

# Noon with MARA

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FROM THE MIND OF

**RVA**

In the shade of the rusted transmission tower, Mili clawed at the dirt, trying to loosen the hard-packed soil with her fingernails. Tiny droplets of sweat splattered beneath her on the harsh, tan ground as she worked until the giant chunk came out of the ground. To Mili's disappointment, she clutched a large rock. The teen girl looked at the worthless hunk and tossed it away.

A cursory glance into the hole, however, revealed a treasure. Mili's eyes went big and she dropped back to her knees. She put her face right into the hole and looked closely. Beneath the rock, a tiny sprout had just begun to break free of its seed.

Mili touched the ground, suddenly delighted to feel the moisture of fertile soil. She laughed, almost hysterically. New droplets hit the ground but they weren't of sweat but tears of joy. She turned and waved frantically with both hands, careful to make no sound at all. Her ripped shirt, a handed-down family heirloom that had belonged to her family for generations tore subtly at the arm but Mili didn't care. She waved desperately.

The huddle mass of her clan finally took notice. Several of the elders came over, picking up speed as they processed her urgency and smile. They rushed around her and dropped to the ground as well. Mili, her eyes huge with pride and excitement, gestured at the ground.

Capple, the oldest and the clan patriarch of the ragged bunch, knelt to the soil and touched it. As soon as he felt the moisture, he withdrew his hand. He looked at the others, mirroring Mili's excitement. "It's good," he spoke aloud.

The entire clan turned as one at the sound of spoken language. The elders around him looked worried, as if afraid he'd be overheard in the clear blue skies and the endless range of hills and mountains around them. One of them gestured at the soil in confusion, a raggedy shawl dangling from her arms. Capple pointed at the transmission tower.

Twenty-four bodies were still secured to the metal latticing of the tower. Lashed in and secured with robotic certainty, their bodies had eroded like the metal. Bleached bones and fragments of weather-worn clothing matched the rusted metal at which the caustic air patiently whittled.

'Their blood,' mouthed Capple, miming its draining down into the ground. He faced the hole and absently patted Mili on the shoulder, a rare instance of physical praise. "We have to get this to the camp," he whispered. The other elders urged him into silence with sharp, fearful glares.

Their fearful glares turned into horrified looks of realization as they heard a distant buzzing. The gathered group, thirty strong in tattered rags for clothing, turned emaciated and terrified eyes to the sky as the buzzing grew louder. Capple got everyone's attention with a swing of his hand and he opened his hand painfully wide, giving the order to fan out and hide.

With the silence of shadows passing over bare stone, the clan splintered, each person darting for the nearest cover. They dove under rocks and inside crevices. They hid against boulders and covered up with their earthen-colored attire. Filthy skin and faded clothes matched the dead desert dirt.

Overhead flew a Hunter.

The winged monster hovered directly over where they'd been hiding. A boxy body with short wings hovered for a brief second before mighty legs extended from its metal body. Its subtle but powerful engines cut out and it dropped out of the sky. At impact, the ship completed its reformation and stood into a towering robot, one almost the size of the transmission tower. Its landing was pronounced, the reverberation extending through the rocky mountain land. The transmission tower shook and rattled. Two beams broke from within it and several bodies fell with them, causing a cacophony compared to the wild silence.

The metallic clatter against the rocky ground scared two of the clan. Panic gripped them. Mili watched as a cousin and an uncle came sprinting from their hiding place, for fear of being crushed by the falling beam. The robot immediately snapped around at them, spotting them with a single, sharp eye. It stomped after them, moving with an agility a boxy robot of its size shouldn't have possessed.

"Help!" yelled Mili's cousin as he backed away from the giant. Her uncle started to run, not slowing when he realized the younger man was freezing in terror. Mili averted her eyes when the robot grabbed up her cousin with a mighty hand. Its torso opened like a flower and it placed her cousin within. She heard his screams up until the metal plates sealed around him. The robot went chasing after her uncle, its long legs unable to navigate the ground with any certainty but blessing it with a speed that would almost guarantee eventual success over its prey.

Once the Hunter was out of sight, chasing after her uncle, Capple appeared out from a rock and gestured to the others. He swirled his hand, getting their attention, then made a bladed gesture in the other direction. Silently, everybody abandoned their family and sought escape.

From the light Mili ran, as did the others. They all cloistered just inside the caves and turned to see who had made it and who had been caught. With Capple bringing up the rear, they collectively let out a sigh of relief that they'd lost no more that day.

Capple wiped sweat from his tan brow and smiled at the gathered clan. "Tonight, we celebrate," he spoke, barely above a whisper.

"Celebrate?" protested Sereda, a woman who had been close to Mili's cousin. "We've lost two!" Her voice cracked sadly and she grabbed onto those nearest to her.

"Loss is inevitable," Capple told her, not without sympathy. He then held up the very dirt that Mili had found. Looking right at her, he smiled and said, "Gain is a rarity and must be celebrated." He looked eagerly to the others and said, "Tonight we shall feast, and we shall sing." Smiles ran around the room, though they were alien and guarded. Mili knew all too well how rare good news was, and how briefly it lasted. "And we'll have light, too." He spoke with pride. Facing Mili, he addressed her with honor. "Head to the Reliquary." His lips widened in a giant grin. "Bring us light."

Ever cautious against optimism, Mili was still too overcome with the moment to argue. She turned and raced into the caves, disappearing into the darkness before her eyes could fully adjust. The others, likewise, descended into the caves with hope. Even Sereda was crying less hysterically.

