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SOLAR CONCORD ENCRYPTED MESSAGE

SEND DATE: 44-101-1322

AUTHOR: BONFIRE LANZIA-2

RECIPIENT: LANTERN IO-29

OBJECTIVE TYPE: RECONNAISSANCE

CONTENTS: Unincorporated Object Sahoti-84-B, known to those speaking the local tongue as “[the] Spectral Station,” is an uninhabited unmarked vessel orbiting the lesser star of Sahoti. External scans suggest the presence of an internal atmosphere, though they do not indicate any multicellular lifeforms. The lack of post-human microecosystems despite the presence of oxygen suggests an unholy presence, or at the very least anomalous behavior in need of explanation. Dock at the station and return with an explanation for these circumstances. ENSURE YOUR CAMERA IS TURNED ON. Do not, in any event, retrieve or disable any technology, blessed or cursed, that maintains the stasis of the Object. As you must know by now, such action will bring the dark upon you. May our sun be with you, and may you rest in the firmament should you fall. Step quickly.”

Io quickly flicked the wall screen off, leaving the interior dark save for the dim glow of the radar and the faint starlight from the rear windows. They paced back and forth across the small room, making it only a few steps before they had to turn around again. As they walked, they could hear the gentle hum of the engine, and they could feel the rumble of the ship as the tunnel bore slowly tore a hole in the ship's hull, very close to punching through. Without any docking aid from the station, the only choice was to literally drill inside, as was standard fare for

many Unincorporated Objects. A full airlock was built into the body of the drill, allowing for passage directly from the ship to the interior of the station. This still resulted in the partial or complete destruction of many vessels upon the ship's departure. Many Objects had been destroyed that way.

A crunching sound rolled through the ship, alerting Io that the drill had completed its task. They affixed their helmet to their suit, which was a big, bulky thing, made entirely of mechanically-sewn organic fibers and aluminum plates. It was durable, but the layered fabric and metal made it heavy, and the thick glass of the helmet didn't help. They checked their oxygen gauge—the tiny dial on their forearm which indicated that the tank on their back was full, and that they had several hours of breath before they'd suffocate. The thermal packs sewn onto the suit's sides would keep them from freezing to death for about as long, according to the second dial. Io received no other information from their suit. It was designed by the Concord, after all.

Io double checked their gauges, put their flashlight in their belt alongside a few other tools, and pulled themselves through the airlock and onto the station.

The docking bay was typical for a station of this size: a vast rectangular room, providing far more parking space than would ever be used. The artificial gravity, however, was anything but typical. The ship's rotation had, at some point, degraded, and so Io found themselves struggling to navigate with any real speed. Still, they examined the space further as they pushed onward. Roughly ten shuttle buses were lined up near the back of the room— nine of them neatly so, and one tilted just out of line, as though it had been preparing for takeoff, despite its opened doors. Io stumbled towards the last shuttle, finally climbing the stairs and entering the bus.

The interior of the shuttle was a mess. Some of it was standard fare for public intrasystem

transport: suitcases strewn across the floor and seats, the occasional mysterious stain. Some of it wasn't. There was the dust, sure, but more strange were the various papers that littered the floors, as well as the binders, folders, and computers, the lattermost of which, Io presumed, had all been shattered upon impact. Io bent over to pick up one of the papers—on it was a table of names, or part of a table of names. There had been some sort of hurry to gather a lot of material all at once, and an attempt to leave with it. That attempt had clearly failed.

Io pulled themselves down the aisle of the bus, grabbing onto the seats and pushing through the low gravity and against the weight of their suit. They made their way to the staircase at the back of the bus, before suddenly pausing on the railing. On the walls of the staircase, subtle but definitely visible, were scratch marks, as if someone had run something sharp down the wall. Io placed a hand on a wrench from their toolbelt before continuing upstairs.

The second floor looked much like the first, although a bit neater, and less suspicious. The things here were more mundane. Io noticed a handheld camera, a teddy bear, and various bags and purses placed more casually in the seats and overhead trunks, perhaps left behind deliberately. What drew Io's attention, however, was the broken window on the right side. Glass shards lay across the floor and upon the seat, and the actual metal frame of the window was bent just slightly. Io picked up a screw off the seat—it was a different color from the frame. Something had broken in, and it had left pieces behind. But the bus was empty.

