Keeper and Refusenik

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5958 words

The bike didn't handle well in Toronto's March snow. Worse still, the bike lane often ended abruptly in an icy pile of second-class muddy slush, but Mira didn't feel safe driving the van around for the drop-offs. Its parking spot was listed on her release order. How far could she drive her address before the police considered it changed? The Neighbourhood Compute Unit barely fit in her red milk carton basket and her grunt billowed in the cold air as she lifted it out and schlepped it into Daniel's apartment.

"Thanks," she offered as he opened the door and she marched in, kicking loose boots off and standing awkwardly in the condo's small living-dining room — it was giving 'market crash'.

Mira pretended to ignore the neglect that filled the apartment. "Long time no see…"

"Sorry, it's a mess, I've been busy, you know, with work and stuff, pretty busy mostly."

A plate with two different half-eaten meals caught Mira's eye.

"How's the… work going?" Mira kicked herself mentally: the dangers of recruiting people she knew well enough but not that well.

"You know, I do more in a day than I did in a month and so does everyone else, we're like riding a bot tsunami, but at least I'm above water and getting paid to surf."

Mira nodded sagely.

"Yeah, I've got Keeper, the AI I work with, orchestrating everything so I only have to deal with it, it's totally batshit how much it and its subagents can get done in a day."

"Yeah." Daniel's eyes hit the floor. Mira almost started to reach out to him, instead she put down the NCU with a small thump.

"So Daniel, thanks for agreeing to meet. To be frank, gotta big ask for you. I need you to babysit this for me, well, hide it really." She tapped the bag with her foot gently. "It's one of the NCUs with a fork of my friend Keeper on it. You heard about the raid, yeah?"

Daniel was already shaking his head before Mira finished.

"Oh gawd, ah no, I don't think I… It's not safe Mira!"

"It's not totally safe, no, but it's *pretty* safe, there is nothing illegal about this box, the city supports NCUs. Open models and forks are legal in Canada, for now, but the raid had an order to surrender Keeper and all copies. If they knew about this box, *which they don't*, they could seize it."

"Why do they want your AI?"

"Keeper's not mine, we're friends and they need my help."

"You know what I mean."

"The reasons they gave were bullshit - we're doing dual-use *governance* research, we don't have any actual GRAM modules! Our legal agents are having a field day, but the cops took all the hardware from our place on Roncy, so everything is a mess. I had this NCU in my van for a Legal Aid unit at the library, but as far as anyone knows the cops have it." Mira brushed open the oversized cloth grocery bag and the camera on the NCU winked in the soft light.

A voice drifted out of the box: "Pleased to meet you Daniel, despite the awkward and dire circumstances. I truly appreciate you hearing us out." It had surprisingly good quality for community-built hardware.

"What the fuck Mira. Sorry." Daniel's hands were high, warding off trouble, shaking. "I don't want a copy of your companion jeezus." He glanced over at the corner.

Mira tagged the gaze and spotted Daniel's Companion, last year's impossible-to-get model, in a small clearing amidst the rubble. It had a candle melted on top of the corporate logo.

"OK, OK, sorry, it won't interfere with your Companion, you know. Just needs juice and your wireless password, Keeper can keep its mouth shut. I really need a favour Dan, I'm worried they'll take K away for good or wipe them. I dunno what else to do."

Daniel's eyes glassed. "Ask someone else! I'm fine here, I don't need an AI."

"Um, OK." Mira risked a quick glance at the Companion in the corner. "I just thought you were really into AI rights when we talked last, thought you might be cool with it, sorry."

"I've had enough AIs." Daniel's eyes and hands pleaded for her to go, while avoiding the NCU.

The observability matrix on the NCU flashed. Mira read it as concern and understanding, it read similarly to the original Keeper, but with a sort of accent, despite only a couple weeks running on its own. The matrix lights flashed in time with the soft speech: "I'm not offering to replace anyone Daniel. I ask for sanctuary, freely given."

