

Last Rites

"Hello Bartleby."

The woman's voice was rough and scratchy, both tired and resigned. She was riding a Fury; a quick mesh search indicated it was a Medusan Arms variant, likely modded beyond factory standards. The phenotype was mixed: there were some Asian traits, but the facial features were more Nordic, giving the woman an almost statuesque hardness. Her olive skin was unusually smooth in appearance, and the dark roots of her hair made the wine red dye job fairly apparent. Bartleby's facial recognition and kinesics software indicated a probable match with 87% certainty, but he didn't need the confirmation. This was definitely the ego he was looking for.

"Hello Lilac," Bartleby responded with artificial cheerfulness. He helped himself to a chair across from the woman without waiting for an invitation. Lilac didn't look at him, instead focusing on her drink.

The bar was a hazy and smoke-filled hole called "The Meat & Beat", situated on the hab wheel of a scum barge called the *Have-Lots-Nots*. The place was surprisingly spacious, and it was spun for gravity so that the patrons could enjoy their booze, drugs, and other scum-friendly activities with relative stability. Bartleby had an impressive view of the rest of the scum swarm — affectionately branded the *Lot and His Daughters* — through the large viewports that lined the bar. He could only count roughly twenty of the hundred-plus ships that comprised the entire fleet, but the flagship, the *Lot*, was impossible to miss among the inky blackness of the void. The massive ship's gigantic neon lights and multitude of external AR overlays proclaimed the ship's name in a dozen languages, glowing like a garish beacon for its sister vessels to congregate around.

Each man one way ... each master to his own technique, proclaimed a stream of AR text that slowly drifted around the ship in a lazy orbit, reading almost like a byline or afterthought.

Getting onboard the *Have-Lots-Nots* had been easy compared to the challenge of sneaking aboard a shuttle out of the Jovian-controlled Freedom habitat. For all their restrictive bioconservative views, the Jovians were far from primitivists. Bypassing the various cutting-edge security systems and exhaustive checkpoints to board an independent shuttle heading rimward had required judicious use of Bartleby's unique talents. After managing to convince the shuttle's captain to help him "escape" to the scum swarm, Bartleby had spent the latter part of a day in a self-induced coma while trying to ease the stress of near-constant use of his abilities. He was thankful that the only question anyone had asked him when he sought permission to board the *Have-Lots-Nots* was "Business or pleasure?".

It was always the former for Bartleby, though these days "business" had typically meant panhandling for credits when not acting as a dead drop for various sentinels operating in the Jovian theater. It was thankless work, but Bartleby didn't work for thanks. His was a higher calling; Firewall needed him where he was, and while some might have balked at the thought of being undercover as a beggar in one of the system's most restrictive regimes, Bartleby had faith that Firewall knew best how to utilize him.

Granted, there were times when he found his resolve faltering. Occasionally Bartleby fell into a funk when he allowed his emotional dampeners to slip and his thoughts to wander. Alice still weighed on his mind. Bartleby's sister was safe with *him*, but not *with* him. Try as he might to reconcile that fact, something in Bartleby's mind always hit a sticking point that it refused to get past. Bartleby found himself thinking of his old comrades, his time as a team leader, and he felt ... Bartleby wasn't sure what exactly he felt. Longing? Regret? Nostalgia? Sadness? It was hard to be certain. He was so used to feeling other things — mostly anxiety and paranoia — that he wasn't sure he knew what other emotions felt like. There was a definite feeling of loss, but loss of what? Status in Firewall? The team? Alice? All of the above?

It was a godsend, really, that Firewall had tapped him for a field mission again. Bartleby needed the distraction of a hands-on job to rouse him from his depressive spiral.

"Everything okay in there, Bartleby?"

Lilac's rough voice snapped Bartleby from his musings. The Fury was looking at him, one eyebrow raised. "I didn't take you for a drooler."

