

## SURVIVAL MECHANISM

I detect the first signs of a possible attack at 15:59. My charge, nineteen-year-old Lux Magna, paces around her kitchen.

"I ask her what's going on, and she sends me a *robot*," she snaps into her phone. "Some cryptic warning, and a robot that follows me around. Three days ago, and she doesn't call me back. This is so her. It's like I can never get a straight answer... What kind of robot?" She spins round and looks me up and down. "I don't..."

I allocate more resources to analysing my memory implants while continuing a scan of the web. I pull up a twelve-year-old scene from a birthday party. Lux still has the slight overbite she had then, and the same colour hair.

Despite an astronaut's knowledge of physics, Bree Magna thought Lux's hair 'the colour of sunlight', which would only be true at a particular wavelength.

"Steve, I don't care. Look, do you care about the robot or me? When are we meeting? 'Kay. Bye."

The adult Lux sinks onto a chair and takes a sip of tea. Then she puts down the mug, leans on her knees and puts her head in her hands. This stance, I infer from my extensive image library, is associated with distress.

Meanwhile, my scans have picked up a threatening sequence of words in a Japanese news stream. The pattern has corroborating evidence in readings from a UN satellite.

I refer to several well-ranked articles on dealing with difficult human emotions.

"A significant body of evidence suggests that sunlight, exercise and vegetables have a positive effect on mental health."

She peers through her fingers at me. "Oh Jesus." Then she leans back and pinches her nose: a motion I observed in the birthday memory. "Let's try this again. *Why* are you here?"

"To ensure your survival."

"In the face of what, exactly?"

I analyse the last four detected micro-expressions and say nothing.

"Ookay. How about what's happened to my mother?" She enunciates slowly. "Where is Bree Magna?"

*Where*. The word has the same ambiguity as *survival*. There are several possible answers. I await clarification, but there's none.

Lux does not engage in exercise or eat any vegetables. She eats pizza and naps on a sofa while I sift through the data streams.

The threatening pattern takes thirty-nine minutes to spread to English-speaking social media. The probability that it's genuine crosses set minimum thresholds, so I decide to wake her. Bree Magna did this by stroking the hair behind her ears; I do the same. She turns into it before her eyes snap open. She half falls off the sofa, scrabbling away.

"Keep away from me," she spits.

"I advise we leave," I say. "This place has a low ground temperature, and neither local supermarkets nor your flat have much nutritious dried food available."

"Sorry?"

"I advise we depart for the next city, where you have a slim chance of catching one of the last flights to Iceland."

"*Iceland*."

"While I can use my own power to heat you, it would be more efficient to go to an area where geothermal activity has been well harnessed."

She laughs: a deeply inappropriate reaction. "I have a date."

"A date is not necessary to your survival."

"Wow. Everyday you sound more and more like my mother, which is disturbing on so many levels." She turns, and strides towards the hallway. I consider physical restraint, when she stops. Her phone vibrates in the pocket of her jeans.

As soon as she picks up a voice erupts.

"What? Steve, slow down – I can't understand what you're saying--"

She rushes to the living room curtains, and draws them open.

Her apartment is on the twentieth floor, so our view is extensive. It confirms the images repeating through the internet, and echoes pictures taken from around the world.

The sun is blackening. It's a deep red darkening to maroon. The sky mimics an accelerated film of nightfall: it shifts from blue to navy to black. The tops of the highest buildings fade into the falling dark.

Lux's hand goes to her mouth.

Stars and a sprinkling of street-lights appear in tandem.

Lux does not date Steve, and we do not go to Iceland.

Some of the humans that stay online call it an eclipse. Because an eclipse with this universality of effect would be impossible, and because the satellite images showing the shot fired at the sun are readily available, I judge this to be a metaphor. It's a mechanism in language, a way of pretending that one thing has the properties of another.

Lux calls it this for forty-four hours, even though the longest genuine eclipse was only six minutes and thirty-nine seconds long. Then she doesn't call it anything at all.

We get to the next city by using a map I have cached, taking back roads as the main ones jam with cars. The web shows images of long lines of metal, and scenes of roadside brutality.

"My mother was on a mission, wasn't she," she says suddenly, after hours of silence. "She knew this was going to happen."

"Something like this," I confirm. "A threat was made, but the nature was unknown."

"She's still in space," she says. "She didn't want to come back so she sent you."

This is a story – another mechanism in language – not a question, so I don't answer.

All the airline websites display cancellation notices. The chances of us reaching Iceland or one of the few spaceships still grounded have dropped to zero.

I switch to infrared mode and drive towards colour while revisiting my one command: *ensure the survival of Lux Magna.*

In night mode, the streets are monochrome; in infrared they're bands of blue and green running between shrinking yellow rectangles. Life is a luminous scarlet, clear to me through walls and distance. Moreover, even as the internet clogs with cries for

help and updates cease to most news sources, I can make reasonable assumptions about what I can't see.

