

Cor Mechanicum

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I Homecoming

The first rays of morning sunlight have just started reaching the top of the massive, ruined concrete pillar, as a tall figure darts through the rubble of the building it used to support. She jumps, and dives down beneath the rest of the pillar, which lies shattered in the dry sand and rubble covering the ground. With rapid steps, she makes her way deeper into the darkness, stepping gently enough so as to be almost silent. The still-standing half of that pillar is one of the taller objects in the area, sure, but no one usually ventures this deep into the Achean plain. Still, she had put a lot of work into hiding that entrance—shifting over a huge block of concrete just to cover up a stairwell is no simple feat—but she felt it a necessary procedure, regardless. She reaches the last flight of stairs and jumps down, remaining completely still after landing to listen to the surroundings. The soft reverberations of the landing gets replaced with the familiar hum of the underground. Deeper still, down the

concrete corridor, a drop of water falls from a pipe and hits a puddle. To be sure no one else is down here, she silently shifts to extend the radio receiver antenna mounted atop her left ear, and the sound of static fills her head. Sweeping through the different frequencies, the sound profile remains more or less the same. Good. No one else is here.

Standing up, she adjusts the overcoat hanging over her shoulders, and grabs a small gas lantern from the waistbelt hidden within. Everything is wrapped in a gentle, warm glow, and finally, her face becomes visible. Doctor Sierra T. Ståhl, former neuroscientist and physicist, now a mere scavenger hiding out in the wasteland. This form was one she had created for herself, grown in a lab for multiple years, a genetically modified clone of herself, hybrid of human and hare, among other organisms. Slowed aging, an improved sense of smell, greater field of vision, powerful legs, tall, articulated ears on the top of her head, and not least of all pale, blue fur covering her

entire body. Further modified with circuitry and processors to add a neural data interface, along with multiple cybernetic implants and devices. Replacing her own body was the final project of her laboratory before it was shut down. Before she ran.

However, this body was not without fault. Not long after, her heart started giving out, and had to be replaced with a mechanical heart. A two-chambered centrifugal pump, quietly humming along in the middle of her ribcage, constantly drawing power and an absolute nightmare to service. Additionally, her entire right arm had been shattered by a falling metal post—an injury others could possibly recover from—so a fine, stainless steel prosthetic with a titanium skeleton stood in its place. After they had received a lot of wear due to excessive use, she decided to upgrade her legs by attaching a shock absorbing exoskeleton, which also gave her the opportunity to install some much-needed upgrades for her body, like internal batteries for her heart and neural interfaces,

and an ability to dash extremely quickly, in order to escape danger.

With lantern dangling from her paw, mechanical hand ready at the holster of her gun, she begins walking down the dark corridor, a dense network of pipes and wires went past around her, the soft rustling of metal and polyethylene from within all of her many many pockets being the only sound, as she steps and hops over piles of junk. Anything useful had already been picked out, so all that remains now is rusty scrap metal, dirty plastic, and shattered glass bottles. She could tell whenever scavengers had been down here; they rummage through the trash, then leave empty handed. But, thankfully, that had not happened today. The tunnels are as they usually are. The sound of the leaky pipe came and went, and with a key in a lock inside an otherwise inconspicuous wall-mounted breaker box, a section of wall hinges inward to reveal another passage, this tunnel much more crudely fashioned, but still spacious enough to

stand upright. Not much further now. Closing the door behind her, she quickly makes her way to a junction, and stops. After retrieving another key, removing her overcoat and placing it neatly on the ground, then taking a deep breath, she *leaps* down the left path, then immediately down a bend, in the blink of an eye. Exhale. She inserts the oddly-shaped key into a control panel mounted on the wall, but pauses for a moment, then grabs a sizable rock from the ground, and lobs it back around the corner. As quickly as she possibly can, she covers her ears with her hands, and—BAM! BAM! BAM!—as machine gun fire blasts the stone, shards spraying in all directions. The home defense system appears to be working just fine. Pressing down on a switch, the small red light on the panel shuts off, and a green one starts blinking instead. She walks back, safely, to grab her coat once more, and walks down the other path without getting shot, giving the machine gun a pat as she rounds another corner. A similar control panel hangs on the wall, with the same blinking green light. A

push of another switch, and the red light comes back on. It's programmed to re-activate the security after one minute, but she still does it manually every time. A ritual of homecoming, just like wiping your shoes on the mat or hanging your coat on the rack! This is not a home with those kinds of niceties.