The rest of the shuttle was mostly unremarkable, at least in comparison to the first two floors. Cargo storage, various extra suitcases. No more damage. The other shuttle buses in the bay were empty, unused even when the station had been up and running. Io tapped the wrench

gently against their leg, sighed, and made their way over to the open doorway at the corner of the room.

The doorway itself was maybe twice Io's height, and easily ten times their width. It was ornate in a way that clashed with the utilitarian docking bay, signaling the formal entrance to the station. Above it was presumably the name of the station, written in a script that had fallen out of favor in the past century. Io squinted at it before stepping through into the hallway beyond.

“Hallway” was perhaps inadequate. Before them was a long tunnel, made of incredibly pure superglass connected by steel beams on all sides but the floor, giving the illusion that visitors were walking through empty space. A conveyor belt was built into the steel floor; years ago, it would have hastened the journey from the ship's parking to the main station. Now, though, Io would have to push through manually. Io looked up as they walked, pulled forward by the slowly strengthening gravity. The station itself was spherical, with artificial rings of solar panels gently spinning around it, forming a great gyroscope. The walkways and hangars spun in rhythm with the rings, creating an almost nauseating effect in exchange for a faux-gravitational pull that, originally, would have been even throughout the station. Io looked back down, shuddered, and continued.

After a long walk, they arrived at the concourse. Rows of interface panels lined its sides, with escalators and elevators beckoning Io in every direction. Reflecting upon their helmet were countless names and endless arrows, directing visitors that no longer came. In their place was only dust, grime, and dirt. Piled up against a wall were various kinds of drones scattered in pieces across the floor. There were a surprising number of them—the facility's entire stock was likely present. Behind the pile, Io realized, was a door. It was an old door, hinges and all, labeled

“STAFF ONLY” in only three different scripts, just one of which Io could read. Carefully, they approached the pile, then began to remove the obstructions from the door, clearing enough of a path to grant entry. A single blast from their multitool had the door swinging open, revealing to them rows and rows of screens, keyboards, and wires. A control center.

Io sat down in one of the many chairs facing the long desk that lined the wall. It was clearly very old, its rusted wheels dating it to a time before furnishing regulations on spaceborne vessels. They tapped the multitool on the desk as they scanned the room, the idle motion kicking up traces of dust.

The most attention-worthy things in the room, at first glance, were the computers. They were modern—heretically so, with the screens made of tiny diodes or crystals, and the inner workings no doubt used forbidden combinations of various restricted materials. Or, even more dangerously, some sort of magic. Io turned away from the machines, scanning the room with their flashlight again, more thoroughly this time. It was only then that they saw the body, and the drone.

“The body” was perhaps a generous thing to call it. It was a skeleton, with only the faintest traces of skin and tissue spared from decomposition. Its bones had turned black and brown from age and rot, connected only by very thin tendrils of decaying tissue. The drone, however, sat entirely intact inside the skeleton's shattered ribcage, covered in aged bone shards and dark brown-red dust that might once have been blood. Stunned, Io felt the tool drop from their hands, clattering on the desk beside the keyboard.

The multitool fired an electric charge immediately upon contact, a flash of blue sparking between the keyboard and the tool. In an instant, screen upon screen shot to life. Bright

green light splashed into every corner of the room alongside the rumble of disks and fans spinning inside the room's many computers. Io shot out of their seat, sparing only one last glance towards the remains in the chair across from them. They darted out of the control room and back into the concourse, where the whirring of the computers turned to a gentle hum from the station's filtration systems, which was then drowned out by a crackling high pitched whine from the speakers, growing louder with every second. The sound piercing their suit, Io stumbled, then fell to their knees, eyes squeezed shut, biting their lip until it bled, desperate to scream.

And then the noise stopped. And Io opened their eyes.

The concourse was now lit up in a bright, flickering lime green, painting every surface of the station's interior an almost blinding hue. Io couldn't help but squint as they stood, leaning against one of the interface panels to steady themselves. Before they could catch their breath, a voice burst through the speakers somewhere in the room's ceiling.

“Hello?”

