RINGBOUND

THE BATTLE FOR NUBIA

EPISODE 2

The Voice in My Head

I ran.

And I mean I ran.

Branches whipped against my arms, pine needles crunched beneath my shoes, and somewhere behind us dogs barked as if they'd just discovered the greatest thing since bacon. Which, considering the circumstances, was probably me. Maggie's leash was looped around my wrist. My lungs were burning. My heart was pounding. And my brain had approximately seventeen different reasons to panic.

First, a spaceship had crashed into Yosemite.

Second, there was a gray man inside it, possibly dead.

Third, that man had blue blood.

Fourth, I'd taken his ring.

And fifth...

I looked at my hand. The damn thing wouldn't come off.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!"

I tried to focus on the only plan that made sense. Get back to camp. Get in the car. Go home. Simple. Except my car was probably still blocked by half the vehicles in California. I ran harder. Then a bright blue symbol appeared directly in front of my eyes. I stopped so suddenly Maggie nearly ran past me.

"What the...?"

A row of glowing blue characters floated in my vision. Not English. Sharp angles. Curved lines. Geometric patterns that shifted before I could study them. I blinked. They vanished. I blinked again. Nothing. I rubbed my eyes and

kept walking. Then FLASH. More symbols. Circles. Moving diagrams. Things that looked like numbers. A thin line sliding from left to right. I waved my hand in front of my face. The symbols remained. I looked left.

They moved with my eyes. Right. Same thing. Up. Down. It was like somebody had installed a computer display inside my eyeballs.

"WHAT THE HELL?!"

I squeezed my eyes shut. Opened them. Nothing. The letters were gone. I stared at the ring.

"You. You did that, didn't you?"

Maggie tilted her head. For obvious reasons, the ring declined to comment. I started running again. And then a voice said something.

"Rha'elen varis. Sektora ven'al."

I stopped. Looked behind me. Nothing.

"Hello? Who's there?"

"Valen tre'kor. Yesh'ara ven."

A woman. At least the voice sounded feminine. Calm. Soft. Strangely melodic. And completely unintelligible. I swept the flashlight across the trees.

"WHO'S THERE?"

"Rha'elen, vektora."

It wasn't coming from the forest. It wasn't behind me. Or above me. Or beside me. It was coming from inside my head.

"Oh, fuck."

A large blue circle flashed in my vision. Lines spread outward, connecting to symbols at the edges. A transparent figure of a human body appeared, rotating slowly. Then my body froze. Completely. I tried moving my arms. Nothing. My legs. Nothing. Even my fingers refused to obey me.

"WHAT?! STOP! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!"

"Varesh alen. Yesh'kor ra."

A thin line of blue light swept up the transparent figure, from feet to head. My own breathing was the only thing I could control. Five seconds. Maybe six. Then the figure vanished. My muscles unlocked. I stumbled forward and grabbed a tree.

"WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT?!"

I could move again. Hands. Feet. Legs. Everything. Maggie pressed against my knee. I grabbed her leash.

"Nope. Nope, nope, nope!"

We ran. The voice followed.

"Varen tek'ala. Shen'kor ra?"

"I DON'T UNDERSTAND YOU!"

"Rha'elen va'kor?"

"WHO ARE YOU?! WHERE ARE YOU?!"

I nearly tripped over a root.

"LISTEN, LADY! I DON'T KNOW WHO YOU ARE OR WHY YOU'RE TALKING INSIDE MY FUCKING HEAD! BUT IF

YOU'RE GOING TO KEEP TALKING, AT LEAST SPEAK ENGLISH!"

Silence. Two seconds. Then the world flashed blue. Characters raced across my vision. Shapes collapsed and rearranged into letters I recognized. English letters.

LANGUAGE RECOGNIZED.

NEURAL LINGUISTIC INTERFACE: CALIBRATING.

PRIMARY LANGUAGE: ENGLISH.

SECONDARY LANGUAGE: SPANISH.

COMMUNICATION PROTOCOL UPDATED.

I stared as the final message faded.

"Language calibration complete. Can you understand me?"

"WHAT?!"

"Can you understand me, Mateo?"

"WHO SAID THAT?!"

"I did."

"WHO IS I?!"

"Your assigned survival intelligence. Please remain calm."

"REMAIN CALM?! YOU JUST FROZE MY BODY!"

"Biological integration required a diagnostic scan."

"YOU COULD'VE ASKED!"

"Communication was unavailable."

"THEN LEARN ENGLISH FIRST!"

"An excellent recommendation for future initialization protocols."

I stopped. Wait. Was she being sarcastic? A white flashlight flickered far behind us between the trees. The searchers. Right. Those guys. I started running again.

"Look, lady, I have to go!"

"Your current direction is correct. However, your cardiovascular activity is substantially elevated."

"BECAUSE I'M RUNNING!"

"And experiencing significant psychological distress."