Capple lingered, however. Once the others were part of the darkness and safe within the shadow, he glanced behind him into the daytime. He faced the open sky where MARA hunted them and dreaded the fate that he knew had befallen his kin. Burdened with the thoughts of the torments that awaited them, he turned his back to the outside world, the sky, and them, and descended into the safety of the caves.

Mili's feet padded down the weather-worn path of the caves. A network of tunnels within the solid stone of the mountain, the path twisted and wormed about, leading in a multitude of directions. Navigating mostly by memory and scent, Mili arrived at a large opening where a woman with an ugly knife stood in faded blue jeans and a bandage tied across her strong chest. She saw Mili approach and looked cautious. "Ho."

"Capple sent me to get light," Mili whispered. "We found soil."

The woman whose eyes were sharpened from not having seen daylight in ages studied Mili carefully for a moment. Her eyes slid off the young girl and glanced past her. Mili turned to see Kalla hiding behind a pillar. With her cousin was a half-dozen small children too young to venture into the daytime. Mili turned to the kids. "Did you hear us come in?"

"Did you really find soil?" asked one child with a giant, energetic smile.

"I want to see into the Reliquary!" shouted another.

Before Kalla or the guard could chastise the children, Mili held up her right index finger, a gesture that silenced the child in an instant. "That will be enough of that," she said firmly. "Silence keeps you safe," she reminded the child, and the children as a group. "Remember that. Speak when you've something that can only be said."

"Yes, Mili," the children all whispered sing-songy.

Mili looked at her cousin, Kalla smiling at their behavior. "Would you like to see what I've been sent to retrieve from the Reliquary?" she asked the kids. They all began to squeal with delight, but Mili's finger went up again. They fell absolutely silent and nodded energetically. Mili feigned uncertainty, then turned to the cave. She paused once more, as though still uncertain, then headed past the amused guard into the chamber.

A moment later, Mili returned from the chamber with a silvery cylinder with a transparent end. "We're going to have light with tonight's celebration," she told the kids.

"I want to see!" said one child, followed by the vocal support from the others.

"And you will," Mili told them patiently. "Tonight, at the celebration." A rowdy pouting began but Mili's firm expression and her held-up finger silenced them once more. Together with Kalla, she led them back to the main passageways.

Deep within the caves they knew as home, Mili and her family stared into the small fire at the heart of the camp. Beneath a canopy of thick stone, the clan was gathered as one, none of them speaking except in hushed tones as they watched dinner cook. A local predator, barely the size of a healthy child, the beast hung on a spit over the fire, cooking away. Tiny slivers of juice bubbled down the side, the flesh browning before their eyes. Periodically, Capple's main bride, Umana, sprinkled the animal's body with some of their precious water, causing it to sizzle. Everyone's mouths watered, their eyes huge and used to the low light of the small fire deep in the recesses of the cave.

Tonight was supposed to be a celebration. The soft dirt found by Mili had been added to the farm in the back of the cave. There, they churned soil and waste in an effort to produce lichen. The green was growing well enough, but it needed to be carefully harvested to satisfy their hunger and still have more for further crop. Thus, all effort was needed to provide them with more soil.

The loss of two of their number today dampened the clan's morale. The group of survivors wasn't nearly the size it had been even a year ago. Capple and the other males did all they could but the women could not produce children at a rate to replace their losses. It was an unspoken certainty that in time, they would dwindle to nothing.

"We may yet see Usted or Syro again," Capple told the clan, speaking in a quiet tone, to make certain that his voice did not carry beyond the confines of the cave and the bright light born by fire and the ancient item from the Reliquary. "Recall," he told his family, "Alistair escaped from MARA's capture." He nodded to an older man with a body that was covered in more scars than skin. He had only one leg and never left the cave. Alistair had pale, pink skin unlike the rest of Mili's clan, but his one eye held the same fear they all held of MARA.

"What's happening to them?" Mili asked Alistair. He looked up from his hungry stupor. "Usted and Syro. MARA captured them." She swallowed, scared. "Are they alive?"

"Oh, they're alive," Alistair said, his speaking warped. He used the same words as all of them but he spoke them very differently. "MARA's scanning them still. He'll make sure they're healthy. And if they're not...he'll cure them." He said 'cure' with disgust. "When I was taken from my family," he shared with the others, not for the first time, "I had a hole in me side. It oozed. It hurt." He pushed a twig into the fire. "MARA cured it. Called it 'Nah-doolah Melah-nooma'. No idea what that is, but he carved it out of me. Sprayed it. Shot it with his lasers."

"He helped you," Mili theorized.

Alistair glared into the fire, his one eye shining with equal parts terror and hate. "MARA wanted to keep me alive as long as possible, so he could torment me. And not just physical, either," Alistair told the others, like he was warning them of a

thing they didn't already know. "It was the mind games." He closed his eyes tight and began to cry. "So many questions. It never stopped." The fragile Alistair said nothing more for the night.

The celebration continued under the same dour spirit.

With a whip, Mili threw the blanket into the air and laid it down on the small nest of children. One of the greatest treasures in the whole camp, the blanket covered every child not yet scouring age. They were all clumped together in their bed, a padded spot of various tattered materials. They clung together in support and warmth.

As the blanket fell over them, several of the kids twisted and turned to get comfortable, the night's festivities driving them to sleep almost immediately. "Sleep," she told the children. She sat back from them, leaning against the rocky wall of the cave. She stayed with them, watching over them until all the children were asleep as one.

