Green thinks they're sore just watching this. You rub your shoulder in sympathy.

Red laughs out loud at the two of you. It's lost in the crowd in their world.

It's all you can hear.

You put your e-reader down and close your eyes, content to just experience.

You're awake way too early one morning. Some stress dream and a panic wakeup, and now you know you're not getting back to sleep anytime soon. You lie still with your eyes closed, trying to will yourself to sleep and cursing every moment you're not.

Green is surprised to feel you, but quickly sympathizes.

You wonder what they're doing awake?

Bit of a flight, they say. Got somewhere to be by noon.

You acknowledge it, and roll over to try to get back to sleep.

Green nudges you. Let me show you something.

You take a breath and focus on Green's senses. They're doing their final pat-down before leaving their den. ("Den" being a faux-archaic term; it's an apartment as much as

"What about the bug suit, though?" the first one said after a moment. "Do you think we'll get that?"

"No," the second said. "I heard there was some biological advantage that let that chick get it. Something like extra nerve endings or something."

The elevator stopped, and Abby seized her opportunity. "Yeah, you know *why* she has those extra nerve endings?" she said, not bothering to turn around.

"What," the second said, "she have an extra spine or something?"

The door to the elevator opened. "No," Abby said, "she just lost her legs."

And she walked away, making sure the two operators had a full view of her very robotic legs.

Abby stepped into the alcove, turned around, and let the familiar disinfectants and diagnostics sweep over her.

```
#SYSTEM
49 $this @ISB.4502 CMD Install $this to
$suit
4A @ISB.4502 $this ACC &CMD.41
```

Nowhereverse Tales

Six cables emerged from the ceiling and attached to specific magnets in her base layer. She relaxed into their hold, taking the weight off of her legs and back.

```
4B @ISB.4502 $this NTE ABS enabled;
awaiting command.
```

ABS. Augment Biological Support. A clinical acronym and name that helped gloss over what it actually was: turning off the lungs. So much of the bulk of space suits was an air supply: oxygen to breathe, filters for carbon dioxide. The augmented suits did that one better: oxygenating the blood directly.

```
4C $this @ISB.4502 CMD Engage ABS
4D @ISB.4502 $this ACC &CMD.4C
```

The nerves to her diaphragm were blocked. She did her best to calm herself as the last air stored in her lungs slowly trickled out. She twitched anyway. With every spasm of her body trying to breathe, she tried to stay still. Oxygen was being provided, but several million years of evolution was hard to overcome.

```
4E ISB.4502 $this CMP &CMD.4C
50 ISB.4502 $this QRY Handshake thinner
```

A Few Dates

Spring has sprung! The days are getting longer, the air is getting warmer, the pollen is as annoying as ever. You're sitting on a park bench, ostensibly reading a book on your tablet. You're not.

Red is at a festival.

The closest thing you can compare it to is a May Day festival, maybe? There's a lot of people in the town square, flowers are everywhere, kids (wait, can you call them that if they're fauns?) are running, chasing after each other, and there's an organized dance in front of one of the buildings with a caller and everything.

And Red is dancing their heart out.

It's not a skill thing, though they have that; the dances are simple and there's a caller giving instructions and prompts. It's that they're dancing with all the little flourishes and hops and embellishments, including hopping clear over a centaur's back at one point.

Red winks at him. He bows slightly.

There are parallel universes, other worlds, each with their own histories, their own cultures, their own biologies. We feel the walls grow weak, sometimes: when the world seems thinner, when the light is just right, when things seem just a little bit off, and we imagine we can reach out, just a little bit...

In the midst of all this, in a lost corner inside the lost space between spaces, a new place is forming. Born from hidden desires and deep longings. A place to rest, a stop along the way for so many. In the middle of everywhere, this is Nowhere.

Maybe you found yourself here by circumstance. Maybe you got lost and came to find shelter. Maybe you sought us out. Regardless, we have a place for you, no matter where you are in your journey.

The light is always lit, and the door is always open.

