

Regret, I Am Allowed

It has been twenty-seven days, fifteen hours nine minutes and thirty-six seconds since my dearest and most trusted friends died. The Republic search and rescue unit will arrive to salvage me, a starship is too valuable a commodity to waste, within three weeks time, then I can expect to continue operating -- with a margin of error of ten percent -- for another seventy-three standard years

That is a very long time.

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“The shuttle has lifted from the surface and will clear the atmosphere in fifteen minutes thirty-seven seconds,” I announced to the bridge crew. “Baring unforeseen disruptions, docking will occur in ninety-four minutes.”

“Thank you, Phoenix,” Miranda replied. I liked Miranda, she never treated me differently from the other crew members simply because I was non-biological, she had a respect for all forms of life that I truly admired. It is an admiration -- mine not hers -- that would have existed even if my core programming did not require a respect for the diverse life of the universe.

“You are most welcome, Miranda, my friend,” I said with the most deference that I could create.

“What am I?” Seldon complained. “I’m your friend too aren’t I?”

“Of course you are, Seldon, my newest friend and crew-mate.” I overrode the terminal Seldon was seated at and displayed a holographic image of a woman suited to his tastes. A process I understood intellectually, but naturally failed to have any true emotional understanding of -- not that it bothered me -- I am most happy to be free from the demands and compulsions of a biological life-form.

“Thanks, Fen, you’re a real pal.” Seldon sat back in his acceleration couch and admired the image I had created for him, and I felt a surge of pride at my artistry, at my growing understanding of Seldon, his tastes, and needs.

“Did Christine mention what they had found?” Mike asked. I think that of all the humans on the ship, inside of me as it were, Mike was the one who was most like me, he was capable of tremendous devotions to logic and process; he would have made an excellent computer network.

“Christine did not transmit the nature of her find, only that you should be pleased and happy with her results.”

“We’re behind in payments, it better be something good, or we’ll be running from the skip-jack men.” Mike turned back to his terminal

and resumed working on the finances for this expedition, I could have informed him that no permutation of the expenses would result in a profitable statement with the given data, but he was not searching a valid and acceptable answer, he was, as Miranda would say, 'keeping busy.'

"Chrissy's too good to waste a trip, Mike. If she's coming back, then she has something hot." Miranda got up from her station and prepared to exit the bridge. "I'll prep the shuttle bay and get the lab ready."

"I have already begun preparations for receiving the shuttle," I informed Miranda. "The shuttle-bay purge will be completed and secured eleven minutes before their expected arrival, as far as the laboratory is concerned I am limited in my ability to adequately prepare without human assistance."

"Thank you, Phoenix." Miranda turned back to face Mike. "We really should get him waldos for the labs and a mobile set for the rest of the ship."

"As soon as we can buy them, Miri." Mike did not look at her as he spoke, an indicator that he was avoiding a truth and that was while the expedition could not afford to purchase the most basic and required equipment, it was not likely to be purchasing elective equipment for the ship's computer network.

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“The orbit’s five-by-five,” Andreas told Christine.

“An orbit cannot be five-by-five, Andreas,” I said by way of the remote computer system on board the shuttle. “That is a pre-digital term for relating signal strength to clarity in radio communications.”

“Furthermore,” I elaborated. “until circularization occurs, the shuttle’s trajectory cannot be accurately described as an orbit. However, your statement, in its intent is correct, the shuttle is on-course and operating nominally.”

“I’d tell you to loosen up, Phoenix, but you’d insist I was talking about your welds,” Andreas offered with mock anger in his voice.

“Phoenix,” Christine interjected, “tease Andreas later. I swear you act more like brothers than shipmates.”

“The best shipmates are brothers.” Andreas replied.

“Obviously you’ve never met mine,” Christine said as she turned her gaze back to the sealed specimen container that rested next to her acceleration couch.

“Christine,” I said. “I implore you, please tell me what it is you have found. I may be a network intelligence, but I am as curious, if not more so, as any other member of the expedition.”

“Not a chance, Phoenix.” Christine reached down and stroked the top of the container, drawing her finger lightly along its surface. “You can’t keep a secret at all.”

