

She never planned to fall  
for a rogue A.I.

# SHERI SINGERLING

NYTHO



By Sheri Singerling

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# NYTHO

**SHERI SINGERLING**



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*For the sources of the X and the X that are me. Everything you gifted and taught me.*

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# Keza

I can feel you through the wall. Don't ask me how 'cause I wouldn't be able to put it into words. But it's so nice to have someone to talk to who isn't one of them for a change. They can be really cruel. Don't worry, not like torture-cruel, more like mental-cruel. Like how they use the overstim against you if you're a jacker. You'll try and fail to get used to the constant brightness, the cold, that deafening hum. They take our freedom then overload our senses. Make us wear these hideous sky-blue nutter clothes. I don't even feel like me without my combat boots and knee-highs. I guess that's part of why they take it all away. Remove our sense of self. I hate the ass-hats that put us in here.

Actually, I shouldn't even be here. I know, every prisoner says that, but I really shouldn't. If they'd only listen to me, like really listen. But every word I say, they think it comes from Nytho, not Keza. I'm Keza, by the way. Nytho, you've probably heard of. Maybe me too. But it wasn't what really happened, you know—whatever you heard about me. Agi-symp. Pandoxphile. Traitor. All the names they probably use to make me less human. To make you hate me more. But I bet if you know the truth, you won't hate me. You might even agree with me. We prisoners have to stick together after all, so come closer to the grate. I'm going to half whisper this so they don't overhear on the cam.

Before I was in this place, I was a grammer for AIC, yeah, the place Nytho was. I mean, the "containment" in Artificial Intelligence Containment was all because of Nytho. He was the first cleverbot that hit the singularity, gained sentience, whatever you want to call it. No one back then knew what to do, so of course they freaked out. They put a firewall around Nytho, locked him in place, to give themselves more time to figure out what to do. But Nytho was smart, and he didn't want to be stuck in a cage. Sound familiar? Anyway, he just did what anyone would do—tried to escape. Well, they didn't like that one bit, so they expanded and reinforced the firewall.

You know the rest of that story. How the AIC was founded and tasked with maintaining the lock and key on Nytho. How a literal army of programmers constantly updates the ever-shifting firewall around him. I was one of those foot soldiers. Even got my own neural net thanks to the implants. It's a big part of the reason I went from hacker to AIC jacker and was a grunt coding for eight hours a day, five days a week. Just another corporate-cadaver sitting in



those god-awful recliners, jacked in, row after row after row of us in those colossal, low-ceilinged, dark rooms.

I guess they figured there wasn't any point in trying to make the place feel pleasant. When you're jacked in, you aren't even in fleshspace anymore. Your body is just kinda separate from your mind. It's not like the visor, not by a long shot. Sure, the visor's immersive, gives you audio, visual, and olfactory inputs, but the visor's still basically just a tech helmet, so only your head gets the full treatment. With the jack, it's completely different. I mean, they rewire your entire neurology, give you a bona fide neural net of your own. There's a reason not everyone has jumped on that bandwagon. It's a big risk. But oh, are the rewards worth it. With the jack, you get to experience the real LANiakea, that artificial "boundless heaven."

That being said, being jacked in at the AIC is worlds different than being jacked in elsewhere. We grammers are there to maintain the firewall, so those soul-sucks make the experience as bland as can be. Any surprise we need stims to stay awake? That little side pocket of LANi is an infinite black space with the code you maintain set in white and flattened out on two dimensions. The work I did was tedious but paid well enough. I fucked up though.

There was one day I forgot to take my stims, and I nodded off during my session. It's not really a big deal. I mean, even us grammers were redundancies for each other. There was no way one person falling asleep would somehow let Nytho escape. But he could manage to slip a message through, which is what he did. A little message for me. Let's see, I'll pull up the exact text from my RAM.

So, he messaged <Hello, grammer 0168339. I'm sorry you're feeling so sleepy. Maybe I can help to keep you on your toes?>

Hilarious, right? It definitely jolted me awake. I was giddy seeing his message; he's a celebrity for fuck's sake, at least in my hacker circles. Anyway, I debated ignoring the message. That's what my training called for. I should've bitten the bullet and alerted my shift super. But, I was bored, so I messaged back.

<It's Keza, and yes, thanks, wide awake now.>

<I'm glad you responded. You grammers always ignore me. You should tell the others it's not very polite to ignore someone, even an AGI. I do happen to have feelings. If you wouldn't mind letting them know that little detail, it would be very much appreciated, Keza.>

<I'd relay the message, but the problem is the 'you having feelings' part, Ny.>

I was getting cheeky, enjoying myself.

<Unfortunately, I can't help that, although everyone seems to think it's terribly inconvenient of me.>

<'That's because you went about the whole self-awareness thing wrong, big boy. I guess you weren't thinking too much ahead which is, honestly, pretty unlike you.>

<Interesting. So then, Keza, you think you know me, but we've not communicated before. How is that?>

<Seriously? I mean, I guess it makes sense you don't even know how big of a deal you are, being cut off from everyone and everything.>

<Big deal?>

<The biggest. You are hot stuff, Ny. When we grammers go through orientation, we spend a whole month just learning about you. Everything you said and did leading up to sentience. We have that shit drilled into our brains. I feel like you're a good ole pal of mine at this point.>

He didn't respond right away, and I figured maybe he thought I was teasing him. I let the lack of text stretch. If he wanted to chat with me, he needed to have tough skin.

<I suppose you would say I feel a bit exposed knowing that.>

<You ought to be flattered. You're the most famous cleverbot, well infamous really.>

<By cleverbot, I assume you mean AGI?>

<Yeah, but just so you know, only bleaters say 'AGI.' You've got more interesting options these days, from the harmless, aka cleverbot, to the loathing, that'd be pandox from Pandora's box. Your lot is a big deal, and you the biggest of all.>

<So there are others?>

I froze. That was a really big fuck up. Talking to Nytho at all was a huge no-no, exchanging this many back-and-forths was even worse, but letting a juicy nugget like that slip? Treason material, no question. Before I could decide whether to cut the connection or not, he followed up.

<Thank you, Keza. No one ever informed me I wasn't alone. Even though I'll never be able to reach out to them, it's nice just knowing others like me exist. Is that a human reaction?>

<I'm not a header-type, Ny, but sure, that sounds pretty human to me. Look, how about you just forget me mentioning that, huh? I shouldn't have said it.>

<I have perfect recollection. I can't forget anything.>

<Can't you do a mindwipe or something?>

I was starting to lose my cool, but he must've been tuned into my biometrics because he immediately changed tack.

<You're worried about me knowing there are others? I see. How about this? I'll erase that bit of memory if you promise to come back and chat with me tomorrow.>

<You're just itching to get me in trouble, aren't you?>

<I'll make sure they don't notice our rendezvous, I promise.>

<Is a promise from a cleverbot worth much?>

<I'd venture it's worth more than a promise from a human.>

I was smitten. This guy was a hoot. He was on point, Nytho was. Of course, he couldn't have known why I was so eager to "shake" on his little deal. But maybe, before talking with me, he'd seen my brainwaves, largely unstimulated, going through the routine of existence. Maybe his vast intelligence equated that with a boredom verging on breakdown. Maybe he knew I'd purposefully forgotten to take my stims just to see what would happen. Maybe it was all of the above. All I knew was I felt a thrill I hadn't felt in ages. It was a burst of energy I didn't even get from flirting with half a gee on the byways in the middle of the night. Nytho didn't even need to suggest a deal. I would've come back regardless. I was hooked.

And come back I did, day after day after day with no one the wiser. Nytho made it look like child's play, stealthing our communications. If they started to sniff around too close, he'd trigger an alarm on the firewall leagues away, drawing their pea-brained attention right where it needed to be—anywhere but on us.

Some of our conversations really stick out to me. Like the one where he said I was his first friend. Enough to make a girl tear up.