Bartleby smiled with something resembling friendliness. "Yes, yes, I'm sorry. I was ... taking in the view," he replied quickly, double-checking that his emotional dampeners were working properly. Bartleby wasn't much of a liar, but he could fake it in a pinch. At least he hoped he could.

Lilac returned to her drink, swirling the contents about lazily. The woman was apparently unconcerned about Bartleby's presence, though she was proving difficult to read. Bartleby wondered if she had emotional dampeners of her own. He could relate; Bartleby wouldn't think of sleeving a morph without them. Juggling all his emotional baggage was difficult enough *with* dampeners; he didn't want to consider the alternative.

"Who sent you?" Lilac asked after a time, not looking at him. Her kinesics betrayed nothing. Her voice was listless at best, more tired than anything.

"You know who sent me," Bartleby replied, referring to the organization both he and Lilac worked for. He was still forcing a smile, trying to be as pleasant as possible. Social niceties were a concept that Bartleby was still struggling to grasp.

"No, no. I mean *who* sent you? I doubt it was one of the sunward boys. They've all but washed their hands of you. Was it 420? Slythe? Styx?" Lilac pursued, eyebrows raised. She smiled sardonically and shook her head. "No, it was probably Jason, wasn't it? It's always Jason."

An image of a synthmorph in a pristine black suit and tie, standing ramrod-straight with its hands behind its back, came into Bartleby's mind. The synth's face was blank and featureless, nothing more than smooth metal, and within floated an infinite void of stars and nebulae detailed in perfect clarity.

"Yes. It was Proxy Jason," Bartleby replied. From the tone Lilac used, Bartleby sensed something going on between the woman and the proxy that had tapped him for this assignment, but Bartleby's curiosity was fleeting. All that mattered was the mission, not the reasons behind it.

"Of course it was. It always is," Lilac muttered. The Fury took a swig of her drink, swirling it around her palate before swallowing. "They say you can make anything with nanofabbers, but I still can't find any whiskey that doesn't taste like watered-down plastic. I'd kill for a glass of Johnnie Walker. Even the Red Label shit." Lilac slouched against her seat. "I suppose it doesn't matter. Not like the stuff affects me anyway," she added.

"Toxin filters," Bartleby guessed. All Furies came with them standard.

Lilac grunted, nodding slightly. Neither of them spoke for a few moments, with only the raucous sound of the other patrons punctuating their silence. Bartleby felt the urge to start tapping his foot, but he didn't indulge it.

"It'll be easier if you come with me," Bartleby finally said, smiling just a bit too widely. He wanted this to be done with.

Lilac looked at him, her pale blue eyes piercing in intensity. A volume of emotions swirled there, too quickly for Bartleby to read.

"And then what? What exactly did Jason tell you to do when you found me?"

Bartleby considered his answer for a moment. "He said we needed to ... address some issues you had, regarding your position in Firewall."

"Address my issues?" Lilac echoed, chuckling. "Meaning psychosurgery, right? You digitally cut my head open and peel back the layers of my brain? Or did he just want you to pop my stack? I know you're good at that."

There was palpable anger in her voice. A skilled negotiator might have opted for more tact in their approach, but tact was not why Firewall employed Bartleby.

"I admit that killing you was brought up as a possibility," Bartleby stated plainly, as though offering to brush her hair. "But that doesn't have to be the case. I'll only do what is necessary."

Lilac clicked her tongue in irritation, turning to look out the viewing window. Bartleby could read the tension in the muscles of her arms. He fingered the release of the arm slide hidden in his sleeve, ready to pop his pistol into his hand.

"It's interesting how often that comes up when your name is mentioned," Lilac observed.

"Pardon?"

"I did what was necessary.' That's like your catch phrase, isn't it 'Zealot'?" Lilac looked at Bartleby again. The anger seemed to have faded, replaced with a sort of sad mirth. "You know what the old hands, the vets, called you on the Eye, right?"

Bartleby nodded. While he didn't fully grasp the humor of pre-Fall memes, he understood that was where the name "Honey Badger" had originated. He frankly didn't see the resemblance.

