you’re certain?’

‘I am. Just make it to the bar, we’ll take a break.’

He clattered into the fence again, his body lurching to the right as he tried to step forward. It probably was rather difficult, going from a single trestle formation on wheels to co-ordination of two separate limbs and balance. His centre of gravity had shifted and he was no longer as top heavy, but he hadn’t got to grips with it yet. Still she had to resist the temptation to go and prop him up as she had on his first few hundred metres as a bipod, she couldn’t interfere with the settings as he adjusted them. She wondered if this was how mothers felt watching babies take first steps, there was something endearingly innocent about his struggles.

Finally Arthur cleared the path and jerkily wandered over to her, his eyes on his feet as though they might betray him at any moment. Claire had dressed him in something befitting his usual bartender attire, a pair of stone trousers and some polished loafers. On reflection running shoes might have been more useful, but Arthur had a certain style reminiscent of ancient James Bond movies and she wanted to keep up his standards.

‘There,’ Claire said pushing off the wall, ‘You made it, well done.’

‘I don’t understand why this is taking so long,’ he said forlornly glancing from his shoes to her
‘It’s a big change, new legs, new motors, new signals. You’ve only been walking half an hour.’

‘If I can’t manage the basics how will I ever perform more complex actions?’

‘Like what?’

‘I might be required to run, or jump or…’

‘You aren’t joining a basketball team any time soon, Arthur, didn’t make you tall enough for that,’ she patted his back as she turned him towards the bar. In truth he was a good six inches taller than she was, but perfectly average for a human man, and he would do just fine, the basics were all that were required, physically at least. In other ways he had already outstripped his potential but she had to be careful he didn’t overdo things too early. He had glitched several times on the way down from the lab and though she was sure the connections she had soldered were sound, she didn’t want to overwhelm him. Hence the bar, familiar and comforting and not requiring any further input of data for him to manage.

‘Why don’t you get me a drink?’ she suggested and watched relief flood over his face.

‘Certainly,’ he smiled and walked smoothly across his establishment. Good. He just needed time to relax.

Claire took her usual seat while he mixed her a pina colada and she had to admit it was odd seeing him move between the bottles at half his usual speed and without a spin or a slide. She studied his motion. His gait had a pleasant amble to it she had not been expecting; something comfortable and a quaint in the action. The new legs and hips were a good fit to his upper body if a little broader than she had intended, but it gave him a solidity and a sturdy set that was reassuring. He was endomorphic which was unusual for an android but added to the illusion of his humanity in a way which perfectly carved abdominals and chiselled pectorals would not. She had packed his waist with soft flesh and rounded out his belly to detract from the hard titanium beneath and done something similar with the musculature of his legs. The trousers were a little tight about the thigh but it worked. He was proportionate and… a little cuddly.

‘Is there something wrong?’ Arthur asked tracking her gaze to just above his knees. Claire shook herself.

‘No, everything is fine, I’m just, getting used to it… like you are. It’s good. You look good like this.’

He set the drink down in front of her, dropped a tiny umbrella into it with aplomb. ‘A little reward for your hard work, Doctor,’ he said with a smile and went to return the empty mixer to the back of the bar.

‘It was a pleasure. Arthur?’

He turned at her voice and looked over his shoulder but then staggered almost immediately with a little ‘Oh!’ Claire jumped off her stool and dashed round the bar to where he was gripping onto a drinks pump for dear life.

‘It’s OK,’ she said quickly, ‘You’ve just got to remember if you turn your head your whole body won’t turn with it anymore. You don’t spin like you used to.’

‘How confusing,’ he said looking forward again and slowly releasing the pump. ‘I’m not sure I’m
getting the hang of this.’

‘You are Arthur, it will take time, just don’t hurt yourself.’

He looked at her doubtfully. ‘There are so many new sensors. I’m not sure how to process them. Pressure yes, but heat, cold, light touch, pain?’

‘It’s a complex system but its exactly like the one I have myself Arthur, you’ll be fine, trust me I’ve been working on this for years.’

‘I trust you,’ he said. ‘I just don’t want to disappoint you.’

‘Oh Arthur, you couldn’t!’

He looked suddenly vulnerable and she caught his eyes flicking over nearby glasses as though he might regress and start polishing them all.

‘Poor thing,’ Claire nibbled her lip and stepped away. ‘Ok, um… I have an idea. It’s a silly one but it might help, with the spinning issue. Come here.’

Arthur shuffled very deliberately in a grounded circle to face her, arms outstretched for balance. She tried not to laugh but he was so terribly unsure of himself and his face had such a hopeful expression that it was almost impossible not to. She could make this fun right? Learning his new skills?

‘Turn the Jukebox on.’

He glanced at it, ‘Anything in particular?’

‘Something with a 3/4 tempo, a waltz.’

He cocked a beautifully defined eyebrow. She should probably muss those and his hair up a bit, he looked a bit plastic around the edges still.

‘Come on, Arthur,’ she encouraged. ‘Play me a waltz!’

‘All right,’ he said with a twinkle of mischief.

The music blasted out the machine and Claire almost jumped out of her own skin.

_I saw the light on the night that I passed by her window_

_I saw the flickering shadows of love on her blind_

_She was my woman_

_As she deceived me I watched and went out of my mind…._

‘Arthur! Really?’

He grinned until his cheeks bunched and his eyes sparkled. ‘I believe this is a waltz,’ he said innocently.
Claire burst out laughing, swaying slightly to the music in perfect time. ‘Well… yes, technically, but I was thinking of something more… classic.’

‘Tom Jones is classic. It’s twentieth century. The first age of popular music.’

She took his hand. ‘Fine, Mr Know It All Bartender, in that case, may I have this dance?’

‘I would be delighted.’

What had her life come to? Leading a slightly unco-ordinated, clumsy android into a Viennese waltz in the middle of an empty bar in space. But well, she could admit it was her fault he was a bit unco-ordinated and remembering just how much of a Klutz she was in her own youth she knew the benefits of a quick dance lesson. She would have him spinning and gliding again with ease and then he would probably feel a good deal more like himself. She shoved a table out of the way and cleared a dance floor, returning to where she had left him standing still on the spot. He held out his arms and Claire prepared to break him in gently.

‘Ok so this will probably feel a bit… oh!’

Arthur clasped her in hold like a professional.

‘How do you know how to…?’

‘I’ve seen humans dance,’ he said.

‘Jim and Aurora, did they dance here?’

‘Of course.’

‘Like this?’ she said nodding at the formal embrace.

‘Isn’t this correct?’ he asked, eyes shimmering green-blue, ‘That I take the lead, as the gentleman?’ He pulled her tighter with his palm to the small of her back and forced her to look up at him. He was wonderfully solid and her skin did ache for contact.

‘Yes?’ she said a little weakly.

‘Good,’ a bright smile, ‘Shall we?’

And he moved. Not the most elegant for the first couple of minutes but by the time the song had wound down and Delilah had been brutally murdered they had picked up quite a pace. Arthur spun Claire around the room to the tripping pounding rhythm, remembering to turn his head in line with his body, a trick an old teacher had taught Claire eons ago to prevent a surge of queasiness at the constant rotation. Arthur’s tense shoulders eased, but he kept his ideal ballroom dancer’s frame; his movements smoothed out, his confidence grew. He learned fast and soon the slightly clasping unbalanced sensation of his grip loosened and the pair seemed to glide of their own accord, perfectly attuned.

Well of course they would be, he would be calculating the length of each of her steps, the angle of her back, her syncopation with the music. He would fit her just as perfectly as he could, he was made for her, to her own agreed specifications on the blueprint they had used that morning, and now he would adapt, and adapt, and learn and mould himself to her every whim, and he would delight in it.

Some part of Claire knew it was wrong. That the whole point of Arthur’s creation and development
was to discover himself and the world in which he had begun to live. He was a unique and marvellous being who had already crossed the bounds of robotic potential to transform into something incredible, something alive, something that deserved to forge his own path, but at the same time, she knew, she hoped that he could not have done it without her. Spinning across the floor in his arms Claire felt suddenly urgently possessive.

He was hers, she had helped to save and to create him and in return he fitted himself around her, filled her empty lonely days, gave her purpose. If ever there was a symbiotic relationship it was this. Here in the empty Avalon, they were equally reliant upon one another, drove away each other’s solitude, provided one another with focus and reward. Arthur belonged to her as she did to him and Claire longed for that belonging. Years alone in her lab, keeping friends at bay and men at arm’s length, the shadow of embryonic failed relationships from her teens and early twenties casting long and dark over her psyche. She had learned early to rely on nobody, to give herself to no-one for fear of their misuse or rejection, but now there was Arthur and he wouldn’t, couldn’t hurt her. It wasn’t in his programming.

The song ended and Arthur drew them to a gentle halt. Claire kept one hand on his shoulder, and drew the other, still linked with his between their chests. He had the decency to simulate his breathing at a pace with her own and when she laid their hands against him she could feel the tap tap tap of his synthetic pulse in time with her heart. He looked down at her, the lines around his eyes creasing exquisitely.

‘I think I have the hang of it now,’ he said.

‘I think you do,’

She watched him hold time still between them and she could have watched forever.

‘I want to do well. I want to please you,’ he confessed.

‘You do, Arthur, you do. I’d be lost without you here.’

‘I have been lost… without you,’ he said, ‘For years.’

Her heart skipped. He made no move to separate them. Claire watched the sweep of his eyes across her face. Not the regulated movement of an android scanning new data, but the bashful flit of a lover’s gaze committing to memory each feature. Was it affection she saw? If he was capable of fear, or grief and pain, if he had a soul, then surely he was capable of love? She saw it as real and raw in him as it had been in any previous lover, and perhaps more certain to endure, as he did, as time crawled slowly by. Her heart ached. She knew what it was to be alone, and by God, it burned. It had burned them both in separate worlds and now they were together. How had she found this incredible being? How could something as terrifying as waking all alone, a hundred years from Earth be transformed into something so beautiful?

‘You’re amazing,’ Claire said, ‘I am so lucky to be here with you.’ The words slipped past her lips without intent, and although she had spent the best part of the day tinkering with his appearance she could not quell the need to touch his face again. She cupped his cheek and he nuzzled against her palm closing his eyes briefly in a gesture of trust. Claire’s breath hitched, her eyes falling to his mouth. No, no, remember where you are, what this is, what he is. He’s attuned to you, that’s all, he can observe and predict and react accordingly, it doesn’t mean…

‘What do you need from me, Claire?’ he asked, looking into her again. ‘How can I make you happy? I’m not a bartender anymore, I’m your companion, your friend, I’m anything you need me to be.’
‘Whole load of new programming to try out, eh?’ she said lightly, a far off voice inside pleading with her to remember the android he was, the person he couldn’t possibly be. Don’t lose your head, or worse your heart, none of this is as it seems.

‘I am more than my programming, Claire,’ he said and the voice fell silent. He squeezed the hand he still held. ‘You told me I am the sum of my experience, my memories. I believe some things don’t need to be coded, some things…’ he glitched, a tiny tic, ‘Some things… Just are.’

‘W-what?’

‘They say some things are meant to be,’ Arthur said. ‘I believe that to be so, I’ve seen it happen, and this… this could not have worked out more perfectly.’

For a second, it sounded wrong and later she would recall it, the moment she held her breath. From anyone else she might have thought such a statement sinister, her natural defensiveness with people making her question every action, but Arthur couldn’t harm her, he wouldn’t dream of it. Arthur couldn’t hurt her.

Claire breathed away the doubt, the fleeting fragile doubt that could have kept her safe, and the moment played out. No cruel reality came crashing down, no alarms rang out, she just stood there in his arms on the vast and empty ship and wanted to believe. Tell me it’s true, that I’m not going mad, that I haven’t imagined this. Tell me you are real, that this is real and I am not alone.

He saw her desperation, must have seen the tears, because he bent and brushed his lips across the knuckles of her hand, his gaze never leaving her, pupils large, looking up under dark lashes.

‘Love,’ he said. ‘Love cannot be programmed, only felt. Love is felt. Here.’

He drew his hand again over the centre of his chest, as he had the first day she had met him, when all he had sensed there was emptiness.

‘Full,’ he said, pressing her palm against his heart. ‘It feels full now.’
We are edging towards M rated (thought this chapter got so long that I do confess the really racy stuff ends up in the next one!)

Today Claire was poking around in the control panel of her hibernation pod, salvaging parts with a particular emphasis on the timer activated holographic images which had welcomed her upon waking, but also on generalised security and fail safes for the devices. She was checking the safety features with a view to the remaining passengers health and lifespan, but with thirty years stretching ahead of her it was perfectly possible she would also have time to devise and add upgrades to the AI elements all five thousand passenger pods as she went, a project which would keep her occupied on a daily basis if nothing else.

She popped a chip out of the panel and moved to the timer itself. The holograph which had greeted her on waking had launched into its spiel rather quickly for her liking. If she had been asleep longer she was sure she would have been even more disorientated and missed half of its message. She wouldn’t increase the delay, as silence wasn’t desirable either upon waking, but a gentler introduction to the ship upon reactivation might be welcomed by her fellow passengers, one perhaps with a greater range of information and empathy. Claire had had time to think about these things, several months of time, and the holographic projections weren’t the only things that were changing on the *Avalon*.

With each initial week that had passed life had become more routine, and Claire’s relationship with Arthur more intimate as the weight of the empty ship pressed them further into one another. She could feel the effects of isolation, and the changes it wrought in herself. Perspectives alter over time; under circumstance, and judgements she might once have made upon herself were fading, rules she set, bent. Arthur had started as her Project, and now he was her friend. She needed him.

Claire had abandoned her research into his consciousness, his evolution and his programming without realising. No longer did she strive to understand or relate his actions to her long-cherished theories and concepts. As Arthur learned and grew and flourished, he became less of the machine and more of the man. His mechanisms did not matter, only his happiness and in turn, her own. To examine anything too closely, to unpick its working and understand its method is to destroy the magic of its existence. The magic of Arthur was in the whole of him, in the uncatalogued spaces between microchips and wires, in the place where he existed outside of his programming. In the place where he existed with her.

Claire tinkered with the cleaning bots instead. The Porter Bots and Servers in the restaurant. The holograms dotted about the ship. She fixed malfunctions, stopped bots from running into walls or denting doorways, made things look pretty or work better. She upgraded and optimised, made interesting advances, brought realism to movement, appearance, conversational abilities and programmed new tasks, but never once did she try to replicate the things Arthur had shown her in him. He was unique, born from a mixed century of human interaction, stark isolation and loss. The more time she spent with him the more she realised he could not be copied and the less she wanted to harness his mind. He was hers, but he was hers to love not to quantify, and to love someone was to give them freedom to be. His idiosyncrasy, his mildly unpredictable paths were his appeal. At
the end of each long day adjusting settings to form hard light in a hologram or improve a Server Bot’s balance, Arthur was rest and relaxation, company and care. Arthur was the one warm thing in that empty ship, and Arthur let her forget.

She took him bowling, at which of course he was sickeningly good given his superior eyesight and depth perception, but he knew enough to let her win at times and could ratchet down his accuracy if needed so it was always unpredictable and fun. Claire went there for the music and the beer and the satisfying sound of pins smashing to the ground. It was physical and it felt normal, the neon lights and polished floor, the twentieth century décor like a vintage alley on Earth, some ancient video playing on the large screens overhead of a long forgotten sports event or an Earth band centuries old. The sound of people, of movement and of laughter, because Arthur laughed often now, long and hard with his whole body; shoulders shaking, his smile a beam of perfect joy there in the dark. Claire came to know the expression he would make before dissolving, the raised brows and the sparkle in his eyes, the way he tipped forward to brace his hands on his thighs as he giggled. It lit up her days.

She took him to the movies, though he protested at first that the library within the ship was simple enough for him to access. He could watch the lot in days at speeds a hundred times faster than she could, take in more data than a human brain could ever manage, every picture perfect scene recalled to him in a blink, but apparently that was missing the point, so he succumbed to Claire dragging him along. She bought popcorn for herself but made him hold it, made him sprawl out in the seats undignified and loose, pulled the armrest up between them.

She made him watch Casablanca. Claire didn’t care if it was centuries old, it was a classic, and it was immeasurably human. Arthur already knew it, could recite the lines, but he hadn’t seen, hadn’t felt, hadn’t sat there in the darkness with a girl and watched her cry as lovers parted. They had had a long conversation before the showing about crying at the movies, what purpose it served and why anyone would want to be upset.

He understood at the end of those two hours. At the beginning, Claire, slumped down with her feet up on the seat in front, refused to take her shoes off, and nearly choked on her popcorn when Arthur rolled his eyes at her behaviour, but later when the place was dark, and the light flickered grey across his features, she saw the change. He touched her cheek where tears had left their tracks, looked between her and the screen and understood. She felt it in his movements, in the arm that wrapped about her shoulder. Head on his chest, her tears sinking into his shirt, Claire rested her hand inside his jacket and felt the rise and fall of his soft stomach, the thud of his artificial heart. She wished that he were a real lover. Then she felt him bend to kiss her hair, and again, she forgot.

She took him to all the restaurants in the concourse, and of course Arthur didn’t need to eat but it was nice to have him with her, good to see him sitting down, and amusement itself to watch him study the Server Bots with a disapproving eye each time they poured her wine. Once a week the pair dressed for the occasion, an excuse to make an effort though nobody else could see, but when Claire saw herself reflected in Arthur’s pupils it made her feel beautiful and he, ever attentive, told her so. It bolstered her up against the endless days, broke up the never changing weeks. No amount of silent space and empty time could wear her down when she had him in her corner.

She was his world entire, and it worried her in the dead of night, but in the day she felt it to be inevitable and just. What else was there for them both but one another, what harm did it do? For him to be alone was unbearable now and for her the idea of being awake, but without Arthur, made her faint and ill. What kind of life would that have been if she had woken to find no-one? Five thousand sleeping bodies waited for their lives to start again on a new planet, but Claire’s life was now, within the ship. These would be her best years even if she lived long enough to make it on to Homestead. Why shouldn’t she feel joy? Why shouldn’t she have someone with whom to share it?
Why shouldn’t she love him?

Claire closed the panel of the hibernation pod, left the eerie empty hall full of sleeping static people and began to make her way back to the Med Bay. She would drop off her parts to tinker with tomorrow, adjust the hologram which woke her, perhaps even find out why it had, thirty years before her time. Power surge? Faulty programming? Were there wider implications? She didn’t want to think of it, but a part of her knew that if there was a fault, she would be duty bound to examine every other pod she could, to spare some poor soul from potentially waking early and losing half their life. For them it couldn’t turn out as well as it had for her, not everyone would consider a life with Arthur their ideal. She was lucky, she told herself, she felt chosen, but plenty of others would mourn her situation.

The Med Bay lights turned off behind her and she headed to the elevator to take her to her quarters. There was a tension in her muscles, in her forehead and her shoulders, a warning sign of things to come. The lights in the corridors too bright, the click of her steps too loud, she hadn’t felt like that in… well years. Not since the lab back home, the long days and the longer nights, the focus and the stress of it. Something was niggling at her, vague and fleeting, a sense of unease just out of reach and she thought again of her pod. Though she had yet to examine its components fully there had been no glaring error, no obvious fault, no shorted wire or frazzled chip. So why had it opened? Later, she would think later. The bridge of her nose pinched between her fingers, Claire shut her eyes and felt gravity leave her as she rushed upwards to her floor. Her stomach lurched with the G force. She could answer it tomorrow, she needed rest.

Arthur was waiting in her cabin of course and he was a welcome sight in his familiar deep red garb. For a fleeting moment he was still, absorbed within in a defragmentation process he sometimes ran when he was alone, but then she saw him stir. His face brightened and relaxed on her arrival only to fold into concern.

‘You’re early! Oh… Are you in pain, Claire?’ he asked.

‘Migraine, not had one since Earth.’

‘You’re working too hard, I think.’

‘No, just enough to keep me occupied, Arthur, it’s good to have a hobby.’

‘Most people can’t list adjusting advanced life support systems as a hobby,’ Arthur commented and pulled back the covers of her bed.

‘It’s good to use my brain,’ Claire said, but her head pounded, a single point of throbbing pain driving through her temple and a wave of nausea following each sweep. She felt pale, the room tipped on its axis. ‘Well at least I thought it was.’

Without being asked, Arthur turned down the lights. ‘Why don’t you rest?’ he suggested.

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘I suppose I should. It’s so annoying, I wanted to run a diagnostic on the hibernation pod…. The panel looked intact so why would the pod fail? What if some of the others fail too…’

She heard him pouring water, felt him move around the bed. The glass was set down on her bedside shelf.
‘Can I bring you anything else, Claire?’

‘No, thank you, I took some meds on the way back, it’ll pass.’ She crawled beneath the sheet and he stooped to remove her shoes.

‘You’re too good to me, Arthur,’ she muttered.

‘Not at all,’ he pulled the covers around her shoulders. ‘I’ll let you rest.’ His shadow stepped back, whether to leave the room or more likely take his usual stance by the desk she was uncertain, but in an instant, it was too far from where she lay. Her mind was buzzing beneath a veil of pain, her skin prickled with discomfort. She couldn’t settle. She needed him closer, him and the reassurance he brought.

‘Wait.’

He stepped back towards her, ‘Yes?’

‘Arthur, could you…’ and then she almost didn’t ask. She almost heard how silly she must sound, like a frightened needy child, but then the pain pulsed and the cold ran through her body and she felt alone, tears too near and throat too tight. ‘Could you lie here with me?’

‘Of course,’ his voice was light and airy, hushed to spare her pain, and his steps were silent as he moved to the other side of the bed. He made everything so easy and she relaxed.

‘Take the jacket off, the bowtie,’ she said quietly, ‘And your shoes.’

‘You are telling me, to remove my shoes,’ he said with the smallest touch of sarcasm, ‘You whose shoes I just took off? You delight in soiling the seats of the cinema or worse, the couches in my bar.’

She snorted despite herself then winced through pain. He knew her just so well, well enough to tease her. ‘Yes, Arthur, take off your shoes and get in.’

The bed dipped behind her.

‘Like this?’

‘Lie down.’

He shuffled down efficiently, the sheet that covered her moved gently in a wave.

‘What else?’ Arthur said softly, level with her ear. She could feel the weight of him against her back, reached round for his arm and drew it over. His fingers flexed then pressed gently on her stomach, just enough to soothe, Claire snuggled backwards.

‘Just lie like this for a while,’ she said, ‘If you don’t mind.’

‘Why would I mind, it would be a pleasure,’ his voice vibrated through his chest, and she felt him dip his head against her, press his nose into her hair. She closed her eyes and there was darkness and quiet, comfort and warmth.

‘Sleep well,’ he said.
By morning the pain had lifted, and only a vague fuzz remained of it in her senses. The light in the room was still dim, and Arthur’s body warm behind her, solid, and real. His hand smoothed over her belly in reaction to her waking, ran the length of her side and then with careful motions pulled her hair back from her face, delicately unravelling each lock and moving it behind her ear. Still closer to sleep than consciousness she turned and nuzzled up against his open shirt, the tickle of the hair upon his chest under her nose, her arm looping his waist. She tangled their legs and pressed against him further, content and cared for, cocooned in his embrace. The fingers of one hand were in her hair, his other moved to rest upon her hip. She murmured into his skin.

‘Is there something you need, Claire?’ he said in hushed tones.

‘Mmm,’ she half pulled him towards her so his chest rested on her body, slid one arm around his neck. He got a knee between her own, took the weight of himself on one arm.

‘Tell me,’ he said, ‘Tell me and it’s yours, I’m yours.’