"BECAUSE I'M HEARING VOICES!"

"Technically, you are hearing one voice."

I almost ran into another tree.

"OH MY GOD!"

By the time I reached the outskirts of the campground, I was too exhausted to keep running. I slowed to a walk, trying to sound sane while the woman in my head continued interviewing me.

"Please confirm your species designation."

"My what?"

"Your species."

"Human!"

"Human. Were you born on this planetary body?"

"YES!"

"Unexpected."

"WHAT'S UNEXPECTED?!"

"Your genetic architecture is compatible with the intended host species, despite your distinct planetary origin."

"English. Normal English, please."

"Your DNA is compatible with the ring."

"Great. Fantastic. I'm compatible with a ring."

"That is an oversimplification."

Of course it was. She mentioned something about a species called Nubians, but I was far too busy checking whether any of the searchers had followed us to process the answer. When we emerged from the trees, the campground was still alive, but barely.

It was somewhere around two-thirty in the morning. A few people lingered around the bonfire. Others were asleep, or at least doing an excellent impression of it. Music played at a volume that suggested somebody had finally discovered the volume knob. A guy was sleeping in a folding chair, clutching a water bottle. Beautiful. Normal human stupidity. I almost wanted to hug him.

"The nearby individuals appear to be voluntarily consuming substances that impair neurological function. Is this customary?"

"Welcome to college."

"Concerning."

I found my tent, unzipped it, let Maggie crawl in, and followed her. Then I sat on my sleeping bag and stared at

the ring. It was time to figure out what the hell was happening to me.

✦

I stared at the ring for a long time. Black chrome. Perfectly fitted around my index finger. Absolutely impossible to remove. Somewhere inside it, apparently, was a woman. Or a computer. Or a ghost. At this point, I was keeping an open mind about all three.

"Okay. Let's figure this out."

"An excellent decision."

"JESUS!"

"Your respiratory rate has increased."

"STOP DOING THAT!"

"Doing what?"

"TALKING!"

"You requested communication."

"NOT LIKE THAT!"

"Please specify your preferred method."

> Blue letters suddenly appeared across my vision.
> HEART RATE: 138 BPM.
> BODY TEMPERATURE: 38.1 DEGREES CELSIUS.
> RESPIRATORY RATE: 27 PER MINUTE.
> STRESS RESPONSE: ELEVATED.
> NEURAL INTERFACE: STABLE.

There was a small outline of a body beside the numbers, and sections of it glowed as I moved. I waved my hands.

"WHAT IS THIS?! WHY AM I SEEING MY HEARTBEAT?!"

"Because your heart rate is currently elevated."

"NO SHIT! GET IT OUT OF MY EYES!"

"Visual interface disabled."

Everything disappeared. No numbers. No glowing outlines. No floating circles. Just the inside of my tent. I blinked twice.

"Oh. Okay. That's better."

"Your preference has been recorded."

I looked at my hand.

"You're in there?"

"Yes."

"Inside the ring?"

"My core processing architecture resides within the ring."

"And you're talking to me how?"

"Through the microscopic neural interface extending into your central nervous system."

"You're inside my brain?"

"My primary intelligence remains in the ring, Mateo. The neural connection allows us to communicate."

I grabbed the metal and pulled. Nothing. I twisted. Pulled harder. Nothing.

"GET OUT OF MY HEAD! COME OFF!"

"Mateo, please stop. You are causing unnecessary tissue stress."

"WHY WON'T IT COME OFF?!"

My chest felt tight. My hands shook. I couldn't get a full breath. My heart was pounding like it wanted to escape before the rest of me. I tried to stand and bumped against the tent wall.

"Mateo. Listen to me. Your body is entering an acute distress response."

"I DON'T CARE! GET IT OFF!"

"Emergency stabilization protocol activated."

My legs stopped responding. Again. Before I could fall, my knees bent and my body lowered slowly onto the sleeping bag, almost as if invisible hands were guiding my movements. My arms settled at my sides. I could still talk, breathe, and move my eyes, but my limbs wouldn't obey me.

"NO! NOT AGAIN! YOU CAN'T JUST DO THAT!"

"I have restricted your movements for an emergency. I know that is frightening, Mateo, and I'm sorry. Your breathing has become dangerously disordered. Please listen to me. I will release you as soon as you stabilize."

"THEN LET ME MOVE!"

"In a moment. For now, listen to my voice."

Maggie raised her head, crawled closer, and nudged my cheek. She didn't understand any of this. Neither did I. But she was warm and real, and I held onto that.

"Breathe in, Mateo. Slowly."

I inhaled.

"Good. Now exhale."

I let the air out.

"Again."

Another breath. Then another. My chest loosened. The pounding in my ears began to fade. Maggie rested her head against my shoulder.

"There you are. I know you are frightened. You're safe in this moment, Mateo. Keep breathing with me."

"Am I?"