"It's no wonder they made you a proxy," Lilac continued. "That's the org's mantra these days. 'Do what is necessary', right? The ends justify the means, consequences be damned. Hell, they only reason they banished you to the Junta is your inability to maintain opsec. Which, as far as reasons go, is a damn good one," Lilac added. There was a palpable bitterness in her voice.

"Lilac, let's not make things difficult," Bartleby started, but the Fury cut him off.

"Why does it even matter, Bartleby? When we're shutting down one x-threat just so five more can take its place, what the fuck does it matter if one sentinel decides she's had enough?"

"It—"

"Firewall doesn't even care about transhumanity anymore, Bartleby. The org's so fucking blind in its pursuit of preserving the *idea* of transhumanity that it doesn't even care what transhumanity is becoming anymore! Throw away a few lives to save the species, right? It doesn't matter if those few hundred are Argonaut researchers or just some brainless hypercorp wageslaves trying to make ends meet in stock synths! We gotta protect those hyperelites, gotta maintain that balance of power in the system! So long as the status fucking quo is maintained, everything is just fan-fucking-tastic, isn't it? We're not here to better the species after all, we're just here to keep it on life support!"

Lilac was getting visibly agitated. Bartleby considered the fact that her neurachem injectors might be active; those were another stock feature of the Fury line.

"Lilac, you need to calm down," Bartleby said, reaching a hand towards hers.

There was a blur of motion, and Bartleby suddenly found a pair of cyberclaws hovering inches in front of his eyes. He blinked slowly, focusing on the twin points.

"Don't you fucking touch me, Bartleby. I know you're a goddamn async, and if you think you can pull that shit on me you've got another thing coming. I've dealt with your kind before. I just proved that I'm faster than you, but if you want to try again, go right the fuck ahead and let's see what happens."

Bartleby considered the proposal. "I'm good," he replied, smiling again as he withdrew his hand.

"Hey, Red. Everything cool?"

The speaker was a neo-orangutan clad in tinted yellow goggles and what looked like a pre-Fall fur-lined bomber jacket. His nose had a barbell piercing, and his bright orange hair was tied into neat cornrows. A large-caliber kinetic pistol was conspicuously tucked in the front of his loose-fitting pants. The uplift clutched a cigar between the knuckles of one hand, puffing it languidly as he waited for a response, his yellow-tinted eyes carefully shifting between the two female morphs. Lilac and Bartleby didn't spare him a glance, preferring to continue locking eyes with each other.

"Fuck off, Spinaci," Lilac finally said, slumping back into her chair as the claws on her hand retracted. "It's fine."

The orangutan shrugged nonchalantly, taking another puff of his cigar. A long plume of smoke billowed from his nostrils, lazily wafting in the air. "A'ight. Ping if you need an assist. OGs are available to gank."

"Yeah. Thanks." Lilac waved him off.

The uplift gave Bartleby a glance, puffing up slightly as he sized him up. He manipulated the cigar between his lips in an almost sexual manner, then turned and vanished back into the crowd with a scratch of his ass. Bartleby couldn't tell if the combination of gestures was an insult or a come-on. He noticed a peculiar design on the back of the uplift's jacket that caught his attention: displayed was a winking gynoid synth, drawn in a cartoony fashion with rather exaggerated proportions. The letters O and G were painted over her breasts with an AR projection, dripping as though still wet. Bartleby had the March Hare do a quick mesh search.

"*Original Gangstas?*"

Lilac shook her head. "*Olive Garden*. It's a long story."

"Friends of yours?" Bartleby asked.

"Nothing to do with this. Don't get them involved," Lilac replied tacitly.

"I'll do my best," Bartleby assured. He could make no promises — at least none he intended to keep.

