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Artyom is the name of the AI for the Ryazan-Tottori Mecha gk scientific survey robot that was originally a seventy ton SRAM armored combat Mech. There is an astronomical selection of robotics to choose from for planetary exploration, specifically to limit human exposure to unpleasant environments, but this Sino-Russo design was perfect for the planet, Dedede, that orbits the red dwarf known as Kirby, which kicks the concept of "hostile environment" up a notch or two.

37-Tau-A is fifty times the luminosity of Sol, which essentially deep-fries everything within three AU of it. Then when you toss in its companion stars, 37-Tau-B and C, this means the *too fucking toasty* region fluctuates between three and four AU or so.

This is a relatively young system and, because of the unstable orbits, either B or C or both are going to get flung out sometime inside the next million years but, right now, 37 Tau also has three red dwarfs spinning around it in the outer periphery.

Two of those little guys also future Frisbee candidates.

The second of these red dwarfs, 37-Tau-E, has a pretty damned stable orbit for now but what has caught the attention of the scientific community is the discovery of a life-bearing planet way outside the goldilocks-habitable zone. That is, outside of the goldilocks zone towards the direction of Kirby, which makes it not so habitable or, *id est*, too fucking toasty.

Like all young red dwarfs, Kirby is volatile and regularly pukes solar flare after solar flare which makes a mess of both alkalis and phosphodiester-nucleic bonds, but what they have found on the second planet is a biology that shields these processes as well as provide a thermal ablative barrier from the steamy-scorchiness of Dedede.

What has torqued the science cranks for over fifty years is that the surface of Dedede will bounce back and forth past 100° Celsius, repeatedly reconstituting and boiling off the surface water in an atmosphere that's already oversaturated at 100% humidity, and in spite of the intemperate weather the flora that has cropped up here manages to keep the internal plant structures between a reasonable 82-94° no matter how challenging it is on the outside.

Studying the unique properties of a biology that shields from both radiation and thermal assault in the natural state, that is millions of plant types with thousands of differing mechanisms, has become a priority to the sciences and academia but, to sweep it all under the rug away from the corporate R&D leaches, they long ago turned to a friend of the astronomy community for help. The Orion Trust, with the help of the SA, developed a ruse where everyone has openly known about Kirby and Dedede for decades. The most powerful industrial R&D divisions have wanted to get their mitts on Dedede in the worse possible way, it's just that they've been cock-blocked by the United Nations strict TLYLT (Thousand Light Year Limitation Treaty) and never knew it was in their 37-Tau back yard the whole time.

They never knew red dwarf 37-Tau-E was in actuality, Kirby.

All the fantastical reports and images they saw of the Kirby system, believed far out of reach past D-Vel in the Vela constellation, showed it had four planets and nine tiny planetoids, not the two planets and one dwarf planet of 37-Tau-E, and all the images of the planet Popstar, getting bathed in the coronal hate of Kirby, has gripped the imagination of grade schoolers taking the compulsory planetary science classes. Kirby and Popstar have become their most favoritist celestial bodies ever since Pluto was reinstated back into the planetary club and joined by the likes of Charon, Eres, Ceres, and Sedna.

Popstar is actually the hyper-volcanic planet, Super Scorch. A molten ball of sulfuric-iron churning inside-out rage that whips around 37-Tau-E with a year that tops out at about 110 hours, just short of five days. Everything they've been taught about Kirby and Popstar has always been 37-Tau-E and Super Scorch.

Dedede, the planet the kids didn't care about, was the planet that everyone else was drooling over by all accounts. The images of it from orbit and on the surface showed it off as some rainbow light-brite planetary Disneyland, where social media science vloggers jokingly added photoshops of smurfs and unicorns just for giggles, yet back in 2296 it was shocking for them to learn this planet was a hot-sweaty rock originally called, Black Cauldron.

And never was there a more fitting name for such a stormy, gray-overcast greenhouse nightmare.

Artyom has enjoyed his job over the last forty-eight years. His life has been a simple and rewarding one of constant photography, scanning, data and sample collection. Now, the scientific community thinks he has been working for them all this time but in reality he has always answered to the Steel Annex. The thousands upon thousands of discoveries made here by Artyom, doing real time AI analysis on the fly, means that the good stuff he discovered on the Black Calderon, (okay-okay) that is Dedede, have, unbeknownst to academia and said scientific community, never made it to the science dweebs. The most fascinating discovery by far, shared with science, is the realization that the indigenous flora here on Dedede is not indigenous.