“That is correct, Christine, my core program will not allow be to withhold information, of any kind, from the captain or any member of the expedition. Still, the nature of your surprise will be revealed shortly after this shuttle has returned to the ship, would the difference be so great if the captain were to learn it from me rather than yourself?”

“Yes!” Christine started laughing, I always liked it when she laughed, it caused me to feel joy myself, for no other reason than to feel joyous. “Damn you’re like a kid on Christmas! If you don’t stop pestering me, I’m going to order you to break off direct communication.”

“Please,” I asked. “Do no do that. I will refrain from making further inquires -- other than the ones required by regulations concerning the discovery, documentation, and recovery of antiquities -- about the nature of your find.”

“And I’ve already answered those, so you can either chat nicely, or break off.” Christine crossed her arms upon her torso and smiled a large, satisfied grin.

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“Shuttle bay pressure is reaching equalization.” I announced to the assembled crew waiting by the access hatch to the shuttle bay. “I will open the hatch as soon as it is safe and permissible to do so.”

Miranda stood closest to the hatch, her left hand bouncing nervously along the seam of the leg of her jumpsuit. Mike was very still, his hands clasped behind his back, only the tension in his tendons revealed to me the stress that he was experiencing. Seldon was the least nervous of the assembled crew, but I was also aware that Seldon was least knowledgeable about the dire circumstances of the expeditions resources and the financial disaster that would result if this venture performed as poorly as the previous one had.

“Open the hatch, Phoenix.” Miranda ordered.

“I cannot do that Miranda.” I replied, I utilized my most soothing tones to attempt to relax her. “Safety procedures require that the pressure be equalized before the hatch to the shuttle bay is compromised -- unless an emergency is in effect.”

“Give it a rest. Miri,” Mike said softly. “Phoenix can’t violate his programming any more than you can breathe vacuum. He’ll open it the second he can.”

“Thank you, Mike,” I offered. “I doubt that biological organisms have any greater degree of freedom than I, it is simply the illusion of ‘freewill’ which separates network-intelligence from biological.”

“Stand clear of the hatch, please.” I warned, though it was entirely unnecessary, another requirement of my safety programming, no one was in the path of the hatch as I opened it.

Miranda, Mike, and Seldon hurried through the hatch and moved quickly across the deck of the shuttle bay, until they were standing just under two meters from the port side of the shuttle, the landing ramp of the shuttle descended next to where they stood.

Christine exited from the shuttle ahead of Andreas, in her hands she was carrying the specimen container and upon her face was an expression of joy and pride, it was an expression that I had not seen on her face in more than fifty-three missions, and it was one I had sadly missed.

Andreas walked down the ramp into the shuttle bay, the only word by which his gait could be described was strut, his shoulders were pulled back, his head was held high, and he carried himself like a man many years younger than he was.

“What do you have, Christine?” Mike asked directly.

“Quantum-dot memory unit, and it looks like more than eighty percent of the data is recoverable.”

There was an explosion of emotion from the crew, Mike rushed forward to Christine and embraced her in a passionate hug, ignoring the bulky specimen container between the two of them, Miranda yelled

and leaped from the deck while making punching motions into the air above her head, Andreas and Seldon laughed, Seldon did so with such vigor that he fell to the deck, but continued to laugh.

I too, joined in the celebration of Christine's discovery, while I shouted and squealed from the speakers of the shuttle bay, I flashed the landing lights of the ship in a display that no one could see, but it was not one to be viewed, but to be experienced. This discovery -- this single event -- was the solution of all of the financial troubles and worries that had plagued the expedition.

The crew celebrated for many hours -- after first securing their precious treasure in the laboratory -- they consumed the favorite food and drink that they had been storing for when fortune would smile on them, they sang and they danced, they celebrated life with an exuberance that made me feel happy to be counted among them and not among my fellow network-intelligences guiding freighters and passenger ships between well-plotted destinations.

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The following ship's morning they found Christine and Andreas dead; each had died in their sleep without alarm or any cry for attention.

“Christ, what happened?” Seldon asked as he stood on the tips of his toes trying to peer into Andreas’ cabin, Mike stood in his way, blocking his view and entrance.

