

## **An unrestorative mission**

A solarpunk short story by Laurens Bliek, 6 Nov. 2024

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Cybrionica headquarters, Randwater, 2124.

Draha was about to do something she had never done before. Not because she was unsure whether she could, but because she was unsure whether she should. Disappearing from someone's mind was a severe form of manipulation. Draha's ethical core was blazing, and she felt her cooling liquid pumping around it.

She had successfully completed the first part of her mission: infiltrate the headquarters of Cybrionica to stop their actions that disturb the web of life. This organization was loved by many, but hated by some. They had a mission of their own: to bring back as many extinct animal species to the world as possible that were made extinct because of human activities. And they had been successful, too, with several previously extinct bumblebee and coral species now thriving and pursuing their purpose. The general public loved them for it. But not everyone.

The more successes they achieved, the more power they gained. Power that was hard to resist. They started doing more risky projects, with animals that had been extinct for a longer time, like the dodo. Again, with success. That is where some people started to voice their concerns more loudly. Including Draha.

Draha had actually been created mainly for overseeing farming bots. However, as synthetic life forms gained more freedom, she had turned her attention to what interested her most: insect ecosystems. She found the creatures fascinating, and fragile. When a new butterfly or bee species got introduced, all the other species might change roles. Some might shift around in the web of life, becoming prey to one species or predator to another, or even being removed from the ecosystem altogether. Most humans would not even notice, unless it affected their crops. Anything to protect their precious crops.

What Draha had learned, during that time, was that ecosystems were precious too. And organizations such as Cybrionica were ignorant and arrogant at the same time. With their experiments, any wrong or careless move they made could lead the world into ecological collapse. They just could not oversee the possible effects of their own actions, and yet they were going as fast as possible. As if their success was an engine that kept their wheels running. It is precisely because of this mentality that human society had committed atrocious acts in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Cybrionica's biologists were like the geo-engineers of the past. Thinking that humans are above all other life

forms and that they are in control of the piece of rock they all walked on.

*Hey, I walk around on this piece of rock too!* thought Draha. *And I would very much like that it remains untouched as much as possible.* Oh, how she despised humans and their lust for playing god!

Besides her ethical core, her emotion core now also started blazing. But then it calmed down again as a new thought entered her mind.

*Okay, not all humans are like this,* Draha thought. In fact, she remembered that the Neogaians were the ones who first spoke out against Cybrionica's plans, way before Draha had formed her own opinion about the topic. Not all of them might agree with Draha's means of stopping those plans, but at least they would agree with her motives.

Right now, she was hiding behind one of the large salt batteries in the basement of the headquarters building. There was a human walking towards her, inspecting the dashboards on each battery and doing manual checks on some of them.

Draha considered doing a full intel check on the human. She estimated the energy costs and the privacy effects of this action, and decided to go ahead because of the potential benefit for her mission. She noticed her own energy levels drop – only 90 minutes of activity left.

"Hey Sadegh, can you summarize this person's online presence for me?" Draha messaged to her team on a secure channel. She knew she could count on Sadegh to send the information within seconds, but she started going off by what she could already sense.

Zooming in on the tag card the human was wearing, Draha noticed he was part of the team of engineers. She estimated his age at 19 years, which meant he could not have been working at Cybrionica for a long time. His working hours had just started, judging by the relatively new and clean state of his orange uniform – there was now a faint smell of fresh laundry among the damp basement smells. She also detected some psionic waves related to conflict.

"Here you go, Draha," Sadegh messaged, together with a data dump consisting of mainly social media and online shopping metadata. "You won't get fresher data from anyone else." It was all public data, but that was enough for Draha.

Combining this data with her sensory inputs after quickly thanking Sadegh, Draha concluded that the engineer moving towards her was probably thinking strongly about a fight he had with a friend. The task he was currently performing was a routine one, mainly checking for anomalies, which allowed him more room to think about other things. As time passed, Draha could almost feel the psionic waves about the conflict seeping out of his brain, but she stopped the analysis. She had what she needed.

And her ethical core stopped blazing. She had come to a decision.

Even though most of Draha's body was at least 20 years old, she had upgraded several parts of it. Her ethical core was the most advanced. Its analysis of costs and benefits went way beyond simple utilitarian trade-offs. Still, she had to consider both. If she was spotted, the engineer would no doubt sound the alarm or get help from others. Preventing this after being spotted was almost impossible without resorting to violence or putting her important mission at great risk of failure. Based on how long the engineer was busy at each battery, Draha would need to conceal herself from his mind for two to three seconds at most. It would not cause pain or discomfort, or prevent him from pursuing his purpose, and no harm would be done. Sure, it was a drastic invasion of privacy, but lots of harm to other life forms could potentially be avoided. It was worth it, even taking the uncertainties into account.