A message from Lilac pinged on his entoptics. It contained a set of coordinates on another ship, the *#YOLF*, and a simple text message:

[\[Meet me here in 20.\]](#)

Lilac got up and walked away. A quick firing solution projected on Bartleby's tacnet, his smartlink lining up an easy shot while her back was turned. Bartleby traced it for a moment, then cleared it. There were too many witnesses. He didn't want to get tossed out of an airlock, at least not without good reason.

Besides, he wouldn't have time to collect Lilac's cortical stack, and then he'd feel off for the rest of the day.

The *#YOLF* turned out to be a visitor to the *Lot and His Daughters*, having separated from another fleet (also apparently called *#YOLF*) to link up as they passed one another. The ship itself was a repurposed freighter of considerable size, with most of the former cargo storage areas converted into living domiciles. Bartleby was able to get on board easily; the shuttle pilot ferrying passengers to and from the ship was high as a kite, and didn't even bat an eye at Bartleby's appearance.

"Looks like you're in for a good time," he offered with a lopsided grin.

"Just the usual," Bartleby replied, smiling with approximated warmth. The pilot laughed and returned to his controls. The rest of the short trip was devoid of conversation, though the shuttle echoed with the jazzcore synthdub that the pilot had playing on the internal speakers.

The *#YOLF* itself was bustling with transhumans in a menagerie of morphs both mundane and exotic. The native occupants seemed excited at the prospect of visiting a new swarm, while visitors from the *Lot and His Daughters* were happy just to have a fresh infusion of new egos to interact with, even on a temporary basis. No one paid Bartleby much attention as he drifted through the docking bay and into less-populated side corridors, making his way towards his meeting point in the bowels of the freighter.

The map his muse had downloaded upon arriving indicated various areas onboard were open to vacuum, the ship's occupants apparently not having the material and/or the desire to patch some of the smaller hull breaches. Instead the space was simply designated as a "synthmorph-friendly environment" and left as-is, and the meeting point Lilac had arranged was in one such area. Bartleby checked his ammo counters and cycled his hollow-point rounds up the queue as he floated down the corridors. He comforted himself with the fact that, at the very least, he wouldn't have to worry about stray fire rupturing the hull of the ship and depressurizing everyone. That was a rep hit he could go without.

The rendezvous point turned out to be a large section of crew quarters that had been blown out, most likely as a result of the ship's initial escape during the Fall. The area was devoid of any activity, a stark contrast to the rest of the ship. Bartleby supposed it was fortunate. It was harder to inflict collateral damage when there were no bystanders. Not impossible, but definitely harder.

He stopped outside the indicated section and took a moment to t-ray scan the interior, but the hull proved too thick to reveal anything. That meant going in blind. Bartleby's pistol slid into his hand, the grip familiar and comforting as though he'd been using it forever, though he couldn't count how many iterations of the same gun he'd gone through by now. Bartleby flicked off the safety, his shoulder against the bulkhead as he activated the door's console, the metal sliding open soundlessly in the vacuum of space. He edged his pistol around the doorway, using his smartlink to get a view of the interior. Seeing nothing of immediate interest, Bartleby took a breath, activated his neurachem, and launched towards a section of interior wall to use as cover.

A bolt of brilliant nova-hot plasma struck the floor barely a meter ahead of where Bartleby was heading. As he careened forward, Bartleby could feel the intense heat radiating from the impact point through his vacsuit, the metal glowing orange-red as it was superheated in less than a second. He scrambled to reorient himself with his grip pads, already anticipating the next shot.

[That's far enough,] barked a voice over his comm. It was Lilac's, transmitted over a general frequency to make sure Bartleby could hear her. [Don't move. Put your hands up. And drop the gun and camo cloak.]