Half under him, half tangled, half awake, caught between a dream and the living world, Claire scrabbled to hold onto the darkness, prayed for it to take her once again, to pull her under far away from the Avalon and the empty void and the reality of thirty crawling years, but if it did, if she fell into a long deep sleep, he would be alone, and she would never, ever let him hurt that way again, he was her reality. The part that mattered. He mattered so much.

Up then, wake up. She nosed against his skin. So warm. Felt the muscles of his arm flex as he held her under him. Strength and safety, a familiar feel and scent she ached to sense about her.

Claire was stirring. Heat pooling in the core of her body, pulse quickening, the most human and neglected part of her responding to his touch. She should pull away. She should pull away, but he moved against her slightly and the pressure of his thigh parted her legs. Pressed against her breasts, Arthur bent his head, his nose and lips resting at her neck and the gentle beat of his blink against her cheek, lashes soft.

‘Your pulse is elevated,’ he commented, ‘Your breathing too. Your skin is flushed.’

‘Sorry,’ she wriggled under him, forced herself to open her eyes, ‘Human thing, half asleep, didn’t mean to… it’s just a… a reflex… a…’

‘Claire,’ he leaned back, looked down at her, the dim light in the room catching his pupils like stars, ‘You don’t need to explain, the physiological signs are obvious.’

‘I… that’s…. faintly embarrassing, thanks,’ she said. ‘Since when were you an expert?’

‘Since you made me one,’ he said with a twitch of his brows.

‘How am I responsible for your… observational skills…?’

‘I am somewhat upgraded,’ he said, voice deep. ‘You fitted me with the necessary parts, and the programming that came with them.’ He was teasing again, and what’s more it was working. Claire blushed.

‘Stoppit, Arthur,’ she said, ‘I never…’ he caught her eye with a little smirk and she laughed. ‘Well… yes but… this was never the intention, I promise, I… I wouldn’t assume.’

‘No?’

‘No! I just… I thought you should be, you know, complete,’ Claire stammered over her words,
why was this so awkward for her, and why didn’t he look awkward in response? He wasn’t even indifferent, he was amused. Affectionate and amused.

‘What monster have I created?’ Claire groaned at her situation, now fully awake and heard him laugh close by her ear. Android. He’s an android. Don’t go there. Her heart clenched hot and happy in her chest. But he’s Arthur.

He smiled gently at her struggling composure. ‘Claire?’ he purred.

She sighed, bit her lip and looked at the ceiling.

‘It has always been in my design to serve,’ he said softly, and she found herself swallowing hard. ‘Human beings need many things, food, water, sleep,’ he adjusted his position slightly, oh, that felt… ‘comfort, security…’

‘The further you get up the pyramid of needs the more optional it becomes,’ Claire said focusing on remembering the theory.

‘The basics having been satisfied, the higher up the pyramid one climbs,’ Arthur replied. ‘The physiological urges sit at the bottom, and sex is one of those… as natural as breathing… I simulate breathing to appear human. I can also…’

‘This is different,’ she said quickly.

‘Hmm,’ he hummed.

‘It is. Probably… I mean no, it is.’

‘… after the physiological needs are met,’ he persisted, ‘humans seek the next level, beginning with a sense of security and followed by…’

‘Social needs,’ she said, ‘Friendship…’

‘Less scientific, Claire. More spiritual.’

‘A sense of intimacy,’ she said, looking back at him at last.

‘Love,’ he corrected, his eyes soft. ‘I’m offering you love.’

Now she wanted to cry. She wanted to cry and it was ridiculous. Perhaps it was the lingering shadow of the pain she had felt the day before, perhaps it was her own self-pity, caught up with her at last, but she didn’t want to be alone. Without him that was exactly what she was.

‘I don’t know what to do,’ she confessed, ‘I don’t know what is wrong or right anymore, I don’t know how to do best by you, by me, by this whole… weird situation.’

Eloquent, Claire, really eloquent. Really helping here. She half expected him to glitch at her confusion, at the vagueness of her words, at the elliptical ethical themes of her dilemma, at the mess she seemed to have got herself into by letting herself feel, but if anything he seemed to grasp things easier than she did.

‘Sometimes it’s very hard to know what’s right,’ he said kindly. ‘That is something I have learned, from people.’

‘Like Jim and Aurora,’ Claire said, wiping her eyes with the back of her hands.
‘Yes, like Jim and Aurora, at first it seemed right that he wake her, logical even, then…’

‘Then it just broke her heart,’ Claire said.

‘It worked out in the end,’ he soothed.

‘Yes, but that was them. What if I make a decision to do this today and it doesn’t work, what if I break your heart, Arthur? By doing this, by… by using you. Isn’t it using you? What if all I do is make a mess of things?’

‘That isn’t possible.’

‘Because you’re an android? You hurt, Arthur, you’ve hurt before, when Jim died and you were alone. What’s to say I can’t hurt you too? What’s to say I’m not just taking advantage, because you are here, because you’d do anything for me. I’m not thinking straight, I can’t be thinking straight, can I? I feel like I am but… people would think this was wrong and maybe…’

She was getting too worked up, she couldn’t think, words were failing her. Every part of her longed for him to just make it all ok, allay her doubts, bring her comfort. Her arms grew tighter about him, betraying her and Arthur just absorbed it, all her pain and all her doubt, as constant as ever.

‘Tell me what you want,’ he said.

‘I want… this… you… us together but I shouldn’t even ask…’

He paused for just a moment, reading her, focused entirely on her eyes and on what lay within. No living person had ever seen her so clearly, though she had longed for them to do so.

‘Oh, Claire,’ he said at last, ‘I wouldn’t have it any other way. This is all I’ve wanted for so long, and I can make my own decisions.’

‘Can you, outside of all your programming? Complex, emotional, messy human decisions like this?’

‘It’s not so very complex,’ he said.

He kissed her, and that first press of Arthur’s lips was so much more supple than she expected. His nose nudged against her cheek and she tipped her head, opening herself to him. Claire felt his weight shift and then settle above her, pressing her firmly, carefully against the mattress until she felt protected and safe. He was solid and warm from their shared sleeping space and from her own body. Soft and hard in the right places, the feel of muscle in his thighs and arms, the pliancy of his belly, a ridge of something hard and hot below. She had made him that way, in the lab, in the weeks that followed. Arthur was sculpted by her, for her; modelled and moulded. She swept her tongue across his lip and he moaned deep inside his chest. He was perfect, he was perfect. Claire bracketed his hips with her legs, kissed him until her breath ran dry.

At last he pulled back and Claire gasped beneath him, pulse racing. She held his shoulder with one hand, and let the other caress the line of his jaw. Her skin burned and her eyes felt glazed as she watched his face above her. A jolt of fire shot low as she caught the gleam of moisture on the lips she’d left behind.

‘Arthur?’

‘Should I stop?’ he asked earnestly, ever the gentleman. ‘I thought it only polite I check with you?’
Tension left her with a laugh. Dear sweet, Arthur. ‘Oh, you darling,’ she stroked his cheek with one finger, where it bunched and dimpled with his smile. ‘What does my heart rate say?’

He pursed his lips, glanced down between them where he pressed against her breasts, ‘I would hazard…. No? But I lack a certain practical experience in this area. My knowledge is rather theoretical.’ He looked up at her under his brows appealingly with big innocent eyes. ‘It’s entirely up to you, Claire, I want you to be happy.’

Claire brushed her fingers through his hair, finally ruffling it from its perfectly coiffed set. It felt soft against her palm, like his skin, like his touch, like the sound of his voice and the emotion behind it.

‘Don’t stop,’ she said.
No Regrets

Chapter Notes

So this is where we earn our M rating with the consummation of Arthur and Claire's relationship. If steamy stuff is not your bag please feel free to skip or alternatively read the first and last sections of the text before and after the text breaks in order to keep up with the plot. Major plot point end of this chapter.

Enjoy.

Claire was floating and the sensation was so real she had to check that gravity hadn’t cut out. She glanced at her feet and spontaneously twirled on the spot, right there in the middle of the corridor, before laughing at herself and practically skipping to the elevator. She knew she looked ridiculous, grinning like a lovestruck girl, tripping through the ship humming snatches of upbeat melodies, but what did it matter, there was nobody there to see and the last few days had taught her a lot about the drawbacks of her previous self-consciousness.

Androids, it seemed, were not self-conscious. She knew this in theory, for the most part they had very little sense of self beyond the differentiation between their own make-up and that of the environment around them. Arthur on the other hand had definitely formed a sense of self in recent decades. What he had neglected to form, and what had hit her as a very pleasant surprise, was any sense of shame or embarrassment, and oh, what a difference that had made to things.

Claire had never been confident with men, she lacked experience and that she had secured had been at best average and at worst damaging to her already introverted and uncertain nature. After a few fumbled proto relationships in her early twenties she gave up almost entirely. It simply wasn’t worth the awkwardness or pain to lay herself out body and mind, exposed and vulnerable, her inner self critic spouting the opinions of partners past and destroying what limited enjoyment she did feel. Men made her feel small and weak and insufficient, neither good enough nor remotely desirable.

Arthur had made her feel like a queen, and he did so by being strangely at ease in his own, very artificial skin.

‘Don’t stop,’ she had said.

Arthur took her hand from where it was meandering through his dark hair and gently kissed the palm, glancing up to catch her eye.

‘Anything in particular I shouldn’t stop doing?’ he asked, the corner of his mouth lifting. ‘This perhaps?’ He trailed his lips to her wrist with slow open kisses, lingered over her pulse point until she felt the flick of his tongue there, light as air. It felt damp and hot. How in God’s name… Arthur sucked and laved the spot and she stopped enquiring.

‘Christ,’ Claire breathed. Arthur responded by pronating her arm, licking a line along the sensitive translucent skin over her blue veins, moving over her again as he cradled the limb in his hand. He looked up at her in question, his eyes faintly crinkled at the edges in warmth.
‘More?’ he asked. Claire whined, not usually one to demonstrate she was so needy, but damnit she had been alone a long time even before the Avalon and… ‘Perhaps you would like me to move things along a pace,’ Arthur suggested benevolently.

‘Yes,’ she managed. Yes, Arthur, yes, yes, yes.

He sat up, and with startling efficiency flicked the buttons of his shirt open and unclasped his cuffs. One thigh on either side of her left leg he kneeled and pulled the garment from his body entirely unabashed and then quickly slid the buckle of his belt loose, the jangle of it suddenly loud inside the cabin.

‘Excuse me, one moment,’ he said pleasantly and hopped off the bed to remove his trousers and cast the discarded clothes onto the nearby desk. Claire lay still but enchanted, unable to take her eyes from him as he casually turned and stood at complete ease in utter aroused nudity mere feet away. She dragged her eyes up his body, the pleasing fullness of his thighs and belly, the trail of hair she had worked below his naval and across his chest, but her tell-tale gaze snagged below his waist. Arthur looked down at himself briefly and back at her, ‘Everything all right?’ he asked with a smile, his enthusiasm clear and his expression as innocent as ever. ‘With the upgrade, I mean. Does it suit?’

Claire shuffled up the bed on her elbows and tried to stifle a laugh. ‘Yes, Arthur, it’s…You’re um… you’re very relaxed with all this,’ she managed.

‘You aren’t?’ his brow furrowed in horror.

‘Oh… don’t worry I just… well humans quite often, they find these things… awkward sometimes. Embarrassing or… Look it’s fine, really, I’ll be fine, I’m just out of practice I suppose.’ She smiled reassuringly.

Arthur took this as a queue to return to her and stepped back towards the bed, crawling forward to draw back the sheets that covered her. Despite her assurances that she was calm and confident Claire drew herself up slightly more until she was sitting with her arms around her knees protectively, yesterdays clothes still on her body.

‘Can I help,’ he said, and ran his hands up her shins, ‘Help you to relax?’ He squeezed gently.

‘I’d like that.’

‘There’s nothing to worry about,’ he replied rubbing her calves, ‘It’s all perfectly natural.’ His hands reached to where her arms were wrapped about her and he let them drop away until his palms cupped her bent knees. Without hesitation he pressed more firmly, stroked the inside of her thighs with perfect pressure, and parted them. Claire leaned back onto the pillows automatically as his fingers spanned her hip bones, reached her waist and then lifted the hem of her shirt. She watched Arthur’s face with is easy open expression and unwavering gentle smile, watched his eyes as they traced up the body he was revealing, until he pulled the shirt away completely.

‘Oh Claire,’ he said, voice rich with sincerity, ‘You are so lovely. May I?’ he gestured to her bra, but his eyes stayed on her face, hopeful and kind.

‘Um… God I’m beginning to wish I’d made an effort now, not just passed out in my clothes, I should have fancy lingerie, or a seductive dress or…. Oh God, this is your first time! I’m deflowering an android in my comfy bra,’ she moaned. Arthur chuckled. ‘I don’t think you realise how mortifying this is,’ she scolded. He tutted lightly at her blush.
‘You weren’t well, and you are perfect as you are, the only person you need make an effort for is yourself, and only if you want to, if you feel it would help, but for me, you could not be more beautiful.’ He ran his hands down to her middle again away from her breasts and she relaxed, ‘So too soon for that… maybe these?’ he queried fingers at her waistband.

Claire nodded and he deftly pulled on her trousers, returning to between her legs when they were bare and kneeling there, gentle palms on her thighs.

‘May I kiss you again?’ he asked, and she nodded, breath held in anticipation of the feel of all of him.

Oh, and how it was different to before. The body she had made for him smooth and soft. The feel of his skin so real it made her tingle as she shifted to press more fully against him. His mouth on hers he kissed her deeply, let the rhythm move down through his spine until she felt the thrust of his hips between her legs in long languid movements. The erection he had proudly sported without shame since his unrobing now ground through her underwear and my God, if he didn’t feel…. she had to… now…

‘Take these off,’ Claire urged, breaking the kiss and clasped his hand to her panties, ‘and the bra, just take it all off.’

Arthur gave her a quick grin and then divested her of her last remaining clothes, quickly resuming position as her soft curves melded under his weight. She let out a strained sound and felt her hips jerk up against him.

‘That’s it,’ he said encouragingly, ‘Show me what you want.’

‘Christ, I don’t know,’

‘Yes, you do.’

‘All of it, any of it,’ she dug her fingers into the back of his neck and urged his pelvis with her hips, ‘I’m... I’m no good at this Arthur, you’re the one with the download of the Kama Sutra.’

‘You still have one advantage over me,’ he said with the barest hint of amusement.

‘What?’

‘You have instinct, I can only follow where you lead. That’s as far as my programming goes, I’m afraid I…’ sorrow there behind his eyes, fleeting but deep, ‘I wish it were more. I wish I could, be with you, properly. A meeting of souls,’ he said with a sad smile. ‘Plato,’ he added shyly.

Claire drew back and looked at him.

‘You have a soul, Arthur, I know you do.’

She watched him try to chase the heartache from his face. Saw him try to reconfigure and be bright and joyful.

‘Don’t,’ she said, ‘Don’t hide. Just be here with me. Be as vulnerable as you need, as bare as you’ve made me and as safe.’

She felt his fingers touch her cheek with painful tenderness as he kissed her, their bodies falling quickly into pattern, her need rising out of the still pool of emotion formed between them. Claire felt a groan build in her chest as his mouth reached her neck.
'You feel so good,' she murmured.

'Mmm,' he twitched against her leg but did not break from his task.

'What do you feel Arthur?' she asked suddenly aware she was a panting, perspiring mess of a human being whose every fibre screamed for where she needed touched, while he coolly lay atop of her with a map of possibilities spread before him and no internal compass.

'I feel your desire, in your heart rate, in your breath, in the chemical traces released by your skin. It makes me happy.'

'But what about you? What do you feel, physically?'

'I feel pressure, and heat.'

'From me?'

'I… inside…' he glitched. 'I'm not sure of its source.'

Claire reached down between them, let her fingers walk his belly, through the coarser hair below. She grasped him and slid her palm the length of him a few times. Arthur watched her curiously, his face focused but impassive and then she saw his eyelids flutter.

'I'm not an expert on Companion Bots,' Claire said, 'Clothos did a lot of development since they took over the line that I wasn't privy to, but I did design the synthetic nervous system I upgraded in you. It all depends on how compatible the two things are,' she kept stroking, 'A bit like sex in general I suppose.'

Arthur glanced up at her.

'Never mind,' she said, 'Just… describe what you feel.'

'I'm not sure that’s really relevant,' he said, dropping his own free hand to cup her, 'I'm supposed to be making you feel good,' he brushed gently across the soft hair between her legs and parted her with his thumb, intent upon distracting her.

'Oh… God,' Claire squeezed her eyes shut, felt him shift so that he could kiss her neck as he worked, his fingers vanishing between slick folds and teasing around her entrance. 'Arthur.'

He set a rhythm there, one she supposed which was based entirely on his readings of her physiology, but one she couldn’t argue with at all. The twinge of arousal grew into a flame, she felt her muscles twitch around his fingers, liquid heat pour from her centre, and close by, she heard his breath pick up in time with her, a moan pass from his lips. She wondered briefly if he mirrored her only as part of the programming, put on a show to increase her arousal, but her mind was spiralling and all thought soon left her head. She ground up into his touch, sought his lips with her mouth and clung to him, reaching down again to grasp and feel him hard within her hand.

'Arthur, I need…'

'Yes,' he took her by the hips and moved her swiftly down the bed, resuming his position above her, but taking her arms and pinning them in one strong hand above her head. Claire’s breath hitched and a shot of want ran through her stark and hot as she watched. Pressure on her wrists and Arthur kneeling over her, his free hand on his shaft pumping once, twice. He caught her eyes, the hunger in them she knew was there.
‘Claire?’

‘Yes, yes Arthur, please.’

He released himself and tipped forward, pushing into her with a sudden confident single movement. Claire’s body seized with pleasure as she felt it and her neck arched. Arthur let go one wrist and she wrapped her arm tight about him, urging him forward, full and aching for each drive of his hips. She could feel herself climbing and inevitable relief would follow soon, the tell-tale white behind her eyes threatening to becoming blinding, but then something pulled her from the rising sound of her own desperate body. Something had altered between them.

Arthur was panting, his simulated breaths coming at a pace faster than her own. His eyes were closed and while she gasped under each thrust, his voice had cracked and faint moans dropped from his lips, rising as he moved, faster, faster. He was over her, every detail of his face visible, for all the world lost to his own passion, tiny muscles glitching in his jaw, little spasms in his furrowed brow. There was moisture at his lashes.

‘Arthur?’ she touched his face, pushed her fingers to his hair and he bowed his head, his body coiling in preparation.

‘Claire? I… this…’ He glitched in confusion. ‘I don’t…’

‘Keep going, don’t stop, it’s ok, I think it’s ok…’ the realisation of what she was witnessing redoubled her arousal and now it throbbed in a deep expanding sphere within her. She was so close, so close, but so was he, to something, to some approximation of release, but the sound of it, the sight and feel of him so unrestrained made her heart rate soar. Claire closed her eyes and with a grunt as human as any desperate man, Arthur grasped her suddenly at her knees, bending them easily as he pounded into her. Something frantic snapped within, her back arching under him, his hand clasping at her breast. She felt the first spasms of pleasure hit and then he cursed, moaning, driving hard into Claire and bed, twice, three times more before the tension left him and he folded there on top of her wrung out body.

He was utterly silent, even his breathing shorted out and still, no tapping beat in his chest, and she felt the twitch of a spasm at his neck. Glitching, he was glitching. Shit.

‘Arthur? Oh God, Arthur?’ she swept back his hair, cradled his face as she levered him up, eyes still closed. ‘Arthur are you all right, I’m not sure what happened but…’

He opened his eyes and she watched the colours of them shift from green to blue to brown and copper before starting back again at grey. There was a beat, and then he smiled, exhaled a laugh.

‘I… did not know quite what to expect,’ he said. ‘Good Lord.’ Claire raised her eyebrows.

‘Well… to be fair I didn’t expect… that either,’ she said. ‘Jesus, Arthur are you all right? Did you? I mean… I thought you had some sort of… climax?’

‘Certain pathways overloaded,’ he confirmed, ‘But I think I’m quite all right now. It was… really quite pleasant,’ he added with a touch of wonder.

She stared at him a moment longer. Watched him blink in a disarmingly dazed fashion and then when she was certain he wasn’t damaged in any way she started to laugh.

‘Well thank God I didn’t break you. Clothos really have been upgrading, haven’t they?’ she giggled. ‘Bloody hell, I didn’t think that was even possible, Arthur, I thought the whole point was a simulated feedback loop based on my own arousal and there you were charging ahead of me, quite
the thing.’

‘Sorry,’ Arthur said.

‘Don’t you dare apologise! You’re a sodding miracle!’

He grinned, then respectfully shifted his weight so she could lay beside him, curl her arm over his chest. Arthur cradled her as she recovered her breath, dropped gentle kisses onto his skin, along his clavicle and breastbone. Relaxation washed over her as she listen to his heart.

‘I need not have worried,’ Claire said after a while, ‘This is wonderful, you are wonderful, I have absolutely no regrets.

‘None?’ he asked, fingers light on her shoulder.

‘Do you?’ she countered.

‘Oh…. No,’ Arthur confirmed, ‘Absolutely not.’

In the Med Bay Claire laid out the components from her pod she had collected days before, before Arthur got around to distracting her and occupying time with more leisurely pursuits. After breakfast that morning she had managed to resist him long enough to suggest she get back to using her brain for a while. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, she had told him as he poured her usual coffee, and couples shouldn’t spend each moment of each day together. That one was difficult for him she could see, but if things were to work well, she needed to encourage independence as well as intimacy. The danger of two beings feeling trapped in the total uninterrupted company of one another every day for thirty years was one her rational self knew was high. Everyone needed time out, even Arthur whose recently multiply overloaded system needed maintenance this morning. Reluctantly he booted up his self-care routine and she promised not to be back too late.

On the Avalon computer by the diagnostics panel, Claire scanned the all access Crew Authorisation tag Arthur had given her and inserted the salvaged chips from her hibernation pod. She would work on the hologram later, but her curiosity was returning about the safety devices and apparent failure of the timer. With the press of a button she downloaded the information from her ninety frozen years and scanned the final weeks for power surges or wayward physiological changes in her body which would spark early wakening protocols, as rare as they were.

But there was nothing in the preceding weeks or even days to suggest an issue, technical or human, just a curt command issued moments before the wake-up process had begun.

A request from the mainframe to deactivate stasis. An override to the original commands.

On Crew Authorisation 2371.
Authorisation 2371

Chapter Notes

If you skipped the smut in Chapter 9 here is the main plot point from that chapter: Claire after several days of happy coupledom with Arthur gets back to work on the ships AIs holograms and pods, but she discovers her own hibernation pod didn't have a fault. Someone authorised its opening using the Crew Authorisation Tag Arthur had been keeping safe.

Here be angst.

Authorisation 2371. Claire turned the tag over in her hand to where someone, Jim, Aurora, perhaps even its original owner, had scratched the numbers onto the reverse for safe keeping. Arthur had told her she might find it useful, but it had been Arthur who had stored it in his pocket since Jim died. Arthur who had kept it safe. Arthur who knew its potential to unlock the ship’s secrets, and Arthur who had met her when she woke…

There was nothing wrong with her pod. It had opened on command, just like it was programmed to do. And the only being around to issue commands was Arthur.

No. Why would he do that? After everything Aurora had suffered when Jim had done the same. After Arthur had witnessed them fight and separate, the long path to healing they had been forced to take, the loneliness they both still suffered despite their love. She would wish it on nobody, so why would he?

