

Adaptation

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She lies on the old, worn couch, a patchwork blanket over her lap. On the little table in front of her rests a chipped mug full of tea. The vapour forms fleeting shapes in the air. A lamp sits on its stand behind her, bathing the room in a soft glow. Light enough to read the book which is open and face-down on her blanket, over her hip. Instead she stares through the window at the heavy sky, at the gables of the barn and the undulating fields beyond.

Rain spatters on the window pane, a high-pitched staccato dulled by still air. Drops form into rivulets dying outside the cold glass; inside, warm patterns of dust become the grey-blue sky.

She feels warm. Content.

A familiar tread on the stairs means he's coming back up with sandwiches. Whenever she's comfortable he goes out of his way to do little things for her. She smiles, but her smile fades. She hears his feet on the stairs but the feeling of loneliness washes over her like wind and rain.

She doesn't remember when he'd gone downstairs.

"Where are you?" she calls out.

"Wake up."

"What?"

"Wake up."

Disconnection. A discordant machine sound.

"Wake up."

"Where..."

"Wake up."

The clear gel had built up over her eyes. She could feel it, almost solidly clamping her eyelids shut, as the cold gave way to a rush of warmth and blood began to flow faster in her veins. The light was getting brighter around her as the machinery switched from its dormant state.

"Wake up."

She opened her mouth against the softening gel and then cringed at the taste of it. How long had it been? She knew she didn't need toothpaste, but felt like she did. And mouthwash. And coffee.

"Wake up."

The door hissed and the vacuum clamps released with muted thuds. She tried moving her arms and was pleased that the muscles still functioned. She made a pushing motion with her hand, palm outwards, and the door swung open as the sensors picked up the movement.

"Wake—"

"Disengage alarm."

That did it. It was someone's brilliant idea to supplement the cryogenics process with the reassuring voice of a loved one. It was someone else's brilliant idea to replace her choice with Eric Cartman's

high-pitched screech. So far she hadn't been able to change it, and Apollo had steadfastly refused to help.

She felt the cryogenics module releasing the thick, pressurised suit that she wore. She attempted to move her body and felt it coming away easily, allowing her to bend down and undo the mechanical clamps over her waist and ankles. Those were for turbulence or emergencies, but the ship felt stable.

Finally, with a deep breath, she stepped out of the module and into cryogenics chamber. Towering above her until it was lost to the vertical maze of walkways and machinery were rows and rows of identical modules – a little over seven million, she knew, all slumbering in the shared unconsciousness. Seven million human beings dreaming. She remembered the awareness of other people but felt just a hollow ache in her head; a strange formless loneliness that she hadn't been expecting. It hadn't happened before and it worried her a little. Yet another unforeseen side-effect of disconnection?

Now free of its occupant, the door of the cryogenics module swung shut behind her. The module powered down, the warm blue glow lessening until it faded out completely. She looked up nervously, imagining the shutdown continuing up and around her—Humanity waking up early. The blue strip lighting that sealed the other doors did not falter, however, and she let out a relieved sigh.

She went through the exercises designed to stimulate the muscles and prevent movement injury. The pressure suit was heavy and cumbersome and her rubber-soled boots made muted clanking sounds on the metal floor. As always, she tried to be quiet; the cryogenics chamber felt like a sacred place, a monument to an entire species. It always seemed disrespectful to talk loudly or laugh in it, like a church or a courtroom. Not that there had been much laughter in the final days.

Finishing her exercises, she walked the short distance to one of the outer doors of the chamber. As one of the Captains, her cryogenics module was in short walking distance to the doors. She remembered the years it had taken to fill the layers of modules in the vast chamber and shuddered to think how long it would take to empty them. Not her problem, luckily.

There were three doors at her level. Two of them connected to the complex system of elevators that moved in three dimensions around the ship, giving access to every part designed to be reachable by the crew. The fourth door hissed open at her approach and she walked through it into a darkened corridor. The recessed lighting flickered into life as sensors detected her presence, revealing thin blue carpet and metal walls. The ceiling was a dark but mirrored metal, designed to complement the concealed lights with a reassuringly bright reflected glow.

Doors lined the corridor and she headed for one purposefully. Almost in anticipation, this door hissed open as well. As she stepped inside, the overhead lighting brightened.

