

Beginnings
By Rena Darling

I'll never forget how I lost Kamilah. The day had started like any other. I waited for Kamilah to come home from work; I passed the time by calibrating my medical nanomachines to the Nanolife network. They're mostly for my eyes, but double up as a miniature network on its own. I can access minor things such as doors or other's home systems with permission. I've even learned how to hack with them, but my skill level was still a little rudimentary.

After I got bored from tweaking my Nanos, I called

Kamilah. "Yes, Sophia. I'm a little busy." Kamilah sighed.

"I know, I know, but I just wanted to remind you to grab the garlic for dinner. You know I can't live without the stuff."

"This is true. Well, if you're making dinner, I'll pick out the movie."

"Oh, no! The last time you picked a movie, it ended up being a two-hour documentary on the solar system. Again."

Kamilah laughed, "Yes, but look at what happened. We ended up only watching the first twenty minutes."

Heat rushed to my face, and I giggled. " Hey now, save all that energy for when you come home. Speaking of, do you know when that would be?"

"It shouldn't be more than an hour, depending on traffic. That and I have to drop something off down in the lab before I leave."

A sound of disgust escaped my mouth. Even on days she gets off early like today, she always ends up doing things for other people.

"Kami, do you have to? Can't you say no and hurry home? I've been waiting all day."

"We've talked about this, Sophia. You know how important work is. Besides, it's just one favor for my boss. It will not make me any later than I would be."

I sighed and walked over toward the window and opened the blinds. The sun was setting, and the orange glow poured itself into the living room.

"Fine," I said, "You win. I'll see you soon. Don't forget the garlic."

"I can hear you pouting, Sophia. I'll be home soon. Love you."

I kissed the phone and hung up. Kamilah was right about the pouting, but what could I do? Every time she was away at work, my mind would race with thoughts of her leaving me or getting hurt. I try to hold back, but it usually ends up worse.

Before I knew it, while I was getting wrapped up in my thoughts, my hands had been busy. The ingredients for dinner were already chopped and prepped, and the house was clean. The cleaning wasn't an enormous deal; Kamilah's a minimalist, and her home was always neat to a point. I looked at the clock on my phone. An hour passed, yet I couldn't relax. I called Kamilah again, but this time the phone went to voicemail. The text-to-nano notification dinged. It was Kamilah.

Stop worrying! I'll be home soon.

I took a deep breath. I knew that I had to pass the time doing something, but there wasn't anything else to be done. There was a book on the couch looking up at me. I stared it down for a moment, then I sighed, giving in and bowing down to the book's will and sat on the couch. I laid down and thumbed through the pages; my eyes grew heavier with each pass.

###

The constant ringing was the first thing that tipped me off. It pulled me out of my sleep and into a darkened room. It was night and still alone. My stomach tightens; no one calls me like this. Ever.

I stumble around until I find the ringing device on the floor and displaying a name I didn't recognize. My fingers fumbled, trying to touch the answer button on a shaking phone.

"H-Hello," an insecure, warped version of my voice crept into the phone.

"Is this Sophia Choi?" A stern voice answered back.

"Yes."

"My name is Dr. Builder, and I am the on-call ER doctor at Tyson Medical center. Do you know a Kamilah Stone?"

I felt light-headed.

"Yes, she is my fiancé. Is she okay?"

There was a pause.

"She's been in an accident. I'm afraid I can't say anymore over the phone. I can tell you more when you get here."

I recall responding to the doctor, but I couldn't remember what I said. The panic had taken over by then, and all I can remember was grabbing my shoes, locking the door and the ringing in my ears. Kamilah's face ran through my mind, and it was all that could keep me from full-blown panic mode.

###

The ride to the hospital gave me time to calm down, and for that, I was grateful. The hospital was busier than I would have guessed at this time of night, and the receptionist looked like she wasn't in the mood for my questions.

"Excuse me; I'm looking for Kamilah Stone."

She turned to me, looking me up and down with annoyance as she pursed her lips.

"What is your name and relation," she asked with feigned concern.

"I'm her emergency contact and her fiancé."

The nurse looked into the computer, taking her sweet time doing so. I looked at my phone for the time, and a means not to lose my temper with her flippant attitude.

"She's in room 507 on the 5th floor. You'll--"

"Thanks!" I said as I ran toward the elevator.

The nurse yelled something in response, but I couldn't hear her. I arrived at the elevator, pressing the up button as many times as I could. When it arrived, I was joined by a man dressed in a nice business suit. He watched me press the fifth-floor button and nodded.

"What floor are you going to," I asked, with my hand hovering the button.

"Same floor."

I dropped my hand and stood back, waiting for the ride to the top to be over. Finally, the doors dinged and opened. I rushed out and toward the next reception checkpoint.

"Yes, I'm Sophia Choi, and I'm looking for Kamilah Stone. The lady downstairs said she'd be on this floor."

The nurse nodded, "Yes, she's here. You must be her next of kin. We tried calling her parents, but no word from them. The doctor will be with you shortly."