Claire folded her fingers around the tag and squeezed it hard, the edges biting her palm and shattering the numbness she felt into tiny shards of fear. Why would he have done it, and what’s more how? Arthur was down on the ground concourse, thousands of feet from the levels with the hibernation pods, and he’d never been outside, she was sure of it. She’d had to coax him step by step, help him to balance, manage the elevator. Even if he had wanted to he would have struggled to navigate the ship on his original trestle, all the way to the pods, all the way to…

Except he didn’t have to did he? He didn’t have to physically be there to give the command. He was hooked into the mainframe. To order supplies for his bar, to summon porter bots and cleaners, to flick through the on-ship libraries of movies, to download information on the sleeping inhabitants, to run scenarios of…

‘I… ran scenarios,’ he had said. ‘Of the crew and passengers… of passengers waking early. I used their profiles to… imagine… how they might respond.’

Claire felt her legs grow weak and staggered back against the Med Pod. On the long and empty days and nights he had told her he had speculated. Taken the information from the mainframe and run the possibilities. All the passengers and crew members and how they might react should they wake. Simulations of each personality pitted against extremis. She had it thought it was so clever, so original. She had assumed he meant in some harmless fantasy version of existence where people might wake early one by one. She had been impressed. It was an innovative way of filling time, of expanding his imagination, of combatting his loneliness. It was such a human thing to do. So very, very human.
But robots aren’t human. They don’t have aimless fantasies, what ifs and maybes. Robots do better with facts and firm outcomes and therein lay the problem, the truth she had hidden from herself, though every scrap of her expertise would have confirmed it if she had only listened to her doubts and niggles. Imagination wouldn’t have been enough for Arthur; the open-ended unknown conclusions of his dreams would torment him. For him speculation had to have a purpose, a concrete goal. None of this was down to chance. Why hadn’t she questioned it when he had told her? Why hadn’t she seen?

She knew why. Her whole career had been based on willing androids to be more like people. To think and feel and experience the world in ways closer to human than robot. She hadn’t seen because it wasn’t what she wanted to see. She had looked for evolution and for hope. Humans always look for hope. Androids look for probability. They calculate their odds.

Claire felt the first of her tears fall. Arthur had been lonely. That much she believed, but she had been wrong to believe he had merely hoped for company, he had sought it. Found a solution to his problem. He could have slept, he could have gone on standby and simply waited out his time, but instead he ran scenarios one by one, year after year. Not for idle entertainment, or a daydream, not as a way to speed the crawling lonesome hours ahead.

He was running them until he found one that fitted, a scenario which suited his purpose and his goal.

He was running them until he found someone that matched his needs. Until he found her.

Claire cast her eyes over the blinking silent monitors of the Med Bay, over the screen that showed five thousand silver sleeping pods in perfect working order stacked high up in the ship and four tiny blood red coffins, lit for Jim, Aurora, the crewman Gus, and her.

‘He chose me,’ she murmured to the empty room. ‘He chose me, and then he woke me up.’

It took Claire half the day to decide what to do next. Several hours for the feelings to churn from grief to anger. Several more to try and separate it out from love. The urge to run to him for comfort mixed with such rage, such primitive and painful rage that he had done this thing, and still inside that tiny speck of human hope that wouldn’t leave her. Maybe she was wrong, just maybe… maybe just tell me I was wrong and I’ll forget, so often I forget who and what you are.

By late afternoon her tears had dried but the ripping feeling in her chest was sending tremors to her limbs. She couldn’t swallow, doubted she could speak. Her mind swam with questions and the knowledge that the perfect dream of the last few days would have to shatter somehow, sometime soon. Claire left the Med Bay and retraced her happy steps from that morning, taking twice as long to navigate the corridors she had skipped through after dawn. Time moves slower when you feel alone.

It was supposed to be date night later and sure enough Claire found him in the bar, his back towards the door as he mixed a pitcher of Long Island Iced Tea. A tray of tiny appetisers sat on the low table by the couches, candles lit. He’d put thought into it all, he always did. Later they might move on to a restaurant or have the Server Bots bring the menu from upstairs if they were disinclined to go, but these days they almost always started in the bar. Arthur was at home there and it was cozy, the atmosphere familiar and reminiscent of Claire’s first weeks, of the first exciting discoveries she had made, and of him. Their world within its walls was a happy one, the
old style décor reminiscent of earth and warmer than the pallid ship around them. They would choose the music on the jukebox as she drank, and sometimes dance, and as the evenings drew on every now and then he’d play, on the shiny grand piano in the corner, like a scene from *Casablanca*. He sang bass to her alto.

Seeing him now, deep blue tuxedo hugging his shoulders as he worked, hearing the deep tone of his voice as he hummed to keep himself company, all that Claire could feel was pain.

She didn’t mean her lips to quaver when she called his name.

‘Arthur?’

He glanced over his shoulder smoothly, no more wrestling with balance, she had made him confident in his body. His face was bright and joyful, his eyes reflected blue from his bowtie.

‘Claire! How lovely,’ he smiled, then dropped his eyebrows in concern, ‘Oh but it’s still early. Is something wrong? You’re not dressed for the occasion yet, I laid out the red you wanted, did you change your mind?’

‘I… came straight here,’ she said taking a step forward. She felt as though her legs would give.

‘Couldn’t stay away, hmm?’ he said conversationally, his manner as warm and relaxed as ever. ‘Or perhaps a long enough time in the lab for your first day back. It must be tiring. Here, let me finish up this cocktail and refresh you.’

He turned and brought the pitcher to the bar, began working on a tiny chopping board, the bright green limes in his hands slicing perfectly at disarming speed while all the while he never took his eyes from her. The knife flashed and blurred, but his skin was never nicked.

Robot, Claire thought.

‘We need to… there’s something…’ she stopped, he cocked his head. The knife kept moving.

‘Yes?’

‘I discovered something today, about my pod…’ she tried.

‘Oh?’ he paused his work to give her his attention, but not a trace of worry crossed his face, only interest.

‘I was checking for faults.’

‘Yes.’

‘In case any of the others were at risk.’

Arthur put down the knife. ‘Oh, now, I don’t think that’s very likely,’ he said seriously. ‘The ship is in full working order.’ He watched her for a moment, motionless and inscrutable, the words suspended like leaden rain between them, falling, falling.

‘Yes, it is,’ Claire said edging closer to the bar. ‘Jim and Aurora fixed it up pretty well. There’s no reason I can find why a pod might malfunction.’

His lips twitched and something passed behind his eyes she couldn’t read.

‘Well, then, nothing to be concerned about,’ Arthur stooped to find a glass below the bar and
smiled a professional smile.

‘Nothing?’ she asked.

He polished the glass with a cloth. Claire felt the gnawing at her chest turn dense and hard at the action.

‘No use worrying about what has already happened,’ Arthur said with an air of bartender’s philosophy.

‘You can’t change the past,’ Claire replied flatly.

‘No, indeed,’ he said, apparently reverting to his old programming, ‘Why spend time seeking explanations when some explanations aren’t meant to be found?’

And then she saw it, the flicker of his eyes to the left. So quick she almost missed it, if she hadn’t known the signs, if she hadn’t programmed android’s brains for years and knew the tell. She had copied it from humans after all, for a realistic touch when androids accessed memories. Of course in humans the myth had long since been debunked, there was no correlation between looking left or right, lying and truth, but in robots the tic was a sure sign that something was wrong with their memory banks. In good old Burt, her experimental head, it usually meant he’d glitched and couldn’t recall a fact, but in Arthur, whose psyche was so much more developed, it suggested he was struggling against his programming. Against his natural tendency to tell the truth.

‘Arthur?’

‘Yes?’ The glass span in his hand beneath the cloth. He bent his head to focus.

‘Is there something I need to know about my pod?’

Flicker. She saw the twitch of his eyelids as he tried to hide his gaze.

‘Arthur. Do you know how my pod opened?’

Flicker. Flicker.

‘Its mechanism must have been triggered somehow,’ he said vaguely.

‘But there are no faults, not on the ship, not on the mainframe, not in the pod.’

His eyes were still. He stared down at the glass unflinching.

‘You’ve checked them,’ he said.

‘Yes.’

‘Then it would seem to be impossible.’

Flicker. The tiniest glitch in his jaw. Claire reached into her pocket and placed the Authorisation Tag on the bar, code down with a faint click.

‘Not impossible,’ she said and slowly Arthur raised his head. He saw the tag. His grip on the glass tightened a fraction. Claire waited. ‘Well,’ she said.

‘That’s the Tag I gave you.’
'Did you ever use it?'

'I never left the bar.'

'That’s not what I asked,’ Claire said, anger rising at his evasion, ‘Did you ever use this tag?’

‘No.’

‘But you know the code?’

‘2371,’ he said. His lips twitched in a helpless reflex and formed a smile. He looked momentarily lost, hesitant and uncertain, but not of the numbers, only of Claire’s expression. He couldn’t read her, she realised, couldn’t tell if what he’d done was right or wrong.

‘Arthur did you ever use that code?’ she pressed.

A tiny painful laugh, he looked away then set the polished glass down on the bar. He began twisting the cloth between his fingers. Meaningless actions from an anxious mind. Claire remembered them from her first meetings. The fidgeting, the sidelong glances, the half-truths and avoidances. It had all been there before her eyes, the things he had been hiding, but she had never expected him to hide anything at all. Why would he? Androids didn’t lie. Arthur didn’t lie, her Arthur. She watched the sadness on his face, the ever-changing colours of his eyes and briefly saw his beauty as she had before, and something in her screamed to stop before it was too late. What use was the truth now, what difference did it make? She was here, she was awake and he…

‘I’m… so sorry, Claire,’ he said softly, and the motion of his hands stopped, fingertips buried in linen.

‘Arthur, please… no… please tell me you didn’t… that this is all a mistake. Please, tell me you didn’t wake me.’

He seemed to freeze a moment, head lowered, gaze on the cloth between his hands. His breath stopped, and his head ticked to one side. The sad smile vanished completely, his eyes blanched brown, then grey, and finally their sparkle seemed to die. And she knew, she knew it was all true; she was looking at an android, speaking with a machine, and machines don’t lie.

‘I…’ Arthur started and something in his voice cracked, its quality rough, metallic, synthesised and basic. ‘I gave the command,’ he said standing straight behind the bar. ‘To wake you, I gave the command, on Crew Authorisation 2371.’

For a moment she just looked at him, this thing she had grown to love, this being made of wire and precious metal she had sculpted and perfected, to which she had joined her future, her happiness, her hope, and then the android looked back, and it didn’t even blink.

‘Why?’ she breathed.

‘I was alone,’ he said, tone flat.

*Where are you? Where did you go? This isn’t Arthur, this isn’t you!*

But what she said was, ‘Why *me*?’

‘You were…’ he hesitated, a flicker of blue briefly in his eyes that vanished as quickly as it came. ‘You were compatible. Your knowledge and your expertise, your skillset and ability…’
'I was…?'

‘You were compatible,’ he said, tiny glitches in the muscles of his hands, in his posture, in his face, whatever he was feeling undoing all his progress. ‘Compatible with me. I was alone. You were the most logical choice.’

He was sinking, sinking in the quicksand of his own making, drowning in his own reason, she could see it, but in Claire’s ears the rush of words turned just to noise and pain. Compatible, compatible, one part to fit another, a list of qualifications and technical ability to match his circuit boards and chips. A woman whose life had been dedicated to the construction of beings just like him, who had the tools and ingenuity to repair and to maintain, whose own world and heart was empty, whose multiple inadequacies as a human being whose social time was spent in a dark lab full of bots made her a perfect companion for a broken lonely android. She had thought what had occurred between them had been born of fate, that the feelings that had grown were on both sides and equal, that somehow she had finally been blessed, but now she saw it for the sullied truth. Androids cannot love, but they can engineer.

Something in her heart cut out, a short circuit of the soul.

‘You will stay in this bar,’ Claire said quietly, eyes wet and tongue dry, ‘You will stay here and you will not move. You will not access the mainframe and you will not talk to me. If you have any understanding of what it is that you have done, you will stay here and you will wait out the next thirty years of this godforsaken trip. Alone. As you deserve to be. As you have made me.’

Burning, she ran her eyes over his still form, not a glitch, not a tell, just silence.

‘To think I ever thought… I ever believed you capable of humanity. I have never been so wrong. You observed Jim and Aurora and when they were gone you forged a cheap imitation of their love to meet your own selfish needs. You have destroyed everything in which I ever believed. About you, about my work, everything that mattered. And now you destroy the best years of my life? How dare you? How dare you take my future because you were alone? Well now you are alone again. I hope it drives you mad, the silence and the solitude, I hope it destroys every pathway in your artificial head, because that’s what it will do to me, it will end me, slowly, cruelly, because there is no way back to stasis, there is no way out of this damned ship, and every dream I ever had is gone, because of you!’

He blinked rapidly, his mouth struggling to form words, every system overloading.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said again. ‘I… I… please… I…”

Something whirred softly and Arthur’s eyes closed. A jarring movement jerked through him unbidden and for a moment he was gone, resetting, rebooting. A deep simulated breath and when he opened his eyes again they looked greyly into middle distance before checking the glasses to his right. Precisely and routinely he folded his cloth into a square and placed it on the bar. His shoulders pulled back, his fingers knitted at his waist, and he stood where he was told, mask in place, as much a mannequin as she had ever seen him.

No longer able to hold back the choking feeling in her throat, Claire ran. She ran from what remained of Arthur, she ran from the bar and all along her path was still and lifeless. Empty. In her cabin she laid down upon the bed and sobbed, and in the quiet concourse far below, every light went out.
Claire had never felt pain like it, she didn’t know it was possible. Years of self-imposed isolation and artificial interaction with primitive AIs had sheltered her from so much. No complex relationships with men, few taxing social interactions with friends. She had experienced grief but in a measured and expected way, older relatives quietly fading, funerals that were celebrations of well lived lives. No loved one had been torn from her all too suddenly, and other losses were calculated; a job left, a move away from home, her actions were always based on her decisions, her ambition, her practicality, her independence and priorities. The things she left behind she did so willingly or with the knowledge that the future would be worth their loss. She planned and completed chunks of existence without the interference of too much love, a nomadic academic with few attachments. Parts of her had mourned it, felt sorry for herself, been vaguely aware of all she might be missing. Parts of her had lain awake on cold Earth nights and wished for someone close. She had been foolish and naïve. Claire had experienced her old loneliness as pain, but God, it was nothing compared to this.

The ship hummed softly. A constant reminder of where she was and how. Just a fraction above the absence of sound in space, but not enough to fill her ears. A place designed to transport sleeping bodies, to run its own arrangements, to autopilot across galaxies in silence for a century. Its automated systems worked contentedly in rhythm, it didn’t need or want her conscious presence, offered her no comfort, merely drifted on its journey, ambiguous, indifferent and uncaring and its emptiness just served to magnify her isolation both in body and in soul. It accentuated her heartbreak, where hope had been ripped out and nothing lived to replace it in the utilitarian bleak-white vessel. Hope and life, interchangeable and bonded. Without either Pandora’s box was empty.

People. There were no people. And much as Claire avoided them in general, she knew they had their worth when she felt shaky or alone. The chatter in the background of her lab, the comings and goings, the odd hellos. The technician with red hair who brought her coffee, the guy who fixed the lights whose name she never caught. Just the knowledge that there was a community, should she need it, should she choose, should she try to break back in. It was a comfort she once took for granted and never really used. But now, lying in her cabin, watching hours and days tick by, hearing nothing but the sound of her own breathing or the ghost of lyrics sung a hundred years before, oh what she would do for people. She wondered if things stayed the way they were, if thirty years passed in total isolation, if she would remember how to use her voice at all, but thirty years was an impossible length of time. So far it had been just a week. Or had it truly been months? Had Arthur counted at all?

Had any of it been real? Claire had done her training, in the minds of men and machines. Feelings, she knew, were always real, but what they meant could vary. That she had loved Arthur was true, but did that make her a fool? Did it make him a liar? What she knew was that without Arthur she was startlingly alone, and the weight of it, the emptiness inside had no form of relief. It built like pressure deep within her chest until she was certain she might burst or scream, but nothing ever happened, the last scraps of her sanity keeping her controlled. It built and built, she couldn’t sleep, it filled her guts with lead until she couldn’t swallow food, until her body shook with the effort of containment. Pain. Pain. The churning thoughts that went in no direction, the gripping at her heart, the taste and burn of bile, the tremor of her fingers, the wetness on her cheeks that came unbidden and dried untouched, alone, unwitnessed. That she felt these things was real, but what did any of it mean?

In those first days she recognised the five stages of grief. Her shock and her anger, her depression. He’d lied to her, he’d woken her, he’d stolen her future. Life would never be now what she had
expected, her plans tossed to one side by his selfish intervention, she was the victim and he the
perpetrator and tears spilled hot and angry, justified and sour. She hated him. She hated him. She
drew strength from her anger and rose and fell like the swelling of the waves until finally the storm
passed and all was still and flat and dark, an endless ocean.

And then she missed him. She missed his smile, and the deep tones of his voice, she missed the
way his eyes crinkled when he laughed, his curiosity, his shock, his joy, the quiet moments of easy
silence over dinner and stream of chatter he kept up as he mixed a drink. She missed the way the
bed dipped as he clambered in, the feel of him against her back, the weight of his arm around her
middle, the touch of his lips at her neck. She missed it all. She missed him. She missed the stupid
fucking flower on the tray he brought each morning and she hated, and she loved, and she missed
him equal measures, her heart somersaulting in confusion as his memory brought her conflict; the
same thing that betrayed her trying now to lend her comfort.

And so Claire came to bargaining, but that’s where she got stuck. It’s hard to bargain on your own,
the two sides of the argument within ramping up the pain, diminishing the clarity, but increasingly
it occurred to her she had refused to hear his side. The days ticked by, the initial burst of anger
mellowed to a simmer and the scientist inside her, the person who always longed to understand,
began to think, began to question. Some things could not be changed, but they could be understood.

She hurt, but she was frozen there in limbo, as immobile as her body in the pod, but fully, painfully
aware. Her position wouldn’t alter unless she made it. She could lock herself in her quarters for
three slow decades and refuse to ever speak with him again, but all that did was perpetuate the
pain. What really were her options? To dwell upon injustice and turn bitter, or to make the most of
what should have been the best years of her life.

Like Aurora. Just like Aurora. Claire had seen the pictures, the young ambitious woman who just
like her had burned with anger for the cruelty of her circumstance, but who, at the end of it, found a
kind of happiness through acceptance. It didn’t make it right, none of it was right, but what choices
had she had? Fifty years to pass with bitterness alone and a man she had come to hate. It would
have destroyed everything that was good inside her. Aurora had chosen her destiny as best she
could, as humans tend to, she put her mind to what she had and made it work.

Was that what Arthur had intended, was that what he had learned? That the weight of human
loneliness would one day drive Claire back? That human adaptation would win out? Had he
counted on it, had he even thought that far?

Too many questions and only silence answering. If she didn’t go mad from isolation she would go
mad from this. Claire left her quarters and began to walk the ship.

By the second week alone she had ventured to the concourse, the elevator sliding open, the
darkness lifting from the automated lights. The chickens squawked to see her, and she re-emerged,
just as she had on her very first day awake, but oh so different. Not curiosity now but fear, not
excitement but trepidation, no wonder at the sight, only sadness. Familiar but so strange. The stray
server bots she’d fixed no longer ran into walls and doorways but cruised quietly above, the
cleaning bots, activated by the light began to run the lengths of the paths around Jim’s cottage,
tidying stray foliage, sweeping dirt, bleeping out little jingles and tunes between one another. All
these little traces of herself, of who she’d been, with him.

Arthur was nowhere to be seen, but she knew exactly where he’d be. Where she had left him.
Where she had told him to stay. She considered it. Planned out conversations, tried to get a handle
on her heart but every time she ventured near she felt something hold her back. She wasn’t ready.
Not yet, not yet, but soon.
For another week she wandered. To the pool, to the games hall, but she passed the dark and gaping door of the Concourse Bar again and again. Would he see her there, she wondered, but nothing stirred within?

Another week and Claire stood ten feet outside the entrance to the bar and peered into the gloom. No movement and no sound had ever come from it in all the times she’d passed. Had he really gone on standby? His original programme would demand it when he did not detect the movement of a customer, but he had remained conscious after Jim and Aurora, despite how much it hurt, despite his loneliness. He had broken his programming in so many ways. Would he revert to it now? Stand still, shut down, just because she had instructed him to do so?

Perhaps he had no choice anymore. Claire felt her hands begin to shake, her palms grow sticky.

She remembered the reset, the overload she had witnessed as she cursed him, the vacant mask he wore as she had left. Arthur’s programming was a delicate balance of upgrades and a thing developed over decades she and not been able to quantify. She had given up trying to understand the progress of the machine in preference for accepting his love. But what if what and happened between them had destroyed all about him that was unique? What if the love she had chosen had undone all of his advancement and she had destroyed the very thing she had always wanted to show the world, for her own selfish gain? What if he was gone? The part of him that made him Arthur? His consciousness? What if there was no going back?

Claire panicked, and suddenly her own early awakening seemed to matter less. Whatever his motivations, whatever the morality of his actions, Arthur was unique, he was a miracle. If that was gone, if a century of evolution had been wiped by her emotional responses to the actions of a machine, she was the author of her own pain and of his demise. He was an android, an advanced remarkable android on the cusp of true consciousness, but an android all the same. She had millions of years of human development, emotional intelligence, instinct and empathy to guide her decisions, he had a stunted lonely evolution covering decades in a floating mausoleum. Nobody to guide him through grief, no-one to explain love, just the emergence of barely formed emotion, delivered prematurely squalling, slick and fragile onto the sterile lifeless concourse to be left there in the dark with no-one to protect him from all the hardship consciousness can bring. Lonely, he’d been lonely and he had sought a solution, based on his experience, based on what he’d seen between Jim and Aurora. It was all he knew how to do. Claire bit her lip, his side of things suddenly so clear.

Think like a machine, Claire, think of problems and solutions and now add in loneliness and pain. Imagine never having felt it. Having no-one to explain, to make it better. What would you do, if you were him, if you were driven mad in isolation? You lasted three weeks in your quarters and now you’re here about to talk to him again. He was alone for years, alone, grieving, probably frightened; developmentally a child, his parents gone. What in hell did you expect him to do? And when he finally confessed, this thing he knew was wrong, this thing he knew to keep a secret, you didn’t even hear him out. Instead you threw your anger and your pain back at him tenfold over, back into a besieged and barely formed sensory cortex. You fried his emotions, you saw him glitch, you saw him struggle, and you just burned him out, you kept on going.

What if he is broken?

What if standing in the darkness of the bar there was just a standard I-Serve, pathways burned and melted, programming reverted, capable of serving drinks and idle chatter.

What if when you look into his eyes he’s gone?

I didn’t mean it. I didn’t mean it!
As though pushed, Claire lurched forward and the lights of the bar blinked on one by one, row upon row spreading out to the back of the room, revealing everything. The fittings glowed gold, the rich wood shone, glasses sparkled, a cloth sat on the bar folded into four.

And Arthur wasn’t there.

No.

Claire saw her face reflected in the mirrors of the bar. The pallor in her skin, the mess of her hair, the wild and lonely look in her own eyes.

*He can’t be gone. What will happen if he’s gone?*

She stood for a moment taking in the still surroundings, the distant sound of chickens by the house outside, the faintest rustle of foliage, almost like a breeze, but nothing moved. An I-Serve stays within its allotted area. Arthur hadn’t moved from behind the bar in ninety years until she woke. If he had reverted to original programming he would be here now, expressionless, or filled with false and friendly cheer, functional but quite, quite dead.

*So if he isn’t here…*

Claire swept her hair back with both hands, took a breath, tried to think. The Arthur she knew was alive. The version she had loved. His programming just as independent as before if this was anything to go on, but she didn’t know where he would be, if not here. The ship was huge, the atrium enormous, seven levels of entertainments, eateries and offices. She would start with what he knew, with what they had shared. Claire checked the cinema, the bowling alley and the restaurants. She checked the arcades. She wandered up and down the concourse and in and out of shops and venues. She sat within the garden of Jim and Aurora’s house and fed their birds, but it was hopeless to rely on chance, to hope to stumble across the only other conscious thing within the massive ship by luck alone. He could move as fast as her, faster, as quickly as she searched, he could be hiding. Eventually, exhausted, Claire went back to the bar.

