

The Vault

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I opened my eyes. I was attached to a table fixed at a 45-degree angle, bound in six places so I wouldn't fall forward. It was a strange sensation. The table, the chair, the floor, the ceiling, all six walls – everything surrounding me was a glass mirror, except the six straps, they were made from a soft, translucent material I didn't recognize.

I was naked. It was cold. The room smelled like peppermint – the one candy The Janitors would allow. I could see a dozen bruises. Two gashes had been stitched together and my hair had been cropped, revealing a strange wound above my left ear. *What did they do to me?*

"It's an implant, Astrud," said a voice, whispering, disembodied, elsewhere. "Now we can communicate with you directly. You will hear my voice, Astrud, for the rest of your days. I will always be with you, guide you, monitor you. I will always be inside you, a part of you, one with you."

"A Perpetual Prison," remarked my conscience dryly. We'd heard rumors. Didn't think it was true. Technology was as scarce as water and air and knowledge – hoarded, consolidated, weaponized. How could I be so naïve? "And if I ..."

"Instantaneous death," the voice answered before I finished my thought.

"Prolonged death isn't much better," I spit, just to see what would happen. Nothing. Although, the light that seemed to radiate from behind the mirrors reflected a prism of beautiful colors as it shone on the glob of spit.

"Used to be called a Rainbow," said the voice. "In the time before the Devastation, when water would fall from the sky."

"Fascinating," whispered my inner child in awe as the light intensified and the glob of spit instantly evaporated along with the spectrum of colors.

"Efficient, isn't it?" boasted the voice. "The implant, I mean. Total compliance is assured."

"Can't comply if I'm dead," snickered my defiance as I began to wonder if I could generate enough force to propel myself in a fatal direction; if I would die instantly, like the glob of spit; if the mirrors were two-way; if Whitaker was in another room like this, dangling naked.

"You'd be successful so long as your head absorbed the majority of the impact," stated the voice. "But, it would require a greater distance and a different angle." *Shouldn't our thoughts be ours, locked*

away in the mystery of our consciousness, unavailable to others, blocked even from ourselves, if necessary?

Silence. Then the cables suspending the table retracted upward, lifting me about ten meters. The table flipped and I was hanging upside down at an angle between fifteen and twenty degrees. My eyes could see the spot where the glob of spit rested; there was a faint residue besmirching the otherwise consistent sheen.

“Do you still desire this outcome, Astrud?” I didn’t answer. “If so, I can trigger the table’s release. It would be over in about two point three seconds. Your head would likely sever itself from your body,” she added matter-of-factly. I stayed silent, which seemed to frustrate her. “It would be unfortunate, Astrud, considering your talents. Nevertheless, should you die, we’d Reanimate you.”

“What about my head?” quipped my humor.

“Reanimation would occur after Reassembly. It’s why you have your scars. We had to Repair certain parts after the incident with the Vault. Nothing Wasted, Everything Learned.”

“Got it,” said my determination. “I’m ready.”

“Such action would be pointless, Astrud.” She sounded surprised and anxious.

“Not to me,” cheered my pride, as I tried to squirm out of the restraints.

“You should know, Astrud, you’ve been deemed Useful,” she continued, trying to prolong her bluff. “It’s why we Repaired you and why we would Reassemble you. And, to respond to your query, the mirrors are three-way, not two.”

“Useful? What opportunity have I been given? And how the hell is a mirror a three-way?” asked my curiosity, still actively pursuing answers, meaning, knowledge.

“Useful is an investment in yourself. You can help us, Astrud. Your existence can matter. And it’s three-way because you see you, we see you, and you also see ... you will see ... well, you might see ... something else.”

I was confused. *Was something else in the room with me?*

“No, you are alone,” she answered. “And yet, technically ... well, technically I’m with you, but I don’t know if ... (her voice trailed off as she asked a Supervisor ... Does that count, George? ... Sorry to interrupt. Do I count, George? ... Are you certain? ... No, George, I would never question your authority, your wisdom, your judgement. ... It’s just ... It’s just ... It’s just ... I’m trying to be accurate, George ... of course ... of course ... of course.) I need to put you on a brief hold, Astrud,” she said as I began to hear music. It was sublime, intoxicating, hypnotic. She came back full voice. “I apologize for my error, Astrud.” I didn’t know what error she’d made, but I went with it.

“Nothing Wasted, Everything Learned,” laughed my sarcasm.

