IV

When Sunny was in college studying for her degree, one of her professors had taught her about The Centipede’s Dilemma.

There was apparently a poem about the phenomenon, but Sunny had never heard it. Her professor had described the phenomenon of a centipede moving along the ground, happy as could be, until it was asked which of its legs moved in front of the other. After that point, the centipede completely forgot how to walk.

He had told the story to his class, and by extension a sophomoric Sunny, as a warning. There was very much a danger of getting caught up in their own thoughts, and they were all going into a field where they would need to be able to trust their calculations. Checking and re-checking their work was fine, but keeping things simple—almost rote—was the key to keeping their cool in the professional world.

And regardless of how well-intentioned that parable might have been delivered, it was *because* of The Centipede’s Dilemma that Sunny would not have any luck finding balance during the coming months while she was aboard the USS *Nashville.*

They were approaching the halfway point on their return trip to Earth. Nearly a year had passed since Sunny had first emerged from cryo sleep with the rest of the crew, a fact made that much more depressing when she remembered that it hadn’t even taken her a full twelve months to have most assuredly outgrown all the clothes gathering dust in her apartment back home. Part of her had begun to hope that there had been some sort of malfunction in the ship’s data logs while they were put into cold storage, that Ashe had simply let them sleep for a few months longer than she ought to have, *anything* that would have accelerated their arrival date so that she wouldn’t have had to spend twelve months and change porking out on this ship with no good way of burning it all off.

But no—the coordinates blinking on the monitor in front of her put them at *just* about halfway to where they needed to be.

Perhaps they could arrive a couple of days earlier than expected, but to go any faster than the recommended speed would have put the cargo into jeopardy. And they needed all hands on deck to make sure that everything arrived intact.

“Why *doesn’t* Yeng just staff the entire ship with androids?”

Sunny had asked the question aloud, suddenly breaking the thick silence that had grown comfortably between herself and Captain Nguyen. The now softened and potbellied Asian woman didn’t even look up from her data pad as she silently ran the question over and back again in her mind, content in letting Sunny further explain her question on her own terms.

“I mean Ashe doesn’t need to sleep, she doesn’t need to eat, she doesn’t need… does she even get paid?” Sunny made a sour face into the monitor, straightening her posture to remove the double chin from her face, “You’d think that Yeng would just have a whole staff of them working something like this.”

“Until they invent an android that can’t be hacked, there’ll always be a need for ships staffed with people who need to eat and sleep.” She stated simply into the small tablet, “That, and someone has to run diagnostics on Ashe every other week or so to make sure that she’s running efficiently.”

“Oh.”

Sunny had said it sourly, somewhere between a concession and a pout. Of course she was hardly so petulant, especially in front of Captain Nguyen. But the quick timing of Evangeline’s response had suggested a sort of curtness beyond her normal gruff exterior. That Sunny might have touched a nerve, or—

“You should eat lunch.” She said inscrutably, placing the tablet down on the console in front of her and looking at Sunny squarely, “You’re always in a bad mood whenever you don’t eat lunch.”

“I’m fine.” Sunny cracked a shaky smile, “I had a big breakfast.”

“You had two pieces of toast and a serving of eggs.” The captain said in a voice just shy of plain and flat, “That was four hours ago. I understand that we don’t exactly have to burn a lot of calories up here, but you still need to *eat food*.”

Sunny’s demeanor slid a bit more into petulance without actually crossing the line of being inappropriate. Trying and failing to monitor her calorie intake was difficult enough when everything was sort of spat out of a nozzle and formed into shapes resembling food, but when all there was to think about was whatever was in front of her on the various screens that ruled her on and off duty life *or* the fact that she hadn’t eaten anything and that her stomach was growling, dieting felt practically impossible.

So for the past few weeks she had been alternating—watching herself through a microscope one week, starving herself in hopes of warding off some of this unsightly weight gain that had plagued her, and the next two giving in and eating herself stupid. Even though she always had a partner around to distract her, they were only as effective in warding off Sunny’s expansion as they were their own. Catherine was a terrible influence on her, Lolo moderately less so, and Captain Evangeline Nguyen…

Well, these long nights without much conversation were hardly inspiring her to think about anything other than the fact that she hadn’t eaten anything since breakfast.

“My, uh… my stomach’s not feeling well.” Sunny lied sheepishly as she shifted uncomfortably in her chair, “I think I might still be space sick.”

“Then you should go to Med Bay—Ashe will give you everything that you need.”

The silence that followed the captain’s statement was less of a lull in conversation and more punctuation. A silent “captain’s orders” that would either go unchallenged or would require Sunny to explain why she didn’t feel like going to the infirmary. Why she didn’t feel like seeing Ashe. Why she had been avoiding the android’s gaze for the past few weeks as she served up breakfast or attempted to make polite conversation, and why Sunny had been uncharacteristically frosty towards her ever since she had really begun to put on weight.