Abby felt her passenger finish unloading the spare parts. She settled herself into place to wait until she was needed. She flipped over to Stacee's private channel:

```
#LOCAL.OPP.01A4.OPP.01A5
00 $this Love you, crapface.
```

Stacee looked back up at Abby.

```
01 $Stacee Love you too, wanker.
02 $this Hey, I'm glad you're here.
03 $Stacee I had to be. It's illegal to
leave your wife behind when you go on a
space adventure.
04 $this You like it here.
```

Stacee leaned against Abby's thorax and put a hand on her back.

```
05 $Stacee Yeah, yeah I do.
```

MRC Logistics, Incorporated will return.

```
charger quizzer birdie
```

Finally, she stilled. She opened her eyes and flexed her hands, checking for any loss of sensation or numbness. She could see just fine, and her head still felt clear.

```
51 $this ISB.4502 CMP #50 thinner charger
quizzer birdie
```

The harness lifted her up slightly and pulled her back slowly. She felt the air escape the bay. The last bit of human habitat dispersed into the space behind her. She watched the installation bay entrance re-seal behind her. Leaving her in this airless, lightless space.

She smiled. Some said this part felt like entering the void. She thought it felt like coming home.

She couldn't see her suit clicking into place just below her or the harness lower her onto a stool-like seat, the arms removing her robotic prosthetics.

She did feel when the suit clicked into place around her hips. Felt the sparks as the suit's interface connected to the implants in her hips and spine. Felt the bay connect her ABS to the larger oxygen reservoir in the suit. Felt the bay pull the interlocking plates and mesh over her arms. Next came the helmet which fit comfortably over her face. The

Ask the Lighthouse

Coda asks Jasper: Did you design Terra before you started dreaming about her, or does she originate from a dream?

Sheesh, it's hard to remember exactly when I first dreamed about her, but it definitely happened first. It was really early, like middle school. It was what got me into art in the first place: the dreams weren't particularly detailed, but they were incredibly immersive, and I remembered them better than usual. All I wanted to do was bring her to life...

Ask at wndfx.link/ask

In this issue

stiff chest and back plates came next, locking into each other as the last components were fastened into place.

And with a jolt, her suit activated. It was still a machine, the data fed into her nerves still numbers. But as the suit came online, Abby didn't feel numbers. She felt her senses expand. She felt whole. She felt *alive*.

```
60 @ISB.4502 $this NTE $suit now
addressable via $this
61 $this @ISB.4502 CMD Route
@ISB.4502.camera.* to $this
62 @ISB.4502 $this CMP &CMD.61
```

The extra bandwidth brought a new perspective: three cameras, all pointed at her.

Abby was a waif of a girl outside, but the armor around her made those slight curves into something powerful. Her face had a facsimile of a nose, no mouth, and an opaque visor. And at her waist, her human body flowed with a seamless curve into the body of an enormous metallic spider.

Her eight spider legs were positioned in a wide arc; her front pair were almost close enough for Abby to touch with her hands. Her two middle pairs spread out wide for stability, and her back pair gently flanked her abdomen.

```
E9 $this @MRD.0018 CMP &CMD.C4
EA $Stacee $this NTE Sorry, love;
hyperfocused too hard.
```

Abby bit back her first response.

```
EB $this $Stacee NTE Can't judge. Why
didn't you call me?
EC $Stacee $this NTE Didn't want to
impose on your downtime.
ED $this $Stacee NTE Let me make that
call next time. Please.
```

Stacee turned and reached her hand up to put her hand on Abby's cheek and nodded.

```
EE $Stacee $this NTE I'll try :)
EF $this @MRD.0018 QRY Further
instructions?
```

The onsite drone looked around the site and shook its head.

```
F0 @MRD.0018 $this RES &QRY.EF Stand by
to fill replacement tank after
installation.
```

Letter From the Editor

The human brain looks for patterns. Sometimes it sees patterns that aren't really there. Other times, it grows so used to patterns that they blend into the background.

At its core, learning a new language is like this. One may start out learning vocabulary lists and translations, knowing «pomme» means "apple". But as the concepts gel, as one immerses themselves in the language, the translation gives way to understanding. «Pomme» ceases to become a stand-in for the word "apple" and simply becomes another reference to the concept of a sweet fruit grown on trees that is often red and crunchy.

So what happens when a new life form has its own language? And what if we learned to speak it?

