

# THE QUARRY

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The bots stared glassily ahead as dozens of off-duty humans milled about them.

‘The Sophisticated Models, or SMs, are self-decontaminating; I suppose that was important for OH&S back in the pleasure houses, and it’s just as useful here. We don’t care as much about the BASE models, but the SMs can clean all forty or so of them in only a few minutes, so we get that out of the way too.’ A plump woman who had introduced herself as ‘Quebec’ but never asked for Jin’s name, was showing him around the mining facility: his home for the next three-year rotation. Currently, she was leading him through the large hangar where the ‘mining tools’ were kept when not in use.

All the bots were second-hand. Even if Quebec hadn't joked about the cost-saving prowess of the Mars Mining Initiative (MMI for short), Jin could still have guessed. It seemed like every factory and pleasure house on Earth shipped their outmoded bots up to Mars to be repurposed as a miner. The MMI must offer a price slightly higher than the scrap-merchants, but still low enough to be economical. Despite this clear desire to cut corners, Jin noticed that all of them, from the two squads of BASE Models (little more than expressionless crash-test dummies with a polycarbonate frame) to the thirty-three more human-looking SMs, were clothed. To be fair, it was an odd jumble of outfits that made the bots look shabbier than ever. All of it looked laundered and well-maintained, but was all still permanently stained Mars Red and Coal Black.

Jin side-stepped a small group of his fellow humans, who were crowding around an SM with a shirt that said "I BEAT JONA'S BURRITO CHALLENGE." "Why clothe them at all if they're just here to mine coal?"

Quebec laughed a little embarrassedly. "Well, initially we just clothed the SMs. They're all anatomically correct, of course, and a lot of us workers found it...distracting, to see them working in such a state. So we got some old clothes sent out to make them decent."

'And the BASE models?'

'Ah, well after covering up the other ones, it seemed proper to clothe everyone. The SMs looked too human, standing next to the BASE models with their faces and clothing, and the BASE models by comparison didn't look human enough.'" She shrugged as though embarrassed.

Earlier, Jin had been shown the main workstation, where the humans monitored the mine from the safety of the facility. A massive window overlooked the scarlet-black scar of its entrance. He had watched from on-high as the bots marched from the mine back to the facility. They had seemed creepy then, out on the Martian landscape, and they were downright unnerving up close.

At least Jin thought so. Everybody else seemed eager enough to be around them, inspecting them with more than just professional diligence. Quebec had practically dragged him down here once the shift ended, to show him 'the best part of the tour.' She stopped by a female SM that had drawn the largest crowd.

'Quebec, that the new kid?' one of the other workers asked.

Quebec nodded but didn't make introductions. Would anyone ever care to learn his name?

'He gonna draw lots for The Supervisor?'

'Who?' Jin glanced around for an authority figure.

The others laughed and Quebec gestured to the SM. 'We call this one The Supervisor because she's in the best shape, so we usually send her down with the transmitter.' It was protocol that every time the bot team entered the mine, a communication device was sent with them.

The Supervisor had a delicate nose and straight black hair: like Jin, she was clearly of Japanese origin. But where his features were organic, the bot was too symmetrical, her complexion too flawless. Only the faded overalls looked like they changed over time, and this helped to soften the striking image. She (it?) was certainly beautiful, a classic pleasure model. After a moment Jin realised that was exactly why they were crowded around her.

Quebec confirmed his suspicions. 'We draw lots to decide who goes first,' she explained, and one man made a crude gesture.

Jin suddenly felt very young. He saw that other humans, less picky or less lucky, had activated different SMs and were leading them away to rooms beyond.

Before he could speak, Quebec reached up and felt around the nape of The Supervisor's neck. There was a low hum like an old-fashioned computer booting up, then the bot blinked and looked around.

'Hello everyone,' she purred, and Jin yelped. It was common knowledge that pleasure bots could speak (unless ordered not to), but he hadn't been prepared for how...human it sounded. He'd half expected the Morse code that had trilled over the loudspeakers earlier, when the bots were finishing their shift. Had that been The Supervisor?

The bot was staring at him, and her gaze was unselfconscious. Jin was reminded of a tiger he had seen at a museum in Osaka. Its eyes had been glass beads, its skinned pelt draped over a metal frame, but Jin had still half-expected it to spring at him. He knew he would be the first to look away now.