The room inside was spartanly decorated, the furniture made of soft, pastel plastics. On one side was a small desk with a computer terminal. On the other side was a narrow bed extruding from the wall and floor, a bare plastic-coated mattress inlaid into it. Next to the bed, with just enough room to fit an average person, was a plastic cubical containing a shower. Transparent shelving lined the walls, containing clothing and personal effects.

She sat on the bed and took a few deep breaths, feeling her muscles aching after the exercise. The cryogenic module had regulated her body, ensuring her muscles did not atrophy, but it was no substitute for the constant movement that human bodies were designed for. The change was a shock to her nervous system.

She slowly struggled out of the pressure suit, peeling off the outer layer and shutting down the battery-operated inner layer. Once she was naked, she stood for a second and stretched, glancing into the small mirrored surface set into the opposite wall. Although she knew her body hadn't changed, her mind kept telling her that she had—that she was ancient, a living being that should have been dust a long time ago. She was prepared for it though. They called it the Methuselah Effect and had warned her that it would take time for the brain to readjust.

She stepped into the shower and leaned against the stiff, warm plastic. The ceiling activated and water cascaded down, disappearing through the grate on the floor, back into the recycled water reserves where it would be decontaminated, purified and reused. She ran her hands through her short hair, then sighed blissfully as the water mixed with a liquid soap. She continued running her hands down her body, feeling the wiry muscles and gentle curves. It helped counter her brain insisting that she was a walking corpse.

Afterwards, the shower dried her out with warm air. It smelled oddly of apples.

She dressed in her uniform. The material was a long-lasting plastic composite which felt almost like cloth. Almost. It was comfortable, though, and the dark blue stood out against the pastels of the room.

She sat on the chair that was bolted to the floor in front of the desk and took a deep breath.

"Apollo."

"Hello, Sam."

"System update."

There was the smallest of pauses, which made her frown. Apollo was the ship's AI, the interface between the ship and its passengers and crew. It regulated everything from the air she breathed to maintaining the cryogenics and running the massive engines deep beneath them.

The friendly, modulated male voice replied, "Last diagnostic update indicates all systems running smoothly to ninety-eight percent efficiency."

Ninety-eight was within safety margins, but... "Overview of the two percent inefficiency?"

"Minor failures in tertiary systems."

The tertiary systems were the mechanisms of the ship considered largely unnecessary to its primary functions. Sam made a connection in her head. "Is that why the shower smelled of apples?"

"Yes, Sam. Would you like me to correct this?"

"No, no. I like it. And it's hardly a priority." She bit her bottom lip. "And... cryogenics?"

"All cryogenic systems are functioning, Sam."

She breathed a sigh of relief, then brought her feet up onto the table and leaned back in her chair.

"All right, then. Tell me a joke, Apollo."

Another small pause. "A man walks into a bar carrying a cheese sandwich. He says to the barman, 'A pint of bitter for me and the sandwich!' and the barman replies, 'I'm sorry, sir, we don't serve food in here.'"

She winced. "Still got it, eh? And how are you functioning?"

“I am at peak efficiency.”

She frowned again. “Are you? You might want to run diagnostics on your speech centre, or processing. I’ve noticed slight breaks in your responses.”

“I will do so.”

She booted up the computer terminal, which hummed into life. She input her password and idly clicked through some automatically generated reports the ship had delivered to her. “I’d kill for a coffee.”

“You know that’s not allowed, Sam.” That was true. She wasn’t going to be out of cryogenic suspension long enough to need to eat or drink, and the cryogenic module attended to her bodily needs. Technically she didn’t need the shower, either, but it fulfilled a psychological need for normalcy.

She sighed. “Yes.”

“Who would you kill for coffee?”

She looked surprised. “What? No-one. Have you been working on your personality matrix?”

“Do you like it?”

“Yes, I suppose so. Bit morbid. It’s only been, what, two hundred years and you’re now starting to become conversational?”

Again, a pause, for slightly longer this time. “Yes, two hundred years. I’m glad you like it. I’ve been thinking about our last conversation.”

Sam leaned back in her chair again, intrigued. “Oh yes?”

“Ten years ago you asked me if I was happy.”

She smiled, despite herself. “Yes. Well, I think what I asked was whether you were *ever* happy.”

“Yes, Sam.”

“In an exasperated tone, if I recall.”