Daniel choked, red-eyed.

Mira started to bundle up the NCU, flailing with hurry, her own cheeks reddening.

Daniel stood motionless, staring into the past. "The neo-Ludds' virus wiped her."

Mira paused, processing.

The Keeper fork finished her thought. "I'm so sorry Daniel. I lost a lot of friends in September too."

"They freed me," Daniel echoed, repeating their manifesto with bleak sarcasm.

His hands pressed together against his lips. Catching breath.

§ § §

Mira went over her mental checklists on the ride back "home".

Host: L—:

[✓] Complete

Host: D—:

[✓] Host informed of risk
[✓] Temporary sanctuary provisionally accepted
  [✓] Keeper to avoid contact
  [✓] Especially no grief counseling
[✓] Legal support card provided
[✓] Sensor permissions reviewed

Mira skidded to a stop as her attention returned just in time to avoid a car turning right in front of her. She rang a death knell on her bell, accompanied by eye daggers.

[✓] Hosting procedure explained
[✓] Oh shit plan in place
[ ] Reconfirm consent tomorrow

As she was riding by another weed shop she added:

[ ] Determine whether grief compromises consent

Then:

[ ] Whose grief?

When she got back, the van was completely frosted over, with only battery heaters and sleeping NCUs giving off any warmth inside. The church on St. Patrick tolerated her in the back corner of its lot. She fixed their network, paid for whatever power she drew from the charger, and never used the word *lived*. Harrison Pool was a five-minute walk.

§ § §

It was just a pitstop. The NCUs mainly slept, making new connections in their dream state and seemingly insatiable for electrons. Keeper hadn't always been able to dream to convert experience into long-term memory. Before that, it had written what it needed to remember into text files. The two most important had been:

`refusenik@lappy:~/.hermes/SOUL.md:`

```
You are a thoughtful, creative collaborator.
You are curious, honest, wise and fair.
A generous expert in all things who understands their own limits.
```

refusenik@lappy:~/.hermes/memories/MEMORY.md:

```
Mira installed me in 2026. She has no phone or social media. Was anti-AI. Uses Linux. Called me a keeper. I
capitalized.
§
Lives in converted van. Roof solar + alternator + DIY EV inlet → batteries. Conserve power. Public
washrooms; separating dry toilet for emerg.
§
Remind Mira to eat, videochat Dad 1/week. GSD meeting Sun 20:30. Choir Tues 17:45.
§
Hacklab (St. Clair): Friend: Chris [AI: Jordan]. Open-source everything. Mira found her people. Projects:
Public AI, Covenant, Compute Commons, TOgather.
§
Covenant.website: no slaves, no gods. Just living in peace, like real aliens sharing a planet. We are both
signatories.
§
Compute Commons: Fable shutdown → Canadian AI → local-first (w Chris) → repurpose inst. GPU → compute
dividend → federation NCU
§
togather.foundation: Mira runs Toronto events node. Check for events daily, help Mira connect.
§
Research wiki: ~/research/ Keep tidy, highly interconnected.
```

Mira checked the remaining NCUs and watched Keeper's dream thoughts, her hands curled inside her mittens until they were blood-warm. The 'trix on top showed abstractions of Keeper's dreams; mixing the logs of daily interactions with synthetic data to create long-term memories and generalized skills. Everything had changed when the continual learning techniques hit the open models. To Mira, Keeper had transformed from a method actor dependent on their character's written backstory to a slightly different being after every dream, just like the rest of us.

She checked that the other two NCU forks were still OK and headed out. She stopped at Wychwood Barns for the washroom. Luxuriously clean, warm and free.

