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Prologue

Sometimes the past catches up with us. Items we vested many hours, expertise, or sentiment in, we soon forget. Then a flicker of memory brings all of it back into our lives. This story touches an ancestor's misdeeds, greed, and disregard for human life.

Chapter 1 - 2432

A private meeting took place in one of the VIP rooms on the Moon's orbiting station. At one side of the room, a wet bar and leather chairs decorated the area. The rich financier, Rosorio Egroeg leaned forward, tapping his foot. His son, Adrian rubbed a spot on his chin while their mining manager, Matt Mathews scrolled through his work etablet.

Rosorio wasn't in the mood for their excuses why they were banned from Mars for a year. "What were you two thinking?" Rosorio shouted, gripping the arms of his chair. "Matt, Adrian, you could have handled this better."

"It's not Matt's fault. I wanted that canyon dig," Adrian replied. "If it wasn't for that snooty girl—"

"Don't give me your excuses," Rosorio said, pointing his finger. "Your incompetence kicked you off Mars. It's a good thing your sister, Samantha, was able to take over."

Rosorio, a formable man of wide girth, grew impatient when others failed at their tasks. And yet he spent time in prison for manipulating governments.

"Sir, may I make a suggestion?" Matt said, leaning forward, as he set his etablet to his side in the chair. His smooth black hair curved behind his ears.

"I'm not happy with you either," the older man grunted. "But go ahead. I'm listening."

"Sam may not be able to handle everything. We need someone we can trust to keep an eye on her."

"Like who?" Rosorio asked, tapping his fingers on the arm of his chair. The amber waves in his hair shook every time he shouted.

"Her friend, Jonathon Carrie?"

"I'll ask, but he may not want to leave his antique businesses on Earth."

Ramon, Rosario's valet, walked toward them, holding a tray of coffee mugs. The android set the tray on the table between the men and stepped away for further instructions.

"Or there's Ramon here," Rosario said, gesturing toward his valet.

"Is this the original one that was booted off Mars?" Adrian asked, brushing lint from his pants leg.

"No, this is an updated version I acquired from our Singapore office, Ramon290. This one would be unbiased in dealing with my daughter."

"And the original is where?" Adrian asked, reaching for a covered hot cup.

"He's helping Matt here on the Moon," Rosario said, shifting his frame in the chair. "I'd like someone else she doesn't know to keep tabs on her."

"I'd feel better if Jonathon could help us," Matt said, grasping the closest mug.

"True, and I wish Simon Heathrow was available," Adrian said, scratching a spot on his curly blond head. "He knew androids well. But last I heard, he was still in prison."

Rosorio took a sip from his covered cup.

"Can either of you think of anyone else involved with electronics that would not be connected to our companies?" he asked.

Matt looked at Adrian and then focused on Rosorio. "There might be one. I don't know him personally and it's been a while since I ran into him," Matt said, setting his cup on the tray.

"In what capacity?" Rosorio asked.

"He worked for the power company when the grid was first set up on the Moon and this station," Matt explained. "I met him at a dinner party a few years ago. He seemed organized and knowledgeable about the power systems we have here."

"Do you think we can trust him?" Rosorio asked. "I mean to do the work and keep quiet about our dealings?"

"Since I don't know him well, I'm not sure, but he seemed a straight focus kind of guy."

"Have I met him?" Adrian asked. "What's his name?"

"I don't know if you have. His name is Richard Rayburn."

"Hmph, I've never heard of him," Rosorio muttered, drinking the last of his coffee.

"That could be a good thing. Maybe we should see if Jonathon is available first," Adrian said as he swirled the remaining liquid in his cup. "Then we can investigate whether this Rayburn fellow would want to work for us or not."

"Yes, with the money we'll offer him, he should," Rosorio said. "In the meantime, you two check out that area on the other side of this moon. Maybe you'll find water there." Rosorio said, grinning.

Matt rose from his chair, ignoring Rosorio's remark. "I'll give Rayburn a call and see what he says."

Rosario nodded. He and his son watched their mining manager turn and leave the room. Ramon approached the two men to remove the coffee pot and tray.

Adrian stared at the android as it left them. "Father, why are all of our personal valets named Ramon?"

"I haven't told you about him, have I?" his father asked.

"No."

"Ramon is a legacy from our great grandfather four times. Since we have an hour before I catch my ship, I'll tell you a sad story."

2109 – A.D.

Throughout the twenty-first century, several lightweight rockets flew further into the solar system, gathering visual and mineral data. Morgan Nole, one of the richest men on Earth, tested and developed several rockets with payloads to Earth's space station and Mars. Now he was looking for another way to investigate the asteroid belt and Jupiter's moons. He contacted

the best in the field of robotic systems and androids. The Egroeg Industry's Robotic Division.