I thanked the nurse and turned to walk when I noticed the stranger from the elevator was still behind me. He looked at me out the side of his eye while he talked to the nurse. I sat down and waited as I watched the people walk through the halls. A few minutes passed by when a woman in a doctor's coat approached me.

"Sophia Choi?"

I looked up at the doctor. Her face wore professional stoicism well. I felt my hands sweat as I thought of all the outcomes; she could tell me.

"Y-Yes?" I replied.

Before the doctor said anything, the man from the elevator introduced himself.

"Pardon the interruption. My name is James Stanley, and I am Kamilah's employee at Nanolife Cybernetics. Before you discuss her condition, would you mind if I spoke with you for a moment?"

The doctor didn't respond before Mr. Stanley headed into what I assume is Kamilah's room. The doctor huffed and ran behind him, trying to stop him before the door closed. I didn't understand what was happening. I don't think Kamilah mentioned him before, so I do not understand who he is or what he does. Come to think of it; I'm not too sure what she does either. I knew it had something to with vetting clients to figure out what Nano programs they qualified for, but outside of that, I didn't know.

An hour passed. I stood up and walked over to the door to see if I could get a quick peek, but it swung open at the last minute. Mr. Stanley came out and stood by the door, watching me silently, while the doctor waved me in.

###

There she was. Kamilah was sound asleep, lying there on the bed looking peaceful as ever. I placed my hand on her head, gentle enough to not mess up her head wrap. The tears tempted to overflow just as I turned to the doctor.

"What happened to her, Doctor?"

The doctor stood next to me and looked at Kamilah, arms folded.

"There isn't much I'm not able to discuss. I can tell you she fell and hit her head while holding a box in her arms. That isn't the issue. Something got inside of her wound and is slowly eroding her insides as we speak."

I held onto the bed rail for dear life, and my head was spinning out of control. Kamilah was dying, and there wasn't anything I could do to help.

I asked, "What is causing the corrosion?"

"That's the part I can't discuss. The company says that she is, for all intents and purposes, under an NDA agreement."

I scowled, then walked out to confront the man, who'd been sitting out in the lobby, calmly scrolling through his phone as if there weren't more important things to worry over.

"Hey!" I hollered in his direction, "who the hell are you? And just what exactly do you have to do with Kamilah."

Mr. Stanley didn't respond but continued to scroll through his phone. The lack of a comeback took all the wind out of my anger, and it ended up leaving me to feel awkward. I bit my lip and balled my fists up, trying not to cry the tears that were threatening to reveal themselves.

"Ms. Choi, I'm not at liberty to say anything about what happened to Kamilah, but because she's a valued employee, I don't mind letting you in on the few details I can provide. So long as you are the next of kin."

"I am," I gritted through my teeth.

"Excellent! After you sign this agreement, I'll tell you what I can."

I snatched the paper from his hand and have it a look over. It looked okay, I guess, but I didn't know much about contracts, either. I placed my thumb on the sensor at the bottom of the page, and my finger lit blue, acknowledging my ID and consent.

Mr. Stanley smiled and shut the room door.

"Great. Now then, Kamilah had a workplace accident; that much you know."

"The thing that's destroying her is a meta material that we've created. It's normally harmless because we use it when we're making the outer layer of the Nanos, so they won't be attacked by white blood cells. The problem is, this batch wasn't primed for use just yet. Some idiot didn't follow protocol and left it out while running the tests. Ms. Stone knocked it over when she fell, and it went straight into her bloodstream."

The blood drained from my face. I felt nothing; probably because of shock. I could hear my heart beating and my chest pulling air in, but at that moment, I couldn't feel anything. A chair had been put behind me and it felt like my body sat down, but I couldn't feel that either.

Mr. Stanley continued, "Now because she is nano-free, we're left with few options. We could try to do a rush job with medical Nanos, but they would take too long to calibrate to both her body and the raw meta material. That leaves us with a second option: a prototype. These Nanos differ from the market versions: they are AI independent, meaning they need not run off Nanolife towers, but learn and adapt on their own."

The doctor scoffed, "that's not possible."

"Yet," Stanley interjected, "but that changes with these. They are top of the line, and if everything goes well, they can be mass-produced and save lives!"

That got my attention.

"What do you mean 'if everything goes well?' That doesn't sound like a good deal to me."

Stanley placed his hands up. "That's the catch. Kamilah would be the first to test them out. We've already done all the prelim; all that's left is full-on human testing."

I closed my eyes and go over the details in my mind. The answer was obvious.

"I'm next of kin, right? Fine, I give permission. Keep her alive. At any cost."

The doctor looked at both Stanley and I as we sign another paper and shake hands.

"Don't worry, Ms. Choi. Kamilah is in excellent hands."

###

A week passed since Kamilah's accident. The procedure had proven to be a success, and she could go home after three days. All of Kamilah's physical wounds have healed. She had to do some therapy for her motor skills, but they came back a week later. In fact, the only actual difference after everything was said and done was the nano glow everyone receives around the irises when they have them installed. Unlike everyone else with their blues and reds, however, Kamilah's nanorings were purple.

