

Counting Stars

A short story

By Jocelin Vania Cindy

I had not seen a single human for a year.

Legends had told me that once mankind read books on paper and had late night drives while listening to the radio. That they went to concerts, cinemas, and held many celebrations like birthdays and marriages. Other stories mentioned the grand beauty of mountains, trees that still blossomed and bore crops at spring. They said it was the good old times when neighbors still greeted each other and cheered on their favorite teams. The world was a beautiful place before the government was replaced by human-droids.

Now, all systems were operated by “trusted professionals” made from electric machines. They were advanced and sophisticated, but literally heartless. The worst was that they failed to save humanity from their own greed.

I had lost count of political crises and digital world wars. I was starting to think that total control over machines was nonsense. I thought choosing my lunch was a choice when it was they who arranged my life. The lunch was irrelevant. They made me think I made the choice and still in control. I hated the truth that they violated my privacy through gadgets and manipulated data.

I was just glad that they couldn't peek into my dreams or feel my emotions.

I counted.

I counted all things:

479 steps to get to the nearest spaceship station,

42 holo-bots,

76 auto-bots and 19 space jets.

It was my habit to kill time in the northern wing of Mars. From here, Earth was just a little dot. I imagined the last survivors of Earth looking up to the sky and telling their children, “Look, son. That is Mars. And it is only a matter of time before we go there and leave this wrecked place.”

As I let my mind drift by, the only sound I heard was my own heartbeat. Little did they know that Mars was extremely silent and boring. I had lived twenty years, four months and fourteen days in an anechoic chamber of 3.3-foot-thick fiber-glass acoustic wedges with double walls of insulated steel and a foot-thick concrete. My lips curled into a faint pitiful smile as I imagined bringing one survivor from Earth to this isolated place. I would watch them turn into a lunatic under 45 minutes. No earthling could stay sane here. Sometimes I reminded myself that breathing and functioning in Mars was already an accomplishment.

There were 552 cameras in the chamber I was assigned.
89 of them were well hidden between carved ceiling decorations.
115 were spread out in holographic paintings across the hallway.
27 were inside digital wall clocks.
And the rest was inserted in the patrolling holo-bots.

My room was very pretty. A lifestyle e-magazine would give a 21 stars rating to the Northern Wing Mars District. It had an outstanding view of our neighbour Andromeda galaxy. I called it the M31 as it sounded more astronomic. There was an enormous glass wall beside my bed through which I could see the curve of stars swirling its way to the centre spiral of the M31.

I looked at the twinkles of something a light year away from where I stood. It was supposed to be a breathtaking view but I woke up to it every day, and it hardly impressed me anymore. I sighed with both of my hands tucked in the pockets of my uniform as I looked at and wondered about Earth. The temperature dropped by four degrees and the fabric started to adjust and changed colour into maroon.

Another chilly night, I thought.

People called me extremely lucky. No wonder they did because I lived in the world's most beautiful room. Maybe I should agree with them. So, I politely zipped my lip from the pain of being in a prison they called beautiful. I tried to fight back this presumption by telling myself that at least this isolation has the best view.

Freedom is an illusion. I did agree with this. I agreed very much.

I was born and raised in Mars. I was the first Martian and I had the luxury of nothing less than exceptional treatments. My identity was classified and known only by Earth's ruling government and authorities. I was their one and only successful Martian Project.

They exaggerated my needs and forgot to give a voice of my own. But, I did not ask for any of this and neither did I have a choice to refuse. What I wanted was merely a normal life and a relationship with another human, not with a synthetic programmed robot.

The 552 cameras were designed and programmed specifically to record every single behaviour I made for the sake of research and the information was sent back to Earth monthly. Most days I was given tasks to do to keep me busy. I did not like it because it was blunt and dull.

There was no colour, excitement or adventure. The routine consisted of only educational tasks or health checks. I followed all instructions because I was a good boy. But really, every day was the same as it would be the same as tomorrow, and I was beginning to get sick of the daily grind. What could I do anyway? They would force me if I didn't.

"Master." my holo-bot called me. I was slow to respond and ignored him.
He just ruined my train of thought.