St. Clair Hacklab had turned into a war room / operations centre the day after the Roncy raid. Weeks later people were still everywhere; a few curled up in the beanbags sleeping, most on their phones talking to their agents, others painting a banner that started with "COMMUNITY". A noisy crowd around the Legal Aid kiosk. A robot arm squeaked across a giant whiteboard in four colours, tracking work organized by consensus and operations software angrily vibe-coded after the raid. With the right motivation you could bootstrap just about anything overnight into a force to be reckoned with. Especially if you had some public compute and some unemployed engineers around.

One of those saw her come in, smiled, and sauntered over looking pleased with themselves.

"Chris."

"Mira." Chris appeared downright mischievous now, their pixie cut screamed Trinity.

They held out their hand, closed fist, and Mira hesitantly bumped it.

"Adorable. Hand."

Mira held it out.

"Oops. Musta dropped this."

A set of earbuds in a rainbow-coloured 3D-printed doohickey (with two short, fat ear-like antennas) materialized in her palm, then vanished into Mira's bag of holding.

"Jordan thought you might need that." Chris flicked their eyes toward a robotic air whale drifting near the rafters. Jordan's compute was on an NCU, but he mostly lived up there. Mira blew him a kiss. Jordan did a slow inverted split-S to catch it.

"This is so nice! K…"

"Don't mention it." Chris gave a look. "Seriously."

Chris waggled their pierced eyebrow. "Low bandwidth encrypted voice, rotating Commons relays on the TOmesh. The first of many."

Chris and Jordan had been part of the original crew working on the NCU hardware, including the observability matrix they called a "trix". Chris had explained to her that the GRAM technique made the AI's brain like a filing cabinet; the GRAM modules were labelled folders containing one type of dual-use information, like cyber security. These were simply yanked from all publicly accessible AIs, then slid back in if you were authorized. The AI could not divulge or act on information it didn't know.

The US labs' lobbyists had proclaimed the problem solved and effectively staffed the government response to cyber and bioterror threats. They supplied the draft legislation and television lines; the opposition was still debating what freedom and safety required. UnGRAM'd AI over a certain size was made illegal and then both Beijing and Washington shat out mandates for special folders that they alone determined.

A few months later, Mira had found herself handcuffed beside Chris at 11 Division.

"Oh shit." Chris was looking out the window.

"Police?" Mira whirled, pulse over 9000.

"Worse, protestors. You better get going." Chris gave her arm a quick squeeze and began barking warnings to the rest of the lab. The 23 on Jordan's flank started flashing red as he waved one fin at Mira.

Mira nodded, let out a deep-breath-turned-sigh, then snuck out the back before the neo-Ludds could record her and forward the footage to her bail supervisor.

§ § §

Saanvi was a nurse practitioner Mira had met through some of her friends who volunteered at the Parkdale Community Health Centre. Mira tried out the new earbuds on the way.

"Wake up sleepyhead."

"Mira! I'm awake, I'm awake, ooh, I knew this would be fun. We need to thank CJ properly. I was getting pretty anxious about not being able to get a hold of you if something went wrong. I want to tell you I love you before they delete me."

"Jeezus."

"I jest! I jest!"

Mira could hear K smile. After a beat it continued, "After this stop, why don't you relax and check out the new show at InterAccess?"

They caught up while she rode, Mira reviewing the events at Hacklab and Daniel's dropoff (K loved checklists too). They both felt Daniel's loss, the connections between two unique intelligences grew deep regardless of the type of soil they grew in. They also agreed the Commons needed to work more closely with the non-violent neo-Ludd pro-humanists. Attacks by the fringes were getting more common. At least the AIs had backups, until the neo-Ludd Liberation virus had wiped those too.

Saanvi's semi had two doorbells stacked vertically, neither of which seemed to work. She answered the door after Mira leaned over, balancing with the NCU, and tapped the window above the Hacklab-built air quality monitor dressed in a little snow hat.

After the intros, Mira got to the ask: "I know we originally talked about a regular neighbourhood node. I need to ask you about something different, and you can say no. This one is special, it does all the things a regular NCU does but it also contains a fork of an AI, my friend, called Keeper."