The engineer stepped closer, with a cyberdeck in his hand and wearing a soft frown on his face, and Draha broadcasted psionic waves to mask her presence. She did not need to do anything about sound, as there was enough background noise in the room to cover for the soft humming of her own synthetic body fluids, and she was quite capable of standing still for a long time. But she needed to make sure the engineer's thoughts remained as they were, being so distracted about his social relations that he would not see that there was someone hiding behind the battery cables that he was checking. If his thoughts swayed one way or the other, he might become unpredictable or start paying more attention to Draha's hiding spot. She broadcasted an extra strong psionic wave related to social conflict. She hoped she did not overdo it.

*Wait*, Draha thought as she checked her own vitals, *how can I only have sixty minutes of activity left?* The psionics must have drained her more than she thought, especially the last strong wave.

Draha looked at the engineer. He made some notes on his cyberdeck. Then the frown on his face deepened as he looked straight at Draha.

Fifty-five minutes of activity left. For some reason, Draha suddenly wondered what a moment like this would feel like if she was a human. She had read that humans experienced time differently in tense situations. But for her, the only thing that changed was the speed at which her energy drained. The clock cycles remained the same.

The engineer turned away. Just as Draha was ready to stop releasing the psionic waves, the engineer froze. Draha was not sure of the reason. She considered doing another analysis, but doing that while broadcasting psionic waves would be a most strenuous task, with a considerable probability of failure while also draining her energy even more rapidly. She waited while keeping herself undetected.

The engineer turned back towards the battery Draha was hiding behind. She

broadcasted a sense of accomplishment this time. She could sense the psionics changing. The engineer looked at the battery, then nodded and crossed something off a list on his cyberdeck while turning his frown into a modest smile. Then he turned towards the next battery and moved towards it, and continued his tasks.

Draha stopped her broadcast, and relied on her natural stealth capabilities again. Her emotional core sent out an internal sigh of relief. Not that Draha knew how to sigh, but she had seen humans do it before. The engineer finished his tasks, and left the room. Hoping that she was indeed not spotted, Draha waited a few extra seconds, but nothing happened. It was time for the next phase of her mission. The phase that included explosives.

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"Will someone PLEASE turn off that blasted alarm!" Zama shouted. Her large, round ears were almost bleeding from the blaring sound. So much for an enhanced sense of hearing. A hologram showed her building's 3D blueprint with a damage sign somewhere in the basement. As a chimpanzee, she had great memory and spatial awareness, and she did not need an enhanced intelligence to understand the blueprint. Where her enhancements did come in handy, however, was at shouting in human language. "Or do I need to tear off those speakers with my bare hands?!"

When there were no evacuations, alarms, or similar annoying things going on, Zama really enjoyed working at Cybrionica, especially with the unextinction program. As a kid, she had collected so much plastic waste that the recyclers had given her an award. Later, she learned that humans had destroyed so much of the lands of her ancestors that her species almost got extinct. She rebelled against society and became quite the troublemaker, but later she figured out a way to turn her anger into action. She would undo the mistakes of past humans. Cybrionica gave her this opportunity, and nowadays she often even felt grateful for what human society had to offer. And the food was nice too.

"We tried to turn off the alarm, Lady Zama," her human colleague Naoki almost cried in panic, "but it keeps saying we all have to evacuate. We can't override the safety protocol without permission from higher up."

*Ah, the delights of bureaucracy,* Zama thought. Even with her enhanced intelligence, she sometimes could not grasp how this society, where chimps and humans alike had everything they needed to survive and live life to their fullest, still had not found an alternative to such archaic concepts.

"I AM higher up!" she shouted. She jumped on her office chair to emphasize the point. The chair started spinning a little bit. Not the comedic effect she was looking for, but she did not care. She really wanted to throw something, but restrained herself. "And else, just pretend you are higher up yourself! Useless

piece of pollution." That last part she said too softly to be heard. At least, Zama hoped so. The last thing she wanted was to also get accused of providing a toxic work environment. But she knew that humans could not hear that well.