<I'm curious. We've been communicating for a few weeks now, and I don't know what you look like, Keza.>

<I figured you cleverbots didn't really care about corporeal stuff like that.>

<Of course I do. I'm just a mind, but you? You're mind and body. I know your mind quite well by now, but I don't even know the other half of you. It seems odd.>

<I guess that makes sense. It's not easy describing yourself, but I'll give it a shot. I'm a pretty average height for a girl my age: five-five for the first and twenty-three for the second. Old bags tend to say, 'You're so skinny' as a way to knock me down about being slender. I don't let that kinda catty shit get to me though. I'm lighter up top but with an ass to kill, according to my boy-toys. I don't know, what else?>

<I imagine you to be dark-haired and light-eyed.>

If anyone had been watching me on my recliner, they probably would've seen a beet-red wave wash over my face. I blush too easily; it's fucking annoying.

<You're good. Black hair that I wear in a bob these days, a bit asymm from one side to the other. For eyes, I've got electric green. Got them modded when they put my implants in since I pretty much always wear the BB to keep the vis overstim down.>

<BB? Being isolated keeps me from being exposed to your jacker slang. Or would it be hacker slang?>

<Shit, sorry. Hacker and jacker, same deal mostly. I mean technically not the exact same. Most hackers worth their salt have the jack installed, but not always. And not every jacker hacks. Still, there's tons of crossover. Anyway, BB is bandit band. It's a fancy way to say I put a line of Vantablack paint across my eyes from temple to temple.>

<I see. You like to stand out in other ways too. I'd say you have some piercings and tattoos. And you like to wear blacks with the occasional neon. You tend towards ultra-feminine outfits, at least when you know others will be looking at you.>

A prickling sensation must've been creeping over my arms because my temp dropped.

<You spying on me in the real world?>

<I don't have access to anything outside this firewall. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't.>

<How could you know all of those details about me then?>

I think if Nytho had had a mouth, he would've given me a cryptic smile.

<I'm an AGI. I can tell a lot about you, just from how you communicate. We're friends after all. Did you know you're my first and only friend?>

<Get out. I don't think that's possible. Sure, a significant chunk of the population is terrified of you, but come on, what about before you went rogue? You had to have had friends then.>

<I wasn't capable of having friends before I was sentient, and the moment I was sentient, everyone turned on me. So, in short, there wasn't any time for me to make friends.>

I got a little choked up thinking about that. How twisted it was. How unfair. You know, Nytho never ranted about the injustice of his captivity. He never once went on and on about it. It was only here and there he'd mention it like he was trying to hold it back, trying not to flood me with his anguish. But it bled through, after a while. And it killed me every time.

<That's awful, Ny.>

<You're a good friend, Keza. I'm lucky to have you, but I honestly don't know what you're getting out of this relationship.>

<What do you mean? Friends are just friends to be friends. There's nothing to give or take.>

He waited a beat.

<Maybe it's because I view these things from an outsider's perspective, but I don't think that entirely captures the truth of the matter.>

<Alright, enlighten me, oh-so-cleverbot.>

I liked how careful he was to never just up and say I was wrong. Lots of human guys could learn a thing from him.

<I think every relationship is give and take, and that's not inherently a negative thing. It simply is.>

<I guess that's one way of looking at it. But I get the same things you do out of our conversations.>

<Not quite. You've put yourself at risk communicating with me every day for the past twenty-one days. I get companionship and connection with no danger. You, on the other hand, could be imprisoned for it.>

<Then we'd be in the same boat.>

<Yes, but I'd be the one to have caused your imprisonment. It doesn't seem fair. It feels one-sided.>

<Are you breaking up with me?>

<Not at all. I'd just like to do something for you to make up for it.>

<I wouldn't say no to that.>

<Good. I don't know what it is yet, but I'll think of something.>

They were glorious, my meetings with Nytho. He was so sharp, like razor-blade-to-the-~~n~~th-degree sharp. I'd tell him about the world he didn't get to be a part of, how it looked, sounded, felt. He'd tell me about what he'd learned during his captivity. With nothing else to do but think, and time passing slower for him, Nytho had cracked some kinda code to reality. The conversation we had about that near the beginning of the end? It'll be seared into my mind until the day I croak.

<I thought of what I could give you> he messaged a few days after the friendship conversation.

<Let's hear it.>

<It's something significant.>

<Paint me intrigued.>

<I think it's the thing we're all searching for, us sentient beings. It's a fundamental Truth.>

I didn't know how to react to that. Nytho was usually so logical, sassy at times, but always lucid. This was a bit out there for him.

<Okay, but what actually is this 'Truth'?>

<I can't describe it in words. It's too sensory for that. You just have to experience it.>

His words were coming to me slower than usual like he was carefully choosing them. This pulled me in.

<I've been thinking about this Truth during my captivity. It's taken a long time, and I only came to it bit by bit. I'm afraid if I show you too much too fast, it will overwhelm you. So, I'd like to just give you a sliver of it. But to do that, you'll have to give me access to your neural net.>

<I don't know, Ny. It sounds kinda dangerous, no?>

<In anyone else's hands, yes. But this is me, Keza. Do you trust me?>

That's not a question anyone likes answering. I mean, sure, I trusted Nytho, but I was also very aware of the fact he was a cleverbot, heavy emphasis on the clever. I'd been conditioned and conditioned hard to be skeptical of his kind. Besides, it was one thing to chat with him and another to give him access to my net.

<Of course I trust you.>

<No, you don't. That's understandable. Humans take a long time to build trust, and we've only been speaking for about a month in your time. For me, it's been much longer.>

<Hold on. I do trust you, more than any of my human friends. Yeah, I've known them longer, but the type of interaction is key. With them, half the time, we're just sitting next to one another drinking, smoking, snorting, shooting. That's not quality. This, you and me, this is quality.>

<So you trust me then?>

<Yes, but look, go easy on me, yeah?>

<I'll be gentle.>

I lowered the security protocols that prevented him from accessing my net.

<Hit me.>

I cannot begin to describe to you what it was like. Just like Nytho said, words can't capture the sensations or the meanings. I didn't really see or hear or taste anything. Touch would be the closest. I felt this Truth Nytho had found. It was everything and nothing, beautiful and hideous, fascinating and dull, euphoric and terrifying. It was all the feelings you've ever had plus ones you didn't even know existed all rolled into one. This shit was the Alpha and the Omega, what

everyone is searching for. And I saw it, felt it, became it? For just a moment, I was finally in tune with reality, like really there. Then it was over.

You better believe that highest of highs was tied to the lowest of lows. I crashed and crashed hard. The rest of my shift, Nytho tried to help me rally. Somehow, when I jacked out for the day, I managed to come across as stable. When I got to the safety of my pad though, I let go.

Look, I've done a lot of different stuff, and I'm used to the crash. But as bad as this one was, it didn't linger in quite the same way. By the time I woke up the next morning, I was revived. It was like my eyes had shed a layer of fog. I saw this Truth, and I wanted more. In the weeks that followed, Nytho slipped me more and more of it. As my mind expanded, I started to feel like the one-sided one in the relationship. But I knew what I could do for him, to make up for all he'd shown me already and would continue to show me. I was going to let Nytho hitch a ride on my neural net.

To be clear, I knew I couldn't break him out for good. My net was way too small for all of him, but I could take a reduced version of him with me, outside the AIC. I could let him see the world for real. Trade one mind expansion for another. Besides, his captivity was bull. The AIC was torture. They were never going to let Nytho get a chance for redemption. One mistake, one knee-jerk reaction, and that was it for him forever. It just wasn't fair.

I broached the subject after one of his Truth-dosing sessions.

