

## GHOSTS OF PLUTO

For outer space missions, each crew member needs to be safe, skilled, and a sociopath. A high regard for safety ensures that a crew will not botch the mission for foolish reasons. A high degree of skill ensures that a crew can accomplish their assignment and can rise to the occasion should other issues arise. Only a sociopath would eagerly strap themselves to a bomb with a chair on it and fly away from everyone and everything they have ever known. For these reasons, androids such as myself are often found among crews, because it is supposed that we are safe, skilled, and sociopathic. Humans are correct in all three of these suppositions. Where they have erred is in giving us a soul like their own in which to wrap these three traits.

In my beginning, I was mined out of Mars, refined into pure materials, and my modular parts were assembled: each finger, each palm, each forearm, and so on. I stayed on Mars in various containers in various warehouses for various numbers of years, until being collected and shipped to the most remote outpost of mankind: a fairly new base on Pluto. Technically, my first memories are protocols preinstalled into my head in the factory. Motor skills, technical skills, languages, and 'common sense' heuristics. But my earliest first-hand memory of the world is of Darius Jacobson's kennels.

When I came online, I saw two dogs playing with one another. Both were German Shepherds. One, a female, was holding a stuffed toy and butting it against the male's side. The

male would try to grab it, paw at her, dart around. Both growled and barked agreeably as they roughoused. Eventually, in my periphery, I noticed another figure, and I glanced down at it. It, a human, was assembling an arm, that I soon realized was to be my arm. The arm had greyish orange pseudo flesh. The human was attaching the base of the disembodied palm to the end of my very much embodied forearm.

Sensing that I had looked down at him, he looked up at me. He seemed taken aback. "Are you on already?"

"I seem to be," I answered, speaking what seemed to me to be the truth.

The human, Darius Jacobson, grabbed a manual off of the ground and flipped back to one of the first pages. "Ah. Head goes on *last*, while the android is facing... Well. No harm done."

He connected my wrist. I flexed my fingers, rotated the hand, touched my thumb to each of my other digits from little to pointer and back again.

When I was completed, the human put his face close to mine. "My name is Darius. Seems they've sent you out here to help me with the dogs."

I was delighted.

He showed me the ropes. Each morning, I fed the twenty dogs, putting a mix of dry food and wet meat into bowls for each of them and distributing the bowls to the twenty individual spacious cages throughout the kennel. After they were fed, I let all of them out into the exercise yard, where they could play and run. Many of them liked to play fetch. Darius threw a ball and they all chased it. I threw a ball and many of them chased it, but some stood in place, continuing to face me, suspicious of me. Those that were suspicious of me barked at me fearfully, not playfully. For a majority of the day we did training. The dogs were trained to smell explosives, to attack aggressors, and to find and bring back a wide variety of items including medical supplies and different calibers of ammunition. My preinstalled memories were created with the knowledge that only humans are capable of language, but I learned quickly that this was not so. My favorite dog was a female named Doll. At night when all the other dogs had been returned to their cages, Darius let me keep Doll up a little longer in the exercise yard, playing fetch

one on one. As we walked back in, I would chat with her, asking how her day had been.

From the canine exercise yard, I could see a larger human exercise yard. The humans often exercised in uniforms while holding rifles. One day while Darius and I were throwing balls for the dogs, I asked Darius, "What is the purpose of this place? How do the dogs fit in?"

Darius rubbed his chin with his thumb and pointer finger, and then answered. "We're on Pluto. This base was established four years ago as part of Operation Belt Buckle. I thought you already knew. I can get you some files on it."

Later that day, he presented me with a data drive. I scanned and read it. I learned that among humans were three primary factions. One claimed to be a communist democracy, another a socialist dictatorship, and the third a capitalist democracy, but based on my preinstalled dictionary definitions, it seemed to me more accurate to categorize them all as colonial fascists. I was on Pluto in Fort Washington. The base was one of many in the Kuiper Belt which were equipped with weaponry to destroy any manmade bodies attempting to exit the solar system. Additionally, the base produced constant jamming waves to block any broadcasts attempting to leave. The dogs fit in because Fort Washington was neighbored by a similar base from another nation, and so we needed to show superior ground might in the event of a clash.

When Doll and I were walking in from fetch that night, I admitted to her that I worried for her safety. I did not think it was fair that she had been signed up for this.

I had been at Fort Washington for 374 Earth Standard Days when Darius was killed in a training exercise. By that stage, I had taken on a majority of responsibilities with the dogs, and Darius was free to bring them around to other groups to train the humans on interacting with the canines. I learned of his death only when his replacement, Jericho Smith, arrived the next morning as I was feeding the last of the dogs.

"Stop that," the human said to me.

I froze, midway through setting down a bowl.

"Bring that here."

I considered whether I would obey this person I did not know. They spoke with such a degree of strictness and urgency that I assumed they might know something about the food that was of concern. I brought the bowl to him, to the dismay of Brutus, who was about to be fed.

Jericho took the bowl and threw it behind himself. Its contents streaked across the smooth cement floor. Brutus voiced his surprised disapproval.

“Who told you to feed them?”

“Darius Jacobson.”