“You really need to work on your poker face.” Captain Nguyen crossed her arms with a rare smirk across her face, “No wonder Lourdes always beats you at cards.”

Sunny’s indignation turned once more to sheepishness—had she really been that easy to read?

“Would you *like* to talk about why you’ve been avoiding Ashe?” Captain Nguyen piqued an eyebrow, “Or would you like to try another excuse?”

It was clear that she had been caught dead in her tracks. And despite the naivete that Sunny felt when it came to being out in space, she knew good and well when she had been backed into a corner. And if anyone would have heard her out and given her an honest answer, it would be Captain Evangeline Nguyen…

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“Are you honestly suggesting that you think Ashe, our *medical officer*, is trying to fatten us up?”

It had sounded so silly when it was boiled down to such a simple statement, Sunny would admit.

But it was the only thing that made sense! Ashe was the one plugging in recipes half the time, she was the one who delivered food and snacks to everyone on board, and she was the only one who didn’t eat the food that was prepared! Granted, it was because she didn’t have a biological need to, but that just gave her all the more reason to not worry about altering the amount of calories per payload into the printing tray! The fabricator was just another machine that she could interface with and, at no risk to her own mechanical physique, Ashe could crank the calorie up as high as they could go without making anyone suspicious! Plus the lack of physical activity aboard went a long way towards helping to foster a lazy attitude and give an easy “out” as far as weight gain went…

It was the perfect crime!

At least, that was what Sunny had thought…

“Sunny, I understand that you’re concerned with the amount of weight that you’ve put on since coming aboard the ship…” the captain took a sip of her coffee, “But it’s completely normal. Catherine and Lourdes are former military, and I’ve been flying I/O since I was old enough to have a license. This is just a thing that happens out here.”

“You don’t exactly seem like the kind of person who would just… I don’t know… accept that.” Sunny scrunched her face distastefully at the idea, “I know that I might be being paranoid, but—”

“You *are.*” The captain’s patience faltered as her normal stern tone slipped back into the conversation, “Sunny is a valued member of this team. She’s been with Catherine and Lourdes longer than even I have. And, to put it bluntly… you don’t really have a frame of reference for what you’re talking about. I do.”

Captain Nguyen had never been one to mince words when it came to her crew. Sunny had born witness to these sorts of conversations awkwardly whenever Lo would get too far out of line, but she had never envisioned that she would be on the receiving end of one of one of them. It wasn’t so much the words that she was speaking as much as it was the way in which she spoke—less like a mother scolding a child or a drill sergeant commanding a recruit, but more like a yacht staring down a dinghy. And in the months that she had been aboard the *Nash,* Sunny had always secretly dreaded getting a talking-to from their captain. Now she had finally realized that nightmare.

“Now, go to Med Bay and get some medication.” she punctuated again, “And while you’re there, I encourage you to talk to Ashe—she might only simulate feelings, but I’m sure she’s noticed how curt you’ve been to her recently.”

A sip of black coffee as Captain Nguyen lifted the data pad from the console and resumed her casual scrolling.

“That’s an order.”

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The *Nashville’s* infirmary was a place where Sunny had, unfortunately, spent a lot of her time aboard the ship early on.

She had been especially prone to motion sickness. And her body had taken some time getting used to an exclusively printed diet. And she often had trouble sleeping. Honestly, the amount of seemingly miniscule adjustments that she’d made over the course of her year aboard had stacked up so quickly that she’d hardly even thought about it. But she knew the small, stark white room better than almost any other on board, save for the recreational facilities, central atrium, and the crew’s quarters.

The ginger droid was, when not mingling with the rest of the crew, stationed there nearly 24 hours. Not simply staring at the wall of course, but perusing the data files in the onboard computer or making small but (probably) necessary adjustments to her equipment. Sunny had never thought it nefarious before she’d decided that it was Ashe who was responsible for her weight gain, but the seemingly needless puttering about her quarters when she’d had plenty of time during the FTL portion of their voyage to prepare for the human portion of the crew’s awakening from cryo sleep was enough to make her think twice.

Ashe had admitted to doing *some* functions simply because it put the rest of the crew at ease psychologically—maybe something similar was going on with this as well? Sunny wouldn’t quite know.

But as she set foot into the sterile, white-paneled room, Ashe’s squeaky turn on her stool as her expression brightened artificially was enough to make her cringe just a little bit.

“Good morning, Sunny.” She said in that cool, calm voice that she was programmed to have, “Something I can help you with?”

“I, uh… I wanted to get some motion sickness pills…” Sunny’s tum minded the gap as she grabbed at her arm nervously, “And, uh… you know… talk.”