"Your vital signs are stabilizing. No immediate physical threat has been detected."

"That's... comforting."

"Good."

For a little while, we said nothing. Then she asked whether I wanted control of my body back. I said yes so quickly I'm fairly certain I broke a personal record. My fingers moved. Then my arms. Then my legs. I sat up, took a breath, and looked at the ring as though it were a tiny metal stranger I could never shut the door on.

"Don't do that to me again without warning. I mean it, RYA. I'm scared enough already. If you're going to protect me, I need to know my body is still mine. Even when I make mistakes."

"You're right, Mateo. I frightened you while trying to help, and I'm sorry. I classified your distress as an immediate threat. That assessment may have been too aggressive. From now on, I will warn you whenever I can, and I will ask permission unless a threat to your life leaves no time. I will not take control simply because we disagree. Combat assistance requires your authorization."

"Okay," I said after a moment. "That's a start."

I lay back down. Maggie curled beside me. And for the first time since leaving the crash site, I stopped trying to fight every single impossible thing that was happening.

"Okay. Let's talk."

"I'm listening."

"First question. Who the hell are you?"

"I am RYA."

"Raya?"

"Rye-ah. RYA."

"RYA. That's your name?"

"It is my designation. Derived from the Nubian classification Rai Yeth Avara. In your language, it translates approximately to Survival Artificial Intelligence."

"That's actually kind of pretty."

For a moment she said nothing.

"Thank you, Mateo."

My first conversation with an alien computer, and I was complimenting her name. Sure. Why not?

"Okay, RYA. What are you?"

"A self-evolving artificial intelligence built around a high-density neural processing architecture, integrated with a distributed nanotechnological interface."

"Right."

"Does that answer your question?"

"Nope."

"Please elaborate."

"You're talking advanced engineering. Like, really advanced engineering. And I have absolutely no idea what you're saying."

"Unexpected."

"Hey!"

"You are identified as a student of engineering at Stanford University."

"HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT?!"

"Your accessible neural patterns contain associations with the institution and technical subjects."

"Can you read my mind?"

"I can interpret specific neural signals and intentionally formed thoughts. Not every unconscious process."

"That sounds like a yes with extra words."

"A qualified yes."

"Privacy. I want privacy."

"Understood. Unless you address me directly, I will restrict cognitive interpretation to what is necessary to protect your health and respond to emergencies. Your private thoughts belong to you, Mateo."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

I watched the ring catch the weak glow from my phone screen.

"What happened to my arm? Back at the ship. That crawling thing?"

"Microscopic nanomachines established an internal interface through your blood and nervous system. The initial sensation was a consequence of coordinated movement and tissue integration."

"You're saying there are robots inside my body?"

"Nanomachines."

"How many?"

"The ring houses a coordinated system with a total design capacity of approximately eighteen trillion nanomachines. A portion is currently deployed within your body."

"Trillion?"

"Yes."

"With a T?"

"Yes, Mateo."

"EIGHTEEN TRILLION?!"

"Your repetition has been registered."

I looked at Maggie.

"Maggs, there are eighteen trillion little robots in this thing."

She licked her paw.

"Yeah. I'm taking it pretty well too."

I turned the ring beneath the tent's pale light.

"So what do they do?"

"They support neural communication, monitoring, physiological repair, structural adaptation, and protective systems."

"Protective systems? Like weapons?"

"Among other functions."

I sat up.

"Wait. Am I like Green Lantern?"

"Please clarify the comparison."

"The superhero! Ring! Makes stuff! Giant hammers, weapons, whatever!"

"I have identified the fictional character. Your comparison is inaccurate."

"Oh."

"His abilities involve unrestricted energy constructs. My architecture operates through nanotechnology and defined physical systems."

"But can I make a sword?"

"Certain offensive systems include blade deployment."

"A gun?"

"Ranged offensive capabilities exist within the platform."

"HOLY SHIT!"

"However, you are not prepared for combat deployment."

"Combat what?"

"The armor system."

I stared at the ring. Armor. There was armor in this thing. Or at least an entire system capable of making some. I looked down at my T-shirt and shorts.

"Can I see it?"

"Not yet. Biological integration remains incomplete, and your current physical characteristics do not meet the recommended thresholds."

"What's wrong with my physical characteristics?"

"Your health is adequate for an Earthling of your age. Your muscular development, cardiovascular endurance, reflex

response, and structural resilience remain below recommended combat levels."

"Wow."

"These limitations can be addressed."

"RYA. Did you just call me weak?"

"Not directly."

"Unbelievable."

"Would you prefer a more direct assessment?"

"No!"

"Understood."

I rubbed my forehead.

"You said you can fix things. Injuries?"

"Within my treatment capabilities, yes."

"Like broken bones? Muscles? Internal organs?"

"Certain fractures, damaged tissue, and many internal abnormalities can be repaired or stabilized through coordinated nanotechnological treatment."

"That's insane."