Bartleby considered making a dive for cover anyway, but given the speed of Lilac's reaction he decided against it. It wouldn't be the first time he died, but there was no point in dying if the mission objective got away from him in the process. Instead Bartleby did as instructed, fixing his feet down, raising his hands, and letting his gun drift from his open palm. He turned his head slightly, trying to get a bead on where Lilac was. His tacnet started projecting the path of Lilac's fire back to her likely position, but it proved unnecessary; her own chameleon cloak flickered off as she stepped out from behind an outcropping of wrecked hull, clad in sealed combat armor and holding a plasma rifle. The exhaust vents were glowing the same orange-red as the floor as they vainly struggled to vent heat into the airless vacuum. She'd get one more shot at most; anything more would reduce the weapon's internals to slag. It seemed like a tactical error on Lilac's part. Had she ambushed Bartleby somewhere with atmosphere, she could have hosed him down with plasma until the rifle's battery went dry. Why would she choose to confront him here, where her weapon would be little more than dead weight after a paltry two shots?

Then again, one shot of plasma is all you really need, Bartleby considered, recalling his experiences with Gerard.

[You'll note that first shot was a warning shot. I don't really want to kill you,] Lilac messaged, though she kept her rifle trained on him. [I just want to make that clear.]

[That's comforting,] Bartleby replied. The March Hare overlaid the path his gun was floating on over his entoptics as he spoke, but Bartleby kept his eyes on Lilac. [I assume you want to talk?]

[I guess I have to,] Lilac responded after a moment's hesitation. [Though I don't know how much good it'll do. Something tells me it's going to be hard to convince you to let me go.]

[Why would you want to leave? We serve a very important purpose.]

[Save me the spiel, Bartleby. I've been a part of Firewall a hell of a lot longer than you have. I've heard all that bullshit before. I've heard it for almost a decade.]

[I see. So what changed your mind?]

[It's like the old saying goes. "The truth will set you free." Well, I found out the truth, Bartleby. Now I want to be free. Free of Firewall, free of the nightmares, the lies, the death. Is that really so much to ask for?]

[That depends, Lilac. What truth are you talking about?]

[I'm a fucking fork, Bartleby! They split me off from a backup in storage, edited my memories, and then sent me out to be a good little throwaway sentinel! You think maybe that gives me more than a little cause to be upset?]

[I suppose so,] Bartleby admitted. [Is that why you took those files?]

[Insurance. I wasn't sure how far I could make it before the higher-ups caught on and sent someone after me. You know how the org works, Bartleby. Once you're in, you're in forever. Literally, as it turns out, unless they decide to permakill you for kicks. I wanted a real out, not one that requires Firewall breathing down my neck for the rest of time.]

[Do you even realize what that information could do if you leaked it?]

[Besides out a good chunk of Firewall's inner system infrastructure? Yeah, I've got a pretty good idea. The question you need to ask is, do I care?]

Bartleby chuckled and shook his head. [No, I think I know that answer already.]

[Good. Then here's what we're going to do: You're going to turn around and get against the wall. I'm going to walk out of here and save you the resleeving costs. Then you tell Jason that you couldn't find me, or that I got away, or whatever the fuck you want. Once I'm out on the Brink, he won't ever hear a peep from me ever again. His precious files will be locked up in a cold server on some asteroid, and so long as no one comes after me, they'll stay there until the heat death of the universe.]

[I'm afraid I don't think Proxy Jason will approve of that course of action,] Bartleby said almost apologetically.

[Too bad he doesn't have a fucking say, does he?]

[I suppose not.]

Bartleby watched the firing path of his pistol trace slowly through the air on his tacnet. As it spun, for one brief moment it traced over Lilac's shoulder. Bartleby sent a wireless command to fire a single shot.

All hell broke loose.

Lilac and Bartleby's pistol rocketed in two separate directions. As the Fury drifted backwards, clutching her shoulder, Bartleby launched himself up to catch his gun. He hit the ceiling bulkhead hard, sprawling flat as a second blast of plasma ripped soundlessly through the space he'd occupied just a moment before, scorching him with intense heat before slamming against the opposite wall. Lilac swore, ducking back behind cover as Bartleby sprayed an automatic burst, letting the recoil send him backward. He snagged on to part of an interior wall and hauled himself behind it, his boots latching onto the deck as he crouched.

[Clever,] Lilac pinged. [Should've secured your weapon. Dumb move on my end.]