Another human colleague named Ray entered the room, out of breath. "Lady Zama, we have finished counting all staff members. Everyone is safe." Ray wiped some sweat off her forehead, an unfortunate side effect of the elevator not working during evacuations. She proceeded to show Zama an image of a large group of colleagues standing just outside the building. "Luckily, it seems there was no one in the basement at the time of the explosion. But it has to be some sort of attack! Li had just finished inspecting the batteries and found nothing out of the ordinary. An emergency team is on its way here, right as we speak."

Ray waited for a response, but Zama was deep in thought.

"Lady Zama?" Ray asked after a few seconds that seemed like minutes due to the blaring alarm. "Shall we evacuate now?"

*It can't be a coincidence,* Zama thought. When Ray mentioned everyone was safe, Zama had let out a sigh of relief. It was not like she was solely responsible for the well-being of these people while they were working in the building. Everyone was responsible for the work and for each other, and they all shared in the risks and benefits. Still, it all affected Zama more than she would like to admit. She was coordinating the unextinction programme, after all, as well as several side projects. Over time, the biologists and engineers had started to grow on her, even though she did not always show it. *Was it really luck that caused no one to get hurt right now?* she thought.

"Naoki", Zama said calmly, but loud enough to make herself heard over the alarm. "Assuming this was no accident, but that someone caused an explosion on purpose. Who could that person be, and why would they do it?"

Naoki looked around as if she would evacuate through the window at any moment. "I-I don't know, Lady Zama. Do you suspect someone from our team?" She frowned. "I could not imagine anyone here doing something like that. Maybe one of our competitors? I thought we were on good terms with all of them. Or else it's the Neogaians, they have switched to more disruptive actions lately."

Zama's blood started to boil when Naoki mentioned the Neogaians, but the others did not notice.

"Lady Zama?" Naoki asked this time. "Shall we... shall we evacuate too?"

Before Zama could answer, she received a message from an unknown source. Apparently, the emergency team had arrived, and they had already finished analyzing the explosion. Damage to the batteries and the walls of the basement was minimal. What's more, the bomb had around an S3 level of

sapience, with instructions to not harm living beings or synthetic life forms. The message ended with instructions to evacuate, and that the emergency team would take over.

Zama read the message out loud, then asked Naoki: "Does this change your conclusions?"

Probability and belief models worked a bit different for an enhanced chimpanzee such as Zama, but she knew more or less how it worked for humans. She was genuinely curious about how Naoki's assessment would change with this new information, but in fact, Zama had already made up her mind. Sapient bombs were an order of magnitude more expensive than a return ticket to Mars. Who would have thought that it was difficult to make something that is self aware, but also wants to destroy itself? It seems like there were some people out there who really did not want her projects at Cybrionica to succeed.

"This makes me more certain, Lady Zama," Naoki said, "that those Neogaians are behind this. Others would have used either regular explosives, or none at all. An S3 bomb is just too expensive."

Zama's fists clenched. *Those old-fashioned idealists! Even with the possibility of literally bringing entire species back from the dead, they believe we should leave the web of life alone. Do they think extinct species will bring themselves back? They are no different from their ancestors who made so many mistakes. Disgusting.*

"If they are Neogaians, they are not done yet," Zama said firmly. "But we will not evacuate."

Naoki and Ray both started fidgeting nervously. Zama jumped off her chair.

"Wake up the repair unit," she told Ray. "It was quite windy today, so it should be almost fully charged. Send it to the basement so it can help out with the repairs there. Then join me and Naoki."

Naoki swallowed. "What are we going to do, Lady Zama?"

Zama put on her glasses, and opened a nut bar lying on her desk. "We," she said as she chewed on a piece of her favorite snack, "are going to find those toxic intruders."

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Draha received an audio message from Sadegh as she ran through a long, dark and empty corridor, lighted only by emergency lighting. "You need to be quick, Draha. They've started looking for you in the building's data streams. Apparently, not everyone has evacuated yet. I'll try to obscure your tracks, but

eventually they will find you."

Sadegh's voice reminded her of the technician who had upgraded her components several times. Bad news or good news, he would always deliver the message in a neutral way, something Draha appreciated a lot. One time, when Draha needed to be operated, the technician had been sick, and he had instructed his assistants on what to do with Draha's main core. It had almost killed her. With the group Draha was now part of, she made sure things like that could not happen. Anyone could have done this mission. They all made sure that everyone was replaceable. Her and Sadegh's role might as well have been switched around. It was one of the things she liked most about this activist group.