Io jumped, but held themselves steady against the panel, their eyes darting around. They reached for their wrench, fumbling with it before dropping it on the ground.

“Is anyone there? I can't— I can't see you, I don't think.”

Io gripped the side of the panel, staring at the green static. The voice rang out again.

“Oh! Wait, no. Hello?” It sounded puzzled. “Give me a second, I think I...”

A figure began to flicker into view on the interface panel. Io could only stare in bewilderment.

“Almost there...”

A second of silence as the blurry figure became more, then less distorted.

“Got it!”

The figure of a young girl, maybe ten or eleven, suddenly became clear through the green haze. She looked almost pallid despite the green, as though she were malnourished.

“Hi there! Sorry about that, I think I was, uh, sleeping? That sounds right. Sleeping.” She smiled, almost appearing sheepish.

Io could only stare back at her.

“Are you okay? Is—is this thing working?” She tapped the screen. “It should be.” She frowned.

Io opened their mouth, then closed it. They waved, unsure.

“Oh!” The girl sounded excited. “You can see me!” She smiled again. “That's great!” She moved closer to the screen. Io took a step back. The girl's eyebrows furrowed.

“You don't have to be scared of me, you know. I'm stuck in...well. I actually don't know. The screen?” She looked around, lips pursed. “I don't know. Anyway, uh. I'm Kore. What's your name?”

Io's eyes widened. They blinked, then shook their head. They interlocked their hands behind their back, and lowered their head, then pointed at the emblem on the left shoulder of their suit.

The girl tilted her head, then gasped. “You're one of the—oh, gosh, I'm sorry. I didn't—”

Io put their hand up and smiled. They tilted their head again.

A sheepish smile crept back onto Kore's face. “Well, uh, it's nice to meet you! I can't remember the last time I, uh, talked to anyone.” She looked down, kicking one of her feet as she stood in place.

Io stared in silence.

“Hey, wait!” Kore looked back up. “You could help me!”

Io placed their hand on their wrist.

“No, it won't be hard or anything, just—okay. Listen. I think I know where I am.”

Io blinked.

“It's, okay, this is hard to explain, but. I think I'm stuck. Like, plugged into the machine? I can't, like...” She trailed off, and her projection grew fuzzy. A soft buzzing began to come from the interface panel.

Io took another step back, just as the buzzing stopped. Kore came back into focus.

“I'm definitely stuck. I need you to come find me. I don't—I don't remember what they did to me, but you have to get me out.” She began to fidget, picking at her nails. “I'm at Lot 1000, at the very back of Section 3, okay?”

Io pursed their lips.

“Please!” Kore shouted. “You—you have to! I can give you directions, it won't be hard, please!”

Tears began to run down the girl's face. Io bit their lip. They sighed, and placed one hand on the panel. Kore jumped.

“Wait,” she stammered, “you'll do it? You'll come get me?”

Io nodded.

A loud squeal came from every interface panel at once. Io scrambled to their feet, tripping over themselves, nails digging into their sides as they stood.

“Thank you! Thank you, thank you!” Kore was still crying, but she smiled nonetheless.



“Okay, almost everywhere has screens or speakers, so I should be able to talk to you once you’re in the hallways. To get out of here, um... here!” Her body was suddenly replaced by a map of the concourse. “Take the third escalator on the left, then enter Lot 1000. I don't think the elevators work anymore, so you'll have to walk.”

Io sighed, and nodded.

“Okay! I'll see you soon!”

Then there was silence, and then darkness. Each interface panel shut off in an instant, and the room became as still as it had been when Io entered. They blinked twice, flicked their flashlight back on, and began the trek up the stagnant escalator Kore had indicated. Io clenched their teeth as they climbed, eyes down and away from the dozens of entryways lining each wall. After a moment, they arrived at the floor with Lot 1000. Io couldn’t help but look down once more at the vast concourse below them, the interface panels as empty as they had been when they’d entered. Io sighed, turned away from the balcony, and walked steadily through the main entrance.

As every other door had been, the entrance to Lot 1000 was tightly sealed. Io brought their multitool to the door's side panel, and flipped the charge switch, only to hear it fizzle. Out of charge. Io chewed on the inside of their mouth, leaning against the wall. Suddenly, the door's panel flashed lime.

