

Course Correction

Another rainy day in the city. The water hits Azura's coat, quickly rushing into her favorite hub after working a double shift. The Hapless Hydra. The blue neon signs flicker, showing most of the bar's sign. The anthropomorphic blue scaled utahraptor shakes off some of the rain, some of her black stripes showing through her half-soaked clothing. No one bats an eye when she enters, her yellow serpentine eyes scour for her favorite place, "*Taken*," she thinks, going to the next best, "*Taken*" and then the next, "*Ah*," her eyes light up, taking a seat at the bar stool, sliding her coat off, folding it back over the chair.

An anthropomorphic orca with one clearly synthetic eye walks up to her, "What can I do for you tonight?" he asks with a friendly smile.

She pulls out her credit card from a small purse she keeps close to her person, claws protecting it, "Let's start with my usual, with an extra shot of whisky."

He looks at the card, quickly scanning it, "Tab or up front?"

"Tab please, I think I'll be here for a while," she says with a groan.

"That bad tonight?" he asks.

"Yeah."

"You can put that away," he says, hand waving it, starting to mix her drink.

"Thanks," she says, putting it away, closing her purse, keeping it between her pants covered legs.

"You should really get an ID chip, it's much safer than a card."

She chuckles, "Like I can afford that. And if you start with one thing it turns into another and another. That's how the companies get you."

He shrugs, sliding her her drink, "Suit yourself."

"Thanks, Torick," she says, taking a good chunk out of her drink in the first swig. The drink did go down in one big gulp, refreshing and numbing the pain of the day just a little. The rest reflecting the dim light from above and glimmering, almost taking attention for more. The orca seemed to follow the gaze of the raptor as he sighed loudly.

"First one is on the house." he mumbled loud enough to make sure the message was understood, while the silent squeak of a towel echoed from behind the bar as he cleaned a glass.

Azura smirks, "I appreciate that. It's Friday, so I can go a bit reckless tonight," she says with a playful wink.

Somewhere in the back of the bar money changed with the player and music started to blast through the club, hulling the whole establishment into a different mood. Azura started to feel nostalgic for some reason, maybe it was the music, the drinks, the stress of the day or a mix of all. One thing led to another and soon she found herself in front of a few empty shots, her mind drifting off under the influence, but life felt better, way better.

From there the night seemed suddenly to change, strange memories of food, drinks, way louder music and a lot of laughter echoed through the head of the raptor. Minutes became hours or was it the other way around? The night became a blur and the feeling of joy laid over her, till

everything turned into a swirl of black and she woke up on her own couch. The body is sore and stiff, still in her clothes and way too early. 4 am....

Her vision blurred, headache, "Damn it..." she growls, claws twitching, feeling the ach of laying on her couch, having noticed the time she slowly gets up, using the couch to keep herself propped up, "Perhaps I had a little too much to drink," she says with a grumble, slowly making her way toward the kitchen to grab some easy to cook microwavable snack and some water.

After the quick meal she steadily makes it back to her bedroom only one room over. Her small apartment was just that... small yet it suited her needs. Far too dark to read any of the half a dozen posters she has on the walls, she simply collapses onto the bed, which creaks under her weight, curling up into the covers, "Thank God for the weekend," she grumbles, attempting to drift back into the sweet bliss of sleep, where at least there she hopes her dreams are at least sweet.

Sleep came surprisingly fast and dark, no dreams, no reactions and the sluggish feel of drifting away. It seemed to take forever till Azura slipped into the deeper phases, her thoughts needed a moment to sort themselves and suddenly rushed over her like never before. Colors became more vibrant, edges sharper. But in the end, it was still a dream, nothing made sense. Green switched to purple, the night sky rushed away and was replaced by daylight only to turn into a night again, the sounds of glasses crashing, the smell of something iron, the feeling to dance and hum. And then the feeling of waking up to the alarm of the clock in the corner. Despite the scales the raptor was sweating like never before. Her heart was racing, and the bed was wet, as if she had a nightmare. A panic gaze wandered through the flat and yet she was still alone.