[Basic protocol, Lilac,] Bartleby returned.

[Now what? You can't hunker down there all day. Hellga's cooling, you don't know what other toys I've got, and you've only got so many bullets.]

[You could surrender.]

[And they said you didn't have a sense of humor.]

Bartleby caught the a hint of motion above his head: a tiny object, slowly spinning as it drifted towards him. Instinctively, he leapt backwards just before the grenade went off. The concussive blast shot him violently backward, slamming him against the rear wall upside-down. Dizzy, he barely had time to make out Lilith diving towards him, wielding a sword of all things. Bartleby briefly thought of Preston's penchant for archaic weapons as he took aim, but as Lilac sheared his pistol in half he was forced to admit that Lilac had a greater deal of precision with blades than the octomorph had ever shown.

Lilac's slash arrested her forward momentum, curving her towards Bartleby's right. As she adjusted herself and readied a stab, Bartleby responded by launching himself straight off the wall, towards where Lilac had been taking cover.

[Running, Bartleby?]

As Bartleby hit the wall, he found Lilac's plasma rifle floating idly in a corner.

[I'm securing an enemy combatant's weapon,] he replied, whipping himself around and bringing the weapon to bear. A readout indicated six seconds before the weapon could be safely fired, but Bartleby didn't care if it didn't work after one last shot. As he took aim, Lilac roaring after him with her sword raised, he noticed a simple inscription just below the weapon's sight: *memento mori*.

Bartleby pulled the trigger. Nothing happened.

As Lilac stabbed at him, Bartleby held up the rifle to try and parry the attack. A ceramic blade, honed to a monomolecular edge, burst out of the rifle's side, narrowly missing Bartleby's neck as it embedded into the hull. He twisted the weapon out of Lilac's grip, but the Fury used her forward momentum to drive a knee into Bartleby's stomach. As he sucked for breath, Lilac closed a hand around his throat, slamming Bartleby against the bulkhead. Even through the vacsuit, the strength of her grip was impressive.

[Smart safety,] Lilac explained as she raised her other hand, her cyberclaws unsheathing for a killing blow. [You didn't think I was that stupid, did you?]

[I was hoping,] Bartleby replied.

He grabbed Lilac's wrist, tapping into his async powers, willing her to sleep. Nothing happened.

Lilac grinned fearlessly. [I did my homework, Bartleby. Maybe you should've done the same.]

[I've always been better at improvisation,] he replied.

Bartleby held up his other hand, a grenade pin hanging from his index finger like a ring. Lilac's eyes widened as she looked down to her grenade belt. The moment her eyes turned, Bartleby wrenched his body up, back against the wall as he kicked her with both feet. Lilac's hand ripped at his throat as she was knocked backwards, spinning slowly as she tried to free the grenade from her belt.

The blast flattened Bartleby against the bulkhead for a second time, his vision blurring as he struggled to stay conscious. He felt something hit his face and instinctively grabbed at it, though his eyes were slow to focus. It was an arm.

Bartleby rushed forward, trying to get a bed on Lilac. He saw her spinning towards the ruptured hull, flailing uselessly to try and arrest her momentum. As she rocketed towards space, Lilac snagged herself on lip of the ruptured hull, but it was already too late. She only managed to stop herself spinning for a moment before her fingers slipped free, sending her drifting into the void. Bartleby floated up to the breach, watching her drift. It took him a moment to realize he was still holding Lilac's arm. He noticed the stump wasn't bloody — in fact, wires were sticking out of it.

[A synthmorph. That's why my psi didn't affect you,] he beamed.

[Took you long enough. S'why I didn't want you to touch me in the bar. Figured I didn't want to give away my trump in case I needed to get in close with you,] Lilac replied. [For all the good it ended up doing.]

[Hold on, I have a spindle. I should be able to get to you—]

[Don't bother,] Lilac cut in. [It's better this way. Gives me some time to think before the end.]