I know the temperatures the seas must be falling to, and when changes in oxygen levels indicate the ending of photosynthesis. I detect the loss of heat from Lux's body, and the redirection of her blood to her internal organs.

She puts on all the clothes she can find, and joins other humans inside a building that used to be a school. They make a fire out of furniture, petrol, dead plants and rubbish – anything that can't be eaten. Everyone crowds around the flames.

Thirteen hours in, I kill two dogs and cook them. A woman plays a guitar and sings a country song. More people hum along than eat the dogs.

Thirty-four hours in, the temperature has dropped five more degrees, and the windows to outside show a static of snow.

Fights break out. Even when those nearest the heat have absorbed enough to survive, they want to stay near the light.

This more corresponds to the battle scenarios Bree imagined. My metal skeleton and lack of pain receptors ensure Lux's survival.

Away from the fires, after her phone has run out of charge, Lux experiences a more imprecise, hidden world. It takes her over eighty hours to see the first dead body, when we have passed by many others.

We're scavenging for fuel for the fire. We're in a front garden breaking up an old shed. Snow lays thick over the ground, and the body isn't immediately obvious. It's a man stiff with frost, curled over, knees to chest. Because it still exists in this place, in the middle of the lawn, Lux treads on it.

The angles of her face go soft. She drops to her knees.

"Oh god oh god oh god—" She hyperventilates, breath smoking in the air, while I weigh different options for inducing calm.

"Listen, Lux," I say, squeezing her shoulder. Then I tell a story that Bree liked to tell her when she was a child. In the story, a boy suffering from terminal cancer writes a letter to the future. One day, time travellers arrive and take him away in their machine. He leaves his parents forever but will be cured in their time. I wonder at the story's purpose.

Lux's breathing slows. When I finish, she continues sitting on the ground, hands bunched inside her many jackets. All is quiet apart from the rattle of her teeth chattering. I'm about to suggest that she stands as the position isn't helpful for conserving body heat, when she speaks.

"Mum's dead, isn't she?"

I read her heart-rate through my touch on her shoulder. I reflect.

"Yes."

Now her breathing stops. She twists away, hunching over like the body on the ground.

"You knew. All along. You kept it from me." She swears, clawing her hands into the snow.

"I advise--"

"SHUT UP!" She rockets to her feet, inches away. "You're not in charge of my life! Stop lying to me! Why send you? Why bother when we're all going to die? *Just shut up!*"

The words explode out of her. Her fists beat against my chest. The movement gets her blood flowing, but there is no sunlight, and no vegetables.

We walk back through sleet and freezing wind to the ruined school. By the time we enter through the smashed doors, she's shivering uncontrollably. The fire has gone out, and the woman who played the guitar lies nearby, curled in multiple coats, breathing ragged.

Lux wraps her arms round herself while I light the fire. Once I'm done I move behind her and encourage her to lean against me. She resists before feeling the heat I'm generating. I increase it until her body temperature has stabilised and her muscles have relaxed.

Three hours later we reach minus thirty, and by the time Lux stirs the woman with the guitar has changed.

Lux notices. She shakes the woman's shoulder. Ice cracks under her glove.

"Hey," she says.



"She's asleep," I say, remembering the not-eclipse.

Lux stares at me. Her lips disappear as she sucks them in.

"I advise that we relocate to a place with a higher ground temperature."

She swallows, and nods. She's already shivering, minutes out of my grip.

"She gave you some of her memories," she says. "Why?"

I start a process querying this. The link to my purpose is obscure. *Survival: the state of continuing to exist.* Stories, songs, memories of birthday parties: these are not medically useful.

"How long does your charge last?"

"120 hours."

I expect her to ask how much is left, but she doesn't.

She puts her hand into mine. "Don't die," she says, though this isn't possible. We walk out into the snow together.

115 hours in, I carry her through black-and-white, and green-and-blue. The red in her has shrunk to small circles in her chest and head, like dying suns. The air is frigid. Ice coats my exterior. I'm unable to generate sufficient warmth.

Lux wants to sleep. I keep shaking her, and telling her more stories Bree liked to tell.

My pace slows. Warnings flicker in my cortex as I switch back to standard vision. The snow is horizontal, eclipsing.

I wake her by stroking the hair behind her ears. There's moisture running off her face onto my fingers. I write this to my memory while shutting down child processes.

"You mustn't sleep now, Lux."

Her eyes are glazed. The last time she was awake she said words that didn't fit together. Her lips mouth the word *Mum*.

I think as I kneel and lay her in the snow. "Once upon a time, there was a girl who was very sick. She went to sleep for a long time, in ice. Her body continued to exist. Stories and thoughts about her continued to exist. She survived."

Then I tuck her into bed.