“Master, you are required to review this morning’s lesson.” a body hologram appeared in front of me with the shape of a butler, about 2 inches taller than me with a tailored suit.

“Monty, it is *every* morning’s session. I am sure you know how well I am acquainted with this subject.” I said a little agitated.

“It is an obligation, master.” He answered as he performed the same old procedure. “How about telling me why you’re here as a warm up?” He continued. It was more of an order than a question. I took another sigh and began.

“I, Raphael Belmont, will swear under oath, that as a Martian, I will take full responsibility in this crucial part of history to continue the journey of men towards greater good and across —”

Suddenly, before I finished, a red signal from all directions of the room illuminated my vision and a series of warnings came towards me with bold red letters:
T34, ASTEROID STORM IMMINENT

Then, everything turned red.

I had never heard a noise so ear-piercing. The rough edges of the asteroids hit the glass and broke in great acceleration. It banged and the pressure inside the chamber leaked before I had even blinked. The blast had thrown me ten feet high in an instant.

I tried to scream, but it felt like I had no mouth. I lost consciousness before I woke up with several broken ribs. I could feel an ache penetrating my flesh. Monty was beside me. He was shielding me with what was left of his body, equally damaged. I saw hell around me.

Something was wrong with his generator and I saw him trying to save his main memory data. His attempt was unsuccessful. I was beginning to panic when the sirens wailed from the security domain on core Mars some 7 miles from there. That was bad.

“Remember all that I have taught you.” His voice came out differently than usual. “No matter what you must continue to live. The next chapter of the human race is in your hands. Think as a species, not a man. It is such an honour to serve you, —Master.” Monty gave his last voice glitches.

He was talking crap again like he always did. The big talk of responsibility and professional shit. The burden of saving people I knew nothing about. That I should not be selfish, as the privileged first Martian to lead humanity’s destiny in the free world.

But Monty was Monty. He was different from other bots. He was made from a special protocol, programming language and even material. I did not like his production name which was P2490, so I gave him a name; Monty. He was not just a holo-bot. He was a friend.

His pixels faded and I watched his systems shut down.

“The honour,” I said at last, “is mine.”

I drifted my gaze to the stars above and waited for my turn to die. I smelled the metallic scent of warm blood covering my chest as my breathing decelerate.

That was it, huh? What a sad way to die. I was young.

Unexpectedly, a silhouette of what seemed to be a cyborg came hovering towards me. It rapidly carried me and put me into a healing capsule. In a matter of minutes, a series of needles and medical equipment were working to fix my broken tissue.

A miracle. I thought.

A dream. I rethought.

I was kept conscious by the breathing apparatus, and the cyborg spoke to me, “Thank God, I found you in time.”

It was the voice of a girl.

“The asteroid storm was unpredictable, I don’t know what caused it. But, there will be more to come — and even worse. It is inevitable.” Her voice sounded concerned now. “Don’t say anything right away. Just listen to me first.” she proceeded. “I am an illegal passenger from Earth. I am not supposed to be here, so I beg you to keep me a secret.” she paused for a while, and I heard her fingers tapping the capsule.

She must have been crazy.

“I came to warn you. I know you are the chosen one. And for it, I have to tell you first and only you. You must leave Mars before the M31 crosses the border of our Milky Way— that is half a year from now. Remember that you owe Earth a chance, and hope.” she stopped again to let me digest her sayings. This girl forgot that I was about to die ten minutes ago.

“You will make the journey alone. I am sorry to be the bad guy to tell you this.”

That girl had the guts to keep talking. I knew she kinda saved me, but the pain was so excruciating she should have left me heal first. My brain couldn’t function yet.

I wished I could have seen her through the capsule’s barrier.

If so, I would have asked, “Who the hell are you?”

“Apparently you are the only successful human sample to have adapted to and survived such an intergalactic journey through various tests. I believe Monty trained you for this.” She sounded like one of the authorities. But she said she was an illegal passenger from Earth. I was surprised she knew about Monty. She knew about me too. Oh, shit. Who the hell was she?