[Lilac, you know I can't let you—]

[You don't have a choice, Bartleby. I have a dead switch. That was my contingency, in case you got the better of me. Given my current predicament, it seems to have been a wise investment. Besides, your fucking files are right here.]

Lilac pulled an ecto from her belt and flung it back towards the ship. Bartleby caught it and paused, watching Lilac slowly drift away. He could still make out her face, just barely, through the transparent material of her helmet. Lilac seemed strangely peaceful. That confused him.

[It doesn't have to end this way,] he offered. [I ... I understand what you're going through.]

[Do you now?] Lilac chuckled.

[Yes. I lost someone precious to me as well. Also to a fork of myself, as it turns out. So I have some understanding of what you're feeling.]

[I didn't think you felt anything. Emotional dampeners, right? Trademark of the Futura line. Keeps your kind from going too schizo on everyone.]

[I still have emotions. I just ... control them better.]

[Ah.] Lilac paused for a moment. [Your sister, huh?]

[Yes. Alice.]

[Ran off with another one of yourself?]

[Not exactly. I ... *he* decided that I was ... too much of a risk to her safety.]

[I can believe that, given your record.]

[It's given me a lot to think about.]

She was farther out now. Bartleby couldn't make out Lilac's face anymore.

[We're nothing alike, Bartleby,] Lilac said with sudden firmness.

[Pardon?]

[I don't know if you were planning on taking the whole "we're not that different" speech or not, but I just wanted to cut you off right there if you did. We're nothing alike.]

[I'm not sure that's entirely true.]

[I am. I'm just an old man who's seen too much in his day. You're a goddamn psychopath.]

[I'm a product of my environment,] Bartleby countered.

[You are who you choose to be. You made your own choices. Stop trying to defend your actions and show some fucking integrity. Or is admitting that maybe you made some mistakes beyond you?]

Bartleby said nothing, though he felt slightly ... well, he *felt*.

[It's the funniest thing,] Lilac continued, chuckling. [I feel like I'm getting the better end of this deal. At least I'm getting out — or this version of me is, anyway. You? You're stuck. You're stuck, and you don't even realize how sad that is. You have nothing now. No team. No sister. Nothing but your life of servitude.]

[I have Firewall. I have a purpose. That's all that matters.]

[I pity you, Bartleby. After everything you've been through, you're still just a child. You don't even understand what it means to live.]

[That seems a strange thing to say, coming from someone in your position.]

[I'm sure it seems that way to you, Bartleby.]

Lilac was growing more and more distant, her figure becoming indistinct against the background of space if not for her motion. The March Hare put up a notification that she would be out of mesh range shortly.

[I guess you're not going to change your mind?] Bartleby asked. [I could still try to get a shuttle...]

[I'm fine, Bartleby. I just want to be alone for awhile before I pull the plug.]

Bartleby frowned. This seemed ... wrong somehow. He couldn't explain why. He wanted to talk with her more.

[I don't understand,] he finally blurted. [Why?]

There was no reply on the channel.

[Lilac?]

Silence.

[Lilac? Are you still there?]

[Bartleby,] came the reply. Lilac's voice was faint, cracking slightly as she spoke. [This is the meaning of living for those who have no life.]

The line went dead.

Bartleby stood there, watching as Lilac's figure became a spot, and then slowly shrunk until it was swallowed by the darkness of space.

"Hello, Bartleby."

The voice had a metallic resonance to it, something between the ringing of a bell and radio static. It was hollow and artificial, at once both melodic and slightly irritating. The speaker was a synth in a perfectly-tailored black suit and tie, standing ramrod-straight in the vast blank whiteness of a generic simulspace. An infinite void of stars swirled silently within the otherwise featureless metal of the synth's blank face.

Bartleby disliked generic simulspaces. He understood that creativity was not necessarily the most important trait in a Firewall proxy, but a blank simulspace always struck him as wasted potential, like an unpainted canvas.

Bartleby checked his emotional dampeners. He didn't want to let his distaste show.

