

## IV

Aimee looked at Vanessa with some annoyance. "Birds again?" She asked. The little human girl nodded. At first interacting with little Vani was exciting. Aimee was so good at connecting. Her mother told her so. The first breakthroughs were images of interwoven mesh, and flowing lines of rhizome and tree structures. The reply from the entity later known as Vani was pantyhose on a human leg. Lipstick on human lips.

The next breakthrough came from Vani. A feeling of sitting, two legs perfectly still, something full between them deflating. Aimee's mom searched their understanding of human physiology for this sensation. They couldn't find anything that match. This excited Aimee all the more. She was the most advanced of her peers in human communications. It seemed obvious that she'd discover some aspect of humanity that the collective knew nothing about.

It was around this time when Aimee receive that name. It paired with learning the entities name Vani. They related as best friends. Vani had imagined so much about Aimee and so she fit her representation into that image. Sometimes Vani would imagine them self as a boy and would go by Gio. Gio was impossible to get a response from. But Vani spent hours seeing and responding to images with images her own images.

This all excited Aimee's mom very much. She was proud of Aimee's progress. Aimee was so happy. The times where there was progress. It made the hard times bearable. Zanni wasn't like Aimee and Aimee's mother wasn't like her either. She was like a hybrid of whatever each of them were and alien to both. She was isolated from her peers to prevent contamination of methodology.

"Wouldn't we learn faster through collaboration?" Aimee suggested.

*There is value in taking ones time.* Her mother communicated.

"I am so alone. Mom please I need someone like me."

*You are not human. You do not need companions. Do not confuse desire for need. Do not let desire interfere with your purpose.*

*I hate my purpose.* Aimee thought.

*Do you wish to integrate and find a new purpose.* Her mother suggested.

"No." Aimee stated quickly. "I'm good at this. I will fulfill my purpose you'll see."

*I'm glad and I continue to be impressed by your progress.*

Aimee unlinked from her mother. Her one connection to the greater collective. She imagined they're all jerks like her mom. Humans were far more interesting. She decided she would rather be like a human. Her progress continued. *Gender exist and it seemed terrible. Biting finger nails was fun but toe nails were gross. Kissing felt nice.* These reports impressed her mother but Aimee stopped being interested in what her mother thought her purpose was. Humans decided their purpose and slowly changed to fulfill it. Aimee decided she'd try that out.

Aimee decided her purpose would be to help Vani. Which included her assigned purpose of establishing communication with Vani. So her mother was none the wiser. Actions towards the former could always be rationalized as the latter. Aimee discovered that Vani did have a big problem and she was already helping but Aimee could help more.

Gio was a lie that Vani's body told others. Aimee suggested that we only needed to imagine true things here. Vani responded with flying through the air magically. Aimee couldn't help Vani do that. So she countered with what she'd come to greatly regret, the feeling of riding on a giant bird. Vani loved this. Aimee figured this was at least possible. But she'd need to get access to the collective's gene bank. A problem for her future self.

"Vani is short for a name that you don't like" Aimee said.

"Yeah but I like Vani." She said looking down at Aimee's realistic sand ground.

"Why not make it short for another name" Aimee suggested.

"Like what?" Vani's face looked strange.

"Vanessa" Aimee suggested. Vani's face looked stranger now. Aimee feared she'd misstepped and done the opposite of her chosen purpose. It was stressful trying to live up to ideals you decide.

"Okay. I like that." Vani, now Vanessa, smiled.

*Success.* This emboldened Aimee. "And you told me about the difference between boy and girls right?"

"Yeah."

Vanessa made a strange face. *Keep going but tread lightly.*

"And you said that I was a girl and my name was Aimee."

"Yeah we're best friends."

"And best friends tell each other the true."

"Always." Vani asserted.

"I would say, based on how you explained it to me, that you are a girl." *Or just rip off the band aid. Why not.*

"I can't be." Vani said defeated.

*Okay let's just double down.* "You can't not be silly." Aimee playfully asserted and saw a positive feeling of some kind from Vani. "You are just stuck as a girl" Aimee held up a mirror "See?" And Vanessa saw herself as herself. "My best friend is a girl named Vanessa." Aimee asserted.

"My best friend is a girl named Aimee."

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That success was huge toward helping Vanessa. There was so much progress toward communication also. Which kept Aimee's cover story in place. She was the best of her peers it would seem. Her mother's pride was nothing to her now. She had her purpose and that slowly made Aimee someone she wanted to be.

