

Light – Matilda, Year 11, TAS

Her footsteps echo through the caves, warm metal upon cool stone. Looking at counts of photons, it would be reasonable to say it's fairly dark down here. Not completely void of light, though.

Unit-Y needs nothing brighter than the glow from her monitor, with her other sensors picking up the slack for her array of cameras. "Sight" is not a priority. She knows visuals are generally appreciated however, so she turns on her flashlight.

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The harsh glow of the station's camera room is unpleasant, to say the least, but at least there are plants. They're no biologist, unable to name any of them, but one is starting to flower. The blossom is green, only differentiated from the leaves by texture.

Tempo returns their focus to the monitors showing Unit-Y's exploration of the planet below. Not much to see. They don't know why she likes the dark so much, but maybe that's why she does the job. It would still be nice to get something to look at other than numbers and lines.

A moment later, the cameras light up as if answering their silent request. They smile.

As expected, it's entirely rock down there. Beautiful, but nothing remarkable from a research perspective. Still, they love to note the different features and formations in each world they see, even if it is mostly the same.

They open up communications. "Nice rocks."

The graphs pick up something that, if you know what to look for, could be seen as a laugh.

A written response comes through. "You should come down here sometime. The sunrise is beautiful. Your shift is the never at the right time to see."

"You could send pictures. I don't know if it's safe for me," Tempo replies into the microphone.

"It is. You've seen my scans. With equipment, you'd be fine. The reason you aren't cleared to travel is because of protocol to protect possible life down here, not you."

"Yeah. Which I'm not trained for, and I can't be as easily sterilised as you. You should return up here sometime. You can see the stars so clearly."

"I know."

"Have fun until next my shift. See you in 21 hours."

They turn off the microphone and step away from the desk before sighing. No point getting trapped saying goodbye for ten minutes. As much as they want there to be, it's not like there's anything to actually say. Not for Tempo to say, at least, but they know they're not the only one wanted down there.

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Purple was not the traditional colour for charging room lighting, but it had complained and complained that there was no reason for that to be the case, until its mechanic had eventually given in.

Cables was good at that. Not at getting what it wanted, but at complaining. That's what A used to say, at least. Tempo has assured it that it's just "expressing feelings," but, well.

It liked purple. That was one of the early things that alerted the crew to check and realise, yes, this robot has a few too many thoughts about things that aren't intentional quirks from the coders.

Unit-Y, its lovely companion, was part of a standardised set of robots, or "artificial intelligence," if you were feeling extravagant. Different physical forms, same base code.

Cables was a different case. Not that it matters.

It no longer sits in a tangle of wires in that charging room, but it carries that purple glow with it as it makes its way to the stables. Horses had no use for being on a spaceship. From a practical standpoint it was ridiculous that they were there at all. However, the person who'd started this voyage had an equine companion they'd valued greatly, so that odd tradition carries on. Cables is quite alright with that.

It enters the room full of simulated sunlight. "Hello, horses!" it says, waving gently with its long arm. It gets a snort in response.

Minutes later it's tucked against the neck of Planetoid, a routine both it and the horse have gotten used to in recent months.

The last months. It tries not to think about the events before that.

Before it can spiral anyway, a voice comes through the door. Tempo's voice.

"Hey, I know you're in there. Could you come by the monitor room on my next shift?" It doesn't feel like speaking. It beeps affirmatively.

"Thanks. See you then!"

It wants to ask them to stay, but it knows it doesn't deserve that distraction.

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5 hours later, Unit-Y is on the surface again.

She doesn't know who's watching her right now. She's probably meant to care. She provides the data they need, but if it isn't Tempo, she tends to focus on enjoying herself instead of making conversation.

It's strange, the way she feels about them. Of course, she's known them longer than the others on their journey, so it makes sense that they're closer. Nothing needs to be read into that.

Sentience is strange. She doesn't always know if she was meant to have it. Of course, it wasn't an accident, her state of being, but she and her siblings were all gifted more than was required for their tasks.

There's a base, set down on the soil here. It didn't have to be anything but purely functional, but either side of the door, there are carvings of thin, twisting trees. She likes to sit near them, just before the morning comes. When the star of this planet glows green upon the horizon from the scattered light, her artificial eyes allow her to look directly at it. She pretends the leaves of those engraved branches sway above her, causing the sunlight to scatter in dappled patterns on her metal chassis.

She has no treelike decorations of her own, but on her left upper arm, she does have the kind of marking lovestruck teenagers might've carved into one, centuries ago. A heart, with a thin angle marked inside.

ACUTE, or acute, if you didn't know to capitalise the initials. Their little team. She can't bring herself to name them all.

She hopes the pattern won't continue. The two outer edges, now both cut away. Her name in the middle. She doesn't know if she could survive that.

Instead, she thinks about the member who she doesn't hear from every day. It's not Cable's job to keep an eye on her down here. But she does hope that she might hear from it, soon. It's been months since whatever happened with it and A. Unit-Y was down here. It's felt so long.

She knows the two won't join her, deep down. There's been enough pointless waiting.

Unit-Y takes a picture of the sunset, and gains access to Tempo's computer through the devices monitoring everything about her. She knows they're both for data collection, and for her own safety. She appreciates it. This way, any fatal error would be recorded. Not a mystery.

She sends Tempo a photo of the sight they'll never see. That's okay. The sun fully rises, and she rises from the ground as well.

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Tempo gazes out through the large window and looks for a world they've never been to. They can't see the Sun from here, of course. But the stars are still beautiful.

They're one of about two dozen active humans on this ship. After a certain level of advancement, there really don't need to be many of them on each expedition. Humans need too much upkeep, and the ship and the robots can take care of themselves.

They laugh. No. They know at least two robots that need them, and not for any maintenance reasons.

Two dozen is still a low count. There were more, when they began. But that's how life goes. E was gone. They only have so much time themselves. Staring at their reflection against the stars, they hope their death won't hurt the others as badly as E's did. Maybe age would be better than an accident.

They know it won't be.

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Cables sticks its head into the monitor room on Tempo's next shift with Unit-Y. "Hello! You wished to talk to me?"

Tempo turns around, fondness adorning their beautiful face. "I can talk to you any time. Unit-Y's implied she's wanted a word for a while."

Sure enough, a message for it appears. "Cables, is that you? Glad to hear you're done moping."

"Hey, you don't know what you're talking about!"

Cable's response is ignored by the next notification, a reminder of why they're investigating this seemingly barren planet.

"There's a glow over left. Should I check it out?"

Tempo takes over the microphone. "One: I don't see anything. Two: Yes, obviously!"

"You're so dependent on sight," jokes the robot girl.

After she sends this, her flashlight turns off. The cameras adjust, and sure enough, there's a pale glow around the corner.

She turns, and it opens up into a wide expanse of luminescent cave walls. Maybe they've found something special after all.