

18 Marionette Moon Word count: 2502

“Tuesday, December 10th, 2053. Log entry for Demetrius Sandall at 1257 West Willow road”

Xyna stood at the edge of the crime scene, red and blue lights washing out the front of the house. Crisp wind billowed against her, blowing out her short cropped hair and nipping at her neck. Maybe if she had had an extra cup of coffee she wouldn't feel so dead, inside and out, yet here she stood, a recorder in hand at yet another murder scene, praying to any god that could answer to whisk her away and put her back in bed where she belonged at 3 in the morning.

“Victim found strangled on his bathroom floor with hand-shaped bruise marks on his neck and a stab wound in his chest. Nothing appears to be missing from the home. No signs of forced entry. We suspect self defense or familicide and are currently requesting interviews.”

Xyna paused the recorder, “Luna!”

“Yes, Lieutenant?” The droid appeared next to her and Xyna flinched at the sudden presence. Luna smiled slightly and actually seemed to *laugh*, the prick.

“Jesus christ, ya gotta quit that,” Xyna grumbled under her breath, “pick up any clues I missed?”

“I am simply doing my job, Lieutenant. And yes, I found some traces of silicon in the bathroom. I suspect this was not a human's doing, so I sent the evidence to forensics. Perhaps they can identify the type of silicon and trace it to a particular model.”

Xyna huffed quietly and wrote down notes in her notepad. What's the point of a droid killing some rando in his home? Anger, Xyna thought, but it flit away as soon as it came. Wouldn't make sense. There wasn't anything destroyed in the house, even if it *was* anger.

“That it?”

“Actually, Lieutenant...”

Derek, her junior detective, peered out the door and interrupted Luna, “Ey, boss! Might wanna check this out.” His voice shook with an uneasiness that almost put Xyna off, but the kid was still new to the force. Hadn't seen *half* the things she did on a daily basis, still only some kid genius with a law degree.

She nodded in acknowledgement and told Luna to stay put. Xyna followed Derek, ignoring the taped off bathroom and marked evidence, and paused as he stopped in front of the back door. He looked back at her as he grabbed the edge of the curtain and took in a deep breath before sliding the fabric open.

“Oh my god.”

Xyna balked, an ugly weight curdling in her stomach as she stared at the brick fence. And don't get her wrong, she'd seen more than enough blood in her life to be fazed by it at this point, but *this*—

“HI LT. NGUYEN” drip, drip, dripped down the walls in deep red.

God she did *not* get paid enough for this.

It took a while for her to even grasp where to begin with the evidence they had. Forensics could only confirm that the blood was indeed the victims, but what gives if they had absolutely no leads? She eyed the evidence warily. Silicone traces, a pair of footprints walking out in the yard, and a scratched floor by the coffee table.

Either way, it wasn't much.

And so Xyna was left with two options, equally unpleasant: A, She was stupid, or B, the perp was too smart.

She doubted the latter. The fact their victim had been found at all was proof enough of that, but there just had to be something she was missing.

“Lieutenant.” Luna appeared in her office.

Xyna did *not* jump at all, barely even flinched, thank you very much, “Y-yes?”

“I returned to the crime scene, and I created possible scenarios that you may want to look over. It could aid your investigation.” Files appeared on Xyna’s desktop as Luna transmitted them and she clicked on them.

“Returned to the crime scene?” She mumbled as she scrubbed through the video, “Under whose authority?”

It was intriguing, to say the least. The first video showed the victim conversing with his assailant on the couch, based on seat imprints that hadn’t faded and Luna deemed fresh enough to consider evidence, before the latter began strangling Demetrius. He pushed the coffee table off-kilter and scratched the floor harshly. The assailant grabbed a knife after Demetrius went unconscious and stabbed him in the chest, then dragged him into the bathroom and dumped him in the tub. The splatters that Luna detected were... well, surprising was an understatement.

“Under my own.” Luna stated.

Xyna looked up, furrowing her brow, “Did Miller set you up?”

“No. I simply required more evidence to further our investigation.”

She gave her a quick once over, skeptical, but sighed. There were better things to be doing than worrying about her droid's sudden free will. She turned back to her computer and Luna stayed in standby on the side.

Derek soon walked in.

