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Literary Genre III: Science Fiction and Fantasy

*Under the Vast Microscope*

"I can't keep doing this," Calum said, head in his hands, sitting on a discarded metal drum tucked into a forgotten corner of the massive construction facility, "they're going to kill me when they find out what we're doing."

Rowen sighed, leaning against the wall, raking his hands through his hair. "You aren't the only one they'll put before a firing squad."

It was quiet for a few moments, the hum of machinery filling the gaps until Rowen removed a small cylinder from his pocket and stuck one end of it in his mouth.

"When's your next meeting with INTRASOL?" He asked, letting vapor escape out of his mouth. It smelled sweet, like lilacs do in the spring.

"They're sending Tere Greene in two days," Calum replied, holding his hand out until Rowen passed the e-cigarette over, "which means I have that much time to prepare for her ridiculous methods of questioning this project."

Somewhere in the vast underground facility, a shout rang out, both men looking up and waiting until it melted into the background noise of construction. A collective sigh passed between them, the world's weight on their shoulders.

"Have you made any progress on the optical concentration ratio yet?" Rowen asked, watching Calum's hands shake as he took a hit off the metal cylinder.

"That depends. Are you asking in favor for or against Project L?" Calum took a final drag before he passed it back, leaning heavily into the wall behind him. "I've managed to concentrate it down to almost perfect levels of photons, and tests show that the UV-Vs are functioning at optimal speeds."

Rowen let out a snort of air, as close to laughter as the commander ever got. "In plain English this time, Ironwood." Calum threw him a mock salute, a grin on his pale face.

"The prototype will be done in a few weeks, and a fully formed iteration can be completed in a few months after that. If all goes well, we'll have the machine ready by the end of next year."

Both men were silent for a while, listening as the monotone beeping of heavy machinery ebbed and flowed, echoed off the concrete floors and corrugated walls. Tucked away in a dark corner, it almost sounded like a heartbeat monitor from this distance. Workers from all divisions were like cells in the human body, each responsible for a critical component, all working towards the same goal: making Earth's last defense against the subsequent alien encounter.

"Have you thought about what we talked about?" Rowen let the question fall between them, giving Calum time to answer.

"I have."

"And?"

"It might work." Calum ran his hands over his face, taking a deep breath before continuing. "If I can hide the killswitch within the code of the master program, it should just fire blanks. The only issue is getting it past INTRASOL."

"I might be able to help with that." Rowen pushed off the wall, waiting until Calum followed suit before walking them down the hall. "Greene still has people to report to, and if we give her enough ammunition to bring back to the board, they'll leave us alone long enough for you to work your magic in the code."

Their footsteps echoed off the walls, almost in synch, as they made their way to the production facility.

"I'll still need a prototype to show them, on top of making sure the work gets done on the floor."

"Leave the floor to me," Rowen stopped them with a hand on Calum's arm, looking over the other's face, "they'll listen to me because they're afraid of me. I'll make sure they're too focused on not getting laid off to notice you fiddling around with the prototype."

Silence followed them after that, walking alongside them until they exited the hallway and were swallowed by the production floor. Seven stories high and twice as long, the underground facility was large enough to house the ultimate machine and all the workers required to build it. It was immense, all-encompassing, and would all be fruitless if their plan worked.

"What's going on in that head of yours?" Rowen's question startled Calum, furrowing his brows for a minute before he answered.

"When the machine doesn't work, when we've succeeded, what then?" Staring straight ahead, Calum watched workers welding metal together to create a giant barrel that tapered off

into a singular optic screen. "They aren't just going to let us *leave* the facility before it works, will they?"

The commander didn't answer immediately, leaning against the railing in front of them as if he was considering jumping. Instead, Rowen pushed off the railing and started to walk down the cosway. Calum followed, as he always did.

"Of course not." Rowen's voice was quiet, knowing they could be listened to. "But they don't have to know when we leave."

"You aren't thinking of trying to *sneak out*, are you?" Picking up his pace, Calum grabbed Rowen's arm, halting them both. "Rowen, that's suicide!"

"So is staying here for when they realize their ultimate machine is nothing but a waste of money and labor." A tense air built between them, commander to genius, standing stories above any other human. "Calum, we can't stay here. They'll kill us after that trigger is pulled. No remorse, just a waste of two years of work. INTRASOL won't even blink at executing us both for treason and sabotage."

"I know." Calum's voice shook, still holding onto Rowen's arm. "I know. They're going to kill us when this whole project falls apart." He took a deep breath, blowing it out slowly, grounding himself. "How do you expect us to find an exit out of this when they've got eyes everywhere?"

Rowen took Calum's hand with a smirk, shaking it between them.

"You're forgetting, all eyes will be on the machine and whatever ship docks in our atmosphere." Rowen let his words sink into Calum, watching his face change with a map of emotions until finally, they locked eyes. "Who will notice two humans fleeing when they're so focused on humanity's chance at retaliation?"

Below them, the groan of metal grew louder, raised voices mingling into shouts until the *zap!* of electricity arcing hushed the crowd. A sparkle lit up in Calum's eyes, making him grin like a fool.

"No one."