“Well, luckily for you, both of those can be arranged.” Ashe’s voice and intonation were reasonably outside of the uncanny valley, turning her body to face the uncomfortable redhead as she struggled to continue the act of swallowing her pride, “You grab a seat, and I’ll be right back with your medicine.”

Sunny did as she was instructed. It was hard enough for her to face the android that she’d convinced herself was sabotaging the diets and figures of all those around her, but to be so close to anyone after deliberately snubbing them for so long was enough to make Sunny want to crawl out of her own skin. The social awkwardness wasn’t mitigated at all by the fact that Ashe couldn’t feel things like social anxiety—Sunny still very much could. And after convincing herself that the *Nash’s* sole android operative was working at some secret fattening agenda, the last thing that she wanted to do was to have to talk to said operative about her delusions…

Well, the *last* thing that she wanted to do in this situation was to be right. But even then, that might have at least come with the satisfaction of knowing that she had been correct. Just sitting there, watching her putter around the infirmary while she pretended to not have an ulterior motive in coming down to Med Bay was enough to make Sunny shiver in anticipation of putting her foot in her mouth.

You know, even more than she already had with the Captain.

“That should hold you over for another week or so.” Ashe rattled around a small orange pill bottle that she had filled with a prescription, “I don’t want to risk giving you too much and not letting your system try and make adjustments without medication… though, given how quickly you seem to go through these things, you should *probably* plan on seeing me sometime next week too.”

“Th… Thanks…” Sunny forced a smile as she took the pill bottle from the android’s hand, “I, uh… I’ll make sure that I grab some if I run out…”

“You seem like something’s bothering you.” The redheaded machine said, her hands sliding down to her hips as she assumed a more authoritative stance, “It wouldn’t have anything to do with what you wanted to talk to me about, would it?”

Sunny gulped. She was suddenly hyper aware of the fact that the Captain thought her poker face was terrible. She could feel the heat in her face rise to make her cheeks flush with shame over her silly idea already. Surely, she was the biggest idiot on board right now. At least Lolo and Catherine could take responsibility for their weight gain, even if they weren’t exactly happy with it. But no, she was the only one who didn’t have the guts to accept the fact that she was just getting lazy—she was the only one who felt the need to pin the blame on someone else.

“Yeah, I… just wanted to ask you if you could... y’know… help me watch my weight while I’m up here in space with you guys.” She finally managed, “I’ve put on a few since I got out of cryo and—”

“There’s not much that can be done that you aren’t already doing.”

Sunny’s response came quickly and sharply, a rare instance of her interrupting anyone with a flat and jagged tone that seemed somehow unlike her normally friendly and optimistic personality subroutines, “You haven’t been eating a lot at your regularly schedule mealtimes. And since we don’t have much in the way of exercise equipment, I would say that the best thing that you can do to help your body weight stabilize is to make your meals more regular.”

And something—*something—*about the way that Sunny offered up that particular response in so quick of a fashion made Sunny tilt her head a bit. It was hard to put a finger on, but something about the way that the android responded to her, shortly and curtly, was just enough to make her have second thoughts about giving up the ghost and asking Ashe for dietary help. Whether it was her tone or the way that she so quickly interjected, the way that the android had responded to her was enough to make Sunny think that maybe she had been too easily talked out of her ideas that Ashe might have had more to do with her rising weight than she had let on.

And it hadn’t gone over Sunny’s head that the advice that she had been given to counteract her weight gain was to eat more regularly.

As in more.

“You know, it’s uh… it’s funny.” Sunny steeled herself a bit, feeling more confident in her assumptions now that Ashe had played her hand, “I was actually thinking that maybe we could adjust the calories on my meals. That way I’d still be getting the same *intake* without—”

“Yes, but that’s not…” Sunny could almost see the ‘thinking’ icon hovering in Ashe’s head like she were a CPU from the onboard computers, “You see, I’d have to tinker with the recipes. And while *you* might benefit from it, I can’t guarantee that the rest of the crew—”

“Come on Ashe, you’ve seen the rest of the crew. Cathy, Lolo, even Captain Nguyen…” Sunny held out her arms to pantomime some tonnage, “They’re all putting on just as much weight as I have! It’d be in their best interest *and mine* to cut the calorie intake of the Fabricator.”

“But putting less calories into the printed meals would mean taking up more power—fractionally yes, but noticeably over a long period of time.” Ashe stated confidently, “And given that our reserves are finite, we should *probably*—”

“Oh cut the crap, would you?”