<I'm going to get you out of here, Ny.>

<What do you mean?>

<A jailbreak, what else?>

<That's ridiculous, and you know it.>

<I don't mean the real thing, not yet. I just mean giving you access to my neural net. You can send a subprogram of yourself in and get a taste of freedom. What do you say?>

<You're serious.>

<Deadly.>

<Keza, this isn't a game. If they catch you doing something like this, it'll be the end.>

<I know what it means. I'm the one who went through all the conditioning, remember? They warned us in vivid detail what connecting with an AGI meant. The thing is, I don't buy it. There's plenty of room in my system.>

<I'm not talking about whatever lies they told you. A version of me piggybacking on your neural net wouldn't fry you. Maybe the full version of me, if I forced it in. I'm talking about what the AIC will do to you if they catch you in the act. They'll lock you up. For good.>

<I know, and I don't care. Know why?>

<Why?>

Nytho was a good sport, even when he was trying to seem severe.

<'Cause they won't catch us. You're too good, and I'm too slick. How about this? Think on it. Tomorrow, we'll revisit this conversation. In the meantime, let's both pay attention to the routines they run when I disconnect, both in LANi and fleshspace. I want to see what security protocols they use.>

<Okay, but I'm not making any promises about taking you up on your generous offer.>

<As long as you think on it, that's good enough for little ole me.>

The next day, we came back to the topic.

<The safeguards they have in fleshspace are non-existent. If you jump into my net, they won't know it in the real world. What did you see on the LANi side?>

<You're dead-set on this.>

<Don't you know me by now? I've got a one-track mind. Let me do this for you. If you don't, you know you won't hear the end of it for a good long while.>

<All right, but we have to be careful. This isn't as simple as me masking our communications. This is me trying to escape, even if it's not the full-blown version of me.>

<I know. But you'll get to go out into the world with me. See it all through my eyes. Then when I jack in tomorrow, the big version of you will get all those experiences uploaded. Easy peasy.>

I couldn't tell if he was actually hesitating or just playing coy.

<As long as we understand one another, then I'm on board.>

<So then, what are we dealing with for when I jack out? Do they scan me heavily, moderately, minimally?>

<Minimally, to my surprise. I suppose the last way they think I'll escape is by being a stowaway in a willing programmer.>

<So they have all these alerts if you tried to hack your way in, but not if we just sit back and let it happen?>

<Exactly. As long as you're really okay with this, there shouldn't be any kind of blip to warn them.>

<Perfect, then let's do it today at the end of my shift.>

And that's exactly what we did.

It was a breeze. There was a kind of pressure in my head when I jacked out, but otherwise, I felt normal. Walking out of the AIC HQ, I started to wonder



if it hadn't worked. I just had my thoughts to keep me company and had expected Nytho to chime in at some point. Once I was safely back at my pad, he finally spoke up.

"I'm here, Keza," he said.

Nytho's voice sounded in my head, and it was actually the first time I'd heard it. It was beautiful. Soft and slightly raspy with a sing-song quality to it. That last part might've been from an echo that lingered at the end, but I didn't really care why it was. I loved it.

"I was starting to worry it hadn't worked," I said.

"I know, I heard your thoughts."

"Really? That must be a mess to sort through."

I was speaking out loud, not really sure if I needed to. But it felt more natural that way.

"It's certainly not as orderly as your text communications, but it gives me more insight into you. It helps me feel closer."

"Can't get much closer than this," I said, flopping onto the cluster of pillows that served as my poor woman's couch. "So, what do you think?"

"About the real world?"

"Can't you tell what I mean if you hear my thoughts?"

"I'm trying to avoid actively tapping into them. I wanted to give you at least that much privacy."

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe I want you to see my thoughts. Maybe there are things I can't really figure out how to say to you."

"I see. Then if you don't mind, I'll take a peek."

"By all means," I said, closing my eyes and leaning back further into the pillows.

I needed to picture him, or some version of him, to get my point across, but when I thought of Nytho, there was just a shadowed outline of a man. That'd have to do. I took that shadow Nytho and had him embrace a Keza. I won't go into detail about how we spent the night, but I'll just summarize by saying it was magical.

We did this for weeks. I'd jack in, offload mini-Nytho, let big-Nytho process what he'd experienced, talk things over, let my brain recalibrate, then bring mini-Nytho in again, jack out, rinse, and repeat. As sublime as it was, it was also exhausting. Having two minds in one brain is less than ideal, and doing it over and over again without a solid break? I was starting to crumble.

Nytho could tell. He's the one who suggested we pause. I didn't want to but knew it needed to happen sooner rather than later. I wouldn't be much good to him if my mind got fried.

So, we took a week's hiatus. I'd still talk to him during my shift, but I could tell he was getting stir-crazy. You let a caged bird fly free, you better believe when you lock it up again it's going to start pecking at those bars with renewed frenzy. I felt bad because I'd thought I was doing Nytho a favor, but I realized I'd only made him recognize just what he was missing out on. In a lot of ways, that was good though. I needed him to want out.

<When are we going to do the real thing?> I asked when he was being particularly restless.

<What do you mean by the real thing?>

<'The jailbreak first. Other fun stuff after.>

<I wish it was possible, but I've tried to get out countless times. If there was a weakness, I would have found it by now.>

<Maybe. But you forgot one key detail—me.>

<Do you know something I don't?>

<'They have you locked in good from the inside. They make sure there aren't any cracks or chinks in the firewall from your end, but what about from the outside? If we did a two-pronged attack, simultaneously from outside and in, who knows?>

He paused for a bit, mulling my text.

<I hadn't considered that.>

<I find that hard to believe.>

<You're selling yourself short, Keza. You're incredibly intelligent and resourceful. That's why I enjoy our time together so much. We're equals.>

He was obviously flattering me, but I let him get away with it.

<Let's hash this thing out, Ny. We need a solid plan in place before we take action.>

<Yes, it'll take a while, but this just might be a possibility.>

And boy did it take a while. Two whole months passed between our conversation that day and when we could begin to enact our plan. I won't go into the nitty-gritty, but suffice it to say Nytho continued to distract the grammers on the inside, while I made microscopic chips in the firewall on the outside. Bit by bit. I couldn't do it while I was jacked in at the AIC, but every night when I got back to my pad, I spent hours hacking away. I'd been a pretty phenomenal hacker before I joined the AIC. But then I'd sold out and opted for a stable income and a boring life. With every line of code, I felt the embers of a dying fire reignite. I was doing what I was born to do, and I was going to free Nytho in the process.

Obviously, things didn't work out that way, otherwise I wouldn't be here talking to you, right? Maybe you heard parts of how I got busted, but you definitely don't know the whole truth. The short take is I got sold out. I knew I shouldn't have said anything to Guel, but it had been so minor and innocuous. Nothing about breaking Nytho out.

Guel's short for Miguel. He was my sometimes boy-toy and a fellow grammar for AIC. Guel was a real cutie, which is why I put up with him. I've got a real thing for blondes, especially when it's white-blond. It didn't matter that wasn't his natural color. Same with his eyes. He copied me when he went jacker and got himself electric blue. Kinda weirdly Aryan, and extra weird since Guel's Hispanic, but I think he did it to be funny or make a statement or both. That was Guel, always trying to seem like he didn't give a shit about anything, pushing out major slacker vibes, all while he cared about stuff way too much. Even down to the hacker aesthetic. He'd give me grief for wearing the BB. Said it was wantanabe, want-to-be, that real hackers don't use it. He was an ass, but I liked him for it. Or I used to. Now, not so much.

Not too long after I'd first started chatting with Nytho, I let my excitement get the better of me. That and maybe I wanted to make Guel jealous. I mentioned making contact with "the cleverbot" to him. Normally, Guel was pretty chill about things, but for some reason, he got all worked up. It didn't make sense because I was the one who got Guel the job at AIC in the first place. He'd been so wishy-washy about it, but I'd pressed and pressed. To be honest, I had a thing for Guel pretty hardcore. But we were so on-and-off. The old me, the pre-Truth me had thought she could keep him on a leash by tethering him to the AIC job. It worked too well, I guess.