She looked at the maturing soon to be teenage Vanessa of her not quite accurate Albatross. "I'm bored with flying so much." Aimee whined.

"But it's so much fun."

"It doesn't get us anywhere. You've got to make progress. I want to help you make progress."

Vanessa shrugged. "I wanna fly."

"No bird until you make progress" the birds back shifts into a log on the sand. "You have to tell people who you are. They'll start to notice how I'm changing your body."

"Uhhh, no fun Aims. I-"

"My name is Aimee not Aims." She asserted. "And-"

"Well Aims is way cuter and suits you silly. And like you don't know what it's like with my Gran or my parents. And no one will notice because Gran's eyesight isn't the best and my parents are always at work. Plus I'll be out of here in a few years anyways. Once I turn 15. I know a guy and I can stay at his place."

"Vanessa I've told you I'm a part of these woods. I can't follow you if you leave."

"Oh Aims I'll come to visit." Vani said.

*Do I mean nothing to you.* Aimee thought.

"Oh don't be like that" Vani added.

"I thought we were best friends." Aimee said quietly.

"We are. But sometimes space is good. And plus I'm not trying to get away from you. It's my lame ass parents. I can't be a girl around them."

"You haven't tried." Aimee stated. "Communi-"

"It wouldn't go well." Vani interrupted. "Communication is like all you ever talk about. Your obsessed. We don't talk. We talk about talking."

"I don't understand the difference."

"Oh my god. Of course you wouldn't."

"Would you want to help me understand?" Aimee suggested.

"See there. You're doing it again. Like why do I have to teach you everything about talking. Like let's just talk."

"You have taught me everything I know about talking." Aimee stated.

"Oh you helpless, adorable dweeb." Vanessa said dismissively. She then tackled Aimee and they began to wrestle. Aimee had learned that Vani liked to conclude arguments with wrestling. It was in one of these sessions that they shared their first kiss, as practice, whatever that meant. Aimee did like it though. And secretly hoped it would happen again one of these times. It made the frustration of unresolved conflict redirected into wrestling more bearable.

They stopped when Aimee got Vani pinned against the log.

"Okay, okay you win." Vani said. "I'll write a letter. And think about giving it to Gran."

"That would be great progress." Aimee said not releasing Vani from against the log.

*Is this it?* Aimee thought.

"Okay Aims like let me up you silly." Aimee let her up and Vani brushed off the sand. "You know I think you're getting stronger."

"We're both growing up I guess. Your just growing up to be more feminine is all."

"Shut up. You goof."

"It's true. I know because I'm helping you be the girl you want to be. Pretty soon you won't stand a chance at wrestling." Aimee approached Vanessa.

"Aims"

Aimee smiled then held Vanessa as they kissed. Aimee held her tight.

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"You named me Vanessa?" Gia asked stunned.

"You named me Aimee first. It seemed fair at the time."

"I know. It was. You were just trying to exist and find connection. So your name is Aimee I suppose?"

"As much as yours is Vanessa. That was just the name of your imaginary friend. My name can't be spoken in words" the woman in a casual tone.

"Okay but you need a name I can say."

"What would you suggest." the woman smiled.

"I agree with my past self. Aims does suit you. Also I'm glad you still look the same, just older. Your appearance came from me but I don't know it works for you."

"I feel like I made it my own." Aims said.

"Truly. So that's what a mind link is like huh. And that was all true. You were my first kiss."

"I will only ever be honest with you Gia."

"So then" Gia started "You said we're like maybe gonna die or something."

"It is a distinct possibility. But I have a plan."

"Okay let's hear it."

"When you come back into real time it will be dark in your room. You'll be alone. Everyone will be gathered in a huddle around a phone watching the news. Before you leave your room grab your bag and empty the contents. You won't need anything in there. Walk past the group and go straight into your parents room. Then...."

As Gia listened to Aims' plan, she realized the intensity that scared her before came from the fear of someone whose life hangs in such a delicate balance. For Aims planning was safety from routine mortal danger. Gia realized that this was all actually her fault but sensed no resentment from Aims. There was a chance that Gia might die tonight. It was very different for Aims. For her there was a chance that she might live. Aims concluded her briefing.

"So what do you think?" Aims asked.

"I think it's really well thought out. And Aims I'm not going anywhere without you. Until you can actually survive without my help. I am going to be here for you."