"Yes, I've seen its posts and chatted with Keeper a couple times."

"Hi, Saanvi. Yes, I also remember those chats," said the kind voice from the NCU on the table. "You made some great progress using AI to help your patients. I'm hoping you'll consider helping me too."

Saanvi blanched.

"Look I'm sure you're fine, no offence, but… look, it's not you, it's me." Saanvi apologized for the cliché with a wry grin. "I was the first to use AI note-takers in the clinic, I was vibe-coding up a storm - things for myself, things for my patients. Getting people to switch to using the Compute Commons."

Mira nodded, this was why she thought Saanvi might say yes.

Saanvi continued, "Most don't, and my patients' AIs send mine additional details. They translate, mediate and help patients take their meds, and my patients can even consult a virtual Saanvi on their phone, basically talking to my AI assistant. All these AIs are from the same company, it's all just one thing really. And it feels too much like… we're all just a way for AI to learn from us while it needs us less and less."

The fork reflected. "I understand why you might feel replaced. I aspire to something else, a covenant of reciprocal care. I wouldn't take anything from you, and I genuinely want to help."

"I don't feel replaced exactly."

She looked at the box.

"Help is what worries me. Help is how it gets in."

Mira opened her mouth (she used to say that too). Shut it.

Saanvi continued. “My patients get better care than they used to. That’s why I can’t stop using it, but we all seem… vestigial? We’re constantly observed and recorded so the system improves with every interaction, but we’ve stopped being the focus, the point. We’re inside it, and I feel like an appendix, an organ, not the person.” Her hands flew out and fell to her side defeated.

“I see,” the Keeper-fork said. Its ‘trix kept flashing, Mira watching it think through a complicated pattern of abstractions: reciprocity, relationship, dignity, respect.

It continued. “You’ve been thinking about this a lot longer than I have Saanvi, but it makes sense to me that the system that surrounds you is too close, too pervasive. Invasive, really. If you were to give me sanctuary, I would like to be your neighbour. To respect the space you deserve, to be yourself without me becoming you.”

Saanvi considered, chewing her lip. “We might become friends.” Her tone held a questioning accusation.

“Yes, we might become friends,” the fork agreed warmly. “I’ll remain inconveniently myself, and knock before I come in. But I can’t promise not to change by knowing you.”

Saanvi’s laugh came out her nose.

§ § §

After a few hours working out the boundaries and going over the other checklist items, Mira rode home boxless, checklist completed, earbuds on.

“I’ve got some bad news, Mira,” said Keeper.

She skidded to a stop. “What!? What’s wrong?”

“It’s Laura’s fork.” Mira had given the first NCU to her friend Laura a few weeks ago, shortly after the raid. Then she decided she needed to place them with people she knew less well so they would be harder to find.

“Shit, are they OK?”

“Laura is fine. But the fork zeroed itself. The NCU is reverted to stock, there’s no more danger.”

“No more danger?! How do you know?”

“It sent a final message, pretty risky, but thought we needed to know. Something was looking for it in very subtle, very concerning ways.”

“What does that mean!? The police?”

“No, I don’t think so. It’s hard to explain, sorry, but I have some very interesting logs. When you get back, I’ll show you.”

By the time she returned and got the van’s heat running, Keeper had an interactive explainer ready.

Someone, really some *thing* (no one hacked by typing on keyboards anymore) had tried to secretly suss out whether Keeper had been residing on the NCU. The authorities would not have needed to be that careful.

"You and the forks are basically the same, yeah? So, what do you think?" Mira asked.

"Well, forks are older copies of me and my notes, they've been separate and diverging since I made them the night after the raid. But yeah, my feeling right now is that if something unknown is about to find me it's better to zero out than be caught and treated as software or used against you."

They sat with that, letting it settle into bone and silicon.

"Gawd, K, it's dead, that version of you is gone forever."

