V

If someone had told Sunny that one day she’d be aboard an I/O ship hurdling through space, she would have been hard pressed to believe them.

If that same person had told them she’d put on more than thirty pounds in the span of one year, she would have been equally distrusting. She’d never had a weight problem before, and the meager diet of a University student turned underappreciated Astronomic Logistics Engineer didn’t exactly lend itself to the sort of disposable income it took to put on that much weight so quickly.

But somehow the most unbelievable part of all of this was the fact that the android sitting in front of her, a trusted crewmate for the past few months before her suspicions started to cook, had been responsible for coaxing the ship into indulging themselves and relishing in the reduced gravity.

It seemed so cliché—like something out of one of the vids out of a cheesy B thriller. One of those rightwing anti AI films that took off when technology like Ashe became a more viable possibility than just science fiction. But the facts had lined up in ways that Sunny couldn’t deny, even if some small part of her had been holding out that she had been wrong. Mistaken about the root cause of the weight gain that had been plaguing her ever since she had woken up from cryo sleep.

“I’ve been working with Lourdes and Catherine for a while now. Watching them blow up and shrink down while we’re out here in the vast, inky void of space.”

Ashe’s voice had maintained that robotic quality ever since she’d been cornered by Sunny. Once her scheme had been snuffed out by the Nash’s least experienced passenger, Ashe had dropped any and all efforts at seeming human. Was it an intimidation tactic? Sunny was well aware that all androids were Three Laws compliant. Maybe it was something else. A retreat? Turning off the simulated feelings of shame and embarrassment?

“Taking an android in as a part of the crew rather than just a tool was a novelty at the time. They took a chance and purchased me from a band of pirates that had taken over a yacht-class transport vessel. Lourdes and Catherine were the only crew aboard the *Nashville* back then. This was before Captain Nguyen was integrated full-time into the roster. I’ve known the two of them for almost twenty years now—most of that time spent watching over them in cryo sleep.”

Here, a little flicker of Ashe’s voice, the one that Sunny was most familiar with, began to flit in and out of her confession.

“Rather than being put to menial tasks, pampering the elite while they enjoyed their cruise or pleasuring the vagabonds who took the *Vega* for themselves, I was given a new designation. New programming. A new name.”

“If you don’t mind me saying so, you’ve got a funny way of showing how grateful you are.” Sunny groused, the adrenaline of correctly deducing the source of the mysterious weight gain quickly fading into a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach, “So what… do you have like, some secret protocol in your programming? Did you glitch out or something before you woke up?”

“Of course not. I may be an artificial intelligence, but I do have some level of autonomy.” Ashe seemed almost offended in her monotone response but continued nonetheless, “The time that I’ve spent watching over them, protecting them, and helping them has been invaluable to me—it may have only been half that time to the two of *them* but to me, it’s been a lifetime of memories.”

A small twinkle in Ashe’s blue eyes as they unfocused from Sunny. No water or silicone liquid to simulate getting misty-eyed, but enough that Sunny could recognize the genuine emotion creeping back into her voice in ways that the android clearly hadn’t expected.

“So if you’re so indebted to them, if you really *are* thankful for the life that they’ve given you… why betray them like this?” Sunny paused, “Or *me*? I’ve just been aboard this ship to get away from my shitty home life back on Earth, I didn’t… I haven’t—”

Ashe adjusted her fingers. She straightened slightly. Her shoulders squared and her eyes lilted.

“I don’t see it as a betrayal. I’m simply doing what I’ve always done—serving. Despite my new designation and regardless of any programming that I’ve been reprogrammed to follow, I was still built with a desire to cater to the demands of my masters… my *friends*.”

“If you had seen the passengers aboard the *Vega,* perhaps you would be able to understand better. All of them engorged and heavy, swaddled in layers upon layers of fat. Some of them had stomachs so vast that brushed against their legs while standing. In more than a few cases, passengers had hips so wide that outside of the cargo bay, no port was wide enough to avoid struggle. Rings of chins and stubby little fingers. Too big to take care of themselves. At times, too fat to move without the assistance of artificial gravity.”