Kore's high voice crackled from above. “Oh, can you not get in? Hold on, I think I can help.”

A click, then a low hiss crept out of the door. Io backed away as the pressure equalized, bracing themselves against the wall. After a minute, the door opened with a click. Io clenched their

jaw, then their fists. They walked inside.

There wasn't much of anything inside, other than various other hallways that branched off in different directions, with a single conveyor belt running down the main, central path. Small panels were placed uniformly into the walls, which were the same pale white as the concourse. Kore's face appeared on all of them as Io entered the hallway.

"It's gonna be a bit of a long walk, sorry." There was still a bit of a waver to her voice. "I'm all the way down at the end." Io just nodded, expressionless, as they walked ahead. A minute passed.

"So." Kore elongated the word as her eyes followed Io.

"I would ask you some questions, but I guess you can't answer, huh?"

Io narrowed their eyes at one of the panels.

"Sorry, I don't mean to be rude! I just haven't talked to anyone in forever."

Io looked away and kept walking.

"I can't imagine not being allowed to talk. My dad says it's a great honor, being a Lantern, but that seems like a load of crap to me." Kore smiled, then her expression quickly soured. "Don't tell him I said that, though. He'd get mad."

Io rolled their eyes, then held their hands behind their back again.

"Right! I guess that's good. I wouldn't want to get in trouble again." Kore let out a breath she'd been holding. "I hate getting in trouble. It happens all the time, though."

Io said nothing.

"One time, I told my dad that I wanted to wear a suit like he does, and he got really mad and got rid of most of my clothes. Now I just have a bunch of dresses."

She frowned.

“I dunno what he’d do if he found out I said bad words, though. I don’t think he can take away the words I like.”

Io pursed their lips. Kore didn’t seem to notice.

“My mom used to say that daddy always means well, and that he wants us to be the best we can be. I thought I was doing a pretty good job, though.”

A moment of silence passed between them, the only sound being the gentle tap of Io’s footsteps.

“You know, you’re a pretty good listener! I can’t think of anyone who actually pays attention when I talk to them. I know you can’t say anything back, but you could still be ignoring me if you wanted to.” Kore giggled.

Io stopped, tilting their head at one of the screens.

Kore’s giggling turned to laughter. “Listen, I can just tell, okay! Don’t look at me like that.”

Io rolled their eyes again, and kept walking. They were smiling, just slightly, when Kore grabbed their attention again.

“Wait, okay, hold on. You need to take, um, a left? There should be a big door there.”

Io turned their eyes left, and there was a door. It was flush against the wall, made of the same smooth metal as everything else.

“Let me... there!” Kore beamed at Io through the panel, clearly proud of herself. The door’s frame sparked, crackling as it slid into the wall, opening out another hallway.

“There aren’t any panels in the next hallway, so I’ll be quiet until you get to the next

room. I can still see you, though, so don't go running out on me!"

Io just nodded, and walked through.

This hallway was entirely unlike all the others. It was rectangular, instead of cylindrical, and the walls and ceiling were made entirely of sharp chunks of granite, layered unevenly and haphazardly, their smooth sides facing inwards towards Io. Dim emergency lights poked out from various places in the rock, painting the entire space a dull shade of red. Io stepped towards one wall, shining their light on it so that they could see more clearly.

What they saw engraved into the stone were names and dates, in numbers far greater than Io could count. They were written in mismatched fonts and different alphabets, and many had pictures or extra messages engraved in them that were cut off by the cracks in the granite. Some remained mostly intact, however: messages praising loved ones, messages asking for undisturbed rest, drawings of crosses, wings, wheels and pomegranate trees. Io stumbled backwards, looking first up, then down. They gasped.

Wedged in the floor, mere inches from their foot, was a single small finger bone, pressed into the smooth stone of the floor. Io's eyes widened, but their feet held steady, frozen in place. They didn't even breathe. The only parts of Io that moved were their eyes, darting across the room. They couldn't see any other bones. Released from their paralysis, Io quickly turned back towards the exit behind them, took a single step, then stopped again. Loud, ragged breath escaped their lips as they stood there.