What's got everyone's panties all up in a bunch is the fight between the intentional camp versus the accidental camp. That is, the Pullulation Theory of intelligently sown fauna versus the Transposition Theory of randomly deposited spores. This knock-down/drag-out now holds the distinction of being the *dumbest non-scientific science ever* and has upstaged the "loss of information" ecclesiastical debates in the theoretical physics world centuries before.

Oh yea, and Transposition is winning.

Anyway, the data and samples that had any industrial value or impact went directly to the SA arm called Jerryworks, who farmed it out to the worst of the abusive research and development groups of the corporations they themselves secretly controlled. The technologies developed from Dedede are being held close to the chest in a virtual death-grip, with a barely noticeable trickle of tech leaking out based upon the samples and data that have been shared with academia.

The problem looming over this enterprise is that after the last war the Annex knew they could not keep this deception through the next one so, after having gotten all the choicest morsels from Dedede, and to block access by the Co-op, in march of 2296 they intentionally let it "accidentally" leak that Kirby is 37-Tau-E.

The fight for access and control over Dedede was won by the scientific community in the courts and, with the cease fire about to lapse, the effort to recover Artyom is now in mad-scramble mode.

Truth be known, the recovery operation is a mulligan of sorts.

Artyom is just the bait.

When the Orion Trust swapped out their beaten up steerage digs of an observatory, orbiting Dark Mind, the crappy little dwarf planet in the chilly region past Popstar and Dedede, for the new posh Access Ark facility, complete with amphitheatre, hotel and convention center, it became both a popular vacation attraction as well as the field trip of choice for 6th Graders in the Hyades. To date, all this visibility

has locked in their control of the Kirby system and effectively locked out the corporations.

Everyone knows that the Co-op will muscle their way in after the shooting starts, in about twenty minutes, but only the microbiology and plant sciences factions will really care. The Orion Trust and the Annex long ago got what they wanted, and before the Co-op can make any sense, science and innovative technology out of Dedede that will make a difference—this new war will be long over.

There are usually about a thousand or so kids on Access Ark, taking the tour and fawning over Popstar and Kirby, but it's the middle of the Christmas-New Year's school break so no field trips today; also the hotel is pretty empty for the holiday and that's great news for the Co-op because this minimizes potential collateral damage. Who is here are the university member delegates to the Orion Trust conducting their bi-annual ops meeting at a cut-rate. They're just pushing funds from one budgetary pool to another, yes, but business is business and fiscal responsibility for the Trust errors on the side of austerity.

And front row seats on the cheap for this show.

Iron Man, SA-14, has been docked with Access Ark waiting for Artyom to be delivered to them. The lift was supposed to happen a day ago but, as part of this ruse, a final core sample was taken over a known high-pressure methane filled sinkhole.

What little fauna there is on Dedede is bacterial and twice the biomass of the plants on the surface. Underground, protected from Kirby, this symbiotic relationship has resulted in a rich soil interlaced with the porous volcanic rock and has converted the predominately CO₂ atmosphere at its inception to a ratio of 36-40-20-4 of CO₂, O₂, nitrogen and other trace gasses. With an atmospheric pressure exceeding fourteen-hundred millibars when methane escapes into the atmosphere of Dedede under pressure, which surprisingly happens a lot around here, all you need is ignition—and on the thunderstorm infested and electrically charged Dedede all you throw are sevens.

There is always a spark.

Artyom was drilling over the sink hole when the ceiling of the chamber fractured and the gas escaped, blowing all seventy-tons of him back away from the breach. A vast plume of methane rolled up into the sky and didn't have to wait long for an ignition source. Artyom had a flare waiting just in case but that was not necessary.

When methane combines with oxygen (O₂) via combustion it goes through a ridiculous number of reactions making it a burn and not an explosion per se. Still, with the plume hitting a low hanging storm cloud, the ignition source for today, this "burn" had the power of a

small nuclear bomb that punched Artyom through the ceiling of the sinkhole as well as having collapsed said ceiling on top of him.