“Hey, Derek. How's the lead?”

“Uh, well, y'know I don't really think any of 'em are any solid, boss, but I gotta run a couple suspects with ya, if ya don't mind.” He pulled up a chair, fully ready to sit despite her answer. She would've agreed anyway, but let a woman talk first, no?

“Sure. Who's on your mind?”

“Well, the silicone tipped me off at first, y'know? I mean if issa droid, then what gives, so I was lookin' for some amputees with this typa silicone in their prosss', which I gotta admit was a bit of a tough find. Anyway.

“They all go back to this one company, ESO, and they make a buncha droid and prosss parts. The arms oughta come from there, if anything. 'Sides, there aren't many people left with these kinda arm prosthetics, which is lucky, but if issa droid, then man... don't think we got much. They're the main supplier for CCB.”

Xyna hummed in thought. If there weren't many left, then they might as well bring in the few that were in the area for questioning. It's not like they had anything else. Behind them, Luna glitched in place, her voice module spazzing as she seemingly tried to stop herself from speaking. Xyna and Derek both looked at her, worried and hesitant to interfere.

"...Luna, you good?" Xyna called out. Luna immediately stood straight again and nodded, like she was snapped out of a spell.

"Yes, I apologize for worrying you, Lieutenant. I will run diagnostics."

Xyna nodded in affirmation and waved Derek off back to his desk.

With nothing to go off of, she had no choice but to put the case on the backburner. Just 'cause her life was being threatened didn't mean other families didn't deserve closure as she waited. It was fruitless, trying to string pins together that weren't even near each other, let alone valuable in their information. She turned back to her desktop, scrambling to finish up case reports that she'd neglected in favor of trying to save her skin.

Luna, ever the helpful one, simply stood there. But if she hadn't been around the bot for over a year, she wouldn't have noticed the quiet hiss of steam as her systems frantically tried to cool her overheating processors.

“Seriously, Luna, are you okay? Don’t lie to me.” Xyna warned. She wasn’t sure why– It wasn’t like Luna had a lying habit.

When the steaming died down, Luna managed to glance at her, “I’m not sure, Lieutenant. I have a memory gap and I’m having issues recovering the files. Usually my data is safeguarded in the CCB cloud storage, but it’s irrecoverable on both servers.”

“What? Since *when*?”

“Since Friday night. My last memory is from when we left the crime scene on Wednesday.”

“A 6 day gap!” Xyna cried, “Do we need to send you to repairs? What’s going on?”

Luna looked down at that, almost as if she was ashamed, and quietly murmured, “...I feel like my data has been...tampered with.”

Xyna’s eyebrows shot up. She stood from her seat and leaned against her desk, “Why would someone do that?”

Luna’s face contorted, an ugly expression that Xyna had never seen on her before, and her voice module glitched again, “I-I do not kn-know.”

Approaching carefully, she rested a hand on Luna's shoulder. It felt weird, comforting a droid, but Luna's face had looked so crestfallen that she couldn't help but feel bad for her. Her exterior was so resilient that Xyna had forgotten how delicate her machinery was, how fragile all her motors and data storage had to be in order to mimic human movements and expressions so accurately, as eerie as it may have been.

She quietly nodded to herself, "It's okay, Luna, We'll figure out who did this to you, okay?" Add *that* to her laundry list of cases to tackle. Sometimes she wished she could toss a few at her subordinate, let *him* deal with the nitty gritty paperwork and reports for once.

Luna nodded with a stutter of her motors and went back to standing still, "I may return to my charging station soon. I am not useful when I am so incapacitated."

Days later, Xyna found herself laying in bed, staring at the ceiling fan in her room circle round, and round, and round. It didn't add up. With Luna's so conveniently timed memory lapse, and the stupid silicone they've yet to figure out (all of the interviews were dead leads, all of their alibis were backed by family and street cams), and the astute knowledge of who would be showing up to the crime scene were all messing with her head.

She really didn't want to pin blame where it wasn't due, but boy if Luna wasn't looking like an amazing suspect, ready to be dismantled where she stood. It hurt her to even think that, but everything was just so convenient. *Too* convenient. If anything, that was why she'd doubted

Luna's guilt at all. Even then, she still had no solid evidence to even connect Luna herself to the crime. Hell, she was the one who stored all of the evidence, why would she give herself up?