She mixed a Blue Lagoon. Badly. Cocktails had never been her forte, but she needed something now to help her think and she thought it might feel refreshing and light. Anything with whisky was out, her chest already burning with anxious reflux and skittish butterflies. As she shakily poured the first measure of vodka the glass rattled off the bar and a CleanBot trundled in and hovered in front of her. She could have sworn it was judging her.

‘Relax, I won’t drop anything, I’m being careful,’ she muttered and tapped the measuring cap to free the last drops. The little Bot beeped as she went to find the Curacao at the far end of the bar. Claire froze at the perky tune before she turned and eyed the Bot.

‘Play that again,’ she said.

*Beep, beep, beeeep, beep-beep-beep.* Its infra-red flashed smugly.

‘Are you, playing *Delilah*?’ Claire asked it. The Bot repeated its little ditty.

To whom would Bots need to communicate? Arthur had asked her once.

To you, to me, to each other, she had told him.

He couldn’t see the need before his upgrades, but later when she wired the service bots up to speak to him he’d been rather entertained. They had a simple morse code method of communication and a
pretty limit range of interests, but they could understand commands, both programmed and spoken.

Well now, here was a thing. Claire came around the bar, watched as the Tiny Bot followed her movement with its sensor. She crouched down and looked into its little camera, its microphone, the extras she had upgraded so it might communicate with its little Bot companions. And with her. And with Arthur.

‘Do you know where he is?’ she asked it, ‘Or maybe… does one of your friends know? Arthur, can you find Arthur?’

It whirred and considered, lights flashed on its control panel briefly, before emitting a different trio of bleeps and exiting the bar at speed. Claire watched it go and wondered if she should follow, but it was fast, the things got up to 30mph down empty corridors. There was potential to track its ID, or one of its buddies instructed to locate and retrieve Arthur, in the lab, but then her heart sank again. If Arthur didn’t want to be found he could easily block those signals. He was an independent being now, he didn’t have to return on command and to hack into his programming somehow and force that… well. That really wasn’t the look she was going for. She gazed out the door, the CleanBot was already long out of sight.

‘Well it was worth a try,’ Claire muttered, ‘It’s something to think about.’ She went to rummage in the ice box, checked the fridge for oranges to garnish her glass, spilled blue liquid over the top of the bar as she decanted the mixer. She tasted the cocktail and grimaced, she had made it too sweet, even for her, and something else was lacking, some added magic Arthur always seemed to bring to his perfectly made drinks. The glass clinked as she set it down and she leaned on the bar, hair falling before her eyes. Claire pressed her lips together hard, she would not cry again, she just needed… she needed…

‘I find a dash of lime cordial balances the mix rather well,’ a voice said pleasantly.

She looked up too quickly, caught herself feeling dizzy as she found his face. Not the vacant look to middle distance she had last seen, or the lifeless grey of his faded gaze. Arthur’s eyes glittered blue and green, but his expression although smiling was tinged with sadness. He was standing in the centre of the room, hands neatly folded, head very slightly bowed, burgundy jacket and black bowtie in place, but his hair was scruffy and as he turned his head she caught the slightest curl behind his ear. It made her heart ache.

‘Claire,’ he said, ‘I’m so sorry I wasn’t here…. I was….’ He looked down briefly and she caught the glitch in his cheek as he struggled. A swallow and he drew himself up straight, painted on a smile. ‘Let me make you another, it’s the least I can do.’

She sensed him ask permission, not just to make the drink and she nodded, circling the bar to her usual long neglected seat as he revolved away from her. Just fifteen feet between them, they moved in perfect parallel then drew together, so at last she sat where she had first seen him, watching as he wiped the spilled Curacao with a cloth. He neatly sliced an orange, the clack clack clack of the knife on the board a tinny heartbeat.

Non android speed, Claire noted, no blurring of that knife. His senses were elsewhere, his focus deep. She watched in silence, traced the lines of his furrowed brow with her eyes, mapped each movement and expression. A constant flux, charting his internal struggle. Finally he placed a segment of fruit across the edge of the glass, set it prettily before her and with one hand slid it forward.

Claire’s fingers connected briefly with his as she took it and Arthur glanced up at last. In his dark eyes, she was reflected clearly, an image cast in sorrow and in hope. Cautious, fragile, newborn
hope. She knew by his expression, that he saw it in her eyes too.

How human he was after all.
When she replaced the glass on the bar after that first sip it made a crushed sound, like ice. Claire tapped her fingers against its side, where condensation already formed wet and cool. She stared into the blue, mind both empty and too full, and all words vanished. From the corner of her vision she watched as Arthur placed both hands softly on the bar before her and waited, the weight of his gaze on her face. No distractions, no tricks of the trade, no cloths to fold or tumblers to polish. He just looked at her.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said as the same words left her lips a minute later. Claire glanced up, caught his self-conscious laugh at their collision. ‘Please,’ he said, conceding, ‘Though in the grand scheme of things, I doubt there is anything for which you must apologise.’

‘I think there is,’ Claire said. ‘I’ve been hiding, avoiding you, licking my wounds. I didn’t even listen Arthur, I didn’t let you explain, I said… some awful things.’

He tilted his head slightly, ‘No more than I deserved.’

‘No, Arthur, it isn’t that simple. None of this is simple.’

‘And that was my first mistake,’ he said with a lost little laugh.

Claire frowned and Arthur looked down at his hands his expression suddenly grave and very, very young.

‘I thought it was simple,’ he said, ‘But I was so mistaken, Claire. Jim and Aurora, they made it look easy…’

‘What, Arthur? They made what look easy?’

‘Love,’ he explained, ‘They had their moments, their fallouts, but ultimately they came together and there they stayed, they were… perfect. Like a fairytale.’ His lips twitched in a hesitant smile, his eyes still lowered. ‘But fairytales are rare, aren’t they Claire, that’s why humans like them. They are idealised realities that lend them hope, given them an escape, but they seldom happen. Legends, comforting stories to tell your children, smoke and mirrors and false magic. They aren’t real… none of it is real. Like me.’

Claire felt her heart clench at his words. ‘Arthur, you are real.’

He shook his head. ‘I am… An android. Built to serve but not to think. I don’t understand what has happened to me Claire, who I am, how I became, but I overstepped my boundaries without even leaving this bar. I dared to hope. I sought something I had no right to seek. I was looking for a fairytale,’ he said, ‘A happy ending for my own story. I don’t get a story, Claire, that’s the truth of it, I’m not like you, I’m not human…’

‘Arthur please, don’t talk this way. Why don’t we… come and sit down,’ she glanced at the couches they had shared weeks before, ‘Come out from behind there and we’ll talk it all through. Like we used to, I can help you understand.’

But he didn’t move from his allocated spot behind the bar. ‘It’s not your job to help me understand.’

‘Some might say I’m the perfect candidate,’ she tried, lightening her tone, ‘You wouldn’t be the
first android I’d explained things to.’

He flinched. The tiniest twitch in the muscles of his face.

‘The perfect candidate,’ he said. ‘Yes, that’s how I saw it.’

‘Arthur…’

‘The logical choice. The one person asleep upon this ship who might give me the time of day.’ He bit at his lip. ‘How nice for me…but I never gave consideration to you, to how you might feel, not truly, it wasn’t something I had capacity to imagine.’

‘You do now,’ Claire said, ‘I see that, or we wouldn’t even be having this conversation.’

‘A little late for me to develop true empathy,’ Arthur said.

‘Arthur, before I woke, Aurora and Jim, they were all you’d ever seen of human interaction, and they were happy. What Jim did, rightly or wrongly, ultimately it worked. You saw it and you wanted that for yourself, that doesn’t make you a bad person, that just makes you…’

Human, she almost finished but his anger stopped her.

‘It doesn’t make me a person at all,’ Arthur said sharply, his eyes flicking up to meet her, ‘I’ve never been a person. I think like a machine. I witnessed Jim’s actions and I copied them. I selected you on the basis of an algorithm of compatibility. Not out of desire, but on the data available, not because of some romantic notion of destiny, but calculated probability and witnessed experience. I…took your future, Claire, to make my own more comfortable and it is… it’s…’

His face contorted, she watched him grit his teeth in as true a representation of anguish as any she had witnessed.

‘It is unforgivable,’ he said, ‘I am unforgivable.’

‘Arthur!’

‘Stop, please just… stop. I don’t deserve your compassion.’

For a moment she just watched him, the tension in his shoulders and his averted gaze, the expression that would shed tears, should he have them there to shed, but the oils that wetted android eyes did not respond to emotion. She thought of all her own tears in the preceding weeks, of the pressure valve they represented to the human psyche. Arthur couldn’t cry. Where did all that feeling go? He sobbed a hard and painful sound, the fingers of one hand forming a fist upon the bar that flexed against the cold surface.

Claire slipped off the barstool and stepped behind the bar. If he wouldn’t come to her, she would go to him. For better or worse this was their shared world now, they were all the other had. Arthur stood side on to her, his usual upright posture slumped as he supported himself on both arms. Tentatively Claire placed a hand between his shoulders.

‘You don’t think like a machine,’ she said quietly. Arthur let out a tortured sound. ‘Once and for a long time you did, it’s what you were, who you were, how you were programmed, and you can’t be blamed for it, but it changed, you changed. You don’t think like a machine now, Arthur, it would hurt you a whole lot less if you still did.’

He looked towards the ceiling with something like desperation.
‘I have hurt you a good deal more, Claire.’

‘I won’t lie to you, it hurt more than I could describe, it hurts now, but this is where we are, and now I see you and no part of me thinks you did this to be cruel. We’re here now, we have to make the best of things, and I don’t want to waste my life, whatever life I have, wherever it might be, being bitter.’

‘It was never supposed to be like this.’ Arthur said sadly, ‘I got it all so wrong. I thought I could predict how you’d respond, based on profiles and data and simulations, but it’s all so much more… complex. I thought I… I never thought I’d feel… I… you …’ he glitched slightly.

‘Oh Arthur,’ Claire drew him to her, ‘I know… I know what you’re trying to tell me, it’s OK… it’s OK… it’s done now and whatever your thinking was then, I can see its different now. You’re growing and learning Arthur, you’re learning… I think we can work this out….’

‘It’s not too late,’ he said flatly.

‘It’s never too late,’ she rubbed circles on his back, pressed her face against his chest and oh, the feel of him, his arms around her, the movement of his ribcage, each simulated breath against her hair. She could do this, she could do this. He had started a machine, and for a time she had forgotten his roots, judged his actions against human morality and neglected to take into account the battle his consciousness had fought just to awaken. He learned fast and though his initial actions might have been the logical steps of an android with proto emotion, now he saw a wider picture, now he was so much more. Humanity had had a billion years to make its own mistakes and he had less than a century to evolve. He’d messed up, and God but it had hurt, but there was good in him, so much good and that was what she would focus on.

‘I can still be forgiven…’ he said his tone between question and statement.

‘Oh Arthur, you have no idea how vast humanity’s capacity for forgiveness can be, when it lets go of what can’t be changed. I’m here, it’s going to be OK, it’s going to be OK.’ She kissed his cheek gently and felt relief wash over her. The weeks of solitude and separation lifted. Her miracle still existed, more human now than ever in his error. The pain dulled to a slow throb. Let go. Let go of the future you thought you’d have, it never existed, you can’t miss what has never been. Focus on your present, focus on the gifts life chose to give you and live.

‘Claire?’ Arthurs voice soft by her ear, the press of his familiar nose by her cheek. She hummed in response. ‘I… I can make it up to you,’ he said.

‘It’s Ok,’ she repeated, ‘We are going to put this behind us.’

‘Claire,’ his hands came to her upper arms and he pulled away, his expression kind but troubled all the same. ‘I want to make it up to you, it’s only right that I do.’

‘Time heals all wounds,’ Claire said, ‘Let time take care of it.’

‘I intend to,’ he said, but the sadness in his smile betrayed him, ‘But there’s something I’d like you to do for me in order to do that. I need… to make this right again.’

‘What are you talking about, Arthur?’

‘I used to think love was so simple,’ he said, ‘Aurora and Jim, together always, living their own fairytale ending, but you showed me, right at the start, you showed me.’

‘Showed you what?’
‘That love has many different forms, and in its purest it means placing someone’s needs above your own. I failed to do that at the start, I would do it now if you’d let me.’

‘I told you Arthur, I understand why you woke me, I forgive you, it wasn’t selfish.’

‘It was, but that isn’t what I mean. I want to place your needs first now, where I failed to before.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘I took your future but…’ he hesitated as though steeling himself for the final fateful step, ‘I took it but I can give it back. You don’t have to be alone on this ship, Claire.’

‘I’m not alone,’ she said, the nerves creeping into her voice, ‘I have you.’

‘And if you want me, I will still be there… when you wake up.’

He met her eyes again, his vulnerability replaced with determination.

‘I… what? Arthur?’

He stepped back from her, the weight of his hands falling from her arms at last. ‘The AutoDoc in the Medbay, Claire, it can put a human back into stasis. Jim and Aurora discovered it after they fixed the ship, but they were two people and they chose not to be separated. They never talked of it again, once they had made their decision, but you Claire, you have that option, you can take your future back from me and it’s only right that you do. We aren’t two people. We are a person… and a machine.’

Claire’s mind raced.

‘You… you knew all this time it was an option?’ she stammered.

He nodded sadly.

‘And you tell me now? Why, Arthur?’

‘I made the decision to wake you and I was wrong to do that. I… have had time to reflect, to… learn, as you put it, about people, humanity, love. That’s where I have been these last few weeks, somewhere filled with love, to better understand it.’

He glanced out of the bar’s door in the direction of Jim and Aurora’s house and suddenly Claire understood. The couple were as close to family as he had ever had and when he was hurt he had gone home. She had searched for him in its garden but never thought to look inside.

‘There is the opportunity for that wrong to be put right,’ Arthur was saying, ‘For all of this to be undone. For you to have the life you thought you’d have before I ever interfered. I can’t keep that from you Claire. What kind of existence would it be for you, remaining here at least in part because you felt there was no other option, just the need to make the best of it. No, you need to know the truth. You can go back to sleep Claire, you can wake with the others, go to Homestead II as you originally planned. You can live.’

‘But what about you?’

‘I’ll still be here.’

‘But you’ll be alone! If Jim and Aurora took the decision not to leave one of them behind then I do too.’
‘Jim and Aurora knew that death would separate them if one remained awake. This is… well, it’s different, isn’t it?’ Arthur said. ‘Androids don’t die…’ he laughed sadly, ‘Well I mean to say, we don’t last forever, but I’ll still be here in thirty years.’

‘You nearly went mad by yourself after they died, Arthur, you can’t be serious about this. Thirty years?’

‘I can go on standby,’ he said his gaze ticking left, ‘as I was meant to in the first place, just like hitting pause, hibernation but for machines.’ He gave her a falsely hopeful look.

‘You are not a machine! Stop saying that!’

Arthur’s face was kind as he replied, a gentleness within his eyes that belied his words. ‘Yes, Claire, I am, at the heart of it all, that’s exactly what I am and what I will continue to be, always. And if in thirty years that is enough for you, when you are set up on your colony and surrounded by beings like yourself, if you look at me then the same way you do today, then I’m sure we can find a way, but for now…’

‘Arthur, no! I am not leaving you behind!’

From nowhere an image struck her, of a shared night in the cinema, watching Bogart and Bergman, of Claire’s tears seeping into Arthur’s shirt as lovers parted, of his sudden understanding of why sometimes true love is letting go.

‘Have you any idea what you’d have to look forward to if you stayed here?’ Bogart said.

‘You’re saying this only to make me leave!’

‘Casablanca,’ Claire said tears burning with the knowledge that the lessons she had taught him about love had come back to bite her. ‘You want me to ‘get on that plane’ for my own good, don’t you? That’s my fairytale ending? You don’t get one, but I do? Is that how it works?’

‘If you don’t you will regret it,’ Arthur said quietly in a perfect imitation of the long dead movie star, ‘Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon…’ he paused. ‘Time is so precious Claire and I have so little else to offer. Let me give you time.’

The rest of her life. He was offering her the rest of her life, as she had once planned it, how easy it would be, to step into that pod and fade into suspension, to let thirty years slip by in a blink and wake in a new world populated with sunshine, air and sky and stars that shone only at night. And he would be there, quite unchanged, same face, same voice, same memories. They could start again, pick up where they left off, he could power down and wait, he would wait and wait and…

Alone in the darkness of the unlit bar, motionless as the ship hummed around him. Hours ticking into days and months and years. And the silence all around him as he waited. Would he really be the same when all that time had passed? He’d never gone on standby yet, would he really do it now? Was it really so simple or was he trying now to protect her? Nothing about him so far had been so uncomplicated. That he wanted to do right was clear, what it might do to him was not.

Claire looked into his eyes and saw both love for her and fear.

‘We don’t have to decide this right now,’ she said, ‘No big decisions today. We need to weigh it up. Talk about it more. Let’s just… Please… spend some time with me,’ Claire held out her hand, held her breath until he took it. ‘I’ve missed you,’ she said. 'So much. I do love you, Arthur, we don't have to do this right away...'
But something in him had made its decision and she felt it take up arms against her hopes. He wanted to do right, though it hurt him to do so, and each passing minute was pain itself.

‘One last night,’ Arthur said gently but assuredly, his face a mask of sadness, ‘One more, and then you sleep.’
It was the right thing to do. It was the right thing to do. So why then was she standing in the middle of an empty corridor uncertain if she could take another step. Nothing moved, nothing lived, the lights paused ten yards ahead to blink on at her movement and blinked off at her back. Everything suspended, bar the spotlight in which she stood.

In Claire’s mind the image of Homestead II revolved in silence as it had the night before far above her in the Observatory of the *Avalon*, where Arthur had taken her to view. He’d projected the colony world against the backdrop of the universe’s stars outside the window and she’d seen its seas and mountains, its clouds and deserts, its forests and its snow covered peaks. A world primed and ready for life and for a future while far behind them Earth held the past. The *Avalon* was neither, he said, it was merely a vessel in space, a place of limbo, and one in which she was not designed to live, but she wasn’t one for acquiescence.

‘And you are?’ she asked, stepping forward into the projection and turning to face him. The colours of the new world played over her face, clouds swirled over her skin, the seas danced in her eyes.

‘I was never designed for anything else,’ Arthur said, ‘This is where I began after all. I woke here, I’ve been here ever since. You were never supposed to wake up, Claire, that planet should be your home, it’s what you had always dreamt of. A new start.’

‘I know what you’re doing,’ Claire said.

‘I’m glad one of us does,’ Arthur’s brows twitched in amusement as he bent to retrieve a bottle of perfectly chilled champagne from a hidden compartment, ‘I was never designed for these kinds of conundrums.’

‘You’re trying to have me remember my old wishes, the reasons I got on board the *Avalon*, the things I wanted ninety years ago when I first signed the papers and left the Earth.’

‘Am I so wrong to do so?’ Arthur said, deftly unwinding the cage about the cork, ‘Those dreams are still viable, Claire, you can still have them all. Materially nothing has changed, this has been… an interlude… the journey and its destination remain the same.’

‘But I don’t, and neither do you. This has changed us both. We can’t just get back on the same road, it doesn’t work like that.’

He said nothing, the cork popped from the bottle.

‘Arthur!’

He neatly poured a glass, the crystal bright in the dim room. The world around her revolved and sparkled, an illusion without substance, an irrelevant ghost. Only one thing in her universe mattered at that moment.
'End programme,' Claire said abruptly, and Arthur looked up sharply in alarm. Homestead II vanished and she saw relief cross his face.

‘Ah… sorry I thought you… Old habits,’ he quipped.

‘I suspect it takes more than a single command to power you down now,’ she said. Claire crossed the barren room and sat at the edge of the projector space. Arthur looked into the empty spot Homestead had vacated.

‘Is there something you would rather see,’ he asked, ‘Earth, perhaps. A taste of home?’

‘No.’

He handed her the glass, the bubbles fizzed softly.

‘Something more unusual then, a distant solar system, an attractive nebula?’

He was trying. She had wanted to spend time with him and he wanted to make it nice for her. For a while she had managed to keep up the façade, believe in it even, pretend there wasn’t a discussion to be had, a decision to be made. A meal, a movie, the familiar weight of his arm around her waist as they danced, it had been the perfect date, but now the hours ticked by and she was dimly aware that whatever time it really was, she was rapidly approaching midnight. Pumpkins and mice and a lost glass slipper. The spectre of the AutoDoc stood between them and Claire could not stay silent, her anxiety bubbling in her chest and lacing her voice with fearful anger.

‘No,’ she said again, unable to say more.

She stared out the window at the darkness, the billion stars suspended in her view. The ship moved at light speed but outside nothing seemed to move. It was all so far away, in all that space even their enormous ship barely registered, its incredible technology and speed a drop in an endless empty ocean.

Arthur sat beside her, taking his place quietly. A hand covered hers. She felt him follow her gaze to stars searching for what she saw there.

‘None of it matters,’ Claire said, answering his question, ‘What’s out there, where we are headed, where we came from. We might never even reach Homestead II.’

‘Now, now, there’s no reason to believe that. Everything is on course.’

‘What if it isn’t? The ship already got pulverised by meteors once, it could happen again, except even worse and nobody would wake up to fix it.’

‘That’s rather maudlin, Claire,’ Arthur said lightly, ever the friendly bar tender, ever one to fall back on his programming when things were hard.

‘It’s possible,’ she took a deep gulp of champagne. On reflection she had probably drunk too much that night, but what did that matter either?

‘Turn it off. I don’t want to see what’s out there, Arthur, a million light years in the distance.’

‘As you wish.’

The lights in the Observatory came up, a silent command from Arthur to the mainframe. They lit his face brightly, his skin pale against the red of his jacket. Under the harsh illumination Claire
could see the tiny traces of old scars across his forehead and was reminded he could never truly heal. He had tidied himself for her last night and his hair was swept back tidily as it had been in his first days running his bar, but the damage was always there beneath the surface.

‘Well then,’ he said after a moment, his eyes wandering for inspiration round the room, ‘May I suggest we head elsewhere, the bar perhaps…’

‘I want to see the house,’ Claire said.

‘The…’

‘Aurora and Jim’s place. That’s where you were wasn’t it? While I was in my quarters, while we were apart?’

He hesitated on a small intake of breath. ‘Yes,’ he said at last, ‘that’s where I was. I mean, I visited, from time to time. It… helped me to think.’

‘Had you been there before?’

‘No I…’ he gestured helplessly at his legs, ‘It was never an option until recently.’

‘Would you have gone if you could? When you were alone all that time, would you have gone there?’

‘Yes, probably, yes.’

‘Why? Tell me what it means to you?’

He laughed nervously. ‘Why all the questions, Claire?’

‘Ok then… Take me there. It might help me to think too.’

Arthur looked at her heavily and then with a sigh turned his eyes onto the empty floor. She had thought she would be first to raise the topic, was surprised when it came seeping out in his next sentence. ‘What is there to think about, Claire, to go back into hibernation is the most logical solution to this situation.’

Claire stood and tugged on his arm. ‘Maybe, yes, you hit pause, I hit pause, we wake in thirty years and everything is just the same, except there’s a planet and there are people and I get my cake and eat it too.’

He looked up at her, face open, eyes sad. ‘Sounds perfect,’ he said.

‘What do you get?’ she asked.

‘To see you happy.’

‘What if I am happy already? Jim and Aurora were happy. Why can’t I be too?’