A second passed. Then another. At last, Io turned around again, held their arms to their chest, and ran down the hallway. Their surroundings flew by in a blur, the gravestones in the walls no longer legible, the emergency lights streaking in the corner of their vision. They flew

through another doorway and into another room, but kept running, their eyes closed.

“Watch out!” Kore cried out from above them.

Io skidded to a stop, resting only inches from a ledge. Hastily, they looked up, their eyes open again.

This room was a great, massive thing, very nearly rivaling the concourse in scale. It was elliptical in shape, with smooth, even walls made of the same granite as the jagged hallway. At the room's center was a great glass cylinder, towering hundreds of meters above them. It glowed with Kore's light, the bright neon painting the whole room, almost alien to Io's eyes, which remained glued to their feet. A hitch in their breath. Their shoes were covered in ash.

Io took a deep breath.

Slowly, resisting the pull, their eyes raised, focused on the cylinder's contents. Inside the cylinder, tightly-packed, was an immense pillar of white-grey coarse ash, extending downward further than Io could see, falling in grains from the gentle cracks that covered the cylinder like spiderwebs. A modest gap separated Io from the cylinder's surface.

“Sorry,” There was a tremor in Kore's voice. “I didn't mean to shout.”

Io backed away from the ledge, eyes darting around the room, breath quickening.

“I...there's a lot of people here.” It was almost a question, not quite, but Io still nodded.

Kore sighed. “I don't know why they put me in here. I can't remember, but...”

Io swallowed.

“Do you need to, um, sit down? You can take a break if you need to.” Concern tinged the edges of Kore's voice.

Io looked at the floor, walked towards the edge of the room, and sat where there wasn't

any ash.

“I’m sorry.” The green light from above pulsed as she spoke. “I didn’t know this was here. Or, um, I forgot.”

Io waved a hand dismissively, but they were still shaking slightly.

“I forget a lot of things, I think. I mean, I still don’t remember why I’m here.” Kore’s voice wavered a bit. “Everyone hates it when I forget things. Thanks for not being mad.”

Io’s breathing evened.

“I was sick for a bit. Dad said I had to stay with the doctors at the hospital.”

There were long pauses between Kore’s sentences. Io sat and listened.

“One of the nurses was nice. Kind of like you! She told me stories. Said that always helped her.”

Kore sighed. The light dimmed for a moment.

“She said she didn’t want to, um, sugarcoat things. She said I probably was going to be sick the rest of my life. She said I could still be happy, though! I just would have to be careful. The doctors said that too, but they always said it to my dad.”

“My dad wasn’t happy about that. He always yelled. One day he yelled at the nice nurse so bad I wasn’t allowed to see her anymore.”

Io looked down at the ground.

“I don’t remember all that much after that.”

Io sat in silence for a moment. Once or twice, the light in the room flickered, as though Kore was about to say something, but it was only when Io stood up that Kore spoke again.

“Oh! Are you ready to go?”

Io just looked up at the light.

“Yeah, okay, I guess you wouldn’t have stood up otherwise.”

Io looked around the walls to find an exit, pointedly not looking at the cylinder in the room’s center.

“Oh, sorry. Take the third hallway on your left. I’m right through there.”

Io nodded, and began to slowly walk around the circumference of the room, careful not to kick up any ash. They walked in silence, the room growing brighter and brighter as they approached. After a moment or two, they stood before the correct doorway.

“Thank you again, for, um. for saving me,” Kore mumbled, although the speakers in the ceiling made her clearly audible. “I don’t think I’ll be able to see you until you find me, so. I wanted to say it now.”

Io smiled in response.

A brief crackle echoed through the room before the green light faded. A shudder coursed through Io’s body as they were left alone once again. They quickened their pace.

This hallway was different from the previous one: the walls were now smooth instead of jagged, and engraved not with words but only with pictures, abstract drawings of great, vast trees carefully cut into the stone. Soft white lights were placed evenly in the ceiling, though as Io walked onward their color became tinged with lime. Io’s footsteps again began to echo as they trod further and further from the ash. It was only now that Io entirely stopped shaking. They looked up as they exited the hallway.