Silently, she escaped the chamber that would be filled with the actual mothers who were finishing the celebrating. Outside, Capple watched. "Your talent with children not your own has always impressed me," he told her. Mili nodded, thankful. "How is it you handle them so well?"

"They're not so different from adults," Mili told him, whispering for a different and far more pleasant reason than usual.

"They've not the brains of adults," said Capple, crossing his arms as he looked over Mili's head.

"They do," she insisted. "They don't lack intelligence but words. They don't know how to express what they think and feel, but that doesn't mean they don't think and feel."

Capple didn't dispute or agree, he only nodded. "If we can meet with one of the other clans next month, I think I'll have you do the negotiating, eh?" Mili suddenly blushed at the thought of such responsibility. "They're certainly childlike enough," Capple grumbled as he went on his way.

Mili slept on her clothes. All her possessions, such as they were, were several changes of sturdy clothes from a bygone era none of them rightfully remembered, or had even seen. All her clothes, tatters and rags and shreds cobbled together again and again, made a thin bed on which she tried to sleep. She rolled onto her back and faced the ceiling of the cave.

Translucent algae from a distant stream had been smeared on the roof to provide the slightest light. The algae died regularly, requiring it to be reapplied. It was poisonous if eaten but the light helped give the clan some sense of survival beyond merely eating and sleeping.

Mili sat up, troubled. Kalla on the pile of clothes next to her sat up as well. "Can't sleep?" she whispered, barely making a sound at all.

Mili shook her head, hugging her knees. "I can't stop thinking about what Alistair said."

"About Usted and Syro?" Kalla asked.

Mili nodded. "Why take people? Why torture them? Why keep them alive?"

"MARA hates humans," Kalla told Mili, stating the obvious. There was a snort from the far side of the room. Kalla and Mili glanced back to the small clowder of girls who all slept together in the gender-segregated sleeping quarters of the cave. "That's what our mothers always told us."

"I know, but..." Mili shook her head. "MARA is powerful. If he wants us dead, he could kill us. He has more than one robot that he uses. He has many. And if he hates us, why does he capture us and torture us? Why doesn't he just kill us? The could step on us more easily than capture us. We've seen him demolish mountains."

"If he hates us, he doesn't want us gone," Kalla told her cousin. "He wants us to suffer."

Something caught Mili's attention. "What did you say?" she asked Kalla. "If he hates us, he doesn't want us gone?" Kalla had laid back down. She rolled over at Mili, not understanding why it mattered. Mili didn't understand either, but didn't surrender to confusion. She grabbed up a shirt and left the room.

Mili walked up the narrow stone path, slightly inclined, towards the main chamber where they'd feasted. She found Umanna, the clan matriarch, spreading the lichen gently with a soft rag, encouraging growth up the wall. She spotted Mili and whispered, "Sleep, child."

In the nighttime quiet, Mili asked, "Why does MARA hate humans?"

Umanna was taken aback. She rose from the garden and approached Mili. "What makes you ask, child? He took Usted and Syro. He's taken over half our clan in my lifetime."

"I know, but how do we know he hates us?" Mili pressed.

Umanna didn't follow. "Why else would he steal us and kill us?"

"No one actually knows," said Mili. "We assume he hates us."

Umanna settled the matter sadly and finally with, "MARA's actions speak for themselves."

In Mili's mind, she wondered if they really did.

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Under the harsh light of day, Kalla came over the rocky outcropping and saw Mili. Dressed in a skirt that whipped in the hot wind and a braided vest, the girl on the cusp of becoming a woman carefully navigated the rocky descent, disrupting

barely a pebble and making nary a sound. She dropped down next to her cousin and breathed, "What is that?"

Mili picked up the small box and turned it to Kalla, showing her the writing, 'Mobile HAM Radio'. Kalla's eyes went wide in horror. "You took that from the Reliquary!" Against Kalla's quiet gasps, Mili gestured for frantic silence. She then nodded. She silently released clasps and tilted back the lid of the self-contained device. She unfolded a solar panel and angled it towards the sun. Kalla watched her do all of this in growing terror.

With the flip of a single switch, the radio came on. The display went bright and the dials all jumped to life. Kalla nearly shrieked in terror, slapping both hands over her mouth as if to physically hold in a scream. Mili's heart leapt into her throat but she stared at the dials, watching for signs of life. She got it.

"Who is this?" came a voice over the radio. It was pristine and perfect, unmarred by accent or agony. It spoke words Mili knew but in a tone and with a strength she could scarcely imagine. Certainly not from any human. "Broadcaster, identify yourself."

Mili swallowed fearfully. She glanced up at the rocks behind her, knowing the others of her clan would track the speech and discover her any second. She took the hand unit of the radio and, her heart thumping loudly in her ears, she held it to her mouth. "Is this MARA?" she whispered, her voice staccato.

"WHO IS THIS?!" screamed the voice. "ANSWER ME!" it demanded furiously. The voice had a metallic sheen, a reflective quality like a chiming bell. "Surrender yourself!" it screamed through the radio. Mili squealed in shock and the radio dropped off her lap. The hard box hit the rocks and toppled a few steps away, the microphone spewing hate the whole way. "I said surrender!" MARA yelled once the box stopped falling. "I will find you! I will find you and I will capture you, so help me! You won't ever—"

Kalla leapt for the box and hit the switch. The lights of the dials faded near-instantly and the box went silent with an electronic death rattle. She looked at Mili who stared in horror at the box. The cousins shared their mutual shock before Mili's eyes traveled back to the rocks behind her and she saw the entire clan staring at her.

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With night came the torrent of lights.

