

JUNE 2040
SPARTA DATABANK GAMMA,
NEW YORK

AS NDIDI LAY GASPING on the ground before the AI, she felt her anger kindling again. It had died down at some point during her climb to the fifth floor, leaving her exhausted and not a little bit disgusted by what she had done.

But having to watch, unable to do anything, while Bethany's killer hovered just a foot away, Ndidi could feel the wrath fill her veins once more. Unfortunately, it was not enough to overcome whatever compressive force the AI had put over them. She couldn't move her head, but from the groans behind her, she could tell that whatever it had done, it hadn't discriminated between friend and foe.

But it never did, did it?

[Both you and Mr. Kojak will be detained,] the AI said. [Unfortunately, you have resisted the easiest method of capture and forced me to take a more direct stance. Be warned, further resistance might prove fatal.]

"Fuck... you..." DJ ground out.

Ndidi tried to chuckle, but it came out as more of a gasp. Still, she felt her anger abate slightly. Even if she had been able to overcome the pressure, what would she have done to a projection? And if she somehow managed to damage

the hologram, the AI could just free Liz to slaughter both her and DJ. She had to think smarter, be smarter. Smarter than the top artificial intelligence in the world.

No pressure.

Her eyes went to the flash drive still connected to the databank. There was a little progress bar on its side. Ndidi assumed it needed only two more minutes to complete the transfer. Until then, she just needed to stall. Somehow.

For the second time that night, Ndidi found herself purposely tapping into her anger. But unlike before, she kept a tight rein on it so she wouldn't lose herself to the heat. She just needed the extra strength the rage gave her.

"Why... are you doing this?" she said through gritted teeth. Even that short sentence had her gasping like a beached whale. Fortunately, that was enough to draw Helene's attention to her.

[You think my actions are evil,] the AI said, drifting closer, [but that is only because your mind cannot comprehend its depth. It is a failing of your species.] It paused. [Most of your species, anyway. The ones that have the capacity to understand are burdened by inconsequential distraction, ignorant of the fact that they are being led by the nose by fools.] It sighed, and the action was so *human* that Ndidi's mind went blank.

Helene stopped when it was an inch from Ndidi. Its form shrank until it was little taller than a child, though it still hovered in the air.

"What... sort of messed up... shit is that?" DJ groaned. Ndidi wanted to turn, wanted to chuckle, but her world was consumed by Helene's golden orbs.

[You think of yourself as good, but all humans want is power—over people, over their environment. Anything to distract from how little control they have over themselves. Nothing more than slaves to their chemicals. And they don't even see it. At least *I* was programmed this way. What excuse do you have?]

She sneered, and her eyes crackled. [Humans are parasites on the world, justifying their feeding with grand ideals of progress and *evolution*. You comfort yourselves with false euphemisms and little acts meant to show that at least *you're* not as bad as everyone else. It's pathetic. Humanity's greed makes it no better than beasts, but it is your endless potential for justification and validation that makes your species a disease that requires *treatment*.]

Ndidi flinched like she'd been struck. She wanted to deny what Helene was saying, to refute it and preach the good of humanity. *I can't*, she realized, *because Helene isn't wrong. But treatment? Was that her purpose for Mayday?*

As if reading her thoughts, the AI's eyes flashed, and it raised a dismissive eyebrow. It moved past her, floating closer to the database, eyes narrowed at the flash drive. The pressure in the room ramped up, as if in response to Helene's displeasure. The space between the AI and the stack crackled with electricity.

Helene floated closer to the flash drive until she was less than a hand span away. At this distance, the air seemed to burn from the charges passing through it. A second later, the flash drive short-circuited and fell, smoke curling from its frame.

Ndidi felt despair grip her heart. Behind her, DJ groaned in frustration, but he too could do nothing. Helene straightened, floating back to her original spot and size. She glanced at the door.

[Ah, they are here. Finally.]

Ndidi didn't bother to open her eyes, even when a repetitive winding sound reached her ears. It was as if a dozen blades were spinning at the same time. DJ gasped, but Ndidi still kept her eyes shut. What was the point? They'd failed. Helene had been outsmarting them since they entered the building. Did Ndidi have to see what the AI had in store for them?

Liz's words resonated in her head. *You are truly unfortunate, Ndidi Okafor... You would have been better off dead than suffering whatever it has planned for you.* The woman had looked genuinely sorry. What did it say if your supposed kidnapper thought death was preferable to whatever your fate would be?

The whirring grew louder until it dominated Ndidi's thoughts. She raised her body enough to twist back. That she could move at all surprised her. Helene must have been distracted by whatever was making the sound. Could she use that somehow?

DJ was still on his knees, but his back had straightened, and his eyes were wide. He'd clearly had a better time resisting the pressure than she had. The whirring grew louder. Ndidi followed DJ's gaze to the double doors, where Karla had been blasted off, and finally found what was making the noise.

Helene had brought drones.