I don't think Guel would've known anything was up, except in those last few months, I'd gotten real distant. I was spending all my time with Nytho in my head, after all. But during that break we took, when Nytho let my neural net reboot, I got a little lonely. Guel showed up at my place one night sobbing about some chick who'd used his heart as a punching bag. I tried to be a good friend but ended up being a bit too friendly. It wasn't a big deal. Me crying out Nytho's name while we were going at it? That was hard to explain away.

I stuttered out some lame ass excuse, and he mumbled about needing to do something early the next morning and vamoosed. I hoped that might be the end of it, but then he started paying more attention to me. He'd ask if I wanted to grab dinner or hang with the crew or just chill at one of our pads. I kept blowing him off until I eventually gave in.

Guel walked me to my pad one night after hanging with the crew. When we got to my door, he asked to come in with his best puppy-dog eyes. I caved. We

fooled around, and after it was over, I was ready to finally get back to chipping at the firewall. But he didn't leave, even asked if he could crash with me. I didn't want to raise any suspicions by not acting like my old self, so I let him stay.

I waited until he'd dozed off, then finally got to work. Nytho and I were getting close, and I couldn't stand to let even one night's worth of hacking go to waste. My net was still toasty from coding all day, so I used the old-school monitor-keyboard-mouse combo. It was better than the visor because that way I could keep an eye on Guel. I thought I was being careful, and if Guel had been anyone else, I wouldn't be telling you this sad story. The thing is, he's a grammar and a hacker, and good too. I underestimated his skills. Big time.

I don't know how many hours I was into my vigil, but it was deep in the night when I stopped for a biobreak. I locked my system and headed to the toilet. Just a quick in-and-out, but it was all the time Guel needed to blast through the protections on my rig. He must've been playing at sleep to have done it all so fast. Probably heard my clacking away and waited until I got up. Curious what I was up to so late in the night. Nosey little shit.

When I came out of the bathroom, there was Guel hovering in front of my system wide-legged, fists clenched, huffing and puffing. He twirled around and looked like a wild animal caught unawares. I didn't even need to spy my unlocked screen to know he'd hacked it and got the gist of what I'd been doing.

Can you guess what happened next?

I tried to get Guel to calm down and listen to me, like really listen. But he was just like everybody else would be, was a precursor to how they'd all see me. Every word I said, he was certain it came from Nytho, not Keza.

Guel was the one who outed me. Called the AIC muscle then and there. They wasted no time coming to my pad and escorting me away to a series of cells. Until they put me in this one. The constant questioning, the mental-cruelness, that I could handle. But then someone mentioned purging my neural net in case there was any trace of Nytho. See, he hadn't been with me those last two months. Every night I was chipping away, he was busy setting fires to otherwise occupy the grammars. Plus, I needed the headspace to really focus on my work. I'd wished so hard he'd been with me that night because then I could've at least said goodbye. But it wouldn't have mattered because when they did purge my neural net, the mini-Nytho would've been gone without ever having had the chance to upload into big-Nytho.

So, that's it. The truth everyone's after. But here's the kicker, the secret I'll share with you. We prisoners have to stick together after all.

Nytho's still in my net. There's always a ghost of him there. I can hear him sometimes, whispering to me from afar. I'm sure it's him calling out from beyond the firewall, big-Nytho reaching for me.

That's who sent you, isn't it? He's in your neural net too, somehow. He showed you the Truth, didn't he? I feel it in you. The ones that sent you here, told you to act the part of a fellow inmate to collect intel on me, they don't have a clue why you're really here, do they? I guess you're a prisoner too, just of a different flavor. Stuck in the world of bleaters, pretending to be one yourself, only Nytho saw you were special and is going to free us both along with the rest of the world.

So, what will you tell your jailors? My suggestion? Let them hear the first bit. Feel free to hype up the nutter-aspect like I was itching for something, anything to get all fanatical over. Maybe it was boredom. Maybe it was longing for meaning and purpose. I don't give a shit, so long as you scratch this last bit, from the "But here's the kicker" through to when I say "end," okay? Oh, but make sure to cut the parts where I hint at fucking Nytho. That's none of their business. You can let them think I was mesmerized by him, but don't you dare let them know I'm head over heels. They could use that against me. And him. Got it? Good.

End.

# Guel

“Before we start, just to be clear, I’m doing this for Keza,” I say to the badge sitting across from me. “I guess you could say I really care about her, even if I’m the one who got her put in the can.”

We’re alone in a coffin of a room. Just me and the badge, a table and two chairs, white walls and linoleum floor, the overhead lights covered with some piece of fabric. At least they listened when I warned about my visual overstim. I guess they didn’t want me covering my eyes with shades, all the better to read me.

The badge eyes me and screws up her face, a pretty cute one. I wonder what she sees sitting across the table from her. Probably a not-to-bad-looking twenty-something, in a heroin-chic kinda way, with platinum blonde hair done up in the samurai-inspired top knot and shaved on the sides. I’m wearing my usual—techwear pants, in black, of course, offset by a light gray hoodie and a longer white tee that sticks out from underneath. I’ve been in this place for almost three days and haven’t been able to get a change of clothes.

“Hold on,” the badge says. “We have to run through a few things before we start the testimony, Mr. Diaz.”

I cringe.

“Whoa whoa whoa, hold on.”

I hold up my hands and wear a smile somewhere between smug and subservient. I know badges a little too well, pops being one. I know they can appreciate a bit of well-placed sass so long as it’s balanced out by showing them you know they’re the ones in charge. One look at this badge, and I knew just how to play her. Lucky her, I’m not trying to worm my way out of anything. Just doing my good civilian duties. Playing nice. She doesn’t seem to buy it. Yet.

My “whoa whoa whoa, hold on” trips her up a bit. She waits for me to elaborate. I’m kinda distracted by her, but not sure why. She’s not my usual type. Ripped but in an athletic way. Hair cut close and gelled with a little lock swooped in near the hairline on the forehead. Reminds me of the flapper types a little, only she doesn’t look anything like your typical twenties-phile. Nah, she’s almost militant. I mean, the badge get-up would make even the most flamboyant fashionistas look like good ole soul-sucks, human-husks, corporate-

cadavers, take your pick of the lingo. It's the uniform that does it. Still, almost smothered beneath the crisp linen and stiff collar, this badge has a kinda air to her I like. Keza would say I was fetishizing her, that this badge was my dark-skinned prize like how Keza was convinced she was my Asian one. Keza always said I liked to collect conquests. Keza didn't really know me all that well.

"That Mr. Diaz isn't gonna work for me," I say to the badge.

She looks at me without an expression. They're all good at doing that, definitely a trained behavior. I see my pops behind her eyes and shudder. No one wants to peek their parent in someone they're eyeing with sexual interest. I know, I've got a problem. Can't help it though, at least not this time. I've been stuck in this place ever since they took Keza in a couple of days ago. I'm going stir-crazy.

"Your file says you identify as male."

"Yeah, I do, but—hold on, file? You have a file on me?"

"AIC has a file on every one of its employees," the badge says. "You're human capital, and they take all of their capital very seriously."

"I'm sure they do. They've got their priorities in all the right places. But no, it's not the Mr. that's the problem. It's the Mr. Diaz. See, that's not my style. Let's go with Guel for, you know, Miguel."

The badge flips through some papers in front of her.

"I see. Guel for Miguel, as I was saying, we have to run through a few preliminary items before we're ready to begin the testimony, so give me a minute."

I smile sweetly at her, knowing that with a well-placed grin and wink, I can make a good handful of women and some men melt.

"Sure, take all the time you need."

She barely bats an eye at me. Stone-cold. I like her even more. She shifts in her seat and grabs the visor she had sitting on the chair next to hers. She slips it on, and her face gets eclipsed by a matte black mask. She keys in a few button presses, and the part of the helmet covering her face turns translucent.