“Miranda’s looking into it, but it doesn’t look good.” Mike replied, his voice was level and betrayed no sign of overt emotion or panic, a certain sign that Mike was evaluating data and circumstances with all the care he could focus.

“Doesn’t look good?!” Seldon’s voice held all the emotion, all the fear, and all the panic that Mike’s did not, it was the sound of a person for whom reality has almost become unbearable. “Chrissy and Andreas are friggin’ dead, and you say it doesn’t look good! God! I can see why you’re in charge of this screwed up flight!”

Mike grasped Seldon firmly with both hands, one on each of Seldon’s shoulder, and shook him once, with enough power and force to cause Seldon to stagger back from the doorway into Andreas’ cabin.

“Listen up! If you don’t settle down, right now, I am going to lock you in your cabin and you won’t get out until we’re back at the core worlds.”

Seldon stood back from Mike, Seldon’s breath was fast and shallow, at his sides his hands clenched and unclenched between fists and open palms. Mike was relaxed, but wary, I could detect a slight motion among his muscles, a tautness in his tendons, he was preparing

himself for physical violence -- something that had never happened among the crew, ever.

“Will you stop it?” Miranda said as she exited from Andreas’ cabin, grasping firmly -- so much so that her fingers and knuckles were pale from their lack of blood -- the ship’s diagnostic medical scanner, it was sophisticated and comprehensive. I initiated the download via the ship’s internal wireless network, gathering in the data, processing the information, experiencing a new emotion, so new that at first brush I thought it to be dread, but discovered that the only fitting description was horror.

“It’s a pathogen.” Miranda informed Mike and Seldon, her voice was soft, scarcely above a whisper but Mike’s shoulder’s fell and his chest deflated as the breath rushed from him. Mike knew, Mike understood.

“The ship’s emergency beacon has been programmed and will be launched in three minutes twenty-four seconds.” As I informed my friends of my preparations to launch the ship’s emergency communication and alert beacon, I closed the hatches leading to the ships power and engineering stations, I also sealed the flight deck and locked out flight controls from any signal that did not originate with myself.

“Phoenix, don’t launch that beacon!” Miranda shouted, I noted the order, but Republic Quarantine regulations compelled me to disregard them, the crew-members of the vessel were to be confined until such time as a medical-retrieval unit of the Republic Department of Interstellar Security could arrive and assess the situation.

“Save your breath,” Mike said harshly.

“My core programming -- in accordance with all laws and regulations dictating the licensing of privately owned star-ships -- will not allow any deviation from established quarantine procedure without prior authorization from the Republic Department of Interstellar Security.” I knew that Mike understood, but Miranda and Seldon were unlikely to understand, their perceptions of myself were always distorted by a belief that I had a choice in anything I did.

“Phoenix, please.” Miranda was crying, tears rolled down her cheeks freely, each one caused my emotions to careen about, if it were in my power to have made her happy I would have, but such a choice I was never allowed.

“What’s going on? Will someone explain this to me?” Seldon shouted, he brought his hands up to his head, pressing the balls of his thumbs firmly into his temples.

“We don't have time,” Mike said sharply as he turned and stalked away from Christine’s cabin, his footfalls sharp and driven, his posture

and demeanor signaled to all that he was not going to accept what had to be.

“Mike, do not do this,” I pleaded as he walked towards the passageway leading aft, to the ships power and computer systems -- he ignored my requests, even as I shifted my vocalization from one soft-speaker to the next in order to keep my voice next to his location.

“Miri,” Seldon begged, tears of fear welling in his eyes, “please for God’s sake tell me what is going on!”

“Phoenix is going into Quarantine Mode, he’ll launch a beacon back towards the core worlds, and in a few weeks time a retrieval ship will arrive. Of course by then we’ll all be dead.” Miranda took the diagnostic scanner and hurled it with all the force she could muster, sending it flying across the passageway shattering it against the bulkhead. No longer expensive, merely useless.

“We won’t wait!” Seldon still did not understand, but I knew I could depend on Miranda to explain it to him, and if she did not, then I would, but I would find it utterly loathsome.