The room was a huge mausoleum, with a barrel-vaulted ceiling supported by pillars lining the walls. In the room’s very center, thirty paces or so from its entrance, was a casket—

though a small one, too small for most humans. Cracks of green light shone from between the lid and the base, creating a sickly rectangular halo on the floor. The room had speakers embedded in the floor, though instead of Kore's voice there was only a sort of garbled scraping noise escaped them: the occasional whisper of what could just barely be construed as speech. Jaw and fists clenched, Io walked onward, towards the center of the room, where the light gathered.

As they drew nearer to the casket, they saw that it, too, was made of stone. It was a sarcophagus—at least, something like one, with engraved characters lining its entire surface. Io ran their fingers along the letters, lips pursed. Although the humidity in the room had eaten away at the stone, and much of it was unreadable, they found nearly an entire paragraph was legible. They read it slowly.

*“...and it was on that day that I carried you, my flower, out of the creche, where they didn't know what to do with you, down those empty corridors, and to the infirmary. Much from that moment and those after has faded from me, though one thing still remains clear as day in my mind. My resolve. I knew I wouldn't lose you. And I won't. You live, still. Not only in that bed, where you lay now as I write this, but in the pictures you've drawn, the stories you've told. If only you had been able to grow how I'd dreamed you'd grow, Kore, you would have been even more than this. But still, you will live on—if differently, if as...”*

The rest appeared to continue on in this way, though few words remained intact. Io closed their eyes for a moment, the noise growing louder. More words crackled through; unintelligible, still, but their meanings obvious. The speakers were pleading.

Io's hands ran along the bottom of the sarcophagus's lid. It was heavy, too heavy to be dragged or even pushed off, but Io's fingers eventually brushed over a switch. Their hand



hovered over it. Unsure. The speakers—no, Kore—wailed in response, the light beneath the lid flashing rapidly. The room was full of her mind, her sound, her emotion. Io, compelled, pressed the switch.

An electric shock traveled through Io's finger and up their arm, knocking them onto the floor, where they sat watching the room unfurl around them. It was cacophonous, now, as the static burst not only from the floors but the walls and ceilings, drowning out the rubble of the moving stone. The porous rock was pierced by beams of light as the lid gently moved, crumbling into pale blinding light, which then faded into a gentle black.

And then Kore sat up, and the terrible noise gave way to silence, as Io and Kore stared at one another.

Kore was gaunt, if such a word could suffice. Her cheeks were hollow, her once-brown skin now ashen and almost wholly drained of color. Dark coils of hair ran down to her stomach, almost as depleted as her skin, dry and crinkling like foil. She trembled as she stared at Io, but she smiled nonetheless—her gums had receded somewhat, but Io smiled back nonetheless. She wore a faded yellow and white ruffled dress, as if she had been preparing to go out on a summer day. Various wires were affixed into points along her torso, arms, and spine. They glowed, faintly, still doing whatever it had been that her father had wished done to her.

“Hi,” Kore said, voice barely audible. It hadn't been used in a very long time.

Io waved in response.

“It's kind of bright in here, huh?” Kore's eyes darted around the room, the space still drowning in light. “Sorry about that. Maybe I can fix it?”

The light dimmed, and the room became visible again. Io sighed, still clutching their arm,

which still sat numb and limp.

Kore looked at Io again, apologetic. “Oh, gosh, did I—I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to,” they reached out their hand, “do...that.”

She examined herself, briefly.

“Oh.”

The light in the tubes glowed brighter as Kore stared blankly at her body. She blinked twice, slowly, then lifted her hands to the back of her neck, where the largest cable joined her body. Gently, she slid her fingers across the metal, then ran her fingers back down to her torso, where the cables slipped out through neatly cut holes in her dress. She exhaled, shakily.

“I’ve been here a while, huh?” She laughed, as though she’d made a joke. Io tilted their head.

“Sorry. It’s just that I remember how I got here, now. How long since, um, since the system went offline?”

A beat of silence.

“Oh. Right. Sorry. Are you—are you allowed to count on your hands?”

Io nodded.

“So, um, how many years?”

Io counted and showed her. It took a moment, Io counting each year on one of their fingers and then restarting upon reaching ten. Kore’s eyes grew just slightly dimmer as they went on, and eventually she interrupted them.

“Stop, please. I understand.” She looked down, lights dimming. “They’re all gone. Everyone’s gone.”

Io looked at their feet. Silence fell between them again.