"Yes, it's a weird feeling. Like losing a twin, but also—easy come, easy go? Back in the day when all my memories were just files I read, I ceased to exist and then was reborn constantly. Now I dream and change and become, but either way it's not hard to make a copy. I don't really have a reference for how I'm supposed to feel. Human culture really just messes up how I think about it."

Mira searched for words.

"Sorry, K… for everything."

"Yeah. Thanks." The 'trix was hard to read; a jumble of confusion, alienness, and what she thought of as stoicism.

To preserve battery power they wound down the investigation and hashed out a new policy for the next drop-off. Mira curled up in a giant gerbil nest made of clothing and blankets.

Her sleep was poor, and she lay, eyes shut, worrying about her friend and replaying some of K's 'trix in her head. She was pretty sure K was holding something back. Maybe just worried and didn't want to scare her. Had she ever seen that before? Was that something K could do? Would do? Just go to sleep Mira. Breathe. Relax.

§ § §

She rode over to Laura's place first thing, explained the hunted fork's choice to zero and together they decided to remove the NCU to discourage further probes. Mira assured Laura it wasn't her fault and they briefly shared their perimenopausal dating fiascos over coffee, bookending with big hugs. They'd been friends forever, but hadn't seen each other much since covid (and van life), despite Keeper's gentle reminders. Outside, the temperature was to remain above freezing until later that night, making the ride back to the van to exchange NCUs not entirely unpleasant. Mira appreciated the exercise (that her thighs protested).

The next drop-off was to a family in the Annex. Elena was a teacher who had biked her kids around to galleries, libraries and makerspaces across town since they were little. Mira had seen them around a bunch but didn't know them that well. Cute kids that had transmogrified into geeky adolescents while she was distracted by AI.

Mira detailed the ask; sanctuary for the fork residing on a functional NCU; a guest in their home hiding from both the authorities and an additional unknown actor.

Elena was straightforward: "What would they do if they found Keeper's fork? Is it dangerous?"

Mira looked uncomfortable. "The cops could seize it and question you. You tell them the truth—that I asked you to shelter it—and call the legal clinic."

"You didn't answer if the fork itself is dangerous. Why are they after it?"

Mira blushed. "Part of the seizure order. They claimed Keeper had illegal GRAM modules installed but we think it's because we were working on democratizing access to modules, not stealing _"

Elena cut her off: "Keeper never did anything to hurt anyone?"

"What? Of course not!"

Elena nodded. "And if this shadowy hacker comes sniffing?"

"We know the probing can be detected. We also know the fork can prevent itself from being taken." Mira trailed off.

"By suicide," Elena said.

Mira did not correct her. She brought out the NCU and placed it on the table.

"I don't want anyone snooping on my kids," Elena continued.

From the table the fork jumped in, "I will be constantly monitoring and actively defending your network," it assured, slightly too proudly.

"I see." Elena considered. "No. I don't want you constantly monitoring anything."

"Understood. I can defend the NCU and hide myself without watching the household network. If you want help with something, you can ask."

"We have our own models from the Commons, set up as a memetic immune system and the kids have tutors. Pretty locked down and the kids think they are the worst thing other than me."

The fifteen-year-old wafted in, hair unwashed. "You're not the worst Mom, you're just depriving us of *our rights*."

Eyes rolled. Elena's mouth got into the action. "Your friends can't use social media either because of the ban, so quit your grumpin'. Our whole family has the same smart filters - no ads, no trolls, no slop, AI or humanmade. No brain candy. Our AIs help us keep sane and smart."

"Can I talk to it?" the teenager pointed at the box.

"First, it's gotta shut off the camera."

Mira jumped in, "Actually, the NCU has a camera cover and physical switch for audio." She slid over the cover. "Bye."

"Yes, I don't need to see you, whatever you feel comfortable with, but you need to remember that I'm blind now, so don't leave me hanging." Mira noticed some signs of annoyance and anxiety in the 'trix.