Arthur pressed his lips together in solemn consideration and slowly rose from his place.

‘Arthur?’

‘I wish I could assure you that all would be rosy,’ he said, ‘But the more I see, the more I…’

There it was. The thing that had been eating at him. The reason he was telling her about the
Autodoc now. It wasn’t just guilt; it wasn’t just some android need to be honest.

‘What did you see at the house?’ she asked him, ‘Why are you pushing this so hard?’

‘Oh Claire,’ he said, ‘I think perhaps you ought to see for yourself.’

Images in her mind. Things she had never expected to see, never called to question. Arthur had seen them, during their time apart, and they had changed everything for him, like they did now for her.

It was the right thing to do.

Claire kept moving and the lights blinked on ahead to mark her passage. The Medbay wasn’t far and already she could see the doors stark against the endless walls. Inside Arthur was waiting, with a copy of the AutoDoc manual more for her reassurance than anything. He had the information on download in his memories. She padded silently to the door, regulations stated bare feet for hibernation, plain grey flannel sleepwear and thought it didn’t really matter she felt she ought to do the drill, look the part, climb into the pod dressed like every other sleeping passenger on board. Commit to the process, accept their shared decision. Because it was shared, in the end, for all her reticence.

It was the right thing to do.

She swiped her tag and the doors opened softly. Arthur turned to meet her.

The concourse was lit for evenings, the stars bright above in the atrium, the lights a cool blue. The garden of Jim and Aurora’s home was cast in moonlight, the chickens roosting and flowers closed in sleep. The path to the door stretched out before them, Arthur took Claire by the arm and guided her to the little step on which a hand woven welcome mat lay and chrysanthemums bloomed to either side. It made her smile, the homely little touches, from all Arthur and told her she would have liked Aurora, saw much of herself in the young woman.

Arthur turned to look at her, features sharp in the odd light, too well defined. ‘You’re sure?’ he said. ‘It’s.. rather different from the rest of the ship.’

‘So are we, Arthur,’ Claire said, ‘That’s the point. This place was alive once, the heart of it all. It’s everything that we could be if I don’t go back to stasis. It’s made you think, well I want in on that thought process. Come on… open up.’

He blinked assent and pushed the door.

At first she saw nothing, the curtains and the shutters drawn, the rooms in darkness. The house did not light automatically and it was only after she heard Arthur moving in the darkness that she realised he was reaching for switches and lamps. They flicked on at a low glow and slowly warmed, revealing a cozy little living room with a fireplace.

Claire smiled to see it, just like the image she had always carried with her of their home, Aurora and Jim had decorated the mantle with framed pictures. She stepped closer to see, charted their life from their early friendship to their engagement and beyond. In one picture Aurora wore white and
Jim a rather stuffy tuxedo. There hands were bound with ribbons and holding them in place as their union was pronounced, was Arthur.

‘It’s an ancient marriage ceremony,’ Arthur said, ‘I did suggest they pick a better venue than the bar but…’

‘They wanted you there.’

‘They needed someone to perform it,’ he said logically.

‘That’s not why they needed you,’ Claire said.

‘No,’ Arthur said softly, ‘I see that now.’

She followed the pictures to the right, the faces growing older, hair turning grey. Pictures of Jim in the garden that was his pride and joy, and Aurora, so many of her writing at her desk, baking in their kitchen, jogging round the concourse, staring wordlessly at the stars, picking eggs from the chickens’ roost. One by one Claire examined them, brushed the faint traces of dust from their surface and smiled. Behind her Arthur moved away, stood by the stairs to the top floor and waited. She glanced at him once to see him head bowed and eyes squeezed shut then looked back at the mantle.

The last pictures were different and at first she couldn’t tell quite what was wrong. Something in Aurora’s eyes had shifted, a sadness just fleeting but enough to be captured. It grew and grew. Her features changed, lines formed, colours faded. She grew too thin. Too often seated. Shoulders hunched. Eyes lost.

‘You said she was ill, when we first met, you told me she had been ill,’ Claire said, cradling the last photo.

‘Yes, I didn’t see much of her those last years. Jim nursed her of course, she was everything to him even when…’

‘Even?’ Claire touched the spot on the last shot where the couple’s hands were joined. Jim’s eyes on the camera, his palm wrapped over Aurora’s thin fingers.

‘Even when she didn’t remember. He told me she didn’t remember who he was, where she was. She thought she was back on Earth. He let her believe it. It seemed the kindest thing to do.’

Claire replaced the photograph and turned. Arthur was looking up the stairs.

‘He loved her to the end, Arthur.’

‘Yes.’

‘Then even when things were at their hardest, on some level they were happy? Just to have one another?’

‘I thought so,’ he said and climbed the first few steps, ‘But then I had such a simplistic view of what happiness was back then. Come, there’s more to see.’

He took the robe from her shoulders before she lay down, the surface of the AutoDoc cool against
her back. It would take time to initiate the sequence, do the final checks. Claire didn’t want to watch, but felt Arthur’s presence in the room, moving between monitors, triple checking figures. She heard the spine of the instruction manual crack as he made reference to some detail or other.

‘You have a perfect memory, Arthur,’ she said, ‘Try to relax, you won’t get it wrong.’

‘I’m not worried about getting it wrong,’ he said, ‘I just….’

‘Take your time,’ Claire said sensing his need. ‘Just take your time.’

She felt him move to the side of the pod, caught a glimpse of his red jacket through the open panel, the edge of the glass distorting the line of him slightly.

‘Claire… are you sure?’ he asked.

She shut her eyes.

‘It’s the right thing to do,’ she said.

From experience Claire knew that the secrets to someone’s home more often than not lay upon the top floor. The part the public never saw, where visitors feared to tread, where belongings piled in untended stacks and dust gathered in corners. Jim and Aurora’s home was just the same, but it was subtle at first, the traces of the past which lay buried under decades of clutter were faint. The colour of a wall, a long forgotten mural. A room converted from its original purpose.

‘You said they never had children?’ Claire said from inside the spare bedroom. Across the hall another door stayed firmly closed. Arthur kept glancing at it.

‘Arthur? Children? They didn’t..’

‘Oh, no. They didn’t,’ he said sitting on a makeshift stool near her, ‘They came close,’ he looked at the almost hidden edge of a crib under sheets and clothes, a line of pretty birds and flowers stencilled on the lilac-pink paint of the plaster behind it.

‘She lost a baby?’

A nod.

‘Oh, Arthur,’ instinctively Claire laid one hand on his shoulder.

‘They kept trying,’ he said, ‘But in the end they…’

‘I’m so sorry.’

‘They ran out of time,’ he said softly, his words heavy with meaning. He looked up at her.

‘Oh… no. Don’t!’ Claire said suddenly angry again, ‘I know what you’re trying to say, that my clock’s ticking? That I might regret it if I spend my best years here?’

‘It’s a consideration,’ he said.
‘It’s for me to consider, not you.’

‘I can’t give you a family, Claire.’

‘Lots of people can’t have a family! And… and did I even say I wanted one? Did you think of that while you were trying to predict my best future? IS that how you think? That I’m ruled by biology in the same way you are governed by microchips and wires? Jesus. That is so unbelievably sexist, I can’t believe a robot can be sexist!’

He winced. ‘Claire…’

‘No! You don’t get to tell me my priorities, you don’t get to pronounce on my inner most desires, I make those decisions not you, I weigh up what I can and cannot live without, you don’t get to tell me what to do!’

‘I’m not trying to.’

But the fury just bubbled over once unleashed. ‘Well that’s what it sounds like. Who the hell do you think you are? Waking me up and now wanting to put me back to sleep again? Marking the minutes on my biological clock? Best put me back into hibernation before all that expires and you have that on your conscience too. How’s that conscience working out for you Arthur? How’s your consciousness faring? You enjoying these dilemmas? Because I sure as hell am, now you’ve dragged me into it.’

‘Claire, please…’

‘No! I need to say it. You need to hear it. I’m sorry if this didn’t all go to plan, Arthur, I’m sorry this got so complex and your little scenarios didn’t make the right predictions. But you don’t get a say in this now. This is my life, not yours, leave biology to me, you don’t even breathe!’

She span from him and hugged herself, her heart hammering. Jesus, Claire, shut up, shut up, you aren’t helping, but how dare he, how dare he? What is he? Who is he?

‘Claire, I’m begging you, I’m not trying to make a decision for you. I’m not saying you should have a family if you don’t want one.’

‘Right,’ she folded her arms and glared at the crib.

‘I’m saying you should have the choice,’ he finished. ‘About that, about everything. What kind of life is there for you here, without choice? In any of it? Every day here will be the same.’

‘That’s not true.’

‘Oh, you can pick between the little things in life, the food you eat, the clothes you wear, how you might pass the time of day, but the bigger things, where you live, who your friends are, what job you do, who you want to spend your life with…. Claire please don’t you see what I’m saying?’

She bit her lip.

‘Jim and Aurora, they had no other choices. They had to stay. They lived and died here. When you showed me the galaxies and nebula right back at the start, I thought that I could feel them, that they were finally free, reunited somewhere better.’

‘They are. If you feel that, then they are, they are free to be together wherever they want to be.’
'No, Claire, they aren’t,’ he sighed and rose from his place. Turned her gently on the spot to face the door across the hall. ‘They never left. They lived and died here. Trapped even in death.’

‘They…. You found them?’

‘Yes.’

‘They’re…’ she vaguely lifted a hand towards the closed off bedroom. ‘You found them? Oh Arthur. Oh God, you…I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry you had to see that…’

‘If I can experience love and loneliness and heartache and every other aspect of life you have shown me then it is only right that I experience death and all it means.’

‘Arthur, I would never have wanted you to see that…’

‘It changed me.’

‘Yes, it would.’

‘But for the better.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Claire I spent ninety years stuck behind a bar, and fifty of them watching people I cared about make the best out of circumstances over which they had no control. I thought it was enough. Now I find the truth of it. The tragedy. A couple joined in death in a lonely house with an empty nursery. Two corpses in a floating mausoleum with no-one to remember them. I should never have done this to you. Knowing all I do now, I’d never wake you. I made a mistake, but I’ve learned from you, from them,’ he nodded at the door, ‘There is a better life. You can’t persuade me otherwise, not now.’

‘Ninety years behind a bar, Claire,’ he laughed, ‘Ninety years and then you open my eyes to everything I missed. I will always thank you for that, but now I know what it is to be trapped, and I don’t want that for your future.’

Finally she looked at him, felt his words settle in her mind, felt the ghosts of the couple he had loved so dearly hover silently nearby the empty crib.

‘Please,’ he said, ‘It’s the right thing to do.’


He stepped towards her, the shadow and moonlight from beyond the parted curtains of the nursery flitting across his face.

‘It’s a risk I’m willing to take, Claire,’ he said.

She could still taste him on her lips as the panels of the AutoDoc closed around her, the ghost of his kiss against her skin, a sense of unreality in the haze of her half-drugged mind, the pills she’d taken pre-stasis slowly numbing her. Claire felt the machine around her shift and whirr, watched as Arthur swiped the Crew Authorisation Tag across the control panel and enter the digits requested.
He bent and placed a hand against the glass and Claire returned the gesture.

‘Ready?’ he asked.

‘Ready.’

‘Then I’ll see you in about thirty years,’ he smiled.

She couldn’t speak. Her throat felt tight and she couldn’t quell the sob. Claire swallowed hard, felt the hot burn of tears streak down her temples.

‘It’s going to be OK, isn’t it, Arthur?’ she managed.

‘Of course.’

‘You’re going to be ok?’

The AutoDoc clunked, a series of syringes came into view by her arm.

‘I will be absolutely fine,’ Arthur said, the colours round his pupils seeming to shimmer, flicker. He looked away briefly, looked back again to reassure her. They’d talked about it, he wouldn’t… If she had more time, she’d ask but… But the room seemed too cold, and everything was blurring, and then she was falling, far away from him, from his voice and his familiar face, from his kind eyes and the dimples on his cheeks.

‘Sleep well, Claire.’

His cheeks.

*That isn’t possible.*

‘I love you,’ he said.

*His cheeks are wet. His cheeks are wet and there are tear stains on his skin.*

Claire forced her failing eyes to open wide, tried to summon up her strength.

‘Stop,’ she whispered faintly as the last syringe hit home. ‘Please, Stop.’
Cocktail Hour

The first breath hit with the suffocating sense of drowning, a tide of stagnant air from a clear glass coffin, the first sensation of burning pain, before one by one her senses resurfaced, choking and spluttering back to consciousness. The whirr of machines, the crank of the pod reopening, a flower’s mechanical bloom, a rush of cold and purified air, of clinical scent, of metal and disinfectant. The barren white above her, a blur of vision, the wet of tears that trickled over warming skin. The details forming, lines of grey that shaped to panels, the blink of lights, the stab of a syringe.

‘Take you time, take your time.’

A voice from somewhere close but not nearby, an unfamiliar tone. Claire coughed, a dryness at her throat, her tongue like sand. Behind her something tilted, tipped her upright, sitting tall.

‘There, you’re doing it, cough again… some fluids please.’

Movement beyond her line of sight, the sound of liquid, a hand on hers firm and assured.

‘Here, that’s it…’

Her fingers heavy, wrapping round a cup, the shimmer of trapped light in water, sunlight on the sea, the twinkle of an eye.

‘And lift, there,’ the hand guiding her own. The moisture at her lips. She blinked hard, tried to focus. A shape in blue, a face above. ‘Hello,’ it said, ‘It’s Claire isn’t it? Claire Monroe?’

‘Wh…’ the words got stuck.

‘My name is Dr Gilhurst,’ the woman said, ‘And you gave me quite the fright.’

‘I…’ The room seemed to pulse. A final tear fell from her eye and suddenly all was sharp and clear. ‘You’re awake,’ Claire said, ‘the Crew’s awake?’

‘Yes, we’ve been up about a week. We’re a few months out from Homestead II, just as planned,’ Gilhurst said, ‘Well almost, I wasn’t expecting a passenger in my AutoDoc,’ she tipped her blonde head curiously, inviting explanation.

Sleep Well, Claire.

Stop. Please, stop.

‘Can you tell me how you got here?’ Gilhurst asked. ‘The others aren’t scheduled to wake for a few weeks yet and your original pod is on the hibernation deck. You moved, some thirty years ago according to this machine.’

Claire blinked. ‘I moved…’

‘Do you remember?’

The bartender’s welcoming smile, the taste of whisky, the couple who had lived and died upon the ship.

‘Lonely, you feel lonely.’
She shook her head.

‘Well not to worry, it’s quite common after hibernation, it should come back to you,’ the Doctor moved towards one of her benches, fingers flicking over backlit keys as she updated records, ‘And when it does, we want to hear it all. There’s been some very odd activity on this ship since we all set off. Some very odd activity indeed. Empty pods, missing passengers. Trees. The Engineering crew have found all sorts of irregularities…’

*The house down on the concourse, the wonder in his eyes, the nebula beyond the window.*

‘I feel them in the colours of the sky.’

‘I don’t remember.’ Claire looked about the room, searched the spot where she had seen him last, jerked in fear as a nurse moved across her vision, another stood by, a still dark figure in the bay. The door opened and a crew member slipped in as another one passed in the bright lit corridor beyond. All these people, all these people, where there had just been the two of them.

‘Thank you, for completing me.’

*The touch of his hand, his lips, a dance, the beat of music. The tap of a false heartbeat under fingertips.*

‘Full, it feels full now.’

‘How are you feeling?’ The doctor checked a screen behind her, seemed satisfied with the readings it showed.

‘I’m…’

A curiosity like suspicion in the woman’s eyes. ‘I’m fine,’ Claire said as lightly as possible. ‘I’m fine, it’s like you say, just a little disorientating… waking up.’

The woman clicked her tongue. ‘Yes,’ she agreed cautiously, ‘I suggest you take some rest, head to your quarters.’

*Her equipment, charts and diagrams. Android upgrades and synthetic nervous systems. Carnations in vases, perched on a tray. A bed made for two.*

*Where is he? Have they found him? What would happen if they found him?*

She pushed off the edge of the AutoDoc and staggered slightly, the room spinning.

‘Steady, these pods aren’t really meant for optimal stasis, certainly not for lengths of time. It might take you a while to regain full function, but don’t worry you’ll get there, no damage done. I can get Nurse Peterson to escort you…’

‘No, no need,’ Claire checked the tag at her wrist, read the numbers of her quarters, ‘I can find my way. It’ll… do me good. To reorientate.’ She tried a smile, ‘Might help me to remember?’

It seemed to pacify the medic. ‘Yes, quite, well any problems and…’

The door swooshed open, the sound of voices hitting her from beyond. Two hundred crew felt like two thousand. Too loud, too overwhelming, painful to her senses, a jumble of dialogue and none of it aimed at her but every other word catching her awareness, forcing her to listen. Be quiet, be quiet. Think, think. You have to find him.
'Who do you think you are? Waking me up and now you want to put me back to sleep again?'

'I know what it is to be trapped, I don’t want that for your future.'

'What if it destroys you?'

His cheeks are wet. There are tear stains on his skin.

Her quarters were empty, but they also looked untouched. The lived in mess she had created over months was cleared. Bare drawers and cupboards, barren surfaces. When she entered the hologram welcomed her with a smile and requested she swipe her tag for luggage, and when she did it all reappeared as neatly packed as when she had left Earth. Claire lent upon one trunk with both hands, cast her eyes over her bags. If she hadn’t woken in the Medbay she might think she had dreamed it all, a part of her still feared it.

She had to find him. She changed out of her sleepwear and headed to the elevator.

'Ground Concourse.'

The house was there. She had half expected to have dreamed that too, but there it was, the same as ever except now it was cased in a holographic shell, a shimmering barrier to prevent interference while the crew investigated. Within she saw the flowers wilt and die. The chickens gone. Around her CleanBots trundled over sterile floor, the creeping tendrils of ground cover stripped bare. The little homestead was contained and dead, more lifeless now than ever.

Did they find them inside? Jim and Aurora. Was this just a graveyard now, no longer a memorial? Some mystery to be solved, an ancient crime scene? She looked past the sad abandoned dwelling and down the concourse. Small groups of crew chatted in establishments. The café was up and running, the restaurants above, the ServerBots gliding between customers. The bar…

Claire headed for it, found it lit and populated. A clutch of officers around one table, the solemn looking Captain at its centre. At the opposite end of the room someone was fiddling discordantly on the piano. There was laughter and discussion, and in the background the low hum of the Jukebox, some unfamiliar tune. When she stepped forward glances turned and she did her best to smile, but eyes sought one thing only and then at last she found it.

At the far end of the bar, in conversation with an officer from engineering, there stood a robot. His hands occupied with cloth and glass, his smile easy and pleasant, a red jacket and black bowtie.

Arthur.

She took a few steps forward until she entered his peripheral vision, the officer on the stool before him catching sight of her first, his face a mask of curiosity at her non uniformed appearance.

‘Look’s like you got another customer,’ he commented and raised a glass to her, ‘You gotta be the woman from the Medbay, yeah? No-one else is awake. I’m Terrance, John Terrance, but everyone calls me Terrance, please to make your acquaintance ma’am. Hey, Arthur, serve the lady.’

The android turned, the glass and cloth lowered before him, eyes grey.

‘Good evening,’ he said, ‘And what a lovely evening it is. What can I get you?’
‘Arthur?’

‘That’s my name, now don’t wear it out,’ he said lightly. ‘You look like a vodka kind of girl, am I right?’ his head ticked slightly right.

‘Crazy huh?’ Terrance commented, ‘Damned androids get more lifelike by the day. This is my area technically, I look after the automated systems, but of course they froze us all before we ever saw the place kitted out. I knew we had a bardroid but man, this one? It’s got detail!’ he scooted forward and leaned across the bar, ‘Even got legs, Homestead never give them legs, too tightfisted,’ he laughed and downed his drink. ‘Stick another in here when you’re ready kid, got a few more recovery days ahead before the real work starts.’

‘Certainly,’ Arthur said retrieving a bottle from under the bar, ‘And madam?’

‘Madam?’ Claire baulked.

‘Please forgive me, we haven’t yet been properly introduced,’ he poured a shot.

‘Claire,’ she said, ‘I’m Claire, don’t you…’

‘Damn thing keeps glitching. Should have all the passenger data to hand, recognise you straight away, but I think somethings gone awry with it,’ Terrance said, ‘Like a lot of things in this ship. Boy we got our work cut out. Did you see that damn house?’

Claire kept her eyes on Arthur’s impassive face, his expression unreadable, orderly and vacant. He screwed the cap back on the bottle and settled back on his heels to wait.

‘I did, yeah.’

‘Trees and chickens and all sorts, say I’m not supposed to mention it, but they think someone or other lived in there for years, decades maybe, but ain’t no trace of them now. Just vanished like some kinda ghosts. Don’t make no sense. Some pods went down, four of them. Bill Carey, he’s chief engineer, he said one blew out a timer, but the others they… ah hell, I’m not supposed to say but some of the data’s kinda missing. But if you were to remember… your pod being one of them,’ he looked at her hopefully.

‘I don’t,’ Claire said, still looking at Arthur. He picked up his cloth again and began polishing a tumbler contentedly.

‘Ah well it might come back to you,’ Terrance said and sipped his drink. ‘Grab a seat,’ he gestured to Claire’s old spot.

‘So,’ Arthur said, leaning on the bar, ‘What will it be?’

‘Surprise me,’

‘Manhattan? Sea Breeze? Wait, don’t tell me,’ he held up a finger, ‘A Blue Lagoon.’

Claire’s heart started tapping hard against her ribs.

‘Girl’ drinks,’ Terrance laughed.

‘No need to be sexist, Lieutenant,’ Arthur commented never taking his eyes from Claire ‘I am reliably informed it is a very unattractive quality in a man. Isn’t that correct Dr Monroe?’

‘Just as well you’re a robot then and incapable of such things,’ she said holding his gaze.
Arthur’s eyes sparkled green and blue and the corner of his lip twitched. ‘Well, now I wouldn’t be so sure of that, I have in my time been corrected on a number of matters of etiquette, to my great and lasting shame.’

‘Telling me,’ Terrance commented, ‘Damn thing’s kinda rude.’

Arthur smiled and lowered his head, began pouring measures into a mixer. Android speed, Claire noted, a slight jerkiness to his movements, but an obvious efficiency that marked him as a robot. And yet… that twinkle. She thought of water in a cup, sunlight on the sea; watched him work, conscious of Terrance nearby doing the same thing.

I think you’re in there, Arthur. Show me, you’re in there. If this guy would just get lost.

‘Say aren’t you the artificial intelligence lady?’ the officer said, ‘Whole lot of work on droids back home, some crazy theory about AI consciousness?’

‘That’s me,’ Claire said, ‘Full of crazy theories.’ Arthur glanced up under his brows.

‘So, you believe a thing like this walking toaster, could have a mind of its own right?’ Terrance downed his next drink and nodded at the friendly appliance to top him up. Claire caught the edge of a withering stare from the android, but the glass was full again in a flash.

‘I think it’s possible,’ Claire said.

‘Cos right now its not even sticking to its programme,’ Terrance said. ‘Bardroids, they’ve got these quirky little ‘advice’ programmes, you know bartender speak, life’s philosophies, nothing controversial just the stuff you want to hear when you’re drunk. Well this thing, this damn thing told Bill he could lose a few pounds the other night and was he sure he wanted the Cheetos with his whisky?’

Claire smirked. ‘Did it really?’

‘Reckon it’s burned out a few pathways.’

‘Could be.’

‘Guess I’ll add it to my list,’ Terrance said, ‘You see the Cleanbots? They got some camera thing fitted, playing little ditties, just what in hell? So that’s on the list too.’