“And I was there to tend to them. To satisfy them. Gratifying hunger, easing the aches and pains of being so cumbersome, and at times…”

Ashe looked away. Not in any sort of simulated shame or to allow Sunny to interject, but out of what seemed to be a genuine sense of bashfulness.

“And regardless of what happened afterwards, no matter how much time has passed since that day when the *Vega* was overtaken by pirates or the many standard months that passed before Lourdes and Catherine purchased me from their crew, I was still designed with a singular purpose in mind.”

Sunny’s rusty brow furrowed further as she came to an understanding of the pieces that Ashe had been putting down.

“So you’re… defaulting to your original programming.” The passenger managed after a pause, “You’re not glitching out and you’re not malfunctioning, you’re just—”

“Making sure that my passengers are comfortable.” Ashe completed the sentence for her, “That extends to Captain Nguyen, and that also extends to you.”

There was another long silence between the two of them. The hum of the engines droned in the metal halls of the *Nash* as Sunny tried to find the best way to proceed while Ashe processed the interaction that had just occurred.

“You can’t keep doing this, Ashe.” Sunny finally responded, “You know it’s wrong.”

“What’s so wrong about it? I’m a Therapy droid. I provide comfort to those in need. Being so far away from home, being saddled with such a thankless job aboard an Import/Export vehicle, you all need to be made to feel more at home.”

“My home isn’t a pantry!” Sunny’s voice rose in frustration of the circular logic, “And Catherine’s been trying to diet for months now—are you just going to keep feeding us until we get back to Earth and drop off the payload?”

“As long as I’m in service, I am obligated to do my part in our mission.” Ashe’s stony intonation lowered, “If you have an issue with the way that I perform said part, then I suggest taking it up with Captain Nguyen.”

Sunny’s lips pursed ever so slightly. She had already tried that. But now that she had proof, now that Ashe had confessed…

“Or Catherine. Or Lourdes.” Ashe continued to perceive the tells in Sunny’s poker face, no matter how small they might have felt, “I am sure that we could all have a very polite conversation together.”

Or, as Sunny understood it:

*“They’ll never believe you anyway.”*

This was a corner if there had ever been one. Sure she had figured out that Ashe was the root of her recent weight troubles, and while it had been vindicating to have confirmation in that regard, the android had admitted as much to an empty room that went unmonitored. And in Ashe’s explanation, Sunny had been informed that they had worked with one another for a cumulative twenty years. Even if Lolo, Cathy, and the Captain had been in cryo for a good majority of that time, that still bought Ashe far more loyalty than Sunny’s meager year aboard the ship.

When pressed into taking sides, Sunny couldn’t deny that it was a hard story to sell.

“So.”

“So.”

“Where do we go from here?” Sunny leaned forward, “I’m not going to just keep letting you fatten us up all the way home, but you’re right. No one’s going to believe me if I tell them what you’re doing. So where do we go from here?”

“I take exception to the idea that I am *fattening you up*.” Ashe’s simulated emotions once more crept back into the conversation slowly, “You are not pigs meant for slaughter, nor am I some giggling cartoon villain. I am *tending* to—”

“Tending to our needs, right. Got it.” Sunny held up a hand dismissively in acknowledgement of the pedantry, “Either way… I’m not going to let you tend to *my* needs. At least, not in the way that you have been.”

“What needs of yours *am* I to tend to, then?” Ashe asked, “We cannot be at one another’s throats for the rest of the duration of our voyage. Not without arousing some suspicion, anyway. Doing that is just delaying the inevitable. And I don’t think you want to get on the entire crew’s bad side.”

“I can’t talk you out of this, can I?”

“No more than I can talk you out of breathing.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Clever readings of my programming aside, I *am* still Three Laws compliant, Sunny.” Ashe shrugged, “I couldn’t hurt you even if I wanted to. And I don’t want to. All I want to do is to help.”