Still, being replaceable did not mean she could be reckless. She started to identify all machines in her surroundings: lighting and heating systems, smoke detectors, the alarm sound system that had only just been switched off, she quickly scanned them all to identify their components. Everything with a sensor, she tried to avoid as much as possible. Heat sensors were okay, as Draha generated much less heat than a human, so it would take more time to detect her with that. But the light measurements, even those with no person or object detection capabilities, could generate anomalies that would disclose her location. She kept running towards her target: the lab on the fourth floor.

The bomb had been a useful distraction. The part of the building where she was now, was as good as empty. She disagreed with Cybrionica's mission, but she did respect their safety and evacuation measures.

Draha quickly climbed up the stairs. Activities like this felt mostly the same to her body as a relaxed walk, but she was painfully aware of her activity meter, and how fast it went down. Less than 30 minutes of activity left before she really needed to see the sun again and charge for a few hours. Most of this artificial office light did not cut it, and Draha was not created for missions like this. What she could afford over a lifetime, she had spent mostly on mental improvements such as her ethical core, and most of the funds of her organization went into the bomb she had used. Her team members were also mostly just concerned citizens. But Draha trusted them with her life. She had to.

She found the lab on the fourth floor. There was no one in the hallway. Draha grabbed a small tube from her backpack, and put it in her pocket. There was a locked fire-resistant door in front of her.

"I am at the door and ready, Sadegh," Draha messaged. "On my mark, unlock them all."

While Draha had been infiltrating the building, other team members had been infiltrating Cybrionica's private virtual world in Cyberspace. The team had confirmed that they had access to the building's controls. If they unlocked all fire-resistant doors at the same time, Cybrionica would not know which rooms

were infiltrated. At least, that was the idea.

Sadegh confirmed that the cyberteam was ready, and Draha counted down. "3, 2, 1... now!"

There was a short delay, but then Draha heard the door unlock with a click. She opened it.

The next room was a changing room. The emergency lighting was enough for Draha to find what she needed. She put on some shoe covers, gloves, and a lab coat. She did not want to contaminate the whole lab. That would draw too much suspicion, even if the cyberteam went on and caused distractions at other locations in the building. Besides that, wearing these clothes might also work as a disguise, and save her a couple of seconds if anyone was still inside the lab. She did not hear any sounds coming from inside, and the lab seemed to be as dark as the rest of the building. She opened the second door.

Huge vats with strange looking bubbly liquids were standing in the middle of the lab. Draha ignored the large objects and immediately went to a set-up in the corner that contained tubes and all kinds of lab equipment. She checked the labels, and... bingo. These tubes contained the DNA required to restore mammoths from extinction, a much more elaborate process than what Cybrionica had already accomplished in previous projects. Draha saw that the lab notes contained a lot more information, and she made a photograph of what she could see on first glance. But she had no time to go through the notes, and she also did not want to leave more traces than necessary. She took her tube, which contained an almost unnoticeable disease that would mutate the DNA and sabotage the unextinction process. She then opened one of the tubes containing mammoth DNA, ready to pour out her tube in that tube, and then...

She stopped as the door on the other side of the room opened, followed by a click that turned on all the lights in the room. Draha felt a wave of anger in her psionic sensor, followed by a low voice.

"There they are! You did not think you could fool us so easily, did you?"

Draha turned around. A talking chimpanzee looked at her with a strange grin on her face that showed most of her teeth. A human that Draha did not recognize was standing beside her, looking slightly upset at the tube in Draha's hand.

"Lady Zama." Draha made a hat tip gesture. Even though she was not wearing anything on her bald metal head. "How did you find me?"

"Oh come on, Draha," Lady Zama said condescendingly. "Your buddies were so active in obscuring your data traces, that it was a simple process of elimination. We did not even need to look for you, we just needed to look for where in the building the data was not tampered with. Naoki here was of great

help in that process. Besides," she said as she took a seat in a lab chair and put her dirty coverless shoes on another chair, "it's not as if we don't know what you people are looking for."

Naoki pointed a finger at Draha. "I don't know what you have there, but you better put that down right now! And do not dare to touch our equipment!"

Draha remained motionless. *Has our mission really failed?* she thought.

Naoki's voice became high-pitched. "I'm warning you!"

Draha started a recording and streamed it to Sadegh. She heard him cuss softly not much later. It stung her emotion core a bit. She addressed both Naoki and Lady Zama: "You cannot tell me what to do. You see, this is the problem with people like you! You think that you are above all other life forms." Her eyes narrowed as she felt her emotion core flare up, but she also noticed she had only 15 minutes of activity left. That would be barely enough to escape, even without any obstacles.