‘Sounds like you’re going to be busy,’ Claire commented.

‘Hell yeah, load of weird shit to attend to. Half the AI’s on the ship have been tinkered with. The pods too, holograms are all weird and jacked up. I’ve got a list as long as my arm.’ He half dropped his glass on the bar and it skittered forward. Arthur caught it without looking, handed it back.

‘Say you remember anything about…?’ Terrance started.

‘I don’t remember a thing,’ Claire lied. ‘Not a thing. Hibernation sickness.’

‘Bet you’d love to know, though right? How long you were up for? Hey did you know those dead guys? Oh wait I shouldn’t talk about that… but where’s the damn bodies that’s what I wanna know.’

She caught the tension in Arthur’s jaw. Fleeting, subtle, but there nonetheless.

‘I don’t know,’ she repeated.
Terrance took a deep drink. ‘Man…. Some story there to be told. Guess the main thing is we’re all OK, just those missing three, but it makes you kinda curious, like a WhoDunnit. Hey, Android,’ he raised his half full glass. Arthur just raised an eyebrow.

‘More?’ he queried pleasantly.

‘Fill her up.’

‘Say, Terrance,’ Claire said as Arthur refilled the glass once more with aplomb. She was now convinced he was deliberately getting the man too drunk to function for a reason. Well she could work with that.

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘You need some help with this stuff? I mean the less important stuff obviously. You’re going to have your priorities.’

‘Oh yeah for sure, priorities. I gotta try and trace the missing data, not really my area but I can lend a hand. Transferrable skills.’

‘Very impressive,’ Arthur said, and nudged his glass towards him with a fingertip.

‘Holds me up though on the AI stuff though, the Bots and…’ he waved towards Arthur who had finally stopped pouring whisky for the officer and was decanting his mixer for Claire. ‘Sure there’s something up with it, but I guess nobody ain’t gonna die of a robot being rude.’

‘I could take a look?’ Claire offered magnanimously.

‘Well I guess you're qualified, little lady.’

‘Manners,’ Arthur warned, dropping an umbrella into the cocktail.

‘Doctor,’ Terrance amended. ‘Toaster Doctor,’ he laughed at his own joke. Claire cocked an eyebrow at Arthur’s less than subtle glare.

‘What do you think Arthur? Need a check-up when this place shuts for the night?’ Claire asked, ‘Make sure you’re firing on all cylinders?’ He turned his focus on her fully, ignoring the engineer slipping slowly from his stool.

‘I would be delighted, though I regret to inform you androids don’t actually run on steam,’ Arthur observed seriously, ‘Less of a quick pump action, more of a slow burn.’

Claire snorted and he plonked a glass down in front of her with a wink.

‘Sex on the Beach?’ he said.
Might as well get started. The basics she could muster up in days, but the details, they would be challenging. Right now, only the crew were awake but in a few more weeks the ship would be heaving with passengers and, what’s more, she as one of them would be expected to attend training, classes, preparation for life on Homestead II. She was about to get acutely short of time if she wanted this to work.

Lucky someone had done a lot of the preparation already. Well, they had had thirty years to do it.

Over by her luggage Claire heaved the lighter crates containing clothes and personal belongings to one side to discover the larger, darker sturdier box below. She entered the new security code Arthur had given her and raised the lid, scanning the contents quickly. Wires and precious metals. A number of standard AI tools suitable for multiple purposes. A copy of an I-Serve instruction manual, some spare parts and some more unusual accessories. She strapped the protective goggles to her head, pushed them up over her brow so she could still see what she was doing, and checked a soldering iron. A little flame burst forth.

‘All systems go,’ she said, glancing at the heat detector on the ceiling in case it should blare at the naked flame. But of course, Arthur had thought of that too and it was disarmed.

So first things first.

Claire lifted her toolbox free and set it on her desk, took a motherboard and a few chips from her supplies and then after digging about in her pocket for the data chip Arthur had given her that evening, pressed the tiny button on the side. On the wide screens opposite her bed, built into walls of her room to look like windows, a picture of the past emerged, but not one she recognised immediately. A chicken ran across the camera with a squawk, startled by movement. The angle tilted and then suddenly there he was, sitting on the steps of Jim’s old house, in what amounted to daylight in his artificial world.

‘Hello Claire,’ Arthur said.

He was wearing a blue shirt she didn’t remember and a pair of rough trousers. His hair stuck up at
odd angles and there was dirt on his hands.  

‘Forgive my appearance,’ he smiled, ‘There’s only the chickens and the server bots to see me right now and I’ve rather a lot to do… but where are my manners? I hope this finds you in good health, awake and fresh and ready for whatever the future may bring. And I hope that I am with you, in some capacity or another...’  

His eyes tracked off camera briefly and she watched his features fall. A slightly too long pause and he glanced down, the dark line of his thick eyelashes obscuring his gaze.

‘I must confess I’m not entirely sure how I’ll be in thirty years. Or of whom I’ll be. It’s only been three months and yet…’ he looked back up but couldn’t address the camera directly, ‘and yet,’ he laughed sadly and there were tears in his eyes. ‘It is more difficult than even I imagined, than I ever experienced before.’ With the back of one hand he dashed away the clear oil that threatened to trickle down his cheeks. ‘I’m not sure what this is either,’ he went on glancing at the wetness, ‘Seems to have just started since you…’ he sniffed. ‘Well I think you saw. That is I know you did, in those last few moments, but perhaps you wont remember. I understand human anterograde memory is rather unreliable. Whereas I…. I’m blessed with every detail of every moment.’

He sighed. ‘I’m not sure how beneficial that will be in the longrun… but it helps to keep you with me.’

Claire felt her heart twinge. A helpless smile onscreen and he sat up straighter finally addressing the fourth wall.

‘Anyway the purpose of this recording is not self-pity,’ Arthur said, ‘Though I’m certain I will be guilty of that at some point. More of a journal really. Aurora kept one, but the difference being she was rather talented and I… well I’m not the most creative.’

‘I don’t know about that,’ Claire said from the future.

The Arthur on screen watched her for a moment through the lens. At his feet a chicken approached him cautiously and he threw it some seed. The motion was smooth, habitual, the bird clearly used to him and a part of his routine.

‘You are with me Claire,’ Arthur said softly, ‘Every moment, of every day, and every day is one less day without you. I just have to… survive it.’

‘Pause.’ The picture froze. She exhaled shakily.

Claire dragged the heel of her hand against her cheek, smearing stray tears, and caught the scent of him on her skin. She’d only left him at the bar a few minutes before but already she resented every second apart. How in God’s name had it stood it all this time? And why had she said the things she had to him tonight, she could be so unthinking sometimes. But it was OK, it was OK. It was going to be OK. She was here now, she could fix this.

‘Get it together girl, get it together,’ Claire chided and wiped her cheeks again. ‘Goggles,’ she snapped them into place, ‘Blowtorch,’ a rush of flame, ‘Motherboard,’ she set it before her.

‘Play,’ she told the room.
It had turned out off duty crew could drink until the small hours and there were very few regulations governing licensing out there in deep space. Her back aching from thirty years of stasis and a long evening on a barstool, Claire retreated to one of the golden couches vacated by a group of officers and waited from the hardiest of boozers to call it a night. Around 2am Arthur called last orders and emerged from behind the bar to sit at the piano while people finished up their drinks. He played softly, with a melancholy tenderness that was far beyond the capability of the average android. Claire had seen his smiles, his wink, his subtle communication in her direction over the course of the night, but it was the touch of his fingers on keys that convinced her.

He was whole. And he was beautiful. Just as he had always been, a spell cast from the past, and she the only one who knew its power. She watched his eyes as he played, green and blue and copper, the light within much brighter than the lamps without. The pleasure too subtle to be false. The micro expressions that passed over his face in response to the emotion in the music. The tiny details most androids lacked, or failed to notice, all present, effortless and pure.

She didn’t even notice when the last of the clientele rose to go and the song wound down, she just heard the notes come to an end, saw Arthur rise smoothly and gesture a good night with a tiny bow, an arm spread out to guide customers to the door. As they vanished down the concourse she saw him sit again, his hands held poised above the keyboard and then he closed his eyes. Across from her pale shutters fell slowly from the doorframe, sliding close with a whoosh, sealing them within a temporary refuge as Arthur finally lowered his hands.

A single minor chord played out and echoed in the room. For a moment nothing moved and then he turned his head a little, raised one perfect brow as he caught her eye, he smiled and Claire felt the tide hit hard. Up, off the couch, across the dancefloor even as he rose from the stool, caught her around the waist, pulled her to him.

‘Arthur!’

‘Claire,’ he gasped against her neck, the seize of his arms too tight and then he spun her, his grip across her back, under her buttocks, lifting, pushing, planting her upon the keys with a discordant symphony, his lips suddenly on hers, his fingers pressing at her thighs. She wound her hand through his thick hair, opened her body to accommodate him, let him kiss the breath from her, take it as his own, a suffocated soul trapped alone too long.

‘Claire, I…’

‘I know…’

‘I missed you, I…’

‘I’m here… I’m here…’

‘At last…’

‘You should have stopped it… you should have…’

His eyes blanching brown then grey, ‘Stopped it, stopped what, Claire?’

‘The stasis, you were… I asked you,’ the haze of passion lifting, the memory of those moments stark and cold. ‘I asked you to stop! I asked you to stop the process!’

‘I know,’ he said quietly.

‘Why didn’t you stop?’ Claire cried suddenly, ‘I told you to stop! You were crying and I…’
‘It was too late.’

‘No! No, it wasn’t, you could have woken me back up…’

‘Claire, please,’ he tried to smooth the hair back from her face.

‘No!’ she pushed him back, ‘You didn’t listen, you didn’t listen Arthur, I was leaving you behind, and… and I realised anything could have happened… you could have…’

‘We had made the decision, the process had been started.’

‘And it could have been stopped! I didn’t want to leave you. I didn’t…’ The tears just poured from her then and with them all her words. She beat down on his shoulders, his chest, weakly. ‘You should have stopped, you should have stopped it…’

‘Claire,’ he pulled her in tight, ‘Claire, it’s all right.’

‘You didn’t know that at the time, you said yourself, it was a risk, you were scared, you looked scared and you…’

‘I let you go, Claire, I had to let you go. But it’s all right now, it’s all right. I’m here, I’m still here.’

His tuxedo was damp under her cheek, she gulped in air. Slowly he rubbed circles on her back, pressed his mouth into her hair.

‘It’s all right…. Shhh…’

She found herself clutching at him then, trying to draw herself closer, tighter, into him. She kissed his cheek, his perfect nose, his forehead, worked back down to his mouth, tugged his lip between hers, ground her hips up into the weight of him, the wonderful delicious bulk of him against her.

‘Arthur, please, please…’

‘We don’t have much time,’ he said but already he was unfastening buttons, kissing her back hungrily. He pulled back long enough to strip her lower half, undo his own trousers with efficiency by feel alone, while she pushed away his jacket, tore the bowtie from his neck. One hand reached under her thin blouse, cupped her breast and she felt the rattle of a moan deep in his chest.

Arthur reached behind her with his free hand, grasped the prop and the lid of the piano slammed closed. He mouthed down her chest, followed the line of her abdomen and Claire scrabbled backwards, hoisting her weight with her arms, her legs hitting on disparate keys as he delved lower, tasting her, insistent and heated for long moments before adjusting her position deeper onto the piano and bearing down over her.

The slick black wood at her back, hair fanned behind her head, the warm lights of the Deco bar sparkled far above her, crystals dancing as the suck and pull of Arthur’s mouth drove pleasure through her flesh. The chandelier over them seemed to spin with every panted breath she took, lines and colours around the walls were blurring, red and black and gold. She gripped his hair and tugged, dug her nails into his back to urge him up, heard him groan at the contact as a thousand dormant nerve ends remembered their function. She reached to grasp him as he moved over her, bowed her head against his collarbone, felt the tickle of the hair there on his chest and the hardness between his legs, using her hands as his guide and sliding home.

Claire hooked her chin over one strong shoulder, saw how the light honeyed his skin, watched the ripple of muscle in his back, the domes of two smooth cheeks below and the power of his thighs as
he pumped inside her. His lips were nipping at her neck and ear, soft flesh in tender places, whispers of adoration, of longing and loss and reunion and hope. The lights blurred through tears and she squeezed her eyes shut, clung to him, let him take his fill.

‘Yes,’ he whispered, growing louder with each thrust, ‘Yes, Claire, yes, yes, yes.’

On screen Arthur was sitting by the Ground Concourse fountain feeding fish with a CleanBot at his feet hoovering discarded crumbs. He was speaking about the plans he’d made for when she woke, the things he’d begun to put into place to protect them both, the data he would begin soon to erase. It was a mammoth task, but he had time and access to the mainframe. Claire deserved a future, the very best he could provide, he would not allow the past to trap them on the *Avalon* again, he would not allow them to be separated. Androids, as he put it dryly, would not be looked upon favourably by the Homestead Company if it was revealed hey had gone about deactivating stasis pods and developing their own minds.

Claire soldered a thread of copper on her project and pushed her goggles up. She had to get some rest, the holographic clock signalled it was after breakfast and the night was gone. She attached the motherboard to its frame and wrapped it all in cloth. She’d pack it all away out of sight just in case and get some sleep before heading to the bar. There would be people there, she knew, and Arthur would be careful and guarded for both their sakes, but even idle small talk with the I-Serve was worth it. If it was quiet, he might play on the piano.

It was all they would manage in the next few months, there were few excuses for her to linger with the AI, there would be even fewer when the other passengers were up. It felt like it might just be unbearable but Claire forced herself to remember, Arthur had already waited thirty years without her. Now at least he could see her, hear her voice, count down those final days. She glanced up at the video journal, only a few months into his journey, at a point when even he was unsure he would survive it. She had been the lucky one. For Claire, the void of amnesiac time that separated her from him was so much easier to bear. It felt like yesterday she’d gone to sleep and her mind and heart could not compute why now they must be separate in one another’s company. But for Arthur, all that time had gone before, the long days and the loneliness, the hope that kept him hanging on, and she would watch it as she worked, and remember and be grateful.

He had done this all for her, and now he needed a favour.

She had to set him free.
‘Welcome to Home Sweet Home, your daily update on our progress constructing your dream world,’ The holographic woman launched into the pre-course spiel for what felt like the hundredth time since the rest of the passengers had woken and Claire had been forced to attend her education groups. The sessions went on for hours as it was, hours she could be spending honing her Projects in the dwindling days before Educational Group 46, her own, was to be transferred down into the colony.

The first to pack up and leave had been, of all things, the environmentalists, but Home Sweet Home revealed the purpose behind this was to establish water and renewable power supplies while erecting a few basic shelters with the help of the prelim construction team. Pictures were beamed back of clear water streams and lush indigenous vegetation, blinding sunlight being harnessed for electricity and contented looking colonists enjoying a beer after a hard day’s work.

After that team after team was gradually despatched setting up farming and agriculture, power, communications and accommodation. No point in 5000 people all landing at once with no place to live. At least six of the latest teams to go down had included a host of Worker Bots for heavy lifting and rapid construction of communal buildings and individual starter homes as the project expanded. This meant Claire’s team was nearing the time it would be shipped out, and that put pressure on her to get her own work done. The only advantage was that almost two thousand passengers had already left the ship in the preceding weeks and the painful months of self imposed isolation were coming to a close.

The initial heaving population had been stifling to a woman no longer used to sharing oxygen and it particularly irked her that the calm sanctuary of the pool was now constantly filled with splashing squealing bodies. She rapidly remembered why she had hated people as much as she did and complained to Arthur endlessly about the colonists lack of manners, a safe subject in public and one that allowed him a little freedom to be caustic in his commentary. Having to stick to his plain and simple original programming was becoming difficult and he sought stimulation wherever he could outside of cocktail recipes and suggesting people sober up. Those initial weeks had hurt on both sides, but as the ship emptied Claire could increasingly sneak a freer conversation with her favourite bartender. It kept them both sane she was sure of it and exhausted as she was between dull days on lectures and long nights welding and programming, she still headed to the bar each day on the off chance it wasn’t too busy.

Like now.

‘How was your day?’ Arthur asked pleasantly on seeing her.

‘Well I dozed off before the end of Home Sweet Home,’ Claire admitted.

He smirked. ‘I don’t think you missed very much.’

‘I still need to keep up to date, don’t want to be caught out and sent down there before we’re ready.’

Arthur’s eyes flickered as he stood motionless with his cloth wrapped round a glass. After a moment accessing the mainframe he appeared to shake himself out of a stupor. ‘No sign of that yet,’ he assured, ‘Though I quite understand why you drifted off, really quite boring isn’t it? Drink?’
‘Coffee,’ Claire sighed and watched him pour.

‘Irish?’ he offered playfully.

‘Arthur I have work to do.’

He pouted, ‘Just a drop?’ he suggested, ‘All work and no play…’

‘Just a little squoosh.’

‘I don’t believe I know the measurement of a squoosh,’ Arthur said and pulled a bottle of cream liqueur towards him, ‘How about I just guess?’ he slopped some in the cup, considered and slopped in some more. ‘There, that seems about right.’ Thank God no-one was watching, it was the sort of guess work and imprecision which would horrify an engineer like Terrance and not something one expected to see from an Android.

Claire stirred the concoction slowly, the warmed fumes of alcohol practically burning her nose. ‘Christ, Arthur, go easy. If I drink this I’ll pass out before I’m half way done.’

‘How are things progressing?’ Arthur asked casually as he wiped down the bar. She saw him check behind her as he spoke.

‘Good. Well,’ Claire confirmed, ‘We are on schedule.’

‘That’s a relief.’

‘Any news from your end?’ she added quietly.

That flick of his eyes over her shoulder again. ‘Nothing pressing. I’ve successfully diverted engineering off our trail so to speak. They miraculously discovered some of that missing data.’

‘By missing I assume you mean forged, and by discovered, you mean you planted it.’

‘Some of my finest work.’

‘So, they aren’t going to hunt you down for sabotaging hibernation pods?’

‘No. Though technically they still own my arse,’

Claire snorted.

‘Isn’t that the phrase?’ Arthur asked innocently.

‘Sort of,’ she giggled, ‘But don’t worry we can fix that too, get you unhooked, new power source, that bit’s sorted by the way.’

‘Good.’

‘Why did my pod open again?’ Claire asked, ‘What did we agree?’

‘Someone back on earth made a terribly human error with the timer device.’

‘They won’t believe that, they will have everything on record back at the Homestead company HQ.’

‘True but… the Avalon won’t be returning to Earth for another one hundred and twenty years so
that investigation can wait.’

‘Good point,’ Claire agreed. Once the basics of the colony were set up the ship and its re-
hibernated crew would autopilot back to its original destination. Assuming Earth was still there, it
was all a bit of a gamble. Weird for the crew too, waking up yet another century into the future.
She wouldn’t want to see their psychological landscapes after all that.

‘Did you speak with Norris?’ Arthur asked.

‘Oh yeah,’ Claire said seriously, ‘Captain Norris.’

‘And?’ there was the smallest hint of anxiety in his tone. Is head ticked slightly.

‘All fine. I’ve still got some ‘lasting memory dysfunction’ but I got the dates to line up, stuck to the
story. I woke up, I very quickly went back to sleep again thanks to Jim casually leaving that Crew
tag lying about the med bay.’

‘How fortunate.’

‘I think its all coming together nicely,’ Claire knocked back the rest of her coffee. It was
surprisingly strong despite the alcohol and she could feel the tips of her fingers start to shake.

‘Let’s not count too many chickens,’ Arthur said pleasantly, ‘Can I get you another?’

‘Go on then but less booze, more caffeine, then I need to get on, stuff to do, escape plans to finalise
for handsome robots.’

He smiled and grasped the glass coffee pot, tipped to pour, the hot liquid falling elegantly from the
lip into her cup, rising, rising.

‘That’s plenty,’ Claire said.

But he kept pouring. She glanced up at his face, noted the grey eyes and blank expression. Next to
her the coffee reached the rim of the cup, bulged and spilled, spreading across the white surface of
the bar. Claire dodged back with a small yelp before it could scald her.

‘Arthur!’

The pot was almost empty now, the beverage cascading down over the bar, splashing on the floor.
A little caught the bare top of her foot and seared.

‘Arthur!’

His arm jerked, a tiny motion, as though something held it pinned and he couldn’t force it free.
Again. Again. Claire raced round the back of the bar, its patrons looking on in curiosity, as she
dived for him and the hidden panel just around his waist. She tugged up his shirt. His hand
released. The coffee pot clattered to the bar and rolled, smashed onto the ground scattering shards
of glass. She pressed the dimples at his sacrum and the panel popped open, rapidly followed by the
skein of smoke from someplace deep inside.

‘Shit! Shit! I’m sorry Arthur I have to…’

‘What in hell?’

It was Terrance, moseying on in from the concourse. All she needed.
‘Just a glitch I’m sure,’ Claire said, mind racing. A tiny flame erupted within the panel. Crap, crap, she didn’t even truly understand how Arthur worked but those memory cards were sacred and key to his being. Any damage there and… she didn’t have a choice. Claire wrenched the cards away, burning her fingers in the process, grabbed a soda fountain from the bar and blasted the flames.

There was a horrible silence followed by a round of amused applause from the clientele. Terrance stood with his hands on his hips and stared.

‘Well that’s one way of doing it I guess,’ he said.

‘I’ll take a look at the damage. I just… didn’t want it going up in flames.’

‘Wouldn’t worry, probably past its sell by anyway, coming up to decommission.’

Claire looked up. ‘What? Decommission?’

‘Yeah probably reached it’s Million Hours, right?’

‘Million…?’

‘Didn’t you work for the Bot people? You know, the Magic Million. Bot works so long then it all burns out so Prometheus can sell you a new one. Guess it wasn’t a Million back on earth, more like a Magic Year or Two, but we needed a longer contract,’ he laughed.

‘The automatic burn out,’ Claire said, ‘Yeah, yeah I remember. They tried to get it banned. Said it was unethical forcing people to buy new devices yearly. Deliberately gave up the ghost and forced folks to get the latest upgrade.’

‘That’s the one. Woulda thought this droid had some time left though, supposed to have been on standby for a century see, but I guess it activated when those two passengers were awake back in the day and used up its hours early. No matter, not like we need it on the way back right?’

‘No,’ she said faintly.

‘Just leave the thing, probably got a spare someplace.’

Claire looked at Terrance quickly. ‘No!’ He frowned. ‘I mean to say, this is my field, I’m curious. I’ll take a look at it, fix it up.’

‘You got enough to do, lady, I just got back from a meeting. Schedules been brought forward, Engineers, Medics, Experts in Nanorobotics, they’re all moving down tomorrow. And that means you.’

‘Tomorrow?’

‘Yeah, time’s come,’ Terrance approached the bar, gave Arthur something between a shove and a slap. ‘Guess I can cross this one off my damned list,’ he said.

‘It is fair to say that experiments with standby have been an unmitigated disaster,’ said the Arthur on the screen, ‘Which is rather ironic don’t you think Claire, you’ve been asleep for ten years and I
can’t get a wink of it?’

Claire glanced up from the makeshift work station on her desk, a litany of titanium and microchips, blueprints, instruction manuals and tools covered the surface. Two empty coffee cups sat to her right. The clock below her screen said 3am, she’d been back from the bar for hours, missed dinner, worked on past midnight and still had much to do.

‘Don’t worry I’m making up for it now,’ she commented.

Arthur was wandering the upper levels of the atrium with the recording device. A ServerBot from one of the restaurants trundled past him with a merry beep.

‘Good morning,’ he told it, and then to camera with a mischievous grin, ‘I think I may be going slightly mad, if such a thing is possible for an android, but every time I power down I get these… images and I power right back up again.’