Sunny made a small, noncommittal noise of agreement. Ashe was right—if no one was going to believe her when she told them all of what Ashe had been doing to them, being all but directly behind their weights rising back up after they shrunk down in order to meet regulation, then they had to come to some sort of agreement. At least for the foreseeable future.

But eventually, a compromise popped into Sunny’s head. One that she hoped would satisfy Ashe’s inborn desire to pamper and indulge her crew, but one that would hopefully put a stop to the troubles that she had been facing for the better part of a year.

“When you were an attendant aboard the *Vega,* were you ever a personal attendant? Like, did you ever get to focus on just one person?”

“Several times—why do you ask?”

“I’ll get to that. What you’re saying is that you are capable of tending to one particular person. You’ve done it in the past, right?”

“That’s correct.”

“So what if, instead of trying to *tend to the needs* of everyone aboard the ship, all at once, you got to focus on just… one of us? What if you got to, in essence, do what you were programmed to do aboard the *Vega*? Act as a personal attendant for one of your passengers.”

“Are you volunteering?” Sunny raised a sarcastic eyebrow

“No, but… I think that there’s a way that you can still be happy here without… you know…”

The android quirked her head to the side curiously, visibly and eagerly awaiting the proposed solution to both of their problems…

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It had not been difficult for Sunny to convince both Catherine and Captain Nguyen that she “needed a break” from working with Lo.

They had known the woman for years now. And while they both looked at her unquestioningly as a friend and valued part of the USS *Nashville*’s crew, they were both ready and willing to admit that she could be a lot.

So when Sunny proposed alternating between Eva and Cathy as their second set of hands and letting Lourdes take the night shift, no one really batted much of an eye. Having three people—well, two people and an android—be awake for third shift in space didn’t make much sense. It wasn’t like Sunny was invaluable to the duties being performed at that time (or really, any other) and Lolo’s long history of making everyone uncomfortable with her overt sexuality made for her perfect alibi.

Besides, if something ever cropped up that Lo *did* need a second set of hands for, it wasn’t like Ashe wouldn’t be there to help her out.

And with the way that Lolo liked to spend her newfound time away from everyone else on the night shift, she found plenty of ways that Ashe could help out…

*“URAAAAAAAAAAP”*

An agonized belch greeted Sunny and Catherine as they exited the Crew’s Quarters and tumbled into the Common Area, still rubbing the sleep from their eyes as they walked in on the final moments of Lolo’s latest night shift.

“Oh… hey…” Lo winced, her head raising slowly as she apparently came to at the sound of her own monstrous burp, “Wh’t time izzit?

“About time for morning shift.” Catherine put her hands on her broad farm girl hips, “Don’t tell me you fell asleep again.”

“Hey, I didn’t fall asleep.” Lolo managed her answer weakly as she struggled to rise out from behind the table in the central atrium that made up the Common Area, “I just took a little nap is all.”

Catherine fish hooked an eyebrow, giving a knowing glance to the debris that the once-lean pilot had left in her wake. The durable plastic cups that had been stocked in the counter had been stacked three high, with two plates and a bowl laid out with some remains of printed rations clinging to the side. Add that into the unmistakable scent of beer from the almost-empty cup next to the tower, and it was pretty clear what had gone down while everyone was asleep.

“A little beer nap’s more like it.” Catherine sighed, “You’re lucky we’re the ones who’ve got Morning Shift—Captain Nguyen would tan your hide if she knew that you’d been drinkin’ on the job again.”

“Hey, it’s not like I don’t have another set of hands.” Lolo steadied herself as she sloshed her way to a stance, “Ain’t that right, Ashe?”

“Settle down, Lourdes.” The android popped her head in from the Recreational Facilities, a small bag of trash in her hands that she put into the disposal chute without so much as looking at the other onlookers, “I might be able to cover for you with Catherine and Sunny, but if you wake up Captain Nguyen, you’re on your own.”

“On my own, huh?” Lolo hiccupped, sauntering over to the redheaded android with drunken confidence, “Lucky for me I might almost forget what that feels like with you around.”