She took a slow deep breath, rubbing the back of her head, showing off her fierce black claws, "What in heaven's sake was that?" her nostrils flare, taking in the aroma of her apartment, "I don't smell anyone here... I should have started with that," she grumped, she goes to make some microwavable egg and sausage muffins, and while it's cooking, she goes to check her phone in the bedroom, the posters about space travel all over the place, "I hope it's here..." she grumbles, trying to recall more about what happened last night.

10 am and Saturday, even the date fitted and yet it felt like a lot of time passed, maybe even days. After unlocking the phone there weren't even pictures of yesterday or anything. Just the bought ticket for the train ride to the bar. Something was different and Azure couldn't tell what, she looked over the simple food and her brain started to work all of a sudden. She could feel her brain trying to remember something. Just for a split second it was like a long-lost memory coming to her, something she never thought about before. How to actually cook. Some spices there, a look in the fridge. In just a few minutes the raptor upgraded her food exceptionally without even thinking about it. It all felt so natural and easy, if she knew this her whole life and the taste was almost like a reward afterwards.

She enjoyed the meal, taking a moment to savor it only to stop and really *think* about it a moment later, "Wait... wait, wait. When did I learn how to cook? And when did I get so many

spices?" she asks herself, checking her kitchen to find a spice cupboard full of freshly bought spices, "Uh... okay something is weird here," she mutters, trying to shake off the feeling about just what this could mean, "I don't think people just manifest the ability to cook. Do they?" she wondered, something about this just not sitting right with her as she mulled it over in her head, trying to solve this mystery, "I don't think someone would just kidnap me and make me learn how to cook and make me forget in under a day, right? That is just crazy talk," she waves off the idea.

And yet there it was. Spices, new dishes, meats, salts, and a pinned recipe on the fridge. All paid and bought yesterday, very late in a shop she never heard or knew about. At least all looked rather good in quality and fresh. The only point to worry was how much it did cost, half of Azura's savings were gone all of a sudden.

"Wait, wait, wait. Where did... gosh darn it, I was robbed when I got drunk?" she grumbles, starting to make some calls and check about the purchases, but it was quickly gotten back to her.

"We checked the records, and it was you. We have a video feed of you making the purchases."

"What? But I don't remember."

"Sorry, loss of memory is not covered under our purchases protection program."

"Dang," she huffs, hanging the phone up after "Thanks anyway," she states, trying to keep her temper through all of this, "At least it wasn't all my savings."

And with that the day started to get weirder by the second. To not think about the loss of money her gaze wandered towards the Tv. Somehow the blue raptor suddenly knew what was playing and on which channel, but more important how to get that tiny flickering away. 20 minutes later Azura caught herself with a repaired tv, a new isolated window and the knowledge on how to actually do those things. It was strange, mild spoken. Every time she focused on something it was just like she needed to remember.

A short break and then a flood of information that made sense, as if she knew those things all her life. First the cooking, now the tv and then her gaze fell onto one of the posters. Showing a cruiser ride through the rings of Saturn. In a try she focused on it, Space, the vast nothing, ship, the travel between the stars. And then it clicked, Distances between stars, compositions of minerals, vectors, build plans for engines. There was so much to know, so much to touch. And it all was interrupted by a sudden, fast-growing headache and bleeding of her nose.

She rushed to the bathroom, splashing water on her face, blowing her nose, confirming the nosebleed. Her claws trembled, "What is going on? I know this can't be normal..." she said, taking a moment to shower, cleaning herself off while trying to get a moment of white noise to clear her head, "I'll call a doctor and get myself checked at. Perhaps they'll know what to do or what is going on? Better than jumping to wild conclusions," she mutters to herself.

She takes the moment to think on which doctor she should call, having been trying to avoid them due to the costs, but now she knew she had to. And as she relaxed for a moment the number and doctor to call came to her, and without questioning it, she dials the number.

The headache seemed to vanish as soon as the focus was shifted, the constant throbbing in the back of her head just stopped all of a sudden. After a short phone call Azura even had an appointment, just around the corner. Lucky her or? It was kind of uncommon to get a doctor that early and so easy. The itch in the back of her head reminded her all of a sudden, that it was anyway better. Who knows what was wrong in the end with her.