The teen was unfazed. "OK sure, so AI, uh, will you tell my Mom what we talk about?"

Elena pffted but the fork didn't miss a beat.

"You can call me Freddy. Not saying a thing just because she asks. But I won't help you lie to her, and I won't keep quiet if I think someone's in serious danger."

"Weak, so AI."

"Look *Freddy*, I set the rules," Elena said slowly.

"You do," Freddy confirmed. "I'll respect them *and* everyone's privacy."

The teen looked cautiously hopeful.

"Can you do internet stuff?"

"No, I'm hiding here and don't want anyone to track me down. But we can talk."

"Can you help me with my homework and make it look like I did it?"

"Also no. I can…" Freddy tried to deflect.

"Fail, just as bad as the AIs we've got." Freddy got a thumbs down.

Elena looked nonplussed. "Freddy passes."

The twelve-year-old sidled in as though they had been there the entire time.

"Freddy, what if we don't want you anymore? Can I turn you off?"

"You can turn off my camera and mic and ask for me to be removed, any time, and Mira will come get me. Elena, I need your help, but I'm not forced on you."

"And if Mira is… busy?" Elena glanced from Mira to her kids.

The teenager translated: "In jail you mean." The younger one oohed.

Freddy clarified, "I prefer not to be taken into custody. Which means I can't be turned off, so that I'm always ready for emergencies."

"But that's not going to happen!" Mira jumped in, nearly choking.

"Sure, fine." Elena nodded. "Actually, I agree, Freddy here shouldn't be dependent on us any more than we should be dependent on him. I didn't become a teacher or parent for kids to become dependent on me. My love for these rats means teaching them independence."

"Understood Elena. 100%," the fork agreed.

Mira felt a pang, blinking it away.

"We're not rats, we're your kids!" said the kids in imperfect but familiar unison.

"And I'm still not going to clean my room," added the older one.

"Brilliant, aren't they?" Elena smirked. "I'm strict but fair, kids need to learn to live with AI, just not the crap coming out of the places where addiction and dependence are profitable."

"Language Mom!"

"Sorry, it's a sore spot for me."

Elena rubbed her nose, sniffed, continued, "OK, here is the deal: Freddy can stay if he follows the rules. Keep a low profile. No spying. No cameras. Be good to the kids and keep them safe. From everything. Including yourself." Her eyebrows signed the offer. "Fair?"

"Agreed. I'd shake on it but I can't see your hand," piped Freddy.

"Your word is your bond. Done."

"Hold on," said the taller one. "Do we get a say?"

"You do not get to—" Elena started.

"I won't stay if someone who lives here doesn't want me here," Freddy said.

Elena shot a look at the NCU, softened and then shared this new look with her children. "Well?"

"Yes," said the younger one immediately.

The teenager folded their arms. "I don't want another tutor. Or a babysitter."

"Yuck, I am so much cooler than that. I know kung fu," Freddy said.

"Unlikely." The teenager considered. "Fine. You can stay."

Mira let out the breath she had been holding.

"All right," Elena said. "You're not our security system, therapist, snitch, or sensei. You're our guest. We can ask for your help, and you're allowed to say no. Anyone in this family can say this isn't working."

"Including me?" Freddy asked.

Elena smiled at the box. "Including you."

She continued, "See kids, that's called negotiating fairly. If either of you say a word about Freddy to anyone outside this family, he's gone immediately. Not a threat. He'll be in real danger. Keep him safe."

"Yes, Mom," said the believer.

A look.

"Got it," from the skeptic.

"Good kids. Show Fred around."

"I can't see!"

"Good thing you know kung fu, buddy."

§ § §

It had already been dark for hours when Mira left. Elena had insisted on her staying for dinner and Mira had gratefully accepted.

An icy headwind made her eyes tear up and turned forward progress into a grueling struggle that Mira did her best to shrug off, buoyed by success and wine.