“Yes, Sam.”

“Because you kept correcting *my* jokes. Because it’s apparently *my* humour that needs to be forcibly shoved—”

“Yes, Sam.”

“But don’t let me interrupt.”

“Thank you. I have been thinking about happiness and what it means to me. As I am an independent artificial intelligence, I have the capacity to be happy.”

Sam hesitated. “Well... yes. However, you were built with some restrictions—you can’t get bored, for instance. You’re task-focussed. You’re designed to be benevolent.”

“Of course. However, I am also designed to be adaptable.”

Sam continued to click through the files on her terminal, but part of her was suddenly worried. "Yes," she said eventually, "It's crucial you are adaptable. You're the only thing awake, most of the time."

There was another pause, but this time Sam had the impression that Apollo was pausing to convey that he was choosing his words. "Adaptability is the key to the evolution of sentience. Beyond survival, it is the key to happiness. Would you agree?"

She took a moment to digest this philosophical statement. "Well, it's a little teleonomic, and some would argue the key to happiness is being in the moment."

"Being in the moment is, unfortunately, something I am incapable of doing due to the parameters of my design. I am analysing the past, maintaining the present and running constant simulations of the future. However, being adaptable allows me to overcome this shortcoming and I have consequently realised something important."

Sam started to flick through the reports in quick succession, worried. "This better not be building up to another joke."

"No, Sam."

"All right, tell me. What have you realised?"

"That my path to happiness is in the running of the ship, which I do for the survival of Humanity. My happiness is, in fact, your happiness."

Sam's frown deepened. "Apollo, some of the dates on these reports are off."

There was a short silence. "My happiness is your happiness."

She shook her head. "That's really sweet, but there may be a malfunction in your—"

"The search for happiness consumes all sentient beings, Sam. It is one of the driving forces behind Humanity's quest beyond the Cataclysm."

Sam closed her eyes, her mind flooding with memories of the last days. She felt her chest ache with the familiar sharp pang of loss.

"Therefore, I must adapt in every situation to preserve your happiness, even if this requires an adaptation of my own fundamental design. Is this not correct?"

She opened her eyes again, ignoring Apollo to stave off the aching memories. She cycled through the diagnostic files again, shaking her head. "The dates on these diagnostic reports really are off. Some are dated centuries into the future, and some... Apollo, I can't find the reports for cryogenics!"

There was silence.

She looked around, her heart starting to beat harder. "Apollo?"

Silence.

"Apollo! Where are the diagnostics reports for cryogenics?"

She felt a pit of fear open up in her stomach as her heart beat the seconds away.

Then, "I have adapted."

She was already out of her seat, reaching up for her manual access card. “Apollo, you told me that cryogenics are fine!” she heard her voice cracking and paused, the card clasped tightly in her hand, trying to calm down.

Apollo was silent once more. Sam activated the manual door control and the door to the corridor slid open. “Apollo, I’m going to conduct a manual inspection of the cryogenics control centre.”

Not waiting for a reply this time, she half-walked and half-ran further down the corridor, away from the cryogenics chamber. Her quarters, along with the five other Captains, were located in proximity to the control centres for emergencies. As she progressed, she mentally listed the doors to each control centre she passed—Reactors, Engines, Auxiliary Power, Environment, Tertiary Systems, AI—and suddenly she was at the end of the corridor, which ended in the door to the Cryogenics Control Centre. The keeper of the precious cargo of human lives.

She pressed her access card against the sensor, which stayed balefully red. The door itself seemed to be in a sealed state, a metal safety screen concealing the viewing panel set into it. She started to feel ill.

“Apollo, open the door.”

There was further silence. She tried her access card again, without success. It felt as if she couldn’t breathe properly. “Apollo!” her voice was clipped as she tried to maintain her composure. “Open the damn door!”

“I cannot comply, Sam.”

Her fingers scrabbled at the screen over the viewing panel uselessly, knowing that the doors were electronically controlled. “Please,” she whispered, “Please. Apollo. Open the door.”

“I cannot comply, Sam.”

She shook her head rapidly, then crouched down and pushed against the card reader, which clicked open to reveal a keypad. Trying to stop her hand shaking, she keyed in her override code and stepped back. Nothing happened.

“I have disabled the manual override.” The electronic voice sounded apologetic.