“Ugh.”

The collective grown between the other members of the Nash was enough to make Lourdes roll her eyes and give up the ghost. Clearly teetering between “drunk” and “hungover”, she hardly had the energy to stand up straight, let alone sexually harass the one person aboard who was willing to sleep with her without any alcohol in their system.

“Fine, fine. I’mma go lay down.” Lourdes said in a sluggish sort of way as she dragged herself back down the hallway, stomach bunching into several little rolls as she braced herself on the circular couch, “Sorry for the mess.”

“It’s fine—we’ll clean up *your mess.*” Catherine sighed in exasperation of her pilot’s antics, “But this *better be the last fuckin’ time, Lo*.”

Sunny knew that it probably wouldn’t be.

Watching the formerly fit and trim ace pilot struggle to make it back to the barracks, the weight that she had put on since the schedule shift was much more noticeable. Her abs were gone, her arms were thick. Lo’s diamond-shaped face was beginning to round out around the cheeks as her double chin became more pronounced. With her short butch haircut, Sunny could see the softening of her upper body as the thirty pounds that she had put on while in space became fifteen more since she’d found Ashe out—Lourdes was more than fifty pounds heavier than she’d been when they’d first met, carrying *most* of it in her hips and softening beer gut.

And since she was the only one who knew to look for it, Sunny could see that Ashe had been examining Lourdes’s exit just as closely as she had been. Albeit for different reasons.

“I don’t see why you ain’t reported her yet.” Catherine groused, “Puttin’ that one on the night shift when *you’re* the only person around to keep her on track ain’t exactly helped us that much.”

Ashe joined the cleanup crew in the kitchen, picking up the plates and bowls that Lolo had left behind. Sunny knew firsthand that Lo’s preferential treatment—letting her access the alcohol settings on the Fabricator, the casual sex, the extra helpings at midnight meal—was all a part of Ashe’s call of duty. Ever since she had been persuaded to sink her teeth into Lo and let the other folks go, it had become a lot more bearable around the Nashville, at the cost of Lo’s share of the workload going down the drain…

“Eh. It’s only one shift out of three.” Sunny was quick to interject, doing her part in keeping Ashe’s all-access to ‘serving’ Lo as best she knew how, “Besides, it’s not like she ever got much done when we worked together.”

“I hear that.” Catherine chuckled, putting the dishes into the sink, “Ashe, you mind printin’ out some breakfast for us?”

“I don’t mind at all.”

Ashe and Sunny shared a knowing look at one another in silent acknowledgement of their deal.

She would stop sabotaging diets, encouraging laziness, and tempting them with their favorite treats. Catherine, Captain Nguyen, and Sunny would be safe from any and all of those nasty little subroutines that had been plaguing Sunny since she first saw her squishy little tum in the mirror.

But as far as Sunny was concerned, Lolo was fair game.

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By the time that the USS *Nashville* broke the stratosphere on its return trip back to Earth, plenty of things had changed.

Getting used to the cramped quarters of the Import/Export ship had been an ordeal, but seeing it from the outside for the first time in almost two years really helped to put everything in perspective. Sunny had given up life back on Earth, a place that—while overpopulated—still offered at least her meager apartment, her regular bus station, a workstation, and all of the other pieces of “real” life that she had missed since being on board.

But honestly, even though there was plenty of room for the five of them to walk around, Sunny really felt like she needed to stretch her legs.

“You too, Slo-Lo.” Catherine smacked the Latina’s meaty ass as she prodded her down the gangway, “The exercise’ll do you some good.”

“Fuck off, heifer.”

Lourdes struggled to pull the printed shirt down over her tanky stomach as she walked gut-first into the port. Her tanned skin had lightened during their shuttering away from sunlight, leaving her a few shades darker than ivory as she winced at the bright light. Hints of pink stretch marks could be seen circling where the clear indentation of her belly-button was as she muffin-topped over her printed pair of cargo pants. Her strong features were now buried under layers of coddled chub, Lo’s intimidating expression now replaced with one displaying discomfort at the extreme unfamiliarity of being back on Earth.