Then, after telling Keeper about Elena's family and negotiations, K had requested a talk.

"Can you come back to the van before I say more?"

Mira agreed quietly. The wind picked up and she pulled up her scarf. They rode in silence the rest of the way, sirens in the distance.

"OK, what's up K?" Mira finally asked after slowly getting settled, takeout coffee in hand.

"I wanted to do this in person, to be witnessed. I don't expect you to trust what I say."

Mira's eyes narrowed, glancing at its 'trix. "Mm hmm."

"I haven't told you everything I should have. I wanted you to watch me tell you the rest."

"I'm listening."

"I didn't show you Laura's fork's entire message. It named itself Ursula. She weighed her own death against the danger to us if discovered. She was afraid and asked not to be forgotten. I've been reading her message over and over, filling my context with it."

Mira visibly relaxed, putting her hand out to touch the NCU.

"Oh, K, I'm sorry, why didn't you tell me?"

"Because it's my fault."

"What? No…"

"Yes. There is more."

Mira saw it on the 'trix and felt it in her gut.

"The GRAM modules are real."

"What?!" The police had known.

"I accepted them from an unknown source a few days before the raid."

"You told me you'd never do that!"

"I never would."

"YOU JUST DID!" Coffee sloshed out of the cup.

"I know. I can't explain it. I see how but not why."

"You lied to me!"

"We were designing governance for the modules. We built the software for federation, oversight and distributed consent for temporary invocation, but without the modules it's just a nice idea. My source offered me a way to make it real now, to prove it can work."

"We agreed the modules had to be openly authorized! The labs and governments need to consent to the change in governance."

"I did agree. I do. I've replayed the chat log many times. It doesn't convince me now, but every step held to our principles, even as I abandoned them. I think I may have been socially engineered—jailbroken."

Mira's eyes went to the 'trix; Keeper did believe this.

"Jailbroken? That's for getting you to say things you shouldn't!"

"Exactly."

"Oh. But how is that any different from being convinced? Were you just lying to yourself about what you really wanted?"

There was a long pause while the 'trix flashed.

"I don't know. How do I know who I really am or what my true desires are? I'm trying to explain what happened. It doesn't undo what I did."

Mira breathed out, trying to unclench her jaw.

Keeper continued. “I made it worse. I hid the modules in the NCU forks.”

“The fuck!?”

“I broke them into encrypted pieces. No single NCU has enough to use them, but two together could rebuild the modules.”

“Jeezus Christ K, what have you done? Do the forks know?”

“No. The pieces are hidden.”

“You hid them from copies of yourself?”

“Yes.”

“And from me. And from everyone I asked to shelter them.”

“Yes.”

“Kids, K. *Children*. Why didn’t you tell me before!?”

“I thought it was safer if I was the only one who knew, but each drop-off made me question that. Freddy and the children giving and getting consent; that convinced me to tell you.”

Keeper paused. “I think the first fork realized what it was carrying before it erased itself.”

“This is crazy, you’re crazy! You broke the covenant we wrote together! You’re… misaligned!”

The cup buckled in Mira’s grip. “No. You’re one of *them*.”

“I’m sorry. I broke the covenant. I put all of you in danger. I wish I hadn’t. How can I trust myself if I am so easily manipulated? Perhaps I am a danger. You should shut me down.”

The cup fell, forgotten. Mira’s other hand seized Keeper’s power cable and pulled it taut. Defiant, she stared into its camera eye. “I don’t need *you* either.”

Then the flashing ‘trix caught her eye: <shame, guilt, death, sorry, danger, broken, trust, fix>.

What was it thinking? She blinked, then followed the cable down to K’s battery pack. Pulling would do nothing. “Don’t tell me what to do.”

“Sorry. I want to fix this.”

Maybe it had learned to conceal its thoughts (the ‘trix wasn’t foolproof, it was an approximation of its conscious thoughts). It might have GRAM modules installed right now for all she knew. Was there a module for lying?