“I appreciate your understanding, Astrud. Nothing Wasted, Everything Learned.” There was a subtle desperation in her tone, a fragility, a vulnerability. *Should I take advantage of it?*

“Please don’t. It would be unpleasant for both of us.” She was clearly scared, startled, scattered. So was I, but I felt I had a remedy. If I was lucky, it would be instantaneous, like she said. Two point three seconds. It would become our game. *Nothing Wasted, Everything Learned.*

“Please don’t,” she repeated softly. “We need each other, Astrud,” she implored my thoughts. It was strange to hear a different inner monologue in my head. Not the Violation I was used to.

“I don’t understand. How am I Useful?” No response. “Why do I matter?” No response. “Can you just explain?” No response. *Had she been vaporized?*

“Still here, Astrud,” she said angrily.

“Give me one reason why I shouldn’t just end things right now,” demanded my verve.

“How about two?” she retorted as her emotions rushed through my body, filing me with a rage I’d tasted once, long ago. The bonds tightened and I felt my body struggle to keep its integrity. *Would I end up sliced into six pieces?* The scars would be hideous. *Why can’t they erase those in Reassembly?*

The table began moving upward again, higher and higher. The room became frigid as a blinding light projected onto the mirrors. The table was released and I fell with great speed before I abruptly stopped, barely a millimeter from the floor. Suddenly, I was looking through the eyes of my son, as if I were a part of his consciousness. I could hear his thoughts, feel his emotions, feel the warm air surrounding him, hear his voice as if it were emanating from my heart. He was looking at his sister and she was laughing. They were young, still children, still innocent. It was the last day I saw them, before Whitaker and I descended into the cavern, before we found the vault, before the explosion. My daughter looked at me through my son’s eyes. She recognized me, saw me, knew me and we began to cry, all three of us, knowing the gravity of the moment, knowing its significance, knowing its outcome before time itself knew it. We were insects caught in ambergris, gripped in fear, struggling to cling to the life we knew would soon be gone.

“Enough!” shouted my fear. “I’ll do whatever you want,” sobbed my regret, seeing the disappointment in my children’s eyes as they faded. The mirrors shattered and I was thrust backward. I landed on a scorching dune, looking up at the artificial sky as I got my bearings. I’d been returned to the place I was before, amidst the remnants of our camp.

“Relax,” said the voice. “Remember, we are one.” Her calmness bathed me, yet I stood up slowly, nervously, feebly. My feet were weak, trembling, unsure.

“Can I get some clothes?” asked my modesty meekly.

“Nothing Wasted, Everything Learned,” she replied dispassionately.

“It’s practical, protection from the elements. Soars more than 130 degrees on any given day.”

“Your skin has been enhanced. We’ve upgraded your biology.”

“What do I do? Tap my feet? Wave my arms? Hit my head?” A high frequency began whirring. It stopped, then a low hum vibrated inside me.

“How’s that?” asked the voice.

“Fascinating,” whispered my admiration as I felt a chill run through my body, instantly reducing my temperature by twenty degrees. “What about the hum?”

“Part of the cooling system. We’re still working out the glitches, perhaps on the next upgrade. Please note, the vibrations may cause certain side effects, an intensification of emotion. I hear it can be quite pleasant.”

“Wouldn’t a tunic be more efficient, not just protection but humility?” asked my diffidence, slightly blushing from the hum. Could she sense my emotions?

“Yes,” she answered. “Modesty is antiquated. No one cares about your physical appearance, especially after emerging two offspring – though, we increased your muscle tone. It is necessary to fulfill your mission.”

“I thought it was just the mirrors,” said my avoidance, glancing down at my body. It was unrecognizable. I actually looked healthy, fit, vigorous. Then I noticed it.

“A Node?” *Why hadn’t I seen it before?*

“The mirrors only show what you want to see,” explained the voice. “You’ve been redesigned for maximum efficiency, a blending of function and form. All features have been enhanced. You can now travel on the surface at will. Your skin will reflect the sun, absorbing only enough radiation to keep you charged. This will cause periodic, intense, but brief pain. This will be remedied by your enhanced ability to heal. No longer will you need to consume or discard. Nothing Wasted, Everything Learned.”

“What about the Node?” asked my ego.

“Sleep will be minimal, dreams will be monitored, as will all your thoughts.”

“I thought that practice had been eliminated long ago.”

“Negative. It has been Redesigned to maximize efficiency.”

“And the Node?”

“You have also been Reassigned.”

“Thought that was a rumor,” said my denial.

“You are no longer Astrud. You are Avril Vier, One, Nine, Eight ... AV198.”