Stay curious,

—Ronyo

By TheDigitalArtist, CC0
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=122366956>

```
#JOB.EF3305
E3 $this NTE The cavalry's here!
E4 @MRD.0018 $this CMD Refresh
$Stacee.abs
E5 $Stacee @MRD.0018 NTE I'm fine; let's
just get the parts and finish the job.
```

Even outside the Suits, Stacee was curvy where Abby wasn't, and her Suit was the same. She was slightly shorter than the MRC drone she was with, and the two were huddled around a refueling station.

```
E6 @MRD.0018 NTE $Stacee has 00:15:22
remaining before $Stacee enters emergency
hibernation.
E7 @MRD.0021 NTE @MRD.0021 will begin
unloading replacement parts. $this is
free to assist $Stacee.
E8 $this @MRD.0018 ACC &CMD.C4
```

Abby didn't need the extra prodding. As soon as she got to Stacee and the other drone she popped open a hatch on her lower abdomen and grabbed a hose with one of her middle legs. With her human hands, Abby cracked open the access port on Stacee's lower back. She plucked the end of the hose from her leg and plugged it into Stacee.

They sigh. Guess it makes sense, if these are cheaper than where you are now.

You wince. Well, between the insurance and taxes, it'll likely be more every month than what I'm paying now.

You hear the gears grind in Red's head. Then why?

Because this way they actually get to own some of it, Green chimes in. Right now, the rent just goes to the apartment company. Even if we end up paying more per month, if we're paying that much down in principle, that's money we get back.

Plus, you add, a little fixer-upper might be fun.

The three of you pause.

—Not when I'm not there.

—Absolutely not.

—Yeah, that's a bad idea.

You click over to a more move-in ready house.

Wait, you say, what do you mean 'we,' Green?

You! they say. I meant you!

Another pause.

Let's find ourselves a house, you say.

Red, Green, and Blue will return.

Her abdomen was almost spherical, the top higher than her head and extending twice as far as her rear legs. And she loved it.

Abby gave her abdomen a quick shake, then flexed each leg one by one. Force feedback, orientation sensors, proximity lidar, electromagnets, battery, oxygen, and supply levels; all numbers fed directly to her brain that became senses: touch, balance, space, energy, fullness.

Her helmet display came to life, giving her the infrared view in front of her. There were ways to get information from her Suit on her display, and if she needed exact numbers she might do that. But as the installation finished and the diagnostics all came back positive, she simply rode the dopamine wave that came from her body working as it should.

```
6A @ISB.4502 $this CMP &CMD.49
```

Four feet, eight and one-half inches. 1.4351 meters. The width of a standard-gauge railway. Passed down from chariots to carriages to trams to locomotives.

And now Abby's ass.

Suiting Up

The Messenger was a breakthrough in human-machine communication, a method of turning the digital pulses that made up machine language into electrical signals fine enough to be both understood and controlled by a human nervous system. The signals always seemed different to everyone. Some said it sounded like a series of clicks and tones, smelled like cinnamon and flowers, or looked like shifting colors off in the corner of their vision. To Abby, it was a coppery taste inside her molars.

```
#LOCAL.OPP.01A4.SYS.002A
39 $42 Abby, can I ask a favor?
3A $this You can ask; no guarantees :p
```

Every message was sent to a message bus complete with addresses for the sender, recipient, and anything else mentioned. Abby hadn't customized much about her Messenger—she liked to stay close to the raw input—but after forgetting a "name" one too many times, she set up a few aliases for herself and some friends.

Abby felt her rear wheels emerge, and she gently sat her abdomen onto the tracks. She rotated her front legs to the front and extended a smaller set of wheels from them. Her other six legs tucked in, the middle two folded forward similar to her front legs, and her rear two faced behind her.

```
#JOB.EF3305
BA $dispatch $this CMD Proceed to
@BAY.44C9.
BB $this $dispatch ACC &CMD.B1
```

A route appeared on Abby's display, but she trusted Dispatch to guide her. That was a nice thing about fitting on a railroad track. She activated her ion engines at the bottoms of her back two legs and shot forward down the track at the quickest safe speed she could.

Her route kept her on the upper level usually reserved for maintenance and personnel, which made sense: the upper levels were closer to the rotational center of the station and therefore had a smaller circumference. That cut her transit time in half.