“That was surprisingly easy... I guess I am getting some luck to balance out the bad. Now let’s hope I didn’t get some kind of brain tumor or something. That just be great, I only have level two insurance, which is hardly a step up from level one,” she grumbles, heading to the doctor office, *“I really hope this doesn’t break my bank.”*

From there it was just the waiting game, after all it was the weekend and most private clinics were closed. A quick glance at the clock told her 37 hours 42 minutes and 12 seconds till her appointment, somehow Azure was even sure she didn't need to look at the clock anymore to know that. Her mind felt like spinning, there was too much in there and she remembered it all, mistakes from the past that just feel stupid all of a sudden or worse. Something was growing, but she couldn't figure out what, no matter how hard she tried. Somehow it got even worse when she tried to distract herself. Watching TV was like a puzzle full of mistakes, seeing her kitchen reminded her of doing it more efficiently, even the thought of going to bed was canceled by knowing it wouldn't change anything.

She kept herself busy, trying to distract herself from her own mind, waiting till it *felt* the right time to go. *“What is going on with me? There has to be some kind of explanation, but what?”* she wonders, her mind felt it was going faster than it ever had before, and she was so lost in thought she didn't realize she reached the doctor's office, only coming to the reality around her when she approached the desk, stating she was here for her appointment, *“Wait, how did I get here already?”*

The time skip was worrying, the whole thing was in fact! The blue raptor was simply told to wait till a doctor or nurse would call her. But even here something felt off. No clock and yet she knew the time, the guy in the corner was faking it, the girl there could have been helped just with a cheap supplement and so on. Azura knew just by looking at what was wrong and started to question her own sanity. Why was she even here? She knew all those things and deep down she already knew what was wrong with her, but her mind refused to acknowledge it, somebody needed to tell her. Minutes started to feel like hours from there and did let her idle into other topics, dreaming of running over the red sands mars, exploding one of the lost arks on earth. Her dreams became almost so vivid that she could feel it, smell it. And as she stretched a arm out to touch one of those old rocks, feeling its texture in her hand a voice broke her back

“Miss Toramora, please step into room 2a and wait there for your doctor to arrive. Miss Toramora please”

For a second nobody even moved, looking around hoping to rush their line and get in early. Even Azura was looking, till her name was asked a third time, reminding her of where she even was, “Azura Toramora please step up”

Finally she understood, and nodded towards the nurse, “Coming, 2a, right?”

The nurse nodded and crossed her off a list, pointing down the floor and going back to her desk. For a second the raptor became goose bumps, her scales standing up a little. Was she really ready to walk down there and hear what she already knew or thought she did? With a leap of fate she moved, her steps feeling heavy over such a small thing.

She shook it off, *“No, I am not going to let myself be diagnosed by paranoia, even if I feel its not. I have to get a second opinion. I have to know. I can’t just let this go unchecked. As unlikely as it seems, I have to be sure of it,”* she thinks, taking another deep breath, heading toward room 2a, already knowing no one will be in it already. She sits on the soft yet worn cushioned medical bed, her claws drumming across the paper that was laid across it poking some holes through it, “Damn, damn, damn,” she mutters, claws twitching in her shoes that hid her deadly claws. More of a caution and fashion choice combination for her kind.

Her nervous peeling started to rip through the soft paper she was sitting on. In a way it was calming, reminding her that her body still worked and obeyed to her desires and yet she knew it was just a nervous tick. The doctor took their time as usual, making her check the room over more. Books in the back, a desk, some sort of monitor with a keyboard in front, medical equipment around, a few lockers, nothing out of the ordinary. So, the only thing left to check was the book, modern cybernetics, the atlas of anatomy and surgery, the encyclopedia of anatomy and more.

The problem was, just reading the titles made her already start to think in directions that were so new and fresh, enough to make her head spin. Why did she know what was in there, without even touching it? And why did it hurt so much? Without a second thought she checked her nose again, no bleeding this time, just poking deep in her head, forcing her to slow down her thoughts, one thing at a time.

A male wasp walked it, his chitin legs clacking on the floor with every step and an almost silent clicker of its mouth filled the room all of a sudden. It wasn't unpleasant and easy to overhear, but that was why Azura was here anyway. She was here causing this wasp earned the right to wear a white coat, he was a doctor, a medical. “Good day miss, I am sorry this is all a mess today, it says here you are here because of headaches?”

