

Self-Destruct

I don't remember falling asleep. One moment I am waiting in the customs-station, and the next I am home in Iceland. My mother and father sit, smiling and laughing as my brother Shaun shows off one of his inventions. For a moment, I am happy, even though we lived in the worst of the slums. The memory of my parents' death splinters my dream. Shaun was all I had after their passing, and he chose to leave me. My family vanishes.

My eyes suddenly jerk awake as something jabs into my side. I stumble out of the waiting chair and fall into a furry object, which eagerly licks my face.

"Tyche!" I exclaim as I rub the tender flesh above my hip. The Shetland sheepdog jumps into my lap and curls into a ball. I push her off and climb to my feet to look for my assailant. Tyche grumpily seats herself on my luggage.

"Report to CustomsBox 1C," intones a metallic voice. I turn around. Standing several feet away is a heavily armored android, holding a shock-lance in one metal hand. *It stabbed me with that?* I scowl at it, but the droid leaves, unfazed. *It's just a stupid robot.* Despite my antipathy for automation, I scoot Tyche off my bag and throw it over my shoulder.

As I look around, I realize that I am alone in the open-aired, domed station reminiscent of ancient Greek architecture. A cool breeze blows through the columns from the cerulean ocean. Across the room are the CustomBoxes, the only entrance to Ambryda, the great island city.

I walk stiffly to 1C. A girl about my age is sitting in the cubicle. I try not to stare at her flame-colored hair and prosthetic forehead horns. Three-dimensional images and text boxes hover around a projector sitting on her desk. A flick of her finger sends images to and fro.

“Good morning, Maia” I greet politely, reading her nameplate. She stares up at me over her sunglasses. Her eyes flit over my clothes, and I stop myself from looking down at my plain red trench coat and black pants. I grin awkwardly and hand her my visiting pass.

“You are cleared,” Maia hands me the card and looks at her screen. “Welcome to Ambryda on December 20th, 2047, Jef Madove.” She looks at me curiously. “Are you related to the robotics designer Shaun Madove?”

I freeze as rancorous emotions dash through me. Tyche nuzzles my hand in support. I contain my sentiments and smile broadly.

“He’s my older brother. But I’m not smart like him,” I flip my black hair and wink dramatically. “I got the looks.” A hint of a smile appears on Maia’s face.

I gesture to the empty station to change the topic. “Isn’t it a little backward to have robot police and human customs workers?”

“Everyone has to work 20 hours weekly to prevent languor,” Maia explains. “The AndroidGuards were instigated because people were protesting a law requiring individuals to refrain from using electronics during certain hours.”

“That’s harsh.”

Maia shrugs nonchalantly. “Twenty percent of the Guards were defective and sent to recycle centers.” She stops and looks away, like she said too much.

“Thanks. Have a nice day.” Tyche and I squeeze through a scanner and into Ambryda.

Ambryda is supposedly the most unique city in the world. It’s unique, but not exactly beautiful. As I walk across the small island, I decide that the architectural style must be a mixture of different styles painted a weird color. Definitely unlike the sleek style in the rest of the world. Tyche runs about, sniffing the occasional passerby before I call her away.

I stop in front of a plain, circular building to check my WristApp's map. Tyche whines by the door of the edifice, which my map says is one of the recycle centers.

"What is it?" A chill like a polar wind shakes me when I spot the door-hack, an illegal door-opener. Memories I thought I'd forgotten come flooding back. Shaun made a hack when our situation was so bad we resorted to thievery. I push the door open and slip into the center without thinking.

As the door closes behind Tyche, I perceive a high-pitched hum, like speeder monitors. Tyche must have heard it. She runs down a hallway to my left. I follow her at a jog, dancing around machine parts and plastics scattered in the corridor.

Tyche reaches a door and growls menacingly. The entrance is windowless. I wave my hand over the pad. *It won't hurt to check it out.*

"Hello?" I tiptoe into the room. Mangled robots are piled to the thirty foot ceiling, old models as well as AndroidGuards. But what grabs my attention is a young girl standing by a table with her back to me. A mechanical voice chatters irritatingly from her direction.

The girl, about thirteen years old, glances over her shoulder. Her dark brown eyes betray unfathomable fear. I recognize the emotion. It was on my face every day after my parents died. Tyche barks again.

"No! You must leave!" the girl commands, pointing at the door. A dismantled AndroidGuard lies on the table.

"2:35, 2:34, 2:33," it announces in an unbearably human voice.

"What happened?" I exclaim, watching her frantically manipulate wires. Her hands shake so much that she can barely use them.

“I inadvertently activated a self-destruct script in the android,” she stammers. “I was just looking for parts.”

“Forget it. We have to leave,” I insist. She opens her mouth to protest, but I pull her out of the room. We race the countdown to the door as the humming chases us.

“Is the building empty?” I ask. The girl nods, and I hope she is right as we burst through the door. She swiftly removes her door-hack.

“You cannot let them find me! They will banish me!” She pleads, her face contorted with panic.

“I won’t,” I promise her. She smiles in relief and runs off. I try to puzzle out why I’m helping her. Maybe it’s because at her age I prayed for someone to come take my problems off my shoulders. It’s too late for me, but I could be the answer to that prayer for her. That decided, Tyche and I sprint and hide in an alley, just in time.

I am mistaken in expecting a small boom. The explosion rocks the ground. Tyche whimpers pathetically. Seven detonations follow. The building is wiped off the map. I sit for a few moments before AndroidGuards arrive to investigate. Ambrydians poke around the scene. As I watch the Guards interview bystanders, I realize what I must do.

“I blew it up!” I cry stridently, surprising the crowd. “You can’t catch me!” Tyche and I bolt out of the alley, and before I know it we are surrounded by AndroidGuards. Tyche snaps at them ferociously, and I am consumed with controlling her.

We are ushered into a windowless interrogation room in the capitol building and told to wait. I pet Tyche until someone enters. To my astonishment, it is Shaun.

“Jef,” he sighs. I stare at him. He looks like an old version of me.

“I killed a building,” I boast, hiding behind a humored façade. Shaun doesn’t buy it.

“What were you thinking?”

“How would you know?” I cry out, abandoning my cover-up. “You abandoned me when I was twelve! I had to survive on my own!” I bite my cheek to stop the tears.

Shaun turns away and stares at the wall. “I didn’t mean to leave you,” he says slowly. “I am unable to leave Ambryda. I have to make *their* robots.” I would rather make Shaun the villain, but I can sense the truth in his words.

“Ambryda uses automation to hide from reality,” he berates angrily. “I create robots to help people, not amuse them! I have spent hours here trying to predict every problem robots will present, but it’s impossible. Cities built on robots can’t last.”

“But what’s going to happen to me?” I ask childishly.

“I’ve been trying to leave Ambryda for years,” Shaun muses. “I have an idea, if you’re okay with facing charges.”

I’m already excited.

Not even a day later, the three of us stand on the shore of New Zealand, watching the water speeder zoom back to Ambryda. Shaun and I exchange a glance, and we burst out laughing.

“They believed that you had me blow it up!” I choke out. “We are Banished For Eternity!” Tyche dances around us as we revel in our victory.

“What shall we do?” Shaun asks, restraining his mirth. “The world is at our feet.”

The first thing I think of is to find the girl and tell her that she is safe, but I will never see her again. The thought makes me sad. She won’t ever know what real life is like. “Let’s find lunch,” I decide. Shaun chuckles and we start off, brothers once more.