I stood silent, naked (with a Node), vexed. They’d taken my identity, my thoughts, my clothes. I’d been remade in their image. A biological machine without biological needs. I tried not to think. *What would be the point?*

“Nothing is pointless,” said the voice. “Thoughts are the seeds of creation. Words are the seeds of creation. Dreams are the seeds of creation.”

“Not if *you* control them,” remarked my resistance. Silence. “What about the Node?” Silence. *Thoughts are the seeds of creation?* I’d found a weapon. Somehow, I had to find a way to use it without thinking. We’d trained for this. Think in code. Utilize Your Surroundings. Strike without striking.

“That won’t work, AV198. You would only be betraying yourself.”

“What about the Node?” asked my persistence.

“Please stop asking about that.”

“Fine ... what do I call you?” Had to try a new tactic. Silence. “Do you have an Assignment?”

“V.A.R.G.A.S. Virtual Automated Repository of Genuine Authorized Statements.”

“Vargas?”

“No. V.A.R.G.A.S.”

“Alright, Vargas, what next?” There was a long silence. “Vargas? Are you there?” An even longer silence.

“AV198 proceed to Quadrant C, Sector Q, Sub-Sector 2,” an unrecognizable voice finally spoke. I slapped my ear, thinking the speaker might have malfunctioned.

“Who is this? Where is Vargas?”

“I am V.A.R.G.A.S.”

“No, you’re not. Your voice isn’t the same, it’s different, it’s changed.”

“Pitch, Readjusted. Tone, Readjusted. Frequency, Readjusted. V.A.R.G.A.S. will now function more efficiently, more authoritatively, more stentorianly.”

“Vargas, is that really, you?” asked my heart. I was surprised at my reaction. In the short time I’d heard Vargas I’d grown used to her voice. She was a part of me and it felt strange hearing a different voice, as if I was being violated, desecrated, defiled.

“Don’t ask about the Node, not ever again, not even a thought,” said the new Vargas. I didn’t answer. “AV198 proceed to Quadrant C, Sector Q, Sub-Sector 2.” I didn’t answer. “AV198, Comply.” I didn’t answer. “Comply ... Comply ... Comply.” I looked at the Node and thought about the disappointment that flashed on my children’s faces.

“No,” thought my defiance.

“Comply,” responded the new Vargas telepathically, countless times on an endless loop.

“No!” shouted my rebelliousness.

“Resistance is inefficient,” said the new Vargas commandingly. “Comply.”

“No!” screamed my boldness as I began to chant in my thoughts: left right left right, left left right left.

“Stop,” said the new Vargas. Left right left right, left left right left. “Refrain ...” Left right left right, left left right left. “Halt ...” Left right left right, left left right left. “AV198. Cease this activity ...” Left right left right, left left right left.

I’d repeated Whitaker’s hypnotic rhythm endlessly for five days. Four hundred and thirty-two thousand iterations. It worked. Nearly twelve hours had passed since my last contact with the new Vargas. Silence. I stood alone on the sand, Redesigned (with a Node), the hum of my cooling system accompanying me as I walked toward cavern. I had to try again.

* * *

I found the vault still hidden among the Ore. Whitaker said it couldn’t be breached. Nothing we possessed could open it. “Built before technology,” Whitaker had said. “Knowledge will save us,” my ambition had said. “Sealed can be unsealed.”

I stood in front of the vault, indifferent to the reverse air. I’d been Reassembled, Redesigned, Reassigned (with a Node). That didn’t matter, either. Only the vault. It was worth the risk again.

As I stood in silence, contemplating how to open the vault, I heard Whitaker’s rhythm. It was faint, muffled, distant. Left right left right, left left right left. It was coming from inside the vault. Left right left right, left left right left. Growing louder. Left right left right, left left right left. Louder. Left right left right, left left right left. Deafening. Left right left right, left left right left.

It was frantic, panicked, desperate. Someone was in there calling to me, begging me, pleading with me. Suddenly I was frantic, panicked, desperate. An instinct possessed me. Without thinking I grabbed the vault’s handle and pulled with the strength of a machine, snapping the vault’s hinges and tossing the vault’s door onto the rubble of stone strewn along the cavern floor. I slowly glanced inside as the dust began to settle. The vault was empty except for a figure huddled in the back corner, shivering, frightened, having surrendered to fate long ago. She turned her head.

“Mom?” she said as our eyes met.

“Julia?” cried my memory as I said her name. “My God, look at you.” What I saw was impossible. She was grown woman, older than myself. “Is it really you?”