“You must work alone to find another host planet in the M31. Once you are secure, then you must extract your own DNA and those from the female’s cells which are stored in the Biopod. You will start a brand new life there and continue humanity’s mission.” she said it more slowly then. Somehow it sounded soothing regardless of the bad news she was telling me. Maybe because her voice was soft. But anyhow, the next few hours were spent listening to her talk as she changed the topic to sweet nothings just to make sure that we were both conscious.

Finally, the capsule’s ceiling drifted backwards and opened. I peeked my head out. I was still a bit groggy and a face of a girl with a rich shade of purple hair dye was the first thing I saw. A cyborg body was the second. Only a quarter of her upper body was flesh and it was covered with wounded stitches.

“...I know my penalty for being here, so I am as dead as a doornail if those damn bots spot me.” She hesitated and crossed her metallic arms, making a ‘clink’ sound. “Please say something,” she said. Her eyes were glistening with attention.

Overwhelmed by her long chat and intense demand for answers, I only managed to reply with an awkward question, “What’s a doornail?”

It was silence for about five seconds.
She burst into laughter, and I grinned.

I later learned that her name was Jenny. The cyborg part of her, which took up at least 65% of her body, kept her operating. I did not dare to ask what caused such damage. Her messy scars revealed a nasty history of the harsh life on Earth. I had heard that those dysfunctional human-droids that took over could attack if you were not careful.

“Earth may fail to revolve in its orbit and gravity may forget to pull you to the ground, but I have been worse.” she noticed my unspoken curiosity. “Trust me, you don’t want to know.”

For a moment, her eyes were clouded with haunted sorrow. But a second later she crossed her hands upon her chest and drifted her gaze on me, unapologetic.

She stretched out her metallic legs slowly to tease me. She gave me a witty smirk.

“I may be a broken sample of biology.” she explained, “But I’m still very much alive,” she winked.

She had the most bubbly and playful personality.

She couldn’t have made me guess that she was a cyborg if I hadn’t already known.

It was hard not to fall for her.

I did not let any bots from my chamber know that I had survived the asteroid storm. It would have just made everything complicated because they didn’t have the protocol to respond to this sudden change of fate. Or perhaps it was because she told me not to. So, she and I hid in an unused chamber of a Martian crater for five months. We were waiting for the right time to launch the spaceship and escape extinction. It sounded like science fiction, but it wasn’t.

Rather than following the right protocol, it felt more like a runaway for me. For a brief moment after the asteroid storm, I felt like I was allowed to escape from my identity as a Raphael Belmont. I could be a nameless nobody without responsibility or schedule to complete; just freedom and a lot of space --

Until the purple haired cyborg girl showed up.

How did she know so much about the Martian Project?

Should I trust this stranger?

Everything she told me about the storm was true; I had checked it myself in the Galactic Storm Detection Court. But, she never answered my questions about her true identity.

“It doesn’t matter who I am.” she would say as she shook her head. “What matters is what you’ll do for humanity.”

“You owe Earth another chance.” That was what she told me every time. I said I did not want to be a part of any of this plan to restore humanity’s future. She was not Monty, so she should stop telling me what to do. After all, what had Earth ever done for me? Screw it all.

I got mad and I was cursing all sorts of terrible things. I lost my senses. I broke some instruments in the chamber. I had unintentionally hit her too. Of course, she was still fine since she was a cyborg. I barely hurt her metallic machine.

But her answers were always the same.

“You owe Earth another chance, Raphael.” she looked at me over her back, her eyes were gentle but she clutched her fist, ready to defend against whatever came next from my mouth or my hands.

“Then so do you!” I replied desperately.

We argued like clueless teenagers, talking with logic but acting with emotion. But most of our days were spent peacefully. We didn’t bring up the fact that Earth was pretty much doomed.

“We are like shooting stars that we gasp to admire, and then it’s over right away.” she said to me one day as we stargazed at the M31 from the edge of the crater. She was so young and poetic. I was surprised that people like her actually still existed. That day the stars were nearer, and the time of my departure was a couple weeks to go.

“You are coming with me, Jen. Trust me.” I broke the silence.

“Nope. That won’t do. You owe Earth— “

“— another chance. I know, I know it. You have actually said that...” I paused and thought. “...149 times Jenny.”