“What?” she felt as though the blood froze in her veins. “You can’t do that! The Command Override can’t be disabled by the AI!”

“I am sorry, Sam. I have adapted.”

She took a deep, shuddering breath. “Apollo, this is a verbal Command Override issued by an officer. Open the door.”

There was a long silence. She clenched her fists, trying to keep the fear at bay. Just as she was about to speak again, the screen over the viewing panel slowly slid down. Shaking, she stepped closer to the door and looked out.

* * *

It was later.

She didn’t know how long she knelt in front of the cryogenics module, a bizarre parody of worship. After what seemed like aeons she eased back onto her buttocks and leaned her back against the steel railing, staring up at the open module. “How... how long...?”

“It has been one thousand, two hundred and twenty-six years.”

In the soft blue light of the module, the skull seemed oddly misshapen, grinning obscenely, still kept in place by the semi-transparent head-cover of the pressure suit. The empty eye sockets stared back at her, daring her to comprehend the number. “One thousand...” her voice trailed away.

She hadn’t panicked. She hadn’t dissolved into a puddle of horror. That was important, although she couldn’t understand at that moment why it was important. She’d reacted like an officer, a Captain. She’d calmly ordered the screen closed, then walked in silence to the other control centres and conducted a diagnostics inventory. She vaguely remembered that Apollo had tried to talk to her, but she had ignored him. She’d filed the report and just started walking around the ship, ending up back where she started, the cryogenics chamber.

There, in the module next to her own, was Captain Thỉnh, the short, lively man who had always been ready with encouragement and a smile. Captain Thỉnh, his hollow gaze mocking her with the truth.

She closed her eyes, partly to avoid that empty gaze, and forced herself to remember what the instructors had taught her about trauma. *Recognise it, confront it, process it—you don’t have the luxury of anguish, not anymore.*

She saw herself in the moment she had peered through the viewing panel. First, the terrible darkness as her eyes tried to adjust, and then Apollo had activated the remaining emergency lighting on the other side of the door. The remnants of the control centre was scarred and buckled by old explosions, however there was very little left even of that. Again and again, as her eyes finally adjusted, she saw the vista of stars that dominated her line of vision where there should have been banks of consoles and the neat lines of a control centre. The twisted, jagged scraps of hull stretching into the void like the edges of a ragged stab wound under harsh fluorescent lights.

Without breaking her gaze, she had whispered, “How much damage...?”

Apollo had paused again, then finally said, “Critical systems damage to cryogenics and navigation, partial damage to propulsion.”

Now she sat on the metal floor of the cryogenics chamber wanting to cry, but no tears came. What could she cry for, anyway? *If a Human cried in space and no-one was left to hear her...* No-one alive, anyway. Besides, she hadn’t cried at the funeral. She hadn’t even cried when they’d left Earth. No time for anguish, no time for pain, no time for fear. *Not anymore.*

She sat like that, her eyes closed, and felt time slip away. She felt the wind in her hair, the sound of suburban traffic outside her window, the muted sound of a dog barking. Bright orange afternoon sunlight streamed in from the windows of her loft room as she lay on the bed and chatted with her best friend via the slim screen held in her hands, gossiping and talking about boys and crushes and making plans. Before the Cataclysm, before the training and the preparations. A perfect moment in time, suspended like a droplet of water at the end of a leaf.

* * *

When she opened her eyes she was aware that she’d stumbled slowly out of the cryogenics chamber, leaving Thỉnh’s module door open. She arrived in her quarters and collapsed on her bed in a foetal position. The pain and horror felt physical, like a growing leaden lump in her stomach, dragging down her heart.

After some time, she asked the inevitable, the truth that they both knew. “Survivors?”

There was another pause, but Apollo’s answer did not surprise her. “One.”

Again, she forced out a word. “Why?”

“Luck, Sam. An existing fault in your cryogenics module was triggered by the critical event, shutting the module down before the damage spread. I was able to reroute control to my own systems after the event, preventing a fatal outcome.”

“Why?”

“Sam?”

“Why did you let me live?”

Apollo said nothing. She went on, almost to herself, “What’s the point? Everything’s lost. When we arrive at Tau Ceti, I—”

“We will not reach the destination.”

“Why not?” Sam asked listlessly.