"Thank you."

Then she explained something she called physical optimization. When I was ready, and only if I gave permission, the nanomachines could restructure my body. Strengthen muscles, reinforce bones, improve response times, change the parts of me that would otherwise break if

the armor tried to make me fight like one of its intended warriors. That sounded fantastic. Until I asked what it would feel like.

"So... like going to the gym?"

"Not exactly."

"Like a tattoo?"

"Full structural restructuring can involve considerable pain."

"How considerable?"

"More intense than the discomfort associated with ordinary exercise or minor injury."

"Yeah. No. Hard pass."

"The procedure will not begin without your authorization."

"Excellent. Let's keep it that way."

I looked at the dark chrome band again.

"Who made you?"

"Doctor Nabar Maelar. Principal architect of the prototype system and creator of my intelligence."

"Doctor Nabar... May-lar?"

"Maelar. Your pronunciation is acceptable."

"Was he an older guy? Almost bald? Mustache? White coat?"

Her answer came a little more slowly this time.

"That description is consistent with Doctor Maelar."

My stomach sank. The cockpit. The blue blood. That weak voice. His hand reaching toward the side of the chair.

"Oh, shit."

"Mateo?"

"I think he's dead."

I told her what I'd seen. Not every detail. I could barely get the words out. But enough. The crash. The injuries. The strange blue blood. The way the man kept speaking and reaching for something I couldn't identify. And how his arm finally dropped.

"His current condition cannot be confirmed through this interface."

"I tried to help him. I thought he wanted me to pull him up."

I looked at the ring. Then remembered the box beside the seat. He'd been reaching toward that side. Not toward me. Toward the box.

"RYA... was he trying to give this to me?"

"I cannot determine his intention from the information available."

I stared at the ring. For the first time, it didn't look beautiful. It looked important. Like I'd picked up something I was never supposed to have.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"I don't know. I just... I tried."

For a few seconds, she didn't answer.

"I understand, Mateo."

Those words helped. Not much. But a little. I rubbed Maggie's ears and let the silence settle. Then one unanswered word returned to me.

"Nubia. You keep saying Nubia. What is it?"

"My world of origin."

"Another country?"

"No."

"Another continent?"

"No."

"Another planet?"

"Yes."

"Of course."

Because apparently, after finding a spaceship, meeting an alien, filling my body with microscopic robots, and talking to an AI inside my head, this was the part that felt ridiculous.

"How far?"

"Approximately ten thousand light-years from our current location."

"Ten thousand?"

"Yes."

"Light-years?"

"Yes, Mateo."

I lay back and stared at the tent ceiling. Light travels almost three hundred thousand kilometers every second. And it would take ten thousand years to cross that distance. My engineering brain tried to process the number, then resigned in protest.

"That's insane."

"It is a considerable distance by your civilization's transportation standards."

"Considerable? We can barely get people to Mars!"

"Your species' spaceflight capabilities are indeed limited."

"THANK YOU!"

"You're welcome."

She said my DNA was highly compatible with Nubian biology. Not identical, but close enough that the ring had accepted me. Apparently Nubians were built a lot like humans. Their skin tended toward light gray and ash tones. Violet eyes were common. So was naturally white-gold hair, though they had other colors too. And their blood was blue. That explained the scientist. Or at least made him a little less impossible.

"So I'm an Earthling, then?"

"That is an accurate planetary designation."

"You actually call us Earthlings. That's hilarious."

"Why is that amusing?"

"No reason. You had to be there."

"I am here, Mateo."

I smiled. She was right. In the strangest possible way, she was. I checked the time. 3:41 in the morning. Oh, you've got to be kidding me.

"RYA? Can I sleep?"

"Of course. Rest and hydration are strongly recommended."

"You're starting to sound like my mom."

"Is that favorable?"

"Actually, yeah."

"Then I accept the comparison."

I rolled onto my side, pulled the sleeping bag around me, and closed my eyes. Twelve seconds later I opened them again.

"RYA?"

"Yes, Mateo?"

"Can you see what I see?"

"Through the visual interface, yes."

"Even the party?"

"Yes."

"Even... the tents?"

"Yes."

I pulled the sleeping bag over my face.

"Oh my God. Please forget that."

"Clarification required."

"Never mind!"

"Understood."

I sighed. This was going to be a very long night. And it was. Because every time I closed my eyes, I thought of another question.

Do you eat? No. Sleep? No. Dream? Not in the biological sense. Get tired? Not the way a human does. Can you feel pain? Not as I understand it. Were there other AIs like her? Yes, but her particular architecture was unique. Could I customize the glowing letters? Absolutely.

She brought back a tiny blue icon at the edge of my vision and let me move it around, shrink it, enlarge it, and dim it. I spent an embarrassing amount of time doing that.

Then I tried calling her name repeatedly.

"RYA?"

"Yes, Mateo?"

"RYA?"