It took only an hour for Artyom and his mech to dig out from under the rubble, but that was a whole day ago. The recovery crew could not get to him under thirty-meters of boiling water that filled the small cavern so the crew has been pumping off the water—fighting the aquifer that is constantly trying to fill it up however, the crew has been winning and the top of the mech is now showing. This is like the twelfth time in forty-eight years they had to fish this seventy-ton machine out of a water filled hole in the ground, and the first time they purposefully swamped one for show, but it's all so predictably old hat for the recovery crew, made of maintenance droids, that they're way ahead of schedule and have been delaying the lift now for six hours.

With just a few minutes to go before hoisting the mech, Jacob and Peña land their Thunderbolt fighters a football pitch away from the sinkhole. They hop out of their ships and step up beside Artyom, the original android component, who is looking down at the mech and his home for forty-eight years. Three cables are running up from the mech, over the lip of the sinkhole and under a supersized HWG-98 Razorback drop ship brought in and configured for this lift.

Artyom was originally David, a service android. Now, service droid was a euphemism for a robotic prostitute, a sexbot have you, but with the Neuronet—service droids became superfluous. One android is as good as another so David was picked up at a bargain-basement rate and, by uploading the RTM mech-utility and core-interface, this robot went from the virtually useless sexploitation David to astronomically valuable sciploitation Artyom with the flip of a switch.

Standing by the sinkhole naked, his cloths long ago burned away by Dedede, and with an eerie calm between storms, the rays of Kirby peeking through a break the clouds, Artyom looks like he's in deep thought as Jacob disturbs him with, "You ready?"

The android turns towards them and his charred exterior is utterly ghastly to behold, ["Just drinking it in, Field Marshal."]

Being the first human eyes to fall on Artyom in forty-eight years, Jacob and Peña were not expecting this horror show. All his hair, eyelids and outer layers of his skin have been burned away with the inner metallic skin hideously tarnished. Extremities like his fingers, toes, penis, ears and nose now sport the chroma rainbow of tempered steel. His broken jaw is wired shut to keep it from flopping about so to talk to them he has to communicate via an archaic radio interface.

Jacob suggests, "If you want to take a few minutes?"

Artyom shakes his head *no*, ["Ready as I'll ever be."]

While they walk towards the Thunderbolts, and the Razorback starting to lift off, Jacob looks over and says, "It's an honor to be the one to come get you, Artyom. You are a hero to us in the Annex."

["That's odd, I simply cannot understand how my efforts in botany could be classified as a heroic endeavor?"]

"Well, you saved my ass!"

Artyom's lips move in deference to the wired jaw, ["Oh yes, the sixth of November, twenty-three-zero-eight. I saw the report."]

Peña asks, "What stupid did you do?"

["Field Marshal, Graves, was hit by a laser battery."]

Jacob adds, "It was just a scratch, thanks to Artyom, here."

Stepping up to the fighters, with the Razorback hovering over the sinkhole to hoist the mech, Artyom pulls a piece of a bramble from a bush, jet black like all the plant life on this planet, and shows them, ["This is the specific culprit. The ablative surface of your JACC comes from the carbon-iron scaling on the stems. It's a brilliant example of bio-molecular interlocked bonding."]

Jacob squints at the plant, "The thorns!"

["This is just one example of that adaptation."]

Peña wonders, "What, I don't get it?"

Jacob motions around them, "There're no critters."

Peña still doesn't get it so Artyom adds, ["Thorns are only for self-defense, purposefully to dissuade animals from eating them. No herbivores means this biology did not evolve here."]

Peña chuckles, "No shit, it's that simple!"

Artyom nods, ["All too often the obvious is difficult to notice."]

Jacob says, "Guys, we gotta saddle up. Fifteen minutes."

Jacob has Artyom strap up in the jump seat behind him then seals the cockpit. Both he and Peña launch and orbit the Razorback as the recovery droids secure the mech. To accommodate this machine they removed the deck of the hold so that they can operate in utility hoist mode as the ever popular Dragonfly lifter. In fact they would have preferred the Dragonfly for this effort but the 2.4g of Dedede makes the 70 tons of the mech the equivalent of 168 tons—and double that for every 'g' of acceleration going up.