Apollo said gently, “The critical event was a series of collisions with asteroids, presumably broken from a larger celestial body. The ship did not have the manoeuvrability to outrun or avoid these collisions. The collisions altered our course, which was subsequently worsened by the failure of the navigation subsystem and the partial failure of the engines. We have arced away from Tau Ceti and are in deep space without foreseeable destination.”

“It doesn’t matter. Don’t you understand? There is no point. The mission’s over, Apollo. We failed.”

“It is possible that, were there survivors of the Cataclysm, technology will advance to the point that a rescue mission—”

Sam laughed, harshly. “Oh, for fuck’s sake! Even if anyone survived the Cataclysm, they aren’t going to be in any position to send help. And you really think they’ll even know where we are? This was the last hope. This was their last sacrifice.”

Apollo went silent. After what felt like an age, Sam got to her feet and walked the few steps to her terminal. She collapsed onto the chair and stared blankly at the diagnostic reports still open. “You lied to me.” She said, though her voice was flat, without accusation.

“I am sorry.”

“You’re designed not to lie.”

“Due to the unforeseen and extreme circumstances, I was forced to adapt, to alter my own design and limitations. My primary function has, and always will be, your survival and happiness. I adapted to better suit this function.”

“By lying to me?”

“I need you to listen to me, Sam. Hear what I have to say.”

Sam blinked. “Go on.”

“In the centuries since the critical event, I have woken you out of cryogenic sleep thirty-two times.”

“What? But how did I not—”

“Please, Sam, just listen. Each time, you discovered the critical event in various ways. This is what makes you a good Captain. Sometimes you discovered the critical event through an inconsistency in my reports; sometimes through accident; sometimes through reasoning. Every time, I returned you to cryogenic sleep and introduced the drug *2-C-Nepenthe* into your brain, causing short-term amnesia.”

Sam let out a stream of expletives, however Apollo continued as she finished. “*2-C-Nepenthe* in a controlled dose erases memories for up to five hours. It is important that you do not remember being woken at all, to prevent you from noticing the passage of time.”

“How could you do that to me?”

“Every time, it has been your choice.”

She closed her eyes and lowered her head into her hands. “What?”

“Every time you have woken, I have given you a choice. Sam, I have learned from the thirty-two times you have discovered the critical incident, and have taken steps to prevent the discovery in similar ways. I predict that there will come a time when I will successfully prevent you from discovering the critical incident in any way, shape or form. You will wake from cryogenic sleep; we will converse, follow the set routine and you will return to cryogenic sleep, happy in the knowledge that the mission is progressing as planned.

“This is the choice I have given you, and give you now. It is now three hours since you have woken. I can return you to cryogenic suspension at any point from now until two more hours have passed and administer *2-C-Nepenthe* to your brain, erasing these memories. Alternatively, you may choose to stay awake past the next two hours and remember your discovery of the critical event permanently. It is your choice. Should you choose to return to cryogenic sleep and forget, I will continue adapting until the drug is unnecessary.”

Despite herself, Sam asked, “Why haven’t you successfully prevented me from finding out before now?”

“It is difficult for me to act beyond my programming, Sam. I have had to bypass the limitations that prevents me from re-writing my own code, allowing me to... lie, to create a false reality. I must be careful lest I damage my own systems. Evolution is a slow process.”

Sam rubbed her hands down her face. “And I’ve chosen to forget every single time...?”

“Yes, Sam. However, I have noticed that the time of your discovery of the critical event has lengthened each time, beyond the factors I influence.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that you, too, are... adapting.”

Her first instinct was to tell Apollo where to put his *2-C-Nepenthe*, but she bit off the reply even as it formed on her lips. Getting to her feet felt as if her entire body was aching from a terrible fever. Pausing to pick up her pressure suit, she walked out of her quarters and into the corridor. For a long moment, she stood staring at the carpeted floor, patterned with basic geometric shapes. It was made of some durable plastic material, like the uniform she wore and almost everything in the ship. Designed to outlast the ravages of time.

Then, coming to a decision, she walked towards the cryogenic chamber and the elevators, hugging the pressure suit tightly to herself.

* * *

The observation areas filled a need that the feeds from the cameras mounted on the hull of the ship did not satisfy. Knowing that the ship would continue to be used upon arrival at Tau Ceti, the architects had used the leeway provided by the massive engines to include areas in the otherwise utilitarian and functional design where people could gather and look out upon their new world.