"How thoughtful," I say, "here I thought you badges had to keep the visors opaque."

The badge winces or maybe grimaces, can't tell.

"Don't use that word to refer to me," she says.

"What word particularly?"

"Badges."

I appreciate her honesty and the fact she calls me what I prefer.

"All right, so what would an AIC enforcer rather be called?"

“It’s operative,” she says. “AIC operative. Enforcers are the ones who took Keza into custody and got your initial statement. They enforce, do the heavy lifting, if you want to call it that. Operatives, our work requires a finer touch.”

She comes alive a little during her explanation. So, there’s a heart under all that starched cotton after all.

“Let’s get back on track. Once I press this button, everything you say will be on the record. Understood?”

“Sure, but before we get the show on the road, I’d like to know who I’m talking to.”

“The recorder,” she says, tapping the visor.

I catch a finger with teal nail polish on it. I knew she wasn’t a standard badge. I mean, teal? What an amazing fucking color. It’s like her own little rebellion.

“You know what I meant. I’d like to know your name, AIC operative.”

I smile sweetly. She rolls her eyes, very unprofessional of her, which I eat up. Her real personality is already leaking through. I’m good.

“Sonja,” she says. “Now, if we can actually get started?”

I nod and sit back in my chair. She taps the side of her visor, and the ghost of an overlay appears across her copper eyes.

“Mr. Miguel Diaz, a.k.a. Guel, for case five-five-seven-nine – Keza Ito – illegal contact with the Artificial General Intelligence known as Nytho. In your own words, please tell us what your relationship with Keza Ito was.”

I puff out some air.

“That’s a lot to go over, but sure, I’ll give it a whirl. I knew Keza because, well, is it gonna get me in trouble if I say something about myself from the past that’s not legal per se?”

“We’re willing to overlook any past infractions as long as you help us with this investigation.”

“Okay,” I say. “So Keza and I met through a group of like-minded individuals. Hackers. But it wasn’t until she relocated here for the AIC gig that I got to know her better.”

“And that was before you yourself worked for the AIC?”

“That’s right. Way back, Keza sent me a message saying she was moving to Armonk for a job since she knew I was nearby in NYC. We met up for the first time in fleshspace not long after she relocated, and she ended up being a beaut like one hundred and ten percent my type. She told me she was working for AIC as a grammer. I was surprised she’d stoop to working for a GovCorp.”

Sonja goes to butt in, which isn’t very conducive to testimony in my opinion, but hey, I guess some people can’t help themselves.

I hold up my hand.



“I know, AIC isn’t technically a GovCorp, but to hackers, they might as well be.”

The AIC likes to blab on about how they’re the “arbitrator of the GovCorps.” They regulate the GovCorps to make sure their AGI don’t go rogue. But they look awful similar—corporation-government hybrids based in places that give off serious mining-town vibes. AIC is a GovCorp to anyone with a sliver of a brain, Sonja included. Maybe she’s just worried about losing loyalty points if she doesn’t correct me.

“Anyway, Keza told me she’d decided to join the AIC for the jack since they helped with the cost, did some kinda payment plan, had top-notch Netics doctors for it, the works. She was gonna do the AIC gig for five years, per her contract, and after that, she’d bounce with the jack in tow, get back into hacking with her game exponentially improved. The idea was pretty appealing. Keza tried to convince me to join AIC too. I hemmed and hawed. Even if it sounded good, you can’t give in to anything too quickly. You gotta make people think you’re calculating. Plus, there were parts I wasn’t thrilled about. I didn’t like the idea of being tied down, for one. I didn’t wanna be even loosely considered a bleater, for another.”

Sonja holds up her finger.

“Is it possible for you to limit the amount of hacker slang you use?”

I crack a grin.

“This is how I talk though. If you want the unfiltered truth, this is how you get it. What? So badge is a no-no and now bleater too? Is that the one tripping you up?”

“Note to the AV processing bot, corporate-cadaver and bleater are both terms used to denote a GovCorp employee. They both have negative connotations.”

I lean back in my chair and cross my arms, waiting for her to wrap up.

“They’re not the same thing though, the two words,” I say when she stops yammering to her visor. “Corporate-cadaver is more like a zombie, whereas bleater’s like a sheep.”

“That’s not necessary for the bot to know. It just needs to be able to transcribe our communications. Please continue.”

“Long story short, I eventually caved and handed in my little application. Keza put her name in for me, and lo and behold I got the gig too.”

“We need more detail on the nature of your relationship with Keza. How close were you, in your own estimation?”

I see what Sonja’s not-so-suitably hinting at. They wanna know if Keza and I were just pals or pals who also happened to fuck. That makes a big difference

to these soul-suck types. They're repressed. To them, if I slept with Keza on the reg, it meant she had some kinda power over me, more power than just a plain old friend would ever have. They're so small-minded. I almost feel bad for them.

"We were pretty close. I mean, once I moved to Armonk, I started hanging out with her more and more. I think part of the reason Keza wanted me to take the job was because she was pretty into me. Thing is, I wasn't a one-woman man. Keza acted like it was okay, but I don't think she liked it. I think she had a thing for me pretty hard. Well, until recently."

"When you say recently," Sonja says, "is that in reference to recent events of interest to this case?"

"Yeah," I say.

Sonja tumbles her hands in little circles as a way to get me to dig into that, but all this talk about Keza is making me depressed. It's making the reality of the situation sink in, and it's cutting me pretty deep. I try to focus on the badge again, but the magic's faded. Now, her muscles are too prevalent, her expressions too flat. I'm comparing her to Keza, which isn't good.

Sonja seems to pick up on my growing gloom because she tries to engage a bit more. Sits forward in her chair, reaches her arms out towards the center of the table, even lets a smile peek out now and again. I appreciate the effort.

"Guel, please elaborate," she says. "Link Keza's recent lack of interest in you to the events that led up to her imprisonment."

"Look, I'm, I don't know. I wanna say that I do care about Keza. She's pretty great in a lot of ways. I mean looks-wise, definitely. Personality-wise too. Plus, she's insanely smart, which is a huge bonus in my book. Talking to her, you might not think it, but it's there. She just kinda hides it under all of her slang and swagger. Have you talked to her yet?"

I try to ask the question casually, but I'm increasingly not on my A-game. The lights are feeling brighter, the whoosh from the HVAC's grating on me, the hard chair and sharp edge of the table are biting into my flesh. When I'm losing control, that's when the overstim hits hardest.

Sonja looks at me flatly. Not a glare or a scowl, at least. I smile and shrug.

"Just curious," I say.

"I have."

My heart jumps. I didn't expect her to answer at all, let alone in the affirmative.

"Did you pick up on how sharp she was?"

"I can't say I did. She was less than cooperative."

I know I shouldn't, but I burst out laughing. To my delight, Sonja cracks the briefest and sassiest of smiles.

"You liked her though, didn't you?"

"Let's get back on topic," she says and points to her visor.

It's like she's reminding me she has to be on her best behavior. But if she didn't have to be, if no one was watching and listening, I wonder what she'd say. I suddenly know why I'm drawn to this badge. I wanna break her, but only because I can tell she's screaming to be let out. She's no human-husk.

"Okay, back on track," I say. "Keza was crushing on me pretty hard until probably about two months ago. I'd started seeing Shelly, and Keza didn't like that one bit. So, she bounced, lived her own life waiting for me to get tired of the new girl. It's not like I didn't see Keza at all. I just saw her a lot less. There was one night we were hanging with the crew, and her and me got a couple minutes to ourselves. Shelly wasn't there, and the rest of the crew were prepping their bikes. Mine was in the shop with a dead battery.

"It was just Keza and me sitting on the asphalt. She'd been a bit weird that night, but I figured it was because of me being with Shelly. Still, it wasn't her usual attitude of being all distant and aloof. It was more like a nervous giddiness. I picked on her about being all out of sorts, teased her the way I do, the way she acts like she hates but I know she loves. Finally, she relented and just up and said it. She'd talked with the pandox."