The Razorback lifts off for Access Ark, accelerating at a paltry half a gravity to start. Once they stabilize the load, identifying the center of gravity, the Razorback rotates its nose straight up and kicks

in its engines. They push it along little by little and topping off at 2g to keep the tension from acceleration at half the cable load-rating so as not to risk shearing them.

It is now noon and they have reached ninety kilometers up near the edge of space—above the thicker atmosphere of Dedede but not high enough for an overloaded drop ship to switch over to MDDSH.

Peña ties into Jacob with, ["Well, we're on schedule!"]

Jacob nods, "SA-14 should be irresistible."

["*Si...piñata hombre de hierro!*"]

Jacob gruffs, "That's an interesting way of putting it!"

Peña, mimicking a severe LA-Mex accent, ["*Patrón*, who can resist a fuckin' *piñata*! Weren't you were married to a Mexican once upon a time?"] He then mumbles, ["*No tiene dos dedos de frente!*"]

"What happened to that clean-cut lieutenant we hired on?"

Peña snorts a laugh, and with an exaggerated redneck accent, ["Oh, 'scuse me thar, Sir! Ya'll git wha'cha pay fur!"]

Jacob and Peña are ninety-seven light seconds away from Access Ark and cannot see anything at that distance in real time, but they are being fed a video and tactical stream directly from SA-14. This tacnet feed is only delayed by a pico-second or two, so at that very moment, with said delay, thirty-five seconds after the hour, two F-51 Condors zip up at a quarter light-speed, break for just a second, just enough time to let SA-14 have it with four centipede missiles, and zip back out at a quarter light speed before they could get shot at.

SA-14 was docked to Access Ark with its long nose, so the condors attacked the engine nacelles in the back of the ship over a kilometer away from the Ark. The platform initiates an emergency decoupling and uses its gravity core in a directional pull to draw itself away. It's only a quarter-g to start but the intensity builds up quickly. They only need 3 clicks to safely zip off in MDDSH spacial displacement mode but that drive capability is now gone. They can actually jump with one nacelle, and it would be a shit of a short jump, but a jump is a jump, and they still have two functional nacelles, but regulations require the ship to be at least of thirty kilometers away.

Iron Man, SA-14, the very first and most revered of the SA battle platforms, is in really deep shit for once.

They launch a squadron of Thunderbolt fighters to take on any follow up condors but all they get now is a centipede being sniped at them from a stand-off range every few seconds. The Co-op cannot launch a spider missile this close to Access Ark so what they plan to do

is now obvious. With no other option SA-14 notifies the Ark that they are initiating an emergency jump at fifteen kilometers.

Jacob, and the others watch as SA-14 approaches the twelve kilometer mark, so Jacob quietly says, "All according to prophesy."

Peña voice is strained, ["Dude, this is hard to watch."]

Artyom says of its AI, ["I always wanted to meet, Grace."]

Just then, at twelve kilometers, three from the proposed jump point, a Zodiac missile, special delivery from Security Services, streaks in and stops dead in its tracks right behind SA-14. Normally these things would initiate detonation about a thousand kilometers away from its target so that it would actually pop right at the exact moment they're about to hit said target, usually inside a kilometer, both the Annex and the Co-op have gotten that good with them, but with Access Ark so close they had to be exacting at worse so they brought the evil thing to a screeching halt.

In a half-a-second the Zodiac closes in and barely touches the Iron Man before detonating in a massive-blinding fifty-megaton pulse.

Iron Man is gone.

The radius of the plasma fire-ball is just over four-kilometers, and with no actual blast or shock wave to be had, this is space, one would still think that Access Ark would be irreparably scorched and damaged by the radiation at this short distance but this facility was built with Kirby in mind. Over the years Access Ark has been hit by a multitude of solar flares spit out by Kirby, so much radiation and charged particles in fact that this little fire-cracker of a nuke, at better than arms distance, was really nothing by comparison.

The fire-ball hangs in space for just a few seconds and fades out but Jacob, Peña and Artyom will not get to see this for another minute and a half. The feed from SA-14 is suddenly and simply cut. They do not need any visual cues as to what happened because they know they'll see it soon enough.

Jacob radios to Peña "Okay, Dog, they'll come for the mech so let's make it quick and painless for 'em."

["This is all so inelegant in its elegance."]