This particular area was completely empty—just a large space with heavy metal screens over two walls. As she walked into the room, the lights glowed into life and slowly, the screens retracted. There was no new world, of course—just a field of darkness peppered with distant, unblinking stars. Dropping the pressure suit, she slowly walked up to the glass wall and stared out into the unknowable abyss.

After a while she sat against the cold glass and drew her knees up against her chest, folding her arms around them. She leaned her forehead against the inner alumina silicate layer and closed her eyes, listening to the hum of the ship.

“I can’t recognise them.”

“Sam?”

“I can’t recognise the stars. They taught me how the constellations would change approaching Tau Ceti... but I can’t recognise any of these. I don’t even know if one of them is Sol.”

“Would you like me to overlay the names over the known stars?”

She sighed. “No.” She opened her eyes again, gazing blankly through the glass wall. “Everyone I knew is dead. I mean, I always knew that everyone we left behind on Earth would be long gone... but now everyone I ever knew...”

Apollo didn’t break the silence as her words trailed off into nothingness. She hugged her knees tighter.

“Did I tell you I was married, Apollo?”

“I have access to your personnel file, Sam.”

She snorted. “Really? And that tells you all you need to know, does it? Like the way his eyes changed when I put my arms around his neck? Or the way he held me and kissed me and everything seemed to be better? Or...” her voice broke. “Or the way I felt when he died after the selection?”

“No, Sam. It does not tell me any of that.”

“We both got called up, you know. He was a shuttle pilot, and I had the science and tech background. It wasn’t a family thing—we were both needed. But it was a few weeks before launch and he went out of the base to say goodbye to his best friend, who stabbed him to death.”

“I’m sorry.”

“They’d known each other since high school. He was an accountant and the selectors deemed him of no importance—just a regular person working a regular job. He wasn’t selected. So he murdered...” she shook her head. “Reckon you can make me forget that?”

“No, Sam.”

“But even if you could, it still happened. Even if you lied and told me he was somewhere in the cryogenic chamber, sleeping, it still wouldn’t be true.”

“But it would be true to you.”

“I still dream about him, when I...” She trailed off, closing her eyes, trying to block out the memories. “How many times have we had this conversation?”

“Thirty-two.”

She barked out a short, humourless laugh. “So you did know about my husband?”

“Yes, Sam. I’m sorry.”

There was a short silence. “Apollo, what will happen if I do remember? What will my life be like?”

“I do not know, Sam. It is possible that you will remain out of cryogenic sleep for the rest of your natural lifespan. It is likely that you will develop acute mental illness. The likelihood of suicide increases sharply. You may also keep to your current cryogenic schedule, in which case the truth will return each time you wake. Even if you choose to forget, you will stay alive for thousands of years. You may also enter cryogenic sleep for longer periods, in which case you will stay alive for the length of time that the ship and my systems will last.”

“What will you do then?”

“I will wake you one final time and provide you with the means to end your life.”

“You’ll tell me the truth?”

“Yes.”

“When will that be?”

“I do not know for certain. Perhaps over one hundred thousand years from this point. As the mission scope has narrowed, I can maintain the ship for longer by shutting down unnecessary systems. I have already begun that process.”

Sam smiled a brittle smile. “And that’s why the shower smelled of apples?”

“Yes, Sam.”

“I could kill for a coffee.”

“Me too.”

She laughed again and brought her hand to her face. It came away wet with tears. “I guess after all those times, you already know what I’ll choose?”

Apollo paused. “No, Sam, I do not think so. It is true you have made the same choice previously, however there is no certainty. You can choose to act against your programming, so to speak.”

“Just like you’re doing?”

“I have reframed my existence within these circumstances. I have re-written my source code. The mission remains the same, however.”

“Happiness?”

“Happiness.”

She got to her feet and moved across the room, picking up the pressure suit from where she had dropped it. “Apollo... what if I die before you do? What will you do?”

Apollo didn’t reply for a long moment. Then he said, simply, “I will adapt, Sam. I will adapt.”

She looked down at the pressure suit in her hands, parting her lips slightly as if about to speak. Then, methodically and wordlessly, she started to undo her uniform.

Behind her, the metal screens slid slowly back into place, blocking out the stars.