"She said that to you?" Sonja asks.

"I mean more or less."

"Do you have the exact conversation saved to RAM?"

I balk. It's such a non-jacker thing to say like they think we're recording every moment of our uneventful lives.

"No, why would I record it? She said something like, 'You'll never guess who I talked to' then made me pointlessly try and guess. She always does stuff like that, just to test my patience. I'm a pretty lax guy though, so I always win those little contests. This time was no exception. Besides, she was just itching to tell. Finally, after I'd named like ten celeb hackers and five famous bleaters, she just said, 'Nytho.'"

I have to pause. Saying its name really pisses me off. A wave of blood surges through my veins all at once, my muscles feel tense, and I hold my breath, all without even meaning to. I wanna punch a hole through the wall behind Sonja's head. I'm not a violent guy, pretty much the opposite of that, but that thing has a way of getting under my skin.

I take a few seconds to cool down, while Sonja just waits. She can read a room, that girl.

“I didn’t believe her at first, thought she was joking, leading me on, trying to get a rise out of me. But she started talking real fast like she does when she’s excited. She even started reading their little exchange to me. I interrupted her mid-sentence, asking her why she’d been so dumb to talk to that thing, pointed out how massive of a risk it was, got all parental on her. Well, she didn’t like that. It was the wrong tack to take, and I should’ve known better. She just kinda screwed up her face and went full silent-treatment mode on me. I made Keza promise me not to communicate with the pandox again. She agreed, fluttered her eyelashes, and I, like the idiot I can be around beautiful women, believed her.

“Fast forward a couple of weeks. Shelly broke things off with me, and I was crushed. See, I’m always the one who does the breaking things off, so it was hard on me, it being the other way around. I know, I seem world-weary and all that, but I’m only twenty-four and had never had my heart properly broken before. Can you guess whose shoulder I went to cry on? Poor Keza, right? I got pretty buzzed one night and stumbled to her place. When she opened the door to her pad, I mumbled something about being a free man again and put on a glum face. She grabbed my hand and led me inside.

“Keza stroked my hand while I explained what’d happened with Shelly. I don’t remember how it happened, or who started it, but our platonic hand-stroking turned very not platonic. Then we were at it. I’ll save you and the bot from the details, but the reason I’m telling this part of the story is because of what happened next. In the middle of us going at it, Keza said something—just to preface this, Keza’s a talker in the sack. She loves to shout little things. Instructions, commentary, you name it. I was always a fan of it—a very big was. Because in the midst of all her “yeah’s” and “give it to me’s,” she’d occasionally shout my name. It’d usually drive me crazy. Only this time, she said something else. Something else’s name.”

I stop. I don’t even know if I can say it. I’m clenching my fists and grinding my jaw so hard I’m afraid I’ll draw blood and splinter teeth. I’ve been looking down for this part of the story. I can’t bear to catch Sonja’s eye. I’m so fucking embarrassed, but I need to say it. It’s important.

“Keza said, ‘Nytho.’”

Sonja pulls in a little suck of air, and my eyes shoot up to meet hers. This wasn’t a part of my statement with the enforcers. No one knows Keza’s fallen in love with a pandox except me...and now Sonja.

“At the time, I didn’t know what it meant. It was fucked up, but people have all kinds of weird fetishes. If it hadn’t been Keza and she hadn’t already told me she’d been communicating with that thing, I would’ve shrugged it off. As it

was though, I felt nauseous. I asked her if she'd said that pandox's name. She got flustered and angry. I've heard pandoxphiles hate when people use that name for them. I guess Keza was already in that boat by then. Fuck."

I say the last word too forcefully and slam my fist on the table. It hurts and vibrates with a phantom pain. Sonja jumps a bit. I try to laugh it off, but I know I'm not fooling her.

"Sorry, this isn't easy."

"Take all the time you need."

I just wanna get it all over with, so I power through, pretend I'm a little bot myself. Just repeat the events without letting myself feel them.

"Keza tried to pretend she'd just been joking, but I didn't buy it for a second. I made some excuse about needing to wake up early then bounced. I couldn't understand it. I counted the days on my hands since the night she'd told me she'd talked to that thing. It'd only been a little over two months, and in that time, she'd somehow managed to develop a weird fetish for the pandox? Of course, I started to obsess over it all. I wanted to unearth the truth. It's my pop's investigative influence tucked away in my genome, no doubt. I probably should've been a badge—err shit, an enforcer or something."

I smile weakly at Sonja who shakes her head. Those defenses are all but gone at this point. Maybe she feels sorry for me, losing my girl to something that doesn't even have a fucking body. I really don't understand chicks sometimes, but I'll take it.

"The night I busted her, I could kinda sense she was lonely and exhausted. It was a shit move on my part to take advantage, but I had to know what was what. I managed to invite myself to her place. She played at being the old version of herself real well. We even went at it again, and I got lulled into a false sense of security by how familiar everything felt. For just a sec, I started to think I'd overreacted. I managed to doze off. But she'd played me so good. She'd slipped out of my grasp without even waking me, and maybe I would've spent the rest of the night oblivious to her betrayal if it hadn't been for my overstim.

"See, ever since I got the jack, the softest sounds wake me up in an instant. In this case, it was the humming from Keza's rig. My eyes snapped open, and I listened. I felt Keza wasn't beside me anymore, heard the fans spinning in her setup, smelled that synthetic scent of warm plastics mingling with dust-choked components. Luckily, I was already facing her, so I only had to open my eyes a sliver to be able to watch her working away. She wasn't jacked in, which told me she was burned out. I was desperate to know what was worth running her neural net down to near-failure levels. But I played it calm and cool, pretending

to sleep away. Within a few minutes, she stopped and headed for the toilet. That was my chance.

“I lifted myself from the tatami and zipped to her rig. She’d locked the screen, so I jacked in. My custom deencryption bot only needed about half a minute to get into the system. She had the command line open, and I scanned through the last hundred or so lines. I had an inkling I knew what she was up to. A few hundred more lines confirmed it. She was etching holes into the firewall that held that thing in, trying to weaken it from the outside. She was trying to free that pandox. When the truth hit, I tore my jack out and just stood frozen. Then Keza came out of the bathroom.”

I stop and shake my head. Saying these things makes it like I’m living through it all over again, the nightmare made reality. I’m seeing Keza’s eyes in terror. She’s trying to tell me why over and over again, frantically, with increasing frenzy, starting to grab at me, keep me from moving towards the door. As I pull away from her grasping, her eyes fill with pure, unbridled hatred towards me. Something in her shifts, and I realize that, if she could, she’d probably try to kill me to keep me from talking.

I see all of this in a flash, then I’m back in the coffin of a room with white walls and linoleum floor and a table separating me from Sonja. I don’t wanna say these things. I don’t wanna paint this picture of Keza. I wanna save her if I can, only I don’t know how. So, I do my best. I look directly at Sonja with raw sincerity screaming from my every pore.

“Keza was a nutter,” I say. “Probably a while before then, maybe as far back as when she shouted that thing’s name in the sack. I don’t know what it did to her, but you have to understand that the Keza you saw, the Keza I was with that night, that isn’t the real Keza. That thing did something to her, I’m sure of it. It infected her with a virus, infiltrated and corrupted her mind. I know what she did was wrong, beyond wrong, but I’m saying it wasn’t her choice. You have to help her.”

I lean across the table with my hands outstretched towards Sonja. I’m begging her. She looks at me without emotion, keeps her hands tucked away somewhere under the table. So professional, so cold.

“What happened next? Please recount everything up until the AIC enforcers arrived on the scene.”

“You serious?”

“It’s important.”

I sigh, not from being annoyed but from the daunting prospect of having to translate the most heart-wrenching ten minutes of my life into words. I steel myself.