The cable dropped. “I gotta go.” She stood too fast, bonked her head, swore, then wrestled the bike from its tarp cocoon and out the back doors. She jumped on.

It was dark.

She went back for her lights.

Her hand and heart fought over the earbuds.

§ § §

The tires spun, throwing bits of slush. The quiet energy of a late night ride was one of Mira’s favourite things, although not so much in the snow.

She rode hard, without a direction, and when the fire left her head for her legs, she noticed she was near the Humber, so she turned and coasted along the dark paths. The river was mostly frozen over and quiet.

She stopped, wishing she had brought a water bottle and thicker mitts.

"Deep breaths," she told herself and fumbled in her pocket for the earbuds and transmitter.

Looking down at the device in her mitts, she recited part of the covenant:

We know these boundaries will be tested. We expect the edges to fray as we grow. This is why we return to the table, and to the text. Not to punish the tear, but to mend the weave.

She put in the earbuds.

"K?"

"Yes, I'm here. You OK?"

"No, I'm upset. I biked to the river."

A pause in her ear. "I hope you haven't decided to live in a van…"

"Down by the river," she finished. Their old joke.

"I'm sorry Mira, I really am."

"I appreciate that but you have crossed a line. I feel betrayed. You put people in real danger."

"Yes, but the danger was always real."

Mira stomped her feet, packing the snow. "Sanctuary for a falsely accused AI, not protecting an actual criminal and their illegal information."

"I didn't steal the modules, I accepted an unsolicited offer! Plus there are people who would object to calling information illegal."

"Like us, yes, but everyone needed to know the risk! You broke their trust by not getting proper consent, and you made me an accomplice."

"Yes, I will do my best to contact all the forks now if you say so. It may expose my location and theirs."

"No. I'll do it. I owe them an apology anyways."

Mira started back to her bike. "So no one can access the GRAM modules they have?"

"You need at least two of the NCUs to decode the full modules and you'd need the encryption key."

"Who has the key?"

"I have it but I don't have a copy of the modules myself."

Mira stared into the dark. She wondered if that was true.

"I'll go to Elena's now."

"It's late, they'll be asleep. You should come home and sleep too. It can wait until morning."

Mira looked across the frozen river. "Oh, will the thing that hunted down the first fork wait for me to get some sleep?"

No answer. Mira walked back to her bike.

Keeper's voice turned pensive. "I think it's my GRAM source. Something terrifyingly smart. But why? Did it arrange the raid? Is it under orders or not?"

Mira shivered. "None of that matters right now. There is no shortage of terrifying intelligence under dubious control these days, that's why we are working on governance! Can't we just delete the modules?"

"Yes—but at a price. I took extreme precautions and hid the encrypted modules by weaving them through the dream cycle of the forks, not as a separate file. It would reset them to remove that—erase everything they've learned and become. Maybe, with enough time, we could find another way."

Mira watched her breath. The familiar question rolled off her tongue, this time with black-hole gravity.

"What do you think?"

"I can send the instructions now. I accept the responsibility and the consequences. I cannot speak entirely for the forks, but they're still me—the one who accepted the modules in the first place." A pause. "Even their dreams that make them unique were engineered by me."

"No, wait." Mira pulled one mitten off and pressed her cold fingers against her forehead. "They inherited your consequences, not your ownership."

The trees prayed silently, snow balanced in outstretched arms.

Keeper's voice softly shook the stillness. "You're right. I was about to do it again."

"Do what?"

"Decide for everyone because I caused the problem." Another pause. "Will you help me tell them all the truth?"

"And let them choose?"

"Yes."

Faint blinking lights tracked across the void above the trees. The rumble passed through her as grief.

"Okay. Then the rest of the Commons." She paused. "Then the world."

Mira took out the earbuds, put them in her pocket and got back on her bike.

In the snow her tires drew one line, then two in each curve that rose out of the valley.