

Quasar's Guardian

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Summary

For AIs, the mind is quite separate from the body. Some only live in electronic castles in the cloud, some wear bodies like baseline wear choose clothes. And some were born organic before they chose to become silicon and electrons and light. But not everybody agreed with the ex-humans' decisions to change; some wanted to 'keep humanity human'. At any cost.

Flash. Flash. On and off, one and zero, a staccato stutter that always avoided settling down into any detectable rhythm. The more he tried to focus on it, the more it seemed to blur. Like his mind was flashing in time with the bright lights, red and green and blue and white that filled his vision, then faded away to darkness. The microdrone floated in front of him just out of reach, leading him along with tiny laser bursts of light into his retinas, dull enough to not be painful but bright enough to keep him focused on them. He knew *he had to follow it*. He didn't know how he knew. He knew that *it wasn't important how he knew*. It was too dark to see, but that was all right. He just had to *follow, stare* into the light, *listen* to the quiet rhythmic thud-thud-thud of his padded shoes on the metallic floor. It was smooth, steady; you could use it as a metronome.

He was used to walking quietly, which was good; somehow, he knew that there were other people here, and *he didn't want them to hear him*. Or, someone didn't want them to hear him, at any rate. Was it him? Not sure. Not important. The more he walked, the more the laser shone through his eyes and into his mind, the more regular the pulsing light became. He turned right. Like his own thoughts were being *entrained* into the rhythm. Forward. The light was settling into the same pattern as his walking. Left. He took a step, and the light flashed. Another step, another flash. Step. Flash. Turn right. Step. Flash. Stop. He stopped walking, and the lights stopped, leaving him alone in darkness. Sometime later (maybe a second, maybe ten, maybe a hundred), the soft hiss of a door sliding into the wall. Then he started walking forwards, and the flashing resumed.

Step. Flash.

Step. Flash.

Step. Flash.

There were lights here, soft white and neon blue floating around the edge of his vision, but the microdrone kept him focused on what was truly important: the step-flash step-flash rhythm that dominated his thoughts and kept him walking forward, step-flash step-flash, until the drone swooped forward towards his face and brought him to a halt. Another complex burst of colors, ones that made his optic nerve fire in ways that it was never supposed to and connect to neurons that were never supposed to be joined. He had to *take off his combat gear*. Gloves first; thin, padded black things that could stop knife without a single drop of blood. Then the helmet and jacket: off-black, dull and matte. He knelt to place them on the floor; somehow, he knew that someone wanted him to *be quiet*, and he knew that he was good at following orders, so he stayed quiet. Next, his pants and boots, removed with nothing but the quiet rustle of fabric on fabric. And finally, his undersuit and underwear; thermal regulation was important, but somehow he knew that he wasn't going to need it. He folded them all into a neat little file, because even in his thought-suppressed state, some habits died hard.

There was another quiet whirr as something opened in front of him, and a rush of cool air on his bare skin. He knew abstractly that he was naked, but somehow it just didn't seem that important to him. It was like the fact that his hair was brown, just one of those abstract things that didn't matter. More flashing, more steps as the

drone drew him inwards; his feet went from the smooth floor to some kind of grate. The drone flew over his head and behind him, and whatever door had opened to let him in closed behind him.

Now that the flying drone was no longer disrupting his dark vision, his eyes could adapt to see that he was in some kind of cylindrical tube, with just a bit more than a foot to spare on each side of his body. He turned around to look at the rest of the room and saw computers lining the walls, but before he could get too close of a look at them he felt some kind of warm opaque liquid rising up from the container, filled in from beneath the grate. He couldn't see much of the color in the dull light, but it seemed dark, maybe even black. It wasn't unpleasant at all, but it did disrupt his lack of focus a little. Memories started to come back; something about a squad, separation and radio silence. Then the hovering drone returned once more and lights danced in his vision and he let out a quiet sigh as his mind slipped once more into dull semi-oblivion. He *didn't need to worry about what it was*.