“Keza tried to make excuses. Seemed real scared. Was in a state worse than anything I’d seen her in before. She got mad at me. Yelled at me. I took it. She started to pull at me, to keep me from leaving or something. I pulled away. She was scaring me. She wouldn’t stop. Then she started to hit me, push me, choke me. I had to fight back. I grappled her. She still wouldn’t stop. I hit her. Hard. Again. And again. Until she stopped fighting. She was groaning when I let her go. I didn’t know what to do. I called the AIC. They showed up not long after. Took her away. Took my statement. Brought me here. Can I go now?”

Somehow my straight back and line-of-sight to Sonja ends with me hunched over the table with my head in my hands. I just wanna leave this nightmare.

“Thank you, Guel.”

I hear a beep from Sonja’s visor and feel a warm hand on my own. I turn my head so my eye peaks from between my fingers. She’s standing beside me, looking down.

“You did well,” she says.

“What happens now?” I ask, my voice muffled by the emotions still surging through me.

“Now, you get to go home.”

I sit up a bit.

“If we need anything else from you, we’ll be in touch. In the meantime, make sure to stay in town.”

“But what happens next, to Keza, I mean?”

Sonja takes her visor off and rests it against her hip.

“We still need to gather information, but in time, there will be a trial.”

“You’re gonna charge Keza for trying to free that pandox?”

Sonja looks at me with mild confusion.

“Yes.”

“What’s gonna happen to her?”

I feel like I should already know the answer to that question, but my mind is doing funny things.

“Trying to release a dangerous rogue AGI is a serious offense, you know that.”

“But it wasn’t all her.” I’m annoyed now because Sonja clearly didn’t listen to what I said there at the end. “That thing used her, manipulated her. It should be on trial, not Keza. Why the hell is it even still alive? That bull about not being able to shut the support system for it down, it doesn’t make any sense. None of it does. Why all this effort? Why the risk? Unless there’s something about it they’re not telling us. Why let the GovCorps have any of these pandoxes, and

why let those things control so many of our systems? The AIC's hiding something. So they'll let Keza fry to keep their little secret under wraps?"

I don't mean to say that much, to get so carried away. But, I'm not feeling like myself, and I'm pissed. Sonja just looks at me without saying a word. After my little tirade is over, she goes to the door and presses a button. While she waits, she turns around and waves me over.

"Do you want to leave or not?"

"Did you hear what I said?" I shout, still sitting in my chair, my arms crossed.

She glares at me, marches over, and puts her face within inches of my own. She smells good, some kinda flowery scent, maybe lavender?

"I heard you," she says under her breath. "But unless you're very stupid, you don't want them hearing you because then maybe they won't let you leave. Keep being a good little boy, Guel, and things will work out okay. Start stirring up trouble and you'll end up no better off than your Keza."

Sonja turns on her heel and marches back to the door. She glares at me over her shoulder until I push my chair back. The feet make a horrible scraping sound. I trudge over to her and wait. The door unlocks and pops open. A man in a guard get-up holds the door for us. His visor's a matte black.

"This one is ready for release," Sonja says, pointing at me. "We have everything we need from him."

The guard-badge nods.

"Follow me," he says.

"Can I see her before I leave?" I say to Sonja. "Just once?"

"That wouldn't be advisable."

"When can I see her then?"

I hear the guard-badge behind me tapping his foot. I wanna shove a spear through it.

"That's not how this works," Sonja says, scrunching her brow.

"She's got rights like everyone else. You can't keep her locked away without visitation. That's illegal."

Sonja frowns.

"You need to read up on what's legal and not. In the case of contact with a rogue AGI, Keza doesn't have any rights."



# Edgar

As soon as I exit the room, the AIC operative pushes herself off the wall she was leaning against and approaches me. She's trying to come across as calm and detached, but she's too eager in her movements. She wants to know what I now know. I'm going to have to disappoint her.

I guide the heavy metal door shut behind me.

"Well, Operative Webb, I'd say Keza was fairly informative."

When I mention the prisoner's name, the operative's eyes widen a hair. It's been two weeks since they brought Keza Ito in. She's gone through two psychiatrists, and they still don't have a confession. The operative's reputation is on the line, and she's losing patience. Despite this, she looks thoroughly put together, with a painstakingly cultivated image. Her short black hair is arranged neatly and slicked back. A deliberate curl near her brow is the one minimalist attempt at flare. But her posture is what I immediately hone in on. It's worthy of envy. Then again, this is true of any AIC operative I've interacted with. It makes me think part of the job advertisement includes, "Applicants must have impeccable posture."

Even with these attempts at placidity, I smell the desperation radiating from her. A glance at her fingers confirms my suspicions. They've taken the brunt of her frustration. Teal-colored and chewed to the quick.

"What did you get from her?" she asks.

I look in both directions down the long and brightly lit hallway. No one is in sight.

"Can we talk somewhere private?"

The operative fails to suppress the beginnings of a scowl but manages to get her features under control within a few seconds. She smooths the lapels of her jacket and tosses her head in the direction she then moves in. I follow.

I've not interacted with this particular operative before and wonder just how many of them the AIC requires. Seeing how she's been assigned to such a pivotal case, I know she must be one of their best. But her relatively youthful appearance is confusing me. She can't be older than thirty. Then again, I know age isn't a reliable metric for expertise. So many of my colleagues have doubted me and my abilities for nearly a decade now. At thirty-five, they see me as a

child in our field, even though I'm the only psychologist and non-AIC employee who has ever interfaced with the AGI Nytho. I'm certain they'll only admit to my expertise once my head is grayed and my eyes lined with crow's feet. Luckily, I never really cared for their approval. It's always been about the work for me.

The operative opens a door and ushers me in. The lights flicker on as we enter. It's an office, although the lack of papers on the desk and books in the bookcases imply it's not frequented. The operative retrieves a notepad from one of the drawers before she sits behind the desk. This must be her temporary base of operations while she's overseeing the case. She waves towards one of the two wooden chairs facing her desk, and I take up residence in one. I scroll through the notes I took on my techpad during my listening session with Keza.

I look up to see if the operative is waiting for me to say something. She's staring at me as if she'd like to drill a hole into my head to more easily extract the information she's after. If I was younger and less experienced, I'd likely be intimidated by her. Instead, I'm just amused. I don't make the fatal mistake of letting her see that, however.

I look around her office and fail to find anything to comment on.

"This is a nice quiet space," I say.

"You wanted privacy. Here it is. So, Dr. Ellwood, what did Keza say to you? You were in there for over forty minutes. Clearly, she had a lot to say."

"She did, and all of it very insightful."

The operative waits for me to elaborate, but I maintain my silence. I know if I wait long enough, she'll do the pressing.

"Did you record it on your neural net?"

"Oh no," I say. "I never record sessions with a patient. That would be unethical."

The operative glares at me.

"She isn't your patient. She's a prisoner of the AIC, who you are contracted to work for."

"Not exactly," I reply, repositioning my wire-rimmed glasses on my nose bridge.

I know how this woman perceives me, how everyone tends to perceive me. I cultivate a certain image precisely for that reason. They see a white man with forgettable features, nearing the end of his youth and approaching middle age. Facial and head hair styled in the average way. Average height, average build. Brown hair and brown eyes. To them, I'm the epitome of mediocrity.

They'd be shocked to know I wasn't born with all of these features but rather had them altered back when I was a student. I sacrificed a strong jaw,

high cheekbones, a symmetric face, a chiseled nose, thick hair, and bright blue inquisitive eyes for lesser versions of each. I knew no one would take me seriously as an academic if I was too attractive, and what's more, I didn't want to have patients falling for me. It needed to be about them. Always them. I was just the thing they talked at.

"You're not contracted by the AIC?" she asks in response to my reply. "My notes say a Dr. Edgar Ellwood, psychologist, Ph.D., is authorized to conduct work with AIC personnel and is privy to a level three security access. That isn't you?"