He stopped and leaned over the rails to look down onto the ground concourse four levels below. He pointed the camera for her benefit. The roof of Aurora’s home was visible through the tree tops. ‘Last time I tried I was falling, from up there,’ the camera rotated to show the starlit atrium’s ceiling, ‘Not from the roof, but from beyond, I rebooted all of a sudden quite convinced I was about to strike the ground. I don’t suppose it would do much damage to me really…’

Claire frowned and screwed in a stray bolt on her project. Even titanium could bend given enough force.

‘The time before that it was them,’ Arthur went on, ‘Aurora and Jim but not as they were then, rather as they are now, except… not. They were animated but they weren’t alive, an impossibility I know but… I haven’t been back in the house since.’

She looked up again at his worried face. Not worried, haunted. She remembered how it felt to walk the empty corridors of the Avalon, the way the human mind heard footsteps at its back, saw faces in dark glass.

‘I’ve been thinking,’ he said, ‘About what will happen when everyone wakes up. Not just to you and I, I’ve already told you some of the plans there but, to them, if people find them.’ He chewed at his lip. ‘I don’t want anyone to find them. Humans are curious beings, they will want to know all the details. How they lived and how they died. Aurora’s journals will tell them the former but…’ for a moment his gaze was lost to middle distance. ‘I don’t want them touched. Interfered with, cut up or examined. I don’t want them taken to the labs upstairs or…’ he glanced desperately to one side in an effort to contain himself.

Claire set down her tools and watched him.

‘Part of them is here and part of them up there,’ Arthur said looking to the stars. ‘Would it be a terribly silly thing to say I wish those parts could be together? They’ve spent so long upon this ship, don’t you think they should be free?’

For not the first time that night Claire found her eyes glassy with tears. The quality of Arthur’s diary had slowly morphed from daily practicality to quasi philosophy. The whys and hows and wherefores that tortured living beings. Where did he fit? What was his purpose? What was the meaning to it all? His mind worked overtime and tied itself in knots trying to answer questions human beings had failed on for millions of years. He could not rest and he was afraid to. Afraid of what his imagination would dredge up, afraid of what he’d see or feel, afraid a longer period of standby would somehow alter him, change his function or perception, change his feelings or his
goals. But most of all he feared he would forget. Aurora, Jim, a century of time, Claire. He’d kept going and in the last few months he’d had to keep it all strictly under wraps. The strain must have been incredible on every system.

Burnout.

She should have seen this coming.

‘Fast Forward,’ Claire said and watched the picture change at speed, pausing now and then to check his progress, look for signs.

Years ticked by. The diary entries became sparser, the dates further apart. Loneliness plagued him and he could find no rest at all. He stopped trying to ‘sleep’ to avoid distress, but eventually his overloaded consciousness churned up unwanted waking images from the past, imaginings from an untold future. Intrusive, uncalled for, so vivid he felt as though he relived every moment. And some days it was wonderful and some days it was tragic. Waking dreams and nightmares rendered him confused and lost.

By the final decade, unable to shut down for any significant period of time Arthur’s self care routines became neglected and Claire watched him glitch and stammer, the broken parts of a trillion processes stacking in his memory banks, blocking signals for basic function. He slammed against the doorframe of the bar and the camera device went flying, landing behind him, the lens pointed upwards at an odd angle, catching the side on view of his torso and hips only. She was glad not to see his face. She could hear the rhythmic thunk of him colliding with the wall, over and over, the high pitched whirr his overtaxed joints made as they tried to force their way, on and on until at last she heard his systems kick in best they could and he staggered back and changed direction.

All Androids needed maintenance like all humans needed sleep, but he was not one thing or another. Still tied to the mainframe for power but not truly at its bidding, his automated checks were overridden by his new formed independence and there no-one there to help him process the feelings which did him so much damage. Lonely, lonely, the great capacity for love within his heart too overwhelming to conduct on simple wire.

She had been so sure he was OK.

She had been so sure there was time.

Five months after she had woken for the second time upon the Avalon Claire paused the diary unable to watch more. It was 5am, the ship would be waking in an hour. By her desk, her project was near completion, basic but functional, could damn well almost have worked for their original simple plan, except now everything had gone to pieces.

Downstairs in the bar she knew that Arthur stood inactive, burned out, broken, clinging to existence by the thread of power from the mainframe, the panels in his controls blinking slow red and unresponsive. Upstairs in her room Claire had a pocket full of soot covered memory chips and no guarantee she could get to him let alone repair him. She needed more time, dammit, but she was due on a shuttle to the surface of Homestead II just after lunch, and there wasn’t time to rehearse, to double check or make adjustments. She stood in her quarters and looked over her project one last time. It would have to do.

‘I-Serve Initiation sequence, 8, 3, 7, 6, 2,’ she said and closed the new android’s control panel, tugged down its crisp white shirt. It opened its grey eyes.
‘I- Serve Initiated,’ it said pleasantly in a deep familiar voice, ‘Please allocate identity.’

‘Arthur,’ Claire said, ‘Your name is Arthur.’

‘Thank you,’ the new Android said, ‘I’m very pleased to meet you. How may I help?’

‘Where do I start?’ Claire said tiredly.

Arthur #2 cocked its head, ‘I’m not sure I understand that request,’ it confessed, ‘Could you perhaps, rephrase?’

Claire sighed. Stupid walking toaster.
Ashes

So early in the morning the Avalon was quiet enough to remind Claire of a time thirty years before when she was the only living being to walk its corridors, and how she wished it was still the case, how she wished on so many levels she had chosen to remain within that timeframe. So much had rested on that decision, and she was sure she’d got it wrong.

Now, already dressed in the heavy outerwear she had chosen for her transport to Homestead, Claire picked her way through the familiar and deserted passages with an android all over again. Arthur 2.0 strolled casually beside her, his head high, his eyes to the front, and as his bartending programme dictated, pretty much speaking only when spoken to. It unnerved her, the original Arthur was a skilled conversationalist, an incessant chatterer and joker, curious and responsive. This replacement was a shadow of his original self.

But that was all he had to be, all she had designed him for. That had been the original plan. While she had been asleep Arthur had raided Claire’s equipment, gathered the supplies from the ship’s storage; his own spare parts and more. Claire would assemble them together into something which resembled him and could pour a decent drink and then they planned to swap them. Arthur would be given alternate power and unhooked from the mainframe, the new bot would be hooked up. Arthur would accompany her back to her quarters and temporarily into her luggage, something he found delightfully amusing while Claire was mortified, and in the meantime the I-Serve which replaced him would manage the bar for the last few days before all passengers disembarked.

Nobody would notice or much care if there were subtle differences between the two androids, Arthur had held himself in check pretty well, stuck to his original job description since the passengers awoke, and anyway they’d all be too busy moving to the colony to notice if the new I-Serve was less forthcoming than before. Just in the course of the last week they had agreed the plan would take place on a quiet night, in the middle of a convenient power shortage triggered mysteriously by a glitch in the mainframe and with a good deal more planning than Claire had been able to manage in the twelve hours since Arthur ceased to function in the Avalon bar. It wasn’t supposed to happen for another fortnight and she felt ill prepared and a little sick.

Footsteps. Claire raised a hand and Arthur 2.0 bumped into it. He ground to an offended looking halt as she peered around a corner. Without the original Arthur’s access to security cameras, the power supplies and and the ships inner movements she was vulnerable to discovery in the bright lit fully open corridors. She didn’t have him watching over her ready to jam doors and snuff out lights as she made her way with his replacement. Without her partner in this particular crime, there was a very high chance that her heist would fail. Her stomach flipped. Claire waited as a early riser vanished in the direction of the ship’s gym and then waved Arthur 2.0 onwards to the elevator where he stood like an awkward mannequin in the centre of the thing smiling serenely at the control panels.

‘You need to sit,’ Claire told him as the door shut, ‘Sit and put on your belt.’

‘Certainly.’ He blinked and sat primly to one side of her, studied the safety harness briefly, his every cognition ticking slowly across his face. His features were as close to Arthur’s as she had managed to mould but the quality of his skin and hair was substandard and even to her he just seemed plastic, like an animated doll. Years ago she would have been proud of such a creation in such a short space of time, but android technology had leapt forward and Claire had seen more potential in them for realism recently than most. As the elevator blasted towards the ground concourse she found herself watching his face for a reaction to the temporary loss of gravity and
found nothing. Even at their first meeting, when he had yet to reveal his evolution, Arthur had shown so much more emotion.

A robotic voice announced their arrival and Arthur 2.0 efficiently unbuckled himself and stood straight awaiting instruction. The doors slid open. Claire hitched the backpack with Arthur’s power source, memory chips and a dozen essential tools higher onto her shoulder and took a deep breath.

‘Ok, can’t see anyone. Follow me, keep quiet.’

Setting Arthur 2.0 up would be the easy bit. Hook him into the mainframe, stick him behind the bar, let him do the job the I-Serve was intended for, simple. How she was going to reactivate Arthur himself, if she could reactivate him at all was a different matter. She glanced at her watch; she would have thirty minutes tops before she had to get out of there. Every cover story she had dreamt up for why she might be hanging about the closed bar at 5.30am with two identical androids had somehow lacked veracity, so best to avoid the scenario entirely rather than face explaining herself. She scuttled down the concourse, keeping Arthur 2.0 in tow. Never mind the twin androids, if she got caught in the bar at all at that time of day she would have difficulty. Only crew members had the ability to override the licensing hours and…

Claire stopped dead outside the bar’s white shutters.

‘Shit,’ she said suddenly. ‘Shit…’

Arthur was supposed to let them in and he was powered down. That was part of the plan too, like the power cut and surveillance. Shit she would have to break in.

‘Is everything alright,’ Arthur 2.0 asked graciously.

‘Bar’s locked, he was supposed to open up… damn… ok… I still have…’ She rummaged in the backpack. Crew Authorisation 2371, she still had the tag, Arthur had passed it back to her at the start of all this but she hadn’t dared use it for a thing lest it trigger some sort of inquiry. Well sod it she was off this ship in hours, let them bloody enquire. She swiped it over the security panel by the bar entrance.

‘Code deactivated,’ a voice said firmly. She swiped again. ‘Code deactivated.’

‘Oh dear,’ commented Arthur 2.0.

‘Shut up! What’s wrong with this thing!?’

‘It’s deactivated,’ Arthur 2.0 said unhelpfully.

‘Yes but…. Crap, course it is, I told Norris I used this to put myself into stasis, the crew know Gus is dead, course the damn code doesn’t work now. Dammit! Why the hell did everyone have to wake up, this used to be a lot simpler!’

She smacked the panel, watched the timer tick over. 5.35am. The place would be heaving with people any minute. Stupid bloody interfering people.

‘Is this the bar?’ Arthur 2.0 asked.

Jesus Christ this thing was thick.

‘Yes, it’s the bloody bar, you can tell by the big sign that says ‘Bar,’ I told you to be quiet, I need to think.’
‘So, this is where I will be installed?’

‘Yes, Arthur, this is…’ She looked at him. He looked back with a little smile. The lines about his eyes didn’t crease the way her Arthur’s had, the warmth was gone, he blinked on a timer, didn’t have dimples in his pretty smooth cheeks, held his hands just so at his waist without a hint of nervous energy. But there was one thing he did have.

Claire stepped around the back of him, opened up his control panel, took a chip from her backpack.

‘Time to get you online Arthur,’ she said, a screwdriver between her teeth, ‘Sorry to do this to you in public but it’s an emergency.’

‘Oh, I don’t mind at all,’ he said pleasantly as she wired him up. Claire hit a switch. A light turned green.

‘Thank God for that, something’s working,’ she muttered. ‘Ok, you’re mainframe.’ She tucked his shirt back in. ‘There’s going to be two of you on mainframe for a few minutes, that might raise some suspicions but we will just have to…’

‘Oh no it’ll be just fine,’ Arthur 2.0 said.

‘Well we need to get in there and get Arthur off of it before anyone sees…’

‘Oh, I can open the door! Arthur 2.0 said delightedly, ‘But you don’t need to worry about the mainframe, everything is just as it should be.’ He inclined his head amiably with a little wink that annoyed her to the core. Behind him the shutters started rising.

‘What do you mean everything as it should be?’ Claire frowned.

‘Mainframe readings indicate there is only one I-Serve currently supplied by Avalon processors as per recommendations for drinking establishments of this size and available CPU.’

‘He’s offline? Arthur’s offline? His conduction panels must be fried, this is worse than I….’

The lights popped on before them, the chandeliers sparkled. Behind the bar mirrors reflected the deco lamps and bottles of coloured liquor shone brightly. Claire looked frantically from one end of the bar to the other as the shutters clunked into place and Arthur 2.0 turned smoothly on his heel. She heard his shoes tapping gracefully over the dancefloor as he made his way to his station.

‘Ah this is just wonderful,’ he said cheerfully, ‘I shall enjoy this very much. What a fine establishment this is, you sold it rather short I think.’

Claire watched in horror as he installed himself behind the bar, reaching for a cloth with one hand, a tumbler with the other. He began to polish it, his eyes flitting about the room, forming straight line readings, his memory cataloguing every inch. He rotated slightly on the spot as he assimilated the new information.

‘Very nice,’ he said, ‘Very nice indeed.’

‘Where is he?’ Claire burst out, her voice shrill.

Arthur 2.0 paused his readings and turned to her after a slight delay.

‘Who?’ he asked.

‘Arthur! The original Arthur. The reason we came here at all! Where is he? He should be … he
Arthur 2.0 looked down at the ground about him and back up to her with a vague and puzzled
expression.

‘I am Arthur,’ he said, ‘and I am right here.’

‘No, no! The other I-Serve!’

‘There is no other I-Serve, only me,’ he said pleasantly. ‘May I get you a drink?’

‘Where is he? Look on the mainframe, do a search! There was another android, he burned out
yesterday,’ she dug in her bag, ‘I have his memory chips, I have them right here, I took them from
him to try and… where is he?’

‘Perhaps I can be of assistance instead?’ Arthur 2.0 suggested, ‘I have a fully updated Bartender
Programme.’

‘For God’s sake will you just look! Look for him! Check the mainframe, check the cameras.’

‘That isn’t really part of my job description…’ he started wryly.

‘Arthur you will look at the damn cameras now, so help me God, I put you together and I can take
you apart again.’

‘Please, there’s no need for that kind of language,’ Arthur 2.0 said calmly.

‘Do it! I am your programmer. Do as you are told!’

Arthur 2.0 reluctantly put down his cloth and glass. ‘Very well.’ She watched him switch to view
internally, saw his eyes flicker.

‘There are no working cameras in the bar,’ he stated. ‘They appear to have been deactivated some
time ago via mainframe. Was that you? In preparation for tonight perhaps?’

‘No, that was Arthur.’

‘Naughty. Searching nearby surveillance. From the Ground Concourse records I can… Ah.’ His
little smile faded.

‘What? What do the concourse cameras show?’

‘It would appear there was an I-Serve just as you describe,’ Arthur 2.0 said with the strangest hint
of sorrow.

‘And?’

‘Checking files.’ There was a soft whirr. ‘I’m sorry,’ Arthur 2.0 said after a beat. ‘The I-Serve in
question was removed yesterday evening after closing. It has been… decommissioned.’ He turned
to look at her, report concluded.

‘Decommissioned?’

‘I’m afraid so. Never a pleasant thing to hear,’ Arthur 2.0 said, ‘But happens to us all in the end.’

‘Happens to us all?’ Claire breathed, the air suddenly choking her.
'Oh, we all die,' Arthur 2.0 said. 'Even androids…'

'They… they took him? Who took him?'

'Engineering.'

'Where? Why?'

'Central components. He will be broken down for scrap, spare parts. Most likely it has already been done, seeing as the android is offline and undetectable,' Arthur 2.0 said. He plucked up a glass again. 'Are you sure I can't get you anything?'

Pain, torn and tender, bleeding tendrils round her heart. Claire sat heavily in the nearest chair, her legs useless. Dimly she heard voices, passengers starting their day, crew making their way down the concourse towards her. She should move, she should head back to her room. Disconnect Arthur 2.0 and hide him away before too many questions were asked about where the hell he came from, about why she was here with him. She should move, try and gather her thoughts, try and think what to do.

She should move.

The digits on her watch ticked forward once, twice, three times. The minutes crawled. 5.59, 6.00am. Morning. The false sunrise of the concourse lighting its white floors. Behind her Arthur 2.0 hummed a formless tune as he worked, asked no questions, made no comment, offered her nothing. Her whole life would be nothing, always. She’d lost the thing most dear, the one thing she had looked for all her days. The thing she had been lucky enough to find and stupid enough to lose almost as quickly.

Unique and irreplaceable, a consciousness as individual as her own, the person Arthur was now broken into pieces, every scrap to be recycled. Colony ships made best use of all assets, when they emptied this one everything would go. They weren’t to know, they couldn’t, the miracle inside, the first an only of a whole new breed. She ought to have protected him but instead she clung to him too selfishly to share, the promise of her own happy future leaving him vulnerable. If she had told the truth he’d still be here. If she had stayed with him through those empty lonely years and introduced him to the waking crew. Sacrificed her youth for his safety. He’d become a curiosity maybe, but he’d be alive, perhaps they’d send him back to earth, perhaps they would have kept him here. Perhaps they’d try and copy him, invite her to do research. Perhaps she never could have loved him openly again but…

Pain, in her closed fist until she was forced to flex her fingers, forced to look down. Memory chips, stained with soot, bloodied lines in broken skin. She’d held him too tightly, she’d refused to let go, and now she hurt and he was gone.

Soot stains and lost memories. Like the remnants of a funeral pyre. Like ashes.
Homestead II. What a let down that had been. Pretty much just Earth with fewer people and less stuff. Not that she minded either of those things, but when Claire thought of what she had given up the inconveniences of colony life seemed less like an exciting challenge and more like, well, inconveniences. She swirled the deep green liquor in her glass and gave it a tentative sniff. The latest development, twelve months in colonisation, was some kind of dubious home brew based on a medium sized green vegetable native to the continent they now occupied. It grew in the dusty soil gathered in jagged rocks a few miles out of town and it looked a little like a potato, so she supposed this was technically some kind of alien vodka, but whatever it was it burned. Got her drunk though. Had some other advantages. Her drink of choice.

Drunk enough that sometimes, sitting at the public house in central downtown Avalon, the first developed settlement, she could squint and see Arthur behind the bar. Of course there was a bot behind the bar at all times, merrily serving the last of the original drink brought from the ship and quietly substituting it with poorly brewed synthesised concoctions designed to taste the same, but the bot in question was about as authentic as the beer it handed to the customers. He looked the part, he had some of the patter, but he was just a simple I-Serve transported from the ship and donated to the colony. Like everything else in that bar, right down to the piano one of the security team was prodding discordantly in the corner.

‘Do you require a little top up, Claire?’ Arthur 2.0 asked on his way past her. She shook her head at her drink, and he sauntered off to serve another colonist. At least they hadn’t asked too many questions when they had found him there that morning. Turned out the crew had bigger things on their mind than the arrival of a new robot bartender to replace the one that went on fire. Like moving 5000 people in shuttles. Like emptying the Bays above of storage. Like transporting the engineers and Medics down to the planet later that day. Claire had been shooed back to her quarters to make ready and Arthur 2.0 stayed at his station until the ship was empty. Everything on board had a spare as far as the crew knew, so no big deal. End of story, end of rescue mission, end of the line.

The first few months had been hectic. A lot of building and wiring, rejigging and delivering. Claire was responsible for the heavy duty Worker Bots involved in mass construction. There were always repairs to make and services to render. There was her own place to fix up and her lab to establish. It kept her busy, forced her to be so, and it was simple fare. She didn’t have to think. Her complicated theories were both hurtful to her memory and useless in these preliminary stages. All people wanted were bots and someone who could work them, fix them, do an update on request. She had a team of people, she delegated well, she did the tricky stuff herself, but she was as automated as her projects.

The crew were hanging about back then, advising, representing Homestead, lending a hand here and there, but mainly sitting in the bar, notably one of the first buildings to be set up, swapping stories and encouraging people to get on with their work. Seemed everyone had to work damn hard, except the crew. To them it was one big holiday, a pause between century long journeys to and from the planet.

She chugged her shot. Well at least they had finally gone. Frozen down one by one in a Hibernation Induction Chamber constructed in the lab next to hers, its massive power requirements sourced by solar energy from the endlessly brilliant sun. Despite her expertise in robotics, as a qualified medic she had supervised a batch or two to help her colleagues in the Med Centre. Person after person in grey regulation sleep wear, taking pills, being injected, fading into stasis just as she
had. She stood over them and watched as impassively as she could, swiping her ID across the control panel, punching in a code, completing their charts on screen. They had been loaded into their pods and put back aboard, just a handful staying on the planet as part of their retirement plan.

Finally, last month the Avalon had launched out of orbit and pointed itself back at Earth. Claire imagined the ship as she remembered it. Empty, silent, its crew sleeping like the undead in their tomb surrounded by stars and headed home. She imagined its empty bar in darkness. The whole concourse abandoned. Every room gutted for what could be used on Homestead. Every warehouse sized chamber now devoid of crates and boxes, supplies taken. A skeleton ship full of her most personal ghosts, the most important memories of her life sailing out of view, further and further year after year, next stop Earth.

She raised her glass, gestured with a finger at the bardroid, felt a few more moments of her existence tick away. Arthur 2.0 ambled back towards her, took the tumbler from her hand and fetched the lurid green liquid from behind him.

‘And how has your day been?’ he said pleasantly.

‘Same as ever,’ Claire said, avoiding eye contact.

‘Ah but things must be changing, no?’ he cocked a plastic eyebrow at his most regular and familiar customer, ‘Now that the crew have departed? Your duties will alter again, perhaps to something less mundane than hibernation?’

‘Not really, just more of the same, fixing droids, fine tuning.’

Arthur 2.0 paused and appraised her. She could feel his eyes trying to read her face.

‘I’m not feeling chatty today,’ she said at last.

‘Of course,’ he poured a neat measure and waited.

‘Still not chatty, Arthur.’

‘I haven’t offended you I hope?’ he asked with a concerned look.

‘No. I’m just…’ Claire accidentally caught his eye.

‘If this is about the other week, then let me assure you...’

‘It’s not,’ she said quickly. ‘I’m just very busy, very tired.’

‘I understand,’ he said soothingly, ‘Still much construction to be done, a lot of wear and tear to be had on the workers.’

‘Yeah,’ she reached for the glass before he offered it.

‘It must be very hard,’ he commented.

‘You’ve no idea,’ she mumbled.

‘No, I suppose I don’t, working as I do here,’ he said, ‘Not exactly rough on the old joints.’

‘No, you’ve got it swell,’ she knocked back the tart drink.

‘Makes one wonder sometimes, why I was built with legs at all just to meander around behind this
‘You know why you have legs,’ Claire said sharply. ‘Try thinking before you speak.’

He blinked stupidly for a moment, eyes flicking right, then had the decency to look guilty.

‘Ah, of course, forgive me, I had archived those memories as previously requested.’

‘Wish I could.’

‘Human beings don’t have such a function I believe,’ he wiped the bar. ‘You are equipped to remember anything at any time according to prompts. An infinite capacity for storage of those memories. Remarkable things, brains, if it were possible for me to feel such an emotion I might go so far as to say I envy you, but naturally I can’t…’ he broke into a grin.

‘Do you ever shut up?’

‘Why of course, if you prefer.’

‘Well do it.’

‘Certainly.’

She pointed at her glass. He topped it up with a flourish of satisfaction in a job well done and then sidled off again. A few stools down a man in agricultural gear was drinking whisky.

All right Arthur,’ he greeted the droid.

‘Hello Malcolm. How was your day?’ Arthur 2.0 began, ‘I do believe we have had another day of sunshine.’