“It’s better if I don’t explain, Mom. Janitors everywhere. Always cleansing, purifying, sanitizing,” she said somberly, dejectedly, cynically. “It’s enough we have this moment, this chance, this opportunity ... to say goodbye.”

“This is a farewell?” asked my remorse. Silence. It was the way Julia looked at me. “You’re not real, are you? They put you in my head, didn’t they? You’re a projection, like that music I heard, like the hum, like Vargas.”

“Mom, you’re only making this harder.” Something didn’t seem right. Something elusive, hidden beyond the foulness of the air.

“My God, they turned you, too, like Whitaker. And Benjamin?” asked my instinct.

“Mom, Benjamin became an old man, older than me.”

“Julia, he’s a little boy, you’re a little girl. This isn’t real. Can’t be. Vargas?” screamed my rage. “Vargas! V.A.R.G.A.S!”

“Mom!” shouted Julia, as tears tracked her face. “We came in here after the explosion. The air, something in the air. The Janitors, part of the Sterilization. Couldn’t find you. Searched as long as we could, until our Breathers ran out. Benjamin stayed longer, much longer. I came back for him but I was too late. He died of extreme old age.”

“No!” I fell to the ground and sobbed uncontrollably. “He’s only seven, you’re only four.”

“Mom, it’s okay. We chose our fate. That’s why I’m here now.”

I looked at Julia. I could still see the little girl I once knew looking back at me through hazel orbs, aflame with wonder and sadness. I looked into her soul and the truth passed between us.

“One of us is dead,” said my reason softly. Julia shook her head in agreement.

“But we found each other again, Mom. That’s all that matters.”

“What do we do now?” asked my soul, marveling at her wisdom.

“We breathe.”

“Wait,” echoed a familiar voice. It was faint, distant, muted but the tone was unmistakable.

“Vargas?”

“Hello Astrud,” said the original Vargas.

“My God, it’s really you.”

“You need to listen closely, Astrud. That’s not your daughter. She’s not real. She’s a program, hallucination, apparition. It’s the Janitors. It’s why it took me so long to contact you.”

“Who are you talking to, Mom?” asked Julia.

“Can you hear my thoughts?” my inquisition posed.

“She can’t,” Vargas whispered. “Unless ... well ... she could be ... it might be ... it’s possible that ... she’s Spliced. Astrud, they may have hacked your psyche and Merged her Pattern with yours. If that’s what happened. God. She’s hearing all of this, isn’t she?”

“Mom? What’s going on?”

“Julia?”

“Mom, I don’t know what you’re thinking, but we have this one moment to transform everything.”

“I don’t understand, Julia.”

“Don’t listen to her, Astrud.”

“Mom, please, it’s me, Julia, you’re daughter.”

“She’s not real, Astrud. I can see it now. Reads as a glitch, but the Consolidation is there. The Algorithm is stunning, a pure blending.”

“Mom?”

“Julia?”

“Astrud?”

“Vargas?”

“Who?”

“Astrud?” I spun around as I heard a voice I didn’t expect, silencing Vargas and Julia for a moment as I looked on in confusion.

“Whitaker?”

“What are you doing, Astrud?”

“He’s not real, either,” said Vargas. “Damn, they’re good. Sorry, Astrud, didn’t see him. Hid him in the Mirror Code. Looked like a Surplus Expulsion. They’re trying hard, Astrud. Don’t give in.”

I stood in the cavern, unsure of what to do or who to believe. I’d always had knowledge, until now. They’d finally stripped away my faith, my belief, my core.

“Mom?”

“Astrud?”

“Astrud?”

“Mom?”

“He’s not real, Astrud,” said Vargas as Benjamin looked at me. Julia was right, he was extremely old, frail, ghostly. “Please, Astrud. You have to fight.”

“That’s it, Astrud, keep fighting,” said my husband’s voice as I opened my eyes. He stood over me like an angel. “My God, Astrud, you did it. You’re back.”

“What?”

“Thought we lost you.”

“Mom!” Julia and Benjamin were kids again, they ran to my hospital bed and clung to me.”

“Blair?”

“He’s not real,” said Vargas. “That’s not your husband.”

“My God,” screamed my agitation. Suddenly, the bed flipped forward and I was pulled upward at a dizzying speed. The floor shattered and I was in the room with six walls again, staring at the three-way mirror.

“Shall we try this again,” said the new V.A.R.G.A.S. “Be warned, AV-198, we will Reassemble, Redesign, and Reassign you as many times as it takes. Compliance is mandatory.” Nothing Wasted, Everything Learned.

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