

"With Vigor"

Megan Jackson

Moira traced her fingers over my chest, leaving trails of tingling skin behind. I pretended to be asleep, not wanting to startle her. The machine was smarter, though. The computer that ran my apartment sensed my heartbeat, my breathing, my thinking. It had all been explained to me before, in training, but I never thought it important until now, when Moira was shaken truly awake by the slow rumble that was code for, "Stop dilly-dallying and get your lovey-dovey asses out of bed."

Moira quietly got out of bed and pulled her uniform on. I rolled over and watched until the rumbling of the bed turned to shaking, then violent pulses that tried to forcibly throw me out of my sheets and onto my feet. Before it could succeed, I got up and dressed.

Then Moira stood before me, smiling. I'd never really seen anyone smile until I'd met Moira. In the food court, poking my too-bland meat before taking a bite, I sat still. I had been lonely, but then this greasy engineer sat in front of me, this greasy engineer who I quickly realized was the most beautiful person I'd met on King's Haven, the most magical person I'd ever met.

Things escalate quickly when you're in love, I guessed, looking at Moira with a smile, loving the way that we mirrored each other. We cleaned up our mess then went to the portrait of the Chancellor. Moira wasn't smiling anymore; she recited the Oath in a monotone. I recited it with passion, as I was taught to.

"I will obey the Chancellor!" I belted with vigor, while her-dare I say it?-wimpy voice murmured along.

"I will never cause trouble for the Chancellor; I will work diligently and never make problems for our perfect world. If I do, I deserve whatever trouble I have coming to me. Hail the Chancellor, King's Haven, and King Drust." I could hear her voice drop lower and lower until she was barely whispering.

This made my heart squeeze. I wondered how she could disrespect the Chancellor like that. I let my arms drop from the salute and stared at her. She looked at me,

knowing she'd done wrong. I wasn't going to turn her in; she'd just have to be warned. I hated being the one to punish Moira, especially in the violent way that we guards must.

When I slowly lifted my hand, her look hardened. She took the slap as if she herself were a guard expecting punishment. I pulled my hand back, looking at her face bearing the red mark. She glared at me with such hatred that I felt hate for myself.

I looked away, clenching my jaw. Moira stormed out, heading down to the lower engineering levels. I looked at my hand, realizing it was just as bruised as Moira's face. I slid on my gloves, glad that I could cover my shame instead of wearing it so publicly.

The elevator took a long time, as usual. People on every floor bustled and moved around as only they could. Not talking, not looking at each other. Life on King's Haven was a very lonely existence. Especially without Moira.

Moira, Moira.

I was obsessed. I needed to work. I looked up at the screen that gave me all my information, text scrolling across it faster than I could read. I couldn't read. The letters blurred and the light shone in my eyes, shimmering. I realized they were tears; I lifted my arm and slid my sleeve against my eyes, drying them.

I looked around, finding a reflective surface in which to examine myself. I had the helmet under my arm, my white hair was longer than most others', shagging over my forehead and ears. I fixed it a little bit and locked eyes with myself. Blue, dark and rare, a color I'd been complimented on by the selector computer.

*"Blue is rare. Interesting eye colors attract mates."*

It was strange getting complimented by something without a face. With only a robotized voice and a screen that displayed words that tilted occasionally. I almost thought it was trying to show emotion.

I wondered if the computer did actually have a personality, or if it was just programmed to have strangely Jaynarin mannerisms, imitating what it could never be.

I got to my station, a drawer that pulled out of the wall. It was three yards from the elevator, at waist height, on the right, and had a nameplate on it.

*Soldier 245601*

*Initiated with Honor under the rule of Chancellor Drust the Fifth*

*Eyan Marc Soldati*

*Status: Active*

I read the nameplate every morning, reminding myself of the hard work it had taken to get that nameplate. That assignment. I grabbed the handle, opening my station up slowly before examining my equipment. The communicator went in my ear, the helmet firmly on my head. The belt around my waist signified that I was on duty. A computer screen slid out of the wall, greeting me as I cleaned my gun.

I listened to it ramble. Although I'd been an honorable soldier, I still had gotten the quirkiest computer in King's Haven. It twitched a lot, and often went on tangents that had nothing to do with my assignment. I never called tech support on it, though. I felt I had to give mercy to this one thing, although I never got any gratitude for it.

It was going on about gossip, a message I ignored while weighing my weapon in my hands. I made sure it wasn't on a deadly setting, knowing that the gun wasn't truly a gun. Gunpowder was never allowed; it was loud and messy and could damage King's Haven if used improperly. Instead it shot...

I lost my focus, the computer had stopped talking.

"Computer?" I looked at it, and it seemed to look back at me. It had that head tilt again, as if examining me.