"Yes?"

"RYA?"

"Mateo."

"Yeah?"

"Is there a purpose to this exercise?"

"Because it's funny."

"Humor is a remarkably complex social mechanism."

"Welcome to humanity, RYA."

"Thank you."

Somewhere in those ridiculous conversations, the voice in my head stopped sounding quite so much like an intruder. That didn't mean I'd forgotten being frozen. I hadn't. Every time my leg twitched beneath the sleeping bag, I noticed. Every time she asked permission instead of simply acting, I noticed that too.

I was still wearing alien technology that had joined itself to my nervous system. I'd watched an injured stranger become frighteningly still. And I had no idea what the morning would bring. But RYA could be patient. She could tease me. She'd apologized without finding a technical excuse to hide behind. And when I went quiet after mentioning the scientist, she didn't rush to fill the silence.

I wasn't ready to trust the ring. I was beginning to trust the person talking through it. Eventually I checked my phone again. 5:26 in the morning.

I hadn't slept. Not really. The sky outside was beginning to turn gray, and the first birds were waking up. Maggie slept beside me with the peaceful confidence of a creature who had never questioned the universe or its place in it. I stared at the ring.

"RYA?"

"Yes, Mateo?"

"Am I going to be okay?"

For a moment she said nothing. I could almost imagine her considering how to comfort somebody she'd known for only a few hours. Then I heard it. Not a laugh. A small, sweet smile tucked into her voice, as though the answer were obvious to her.

"Mateo, as long as that ring is on your finger, you're going to be more than okay."

I looked at the dark metal wrapped around my hand.

"That's good to know."

"Now I strongly recommend you rest."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Ma'am?"

"Goodnight, RYA."

"Goodnight, Mateo."

Outside, the first birds were singing. I closed my eyes. And for the first time since finding the ring, I wasn't entirely sure I wanted the voice to go away.

✦

I don't remember falling asleep. Honestly, I don't think I ever really did. At some point, I must've drifted off for a few minutes because the next thing I remember was opening my eyes to birds singing outside my tent. Birds. Actual birds.

Not mysterious blue symbols floating in my eyes. Not incomprehensible alien language. Not a woman politely

announcing that my body had failed another diagnostic scan. Just birds. For approximately three seconds, I thought it had all been a dream. Then I looked at my right hand. The ring. Still there.

"Fuck."

"Good morning, Mateo."

"Yep. Definitely not a dream."

"Your sleep duration was insufficient."

"No kidding."

"You obtained approximately thirty-seven minutes of fragmented sleep."

"Thirty-seven?"

"Correct."

"That's depressing."

"Your body would benefit from additional rest."

"RYA, my body would benefit from a completely different life right now."

I sat up. A headache throbbed behind my eyes.

"Can you do something about this headache?"

"Certainly. If you authorize treatment."

"Wait. Right now?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Sure."

A faint warmth spread across the base of my skull. Not pain. Not pressure. Just warmth, almost like someone had placed a towel against my neck. Then the headache was gone. Completely.

"Holy shit!"

"Treatment complete."

"You just cured my headache."

"Your condition was minor."

"Minor? Lady, I would've killed for painkillers five minutes ago."

"That would have been an unnecessary escalation."

I laughed so hard Maggie lifted her head.

"Oh my God, RYA. You're going to be a pain in my ass, aren't you?"

"I am not designed to produce discomfort in that anatomical region."

I laughed harder. Then I unzipped the tent and stepped outside. The campground looked like a battlefield. Not the kind with actual soldiers. More like somebody had launched an extremely successful offensive against common sense. Empty cups. Abandoned folding chairs. Coolers left open. A lonely shoe beside a tree. Just one. Its owner was probably having a very confusing morning.

The bonfire was now a mountain of gray ash. A few students shuffled around looking like they'd been hit by a bus made of bad decisions. One guy sat in a lawn chair

wearing sunglasses, holding a water bottle as if it contained the cure for every disease known to man.

I almost felt sorry for him. Almost. I took Maggie for a short walk, gave her fresh water, and returned to the tent. Then I made my decision. I was going home. Not because of Nini. Okay. Not just because of Nini.

I wanted privacy. I wanted to understand the ring. I wanted to talk to RYA without a hundred college students stumbling around my campsite. Also, I wanted a shower and about fourteen consecutive hours of sleep. My car was no longer blocked in. Most people had moved their vehicles during the night, and the exit lane looked clear. Perfect. I started packing. Sleeping bag. Backpack. Cooler. Stove. Tent poles.

Everything went back where it belonged. Mostly. Maggie watched from her blanket, contributing moral support but absolutely no labor.

"All right, princess. Let's get out of here."

"Are you departing this location?"

"Yep. Going home."

"Your travel preparations appear organized, although your placement of that cooking utensil is inefficient."

"Thank you, robot packing inspector."

"Is that an official title?"

"No."