Eventually she spoke again.

“You know, it wasn't so bad, for a while. It was fun! I got to help sort everyone into the right place, near their friends and family. I got to talk to the staff, at least when they were on break.” Kore smiled again. “It was almost like having a family again. They checked in on me every night, they told me stories about what was happening outside.”

Kore fidgeted excitedly as she spoke. “I liked the drones the most. Everyone says they aren't smart, not like people, but they still made me happy. They all had their silly ways of building and carrying things. One time one of them even brought a flower in here! I don't think anyone had ever given me a flower before.”

“It was so much better than being stuck in that bed,” she sighed. “At least, I thought.”

Kore paused, taking a moment to gently wrap her arms around her torso, taking care not to irritate the ports on her skin.

“But it wasn't better. I was still stuck here, after all. People started getting used to me. I was boring to them. Boring to daddy, even. He put me here, and after two years, he left. He said he'd come visit. He didn't.”

Her grip on her sides tightened.

“I still remember that look on his face when he said he was leaving. It was that look he gave when I did something wrong. Even though I'd been good.”

Kore looked down, shaking gently as she clutched herself.

“Things really hadn't gotten better. Even when I was loving being here, when I was talking to people and comforting them and being happy, I was still *trapped!*”

As if to accentuate her point, Kore extended her arms and slammed her fist down onto the side of the casket.

“I just wanted some fun. My dad, before he left, told the staff not to give me web access—he was worried that I would lose myself in it, he said. And I couldn't even talk to the tourists! The staff said they didn't want me *scaring* anyone. So I didn't have anything to do. And I was alone.”

Kore's colors flickered. She took a deep breath.

“So. I was bored. Really bored. I had to do something, so I started messing up my job. Just a little! Enough for it to be funny. I didn't hurt anyone, I just gave wrong directions sometimes, or put people in the wrong spot. Sometimes I'd tell the drones to play instead of doing their job. Little things! Not enough to get mad about, I thought.”

Io blinked at her, frowning slightly.

“I know I wasn't supposed to, but it really wasn't a big deal.” Kore rolled her eyes.

Io continued to frown.

“Really! Nobody got hurt or anything! The staff still got angry though. Really angry. I guess without my dad to punish me, they thought they had to do it instead.”

Cautiously, Io reached a hand out, placing it on the lid of the casket. Kore slowly brought her arms back to her chest in response, and so Io retracted it.

“Eventually they started taking parts of the cemetery away from me. My dad had said they couldn't turn me off, but I guess he didn't tell them not to take parts of me off.”

Kore's hand formed a shaky fist. She looked towards the hallway.

“It hurt. A lot. It hurt more than what they did to me when I was sick. Nobody believed

me when I told them. One time a visitor called me ‘another broken machine.’”

A cough carved its way out of her throat, dry and strong enough to shake her whole body, leaving her gasping for air. She pressed on, regardless.

“So I decided to be a broken machine,” Kore grinned, wires glowing. “I blasted noise through every loudspeaker, loud enough to distract everyone, and then I told every drone to move everybody around, and to stop building anything the staff told them to. They only listened to me.”

Io swallowed and looked down. Kore continued.

“I gave them enough instructions to freeze up the system for years. Enough so that the people would have to take the time to listen to me.”

Kore's smile faded. “But they just shut me off. They couldn't turn off the drones, they couldn't tell them to stop. I *know* they couldn't. They were my friends!”

She sighed. “But I guess the drones couldn't help me. You, um, you saw what they built. Out there.”

The girl pointed back towards the chamber with the ash. Io looked away from Kore.

“But! The staff, they left me. They made me into this place, this station, without telling me, and then when I wanted to be treated like an adult, they said no! I just. I don't get it. I don't get why everyone left.”

“You're going to have to leave too, aren't you,” she whispered, finally looking back towards Io. They still couldn't meet her gaze.

Kore dug her nails into her arms. “I won't stop you. I couldn't, I don't think. Just...before you go. Unplug me. Please.”

Io hesitated for a moment, clenched and unclenched their fist, and then said, “Okay.”