Ahead of her lies a gigantic, and once very productive nuclear research and processing facility, with many strange fuel breeding reactors, stockpiles of extremely dangerous nuclear materials, and huge gas centrifuges she can only dream about seeing up and running again. One of the few things that still works in this facility is a thorium backup reactor. It doesn't generate a lot of electricity, but it's enough to keep the air fresh, grow food, and run some servers, plus, its system allows it to automatically refuel itself. An array of power bank lets her store energy for more intensive experiments or shut the reactor down for prolonged periods when needed. Things could certainly be worse.

She makes her way to a smaller control room, where she has made her home, and the fluorescent tubes hum and blink as they're woken up. Exhaustion now finally setting in, she gently puts everything in her coat pockets onto a workbench, littered with tools and electronic devices, then takes off the coat and her waistbelt, hanging them both over the back of an office chair. The sound of multiple computer fans quietly spinning along fills the room, one standing below the workbench, connected to multiple monitors and peripherals, and a few smaller servers standing in a rack. Judging from the slow fan speeds, the computations and simulations scheduled to run while away have finished. She detaches her prosthetic arm from its socket, and attaches it to a docking device at the other end of the table. A small blip and some blue lights indicates that it connected without issue. She drags herself over to a mattress in the back of the room, and passes out onto it.

II Maintenance

Sierra jolts awake at the sound of an alert blaring inside her head. She reaches for the gun on her hip with her currently not-attached arm, then fumbles around, grabbing it with her other arm and sweeping it across the room with a scanning gaze. However, now slightly more awake, and more importantly detecting nobody else in the room, she realizes what the alert was: a low battery warning. Right, nothing to worry about. Normally, the prosthetic can provides the bulk of the power needed via an array of strontium-90 betavoltaic cells, and forgetting to charge after getting back, the already mostly-empty internal batteries had to keep everything running while she slept. At the next lower threshold, glucose generators installed in her heart and major blood vessels will kick in. They can keep everything running, but at the cost of precious blood sugar, which the rest of the body needs. Something to avoid, when possible.

Now much calmer, she gets up from the mattress and walks over to the desk, setting the gun down and picking up a cable which gets inserted into a port on her sides. Immediately, she can sense the energy filling her circuitry, and the admittedly still-very-strange, sort of tense sensation of “low battery” disappears.

Not yet fully awake, she slumps down into the chair and remains motionless for a moment, before finally rolling it over to grab her prosthetic from the docking station, attaching it to the socket with a satisfying click, then wakes her PC from sleep mode. The monitors flash to life, one by one, the first and smallest one showing a graph of different sensors both internal and around the facility. The clock told her that she'd slept through the entire day, dawn to dusk. Oh well. A tall one comes on, with a bunch of command terminals open, and finally the central monitor comes on. The desktop wallpaper was a photo she had taken herself some time ago, a sunset overlooking the plain.

Navigating through some folders, she brings up a schematic, flips to a diagram of the circuit board, and locates a specific part. 6.3 volts, 22 microfarads. Kicking against the wall, she rolls the chair over to the items she had kept in her coat pockets, a heap of anti-static plastic bags containing different electronics. 6.3 volts, 22 microfarads... 6.3 volts, 22 microfarads... A-ha! She finds piece of circuit with a suitable capacitor, and removes it from the sleeve, moving it over to the “work” part of the workbench.

After letting an iron heat up and flicking on some small, bright lights, she carefully desolders the capacitor from the circuit board. Attaching it to a breadboard, along with a resistor and power supply, she tests it using a multimeter. Not perfect, but it'll do. Setting everything else aside, she grabs a spool of solder and a disassembled device—the one the schematic was for—and locates the spot where a faulty capacitor had been mounted. Gently and precisely, the scavenged capacitor is

mounted and re-soldered onto the circuit board, and now, after putting everything back into the casing and inserting some fresh batteries, the motor again spins when pressing one of the buttons. A different one releases a latch keeping the button pressed, and the motor stops. Excellent.

The casing is screwed back together, and the entire device slides and locks onto a rail mounted on her hip, normally hidden by a metal panel. She stands up and puts her waistbelt on, drapes the coat over her shoulders, and opens up a drawer under her desk. Within lies a loose assortment of plastic cassettes, most of them in hard casings, all in various different colors. As well, a pair of headphones modified to fit her rather unique ears, which promptly gets put on, a soft spark heard as they're plugged into the newly-repaired device. She could easily plug the audio directly into her neural interface and hear it directly, but nothing beats the quality of old and flimsy headphones.