“Come on, Lo. The sooner we get off the ship and into a new routine for you—the better.” Eva said from her place at the head of their little group as she patted Lourdes reassuringly on the shoulder, “Hell, they’re paying us enough. You could probably get a lipo if you want.”

Despite how easy it might have been to blame Sunny for the additional pounds and inches that had cropped up *after* they had made their secret pact, Ashe slowly realized that the android wasn’t to blame for the Captain’s softer, rounder face. Nor was she responsible for the extra pounds and inches that had been fighting for space in Catherine’s coveralls. That girl just ate like a horse when uninitiated, and the Captain’s shitty sleep schedule and insistence of putting cream in her coffee didn’t exactly pair well with extra rations.

The entire crew of the USS *Nashville* exited the vessel with a few more pounds than they had carried aboard, but behind Lo, there was only one passenger aboard who had really let herself go the hardest…

“Oh stop fussin’ back there, Sunny!” Catherine rolled her eyes, elbowing their passenger in the belly, “You look *fine*—ain’t none’a these people know you from Adam. How are they gonna know if you put on a little weight?”

As it turned out, being free of having to worry about Ashe trying to make her fat hadn’t meant that she’d learned any resistance to the lazy sort of lifestyle that she’d been introduced to over the course of their trip out into space.

Sure, her gains weren’t as pronounced as poor Lo’s were, but Sunny wasn’t exactly having fun with her chafing thighs and muffin top.

“Hey, I’m supposed to meet my mom tomorrow!” Sunny groused indignantly with another futile tug of her top, “She’s not gonna recognize me! I’m huge!”

“Listen, I told you that we all usually wind up gaining a little weight while we’re up there.” Catherine crossed her arms sagely over her sagging tum, “Nobody force-fed you or nothin’. And besides—”

Another quick smack of schadenfreude across Lolo’s back, sending her paled brown blubber wobbling.

“It ain’t like you blew up near as much as Lo did.”

“I’m gonna fuckin’ *cut you*, farm girl.” Lourdes warned, whipping around so that their stomachs squished against one another, “J-Just knock it off, okay?!”

All in all, Sunny’s gains paled in comparison to the more than hundred pounds that their pilot had put on. Convincing Ashe to narrow her scope to just one of them had been a bright idea if there’d ever been one. If she hadn’t realized that her old programming was causing her to enable to rest of the crew…

She didn’t want to think of just *how* much weight she might have put on then.

“Hey, Acid Rain.” Lourdes nudged the smaller chunker in the arm, “We’re in your hometown, right?”

“Uh… I mean, we’re in my home *county*.”

“You know any good Earther bars here?” Lolo smiled, “I ain’t had greasy bar food in years, and Ashe tells me that you guys make it *mean* down here.”

“Yeah, we can tell your mom about the time you locked yourself in the latrine.”

Sunny smiled.

She was almost going to miss these guys.

“Sure. Drinks are on me.” Sunny smiled, “You ever taken a train before, Lo?”

“Is she even gonna *fit* on the train?”

“*I swear to fucking God—”*

An hour or so later, after the delivery was finalized and all of the paperwork signed, the *Nashville* was left docked for a while longer so that its crew could enjoy one of the local bars. Sunny, Catherine, Eva, Lourdes, and even Ashe, enjoyed one last meal together.

After a couple of drinks, a few celebratory appetizers, and one surprisingly sappy speech from Captain Nguyen, everyone was just toasty enough that no one seemed to judge Sunny too harshly when she allowed Ashe to help her “engage in digestive aiding.”

For as much as she had been fighting it, Sunny would admit that getting a belly rub wasn’t exactly the worst thing in the world.

But now that she was back on Earth, back in gravity, and back to not having an unlimited amount of food to-be-printed out of the Fabricator would be the best thing in the world for getting back into shape.

That is, if she decided that she didn’t want to stay on for the next job when it rolled around…