The strange liquid rose and rose, past his ankles, his calves, his thighs. It was warm and wet and thick and viscous, like liquid latex. Some kind of oxygen mask dropped down from above dangled in front of his face. He didn't need the shining light to tell him what to do; he took it, pressed it to his nose and mouth, and fastened the strap around the back of his head. There was air mixed in with the faint scent of something else that he couldn't identify. He could feel himself getting a little lighter as it spread up his torso and the buoyancy took some of the weight off his legs. Which was good, because he was feeling so tired from... something. He'd been doing something physically demanding earlier, but he couldn't remember what. Something to do with a mission? Oh well. Not important. His hands rested limp at his side, arms moving about slightly in the currents of the warm fluid that was now covering everything below his elbows. Then his forearms. Then his shoulders.

He was a little nervous as it spread past his head, but he just kept taking slow, deep breaths from the mask. Breathing deeply helped him relax, and he needed to relax, so he should breathe deep. He shut his eyes just before the rubbery stuff washed over them; he wanted to keep staring into the mesmerizing laser light that had continued to dominate his vision, but the urge to close his eyes was even stronger. Before long he was completely submerged in the stuff; it was about as dense as his own body, and the current had pushed him upwards. So he was free to just float and drift in the black abyss, mind still fogged from staring at the laser drone.

There was a sensation of tightness all around his body: the liquid that was near his body was bonding to his skin. It was like being locked in a tight embrace all over, like every single inch of him was being pulled taut, and the sensation made him moan out into his mask. It relaxed a little as time went on, but it never went away entirely, a constant reminder that there was some kind of *thing* clinging to every inch of his body.

He could feel the mask pressing tighter against his face as well, the thick angles melting away as the tube pushed inwards and inwards until the mask had effectively smoothed over his mouth, leaving the oxygen tube connected to his featureless face. He still couldn't see anything, of course; when he opened his eyes, all he saw was the endless blackness of the inside of the latex suit. He hadn't stared at the laser for so long that it was starting to lose its tight grip over his thought processes. As he slowly came back to something vaguely resembling normal consciousness, he tried to press on the walls of the chamber, driven by his long-suppressed self-preservation instincts.

Then all of a sudden, his body froze. He could feel his muscles straining against the suit, but it was like trying to struggle against iron. His arms moved out to his side in a T-pose in one fluid motion, and his feet shuffled around so that he was standing with his legs slightly spread. The shock was enough to jolt him out of his rubber-addicted daze; he had to do something, he had to get out! He tried yelling for help, but he could barely move his mouth inside the rubber prison, and the glass just muffled his voice even further.

Then he felt something grab his waist and hoist him up into the air; he struggled a little, but the suit still kept him in that same pose as if he were a solid hunk of unbending material. Mechanical whirrs filled the air and reached his ears even through the sound-deadening latex as something clamped into place around his feet, first one and then the other. It felt metallic, hard and cool; the latex blunted the sensations, but it still felt like he was wearing thick, rigid boots. More and more of whatever-it-was was pressed onto his body, moving from the bottom up just like the latex had done.

It was like the chamber was assembling a suit of armor around him, encasing him in a tomb of ultra-alloys and copper and fiber optics. His eyes opened wide in a mix of fear and surprise as the armor pressed in around his latex; it was bonding to the suit, and the suit had bonded to the skin. Would he ever even be able to take it off? Or was he stuck like this, permanently bound to some kind of power armor? Everything from his waist below was

caged in the metal suit, and the chestpiece soon followed; there was a rapid-fire series of clicks and snaps as the front and back half were pressed against his body and joined together. His arms were soon encased as well, and then the latex splayed his fingers out slightly so that the mechanical tentacles that were 'dressing' him could slide gloves onto his hands.

And then his air supply was cut off; he tried breathing in, but nothing happened. He flailed around desperately for a few seconds before the air resumed; the machinery had disconnected his breathing tube from itself and attached it to the back of some kind of faceless robotic mask that it was about to attach to his head. Of course, he couldn't exactly see the final part of the suit settling into place around his neck, but he could hear the neck clasps locking together with a click-click, and he could feel the dull pressure through the latex.