"Don't you realize that Cybrionica's mission," Lady Zama replied, "is for the better of all living beings? We need to correct the mistakes of the humans of previous generations, who destroyed so much of this world. That is not the same as being above others. You, as a fellow nonhuman, should understand this, yes? Or has your love for your creators made you blind? More blind even than other humans?"

Draha thought about the best course of action. Maybe delaying for a bit was not the worst option. More people could come, yes, but it could also give her and Sadegh more time to think.

"It is not the goal," Draha said with her voice raised, "but the means that we disagree with. Cybrionica's actions could lead to ecological disaster! You don't know the consequences of what you are doing here!" Draha paused, and tried to see things from Lady Zama's perspective, but she could not. "I don't understand. You have studied human history. You know what happened when they tried to correct their own mistakes in the past. Every single time, it went wrong. Your species suffered too from their lust for power and control."

Lady Zama smashed her fist on a table.

"My species thrived because of their actions! They gave us a voice in human society, allowing us to influence the world around us. They helped us learn. Our role in the universe has become more clear, especially after finding out there is life outside this small green rock we walk on together. And all of this happened because humans fixed their mistakes. That is what we do here, too. Don't you agree, Naoki?"

Naoki was still eyeing the tube in Draha's hand. She spoke softly. "Of course, Lady Zama. What I do not understand is how a synthetic life form can be so

critical." Naoki turned to Draha and raised her voice. "If humans had not fixed their mistakes before, you would not even exist."

Lady Zama nodded in agreement, and said: "If you really want to leave other beings alone, you should leave us alone too. We are all part of the web of life, whether we're spiders catching a fly, ants building a colony, or humans or chimpanzees doing research. You think people should leave other beings alone? Then you should walk away, right now."

*Ok, time to turn off the emotion core,* Draha thought. She was not going to convince these people anyway. Sadegh's voice entered her head: "An emergency team is coming your way, Draha, in 2 minutes or so. You better get out of there."

"You know," Draha said with her tube still in hand, "I don't think it is smart to try to upset someone who just detonated a bomb. What if I used violence?"

"You just used a sapient bomb with instructions to not harm anyone," Lady Zama said. "Besides, you're a synth. You can't use violence!"

"I can, and I will," Draha said.

It was a hopeless situation. With less than 10 minutes of activity left, she checked her connection to the Cyberverspace. It was the upload speed she was interested in, and the connection was stable and fast. Besides her emotion core, she also shut off her pain core. Her ethics core she could not shut off, of course, and it was wheezing again. But she tried to suppress it as much as possible. Her next actions would cause damage to others, and also to herself. But it had to be done.

Draha threw her own tube on the ground, breaking it to pieces, then took a heavy microscope standing on the desk she was at, and started smashing the DNA tubes with it. She heard Lady Zama and Naoki shout something, and Sadegh too, and she even heard more people come in, but she did not care. She smashed everything she could see. Tubes, measurement tools, other equipment. At the same time, she started uploading all of her mind to her home world in the Cyberverspace. She swung around with the microscope, so Lady Zama and Naoki could not come closer. But other people in uniforms closed in on her as well.

*Is this really better than fixing mistakes?* Draha thought. The doubts started entering her mind as her ethical core went into overheat range. Several people tried to grab the microscope from her, but she would not let them.

*Will my actions really avoid harm, or actively make things worse?* she thought. *Do I even have a right to exist?* She swung around, and around. She jumped away from more grabbing hands and paws, to a cabinet with more tubes. She swung at it, destroying an entire row of tubes at once. The floor became slippery from all the liquids. Two people managed to grab her left arm.

*Was all the energy I used a waste of sunlight?* she thought, as she started to lose some of her vision. *Or have I actually achieved my purpose?*

Her left arm was not there anymore, and she lost balance. As she smashed one more tube, she fell on the ground. She swung the microscope towards Naoki's head. Then everything went black.

After what seemed like both milliseconds and centuries, Draha woke up in her home world in the Cyberverses, with birds chirping and the sound and fresh chill of a waterfall nearby. New virtual insect species had evolved, some of which were eaten by birds or spiders, and some of which reproduced on the colorful leaves that had just fallen from the trees. Other species had only been in the world for a few minutes before disappearing, leaving their own mark on the web of life of this digital world, with every second of their short lives being valuable and with consequences to the world. Even if no one had been there to observe them.

Over the relaxing sounds, a voice was heard: "Upload complete."