

## **NO WORRIES**

“You are late.” The tinny voice from hidden speakers has no ability to sound accusing; still, Maria felt the charge pressing down on her. She slid her ID card across the control panel and pressed her thumb on the scanner. “One hundred and twenty beats per minute.” Maria knew that. She felt her heart racing in her throat, the blood rushing in her ears, though she kept her breath steady. “Countermeasure: One blue pill at twenty-one hundred.”

“Roger that.” Maria withdrew her hand and clenched it to a fist. Then she turned away to open her mantle. Light was on sixty percent, reflecting on the clean white surface of the furniture. It was almost clinical. She took off her shoes, put them in an exact parallel on the shelf, before she got out the white clogs to put on her feet. The air was pressed out of her lungs, as she bent down slowly. She knew, the microphones would catch that.

“Maria. Your breathing rhythm is showing unusual signs”, the voice came from all over the place. “Acknowledged. Shift was demanding.” She did not add, that it has been a long day, although it was. It has been a really long day. Her feet were aching, feeling kind of swollen and her back hurt. All she wanted to do, was lie down and sleep for at least three days. But before that, she needed to go to the toilet, her bladder felt like it could burst any second now.

However, she still needed to go to the kitchen to drink her glass of water, otherwise the cameras would catch her breaking the schedule and then, there was no way to get out of a screening by her supervisor. And that, she couldn't risk. Not now. Not ever again. She could barely stop herself from running to the bathroom and the door didn't shut properly, but she wasn't able to hold on any longer, so, she led that slip pass.

Only after she got off the seat, she closed it and used the basic right for hygienic privacy to take a few deep breaths. One minute was reasonable, and after exactly sixty-three seconds she could persuade herself to leave the bathroom. In the fridge, there was a meal package with the right date on it. Maria's stomach grumbled in anticipation, then she ripped open the film and opened it.

“Oh no”, the words slipped out of her mouth, before she could stop it. Which was a mistake she realised, even before the metallic voice filled the silence: “Maria. Are there problems with today's meal? Would you like to put forward a complaint to the supply unit?”

“No. It's alright”, Maria says, although it wasn't. “I just don't feel the need for fish today.”

“Would you like to request meal delivery for tonight?”

Everything in Maria craved for some pancakes, but special requests are only allowed on your day of birth or for the registration date. Instead, they would drop off something else with no certainty that she could eat that. So, she denied and put the meal onto the tray of the heating unit.

She sat down at the desk, staring absentmindedly to the chair opposite of hers. Thirty-four weeks, two days and ten hours since he was gone. She didn't know, where he was. She had no clearance to ask, so she didn't even try. But the question kept her awake at night, when everything was dark and she was alone in the safety of her bedroom.

She couldn't say, she missed him. In fact, she couldn't even allow herself to think that. So, she didn't. Instead, she tried to remember, how his voice sounded like. Or his laugh, she heard on really rare occasions. It always sounded ... fascinating. First, she thought it was because she didn't hear people laughing very often. It wasn't really something they do these days, not the real kind of laughter anyway, when it seemed it burst out of someone's chest uncontrollably. He did that.

If everything had gone differently, maybe she would have been able to do that now as well. But it didn't; and she couldn't.

The heating unit beeped. Maria turned off the alarm and retrieved the meal. The smell did nothing good to her stomach, but she got fork and knife out and sat down again. At the end, she just ate the potatoes and the vegetables, and hashed the fish in tiny little pieces, that the cameras wouldn't be able to see whether she actually ate something from it or not.

After she did the washing up, she sat down at the TV and watched the first of tonight's evening program, as always. She needed to concentrate in order to keep her eyes open, while she covered her body under the blanket, remembering how they used to sit together on this couch. Although with the appropriate distance between them, she had felt his heat under the cover they used to share. It wasn't very logical to ask the housing unit to keep the temperature below the recommended twenty-two degrees for living areas, especially as they always needed to share the blanket afterwards, when his body dissented.

But a small part of her, the part she was trained to ignore as it was this part that kept her from being the most efficient version of herself. Efficiency was what made their country great, what made them survive the aftermath of the Emotional Breakdown of humanity in Twenty-Two-Three. Rationality was the key and emotions made people weak. Weak people didn't survive, they never would.

Nerves tickling in the back of her neck, Maria moved to another position while the pain in her back worsened. Cautious about the blanket loosely stuck around her, she reached for her third water bottle this evening. She needed to drink at least one another before going to bed, but couldn't risk going to the toilet for the fourth time in one hour.