"Blue Eyes," that was its name for me, "you did a fine job this morning. With Miss..."

I looked back down as I slid the gun into its holster at my hip, not wanting it to congratulate me on hurting Moira.

"Moira..." it said, and I wondered if the voice had a twinge of pity in it, or if it was just my imagination.

"Thank you," I said, trying not to respond with emotion or punch the computer screen. It was just doing as it always did. Congratulating me on a job well done, except this time I didn't believe that it was anywhere near as honorable as anyone else would think.

"I am glad you have finally found a mate."

I remained silent, closing the drawer and dismissing the computer, hating myself for being so cruel.

Lunch was slow. I got in line, flipping my identification card over in my palm. I looked over at Moira's favorite vendor. Which provided one of the few choices we had in the world. Moira was there, standing completely still. Suddenly, she looked over at me.

There was the hatred again. The shared hatred we had for me. I hated myself because she hated me.

Moira. MOIRA. I'm so sorry.

Her look softened, as if she had read my thoughts. We both looked away, and I stood as still as she. We went over to our table and sat beside each other. Her leg pressed against mine, and all was right on King's Haven again.

Days went by quickly, heavenly. Moira stayed over at my apartment more and more often, the nights longer and sleep growing short. Because I was lax with my duty, my computer worried.

"Blue Eyes..." it would say to me, then halt. Its gossip had grown short, and I wondered if it would stop talking altogether.

Moira distracted me from my worries about my computer friend, her beauty striking me more and more each day. She had a glow around her, a constant smile on her face. She started hunting among the vendors, finding strange new flavors. It was a strain on my wallet, but I didn't care. She was happy and I was too.

Then the smile was gone.

"It's gone," she said to me one morning.

"How can it be gone?" I had yelled, grabbing her shoulders. She had that hateful look again. Anytime I touched her in an unloving way, she had that look. It made me feel like a monster.

"It just is," She said, slapping my arms away. "I have to be alone for a while, Eyan."

I had watched her leave then. She was gone. I found my sheets empty, tears on the pillow. I never figured out if they were mine or hers, if the fights in my head were real.

The days became long again, and sleepless nights became melancholic. The tears on my pillow dried, and my quirky computer became lively again, as if to cheer me up.

"Blue Eyes!" It chirped at me.

"Good morning, Jake." I'd finally named it, my computer.

"A name! I am delighted, Blue Eyes!"

"Stop calling me Blue Eyes," I whispered, hoarse.

"Oh. Sorry, Blue Eyes."

Every morning began similar to this, every patrol ended like this. I stopped seeing Moira. She'd requested a lunch hour separate from mine. I hated the way life was going for me. I hated waking up every morning alone.

I finally began collecting women. Jake never seemed to approve of them as he had Moira. He completely stopped talking to me whenever I took a girl home for the night. That was all they were, one night each.

Then Moira happened again, spiraling my life downward once more.

Moira was at lunch, for the first time in maybe a year; she was at lunch. My heart squeezed, lunging into my throat as if I were young again. I tidied myself, straightening my already perfect collar before darting over to her table.

"Moira," - I slapped on a smile for her - "How's it been?"

She looked up at me with the same familiar smile, "Eyan, it's nice to see you again."

"It is," I sat down and ate with new vigor. The food had new flavor, the conversation starting easily as if we were still a couple, still connected in the way we used to be. Our feet played under the table as we laughed quietly.

Moira came home with me, the tiny apartment again an expanse of possibilities. We spoke in whispers on the couch, played with each other's fingers and toes in the cramped kitchen. The next morning was almost like the first we'd had together, a ballet of getting ready for our day.

I noticed something about her. The way the clothes rose to meet her hand, the usually cumbersome uniform sliding on easily and her hands gliding over her front as the buttons fastened themselves.

I didn't say anything, for fear of another year alone. We spoke the Oath, we went to work. Jake was enthusiastic, speaking so quickly that I could barely hear. I floated through the conversation, barely paying attention anymore.

Jake apparently noticed, and rushed me out onto patrol.

When it came time for lunch again, I noticed more things. Moira reached over and took my hand. She seemed abnormally warm. The warmth wasn't as comforting as it used to be.

I chilled, and she looked at me with a queer look. "What's wrong?"

I grabbed my tray, trying to think of the past few days, how they had seemed too perfect, too magical. Magical.

Was Moira one of those abnormalities? People on Deithon called those mutants magic, the word that I always used when describing Moira.

I walked off, leaving Moira behind me and knowing that I'd have to tell her later. Tell her that I knew. That I knew.

I was repeating the days in my head; Moira's floating grace, her warmth against me. No one was warm anymore, no one except Moira.