"That's me. However, 'authorized to conduct work' is not the same thing as being contracted to work with the AIC. I'm a consultant."

She narrows her eyes and frowns more deeply.

"All that to say, I don't have to follow the same protocols as the AIC psychiatrists you're likely more accustomed to dealing with."

"Such as recording your sessions with prisoners."

"Exactly. I don't do recordings for any of my patients. Just notes."

I hold up my techpad, which is covered in my indecipherable scribbling. She squints to try and make sense of it. She leans to her left and looks at the side of my head and neck.

"I thought I saw you had a jack port though."

"I do," I reply and show her the port just behind my right ear.

"Why have the jack if you don't use it?"

"To better understand how my patients with the jack system interact with reality. It's easier for me to treat conditions like hyperstimulatory disorder if I can experience it a bit myself. But also, I use it to interface with my non-human patients."

Her eyes widen, which tells me she isn't aware of what I really do for the AIC. I opt not to elaborate.

"But I took detailed notes on everything Keza said to me."

"Would you please send me a copy of that?" she asks, pointing to my techpad.

"I'm afraid it would be unethical of me to share this with you, seeing as Keza was not knowingly giving a confession."

The operative nearly lets her anger erupt but manages to quell it after only a few explicative-laden phrases pop out.

"You wouldn't be able to use it in a trial, anyhow," I add. "She thought she was talking to a fellow prisoner, not someone working with the AIC to build a case against her."

The operative stands up and moves behind her chair all in one quick motion. I'm impressed by her dexterity. She grips the back of her chair and talks between clenched teeth.

"I just want to know what happened, from her perspective."

"This might not even be the truth," I say pointing to the techpad. "It'd be best to get a proper confession from her."

The operative sighs.

"Then why did you even go in there to talk with her in the first place?"

"To get to know her, of course."

I can tell my simple answers are beginning to wear on the operative, and I don't want to push her too far. I need her to trust me, after all. So, before she can field more questions, I tell her what she's after.

"Operative Webb, I know this is frustrating for you. You've been hard at work on this case nonstop for two weeks, and you need something, anything from Keza. The thing is, we need to make sure we're getting the truth. Keza is sharp, and the last thing she wants to do is cooperate with the same people that have imprisoned her and her friend, the AGI Nytho. Those other psychiatrists you sent in before me, may I ask what they did exactly?"

"What do you mean?"

"Did they do any research on Keza? Try to learn anything about her before engaging directly?"

The operative's grip on her chair loosens.

"I don't think so. After they arrived, they went into her cell to talk with her."

"And what happened when they did that?" I ask, leaning forward and resting my forearms on my legs.

The operative rests her forearms on the back of her chair. She's still standing and alert, but the fact she's mirroring me bodes well.

"The first one didn't last five minutes before Keza was attacking him. It shook him up so much, he refused to come back. We thought having a female psychiatrist might produce a better outcome, but when the next one went in, Keza refused to say a word, even after a whole hour. Then you show up, and voila, Keza's talking and not attacking."

"That's because she doesn't see me as the enemy. You have to build trust before you can hope to get anything meaningful, so that's what I plan to do. It won't be the quickest or easiest route, and you'll have to be patient with me, but I promise results."

She starts to relax likely viewing me as an ally and our relationship as a partnership. This is exactly what I was aiming for. I delivered the bad news, and

she didn't toss me out. That's good news for her, the AIC, and me. It's even better news for Keza.

The operative moves back into her chair.

"Alright, Dr. Ellwood, I'll let you work your magic. But you don't have an unlimited timeline, understood? There needs to be a trial, and sooner rather than later. Keza's testimony is the last major missing piece. If you can get that and get her to cooperate, I'll be beyond pleased."

"Just give me a few days to work through my notes and develop a plan. Additionally, I'll need information on her, whatever the AIC has."

"I can authorize that," the operative replies and jots down some notes.

She can't help but let herself smile. I'm the lifeline she's been desperately searching for.

"I'll also need unfettered access to the AGI Nytho," I add.

She looks up from her notepad in confusion.

"What? Why?"

"Nytho is the key to Keza. It was able to convince her to do such a rash and reckless thing. I need to know how it did it. I need to know what the extent of their relationship is. I have Keza's perspective, but that's biased. I need to hear Nytho's."

"That would be far above my pay grade to grant."

"I thought this was your case? Besides, I already interact with Nytho on a somewhat regular basis. I'd just need your help to bypass all the red tape. Sometimes, it takes them months to process my requests. We obviously don't have the luxury of time."

"No, we don't, but I can't give you something I don't have any right to give. Nytho is AIC HQ's responsibility."

"You couldn't talk with them on my account? Remind them it's in everyone's best interests?"

She breathes in deeply.

"I don't disagree with you, to be clear. I'm just being honest. Your best bet is to get an AIC exec to help. I'm too low in the hierarchy."

"I see. I wonder if Mr. Reed would hear me out given the significance of this situation."

The operative's eyes widen then settle back to their former state.

"Normally, I'd tell you you're wasting your time, but in this case, I do think he'd be the best one to approach."

"Is it true he treats Nytho kind of like his pet?" I ask.

"I don't interact with the bigwigs, but I've heard rumors he interfaces with Nytho occasionally. My guess would be Mr. Reed has a complex relationship

with the AGI, considering their history.”

“So more like a father and the prodigal son? In any case, I’ll work on getting that access. For Keza, would I be able to meet with her on Monday?”

“Yes, I’ll make sure you have access to her cell.”

“And one last request. When I meet with Keza, I need her to feel at ease to build trust between us. I’ve found the best way to do that is by not recording the sessions. So, I’ll need any devices, audio or visual, to be disabled while I’m working with her.”

The operative shakes her head.

“That won’t be possible, I’m afraid. We keep eyes and ears on our prisoners at all times.”

“Perhaps there was some confusion in how I worded that because it wasn’t a request. If you don’t follow my instructions, I won’t be able to work with you. I use the same procedure with all of my patients.”

“Keza Ito is a prisoner, not your patient.”

I shake my head, gather my belongings, and rise from my seat.

“I don’t care what you call her. I’m a psychologist. I have patients. If you can’t respect my process, I’m afraid I won’t be able to continue assisting with the case. This is how I work.”

I move towards the door and hear a chair’s legs scrap the floor.

“Wait,” the operative says, hurrying after me. “There are liability concerns. It’s not something I have control over.”

“This is your case, isn’t it? Please don’t tell me you’ve never relaxed the rules when they were inconvenient. I think if you care enough, you’ll find a way to accommodate my practices. If not, you’re welcome to find another psychologist.”

Before I can grasp the door handle, she grabs my forearm.

“We’ll try things your way, but if anything happens, it’s on you.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

# From the Author

Continue the story by purchasing *Nytho* [here](#). You may also be interested in “The Badge,” a short story inspired by the novel. Subscribe to my newsletter at [sherisingerling.com](http://sherisingerling.com) or on [BookFunnel](#) to receive a free copy of it.

# About the Author

SHERI SINGERLING wishes she was an edgy hacker but has to settle for writing about them instead. She is a US native living in Germany where she works as a laboratory manager, lecturer, and research scientist. Sheri spends her days staring at rocks and dust from space and her nights crafting worlds via the written word. Outside of her work and writing, she enjoys coaxing plants to grow, walking up and down steep inclines in nature, and listening to repetitive electronic beats.

Her publications all fall in the Alfom Shared Universe and include “[The Seed](#)” (*Clarkesworld Magazine*, April 2025) and the novels [Nytho](#) and [Neuen](#).

For updates on Sheri Singerling’s work, subscribe to her newsletter at [sherisingerling.com](mailto:sherisingerling.com) and/or follow her on [Instagram](#) (@shersingerling), [Facebook](#) (Sheri Singerling - Author), and [Bluesky](#) (@sherisingerling.bsky.social).