Xyna almost didn't blame her.

Frustrated, she stood up from her bed, tossing the covers to the side and stepping foot on the cold wooden floors.

What she desperately needed was *much* more coffee.

As her hand-me-down Keurig struggled to pour boiling water through the ground coffee beans, she leaned against her kitchen counter, arms crossed and hands fiddling with the strings of her hoodie.

Toc toc toc. A knock at the door.

Xyna walked over and moved her cat out of the way, who quietly chirped in protest. She looked through the peephole, wary, and spotted Luna, shivering in the cold. She quickly swung the door open in confusion and pulled Luna inside.

“Luna? Why are you shaking? I didn't even know you could do that.”

In a perfectly steady voice, she replied, “At certain temperatures, my motors are programmed to move back and forth so they don’t freeze and become cold-welded to each other. Creates friction, creates heat.”

Xyna looked outside and scrunched her nose at the borderline blizzard whirling outside. Gotta love Michigan winters, no? She suddenly regretted only wearing pajama shorts.

Xyna closed the door behind her and locked it before walking back to her Keurig and picking up her coffee. She stared at Luna.

“Why’re you here? Somethin’ wrong at the station?”

Luna shook her head, “No, nothing like that. Is that black Colombian roast?”

She snorted, “Yeah, why? Ya wanna try?” She asked wryly. Luna only smiled, “Well if not because of the station, then why?”

Luna stood in thought, “I’m not sure. I simply wanted to visit.”

Already, this rang alarm bells in Xyna’s head. Under normal circumstances, she’d question why Luna had free will, but after her 3 hours of overthinking, she teetered on the edge of why Luna wasn’t killing her.

“O.. kay...” Xyna said, skeptical. She walked into her living room and sat on the couch, making room for Luna to sit beside her.

She did, and immediately broke her facade, “I’m sorry, that is not the real reason. Please forgive me for lying to you—”

And Xyna thought, *Oh god, this is how I die, drinking bad Colombian roast and wearing week-old dirty pajamas.*

“—But I am incredibly worried for your safety. I believe you are in danger.”

That’s— not what I expected.

Xyna looked at her, nervous, “Danger?” It didn’t help having your worst fears confirmed by a robot.

Luna stared at her, face completely still yet pleading at the same time, “I believe it is important you know Detective Newport has a second degree in computer science and was previously employed in the law department of CCB.”

“*Derek?* The freshie? How’d he do that? He’s, like, not even 25.”

“He went to university at 16, graduated in 3 years with a double major, went to law school and passed the bar at 23. He was employed at CCB for 2 years before switching to the police department.”

Xyna simply stared at Luna, not quite sure what to make of the information Luna had dumped in her lap. It only took her a few seconds before it clicked.

“Derek killed Demetrius Sandall?” She whispered, disbelieving her own words.

“No.”

“No?”

“Xyna, I do not have a lot of time to explain, but he has the coding and company experience to be familiar with my model. I believe he may have been the one to tamper with me. I cannot draw any conclusions with only that, but Detective Newport never enjoyed my presence... He never quite enjoyed yours either...” She spoke the last part quietly.

If only she had had a few moments to prepare, if only Luna had visited even five minutes earlier, it may have been enough time to figure out how to deactivate Luna until she could pin Derek down. But she was never really confident with computers anyway, was barely competent enough to work with her own desktop, let alone frontier tech like Luna.

Xyna knew that with her gone, Derek would be taking her spot as her successor. Would be the fastest path to Lieutenancy that he had. Would be the youngest Lieutenant at the department.

So really, when it all clicked, she should've expected the sharp shift from Luna's typically soft and warm demeanor to the hard, emotionless droid she knew when she was first assigned. *Two in one go— smart move, Derek. Luna'd be dismantled faster than she could process.*

She should've seen the knife that Luna had grabbed while Xyna picked up her coffee.

But now all she saw was Luna screaming, hand on her cheek and a bloodied knife beside her, pleading with her to stay awake. White-hot pain throbbled through her abdomen. Red and blue lights washed over the front of her home. She closed her eyes with a final breath of release.