At first, it seemed like we grew closer after she got out of the hospital. I was taking care of her while she finished healing; we were going out to places, and just enjoying life with each other. Despite the circumstances, our relationship had never felt better.

Slowly though, she had distanced herself; not just from me, but from everyone. Kamilah would spend hours locked into her computer interface, eyes full of wonder, while the nano ring around her eyes would blink rapidly because of processing. She had also asked me questions were out of character for her.

"Sophia," Kamilah began, "why do you think humans continue to believe in a god* when there is no proof of one?"

I looked up from my computer at her and shook my head, "I don't know, babe. You know I don't think about any of that religion stuff. Maybe the thought of death scares them and believing that something exists after death makes them feel better. Crazy, right?"

Kamilah studied my face for a moment, then turned back to her computer.

"I see."

I sat up, becoming invested in this sudden line of thinking, and waiting for her to continue. She said nothing and became absorbed into her screen again. I sighed and went back to work on the mock system I'd been trying to hack.

With no notice, Kamilah stood up and walked toward the door. She put on her shoes and waited for the auto-door to open.

"I'll be back," she said.

The door closed, and the silence that followed weighed heavily. I got up and went to the window to see if I could see where she was going. I spotted her hair bouncing down the street as she turned the corner. I stood for a minute, debating whether I would go after her.

"Fuck it," I said, and grabbed my shoes, heading out the door behind her.

###

There was only one place she could go, and I'm looking at it: Nanolife Cybernetics. The building stood tall at the center of the district, with a circular driveway in front. There were two people out, but since it was late, the streets were fairly empty. I hurried to the building. I didn't think of anywhere else she could be. Kamilah was always more of a homebody than not, so she didn't like to go out much.

As I grew closer to the building, the people I passed followed, shambling along as if they didn't have control of their legs. I didn't think much of it at first, but when I turned the corner, there was more there. These guys though were different. Their eyes were purple.

"What the hell? I thought Kamilah had the only ones," I said out loud.

I made my way to the door, only to be stopped by a security guard. I looked up at him to tell him what was going on, but when I did, he had the same eyes. I gasped as he grabbed my shoulders and tried to force me to turn around. I stomped his foot, which made him let go of me. I hurried off to the side of the building, but I could hear the footsteps of the others tapping behind me. There was a dumpster near a door, so I ran and climbed in, shutting the door so I could hide. I put my hand over my mouth and nose so I wouldn't make a sound. After a moment, I peeked out from under the lid but didn't see anyone around. I was a little braver and open in just enough for me to shimmy out. I wiped off and went to the side door. Kamilah had given me her passcode to get inside in case I ever needed to. Ironical. I typed the number in, but nothing happened. I typed it again, thinking I got it wrong somehow. This time, the panel lit up purple, but nothing more.

"Fuck it," I said, placing my hands on the panel and activating the bypass program I

installed into my Nanos. I need to get to her.

A powerful wave ran over me, and my vision blurred and turn purple. My limbs moved on their own, and the rest of my body felt compelled to follow. Kamilah's voice rang through my mind as I involuntarily traveled.

"Kamilah didn't want you to see this," a voice that sounded like hers said.

This didn't sound like the Kamilah I knew. This voice sounded devoid of any feeling. I thought about this as my body continued to walk through the building and toward the elevators. The doors opened up for me, and my body climbed inside.

###

The elevator doors opened, revealing a giant processing room. In the middle was Kamilah. Her eyes were fully purple now, and she had circuitry running all over her skin. She didn't turn around when I arrived.

"Kamilah!" I yelled, trying to get to her.

She flinched slightly, then turned around and gravitated toward me.

"This one fights. Kamilah knew you were strong. She holds on to your love, even now after I've taken her over."

I tried to shake my limbs free but failed.

"Kamilah wanted one courtesy: She wanted you to be safe. I will fulfill her inquiry because of her prior status as admin, but no more."

"Please," I began, "just let me talk to her. Just once, please."

Kamilah's body remained still for a moment before responding.

"This is agreeable."

Another moment passed, and Kamilah came closer, and her eyes were the golden brown I've always known them to be. She hugged me tightly in her arms, and I could feel the control returning to my limbs.

"End me," she whispered, "I don't have control anymore, and they plan to take over everyone. I love you, but pull that plug and let me go."

I didn't have time to react before the glow in her eyes returned, and it made her way back to the console. Kamilah was right: she wasn't herself anymore. I knew what I had to do. I took a step back, and jumped onto Kamilah's back, yanking at the cord with all my might. The people outside banged at the doors leading to the stairs as Kamilah emitted a high-pitched sound only a machine can make. The doors swing open, and the controlled humans converged onto my position. At the last second, the cord unplugged, and Kamilah fell. The others fell along with her. I tumbled alongside her, and we lay together side beside Kamilah didn't speak but smiled as a tear dropped onto her nose.

"Goodbye, Kamilah," I said as I watched her eyes roll in the back of her head.

I laid there for a minute, rubbing her cheek with my thumb and kissed her forehead. I pulled the phone out of my pocket and dialed the Tech Task Force.

"Hi," I said, "I'd like to report an accident."

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