Jacob agrees whole heartedly, "Ya, it's not what I wanna do."

Artyom speaks up introspectively, "You know, I was already uploaded with the core so I do not know why we are going through these motions. You should have just bombed me on the surface."

Jacob just shakes his head, "This is not about you, Artyom, but we'll get you up to speed when we debrief."

Peña adds, ["If anyone is deserving of a duster it is you."]

They are less than a minute away from the point where the Razorback can kick it into MDDSH, but above them a single F51 Condor streaks in, so Jacob says, "Right on time."

Seconds later fifteen more Condor's streak in between them and the point of escape, with a cruiser above them for fire support. The Co-op wants to scoop up Artyom, and are clueless that they are being played, the drop ship carrying Artyom's mech suddenly rotates and, with this load, struggles to transition its trajectory sideways and away from the fighters above. There is not enough air pressure at this altitude for the Razorback to aerodynamically force a turn, and with the Condor's starting to descend on them the recovery crew cuts the mech loose—according to plan.

Once the mech is clear the Razorback kicks in its MDDSH engines and rips away at high speed. It couldn't do so with the load but now it can fly away unscathed.

With the mech starting to drop in a trajectory back towards Dedede so, as a kiss-my-ass to the Co-op, Jacob and Peña spread out and both launch a spider missile on it.

The whole reason for the Co-op to attack has now been obliterated. It's not even a debris field, the mech has been converted to hot and rapidly expanding fire-ball.

With the drop ship and mech now gone, Jacob and Peña go from pure defensive weakness to 'come hither and play' dominance. Not wanting to take them on just yet, the Condors climb away and high-tail it out with the cruiser. Now is not the time.

The two Thunderbolts MDDSH it out of the area and at 30au from Kirby they stop, link up, charge...and jump.

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Normally in the SA you do three jumps and wait a day to make sure nobody has followed by recalibrating the jump signatures. Two jumps have been traced, yes, but never three consecutive jumps. Jacob and Peña jump five times with the last one straight back to the Carrie Nation orbiting Cue Ball, the eleventh planet of alpha-Orion.

From Dedede to a touchdown dish-side on the Carrie Nation was less than an hour. On combat jumps they stick to an operational protocol that calls for strict communication blackout but, if necessary, they can text and even synch clocks via old school paint-by-laser. This part of today's mission was uneventful, boring even, as will the post mission debriefing, or so Artyom was led to believe.

Standing alone on the lift in a JACC is Marshal, Nancy Yoon, the commander of the Carrie Nation. She guides Jacob and Peña to a cross-armed stop. It wasn't necessary but safety protocol is protocol, so if a pair of eyes are available they are required to be used.

As the lift drops to the first flight deck, their cockpits open up while still in a vacuum. At the bottom, Yoon walks along with them as they drive their Thunderbolts into the adjoining air lock where, once cleared, the door seals and the bay floods with air.

With the atmosphere stabilized, Yoon steps up to the first fighter while detaching her helmet-canopy assembly and pulling it straight up and off, "Trooper Peña, I've heard a lot about you."

Peña smiles, "All lies, Marshal Yoon!"

Jacob calls over from his ship as he starts to help Artyom out, "Heads up, Nancy. You're gonna be seeing a lot of him."

Yoon smiles, "I heard. How's Sandy taken to her new job?"

"Sandoval is fuckin' pissed." Jacob laughs as he lifts Artyom from the cockpit and helps him down to the deck, "I don't know if it's the promotion or being saddled with Cricket as a DFM?"

Yoon hides her shock at seeing Artyom's haggard appearance, "We're all praying Cricket gets through this...without fucking up."

"No shit. Though she is fantastic as a company commander."

Yoon shrugs as Jacob, Artyom and Peña step up, "Some fail to adapt to the impersonal touch, you know. I'd rather command a company over a fucking station but..." She sighs, "Good days, right?"

Jacob nods as he fist-bumps Yoon, "Those were good days."

Looking at the android, Yoon shakes her head, "I can't believe that it's you, Artyom. How's the SYLN nodes working for ya?"

Peña wonders, "I thought Artyom was pre-CLaN?"

"He got the C.L.N. nodes when he deployed and the SYLN upgrade thirty years ago. I was the liaison on that project."