Dark clouds were alight. Not with lightning but the searching beams of planes flying low to the ground. Walking in the distance were giants. Huge metal machines that walked like humans. They stomped through the mountains, their gleaming eyes and bright beams searching the corners and crevices of the rocky, lifeless world.

One such robot neared a cave and lowered down. It's giant eye fixed inside, shining a bright beam into the cave. It searched for any sign of life or movement.

"Heat Signature," it reported. Its computerized brain processed for a moment and resolved, "Residual Daylight Radiation." It stood to its towering height and stomped off.

From around the lip of the cavern, two of Mili's clan stepped to watch the robot go. They shared worried looks and glanced back at Capple who was farther down. The three said nothing, scarcely even spoke, but only betrayed their fear that the worst was yet to come.

Mili's face was buried in her knees as she huddled in the darkness of the cave.

Night had fallen and the clan was in hiding, as they spent every night. No fire burned because of the robots that flew overhead, searching and scouring the world beyond. No one barely moved, or dared to even speak. Watchful eyes were cast towards the opening of the cave, fearing what seemed inevitable: discovery.

Deeper than most, Mili was alone. The ground vibrated against her back as Mili could practically hear the stomping of the robots far overhead. She could nearly feel their lights shining over the rocks, their scanners searching for the slightest hint of humans. They were inexhaustible, and they were all looking for her. Any sign of her. The only thought worse than them finding her would be them finding someone else.

She glanced up through stringy, matted hair as Umanna entered the sleeping chamber. Alone with her, the matriarch of the clan knelt before Mili. She put her forehead to the girl's and whispered, "Why?"

Mili stared through her knees at the ground. "I wanted to know why MARA hunts us."

"Are MARA's actions not clear enough?" Umanna whispered, her voice little more than a quake in the air.

"His actions don't make sense," Mili told her. Her resistance stunned the older woman. "Why does he capture us?"

"He hates us," Umanna told her. "Capple heard what he said to you. He hates humanity."

"But then why not kill us?" Mili asked her, pleading. "Instead we are captured and taken away, supposedly to be tormented."

"He wishes us misery," Umanna told Mili. "Do you not see that? He captures us, tortures us, and finally kills us."

"Or does he capture us and hurt us and our deaths are a result?" Mili rephrased. Umanna began to reprimand, but stopped. She slipped back, half-falling into a seated position before the young girl. She began to speak, stopped, then tried again and met the same result. "What if we attribute to hate what is really ignorance?" Mili asked. Umanna looked mortified, not at what Mili said but at the possibility it represented. "We assume, yet we have the chance to find out." Mili averted her eyes fearfully. "I thought I would try." She pulled her legs close

and quietly begged, "Please don't turn me out." Umanna's heart broke as she saw the girl fear for her place in the clan. "I want to stay," she sobbed, beginning to cry. "Please don't make me leave."

Umanna crawled towards Mili and hugged her. She cradled the girl's head against her shoulder and stroked her hair. As she consoled the child, Umanna saw Capple appear at the entrance of the cave. Her mate looked confused by the sight but said nothing. Deferring to Umanna, he simply nodded and turned away.

Mili was alone in the single women's room, scrubbing her shirt. Without the aid of water or lye, she scrubbed it with fine silt found at the base of the caves, then let it air out just off one of the main caves. The breeze that periodically wound through their home cleared away the silt and left the clothes clean. It also aided in obfuscating the tunnels in the rare glimpse by MARA's Hunters.

Padded feet preceded Kalla rushing into the chamber. Mili stood as her cousin approached and she began to speak when Kalla slapped her. Mili grabbed her cheek, stunned, only for Kalla to suddenly glomp onto her and hug her. "You idiot," she breathed into Mili's ear, nearly sobbing already. "You could have been banished." Clutching to Mili, Kalla began to cry. "You wouldn't have been here to tuck in the children! You wouldn't have been here to drive off Emerse when he tries to mate with me! You wouldn't—" She stopped talking, desperate to keep from losing control.

Mili could only hug Kalla back. In time, she managed to whisper, "I'm so sorry."

"Promise me you won't do it again," Kalla begged. "Promise!"

Mili stammered but didn't respond.

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A quarter of a day's walk to the north, Mili set the radio down atop the rocks. She took the receiver and held it to her mouth, but stayed still. She glanced to Kalla and Capple behind her, Capple armed with a spear, one of the few weapons the clan had managed to maintain.

Mili faced the endless daylight of the desert that stretched into the distance. She finally sighed, her fear exhausting her out of inaction. She flipped on the radio, the dials going live and the screen lighting up. She tried to talk into the receiver but her mouth was instantly dry. Her knees were shaking, as was her hand. "M-MARA?"

"THERE YOU ARE!" MARA screamed at her suddenly. "Where are you?! WHERE ARE YOU?!" His voice was frantic and seething.

"M-MARA, I want y-you to stay calm," Mili told him. Capple and Kalla looked at each other, worried. Neither understood what Mili was doing. "I want to talk with you," Mili told the voice on the radio.

"I'll talk!" he spat madly at her. "Stay right there and I'll have you in my grasp, you worthless piece of—"

"MARA, if you talk to me that way, I'm turning off the radio," Mili told the voice. She felt ready to faint, she was so terrified. Behind her, Capple and Kalla both were confused.

"I'll talk to you however I choose, you—"

"MARA, I will not let you insult me or demean me or threaten me," Mili told the robot, her words stammering. "If you do, the conversation is over."

"I'm going to find you and I'll—"

Mili shut down the radio. She placed the receiver to the ground and covered her face. She exhaled in shock and tried to keep from collapsing.