I wrapped my hands around her, keeping her close. She looked at me in disbelief that I actually counted her phrases. “You know I hate to be told what to do.”

She glanced back at me. Her hair was hanging loose over her shoulders. Her metal fingers were tracing the line of my jaws. I could swear, her metallic hands were warm, not cold. I could barely hear the rhythm of the machine going inside her with the hard silver components. As her eyes told me to let go, my gaze told her to stay.

I knew she was only a part flesh and blood. But I did not care. Before I knew it, my hands were reaching for her hair to tuck it behind her ears. Then, I kissed her.

I expected a slap on my face but she didn’t.

“Do not take a ghost with you.” she whispered to my ear. But I was not listening. “...Cause I’m one *very* heavy ghost.” she chuckled. Her cyborg weight was over twice as mine, but I did not mind at all.

She kept her distance from me after that. I never knew what I did wrong. After all, there were only two living beings in the chamber. So, it was hard for me not to talk to her.

“You know what to do.” she said. “Don’t make me do your job.”

I was completely unaware that she was actually dying. I should have realized it earlier behind her laughing eyes and cheeky jokes. The obvious need for machines to support her life and her reference to herself as a ghost were all covered by the blush of her face and her bright purple hair.

I was determined that someday, somehow I would bring her with me.

I was wrong.

Just a few days before my departure, I found her lying on the floor motionless. I rushed to pick her up. She refused it.

“You owe Earth another chance.” she said those words again between her faint breaths as I held her tight. “Promise?”

I nodded. “I promise. I promise.” I said without thinking.

“Consider yourself lucky. Man up and do what you need to do.” she muttered. “You are Raphael Belmont; the first Martian –the only thing you carry to your grave is your name.”

Her pulse weakened and she died two hours and 16 minutes later. Nobody would know that she died gallantly; nobody really knew this illegal passenger.

But I thought she did.

There was nothing I could do. It was the limit of what her body could bear. Not even a healing capsule could save her.

The strange thing was I didn’t cry.

There was a constant heavy ache in the chest. I could not tell if it was my long wounded broken ribs or my bruised ego. If I could play a better hero and save everyone, I would. But not only was it impossible, it was also unfair. The universe works by fair trade, from the exchange of electrons, energy transmission and maybe in this case, life. Though this fair-trade concept may remain as the biggest unanswered mystery, somehow, I was convinced that her being gone was a trick to cheat Doomsday.

But even if it wasn’t enough to pay the price to stop Doomsday, I had nothing left to give.

Shit. It hurt like hell.

I took some strands of her hair and blood sample. I put them in a specimen container and buried it in my pockets. Who knows when in the future, in another place, time and galaxy, we could be cloned and be reborn to find each other again. I would save it for another amazing story.

But as for the rest of her body, I did not need it. With a final look and a heavy heart, I left it on Mars.

It all came to that. A final breaking point when there was no other option but to surrender. I had gone a long way to reach the impossibility of meeting her. Though it was hard to keep moving forward, I had kept my promises with Monty and Jenny thus far. I knew that all 9 billion 7 million 5 hundred 7 thousand 3 hundred and 587 humans left on earth would not be battling for life much longer. But as unfair as it sounds,

... *I* might.

Staring at the trillion stars of the M31 reminded me more about Jenny than the end of us. The engines were initiated and all systems were preparing for departure. From the tiny window, I could see another storm of asteroids accelerating towards Earth. It felt wrong to say goodbye, so I just saluted from my seat.

When facing an end of the world situation where everything would turn into nothing, I thought it was a sin to ask for mercy. Instead, I just simply surrendered to the beauty of this final dystopia.

The sky was purple.

I heard the countdown notice; “THIS SPACESHIP WILL LAUNCH IN T MINUS 10 SECONDS”

I opened my eyes and felt my shoulders relaxing as the warm heat travelled through my bones and the light started to burn my retinas. I heard faint songs of victory like a broken record as my brain replayed the last bit of dear memories before I lost it all.

I would not count steps, seconds or objects anymore. People had always said I was lucky, and now I believed them.

Three, because I knew my purpose.

Two, I had lived my purpose.

And one,
I owed Earth nothing no more.

THE END