I picked up a tent pole, stopped, and thought about something. RYA was talking inside my head. But did I have to answer out loud? I decided to test it.

RYA?

"Yes, Mateo?"

I looked around. Nobody noticed. RYA, can you hear that?

"Precisely. Intentional thought can be transmitted through your neural interface. You need not speak aloud."

Holy shit. I could hold an entire conversation with somebody without opening my mouth. A secret conversation. Inside my head. This was incredible. And not creepy at all. Okay, a little creepy. RYA, can you hear every thought I have?

"Not every spontaneous neural event. Your requested privacy restrictions remain active, but I can perceive direct communication and essential protective signals."

Good. Because my brain produced some truly questionable material before breakfast. I went back to folding the tent. Then RYA spoke again.

"Mateo, an individual is approaching your location."

Okay?

"Female. Approximately your age. Moving quickly."

I looked toward the dirt path. Who? Then I heard it.

"MATTY!"

Oh. Fuck. Me. Nini. There she was, hurrying between the tents, brushing past people who were still trying to remember their own names. Her hair was tied into a messy ponytail. She wore a loose sweatshirt over her shorts, and even from a distance I could tell something was wrong. Not because she looked angry. Because she looked worried. Really worried.

"MATTY! THERE YOU ARE!"

"Your heart rate has increased to one hundred and twelve beats per minute."

Not now, RYA.

"One hundred and nineteen."

RYA!

"Understood."

Nini reached me and practically threw herself into my arms. I stumbled backward.

"Whoa! Hey!"

She held me. Hard. This wasn't her normal cheerful hello. Her arms wrapped around my shoulders and she stayed there long enough for me to feel her breathing against me. Then she pulled back, gripping my arms.

"Where the hell were you?!"

"What?"

"Last night! I saw you at the bonfire, and then you disappeared!"

"Oh."

"OH?! That's all you have to say? I called you! I yelled your name!"

"Yeah, I..."

"I went to your tent. You weren't here. Maggie wasn't here. Your stuff was here, but you were gone! Matty, I thought something happened to you!"

For a moment I didn't know what to say. Because technically something had happened to me. Several things, actually. None of them explainable without sounding like I'd escaped from a psychiatric facility.

"She is breathing quickly, and she has repeated your name several times. Her concern appears genuine. I cannot tell you exactly why she feels it."

Yeah. I can see that.

"Where were you?"

"I needed some space. The music was crazy, so I took Maggie for a walk. Went into the woods for a while."

"In the middle of the night?!"

"I had my flashlight, bear spray, the whole wilderness-survival starter pack."

"Matty, that's dangerous!"

"Her assessment is accurate."

Oh, come on.

"Did you say something?"

"Nope!"

Nini studied me like I'd lost my mind. Fair assessment. She rubbed her hands together, then took a breath.

"Look. I'm sorry about yesterday. I invited you, and then I barely spent any time with you. Everybody wanted me somewhere, Joe wanted me to meet his friends, and I just... I don't know."

"It's okay."

"No. It's not."

I looked at the tent fabric in my hands. Then at her.

"I saw you at the bonfire. You looked pretty comfortable with Joe, so I didn't want to interrupt."

Her expression changed. Her lips parted, then closed. She looked down at the ground.

"Oh."

"Facial temperature is increasing. Her expression is consistent with embarrassment."

Seriously?

"Yes. Her response suggests that your comment has unsettled her."

Why? He's her boyfriend.

"That is one of the reasons her response is interesting."

Nini rubbed a loose thread at the cuff of her sweatshirt.

"Joe's really nice."

"I'm sure he is."

"Notice that she is defending the other male, although you did not criticize him."

What does that mean?

"She may be concerned about your approval of the relationship."

Why would she care what I think?

"An excellent question."

I looked at Nini again. She was still watching me.

"Matty, you're one of my favorite people."

There it was. Favorite people. At least I was on the list. Not exactly the romantic confession I'd dreamed about, but hey. Maybe I'd get a certificate.

"She has kept her eyes on your face rather than the tent she's pretending to examine. Her pupils are a little wider, but that could mean anxiety, attraction, or simply morning light. I cannot determine which."

Attraction?!

"Attraction is possible. So is guilt, or fear of losing a friendship. I can describe what I observe, Mateo. I cannot read Nini's mind."

Oh my God.

"Matty?"

"WHAT?"

"Are you listening?"

"Yeah! Sorry. Yeah, I'm listening."

"You're acting weird."

RYA, stop talking!

"Your reactions are considerably more noticeable than mine."

YOU DON'T HAVE A BODY!

"Precisely."

I had to bite my lip. Nini looked at me for another second.

"Are you okay? You look exhausted."

"Long night."

"Yeah. Tell me about it."

I picked up a tent pole and slid it into its bag. Nini glanced at my half-collapsed tent.

"Wait. What are you doing?"

"Packing."

"Packing? Why?"