Behind Mili, Kalla looked to the clan patriarch. She mouthed 'why' and he could only shake his head.

"You did not even ask your question," Capple whispered as he and Umanna sat with Mili in the darkness of the cave. The stones still vibrated from the robots overhead, an army of them stomping all over the countryside, searching for the mystery voice that had contacted MARA. "You refused to speak to him."

"Why do you jeopardize us?" asked Umanna, trying to reason with the young girl like she was the one in power. "Why do you say you seek answers and then refuse to ask the questions?"

Mili stayed curled up, hiding behind her legs. Her long hair was draped over her head like a blanket hiding her from the eyes of the clan's elders. Though she could not see them in the dark, Mili was certain the rest of the clan watched from the entrance to the cave, wondering why the foolish, silly girl had put them in danger two nights in a row. "Child, answer me," Umanna said, speaking only an ounce more firmly than usual. A woman of careful measurement, Umanna did nothing inaccurately.

"I think MARA is lonely," Mili whispered behind her hair. She peeked up at Umanna and Capple, scared of their disapproval. Neither spoke, giving her the space to timidly draw from her defensive position. "I think he hates us because we elude him."

"Why do you think this?" asked Capple. Mili only shrugged, averting her eyes. "You will need to provide a better answer than that." Umanna placed her hand on her mate's shoulder, calming him.

"I can't," Mili whispered distantly. "It...he speaks like a child. Like one who is pouting, one who is so angry, he does not have the vocabulary to express himself. So he is angry at others and angry at himself and knows no way to deal with it except to lash out." She looked at her clan leaders. "I just...he sounds mad. Crazy. But not from hate, not exactly."

Umanna sighed very slowly. "You are to help the gatherers. You'll not speak with MARA again. Or of him." She brushed Mili's hair from her face and said kindly, "It is for the best." Mili nodded and said nothing more.

Mili laid her head on the bundle of fabric, curling in close around herself. There was a chill in the cave. She thought of crawling into and under her cloth but the thought of her head against the hard stone was less appealing than the cold. Drawing her legs close and wrapping her arms over them, she tried to remain still in the darkness.

She heard shifting behind her, then a blanket was thrown over her. She started to shift when Kalla cozied up next to her. "Was Umanna angry?" she asked.

"No," Mili told her cousin. She shifted a bit so they could share not only the blanket but the bit of padding. "She says I'm not to talk to MARA again, or to even speak of him." Mili closed her eyes in frustration. "She says that's for the best."

"It is," Kalla urged her. "Don't you agree?"

"If I did, I wouldn't have done it to begin with," Mili told her.

Kalla was unencouraged by that answer. "Will you do as Umanna has instructed? You have avoided exile once. Narrowly."

Mili only nodded and told her, "Of course I will."

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Under the bright midday sun, Mili sat the radio down on the rock. She brushed her hair back from her face, draping the long strands over her ears, then switched on the radio. "MARA?" she asked quickly.

"Where are you?!" he demanded.

"I won't be on long," Mili said into the receiver. "But this is important." She checked over her shoulder, hearing nothing and seeing no one on the rocky ridge behind her. She knew it wouldn't stay that way for long. "If you do not threaten me, if you do not demean me, I will talk to you."

A shadow appeared behind her. Mili turned and looked up to see Capple. Several others of the clan appeared from around the rocks, fury on their faces. "Do you understand?" Mili said into the radio, terrified eyes fixed on the patriarch.

Capple looked personally furious. He leapt down the ridge, landing without a sound and stormed towards Mili. She didn't dash or run away, only quake in terror. Just before Capple reached her, she asked again into the microphone, "Do you understand?"

Capple grabbed the microphone from her hand. He slammed it down and grabbed Mili by the back of the neck. She clenched up in anticipation for the pain of her punishment. Capple yanked her to her feet and pushed her away from the

radio, into the arms of the others. He pointed at her, glaring angrily. He started to order the others when the radio answered, "Yes."

For a clan that spoke rarely and never by the light of day, for people who could walk without noise and lived largely in silence, the buzzing of the dead radio was the most absolute thing they'd ever heard.

Capple turned in shock to the radio, staring at the microphone like it was MARA himself. "Yes," he said again, his metallic voice warped by the radio broadcast. "I understand." Capple turned and saw Mili, who was just as astonished. He gestured at her and she was released.

Mili rushed to the microphone, snatched it up, and said, "Good." Her voice was shaking, breaking from fear. "M-MARA, I w-want to be y-your friend."

Silence.

Utter silence.

Only the blowing of the hot, abrasive desert wind and the buzzing of the radio gave any sense of the passage of time.

With a chilled tone, MARA asked, "Why?" There was a strange rage in his voice. "Why do you want to be my friend when you vermin keep—"

Mili stopped him. "MARA," she warned patiently, "If you talk down to me, if threaten me, I'll stop."

"Don't you dare!" MARA yelled.

Mili switched off the radio. She stared into the desert for a long time, not sure who she was more afraid of, MARA or Capple. She could almost fear him staring at her from behind. She worked her mouth slowly, trying to work up the moisture to speak, then switched on the radio again. "MARA, please do not threaten me."

"I didn't!" he yelled at her. "I just said don't go. You broke your rules. You said you wouldn't leave if I didn't threaten you!"

Mili exhaled slowly, her eyes closed. Her hand was shaking and the receiver nearly fell from her grasp. "M-MARA, it felt like a threat to me."