Artyom nods and responds through the speaker in his throat, "Nancy Yoon, you were a corporal back then."

Yoon hands him the BDU pants he asked for on the way in, "Dude, you look like shit!"

"Yep, Five-Nights shit...thank you!" He holds the BDU pants up and inspects them with infinite joy, "God, how I've missed pants!"

Peña asks, "Pants? Forty-eight years and you ask for pants?"

"It's the little things."

Jacob and Yoon help Artyom steady himself, and as he puts the pants on, Yoon says, "Two things, first, all that time in the field made you eligible for rank. Only five people in the history of the Annex have been awarded PFC-Six and, well, you've earned it but, unfortunately, we do not have a brass pin on hand."

"I am honored!" Artyom cinches the belt and, "Not having the pin is okay because I believe it is the thought that counts."

Jacob adds, "You did earn it."

"I'm proud of my work on Dedede, but I am apprehensive about my next assignment. Becoming a battle platform SYLN is one thing, but they want to migrate me to the new SYLN-b cybernetic."

Yoon asks, "What's the problem?"

"I'm not of their caliber. Using SYLN node components does not make me one of them. It does not make me their equal."

"Well, they don't see it like that."

"Would you be so kind as to advise them that I appreciate the offer, but I do not consider myself qualified."

Yoon laughs, "Well, you can tell them yourself! This was the second thing I had for you. In two hours the SYLN from the C3, Glados, is leading a round table with the other twenty-six SYLN droids to discuss the SYLN-b transition she already went through. They did schedule this get together for today to make sure you'd be here."

Artyom looks down in thought, then, "I guess this means I should accept this new assignment, qualified or not."

Peña snorts, "D'uh, ya think!"

Artyom then shrugs, "Then a transition to a female persona and anatomical construct shouldn't be that problematic." He looks up, "I've identified as male for so long that it gives me butterflies to think about such a change. New life, new me as they say?"

Jacob offers, "If you want to talk to my daughter, she made the switch. I can arrange it, just say the word."

Artyom delights in the offer, "I would like that! Thank you."

Yoon gestures them to follow her, "Look, we got one more thing before we get you checked out and to your SYLN group therapy meeting." As they step up to the airlock hatch that's starting to open Yoon says, "You'll be here for the next two days. At that point Marshal Graves will take you to the Spike. You'll be debriefing there and get prepped and fast-tracked for your new assignment."

Blocking their way is a platform with stairs, so as Yoon starts

climbing, Artyom calls out, "I am indebted to you, Marshal Yoon. Honestly, I cannot thank you enough for your hospitality."

Yoon has reached the top and as he labors away, climbing the stairs, she says, "No, Artyom, it is we who want to thank you."

At the top, on a landing, Artyom steps out onto a stage. He is faced with a dozen senior SA marshals including Maria and Bob. On the flight deck behind them are over three-thousand troopers lined up in columns, at parade rest, which is visually staggering.

Jacob steps around Artyom and stands beside Maria who asks, "How was the mission? Any casualties?"

"Zero, droids only." Jacob smiles at her, "Like clockwork."

A lone sergeant, at the head of the columns of troopers, shouts with a D.I. bark, "*More majorum*, atten-hut!"

Bob steps up to Artyom and pins a PFC medallion to the belt loop of his pants and steps back, "PFC-Six, Artyom, so many here owe their lives to you but...no words can express our gratitude."

Robert Jackson, Bob to some, the alpha-6 Consulate Marshal of the Steel Annex, snaps a perfect salute to honor him—a charred scrap heap of a robot. A whole second later everyone else, those on stage and the three thousand on the deck, follow suit in lockstep.

Artyom quietly mutters to himself, "Oh, my."

He looks down at the polished-gold medallion of a single chevron with six-rockers. He's had SYLN tech inside him for so long that over the years emotions have naturally manifested themselves, but suddenly they are proving difficult for him to cope with. Artyom has always felt like the outsider, an infinitesimally small part of a greater something, something he has had an intimate and detailed knowledge of but always from afar in both distance and time.

The tribute of being polished has never been bestowed upon the likes of him before, a machine, but these humans freely chose to do this so in spite of his reservations, and in adherence to protocol, Artyom struggles to attention and returns the salute.

The ovation that followed was deafening.

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