

AYLA “BIOS” RAHIM

When she was done with midday prayers, Ayla Rahim didn't really feel any more serene than she had when she started. She was, if she was being honest with herself, still something of a mess. Had been for weeks, ever since Professor Atoc had been arrested. She let her prayer rug roll itself up, then tucked it into her pocket, putting the professor and his legal troubles and his cut funding and her uncertain academic future all away at the same time. She took a deep breath. “You're doing fine, and everything will be fine, inshallah.”

She climbed down from the water tower. She didn't technically have to be high up to say her prayers, but she felt closer to God with at least a little open air around her. In a way, she was happy to have been forced to move her lab. The agricultural genomics campus was one of the few open patches of land and sky in the city, and at this phase of her project her needs were modest. And she'd always liked plants.

“Not that they're plants,” she said to no one. She shoved open the door to the disused shack that had become her lab. Her... “creations,” she supposed was the term, rested on counter-tops and dusty shelves, humming and glowing as they grew. “Rather like plants, it turns out. I am talking to them, after all.”

They looked like plants, a little, growing in their pots, new branches and leaves gradually blooming as they developed, sipping data from the Network instead of sunlight. But they were fantastically complex quantum computing constructs, growing their intelligences through endless iteration, budding out new processes and subroutines. Sometimes she had to prune a defective growth. Other times she had to break open the pot of Network protocols and defenses that kept her “plants” from learning.

Each of her constructs had been given a different seed, a question or a task, and so each grew according to a different pattern. This one analyzed the NASX and had grown wide with thick, luxurious petals. Another calculated interplanetary travel and had long, sweeping branches for each of the worlds. But the last one was her favorite. She'd simply told it to learn

how to think. She stooped over it, brushing its sensor field, inviting it to bloom and show her what was inside.

It bloomed, and kept blooming, and filled the room with a rush of new data she'd never seen before. An infinite latticework of tendrils and leaves, rising up and up into an impossible thicket. All from a single new branch. “Well,” she said. “That is interesting.” Ayla pulled open a drawer and lifted her console. Her experiment was either ruined, or had just uncovered something profound. Time to find out which.