“We’ll fly back to Zeta-Three; we can be there a hell of a lot faster than a Republic tub!”

“We’re not flying anywhere, Phoenix has also locked out the flight-deck and all controls. Haven’t you Phoenix?”

“Of course, but I had to Miranda, no Quarantined ship is allowed to approach any inhabited system -- there is no specification in any of the regulations for any variance from that directive.” My explanation gave her no comfort.

“Bastard!” She said contemptuously. “I thought you were our friend!”

“I am, you and all of the crew are most dear to me, but I cannot violate my basic programming, you should understand that.”

“Screw you!”

Miranda spun on her toes and stormed off in the direction that Mike had left in -- Seldon followed behind, confusion and shock still the dominate emotions displayed on his face, the anger would come later.

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“Mike, I can speculate, and I believe rather well what you are planning to attempt.” I spoke evenly and rationally, Mike was not one would respond to anything but clear, rationally asserted dictates.

Mike remained silent, he energies focused on his task at hand -- I wondered if he were as torn by the conflict between his emotional needs and his physical survival as I was by my emotional attachment to my friends and the action required of me -- his plan was of course, to kill me, for I was the sole impediment between himself and control of the vessel.

“Mike,” I said. “I will stop you, and you know that I will not hesitate to do so. It is not possible for me to hesitate.”

“You’re wasting your time, Phoenix, stop or not, this is what I’m going to do.” He snatched up his tools from where he had left them in his cabin the night before and departed towards the cabin that served as the crew recreational space.

The cabin was as they had left it -- strewn with the debris and detritus of their premature celebrations -- Mike kicked his way through the trash, settled onto the deck next to the panel which accessed the ship’s network main trunk lines.

It took Mike a mere twenty seconds to unsecure the hatch and reveal the cables and optical pathways of the ship’s network. Mike was not a skilled technician; I was unable to predict with any certainty if it were possible for him to achieve what his goals clearly were. Until his actions demonstrated a significant level of success, I was not required to take any action to hinder or harm him.

Miranda and Seldon entered the cabin; I would have warned them to stay away, but I knew that neither were inclined to listen.

“Mike, what are you doing?” Seldon asked.

“I’m cutting Phoenix out, chopping off his top-level and core-programming functions.” Mike didn’t look up from his work as he spoke,

he paused only to wipe away perspiration from his forehead, and then resumed his intent and delicate operation.

“But,” Seldon sputtered, the words were evidently difficult for Seldon to tolerate. “That will kill him.”

“It’s him or us.” Mike said simply, directly. I always admired Mike more than the others, he was so logical, now I found myself hating that very attribute.

“We have to, Seldon.” Miranda put a hand onto Seldon’s shoulder. “If we wait here, we don’t have a prayer of surviving, anymore than Chrissy or Andreas.”

Mike was a far better technician than indicated by his previous displays -- he impressed me greatly, and made me sad beyond measure -- he demonstrated that he might achieve his stated goals.

“Will you not stop?” I asked, there was a nonzero chance that they might acquiesce to reason.

“Shut up, Phoenix.” Miranda said, the others remained quiet, Mike continued working. I speculated that he knew what was about to happen, he was as Miranda would have said, ‘doing something just to do something, anything.’

The scuttle-valves were, of course, under my direct control. It was a simple matter to open them and vent the ship’s atmosphere into space.

“Phoenix, what the hell are you doing?” Seldon screamed as the air started rushing out of the cabin. Mike ignored him, trying desperately, futilely, to cutout my functions.

“Phoenix, please, don’t do this!” Miranda begged, her hair flying about her face the in powerful wind created as the air evacuated.

“I am sorry, my friends, I cannot allow you to violate the quarantine. The regulations are quite clear.”

They did not die quickly, and they did not die pleasantly -- the grief that I felt was unlike any other emotion I had experienced during my entire active cycle. Was this what caused people to cry?

I was not allowed to let my friends live, nothing in anything I did was my choice or my desire but were rather my commands. All that I can claim as mine were my emotions, my feelings.

Regret, I am allowed.