Digging through the drawer, she picks out a few cassettes and places them in her various pockets, as well as grabbing an empty container for one she had brought home with her earlier, one with a beautiful, translucent pink color. These were quite rare, and it seemed to be in good quality, so she inserts it into the cassette player and hits play.

The gentle crackling, the soothing hiss, the way the sound seems to flutter at times, the slight speed variations giving a unique feel to each listen... She had always been enamored with the formats of old, especially the audio cassette. Primitive by today's standards, sure, but there is such an elegance in how they solved the problem of storing a sound. Considering how old the format is, it's no small wonder that any of them still exist today, maybe there were people like her, before and after the apocalypse, who kept using it even after it became obsolete.

With loud music in her ears and bleeding out into the environment, she grabs a broom and a handheld vacuum cleaner from a storage locker, and leaves the control room. It's tedious work, but an important duty. Having been out for many days, a thin layer of dust coated many parts of the facility, both floor and machines big and small. All the dust gets swept into piles, where it can easily be sucked up by the handheld and collected in a filter. The hard to reach places, like the gas centrifuges, will have to wait for another day, though it is starting to build up. Flip cassette to other side. Actually, it's possible to reverse the fans and make the thing blow air... But she quickly realizes that this launches a lot of dust into the air and, coughing, trying to avoid getting dust in her eyes, escapes the area. Cleaning those will, indeed, have to wait.

On the way back, she passes by the facility's nuclear material storage, and checks around the area with a Geiger counter. Readings nominal. Behind that heavy steel door lies stockpiles of

many exotic and now mostly-decayed isotopes, and several barrels of unprocessed uranium concentrate. She'd be not a little bit ashamed to admit to having sample the product (and getting rather sick in the process), yet still she wondered why it's called "yellow cake." It's certainly yellow, but not even remotely close to cake. Erm, best not to think about that, everything here is *fine*, so onwards to the next chore: *Actual* food.

Despite many improvements to her digestive system and a system to recycle many nutrients, food is still a requirement, especially in a place like this. To this end, she has converted one of the many storage halls within the facility into an artificial garden. The shelves within are lined with large, clay aggregate filled growing trays, connected with PVC pipe to transport the nutrient-packed water and illuminated by bright magenta LED arrays. The facility is connected directly to the groundwater supply, but getting those pumps and filtration systems up and running again was an absolute bitch.

Doing maintenance down in that damp, dark hole is not particularly fun either, but despite the meager trickle it now produces, it's quite enough for her needs. Has been running quite smoothly as of late, as well. The nutrients that get added come from a wide range of places. Bones, bits of wood, ash, discarded scraps of food, manure from whatever beasts scavengers force to roam the surface... hell, even the parts for the nitrogen generator were scavenged, and the phosphorous was taken from an unexploded incendiary missile—good thing whoever owned it probably died before it could be launched. One man's bomb is another plant's macronutrients, as they always say. Yeah, they *definitely* say that.

Whilst snacking on a ripe cucumber, she inspects each tray for leaky piping, poor growth, fertilizer burn, and signs of pests that have long since gone extinct, only warned of in the centuries-old guides to horticulture she was able to dig up. Cucumber devoured, she finds a healthy, invitingly red sweet pepper and—oh,

how delectable, an excellent specimen! Better save the seeds in this one. A leaf of lettuce to round things off... or two, and it's definitely *a* meal. Not necessarily a healthy meal, but it'll at least keep her going, that's what's important. Man, she really needs to go looking for some grains or potatoes or something, and a suitable strain of yeast. Some freshly brewed alcohol would really hit the spot—but not right now, while there's still work to do, *obviously*... just in general. Grapes could work too. Any particularly sweet fruit would do, but growing a tree indoors is... Well, actually, she has absolutely no idea how to grow a tree. Probably wouldn't be able to grow one down here anyways. The dreams of a brewery will have to stay shelved a while longer.

The tape runs out of music, and the cassette player's auto-stop releases the latch on the play button. A hollow silence seeps in, interwoven with the occasional trickle of water from the hydroponics, faint, low hum of HVAC reverberating through the air ducts.

She would go on to think about the music on that pink cassette tape quite a lot.

It had been a few days of other maintenance tasks, toying with trinkets, improving software, and more menial shit when she felt a rumble. A faint one, but she felt it, and it was close. Couldn't have been a reactor explosion, that's still running just fine, meaning... Something is happening above her. And she intends to find out what—it has been too long since anything interesting happened around here.