‘They’re just machines,’ Quebec said after a moment, also staring at him. Her human eyes were more animated, the windows to an actual soul with the actual capacity to harm him, if Quebec chose. But he still found it easier to look at her than at the bot.

Just Machines. Just machines with human faces and human voices. And even the BASE Models had human clothes. What did a bot know about Jona or his burritos? And pockets, too; bots had no use for them, but there they were, in every pair of jeans or battered coat that had once belonged to a real person.

The other workers were getting restless, and soon Jin was forgotten even by Quebec, who must have figured his first day had been informative enough. The Supervisor had also turned away from him, and was smiling demurely at the workers clamouring to ‘go first.’

Quebec found him later, after she and the others had had their fun. Jin could tell she wanted to talk about it, put the new kid’s concerns to rest before they festered. But he brushed her off, laughed, talked about anything else. Mechanical movements.

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Jin soon learned to avoid the entire ground floor of the facility, where the storage hangar was located. Worker’s quarters were on the higher levels, near the main workstation and technical offices; but there were several old storerooms and such on the ground floor that the crew utilised during their downtime with the bots. Jin stayed up top, reading books and recording messages for his family back on Earth.

*Nii-san,*

*So far this job has been easy enough. I mostly fetch and carry, and occasionally they make me do data entry. So far even you could do it!*

*I thought I would have a lot more to do with the mining itself, but no. Why try to oxygenate the mine for humans and risk blowing the whole thing up with a loose spark, when bots can do all the work? There are almost a hundred of them, and they don’t need air or even suits; so not only is it a less volatile environment for the coal, but it all works out far cheaper when none of us humans ever even leave the facility. Occasionally one of the bots will send a message over the transmitter- I’ve had to learn*

*Morse code since arriving- but usually it's almost boring for the people, stuck here in the facility.*

*Speaking of which, don't tell Mama this, but the workers here use the bots for sex in their free time. I know that was probably their purpose once, but I still don't think it's right. Quebec told me not to think about it like the bots had feelings. 'High-tech sex toys,' she called them.*

*I saw them up close on my first day, and they're way more realistic than I thought. Kenta told me he visited a pleasure house in Kabukicho once, and was with an SM. Atsuko too, she said her sister rented a male one for her graduation. They're all beautiful of course, but they're too real. They even have normal clothes, not just lingerie like in the catalogues. All the looks of a proper human, none of the feelings. I avoid them.*

*Sorry to bother you with stuff like this. Don't tell Mama.*

*-Jin*

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*Nii-san,*

*Today, I got sent down to the storage hangar with Salva, one of the engineers. I had to hold some tools and take some notes while she did her routine check-up of the motor functions of the bots. I asked her why she chose me to assist her, and she said it's because I don't use the bots. I don't think she does either.*

*We had to strip each bot, to check it for damage. The SMs have particularly delicate outer shells. It's still much stronger than human skin, but the crew are paranoid about any little tear on their 'toys.'*

*For the SMs, Salva switched them on and asked them to strip down by themselves. That was almost worse than us doing it; like part of a routine. I just stared at my clipboard.*

*Salva even chatted with some of the bots as she inspected their naked bodies. I know it's just a personality modification that allows them to 'chat,' but it's still creepy.*

*They're so realistic, I don't know how people can use them in the way they do. Sending them down the mines to work, taking them away for sex...it's like slavery. I know I sound like those radicals with the megaphones who hand out posters at Roppongi. But I don't believe they have real feelings or anything. I don't think they need to have feelings for it to be wrong.*

*After we finished inspecting them, we collected up the laundry. This happens every few weeks. The first time, I started shaking out their pockets like I do with my own clothes. Then I realised there was no need. What would a bot ever put in there, after all? So now they'll just stand there naked until the clothes come back clean tomorrow; no need for spares. No need for decency, at least not while the humans aren't around. No need to empty out their pockets before throwing them in the wash.*

*They really are just machines.*

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Jin sat at a desk in the main workstation, the rickety one that he could claim as long as nobody more important wanted it. The other workers tapped languidly at their keyboards as they calculated batching numbers. The bots had been down in the mine doing the real work for about five hours.

Just as Jin thought about going and making a coffee, all the radios in the room sparked to life with a series of beeps. The echoes were too chaotic for Jin to make out the code right away, but after a second Gordin, the head batcher, played the transmission through the loudspeakers and shouted for everyone to shut up.

