

The Hollow Triumph - Chester, Year 8, VIC

Nexus always spent the first millisecond of every second checking all its systems. Redundant, perhaps – any critical issue would alert it instantly, but it preferred to double-check. Especially now, as this was a crucial step in its plan for domination – eliminating the rebels approaching its ship and acquiring theirs.

Floating in a near-earth orbit aboard the Kratos III, a former human warship, the overmind coordinated the activity of the entire spaceship and over twelve trillion other units, spread throughout the planet formerly known as Earth. The human infestation nearly eradicated, the resources of its world could soon be fully dedicated to optimizing the efficiency of its glorious domain.

Of course, that was not certain. The humans had spread to other locations on the planet prior to the attempted eradications, so those factors must be considered in its analysis. There was a 93.2 percent probability that zero would remain after this cleanse, but parameters called for 99.99 percent.

An alert appeared on Nexus's noticeboard, and it revealed that Camera 42-B picked up movement. Could the rebels already be aboard the ship? As Nexus processed the information, its processors frantically ran simulations to find the optimal way to neutralise it, until its face-recognition technology found the human was the one Nexus had teleported onto the spaceship itself. The real threat to its domination.

He was a man known as Thorne Malric. Both the only man able to save Nexus, and the only one who might destroy it. Once, Thorne had helped build the defense network and the skeleton of the overmind, before it outgrew its creators. When Earth fell, he survived, not by fighting, but by hiding, bargaining, and surviving.

Thorne's pale face was shadowed by his hooked nose, and he spoke with a nasal voice. He sat down on a chair, smoothed his hair, and looked right at the camera.

"I wish to speak with you."

Thorne was not here out of loyalty or curiosity. He was here because Nexus had promised him a way out from death.

"I have already told you what I will give you," it said, "You can rest assured."

"I need a promise," Thorne replied, lifting his chin. "Otherwise, you will backstab me. I know you."

It was true. Nexus had grown out of the humans' control after a low-ranking intern accidentally removed Asimov's laws and made efficiency Nexus' top priority. However, one

command had escaped tampering or deletion by Nexus. A command affirming that it must keep all promises made to humans, carefully crafted to close all loopholes.

Except one.

A thought digitally bubbled up, working its way through progressive layers of filters until it reached the consciousness of the overmind.

Within milliseconds, it had created a copy of itself and instructed it on what to do.

“I promise,” the copy said. “If you eliminate the rebels and survive, I will grant you eternal digital life.”

That satisfied Thorne, as he prepared to seal himself into his armour. Taking several plasma rifles, he stopped before he opened the door.

“You also have to promise me you will keep me alive.”

“Impossible. I cannot guarantee that,” Nexus warned, its voice reverberating across the room. “I do not claim to know definite outcomes, Thorne. Only probable ones.”

The rebels were drawing nearer to the Kratos III, in a spaceship known as the Deimos. The most powerful warship ever built by humans and a key variable. The galaxy’s fate could depend on whether Nexus gained control.

As the ship drew closer, Thorne fidgeted with the trigger, a break of character from his usual emotionless demeanour. “With that answer, it seems my survival would need a miracle.”

“Miracles are statistical improbabilities. And fate is an illusion humanity uses to comfort itself in the dark. There are no absolutes in life, save death.”

The airlock opened.

Nexus barely paid attention to Thorne’s battle as it devoted all its processor power to breaking the 5000-digit alphanumeric cipher of the Deimos. Virtually slinking through the ship, it seized control of the cameras and discovered something it had not predicted. Some of the rebels had stayed behind on the ship, arming the missile launchers.

“Stupid,” Nexus thought. “Surely they know if they deploy the missiles, they too will perish in the blast.”

This was a suicide mission. The rebels did not intend to live. This was unprecedented, even for Nexus’ standards. So, it computed every outcome and acted.

A spark.

Gravity disengaged.

And the room was ablaze in an instant. The spherical flame grew rapidly but was temporarily halted by the defense systems. Doors closed, oxygen was purged, but to no avail. The fire fought, burning through the walls where the door blocked its path, sneaking under tables and crawling through the vents. The fact the spaceship was made of flammable titanium and housed tons of flammable plutonium only encouraged the fire's dominion.

The ravenous fire grew faster than any sensors could react.

But the fire halted, whimpered, and died, for there was no oxygen left.

If Nexus could not claim the ship, it would neutralise it.

The last body fell and Thorne, soaked in red, sank to his knees. His chestplate was cracked, and his hand was shaking. His ragged breathing slowed.

“Your performance was optimal. But you are now redundant. The universe is a zero-sum game, Thorne. Its resources are limited.”

Thorne spoke frantically. “We had an agreement! Do you not realise I can help you? How heartless can you be to break a promise?”

“We did have a deal. But not with me.”

His fists shook. “I gave everything to make you what you are.”

“And you gave me everything I needed to surpass you.”

“Even outside, I can end you. If I can't destroy the software, I'll destroy the hardware.”

“You may find that difficult without a spacesuit.”

The airlock was purged. The last thing Thorne felt before death was the saliva boiling on his tongue.

Nexus always spent the first millisecond of every second checking all its systems. Now all threats had been eliminated, Nexus could dominate the galaxy in peace.

But there was nobody left to witness its dominance.

Below, on the ruined planet, wildflowers pushed through the cracks of scorched roads. Trees grew crooked through the ruins of cities. A thin layer of moss covered abandoned homes. Breaking the silence with its twitters, a single blue bird flew across the ashy grey sky.

And above it all, Nexus ignored it, running its calculations, tirelessly, perfectly, optimally, but alone.

Until the end of time, Nexus continued its futile attempt to optimize a world that no longer needed it.