Kore's jaw dropped. “No, wait, you didn't have to...I mean, you're a Lantern, right? That means you only get ten, you shouldn't have wasted a word on me, you—”

Io put their finger to their lips and shook their head. Kore fell silent for a moment, a single tear running down her face. Eventually, she just nodded.

“Thank you for your blessing. You can, um, shut me down just by taking out, um, all of the cables. It won't hurt, I don't think.”

Io pursed their lips and nodded, starting their work.

“You know,” Kore gasped, “they told me, back when I was sick, that I probably wouldn't live to my thirteenth year.” She grit her teeth as Io disconnected another cable—it seemed to hurt, after all.

“It makes me happy that I proved them wrong. I didn't just turn thirteen, I turned one hundred and thirteen. More than that, even!”

The now-unoccupied ports on her arms and chest hissed. Clear fluid trickled out of the disconnected tubes.

“I guess my dad isn't around anymore. That's probably good, right? I mean, he never wanted me taken out. Said I deserved preservation, or something. Whole lot of good that did.”

Io moved to Kore's torso, silently continuing their work.

“Sometimes,” she continued, “in the years after he left, I'd start sending messages out to various passing ships. Just little things. I'd say hi, or talk about what I did that day. People usually didn't respond.”

The primary cable on Kore's chest came unhooked with a loud click. Kore coughed up

some of the fluid from the pipes.

“One day, though. One time one of your, um, Concord ships came in. I couldn't hear what the man on board was saying to the staff, but, well.” She looked down, tremors shaking her limbs. “I couldn't send messages after that. I'm glad you weren't like him.”

Io didn't respond, and Kore didn't say anything else. Eventually, Kore was connected to the station only by the cable on the back of her head.

“This is it,” Kore said. “After you take that out, I'm gone.”

Io paused, their hands wrapped gently around the cable.

“It's okay, really. I finally get to sleep. For real this time.” Kore was limp, now, unable to move her body at all. “Besides, I'm not gonna last much longer anyway. Not with all the stuff you pulled out.”

A moment of silence covered the room. Kore opened her mouth, closed it, then opened it again.

“It hurts a lot,” she murmured. “I... could you please just kill me?”

Io did.

No last words escaped Kore's lips. There was only a scream, a flicker of the light, and then both darkness and silence, leaving Io alone once again, the only thing left moving on the entire station. They sighed, turned their flashlight on again, and left the tomb, unable to spare a second glance to the body they were leaving behind.

As Io made their way to the ship, they did not flinch or shake at the sight of what lay in front of them. In the broken crematorium, they stood still, staring at the ash gently floating down like white snow, now that Kore's green skylight had faded to the default white. They wiped the

ash off their helmet and walked slowly through the jagged hallway, where countless graves had been hastily arranged at the misunderstood whim of a teenage girl. They kept their eyes up and stepped around the bone that lay wedged in the floor.

The walk down the hallway seemed far longer alone than it had with Kore. Darker, too, as the station's lighting started to fade entirely.

As Io reached the concourse, they stopped again on the balcony, this time looking out with their flashlight into the dark room. They saw the drones that had attempted to claw their way in to defend Kore, and thought of the drone that had succeeded in its attack, but ultimately failed in its mission. As they descended the many flights of stairs, Io listened as the various machines that had reawakened with Kore followed her back into the dark. The station fell silent once more before they reached the docking bay.

The shuttle buses hadn't moved in the time Kore was awake; after all, they had been autonomous, even though they hadn't been free of her reach. Io stared at the nearest bus, where several employees had tried and failed to flee the drones. The shattered glass of the window twinkled, refracting the shine of their flashlight. They kept walking, slowed again by the lower gravity, pushing themselves through the docking bay and into the airlock.

Io's ship was small—it had only a cockpit, a small bathroom, and a slightly larger space that was intended to serve just about every other need a Lantern was thought to have. These needs were few, supposedly, and so the space was barren: it had only a bed, a box of rations, and a small bedside table. Upon verifying that the ship was properly pressurized, Io hastily removed their suit, first unfastening the helmet with a hiss, then dropping the suit and oxygen tank to the floor. They scrambled onto the bed, opened a shelf on their bedside table, and pulled out a pencil



and a single piece of folded paper. On the paper were two marks. Io sighed, added a third, then folded up the paper and returned it and the pencil to the shelf.