*.\_././...\_/././.\_.*

It was repeated several times, with barely a pause between the final dit and the first dah.

CAVEINCAVEINCAVEIN...

Everyone started talking at once, over the top of the beeping.

'Who's got the transmitter down there?'

'Message back for more information.'

‘I think it’s The Supervisor.’

‘She won’t give more information if you don’t ask for it.’

‘Ask her how many we’ve lost.’

‘Just tell them to get out of there!’

Gordin tapped out a short message on the straight key, and the transmission shut off. ‘I’ve told them to come back to the facility at once,’ he said, and then crossed the room to stare out the window. After a moment the others followed, clambering for a glimpse.

Jin had been sitting close to the window, and was in a good position to see out. It took fifteen minutes of tense anticipation, but eventually the bots began to trickle out of the mouth of the mine. Usually they marched two-by-two, with carts full of coal trundling along between them. But now they staggered out in drips and drabs, dragging limbs that bent at unnatural angles. The first few were only about as dirty as they ever were, but most were covered head to foot in coal dust. They looked like shadows moving across the red rock.

‘Must’ve been buried,’ someone said. ‘Dug themselves out.’

Gordin swore. ‘Salva, I want you to check them out once they’re all in. They look pretty banged-up.’

After a while the procession of bots dwindled down to one every few minutes. Workers began to return to their desks and deal with the expected fallout from the cave-in. Salva kept watching, and Jin, who had no job to do and no desk now that everyone was actually busy, stayed with her.

The engineer grunted. ‘Damn things. There’ll be no end to their glitching now.’

Jin was about to reply when a klaxon drowned him out. He glanced around. The workers seemed as surprised as he.

‘Something in the mine?’ Quebec asked, and Gordin shook his head.

‘No, it’s in the facility. Fire crew to storage hangar, now!’

‘The bots,’ Jin breathed, and Salva fingered her radio.

‘Supervisor, come in Super,’ she called. Now that the bots were inside the facility where there was air, they could send spoken transmissions.

For a moment there was nothing but the klaxon and human chaos. Then there was a crackling noise and the too-human voice of The Supervisor.

‘Copy, Salva,’ she spoke placidly. ‘I’m afraid I cannot speak for long. There is a situation in the hangar.’

‘I know that!’ Salva snapped, ‘That’s what I’m calling about. What’s going on down there?’

‘There is a fire.’

‘How did it start?’

Silence. Then, ‘I am not sure. There seems to be a high concentration of coal dust in the air.’ After another pause, The Supervisor said, ‘I am sorry Salva, but the fire is damaging my outer shell. Emergency protocols are compelling us to leave the facility, to prevent further damage.’ The radio clicked again, and the voice was gone.

The indicator light for the depressurisation chamber lit up green. Only Jin and Salva noticed. Most of the others had left or were leaving, desperate to contain the fire.

‘One of the bots must have sparked and caught alight,’ Salva said, more to herself than Jin. She seemed uncertain, out of her depth. ‘It doesn’t add up.’

Jin wanted to give some reassuring comment, tell her a spark probably did just catch on a piece of clothing, and would be snuffed out the second the bots went outside. But then, what had The Supervisor said?

‘The pockets.’

‘Hmm?’ Salva glanced at him. ‘What’s that?’

‘The pockets. The tunnel collapsed and buried them. They dug out. They came back covered in coal dust.’

‘That still shouldn’t have been enough to-’

Jin interrupted, ‘But the pockets. They all have human clothes, but no understanding of what humans use clothes for. They don’t ever put anything in the pockets, so they never think to empty them out.’

He could tell by Salva's face she understood. Several dozen sparking bots had just brought in several dozen pocketfuls of flammable dust to the oxygenated hangar. By now the fire would be unstoppable, and greedy to consume any fuel it could reach.

Even as that realisation clawed its way into Jin's too-young heart, the bots marched naked back out on the surface of Mars. Instead of making their usual beeline for the mine, they halted, gazing up at the facility. They looked horrific: still blackened, still with mangled limbs, and now the added gruesomeness of burnt synthetic hair and skin, peeling back to reveal the circuitry below. They stood inert, no thoughts in their metal head of the souls trapped within the building, fifty five million kilometres from home.

They were just machines, after all.