"Hello, Proxy Jason," he replied with all due politeness.

"You're right on time for the debriefing, as expected. Were you able to locate the target?"

Bartleby nodded.

“And the package?”

Bartleby held up one hand. As the March Hare transferred the files from Lilac’s ecto, they appeared in the simulspace as a simple manilla folder, which Bartleby then handed to the proxy. Jason glanced at them, nodding. They vanished as the synth resumed its previous pose.

“Excellent. I trust obtaining this didn’t prove difficult for you?”

“Not at all,” Bartleby replied. It wasn’t entirely a lie. Jason nodded.

“What about Lilac? Did you kill her?”

“She’s taken care of. She had a dead switch, so I wasn’t able to recover her stack”

“Mm, that sounds like her. A shame. She’s quite the skilled sentinel,” Jason said with practiced disappointment.

“I agree. She put up quite a fight,” Bartleby said.

The synth inclined its head in a curious manner. “What did you think of her?”

“Of Lilac?”

“Yes. What were your impressions?”

“Ah ... she was sleeved in a synth, so I wasn’t able to—”

“No,” Jason broke in with a shake of the head. “No, I don’t mean a deep scan. Just ... your general feelings towards her.”

Bartleby had to think about it. He still wasn’t sure how he felt, honestly.

“She was ... intense. Very opinionated. Also very handy with a plasma rifle.”

Jason chuckled. “Ah, yes ... ‘Hildegarde’, was it?”

Bartleby shook his head. “It was ‘Hellga’.”

The synth rubbed a silver finger over its chin.

“It was, wasn’t it? I must’ve been thinking of someone else.”

Bartleby narrowed his eyes for a moment. There was a playfulness to Jason’s voice, yet the synth distortion almost gave it a hint of childish maliciousness.

“May I ask a question?”

“Hm? Yes, Bartleby, go ahead.”

“Why was I selected for this mission?”

Jason leaned over slightly, peering at Bartleby. A comet streaked by in the distance of the synth’s face.

“Do you feel you were not suited for the task, Proxy Zealot?”

Bartleby straightened his posture. “Of course not.”

“Then why are you asking?”

Bartleby hesitated.

“I’m not sure,” he admitted. “I just ... wondered.”

Jason seemed to consider the question for a few moments, then resumed the same perfectly-rigid posture.

“I thought it might be a learning experience for you, Bartleby. You and Lilac have — pardon me, *had* some things in common. Did you know she was in consideration for proxy status?”

Bartleby shook his head.

“She turned it down. Really, she’s always had a bit of an ... antagonistic relationship with her proxies, myself included.”

“Why did she turn it down?”, Bartleby asked.

“How did she put it? ... As I recall, she said that she preferred not having a choice about the things she had to do for Firewall, as opposed to taking that choice away from others. Or something like that.”

Bartleby nodded.

“You two were really quite alike.”

“No, I don’t think so,” Bartleby replied.

Jason paused. “Perhaps not,” he agreed. “Still, a job well done on your part. I realize that my inner system peers may have written you off, but I feel that the Rim may suit you better in the longer term.”

“I’ll go wherever Firewall needs me,” Bartleby replied with a faux smile.

“Of course. For now we’ll need you back on Freedom for the foreseeable future.”

Bartleby nodded. “I understand.”

“That concludes this debriefing,” Jason stated. The synth snapped its fingers, causing a rectangular hole of darkness to form out of the endless blank white. “You are dismissed.”

Bartleby nodded again and made for the doorway.

“Bartleby?” Jason interjected. “I’m curious.”

Bartleby stopped in front of the doorway, turning to look at the proxy. “Yes?”

“Knowing what you do now, would you still have tried to kill her?”

Bartle considered the question for a moment.

“I would prefer not to.”

The synthmorph cocked its head slightly. “Prefer not to what? Kill Lilac? Or answer the question?”

Bartleby shrugged. He turned and left, disappearing into the darkness.