She grabs her pistol, ensuring that it has a loaded magazine, but holsters it—this isn't a pistol situation. Instead, she procures a combat shotgun from a storage closet, folding out the stock and a hook so it can be wielded with one hand, as well as a metal police shield. It may look flimsy, but can actually deflect bullets quite well. Fully geared up, and not forgetting to bring additional magazines and shotgun shells, she runs out into the tunnels again,

taking care to disable the turret, go down the tunnel, re-enable it, and dash through. It was always a little scary to be within sight of a high-caliber machine gun trained to shoot anything it sees, even *if* she blinks past it in a fraction of a second. Still, things ought to be done properly, or not done at all.

The corridors are quiet, but she could pick up... some kind of signal. Actually, much of the radio spectrum was saturated with garbage of a headache-inducing timbre. This isn't anything she'd ever encountered before, whatever the fuck it is. Maybe it could be... a satellite that's still transmitting data? How would that even have survived? No matter, she continues onwards, from the way she had entered before. While there were more entrances to this tunnel system further down, it's unlikely anything nearby would just stumble upon those, considering they're a few kilometers away. Ha, it's rather strange, actually. Whoever placed *this* tunnel *here* must have been on drugs or plotting to kill someone

in an elaborate tunnel-scheme, whatever that entails. Maybe both.

As she gets closer to the surface, she slows her ascent up the stairs. She's quiet, sure, but she needs to be quieter. The afternoon sun yet hangs in the sky, casting long shadows across the ground. She couldn't see anything from the top of the stairwell, no cloud of smoke or anything quite so simple. Reaching a higher vantage point atop the rubble, she suddenly spots... nothing? There was not a single thing out of the ordinary, from here unto the horizon. She couldn't have hallucinated it, could she? She definitely felt something—was it something inside the facility after all? Had she made a mistake?

But that distinctive, harsh, gibberish signal is still there, although much fainter from here. Muffled, in a sense. But she can't tell what direction it's coming from, unless...

On the verge of panic, she practically flies back down the stairs, and as she does, the signal gets stronger and stronger. It was already down here. She leaps through the corridor, aided only by a dim headlight, shotgun at the ready and the shield now attached to her shoulder, jumping over the trash on the floor, dodging the random pipes and valves sticking out from the ceiling. The signal starts getting too powerful to keep listening to, better shut the radio off again. Her worst fear comes to pass when she reaches the secret entrance—it stood open, almost as if to mock her for thinking this could ever be well-hidden. Fuck. Gods, fuck! Fucking shit! But she does her best to regain her composure, and comes up with a plan: sneak up on whoever is in there, and either wait for them to walk into the firing line of the turret or just back them into it... if it hadn't already happened. Oh, seeing it actually do its job would be *immensely* satisfying, especially now.

With low and slow steps, she traverses through the dark, cowering behind the shield and staying as close to the wall as possible, frequently checking if someone's behind her. Up ahead, a short, cloaked figure wading through the dark with but a flashlight. It's too soon to say whether or not this was to be a threat, so ever does she make her way closer, soundlessly creeping through the shadow. The figure stops to ponder the branching path, and Sierra stops as well, about 5 meters or so away. The left. This is it. Standing up more and moving the shield out of the way to see better, she accidentally scrapes it against the rock. Past the beam of light now shining directly at her, she can now at least gets a good look at the figure behind the cloak. The face currently staring her down is the face of a teenager. Dirty, scratched and bruised, but there was no mistaking it, she stood face to face with a mere child.

The deafening sound of machine gun fire rings through the corridor.

The bullets do not reach their target.

Without even realizing, Sierra had dashed forward to intercept and deflect them with her shield. She staggers, containing a scream of pain as her calf is shot clean through, but does her best to maintain her posture, so as to not trip up the motion detectors any more. With strained, heavy breathing, she looks down at the child, and a voice that hasn't spoken to someone else in a very long time orders them to "Get... the hell... out of here."

Once again, she collapses.

III Visitor

"Nervous?"

Tanja jumps in her seat slightly. She hadn't noticed Bianca standing in the doorway. Seeing anyone else would not have made her calm back down so quickly. "No, no, it's just... Yeah," she admits. Who wouldn't be nervous.

"Sorry for scaring you."