Edwin Egroeg, owner and CEO of Egroeg Industries met Morgan at a space conference where they sat for hours, talking about their goals and projects. The two collaborated and agreed to create specialized satellites for study and building beyond Mars.

In the next couple of years, Egroeg Industries collected data on minerals, ice, and gassy asteroids for twenty years with several other spaceships until one day, their first probe, Di-A-MND, stopped transmitting. Edwin, now in his fifties contacted Morgan at the Nole Launch Station in Virginia.

"Morgan, this is Edwin Egroeg. Can you contact the space probe, Di-A-MND?"

"No, I have my people working on it, but the last transmission is garbled. I hate to say this, but we think the ship crashed or landed on one of the asteroids," Morgan said. "Until I know more, we'll keep looking."

"All right, keep me up to date," Edwin replied, twisting his pen between his fingers. "How are the other samplers doing?"

"So far, they are operating well," Morgan said. "The avoidance systems placed in the probes dodged the smaller asteroids, but there isn't a guarantee they can bypass the large rocky material in the belt."

"Keep looking for the missing ship. How many do we have there now?"

"Twelve. If we determine *Di-A-MND* is gone for good, we'll send up another to continue its work. Are you all right with that expense?"

"Yes, go ahead," Edwin said. "If you can't locate it, I'll consider the probe a casualty of the business. Thank you."

Edwin frowned. He had a special payload on that ship. *"If anyone found it—well they won't,"* he thought. *"The less that is known about Di-A-MND, the better."*

As Edwin disconnected his call, his manservant entered, carrying a pot of coffee and a cup on a silver platter. He watched as Alfred set the tray on a small table. The valet poured a cup of the steaming black brew and added two cubes of sugar.

"Here you are sir," Alfred said, handing Edwin the filled cup.

"Thank you," Edwin said, receiving the hot mug. "Alfred, how long have you worked for my family?"

"Let me see, I think it's going on fifteen years, sir."

Edwin paused for a moment and sipped his coffee. He set the cup on the saucer and looked at his loyal servant. "Amazing. Where does the time go? You are excused, Alfred."

"Yes, sir," Alfred said. He nodded a short bow and left the room.

A knock rapped at the door. Edwin's son, Ramon, walked in. He was close to twenty-eight and in charge of several robotic operations in the west.

"Are you busy?" Ramon asked.

Edwin admired his son's dark curly hair and thin stature. "Not for you. Come in. Did you just return from our warehouse in Denver?"

"That I did. The robotic systems are developing well. We have orders coming in from NASA, the European Space Agency, and the Guiana Space Centre."

"Wonderful. Will you oversee those projects?" Edwin asked.

"Yes. In fact, I'm leaving tonight for Guiana," Ramon said. "You should come with me."

"Thank you, but I have other matters I need to attend," Edwin said. "Let me know when you arrive."

"Oh, and Francie took mom to Paris to celebrate her birthday," Ramon said about his sister. "Maybe I'll catch up with them there."

"Maybe I will too."

"Talk to you later," Ramon said, waving as he left the office.

Edwin rang for Alfred. When the servant entered, Edwin rose from his chair. "Alfred, contact our travel bureau and order a plane to Paris."

"Yes, sir," Alfred said and backed out of the room.

That afternoon, Edwin, his valet, and several members of his business entourage boarded the Egroeg private jet for Paris. He was happy all his family could come together. He noted it had been a while since they attended a family gathering.

As soon as Edwin entered his suite on the plane, a steward poked his head inside.

"Sir, we will take off in twenty minutes," he said. "Be sure to buckle in as we will climb to the edge of Earth's exosphere where the gravity is nonexistent."

"Thank you, Roberts. I will," Edwin said.

"Would you like something from the galley once we're airborne?"

"Yes, coffee and a muffin will do just fine. Oh, Roberts, will you patch me to my wife's private line once we are in the air?"

"Yes, Sir."

After the steward left, Edwin picked up one of the magazine tablets on robotics. His son's photo smiled back at him, holding their latest invention. He placed the other readers in their carousel holder. Edwin settled into his leather chair and snapped the safety buckle closed. He relaxed, reading the article about his son's accomplishments.

Twenty-five minutes passed when he heard the jet engines roar beneath him. He placed his earphones over his head and turned on his playlist from Mozart to Bach.

As he dozed, Roberts entered, holding a tray of refreshments and a cell phone. Edwin opened his eyes and removed his earphones.

"Sorry to disturb you, Sir, but I have your wife on the phone."

"Thank you," Edwin said, removing the device from the tray. "Bring me some water, please."

“Yes, sir. We will climb into the upper atmosphere soon. The captain will let us know.”

As Roberts left the suite, Edwin answered the cell phone.

“Hello, June? Yes, I’m coming to join you. Have you contacted Ramon? That’s all right. He left last night. Yes, it will be nice to have us all together. Love you, bye,” he said, disconnecting the call.