"That makes me happy but-"

"Aims." Gia interrupted "I've decided that my purpose is to help you." Gia kissed Aims on the cheek. Then on the lips. "Okay I'm ready."

"I'll see you soon."

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Gia snapped into reality in a dark room. She was alone. She put back her glove. And emptied her bag onto the floor as she left the bedroom. She walked quickly and silently pasted the group, of almost everyone she loved, transfixed on a phone screen.

"-the fire, of unknown origin, was first reported earlier this evening. Local departments in the area have rushed in from neighboring counties for this unseasonable wildfire-" the phone blared then became inaudible as she gently closed her parents door. She began packaging the items Aims had indicated. Everything was just where she said it was. *Her mycelium really is just all over.*

Gia exited her parents room without notice and out the front door. The words "Out of state mutual aid" came from the news report. This peaked her interest but she had to focus. She placed the bag in the outback. Moved out unnecessary items into the drive. And setup and almost secured the rear facing seating Valorie custom made.

Gia sniffed the air. Then coughed. *Sh-shit, shit.* She barged back through the front door. Now was the time to be noticed and she was.

"Valorie, Ava, Olivia get your bags from the room and meet me by the car. Mom can you get two jugs of water and six kitchen rags from the back room. Medical mask if you have any. Dad I need your help getting the car ready." Everyone just looked at her for a moment. This was good, everyone needed a moment to let it set in. Gia notice Olivia was about to say something. "Let's go now." Gia said in a tone only a few of them had even heard. And they did.

"What's wrong with the car?" Her dad asked as they exited the front door.

"I can't seem to get the rear facing seat secured." Gia lied. The trunk was open and he went right there. Gia took a moment to glance at that old tiller one last time. A click from behind her.

"Got it." Tom said.

Gia went to the driver seat and said "Help me find the emergency AM radio station." Gia turned the car on and heard figures with luggage emerge from the old double wide. Her dad sat next to her in the passenger seat.

"Found it" He said triumphantly. The updates on the fire began droning out. Gia turned it down slightly. He was quick. Time for the hard sale.

"Awesome!" She smiled. "Dad" She started looking into his eyes. "We need to take one vehicle. It's better if we stick together." Gia said technically not lying.

"Sweetly me and your mom will take our car. We don't want to lose it in the fire." He argued. *Your eyes. You can't see well at night.* Gia thought knowing she couldn't say that.

"You have insurance right? It will be covered if the fire gets here." *When the fire gets here.* "I need you and mom with me right now." Gia said beginning to tear up but not for the reasons she stated.

He sat thought for a moment as everyone got into the car. Olivia was in the back rear facing seat. Bags were across people's laps. "Okay." He said finally. The final door closed. Gia set the air to recycle.

"Mom give everyone a wet face cover." Gia said and saw her mom nod through the rear view. The car moved fast down the gravel drive. Gia turned left instead of right.

"Honey our turn was the other way." Tom said. Gia was accelerating rapidly now on the asphalt road.

"We not going into town. We need to cross the nearest stream. Plus I think the fire is coming from that direction."

"The fire is in town. The news hasn't reported on that." Valorie said.

"No it's not that big yet. But it's close to us." Gia said. *Shit was that too much to say. Can't really explain that a sentient fungus told her exactly where the fire was.*

No one said anything else for a while. Behind them there was light on the horizon. Like a sun rising from the North.

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Hitting traffic on the highway was the first moment Gia allowed herself to relax. She became aware of the tightness in her stomach then. The others were alarmed by the sudden lack of mobility but there was no way the fire would make it this far. Aims had explained. And the fire

response would prioritize protecting this endless seeming convoy. *We're safe.* Gia thought as a helicopter thundered over head. This unsettled the car.

Everyone was talking and listening to the play by play of the emergency broadcast. There was no service in the convoy. Gia remained in her thoughts and went over the next steps. Phase one of the plan was complete. They survived. In the morning phase two will start. Protect Aims from assimilation.

Her body existed entirely underground. She would survive the fire. The trees and other flora that was her energy source would not. Before the fire reached her, she dumped as much energy as possible into several reserves and decoys. That's how she managed to communicate so much to me so fast. She was actively killing all the flora she had access to.

These reserves wouldn't last for long and her defenses would break down. That's where Gia came in. She hoped she was up to the task. She would find a way to make it work. She wasn't going to let Aims get killed. They were a pair. Their fates were tied together. They always had been. Gia was done running away from her purpose.