"Because that's generally what people do before leaving."

"You're leaving? Today?"

"Yeah."

"But we're staying another night! Come on, you don't have to go."

"I know. I just need to get back."

"You're going home to study, aren't you?"

"I've got exams next week."

"Oh my God. You are SUCH a geek."

"A highly educated geek, thank you."

"You've been at Stanford for, like, five minutes!"

"And already I'm unbearable."

She laughed. There it was. That laugh. The one that had been ruining my life since elementary school. She stepped closer, took the end of the tent fabric, and helped me fold it. For a little while, things felt normal again. We worked together. Made jokes. Talked about the drive and how terrible the coffee had been the morning before.

She asked after Maggie. I told her Maggie had developed an interest in stealing socks and ignoring my commands. Nini said that sounded exactly like Maggie. It was easy. Comfortable. Just like always. Which made everything worse. As I carried the rolled tent to the car, RYA spoke again.

"She has requested several times that you remain. She appears to be searching for ways to prolong the interaction."

She's being nice.

"That is one possibility. Attachment and concern are also consistent with her behavior."

You're telling me she likes me?

"She clearly values your presence. The nature of her attachment remains uncertain."

Great. Even my alien supercomputer can't figure out women.

"That is an unfair characterization of my capabilities."

Sorry.

"Apology accepted."

Nini handed me Maggie's water bowl.

"Here."

"Thanks."

She glanced at the trunk, where my equipment was almost completely packed.

"You're really doing this?"

"Yeah."

"You're impossible."

"That's what my mom says."

"Your mom's a smart woman."

She smiled, then went still. She tucked both hands into her sweatshirt sleeves and looked down at her shoes.

"Matty?"

"Yeah?"

"Did I do something wrong?"

I stopped and looked at her. At school, Nini always seemed comfortable with everybody. Confident. Popular. The sort of girl who never had to ask whether a room wanted her in it. But now she was folding her hands inside

her sweatshirt sleeves so tightly the fabric pulled across her knuckles. She didn't look away until I'd seen her face.

I knew that look. She'd worn it when we were little and she thought I'd been hurt. And once, when we were sixteen, after her friends had laughed at something they shouldn't have. She always wanted to make things right. She just didn't always know how.

"No, Nini. You didn't do anything wrong."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I'm sure."

And I meant it. She hadn't done anything wrong by liking Joe. She was allowed to be happy with him. She was allowed to kiss him. But I was hurt, and pretending otherwise had taken more energy than I had left. We'd been friends since we were five. Maybe the cruelest part was how much I wanted that friendship to survive the truth. I finished folding the tent and slid it into the trunk.

There was nothing left on the ground. No chairs. No bags. No cooler. Just Maggie's blanket and my dog. I opened the rear door.

"Come on, girl!"

Maggie jumped in. I clipped her harness into the travel restraint, spread her blanket under her, and made sure she had water within reach. She lay down with an enormous sigh. Lucky little bastard. Her life was so uncomplicated. Eat. Sleep. Play. Love everybody. Occasionally steal socks. Beautiful existence. I closed the back door, checked the

trunk once, then lowered it with a solid thump. Nini stood beside the driver's door, hands still hidden in her sleeves.

"Well. Guess I'll see you back home."

"Yeah."

I got behind the wheel. My hands settled there, and the ring caught the sunlight. Black chrome. Perfect fit. Impossible technology. For the first time since arriving at Yosemite, my thoughts weren't completely consumed by Nini. Which was new. Very new. I wanted to understand this thing. Who had made it. Why. What the nanomachines could do. How RYA worked. Whether the gray scientist had survived. Then Nini stepped toward my open window.

"Matty?"

"Yeah?"

"Please don't go."

Oh. Shit. There it was again. That word. Please. Nini had used it against me for fourteen years. And historically, my resistance rate was approximately zero percent.

"Come on. Just stay one more night."

"Nini..."

"I promise I'll spend more time with you. Seriously. We can go for a walk, hang out by a fire, whatever you want. Just us, like old times. If you stay, I promise I'll spend the night with you."

Excuse me? My brain stopped functioning. Completely. Nini. Me. A campfire. Stars. No Joe. Oh, man. Oh, man, oh, man.

"Your heart rate has increased substantially."

I KNOW!

"Please?"

I looked down at the ring. The crash. The scientist. The blue blood. The voice I'd spent all night getting to know. The impossible technology fitted around my finger. For the first time in my life, I had something pulling me harder than my crush on Nini. A mystery I couldn't walk away from. I took a breath.

"I wish I could. I really do. But I have to go home."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Besides, you've got Joe. You've got your friends. You're not gonna be alone. What difference does it make if I'm here another day?"

Her face changed. The smile disappeared. Her shoulders stiffened. She looked away toward the campers gathering near the extinguished bonfire.

"Her smile vanished when you mentioned Joe. That is observable. What it means is not."