Of course Jake found out about my leaving Moira. When my patrol was over and I was putting my equipment away, he simply seemed to stare at me, not saying anything.

The hairs rose on my neck in anger. "What is it?" I snapped at Jake, curling my hands into fists.

"Blue Eyes—" he started, and that name set me off.

I grabbed the screen, pulling it close and nearly tearing it off the wall. "Don't call me Blue Eyes!" I screamed at the stupid computer.

A silence grew between us afterwards, I finished stashing my things and closed my station. I went back home, and then realized I'd taken the gun with me. No one was coming after me, though; no one was contacting my room to inform me of the error.

I tensed, standing in the apartment doorway. I pulled the gun out, staring at it. I pressed it to my temple, and slowly closed my eyes.

"Eyan?" The voice was familiar— Moira's.

I stuffed the gun back into my uniform. "Yes?"

She came out of the bedroom, smoothing her uniform. "The doorway's been beeping for a while. You should get out of it."

I nodded, and then stepped into my apartment and back out again. "I forgot something at my station." I ran back to my station and found something strange there.

Jake was pulled half out of the wall, two people opening him up and pulling cords out.

"What are you doing to Jake?"

The people looked at me, they had shaved heads and wore the uniforms of technical support. My gun was heavy in its

holster. I wanted to tell them to stay away from what was mine, but it wasn't truly mine.

"Jake?" one asked, obviously confused. "We saw that you were having frustrations with this model, and decided to update it as a reward for your great service,"

I chilled. "I don't want a new model."

"I'm sorry, it's already been done, and the old system's been deleted."

I felt strangely calm, walking over. "Okay," I said, my mouth barely moving around the words. I put the gun back in its place, unable to do anything for Jake now.

Moira is gone when I return home, and I am glad. I don't want her to see me like this. The lights blur more than they ever had before. I can barely get to a private place before bursting into strange, alien convulsions.

When I come out of this screaming fit, I find myself on the bed, burying my head into the pillow. Moira is there, putting a blanket on me. Her hands don't even touch the blanket.

She looks scared, and she knows I know.

"Why do you lie to me, Moira?" I say, sitting up.

"I don't lie to you," she whispers, the blanket falling on my shoulders as she lets go of it mentally.

"You hide the truth," I get off the bed, and put my hands on her shoulders, "I should've figured it out earlier—you're too vibrant, too happy." A grimace tugs at the corners of my mouth, my mind working over everything happening.

I see the fear in her eyes, the truth. She can't hide anymore, she can't hurt me.

I wrap my hands around her neck, a threat. "Tell the truth Moira," I say. "Tell me the truth, how long have you known? How long have you thought you could fool the Chancellor? The computers? Jake would've told me if you had powers, he wouldn't lie to me."

"Jake?" She trembles beneath my hands, and I feel the power I have seep into my bones.

"You killed him, you made me kill him, you killed him." I toss her on the bed, wrap her in the sheets, tie them tight around her so that she can't leave me again. "I'll be back for you."

She knows that's a promise.

I go and get the gun. Heavy in my hands, it's waiting to be used. I don't know what I am going to do with it yet, but before I realize it, I am standing at the foot of the bed, staring at Moira.

Moira stares back. Her hands are free, I realize, too late.

The sheets fly from of her body and wrap around me. She throws herself at me, and I fall to the floor, she straddles me and presses the gun to my chin.

"Self defense," she whispers, and I see tears streaming down her cheeks.

"You don't have to do this, Moi-"

She shoves the gun into my open mouth. "I do, I have to." Her voice is hoarse. I wonder if she screamed while she was tied up.

But everyone important knows she has magic now. They're sending people to help me, right?

Something tells me that it isn't right, that I'm alone. I'm the best they have; they think I can handle it. Jake's robotic voice is in my head, telling me not to hurt her, to help her.

I try to get the gun away from her, but before I can move, she pulls the trigger with vigor.

Moira looks down at Eyan's dead body, her hands trembling. She closes her eyes tight against the sight, feeling bile rise in her throat. She has to escape soon; the cameras has

seen what has happened.

"Jake?" she whispers, feeling around her head for the man she'd communicated with. "Jake?"

"Just removing all traces of me and you, Greenhorn." Jake's slightly robotic yet teasing voice fills her ears, warming her heart with the affectionate nickname. The man who'd helped her so much over the past few years, even going so far as to befriend one of the top guards to help her. It had been hard, she knew, but Jake just did these things for her.

Just as Eyan would've done those things, if he hadn't responded as unexpectedly as he did. How was she to know that the plan to get him to help get them off this goddamned fake moon was going to turn him into a murderer?

Moira gets up, dropping the gun.

Eyan isn't the murderer- she is.