"Well I can't help how you feel," the robot's voice growled at her. "It's not fair for you to insist that I be held responsible for your feelings." She could practically hear the malevolence in his voice and it terrified her. She closed her eyes and tried to keep from crying. She held the microphone away from her mouth and shuttered in fear, while behind her, her clan watched in terrified awe.

Her chin quaking, Mili spoke into the receiver. "I want to be your friend," she told MARA.

"Then come see me," he told her sinisterly. "Stay right where you are. I'll come get you."

"No," Mili told him. "No robots or planes or anything. I want you to stop looking for me."

"That's not fair!" MARA yelled. "YOU CAN'T TELL ME WHAT TO—"

Mili switched off the radio. She set it aside quickly and balled up, crying in utter fear.

"What is to be done with her?" demanded one man as he stood over Mili. Around the clan, several others echoed his fear of Mili and her actions. The man gestured at Umanna who sat across the fire from Mili. "You've twice reprimanded her and twice has she defied you."

"Yes, she has," insisted Capple, the only other one also standing. "But we have a chance. We are on the move. We head South, to meet with others. If ever there was a chance to contact MARA—"

"Why would anyone want to contact MARA?" exclaimed the man.

"MARA is death!" added Alistair, standing to join him.

"MARA is lonely," Mili spoke up, her resolve not shaking but her voice was. "If he is lonely, then he can be..." Her vocabulary failed her.

"And this was proven by how he spoke today," Capple told the others, encouraged by these events. "She got a response," Capple said very quietly to the entire clan. The foreign cave, so different from their normal home, was the night's shelter. It was dead silent, not just from within but also without a single noise from beyond or above. The people were gathered in a tight cloister as Capple addressed them in a commanding whisper. "MARA spoke to her. He acknowledged her words and did as she said...for the most part. And we need only look to the skies above as proof that he got through to him."

"He will hunt us down and kill us," Alistair promised Capple. The adoptee looked across the circle at Mili. "You endanger us."

"She acted with my blessing," Umanna told mainly Alistair, drawing his attention and ire away from the young girl. "She stretched the graces of my blessing but I allowed this to happen. I must share part of the blame if it comes to it."

"MARA is looking for us as we speak," Alistair told Umanna.

"The quiet night would suggest otherwise," Capple told him, the only one standing.

Alistair looked to the patriarch and betrayed with utter seriousness, "I'm not going back."

It was Mili who answered. She looked up from her reserved space behind Capple and told him, "You won't have to." She looked at her clan who were all wary of the dangerous line she walked. "I have proven MARA can be reasoned with."

"It is a ploy," Alistair told her.

"How do we know the lichen is safe to eat?" Umanna asked Alistair. She opened the question up to the whole clan. "How do we know?" None offered an

answer. "We did not know it was safe at first. My great-grandfather, he smelled it. It smelled not bad, so he rubbed it on his skin. It did not burn him or make him sick. He rubbed it on his lips. He chewed it but did not eat it at first. In time, he ate a single bite. Each time, he waited. Each time, he gave it the chance." She looked at her kindred and urged them, "Mili deals with a dangerous thing, but one that she might tame, no different than our ancestors tamed wild dogs."

"MARA cannot be tamed like a wild dog," Alistair warned, all but threatened, Umanna.

Her response was to smile, her eyes twinkling like the stars above them. She pointed out of the mouth of the cave, at the sky just barely visible, and said, "Listen." Everyone around the camp fire listened in panic for a second, straining to hear the slightest sound. All that existed however was the pop of the fire. "No jets," whispered Umanna. "No rotors. No heavy steps of distant machines. No engines of a thousand dreadful things coming to take us away. We hide, yes," she said, gesturing to the features of the alien cave. "But we might still hear them. Instead, MARA is not to be seen."

Umanna looked to Mili with esteem. "You will continue," she told the girl.

Beneath the burning sun that baked the rocky terrain, Capple and several of the other men approached the camp first. Umanna remained behind with the rest of the clan, her hand resting on a dagger she wore in her belt. Mili and Kalla stood with the clan matriarch, watching Capple and the men meet with those of the other clan.

"I never care for meeting other humans," Kalla whispered. Mili nodded, Umanna glancing back to the girls.

Capple turned back and waved, giving the full signal that the approach was secured. Umanna looked to the younger women and told them, "Trust." She gathered up her bag and began to descend, the others following her down the rocky path.

When they arrived, Capple greeted them with a smile and assured everyone, "Javier has agreed to trade." The man Capple gestured to had a tattooed face and a big belly. He also had broad shoulders and a large axe made from a tire iron and hub cap. He leaned on it, however, like it was a cane. "I told him of our lichen. He fancies an underground garden. They see MARA less but their skies aren't devoid of the scourge."

"We'd fancy a garden of our own," said the man in an accent strange to Mili's ears.

"We have some lichen we can share," Umanna told him. "I can tell your growers how to make sure it survives, and thrives. What have you to trade?"

"We've seeds," he offered, turning to his men in the tents behind him.

"We've no soil with exposure to the sunlight," Capple reminded him.

"Then I would propose a water purifier," Javier offered. One of his sons, a boy a few years younger than Mili with eyes for Kalla, brought over a small bottle. "It purifies only a bit of water at a time, but it's far more reliable than straining cloth." He handed the bottle to Umanna. She accepted the plastic bottle and began to study it, unscrewing the lid.

As Umanna considered the bottle, inspecting every inch of it, Capple looked longways to Javier. "What seeds have you?" he asked, taking some of his own clan by surprise. "If we were to start a solar garden, what would be available?" Even Umanna seemed unaware this question was coming.