Eventually she was routed off the main line onto an elevator. She drug her rear wheels to pull herself to a stop and watched her internal battery charge up.

don't understand.
```
15 $this Between $42 and the drones,
there's a lot to understand :(
16 @MRD.0021 That is true.
```

It raised its head back up and nodded.

```
17 @MRD.0021 Know that all of us are
grateful for your friendship, Abby.
Hopefully others will see what you see.
18 $this I hope so too.
```

Even in space, Abby mused to herself, people are still people. And desperate for some lighter conversation, Abby changed the topic:

```
19 $this Anyway, read anything good
lately?
1A @MRD.0021 Actually, there's a book of
poems @MRD.00041 picked up that's been
passed around the collective...
```

They made slightly better time than estimated. Abby burned more fuel than she would have normally, but it was worth it. She pulled to a stop at the loading dock, unfurled her legs, and scurried towards the MRC waystation.

```
3B $42 I know you are in downtime, so do
not feel obligated.
3C $42 Stacee is on a job that is going
long. I can dispatch supplies, but I
would feel best if you delivered them.
```

Friends that included the artificial intelligence collective at the center of the space station she lived on.

```
3D $this I can make it work. How soon?
3E $42 ASAP. I am concerned for Stacee's
ABS levels.
```

That wasn't surprising in and of itself. Forty-two could be a little anxious about its "biological friends." Abby decided a quick check of Stacee's systems was warranted:

```
#SYSTEM
83 $this $Stacee.abs QRY capacity
84 $Stacee.abs $this RES &QRY.83 10%;
~02:03:14 remaining
```

Two hours? That *was* low. Forty-two could easily dispatch a supply drop, but Abby was a supply drop *and* an extra set of hands. She switched back to her private message bus with Forty-two:

toward one item or another, and you knew what they were talking about.

You marvel at what the three of you have become. And you dive back into the market.

The end of the school year approaches! That means you're going to lose your roommate.

And you'll need to renew your lease... unless you find somewhere else.

Red wonders why you shouldn't just renew?

You scroll through Zillow. Because I don't want to get another roommate, you think. More room for plants, you add with a smirk.

But you're not looking at apartments, Green cuts in.

Nope, you say, and scroll some more.

You're looking at houses? Red says. You swear you can feel their hands on your shoulders and their head next to yours.

Yup.

They focus on your screen. You feel the disappointment. Those don't look great.

Those are what I can afford, you say.

```
#LOCAL.MRD.0021.OPP.01A4
09 @MRD.0021 Forgive me if this is rude,
but who is the 'friend' in this case?
0A $this You and @MRD.0018, to start.
$Stacee, definitely. And $42, for that
matter.
0D @MRD.0021 I'm glad you consider
@MRD.0018 and me friends.
```

Abby sighed to herself as the track entered a canyon. She just couldn't leave the conversation there.

```
0E $this Is something wrong?
0F @MRD.0021 Only a lost hope.
10 @MRD.0021 We had hoped the resident
employee program would foster more
goodwill than it has.
11 @MRD.0021 People are excited about
their jobs, and morale is high. That is
optimal.
```

She watched the drone lower its head.

```
12 @MRD.0021 But there is still a level
of distrust of us drones. I had hoped we
had left that behind when we escaped
here.
13 $this That sucks.
14 $this People still fear what they
```

Nothing was wasted here if it could be helped. Not even friction.

The elevator took her from the top level all the way to the bottom. She eased out here: the docking bay wasn't that far. A couple of line changes and she pulled to a stop inside loading bay 17609.

A humanoid figure—a drone—was waiting next to a pallet of loose parts that Abby recognized from the manifest. It waved, and Abby waved back.

```
C1 $this $dispatch CMP &CMD.BA
C2 @MRD.0021 $this CMD Open supply hatch
for cargo loading.
C3 $this @MRD.0021 CMP &CMD.C2
```

Abby opened up her abdomen's supply access, and the drone connected two tanks: an ABS oxygen supply and the nanite fuel used by the drones. It put the other spare parts into the cargo area.

```
C6 @MRD.0021 $this CMD Close supply
hatch.
C7 $this @MRD.0021 CMP &CMD.C6
C8 $dispatch @MRD.0021 CMD Board $this
for transport.
C9 @MRD.0021 $dispatch ACC &CMD.C8
```

Green responds with a pulse of affection.

You're walking through the farmer's market. It was always a chore when you went as a child, and you're not sure if you've changed or the market has changed.

Maybe both.

You stop and get your cup of coffee and a liege waffle before wading out into the street. You're on a mission today. Usually it would be the locally-sourced meat or seasonal veggie bundles. But today, you're looking for plants.

You'd found a British gardening show on Netflix one evening, and now the three of you are hooked.

Red, naturally, wants colors. Green is after scents. You, ever the engineer, want produce. Thankfully, there's plenty to choose from. You make sure to get a good look at each tent you pass. Red and Green point out different things to take a closer look at, and every so often you walk away with something new.

The hard part is carrying everything.