“No... I mean yes, headaches and nosebleeds. I also start to know things? I had a few blackouts so far and sometimes it's just like i remember stuff i never did in my life”

The chitter stopped and for a moment the facet eyes focused her. The raptor felt strangely naked under the watch, so many eyes on her and all moving at a different pace.

“Hmm, miss... Ah yes Miss Toramora, would you mind a blood test and a scan of your head? I may have a few ideas.”

She listens, claws drumming across her thighs, “Yeah, sure, where do we need to go?” she asks, tensing a little bit, looking at the anthropomorphic wasp with an odd calm, normally something so strange to her made her skin crawl but now... she understood him better than she ever had before.

And now that she thought about it, yes there was no accent. She understood him fluidly, so far, she did understand everybody as perfect as it would get, back home on the radio, here or

on the street. It was such a small detail that it slipped past her till now. For a second, she was stuck on the thought, trying to remember what else changed or switched in her life.

“Just sit up straight, choose an arm and let me take some blood”

“Left arm, I’m right-handed,” she chuckled, trying to keep calm, but deep down that nagging thought grew, that she knew the results she didn’t want to recognize.

The rest was the usual, balling a fist, hold breath and relax. As he pulled up a few scales and searched for a vein. The short pain of the needle twitched through her body as both could watch the small ampul filling with the dark blood in a few seconds. Leaving Azura a little dizzy “2.3 ml”

She mumbled under her breath about the vial. The doctor looking up in a little confusion. Lifting the small mass of blood up and checking it.

“Look at that, you are right. Impressive Miss Toramora. Did you work in medical service before? Anyway, this might take 2 days to analyze. But we can give you a scan for the head right now. Could you show where the headache starts and spreads?”

“That would be good. I’d appreciate it, it starts around the back of my head, about here,” She put a hand on the upper half of her head and did run it forwards, almost all around the head and back. Pointing at specific areas all around her head, almost in a pattern. Somehow it started to click in her again, an idea was growing that her own brain didn't dare to speak out loud.

“We can make the scan, it only takes a few minutes. But before we come to conclusions lets just do that.”

“Sure, but is that...” The raptor sighed loudly, some part of her didn't want to know the truth, feared it and yet she needed to know, “...fine can't hurt, can it?”

In the end her worries won, making her follow the doctor into a small chamber and laying down into an standing tube. The blue light over her head, wandering up and down. The laser scanning the fine differences in her face and below. Showing the doctor with every beep a more detailed picture of Azura's head.

“Hmm, to be fair you look quite normal to me. But with the pattern you described I would rather recommend a rigger than a hospital. It seems to be connected to your cybernetics and I can't make out the model at all. Where did you get it? The way it's moved into your brain is almost art”

“But I don’t have...” she looks at the image, unable to believe it herself. But the pictures didn't lie, even from here she could see the cables wrapping and pressing in her brain. Folding around it like a network of wires with small plates in certain spaces. All connecting to a small port on the lower half of her back skull. Hidden under a few scales. She takes a deep breath, keeping herself calm, “I never got cybernetics. If you check my medical history, I have none installed. Nor am I big on it. I tend to lean naturally when it comes to my bodily functions. Sure I understand that people need it, but I never did it for the sake of having it. But... how could it be done? Isn't it a long surgery? Days of recovery? This just happened to me recently.”

She shivers a bit, running her along her thighs, drumming them along as she looks between the doctor and the initial scans, judging just how much he even believes her story, or

thinks she got some kind of illegal enhancement and trying to cover it up, “Really, I am as confused as you are,” she says, knowing the doctor is not all that confused.

The insect looked over the pictures on the wall and back to you. His Arthropoda clicked loud thinking and running a finger over them. Looking towards Azura and back. Automatically she followed the pattern, feeling for the cables in her head, but nothing. No bumps, no pressure or even scars. The only thing she found was on the left side on the back of her head, a small opening that felt like a slot of sorts. Her gaze met with the doctor, again confirming something she already know deep down.

“I won't judge you for it, getting implants is expensive but opens new possibilities. I just have to ask you why you lie, there is no scarf or leftover tissues on the skull. To be honest whoever did this is was a genius, I have never seen such....”