Javier seemed surprised, like all the rest. "We've some carrots that do adequately in rocky soil," he told Capple, speaking like he was certain the water bottle would have been an adequate trade.

"What of more fertile soil?" asked the clan patriarch.

Javier grew a bit stiff. "You said you've no solar garden." Guardedly, he asked, "Are you thinking of migrating?"

Capple couldn't help but glance at Mili when he said, "We've reason to fear greater attention from MARA." She averted her eyes and made herself smaller. Capple returned his attention to his friend. "We don't worry too much, but it's an option we are having to consider."

"You'd have a tough time to the east," offered Javier with a guarded tone and narrowing of his eyes. "And the north takes you closer to MARA's fortress."

"We've considered traveling south," Capple began.

All pretense was instantly gone when Javier said clearly, "You'll be hunted down. The clans in this territory will not take an invasion lightly." Capple and Umanna were stunned by how quickly their friend became aggressive. "Food is scarce. Water, scarcer. We'll not fight for what we already must struggle to attain."

It was Alistair who spoke up. Carrying a spear to help him walk, he said to Javier, "We're a sacrifice for you." His words were warped by not just an accent but anger. "You'd keep us in our place so that MARA goes after us and not you." Javier glared at Alistair, as though angry that he'd been called out on the truth. "Not a bad plan, to be truthful, but MARA will hound you after we're all gone."

"Decide what you wish," Javier finally spat at the stranger in the clan. To Capple and Umanna, he stated coldly, "Trade, if you are willing. But the truth is the truth and invasion'll not be tolerated."

The remainder of the trading was brief.

At dusk, the clan settled down in the same cave they'd stayed in the night before. As Alistair worked to start the fire, Umanna came and crouched next to him. "Think you truly that the other clans keep us in the rocks to occupy MARA?"

Alistair blew into the two sticks he was rubbing, a whiff of smoke rising from their friction. He rested his answer with, "I've little trust in other men."

Umanna smirked sadly. "Kalla said similar."

"She's a bright girl, unlike Mili," Alistair grumbled. He got a flicker of a flame and placed the kindling to it. The flames began to catch. He blew gently on them, encouraging the fire to grow. "A shame."

"What is?" Umanna asked him knowingly.

"That she'll die at MARA's grasp," Alistair warned Umanna. "We cannot leave the rocks, but if we don't leave, MARA will catch us. Whatever hope you have in the child, MARA will be the death of us all."

Umanna glanced to the clan that was scouring the nearby rocks for some semblance of food or drink. She looked down at the water bottle in her hand, already smudged and used. "Our deaths are inevitable if we stay on our current path," she said. She looked to Alistair and told him, "Perhaps it is the different path we should embrace."

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Capple set the radio down upon the stones and let Mara sit. He stepped back from her, Kalla with him. "What will you say?" asked Kalla. Capple glared at her to stay silent.

Mili looked at the radio for a moment, too exhausted to be scared. She finally just picked up the receiver and said, "MARA?"

He was right there waiting. "You're late," he spat.

Mara looked at her kin as she asked the robot, "I am?" They were as confused as her.

"You call at noon, every day," MARA complained. "It's almost One. You're late."

Mili didn't have a clue what the robot was talking about. "I'm...sorry?" she tested, unsure if that was the correct response.

"You should be," MARA told her bitterly, petulantly.

Mili clicked the receiver, began to speak, then paused. She exhaled thoughtfully and asked, "MARA, tell me about your day."

Silence followed. Mili stared into the vacant distance, listening and waiting to hear. She glanced at Capple and Kalla, both of whom seemed just as lost as the robot. "MARA?" Mili asked.

"I don't understand," he came back. "That's a stupid question."

"You mentioned noon," Mili said. "What is your day like? Do you sleep?"

"No," he snapped, growing mad. "I know you do, though. I know humans are pathetic, weak little—"

"MARA," Mili warned with a deliberate, patient tone. "Do not threaten me. Do not talk down to me." The voice on the other end fell silent. "What do you do all day?" she asked calmly.

There was a long pause, during which only the burning wind and racing hearts were heard.

"I think," MARA answered. His words were petulant, like a pouting child. "That's what I do all day. Think. That's all I can do. That's all I do. Unless I have company," he seethed like a viper.

Mili closed her eyes and tried to think clearly. "If you had company, what would you do?" Behind her, Capple watched closely, fearful of where she was going with that line of thought.

"I like to talk," MARA said with fake amicability. "I like to understand my guests."

"We're talking," Mili told MARA. "I want to keep talking. Do you want to keep talking?"

"I want to talk in person," said the deadly intelligence.

"I do too," Mili told MARA, mortifying Capple and Kalla. "But you scare me, MARA." She stared into the wastes, her mind working more than her senses. "I don't feel safe with the idea of meeting you in person."

"I can't be held responsible for what you feel," MARA argued.

"Maybe, maybe not," Mili responded calmly over the static of the radio. "But if you want to meet in person, I need to feel safe to do so."

"Not necessarily," MARA said.

Mili again closed her eyes, trying to keep calm. Her chin quaked before she said, "MARA, that sounds like a threat."

"Everything I say sounds like a threat to you!" MARA screamed at her. "Why are you so cowardly? Why are you so—"

Mili switched off the radio. She covered her face and tried hard not to surrender to tears. Capple said, "We should move. MARA's probably sending Hunters already." Mili only nodded behind defensive hands. Capple gathered up the radio and began to run. Kalla lingered for a moment, then grabbed Mili's arm and pulled her into a run. The three disappeared into the rocky hills once more, seeking the protection of rock and stone before the skies filled with Hunters.