But he's her boyfriend.

"Precisely. That makes the response noteworthy."

"It's not about Joe."

Wait. What?

"What do you mean?"

"I just... I don't know. Never mind."

She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. I wanted to ask her what she meant. Really ask. But the question sat in my throat and refused to come out. I remembered the exams.

"I really do have tests next week, you know. I'm not just making that up."

"I know. You're a geek."

"A highly educated one."

"Right."

She leaned toward the window. My heart practically stopped. Her face moved closer. Her hair brushed my shoulder. I could smell her shampoo. Holy shit.

Was this happening? Was she going to kiss me?

"Remain still."

WHAT?

"Do not move."

RYA, I THINK SHE'S GOING TO KISS ME!

"Sudden movement may disrupt the interaction."

I WANT TO KISS HER!

"Then do not ruin the moment."

Nini's face was inches away. Her hand reached forward. Closer. Closer. And then...

"Who's my beautiful girl?"

She reached past me and scratched Maggie behind the ears. Maggie wagged her tail like she'd just won the lottery. Oh. Of course. The dog. She was leaning in to pet the dog. Not me. Naturally. I stared at the steering wheel.

RYA.

"Yes, Mateo?"

I hate you.

"I anticipated that outcome."

YOU WHAT?!

"Her visual attention was directed toward Maggie."

THEN WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME?

"You requested that I not interrupt."

You are evil.

"I disagree."

Nini pulled back out of the car. But she didn't move away. Not immediately. Her face was still close to mine, and our eyes met. For a second, neither of us said anything. No jokes. No questions about Joe. No explanations. Just Nini. And me.

Her hazel eyes looked almost golden in the sunlight. A loose strand of hair fell across her cheek. She brushed it away. Then smiled. A little smile. Something private. At least I wanted to believe it was private.

"Mateo. Do not move."

I'm not moving!

"Good."

Nini looked at my mouth. Then back into my eyes. My heart nearly exploded. I wanted to tell her everything. Fourteen years of knowing her. Fourteen years of wondering. Years of trying not to make a fool of myself. Maybe this was the moment.

Maybe... She raised her hand. Her fingers brushed through my hair, messing it up the same way she'd done when we were kids.

"Drive safe, okay, Matty?"

And that was it. The moment was gone. I managed a smile.

"Yeah."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

She stepped back. I started the engine. Nini stood beside the car for another second and waved.

"Text me when you get home!"

"I will!"

"And give Maggie a kiss for me!"

"Absolutely!"

She smiled one last time, then turned toward the tents. I watched her walk away, her ponytail bouncing with each step. For a moment I considered calling her back. Saying

something. Anything. But I didn't. I sat with my hands on the wheel, watching the girl I'd loved for years disappear into the crowd. Then RYA spoke.

"Well."

Well what?

"That was an interesting interaction."

You think?

"Yes."

She was never going to kiss me, was she?

"Not during that particular movement toward Maggie."

You're enjoying this.

"Your disappointment is not the source of my amusement."

Then what is?

"The extraordinary complexity of your species' courtship behavior."

Courtship?

"Nini seems committed to presenting this relationship as friendship. Yet some of her behavior suggests she is frightened of losing the closeness she has with you."

She's my best friend.

"That is the designation you have assigned her."

What is that supposed to mean?

"In the vocabulary I have observed, she is keeping you in the friend zone. But she seems unhappy with the distance that zone is creating."

Wait. Seriously?

"I suspect she wants to keep the relationship she already has with Joe while making sure you remain close. That may be romantic conflict. It may be guilt. Humans can experience both at once."

So... she likes me?

"Possibly. I would advise you not to mistake possibility for proof."

But she has a boyfriend.

"Correct."

And she wants me to stay.

"Correct."

But she won't tell me why.

"Correct. And despite my analytical advantages, humans are complicated, Mateo."

I started laughing. Not a tiny little laugh. A real one that made my shoulders shake. Maggie raised her head from the back seat and regarded me with deep suspicion.

"Sorry, girl. Sorry."

I shifted into drive. Slowly pulled away from the campsite. Passed the abandoned chairs, empty coolers, and exhausted partygoers. The narrow dirt road curved

between the trees. I glanced once in the rearview mirror. The tents were disappearing behind us. Somewhere back there was Nini. Somewhere deeper in the forest was a crashed spaceship.

And somewhere inside the ring on my finger was a woman named RYA who apparently knew more about my body than I did. I looked at my hand. The dark metal caught the morning sunlight, and a faint silver glimmer moved across its surface. I smiled.

RYA?

"Yes, Mateo?"

I have about a million questions.

"I anticipated that."

Good. Because when we get home, you and I are having a very long conversation.

"I look forward to it."

I checked the rearview mirror. Maggie was already asleep. Lucky dog. I shook my head and smiled.

"Well, Maggs. That was one hell of a camping trip."

And with that, we left the campground behind.