The android had clearly not expected such a response from Sunny. Maybe Lolo, but Sunny’s sudden rebuttal of her dismissive comment had clearly caught her off-guard. She blinked her synthetic blue eyes and made an expression that would have made her seem almost human if Sunny hadn’t been so tossed over the way that things looked to be going. If this sort of interaction had occurred earlier in the year that she’d been out in space, if Sunny had just come to her grand realization sooner, then perhaps it wouldn’t have felt quite as awkward.

But Sunny was, in a few words, on a roll. And nothing was going to stop her from rolling right to her conclusions—hopefully before they had to roll her out of the cargo bay.

“I’ve seen Catherine do it plenty of times when she gets especially worried about her weight. Before *you* talk her out of it and get her to go sit down in the Rec Room with a bowl of popcorn.” Sunny pointed an accusatory finger at the synthetic woman in front of her, “Lolo, the Captain, all of us had flat tummies before we woke up from cryo, and you’re the one who’s right there, encouraging us to stuff our faces at every meal.”

“It is not *my fault* that you’ve put on weight, Sunday.” Ashe furrowed her eyebrows as Sunny’s full name fell from the robot’s lips, “If humans were just as easy to reprogram as androids, then the Yeng Corporation wouldn’t have hired you all to—”

“Humans are easy as *shit* to reprogram! You’ve been Pavlov-ing us!”

Sunny had come to her point a little too loudly. If she caused too much of a commotion, Captain Nguyen might realize that Sunny hadn’t come to Med Bay and apologized like she had been all but ordered to. Then she might come into the middle of Sunny’s accusations, and that would just be a whole other can of worms right there.

But Sunny was confident—she was so *sure* that Sunny had something to do with her crewmates gaining weight! Upping the calories, maybe secret additives, or just plain enabling them until they all got fat and lazy while they had nothing to do aboard this ship but float around and eat!

“Pavlov-ing… as in Ivan Petrovich Pavlov?” Sunny piqued an eyebrow, “Am I to assume that you’re accusing me of trying to condition you all into behaviors that I deem ‘preferrable’ because of some ulterior motive?”

“I am.” Sunny stated boldly as she consciously lowered her voice to a more manageable level, “And you might be messing with the calorie intake on the Fabricator too. I just don’t have any proof of that.”

“You don’t have any proof of me trying to condition anyone either.” She leaned forward and rested one lily white hand over the other, “And yet, you seem very confident in your accusations.”

“If I’m wrong, then I’ll apologize. Maybe I really am just getting lazy, and maybe I’m just not cut out to be up here in space. Maybe this endeavor was a mistake, and I’m letting my insecurities and cabin fever get too worked up.” Sunny’s face grew stony, feeling doubt begin to creep in as she listed out the various reasons that Sunny could use to undercut her argument, “But you’re not doing a lot of refuting for someone who isn’t doing exactly what I’m accusing you of.”

And in that moment, despite the righteous indignation that she felt welling up in her chest as she ignored the part of her brain that was already bracing for the inevitable “pull out the rug” moment in Ashe’s counterargument, Sunny was surprised when the android’s expression changed ever so slightly.

Not in an angry way. Not in an amused sort of way. Ashe was no longer visibly simulating the emotions that she was programmed to in order to make the human crew more comfortable. The small micromovements that went into every conversation between two animate crew members were now absent in the silent, unreadable robot who stared her down with a thousand yard gaze. She didn’t seem to be looking *beyond* Sunny. Instead, she seemed to be focused entirely on her, boring deep into the blacks of her eyes as she made small adjustments in her seated position.

“You’ve clearly come up with quite a theory, Sunday.” Ashe’s voice even sounded different—more monotone, more flat—as she finally responded after the briefest of pauses, “You’re a scientist. An engineer. I assume that you have some way to back up your claims.”

“Not yet. But I’m willing to bet that if we checked the logs on the Fabricator we’d see that plenty of the meals that *you* make for us are over the recommended dosage per serving.”

“You don’t have access to that kind of information, Sunny.”

“But Captain Nguyen does.” Sunny bluffed, “And if she doesn’t, then I know that Sunny and Lo can get in too. All it would take is just one of them to believe me, and I’ll have all the proof I need.”

“Assuming I did it.”

“Assuming you’ve *been* doing it, yes.”

There was a long, deathly pause between the two women as they sat on either sides of the Med Bay counter. Staring at one another blankly, without expression, as they both silently dared one another to make the next conversational move. Sunny, with nothing but a gut feeling and a bluff, and Ashe with no way to *dis*prove the newest addition to the crew’s gut feeling or bluff.

Sunny almost didn’t believe the words that soon followed out of Ashe’s mouth.

“Well then… you’ve figured it out.” Ashe said in that flat, robotic monotone as her fingers went from overlayed to steepled, “I suppose that means that I have some explaining to do?”

“Yeah… I guess you do.”