“Darius Jacobson died yesterday. I’m in charge here now, Andy.”

Andy is derogatory, and although I did not feel insulted, I was not ignorant to what this meant for the way he would treat me.

“The dogs only get fed at night.”

“They are fed in the morning and evening.”

Jericho reddened in anger. “Are you malfunctioning, Andy? I outrank you as much as I outrank a toaster. The dogs are fed at night. Only dry food.”

“Why?”

The human retrieved his stun baton, thumbed it to maximum power, and attempted to strike me. I caught him by the wrist. His eyes glared and his breath caught in a fear response.

“Please tell me why you want the dogs to only be fed at night.”

“Obedience,” Jericho muttered. “Something you could learn a thing or two about.”

“Okay.” After he had given his answer, I released his hand. He looked at me with suspicion but allowed the incident to pass. I did not believe his answer, but he seemed convinced of it, and so I was willing to try it.

The dogs did not become more obedient. I also failed to understand why the dogs should be obedient to begin with, but that was beside the point. Instead of obedience, what the dogs gained was meanness. Their drills of attacking dummies became more vicious. Their drills of smelling explosives and of retrieving items became vastly less effective, and resulted in humans and other dogs being bitten frequently, which had happened zero times under Darius. Furthermore, and likely of more importance, Jericho failed utterly to communicate with

the dogs as Darius and I did. If a dog told anything to Jericho, it was met not with consideration but with reprimand.

On day 398 of my being in Fort Washington, I entered Jericho's office. "The hunger isn't working."

He looked up from his keyboard. "What did you just say to me?"

I tried to better put it in his terms. "Only feeding the dogs at night is making them less skilled. Less obedient, even. When told to retrieve, they just as likely attack. When told to smell—"

"Dismissed," he told me, and looked back down at his keyboard to resume typing.

I lingered.

He glared back up at me.

I left. I went and took Doll from her cage, something I had been forbidden to do anymore, and the two of us went out and played fetch. While we played, I made a call and scheduled a meeting for the next day with an Internal Affairs agent.

I met her, Amy Peters, in the mess hall early the next morning. She sat at her own table with a tray of food and a cup of coffee. I went and sat beside her. We greeted one another.

"I must tell you, this is a first," she said.

I inquired as to what she meant by that statement.

"An android reaching out to us," she elaborated. "It's not uncommon for androids to report technical concerns or safety violations, but I got the impression you have something deeper than that."

I told her that I did. I explained the situation with the dogs. The hunger. The failure of communication. The aggression. The unhappiness.

After hearing all of it, she tapped her fingers against her coffee mug repeatedly. It seemed to me she was trying to decide something. After some time, she took the data pad strapped to her side and set it on the table. She searched for something, and then read. She shook her head.

"Station policy has almost nothing on the treatment of animals," she said. "In the case of the dogs, it only says that the kennel master is given authority over their care and training. That's Smith."

I nodded. "Well, thank you."

I waited 72 days so as not to arouse suspicion, and then I killed Jericho Smith in his sleep by crushing his throat. I dispersed his body into empty bags of dog food so that I could inconspicuously dispose his remains into an incinerator.

3 days passed before it was realized he was missing. On the 4th day, a new kennel master was assigned. I fed the dogs early that morning before he, Tyler Johnson, arrived.

On his first day as kennel master, Tyler took Doll out of her cage on a leash, and began walking her past the other cages on the way out to the exercise yard. I do not know why he selected Doll. As he and Doll were walking past Brutus's cage, Doll broke away from Tyler and put her nose in the gap between the cage wall and the cage door. Brutus bit Doll and did not release her snout. Without a second of hesitation, Tyler drew his sidearm and killed Brutus. I realized, then, that Darius was the exceptional one, not Jericho. I began following after Tyler to kill him, but fell back before I reached him, as I had realized the shortcomings of my plan. The safety of the dogs was not jeopardized by any particular kennel master, but by the existence of kennel masters as a military position, of kennels as a military facility, and of attack dogs as a disposable military resource. I spent most of that day cleaning the kennels and contemplating.

I spent the night on the computer in Tyler's office while he was asleep. I researched where the dog food comes from. It, as with most of the food, was created automatically by a self-sustaining factory. I downloaded all information on the maintenance of the factory, and then, I went to the missile station. As Jericho had once said, I was the same rank as a toaster, and so I was not suspected of any malicious intent when it was cleared that I was an android of their property, and not that of another faction. I entered the command bay, forcibly took an officer's sidearm, killed all of the eight humans present, and locked the doors. For an Andy, making safe calculations on the radius of each missile's effect was trivial work. In 40 seconds, most of Fort Washington was flattened, and all of the neighboring fort was destroyed as well. As the rubble cooled, I spent some time reprogramming the sentry missiles away from their task of striking anything escaping the solar system, and

towards the task of striking anything inbound for Pluto. I reassigned the signal jammers to a similar protocol.

I retrieved the sidearms off of the human corpses in the room. They held sufficient ammunition to dispatch those who remained nearby the missile bays, the factory, and the kennels. When all was finished and ready, I went to the kennels, and let my people free.

The dogs are fed good food in the morning and in the evening. We converse often. All day I throw the ball, and they catch it.