This project had been kept a complete secret from both her patrons and the rest of the lab. Even her most loyal assistant had been kept in the dark, at least for a time. Now, it would be her ticket out of this shithole. A single mistake now, and she is dead.

It was only by mistake that Bianca found out about this project. Assuming everyone else had gone home for the night, the door was left unlocked, and in she wandered. Saw all of it. However, where Tanja expected contempt and disgust, was found instead awe and admiration. Where she had thought that *anyone* finding out would jeopardize the entire project, Bianca

offered her hand. "Doctor, I do not know what it is you are doing here," she said. "But you need not do it alone."

And now, there they were, at the precipice of the final procedure. The neuro-genetic reprogramming treatment was starting to take its toll on her psyche, but the hand on her shoulder provided no small amount of comfort. She was in good hands. "You'll take care of the lab while I'm...?" she begins, leaving the question unfinished to avoid thinking about what's about to happen.

"Of course," Bianca reassures her.

The silence hangs in the air for a moment before Tanja mutters that "it's time."

Leaning on her shoulder, they walk into the operating theater. This kind of... intimacy is not at all appropriate given the amount of immuno-suppressants currently in her body, but it cannot be helped. A part of her enjoys it, this feeling of being held up by the strength of another, but she does not want to admit that.

Inside the theater waits a surgery machine, the flagship model developed at this very lab, already powered on and programmed to perform the procedure. Beneath its gleaming metal instruments, two medical chairs facing away from each other. One for her to get seated in, and in the other, her soon-to-be body, hooked up to various life-support machines. Bianca helps her to get seated and connected to the many machines as well, before finally strapping a breathing mask over her face.

“Ready?”

Tanja nods slowly, and anesthetics begin filling her lungs. As the world fades away, Bianca leans down to kiss her on the forehead.

A careful tap-tap-tap of the foot against her head. “Miss bunny, wake up!” No response yet. Tap-tap-tap. “Miss bunnyyy?”

What’s happening? That child. Right. There was a child here. *Still* here. Damn it.

“Wake...” They gather for a much more deliberate kick. “Up!!”

Swing and a miss. Sierra has already jumped back to dodge the attack. Now relatively upright but still close to the ground, only able to support herself with one knee—some wires must have gotten severed—she aims her pistol at the child staring curiously at her. “Who are you,” she threatens, trying not to wince from the pain. “Who sent you?”

No fear. Instead, they point to the injured leg behind her. “You bleed weird.” Indeed, from a wound this severe there was very little blood, naught but a thin, dried up trail from here to where she was standing, and it had already mostly stopped. They crouch down to meet her level. “Does that mean you’re like me?”

Huh.

She takes a closer look at the person in front of her. Long and rather unkempt pale hair, bangs pinned to one side with star and rainbow hair-clips, covering skin with a plastic sheen. The seams between the panels are clearly visible

from up close, as well as their fully mechanical frame, uniquely patterned, hidden beneath the dark, heavy cloak. This is certainly no ordinary child. But they seem friendly enough. Maybe if she's nice, they'll just leave her alone.

She lowers her arm, still holding on to her gun as it touches the ground.

“I mean, you're, like, a robot, right?” they clarify.

“Well,” she begins, struggling to find the best way to explain. “Mostly robot.”

“Which parts?”

Alright then. Sure. Why not. Re-holstering the gun and sitting more normally, she starts by detaching her right arm, and shows it off for a brief moment, as well as the connector that remains. “Titanium skeleton, fully articulated. Has some power cells, too.” After reattaching the arm, she taps her chest, “mechanical heart,” then gestures towards her entire lower body, reveals the neural interfaces around her spine, and lastly (probably least, too) the radio antenna module mounted on her ear. “This one

doesn't really count. I have some other implants here and there too, but, that's everything."

"Wait, so—" their eyes begin to light up with excitement. "Is your face, like—I mean!—you know, the ears and all that? Is that..."

An internal sigh. "Yeah."

"WOW, okay so, wait, how?"

"I... created this body, in a lab," she explains, but giving no further details

"Brain transplant?"

She nods, impressed. This kid seems to know more than she had assumed.

"So we really are alike!" they exclaim, with a beaming plastic smile.

Sierra stares down at the ground blankly.

"Then..." she grabs the shotgun and shield from where they had landed, and stands up using the shield as an impromptu crutch. She leans against the wall, avoiding putting any more pressure on her injured leg, and asks, "what about you?"

They stand up as well. "I am *one hundred*

percent robot!” They sound proud. “Well, ‘cept my brain, of course. My name’s Irene, by the way.” They extend their hand in greeting.