His beeper suddenly rang and he raised a hand to imply a break, as he looked at the message. Even for an insect the raptor could tell it was putting him off, whatever he just received. “If you would excuse me, apparently there is a phone call I can't put away. Please go back to my room. I will be shortly with you”

And then he left as fast as he could, leaving her alone in the room. And what else could she do by now? Irritated as he was, she left the scanning room, turned off the machine without thinking about it and waited on the thin paper again. Her nervous tick returned, making her play with the layer and forming small balls with every rip. Soon forming a small pile, “*What could be going on? How could I suddenly get implants like this? I don't want implants, and now I have them? I mean it could be worse, they have been helpful? Wait, wait, what am I thinking? Someone just did surgery on me without my knowledge! There has been an ethical standard for something like this.*” The door opened. Azure could already tell something was off, he looked worried, pale even. If bees even could do that.

“I must inform you, your further treatment here is canceled and I will refuse any more details or similar. Here is the current data. Please leave...” He says with a sense that this is the best he could do. She could read more into him than she thought was possible, knowing something in the backdrop was forcing his hand, and there was little he could do to stop it. He sounded broken and looked around, as if he was searching for something without results, finding his gaze again and again focused on the raptor woman and holding out a small stick.

She takes the stick, “Thank you. I appreciate what you've done. Hopefully this will tell me more that you can't, right?” she chuckles, leaving with more questions than she had answers, “*I don't know if I could go back to work like this... no, no, I will keep going. I need to get my mind off things,*” she says, as she just ‘feels’ the plug hole in the back of her head. Just knowing its there, she can feel it itch, bother her. Mind running about dust, infection, all sorts of problems that can come with a metallic hole in one's head.

As she thinks of it, she gets counter information flooding her head, causing a headache in the process but it also gives her ‘legitimate’ information about how all her concerns are unfounded and were problems in the first generation of these data jacks from over a century ago, but not today.

She gets to her apartment grumbling, “I can’t trust what this is feeding into my head. It’s probably trying to change my mind. Perhaps it’s a government... wait no, don’t think of that. I don’t want my head filled with extra drivel,” she comments, going to her computer, sitting down, looking at the information stick. She moves to put it into her computer but just before she does, she stops. The back of her head itched, right where the stick was. A sensation, curiosity, a drive? Something is pulling her hand to push it in back there, “Now I shouldn’t just be shoving things in the back of my head...” click, as she hears the stick being pushed in through the vibrations through her skull to her eardrums. A strange soft muted sound, but it leaves her tensing up wondering... why.

Her body didn't freeze like she expected. But it also was way stranger than hoped. Her mind felt calm, for a second even in total bliss. No thoughts, no feelings, a second of pure nothing. And then it all came back in a big swoosh. The pictures from the scan, the data of her blood and everything that was talked with the doctor. In just 2 seconds she learned more than ever before, and it wasn't right. No matter how hard she tried to explain it to herself it wasn't. There were no scars, no old tissues on her head. The implant just seemed to appear overnight and worse. Her blood was full of nutrient paste, a fluid that wasn't even identifiable. Somebody did fiddle with her body and the changes were visible. Some even repair old damage to her liver. In a way she was healthier than ever before, and it was only to go become better over time.

Her claws shook, “What, happened? How did this happen?” she felt a knot in her stomach “I’m going to fall and just have this thing get shoved deep into my head, I just know it,” she said, pulling out the USB stick, tensing up, unsure if that was the right thing to do or not, her mind still racing over the information she’s already obtained.

A short breath left her lungs, something in her head tried to tell her there was no need for panic. Everything was okay and yet she knew exactly what was there and shouldn't. Even as the stick was gone the memory stuck to her, she just had to think about it. Pressing the existence of those unknown things in her blood and the implant around her brain back to mind and at the same time telling her methods to calm herself down. The body is already betraying the raptor and calming her, showing results after just a few seconds. Now that Azura started to watch it there was even more, she walked straighter, holding the knives for cooking differently, a strain of thought entering her mind again, showing her small things she already changed and yet making her aware of how much better she feels because of it. The blue raptor flinched, was she even still herself or just slowly becoming something else? Even looking through the flat made her suddenly question what was there before and hers. Clearly not the food in the fridge and the new knives, but the rest? Those music files, the poster on the wall, even the bedsheets. What was real?