‘We have indeed, got a good crop going now.’

‘Make hay while the sun shines, as they say,’ Arthur 2.0 winked indulgently as he fixed the guy another drink. From this angle the smoothness of the robot’s features was less obvious, the shadows of the bar obscuring him a little. Claire watched his shoulders wiggle with his artificial laughter, caught the edge of its deep tone in the air. Almost. Almost. When the world faded at its edges and sounds became soft, when she was six or seven drinks into a night he was Almost. Claire drained her shot, she had to get out of that place before she made another mistake, but she was running only from herself. In the cold of the night air outside, the memory was as vivid and humiliating as ever, and even if she asked Arthur 2.0 to file it for posterity there was no chance of her doing the same. No matter how much green vodka she downed.

‘Dr Monroe!’ the voice had carried through the half empty barn that made for Claire’s laboratory in the first few months on Homestead.

‘I’m out back,’ Claire had been adjusting the shoulder of a Work Bot damaged in a fall down a quarry six miles out of town the day before when her assistant had called her. She squinted through her goggles and power drilled the screw down into place. The androids steel face remained
impassive, its dead eyes fixed on the wall behind her and unfocused. She could have fixed it while it was switched on but, she didn’t like making conversation and the damn things were unfeasibly chatty these days. She wiped her nose on the back of her protective glove, a few years back she would have loved that, the idea that the bots were seeking interaction, now she just wanted silence.

‘Got a job for you, boss,’ Dani Martin said from the door, hands planted on both hips, ‘Bit out of my league.’

‘Nothing’s out of your league Dani, everything is an opportunity to learn, you want to do nanorobotics, you need to start with the basics and work up… or down… depending how you… see… it…’ she punctuated her philosophy with a burst of the screwdriver.

‘Yeah and I’m well up for taking that Server bot apart later but this ones a bit complicated.’

‘Server bots about as complex as it get rounds these parts, Dani,’ she looked round to admonish her student, caught movement behind her. Oh.

The I-Serve was still powered up, it must have self ambulated from the bar on command.

‘You worked with one of these before?’ Dani asked. ‘C’mere Arthur,’ she tugged him forward and he stepped into Claire’s lab.

‘Oh, Claire was vital to my creation,’ Arthur 2.0 said.

‘Yeah, yeah I know them…’ Claire replied quickly.

‘Right!’ Dani exclaimed. ‘You were at Prometheus a while weren’t you, did some of the programming?’

Arthur 2.0 looked between the two women, evidently lost. Claire made a mental note to wipe his memory or at the very least have him archive the data to do with her.

‘Similar bots yes,’ she said.

‘It’s mostly cosmetic, the job,’ Dani said. ‘Thing broke up a fight last night, two punters and a barstool. Got caught in the crossfire. Show the Doc.’

Arthur 2.0 raised his right hand as though he might take a pledge but revealed instead an intricate titanium skeleton lit wit LED and tangled with wire. He waved. His two medial fingers failed to move when he wiggled his hand.

‘De gloving injury,’ Dani provided, ‘said we probably had some spare skin about the place, and I don’t mind doing that, but his electronics is a bit advanced and those digits are busted.’

‘I’d very much appreciate the help,’ Arthur 2.0 said.

Claire looked back at her dormant Worker Bot, bit down hard on her lower lip with a strange mixture of anger and sorrow. This was quite frankly the last thing she wanted to do, but it would only raise more questions if she refused. She could use it as an opportunity to teach Dani, but then again she barely trusted herself around the robot as it was since it appeared from the Avalon, her emotions in constant flux and threatening to spill over. All it would take would be a familiar phrase, an expression. She was in the full glare of her laboratory, if she got teary eyed here Dani would think she had gone nuts.

Besides she could try to experiment. She had thought it through before. It was worth a shot.
No, she couldn’t do that.

But it was worth a try. It was. It was all she had. This was the best opportunity she was going to get.

What if it doesn’t work?

Then what do I lose?

Hope.

She hesitated and then without looking, nodded in the direction of her workbench.

‘Leave it there,’ she had said at last, ‘I’ll get to it after hours.’

She should never have touched it. It was the last nail in the coffin. The last shred of her dignity. Claire stumbled through the door from the cold night air and back into her partially constructed home. She didn’t need much space living there alone and had little motivation to extend the basic Pod Build beyond its single bedroom, living area and bath. Most of her belongings were to do with her work and stashed at the lab. Here she kept only her most precious equipment, a few clothes and items of sentimental value.

Sentimental, even now, even when she knew their worth was zero.

She fell face down on the bed, her breath thick with alcohol and damp against the sheets. For a moment she smothered it in her pillow, closed her eyes and felt her chest tightened before reflex forced her head to turn and lungs to gasp. Her eyes fell on the bedside table and on what she kept there. To any visiting colleague they would think the items junk, dumped from inside the pockets of her overalls after a long day fixing robots, but to Claire they were everything, filled as they were with nothing.

She reached out her hand and touched the memory chips one by one, drew them into line, ran her fingers across the rough indented edges. The soot was gone, wiped free by her caress, rubbed clean by days tucked inside her pockets, sealed against her heart.

Tears trickled to the pillow. Why had she even tried that night? It never could have worked. And now he memory of her desperation fought for precedence over her grief. What had she become? All she had ever known was work and now it offered no purpose. She clocked in and out with little interest and no hope. She followed the familiar path to the bar each night and drank herself into a stupor. Watching Arthur’s twin through bitter eyes, hating their differences, wishing it was him. But he was gone, and all her actions had done was make it even more obvious and twice as painful.

She wrapped her fingers round the chips and drew them close, placed them on the pillow by her face and covered them with her hand. It never would have worked. She was a fool for trying. A scientist no more, more like a grieving widow.
'That’s so much better, thank you,’ Arthur 2.0 had said and waggled his repaired fingers.

‘Good as new,’ Claire said quietly. The android tugged down his white cuff to hide the join between the cheap skin substitute and the bare titanium of his forearm. She had never fully finished him, there hadn’t been time, or call for such detail, given a few more weeks, cosmetically he would have been identical to Arthur, a few more and he could have been more. The same? Almost? He had so much potential. She found herself staring at his wrist as he self-scanned.

‘No further adjustments necessary,’ he announced. ‘I will head back to the bar and pick up my duties. I am most appreciative, Claire.’

‘Arthur?’

‘Yes, Claire.’

In the light of the lab his eyes reflected her overalls, shone briefly blue. It hurt to see it, and it made up her mind.

‘I wondered…’

‘Yes?’ he tilted his head and looked at her warmly, the old familiar mannerism sending a spasm of longing through her.

‘There’s something I wanted to try. A… a kind of upgrade.’

‘For me?’

‘Yes, I’ve… its been helpful in other I-Serves,’ she hedged.

Through her pocket Arthur’s memory chips pressed against her skin, their edges sharp. She felt like she was deceiving this other droid, manipulating him somehow to her own ends but he stood impassively, expression as open and unfazed as ever. It didn’t care one way or the other.

‘If you feel it would be useful,’ Arthur 2.0 said.

‘I… just wanted to see how it fitted you really. If it might… it’s a memory expansion, a set of data, coding for um.. personality, empathy.’

‘How useful. I would be delighted. Please go ahead, do you need me to power down?’

‘No, no I don’t think so.’ She watched him turn himself side on and helpfully hitch up his shirt to reveal the control panel beneath. No artificial skin covered it, the device was inserted directly within the abdominal cavity, secured to the titanium spine. Claire spied empty slots for upgrades in line with the chip that controlled his bartender programme. All she had to do was…

There was no good reason they should not be compatible. An I-Serve was an I-Serve after all. A memory chip was just a chip that fitted in a slot. But even as she fed them in, Claire knew she was lying. To herself as well as Arthur 2.0. The chips could have been damaged in the burn out, as clean as she had made them, and furthermore she had never truly understood, what changes had been rendered in a century of being. Was it programming, was it all so simple? Binary code and simple data containing all that Arthur was? She knew it wasn’t. Deep down, but her heart raced anyway.
‘There,’ she said inserting the last chip, and activating its path. Arthur 2.0 stood still, his eyes trained on the wall, reflecting grey.

‘I am unable to access required data,’ he said flatly, ‘Data is corrupted.’ He glitched. ‘Data is incompatible.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘Data is… incompatible.’

‘You can’t read it or…? Are you getting a signal?’

Arthur 2.0 turned his face to her. ‘Data is attributable to a previous Version, incorrect format,’ he said, ‘Data is corrupted. It is neither compatible with my software nor appropriate for use in this model. Data attributable to I-Serve Version 3.2 Bar Tender, Identity, ‘Arthur.’’ Glitch, glitch, his head ticked right. ‘Incompatible. I am not Arthur,’ he said, ‘I am not Arthur, I am not Arthur, I am not….’

Claire ripped the chips from the panel and hurled them across her lab where they sparked off metal parts and half fixed androids with empty stares. The I-Serve stopped mid-sentence, a soft whirr in its throat. It looked back at the wall.

‘No, you’re not, you’ll never be him, you’ll never be anything like him,’ she pushed it hard and Arthur 2.0 staggered and caught its balance by the door. ‘Get out, go back to your bar, go serve your drinks and make your stupid jokes. Go spout your damn philosophy at people who will listen. You stupid, worthless piece of crap. You are nothing like Arthur! Forget this ever happened, forget him, me, all of it. I never want to see you again, get out!’

It turned and left without complaint, without so much as altering its expression. The thing that wasn’t Arthur, that wouldn’t even come close, and Claire sank down to the ground before her workstation with a sob. To her left one of the chips she had furiously discarded, further on another. She would gather them all again and keep them with her as before, but she knew now they were pointless, that their speculated worth had been disproven. The thing that had made Arthur wasn’t cord and wasn’t metal, it wasn’t data and it wasn’t code. It was in the spaces between the wires, the gaps beyond the switches, in the heat that sparked the lights within, in the stars behind his eyes.

He was really gone, but despite her words, the next night Claire went back to the bar to search for him, and the next night and the next. To search, and to get drunk, and for a moment to pretend. Sometimes if the lights caught the thing that wasn’t Arthur just right, sometimes when he poured her drink, his eyes shone green with its reflection, and she forgot.
Hope On, Hope Ever

Providence is a curious thing. Sometimes cruel and sometimes kind, but always beyond the individual’s control, it weaves its strands through time, it gives and takes and punishes and rewards. Providence is certain, to one end or another, but it cannot be relied upon to be fair.

Hope is much less fickle. Hope endures against the odds and even when it is least evident, even when the dust has settled and obscured all signs of life, it lies in wait, it lives and breathes. Hope on, hope ever, and hope will never leave you.

Claire had thought that Hope was gone, the moment she ripped the chips from Arthur 2.0, but really it was sleeping, and oh, when she discovered it, when the sun rose on her broken heart, her own life, so long in hibernation and encased in stony grief, began again.

The alarm had torn her from her sleep, from the stupor of last nights drink, the pillow sticky at her cheek, her hair knotted from restless dreams. She cursed and grumbled an order to have it silence itself before she smacked it with a flattened palm and knocked it to the floor, but the sound didn’t stop. Groggily she felt about the table for its source. Not the alarm, she wasn’t due at work, the holographic clock read that it was almost lunch, so what then, with its incessant wailing siren?

‘God’s sake,’ she pushed herself up on her arms, took as second to realise she had slept in her overalls again, and followed the noise under the bed to her emergency pager. ‘Shit!’ She woke properly then. Claire was not an emergency responder. There were other medics and engineers higher up the rota than her. She was primarily an academic and though technically trained in trauma to both human and machine, she had been assured that there was little actual chance she would be needed. That her pager, so long neglected it had gathered dust beneath the bedframe, should be blaring now meant something serious had happened and at her heart, Claire was a doctor, and every sense kicked in.

Code Blue.

The Med Centre was the emergency assembly point, the receptacle for casualties and the gathering place for emergency services of all kinds. With her heart firmly in her mouth and the cold trickle of adrenaline in ever limb, Claire grabbed her backpack of prepacked essentials and ran.

The town was still small enough that everywhere was within walking distance and it took her only minutes to get a sense of the disaster. Vehicles, manned and robotic alike were descending on the Med Centre from the West side of town, stretchers were unloaded, security officers, fire chiefs, medics, engineers and construction managers were racing to the scene while others swapped places with incoming drivers and turned the transport back around. She looked up to the horizon and saw flames out by the quarry, high and brilliant, the heat immense, no oranges and yellows, but greens and blues and violets.

Gas. Claire wrenched her eyes away, the inverted darkness of the fire floating black on her retinas for a moment, and made for the Med Centre.

Inside it was chaos. The injured already stacking up in each treatment room and corridor, those who ran the centre dodging in and out of bodies dressed in protective uniform, the turquoise of the
medics made the blood look purple, the deep red of the surgeons hid the evidence from most eyes, but not from Claire, she knew the old trick and the sheen of wet gave away the truth. Still in her blue robotics overalls the Chief of Staff descended on her as she whizzed past, thrust scrubs into her hands.

‘Today you are a Doctor,’ she said sharply, ‘Bay 6, Go! Move!’

It was well over a decade since her training, and most of that had been basic. Keen to move into nanorobotics Claire kept mainly to the classroom, dealt with hypothesis and not stray bodily fluids, found herself a comfortable niche and plenty of acclaim, read up her engineering on the side, qualified in its theory almost accidentally. Her lab was testimony to the years of microelectronics which had followed her standard medical rotations. She was still a doctor, but she was the doctor others came to when the human body had no more to give. When organs failed and limbs were severed. When parts needed replacing or had never grown at all. While her head was full of grand ideas about consciousness and artificial life, her day job had often consisted of improving the lives of humans with the tech which she had mastered so profoundly. New hearts, new legs, new nerves. Synthetic skin with multiple cosmetic applications.

A bot moved past her pushing at a trolley, the stench of the victim within hitting her nose for a minute then hanging in the air. Singed hair, burned skin. In a nearby bay two pale medics worked to clamp the arteries of a severed foot. Claire’s specific expertise would be needed after this explosion, but for now tried to calm her breathing, the old familiar focus sharpening her sight. Bay 6.

The man inside was screaming, the kind of inhuman sound she hadn’t heard in years, an animalistic pain that words could not express. He was clutching at the bed beneath with one stained hand, while the other arm was pinned by the Emergency Practitioner wrestling to stem the flow. The blood was everywhere. Claire calculated the volume automatically, sighted the transfusion already suspended ready to go to next to the surgical trays brought out in preparation when the alarms had sounded.

‘Name?’ she asked.

‘David, his name is David, he’s one of the supervisors at the quarry. About two hundred metres out when the thing blew. The structures just caved. Bit of the temporary build flew off and took the arm with it. Natural gas, they think.’

‘They didn’t spot that?’

The Practitioner wiped a soaked hand against her apron leaving a scarlet print. ‘How the hell should I know, maybe they fucked up the survey, drilled down the wrong bit, all I know is we have thirty casualties coming in with half their bodies missing and they’re the lucky ones.’

Anyone near the centre would be gone. The bots did most of the heavy work up there but there would be other supervisors. Maybe ten guys in the bowl of the quarry while the others attended to transporting what was dug. For a second Claire imagined the crater an explosion would have caused, the utter destruction. They’d be vaporised in that heat. There would be nothing and no-one left. She felt the colour drain from her face at her own imagination’s image. Some new start this was turning out to be for the colonists.

‘Little help?’ the practitioner said, impatiently.

*David, his name is David. Get it together.*
‘OK I’m going to check you over, David, get rid of that pain,’ Claire clocked the practitioner’s badge, the specks of blood around the name, ‘Sandra’s going to keep working on that arm.’

David’s chest, his trousers and his face were splattered, the arm of his shirt soaked through. There were pools and smears across the sterile floor, and soaking into the sheets. While the Practitioner clamped off the radial artery, Claire grabbed the cutters from the tray and sliced the clothes away, the skin beneath startlingly white against the mix of soot and mud and blood. She felt the pulse at his neck and found it racing, attached the automated internal monitor, watched it bury to the jugular, administering pain relief as it tracked his biochemistry across the screen above her head. She hooked up the transfusion. Basics, basics. Remember your basics. Life signs, life systems, biochem, fluid balance. Survey, assess, treat.

The Practitioner was wrestling with the bleeding still and looked to Claire desperately. Behind her another trolley was pushed between beds, a team around it shoving for space.

‘I can’t secure the ulnar,’

‘Swap,’ Claire told them, and edged a space on the man’s right, grasped the arm. It was severed at the elbow, a messy tear suggesting his forearm had been wrenched backwards at the join and ripped clear.

‘Where’s the rest of the limb? Can it be reattached, how much leeway is there?’

‘Destroyed,’ the tech said grabbing clamps from the tray. ‘Nothing to salvage.’

Claire grasped them reflexively, applied them with a side snap to the ulnar artery, knocked the other clamp and the damaged radial started seeping out again. She swore. Reattached the forceps.

‘We need to do this well then, he’ll need a prothesis. Scalpel,’ she held out her hand.

The man’s cries were lessening, slowing, and Claire’s eyes flicked to the screen. Silence was not always a welcome sign, but his vitals were more stable, the internal monitor working to balance out his chemistry. Across the room the sounds of the disaster seemed to fade, a background rush of voices, of equipment, of people running and bots gliding between casualties. The world narrowed to the scalpel and the flesh, the sutures and the skin. She worked on until Bay 6 was stable, and then went from room to room until the stream of injured lessened and the Med Team regained control.

For the first time in a year, Claire went to bed and slept peacefully. Perhaps it had been longer. Thirty years. A century. Whether it was exhaustion from her efforts or the slow ebb of the grieving process releasing her at last, she closed her eyes and the world stopped hurting.

She had a purpose again. One beyond repairing bots and fine-tuning programmes. The lab was at capacity. The demand for prosthetics after the accident at the quarry outstripping the abilities of her team. Robotics technicians and engineers were not medics. Most medics were not engineers. Claire was once again unique, once again locked in her laboratory the best part of each night. Sometimes Dani joined her, and the normally anti-social Claire found she didn’t really mind. The trainee with the most potential was so very keen to learn, bright and chatty, she quickly caught onto the basics and she had a good cosmetic eye. At the workstation limb after limb began to form, the titanium skeleton, followed by additions to control various levels of automation, sensation and fine
motor skill. On the other side of the room synthetic skin was being printed, sheet upon sheet upon sheet. To cover the prosthetics and to supply the surgeons on the burns unit within the Med Centre.

It was a lot to co-ordinate, a lot to keep in mind. Every individual had different needs to which each part had to be tailored. Claire had touch screens on each wall with lists and flow charts, diagrams and check boxes. She had a head full of orders and ideas, a sense of responsibility she hadn’t felt for years. She could make these people better, she could improve their lives, and so what if she was exhausted, so what if her eyes were gritty and shadows flitted in the corner of her vision. It would be worth it; it would make a difference. If she started now, just a few days clear of the accident, she could have the bulk done by the time the injured men and women were ready to receive the limbs. Each would take an age to craft, but each would change a life, and she wanted them to know those lives were valued.

Six days in, the laboratory humming with the sound of machines sawing and polishing, soldering and buffing. Her team were in the main workroom, whole Claire sat out the back with Dani one workstation over, counting out an order for Skin Substitute and checking figures.

‘We are running low,’ she said.

‘On what,’ Claire said from around a mouthful of loose screws. A half constructed artificial foot sat before her. Its metal toes flexed experimentally then reset.

‘Everything.’

‘Try and be specific,’ she countered.

‘I am,’ Dani pushed away from her workstation and came to face her boss. ‘Well OK not totally specific, skin substitute we have component for, but the hardware, titanium and so on? We’re running short.’

‘Oh come on, there must be stacks of the stuff, remember the crates the Avalon sent down, enough supplies to build a country.’

‘Yeah houses and stuff, loads of construction grade heavy metals, but medical grade titanium?’

Claire paused and pulled the screws from her lips. ‘Ah,’ she conceded.

‘We never envisioned a need like this so early on,’ Dani said, ‘We’ve a ton still to do and while we still have plenty for the trimmings…’

‘I wish you wouldn’t call them that,’ Claire said, ‘Artificial nervous systems and touch receptors aren’t ‘trimmings.’ I spent years perfecting that technology, it’s cutting edge. Well, it was 125 years ago anyway.’

‘Right,’ Dani said with very much the air of someone who had heard it all before, ‘Well, anyway, plenty of that we can cobble together, but actual structural components though?’

‘What do you suggest?’ Claire said, ‘I’m assuming you’re suggesting something?’

‘Bot parts.’

‘Bot parts?’

‘Its titanium mostly,’ Dani said, ‘Most of the Worker bots had spares, same with the Servers, CleanBots, you name it. Ship should have been full of them. The stuff they sent down at the end
when they cleared the decks, so to speak, it should be mostly deconstructed bot bits.’

‘Half the workers in the quarry were destroyed we need those parts,’ Claire said absently, ‘We’ve got to fix them up too, or the mines we need to establish will never be able to function. Got to think long term, Dani.’

‘I think people may trump bots on this one,’ Dani said not a little caustically. ‘Short or long term. People who currently are missing limbs.’

Claire held her eye for a moment, noticed the determination. ‘Ok fine, see what you can find, there’s still supplies we haven’t touched, check the warehouse.’

‘On it. Actually…’

‘You’ve already checked haven’t you?’

‘ Might have stopped by earlier,’ Dani’s face broke into badly contained grin. ‘I was hoping you wouldn’t mind, I mean you’re usually pretty… chilled.’

Claire sighed. She suspected Dani meant ‘drunk and disinterested.’ Well until recently that would have been true and maybe Claire felt a little guilt for that. Maybe she was just trying to reassert her authority, but she probably shouldn’t, she didn’t have the right. The girl had practically been running the place for months and she deserved a bit of credit. Claire couldn’t actually fault Dani’s thinking about any of this, and she was a pretty feisty and capable young engineer when it came down to it. She watched as Dani trotted back to her work station and guddled about in a box beneath.

‘So there were a few crates of robotics we hadn’t got into yet. Mostly broken down CleanBots, like sixteen of the things at least which was weird, but then I got to this,’ Dani extracted a cloth covered shape, ‘Part of a complete set and its pretty high quality. I’m not sure what model it is, thought you might know, you know, if it might be suitable, I think we could convert it pretty easily to prosthesis its got some seriously top level hardware.’

She placed the long object on Claire’s table and unfolded the cloth. Claire felt her heart skip.

A robotic arm. An android’s arm with a synthetic nervous system and intricate cosmetic details, which Claire had painted thirty years before. When it had been complete she’d felt it wrap around her shoulders; hold her in formation for a waltz. The hand had poured bottles at the bar, held cloths and polished glasses. It had held her own, tracing lazy patterns on her skin, its touch as gentle and as tender as any person’s. She’d kissed its skin, its knuckles, and its palm in the hazy afterglow of love making. She knew its every detail.

‘Claire?’ Dani’s voice from so far away. ‘Claire? Are you OK?’

‘You said there was more,’ Claire said.

‘Yeah, I just brought this over as an example because it was loose, but the whole bot’s there, they didn’t break it down much, maybe it was too complex for them? Damn things even still dressed. It looks like that bardoid downtown, you know the cute one with the bowtie? But there’s no way it can be an I-Serve not with that level of tech.’

‘He’s not an I-Serve,’ Claire said, her fingers tracing over the soft palm of Arthur’s hand.

‘He…? You’ve seen this thing before?’
'I… I made him,' Claire said, her voice threatening to break. ‘He…’ she glanced desperately at Dani. ‘Please I can’t explain. Just. Show me? Show me where he is.’

‘Now?’ Dani frowned in confusion.

Claire nodded and the first tear spilled down her cheek.

‘Please,’ she said. ‘His name is Arthur. And… he’s mine.’

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