The screen switched to another picture. She kept her bland face, staring straight ahead while her mind wandered off. She knew, it was just some abnormal disfunction of her brain, sending false signals to her neurons as she felt a little skin response on her lower left leg. Maybe, it was some kind of post-traumatic syndrome, her body remembering the contact that happened right there.

Sensual overload. She heard, it sometimes happened at the medical centre, when touch is indispensable for special treatment, although paramedics usually were wearing gloves in order to reduce the stress. Some patients are not able to handle it well, not even when it clearly was the only logical way to treat body damage.

Maria did not handle it well that day. In the safety of her bedroom, she collapsed, completely blacked out for at least eighty-three seconds. That was when he came looking for her. She did ask him not to do it again, and he didn't. At least four days, he did not. Then he touched her lower back, while walking passed her. And her hand, when he gave her his water bottle.

Under the blanket, Maria made a fist, only for a split second, until she forced herself to open it again. She needed to wait eighteen minutes and twelve seconds, then the program was finished. "Turn off the TV. I am going to bed", she said right away. Then she turned to her right side, put one foot after the other on the floor, before she pushed her upper body into an upright position. All that, she tried to do without holding her breath - it only partly worked, but because she tipped over the empty water bottle at the same time, there was no way the housing unit could pick up on that. She caught it before it could roll off the small side table. That would have become a real challenge.

Her back ached and black dots appeared in her visual field when she got up way too fast, but she managed to keep on her feet. In the bathroom, she prepared herself for bed, her body slow from the tiredness. It was with great difficulty, to put one foot in front of the other, when she walked back to the kitchen. A difficulty that was familiar, but unwelcomed.

"Asking for permission to take the water bottle with me."

"Permission granted", the metallic voice said. "Maria. I am to remind you to take the blue pill." Her shoulder sunk down for a small bit, impossible for the cameras to pick up. Still, she said:

“Roger that”, and reached for the medicine cabinet. None of the cans were labelled, but as they were made of glass, it was easy to distinct them.

She put the pill on her tongue, took two sips of water and swallowed. Then she turned around to head for her private room. “I don’t want to be disturbed until zero eight hundred tomorrow, unless there are emergencies.”

“Understood. Rest well.”

Maria did not bother to answer that, just closed the door behind her and sighed. Then she went to straight to the small green plant that stood in front of the non-transparent window, where she spit into the flower pot. She made sure that the pill was buried deeply under the flower soil, so that the cleaning unit would not be able to see anything the next day.

Only after that she stumbled out of her trousers and removed the Kasack that usually hung loosely over her upper body. It became more tight a couple of weeks ago, enough that her supervisor realised it and ordered new ones. It wasn’t allowed for women to display bodily features outside of one’s own private areas, as it caused distraction and renewal of conditioning was time-consuming and expensive.

Her bed was big, she never before realised how big it was. Technically, it was enough space for two people, but only if you remove the distance that was appropriate between people. Maria didn’t put on her night gown, as it was uncomfortable and strained in really displeasing places. Within the safety of her bedroom, she climbed the mattress as slowly as possible, held her breath until her back was stretched out and her head comfortable on the cushion.

Hands put on her lower abdomen in a decent manner, she stared at the ceiling, counting every movement in her head, until she fell fast asleep. She did not know what wakened her in the first place. Her gaze wandered to the clock on her bedside table to see how long it has been. Two hours and twenty- Then she heard a scream, even before her brain could process the strange signals it received from her belly. Her back arched from the mattress, blood rushing in her ear.

She must have blacked out at some point, because the next time she opened her eyes there were people in her room. Masks were covering their faces, still she could see the blank horror in their eyes as they stood around her bed, looking down on her, not moving.

She screamed again, every single muscle in her belly seeming to contract. The medics were still standing there, still watching her from a safe distance, as if she had a disease. If she had enough

breath to spare, she could tell them not to worry. It wasn't contagious. "This is impossible", they said.

A breathless laughter wanted to escape her mouth, even while her hands were clenched into the bedsheets of that same bed and sweat was dripping down her spine. No. It wasn't. Though the only person who would be able to explain anything, was gone. Taken for that same reason. The last thing he told was not to worry. Back then, she didn't know what he meant. People don't worry anymore, there was no reason. At least not usually.

But now, she did. And she could tell, from the look on their faces, that they did too.

The first natural procreation in centuries.