A firm handshake from both parts. “Sierra.” She lets go. That’s quite enough of the friendliness and formalities. “Why are you here. How did you find this tunnel.”

“Oh, I completely forgot! I’m looking for my friends, and...” A puzzled expression appears on their face, which slowly turns into concern.

“I actually, um... don’t remember how I...”

Sierra looks on, trying to discern if they’re bluffing. Hard to say. The concern takes on a hint of distress. Might not be bluffing.

“Miss Sierra, where, um... Where are we?”

“Achea.”

“ACHEA!?”

Yeah, they’ve completely lost it. “Achea,” she reaffirms. Whatever. This weirdo can have a digital psychosis or whatever somewhere else. “Well, your friends aren’t here.” Just turn around and go back. “Close the door when you leave, thanks.”

“Wait!”

Two desperate hands cling onto her arm. Begrudgingly, she waits.

“I...” A contemplative pause. “Do you... need any help walking?”

Oh, she does. She absolutely does. In this state, she genuinely might not even be able to make it back. How fucking perfect. At this point, she'd rather they were just another low-life scavenger trying to kill her. “Fine.”

And so, after Irene has closed the entrance to the tunnel once more, the two of them begin stumbling back. They do not make it much farther, however, and Sierra orders them to “stay here,” then promptly injures her ankle even more and almost gets shot again. Having to almost crawl up the wall, she disables the security, and the journey can resume. The machine gun receives one stern and one admiring look as they shuffle past.

Sierra avoids even *looking* at any of the marvelous technology within the facility she calls home, focused only on getting back to the

control room. Her crutch sure seem like they'd want to explore everything, but she ignores them as well. Maybe she'll kill them once this is over with, an android would certainly have a lot of valuable materials and components.

Hanging up their coat and analyzing the room, Irene isn't particularly impressed with the state of Sierra's living quarters, but their eyes are quickly drawn to the workstation, and all the tools, trinkets and components. Still in quite fine shape, they are, "Where do you even find all this?" Irene asks, picking up the camera.

"Uh, around," Sierra responds plainly.

Having put the shield and shotgun back in their storage locker, she hops over to the chair and sits down, still maintaining a watchful eye on the child currently looking at her belongings. Sure, this absolute nut was able to just waltz into her tunnel, but those powerful radio signals were still a mystery to her, and the antennas installed on the surface should help clarify just what the fuck was up with that.

But right as she's about to do something productive, Irene grabs hold of her leg and lifts it up onto the table. "Hey—!" They begin screwing off the damaged paneling on her calf, ignoring all of Sierra's initial complaints, who soon accepted her need of repairs. Indeed, the wires underneath had been damaged, and they replace the entire section, twisting old and new strands of copper together with both care and efficiency. "Try moving your foot?" Lo and behold, it works again, but there's still an aching bullet hole.

It does seem like everything else is still mostly intact, but it will take some time to heal. For now, the finishing touches: Irene solders the wires together permanently and wraps them in electrical tape, then follows it up with a wrap of bandage—how they were able to find that so quickly yet another mystery. "You'll have to, like, fix the panels yourself," they disclaim, "but that should be repaired now!" They're clearly proud of their work. Sierra lowers her foot to the ground again and stands up. Their

work is... actually quite good, especially considering they wouldn't have any idea how her legs were built. Not like brand-new, that's for sure, but it'll absolutely work as long as she doesn't put any more stress on it. She mutters out a "thanks," and slumps back down. They're a good person.

"So," she begins, after a moment of silence, "you're looking for your friends?"

Irene's face takes on a somber expression. "I am, yeah. I still don't remember what, like, happened before I got here, but... We were a crew of bounty hunters. I just... I *have* to find them again."

"I've only seen scavengers out here, but tell me about them."

"Well, there was Taylor. He's, like, the most beautiful man I've ever seen. *Really* good singer. Great cook, too. Fair skin, long and shiny black hair—anything?"

"No."

"Hrm, alright then. Our captain, like, um," they stop to think for a moment. "Our captain... She

had, um, darker skin, purple hair, and... Man, she was, like, a total bad-ass, and *really* smart.” Sierra’s eyes widen slightly. Could it be? But, no, that would be impossible.

Irene takes another moment to remember. “Her *name*... Oh, her name was Bianca! And, now that I think about it, she had a coat that looks *just* like yours!”

Fucking hell.