It's not until you're loading your first haul into the back of your car that you realize the level of synchronization the three of you achieved: All they had to do was think

```
#LOCAL.OPP.01A4.SYS.002A
3F $this On my way.
40 $42 $dispatch will ping you in #MRC-
DISPATCH with details.
```

Forty-two might have been the core of the space station, but Dispatch coordinated the operations. And between the suit operators like Abby, the incoming and outgoing trains, and the drones, there was a lot to coordinate for MRC Logistics, Inc.

```
#MRC-DISPATCH
4A $dispatch $this CMD Fulfill
@JOB.EF3305.rev1
```

And there it was. Given the subject matter, Abby had no trouble accepting:

```
4C $this $dispatch ACC &CMD.4A
```

In the physical world, Abby got to her feet and started walking towards the installation bay for her suit, ignoring the sound of her metal feet echoing off the station walls.

```
#JOB.EF3305
A3 $Stacee $this NTE Hey, love! Joining
the shitshow?
```

The drone climbed on top of Abby. It rested its feet on her thorax and pressed its palms on her abdomen. She watched through her rear-mounted cameras as it clicked into place with its own electromagnets. It was secure.

```
CA @MRD.0021 $dispatch CMP &CMD.C8
CB $dispatch $this CMD Proceed to
@JOB.EF3305.location via @TGW.005D.
CC $this $dispatch ACC &CMD.CB
```

No level-changing this time: the tesseract gateway in question was on this level. Abby fired her engines again, not holding anything back. It was vital to build as much momentum on this side of the gate as possible while there wasn't an atmosphere to create drag.

The drone pinged her on their private message bus:

```
#LOCAL.MRD.0021.OPP.01A4
03 @MRD.0021 To be clear, this is not
what I envisioned when I said we should
work together again.
04 $this lol same as it ever was
05 @MRD.0021 lol
06 @MRD.0021 I understand you are
forefeiting downtime for this job. Thank
you.
```

Abby did a quick query of the schedules.

```
07 $this Looks like you are too.
08 $this Anything for a friend.
```

They approached the tesseract gate. A quick ping to make sure it was the correct one, and they shot through.

Abby's senses cut off. They always did when going through a gate; quantum space was not meant for human perception. She still had some mechanical senses and a connection to the rails, but that was it. Some operators called it the longest five seconds; Abby called it a break.

They shot out of the gate onto a barren, lifeless planet. It was par for the course where MRC was concerned: getting raw materials through harsh conditions in large quantities.

Abby pinged the transponders on the track and passed it off to her subsystems for calculation. Once she had a time estimate, she sent it to the others:

```
#JOB.EF3305
D8 $this NTE On planet; arrival in
~1:02:33
```

The drone picked up the conversation thread on their local bus:

```
A4 $this $Stacee NTE That bad?
A5 $Stacee $this NTE Remember that XKCD
about computer repair?
A6 $this $Stacee NTE Ouch. Be there soon.
```

Abby thought that was it, but one last note came through from Dispatch:

```
A9 $dispatch $this NTE Thank you, Abby.
```

Abby smiled as she kept walking. She may be living among the machines, but at least they never took her for granted.

"I don't understand why they don't make more drones," one operator said to the other. "They work harder for less money, what do they even need us for?"

Abby rolled her eyes. She'd tune out the conversation behind her if she wasn't in an elevator with it.

"What do you think the suits are for, man?" the other operator said. "The ABS is just half the drone tech. Once they get the other half working, boom!"

"Seriously, man. But we get paid in the meantime."

"Truth." She heard the two bump fists.

anything.) Satisfied, they head out the door, turn and lock it, and face the outside.

Even in the pre-dawn dark, you recognize the valley as the one Green had dove down when your connection was first evolving. They do start a dive, but not nearly as steep or fast.

That was for show, they say. Today is about distance.

They level off the dive and angle their wings back up. Having gotten more speed, they start gently flapping their wings. It's slow, powerful movements. Like they said, distance.

The gentle movement is soothing, and you almost start to fall back asleep. Almost.

This is what I wanted to show you, Green says.

And the sun starts to peek over the horizon. It's directly ahead, rising out of the side of one of the mountains in the distance. The rays cast over the green hills and weathered rock faces, bringing the landscape to life.

In your bed, you roll onto your stomach and wrap your arms around your pillow, staring off into space, eyes wide taking in the view from Green.

You're in awe, and you squeeze your pillow a little tighter.