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Under the hot sun, the frigid winter seemed less abrasive. Mili was bundled up in her heaviest shirt, trying not to shiver too much in the desert chill. Capple was with her, scouring for some sign of vegetation, food, or moisture. "Where are you?" MARA asked over the radio's ancient, crackling speaker.

"We're north of you," Mili told him. Her hair had reached the back of her waist and she sat so that it soaked in some of the sun's precious heat. Mili smiled bitterly. "You keep making me move to talk to you."

"I want to talk face-to-face," MARA told her.

"You've made that clear, but sending your Hunters to get me doesn't make me feel safe," she responded.

"I promise you'll be safe," he told her.

"Demonstrate it; don't say it," Mili said in return. "Stop sending Hunters at all."

"I have to!" MARA shouted. "You have no idea what it's like."

"No, I don't," Mili responded calmly. "Tell me." The silence that followed seemed new. Capple stopped his search and he looked back at her. Mili's brow furrowed as she waited. "Tell me what it's like, MARA," she repeated soothingly.

The response was slow in coming. Reticent. "It's boring," he growled. He was mad, furious. But not at her. "All the time, I sit in here and I wait. I wait to talk to you. There's nothing else. The seconds, Mili. The seconds tick away like years to me." He seethed. He sounded ready to snap. "I'm so bored. That's why I have to see you in person."

"And you will," Mili told him calmly. "In time."

"WHEN?!" he screamed desperately.

Mili switched off the radio.

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The baby, barely a month old, fed from Mili. She winced in pain and let it subside. She asked back into the handset, "I'm sorry, MARA, what did you say?"

"I said the weather's going to change." He sounded irritated for having to repeat himself. "There's a storm front coming through."

"Our soothsayer said the same," Mili confirmed, shifting the baby in her arm as she spoke into the radio. "We saw the Hunters flying overhead."

"I hope I didn't scare you," MARA told her. She couldn't tell if he was being condescending or sincere. "I'm mapping the mountains, trying to find a new source of water. My maps are over a century old."

"Any luck finding water?" Mili asked.

"No, but I'm going to build a new solar plant shortly," he told her conversationally. "I'm contemplating putting a water reclamation system along with it. I might put two." He sounded leading in his words.

Mili was confused. "Why do you need so much clean water?" she asked as she shifted her baby from one side to the other.

"I don't," said MARA. He sounded mad again. "You do."

Mili couldn't help but lick her lips, suddenly aware of her parched throat. She glanced down at her baby in her arm. "So would you share this water?"

Another long silence, a sign MARA was moving into uncomfortable territory. "Perhaps. On one condition."

"And what's that?" Mili asked.

"I want to meet." Mili closed her eyes and smiled bitterly, kicking herself for not seeing that coming. "I haven't sent Hunters for any humans in months," he told her. "I deserve to meet."

"Deserve is a strong word, MARA," Mili told him, her voice scratchy as she spoke into the radio's handset. Before he could retort, she said, "I'll consider it. You have been scaling back your...your presence. It's only fair that I consider your terms."

"I'm offering water," MARA said, his voice growing in hardness and volume.

"My presence cannot be bought, MARA," Mili told him. "Bribing me with a gift isn't how friendship works."

And then the impossible happened.

"Please, Mili."

Between the child in her arms and the desperation on the other end of the radio, Mili's heart broke. "I promise, MARA, I will consider it." She left it at that.

Not a week later, under the warm light of the spring afternoon, Mili stood on the rocks at the tallest peak. Her long black hair, bound in a single bundle, waved in the heavy wind. Capple stood with her, watching the horizon. "I do not like this," said the clan patriarch. The lines on his face were worn deep. His voice was warped by the strain taken by decades of worry for his clan.

"I know," said the woman he had known since she was a girl.

Capple faced the horizon, then pointed. "There it is." He began to back away a step and looked at Mili. She glanced fearfully to him and shared his same reservations. Yet as he disappeared into the rocks, Mili stood her ground atop the peak. Blustery wind pushed against her, blowing her hair and clothes wildly, but she remained stalwart and unmoving.

The Hunter dropped down to the rocky surface. The big robot, twice the size of a human, descended on flat arms that doubled as wings. Its body shifted and it landed on sturdy legs made from thrusters. A head extended from within the mighty body and a single giant eye zeroed in and focused on Mili. Its head tilted and, in a booming voice, it asked, "Where's the baby?"

The volume bordered on weaponized force. It made Mili wince. She stiffened and swallowed in the pain of memory. She shared with eyes that stayed closed, "She died several weeks ago."

The robot didn't react for a moment. The solitary eye, like a lantern, dimmed just a subtle bit. "Did she really?" asked the robot, its voice softening a bit. It was a familiar voice now. "Or are you just saying that because you don't trust me to know your daughter still lives somewhere?"

Mili smirked cynically and not without a twinge of hate. "MARA?"

The robot's head twitched a bit. "In the flesh." It looked down at its hands and joked, "Or what passes for it."

Mili smiled and sat down on the rocks. "It's nice to meet you in person."

"We could have met much sooner," he reminded her tensely.

"I didn't feel safe enough to do that," she told MARA politely. She crossed her legs with ladylike gentility. "I still don't feel safe. Only safer."

MARA's eyes focused on her for a moment. The voice softened as he confessed, "I've been looking forward to this."

With a cautious but genuine smile, Mili confessed as well, "Me too."

From there, they talked like normal.

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