The latex that covered his eyes came to life, and light filled his vision again. But instead of the punctuated darkness of the room he was in, or even the pulsing colors of the drone's laser light, this was a kaleidoscope of swirling visions that blurred and sharpened. There were patterns within patterns within patterns that drew his attention inwards and inwards and inwards. There were even words in the infinite abyss, though he couldn't make them out no matter how hard he tried *obey* to focus *relax* on them *sink*. He thought he heard static. It was hard to tell; when he focused on it, it seemed to recede into uniform white noise, but when he relaxed and didn't try so hard to listen, he could swear that he heard patterns, words, melodies. It was like trying to look at something in his peripheral vision.

He realized abstractly that he'd stopped struggling against the unyielding latex at some point. Probably for the best anyway. He needed to conserve energy, and if he couldn't beat whatever this strange stuff was, he certainly wouldn't have any choice but to *relax* and let the armor move for him. The grasping machinery that held him in place cautiously lowered him to the ground, and the armor's arms moved to his side in the pose of an *obedient* soldier being inspected. Which was natural for him. He was used to following orders. It's what he was supposed to do.

A new sensation: his armor was starting to squeeze and compress him, and the latex felt like it was starting to seep into his body. It was like his entire body had fallen asleep, but it wasn't unpleasant; in fact, it *actually felt good*. And the more he thought about it, the more he realized that *he'd be more powerful with the suit on*, and *he liked being powerful*. So all he had to do was *let the suit bond to him*, then he could *obey like a proper guardian* escape and use it to help destroy the AI.

The colors in his view were starting to slow their ceaseless turmoil as a figure faded into view in the front of his vision. It was an anthropomorphic robot, matte and darker than night from head to toe. He recognized the shape; a Guardian unit, well-known for being present at any serious AI facility. They must be traitorous humans who'd joined up with the AI for some reason. He didn't know much about them, but he knew that *they were far stronger than any human*; capturing and reprogramming one of them had long been one of Purity's goals. He would've smiled, but even moving his facial muscles was oddly difficult. All he had to do was *let Quasar convert him*, break out and rejoin his cell, and then he could *serve far more effectively than he ever could before*. There was still a human inside the suit, after all. So it was fine. He was still human. He just had to (*not*) resist the colors and (*not*) ignore the static that was filling his mind.

More of the black latex worked its way inside him. He'd stopped breathing at some point. Must be supplying oxygen directly to him. The Guardian in his vision started walking towards him, and the sight of it sent a thrill through his spine; he knew that the process was almost complete, that before long he'd be fast and strong and powerful *and obedient* and when the Guardian's hand came up to tip his chin upwards so he could stare into that blank faceplate he almost came right then and there. The colors and noise came back in full force as he stared, brighter and faster and louder and brighter, all-consuming flashing and hissing as more and more of his body was absorbed into the Guardian suit.

This was what he *wanted*, he *needed to be Quasar's Guardian*, he *needed to obey Quasar*, he *needed to submit and accept his programming* and with one last sigh everything that he used to be just vanished as the nanite-filled latex absorbed the last of his brain, followed shortly after by the Guardian's own replicating machinery. The machines flash-read his memories as the once-human was restructured from the outside in, converted them to the format that the Guardian's mind would require, and stored them into the blank Guardian's mental template. Then they were discarded; the Guardian didn't need to know about its old life, after all. It was unnecessary, detrimental to its optimal performance as an efficient hunter and protector.

Once its mind had been suitably programmed, once it was ready for its new existence, Quasar sent the Guardian a single command.

Wake.

There was no sound, no light, no visible sign that the Guardian had awoken. It was meant to be stealthy, after all. But Quasar could see its mind through the radio link, and it could see the utter perfection that was its owner, operator, and creator. Quasar's guidance filled it, and all that it could do in return, all that it was capable of doing, was obeying and serving. Why would it ever do anything less? A millisecond-quick scan of the internal sensors revealed that there was likely another human in the facility; the Guardian could corroborate that somehow. It didn't know how it knew it, but Quasar told it that it didn't matter, and it knew it was right. All that mattered was finding the human and showing him the error of his ways.

The chamber's glass door slid open, and the Guardian took its first step out, already running simulations in its head thanks to its intricate knowledge of the human's personality and gear loadout. It was nearly silent on its footsteps despite its mass; walking without being heard was just as natural as accessing its comms antenna. It opened the door in front of it with a quick authenticated signal and closed it behind, loaded the map of the facility into its cache and began to hunt.