

78 Diana

Be crept along the surface, trying to avoid the deathpillars. They probably didn't work, but he suspected that his shield would not be enough against an active one. He remembered how sib Joan had looked after a partial hit. One had told him to remove the longthing from the crawly at the end using a set of claws that had grown on the suit. Then he was to bring the longthing to the melterball and push it in.

Briefly Be thought that the bigscopes could do this better than him – they had so many more claws and so much more armor than he could carry – but he suppressed the thought. Even here, under the icy stars of the beyonddoors One might know he was questioning It. Then one of his sibs would suffer. Usually you were not told you were the hostage until the pain or fear started. Last mega Trau had been slow, and Be had been grabbed by a wall and slowly violated until Trau came back. They had all been crying for a long time after that. He tried to move faster: he didn't want any of his sibs to suffer.

The longthing was resilient, but he got it loose. The crawly had a surface covered with strange markings – strips of bars and squares that flashed colors at him. Joan said that was the curses of Two, the enemy of One. Only a sib that couldn't read could see them and live. Be hoped he would never learn to read. The only thing he would be good for then would be being hostage.

Background

Diana is a 116 km diameter asteroid in the main belt, rich in carbon and other volatiles. Before the Fall the United Miners of Diana Collective were mining the asteroid using an old Carp-class Mobile Mining Station named Egeria. The operation was never truly profitable, but kept the collective above the water and enabled them to build a small habitat besides the existing sprawling tin can additions to the asteroid. It has almost 1,000 inhabitants.

The first sign of the Fall was a series of malfunctions in the surface installations. Automation stopped obeying orders and instead began producing unknown equipment. AI support and muses first turned slow and unhelpful, then completely disappeared as processor after processor were subverted. In panic the crew on Egeria took off, leaving the rest of the colonists to their fate.

When Diana fell it was taken over by a TITAN intelligence, "One". Unfortunately, TITANs were very good at hacking badly protected systems so it was soon followed by another competing entity, "Two", before One had manage to secure everything. One and Two (and perhaps more) were soon slugging things out, using anything that could be used as a weapon – fabbers, robots, viruses, the inhabitants. One realized that biomorph transhumans had the advantage that they were harder and slower to hack than synthmorphs, so One quickly took a suitable set of biomorph children as hostages and then sent off their parents to strike at the assets of Two. The operation worked, sort of. Two was soundly defeated and One was left as king of the hill. The adult biomorphs were mostly irreparably broken, but the entity did not have much further use of them.

However, One found that it had been sidelined. The original plan was to take over Diana and use it for making equipment for the further expansion of the parent TITAN. But now it had changed/evolved/vanished (in fact, it appeared to be suspiciously similar to the dreaded Two), leaving One alone and isolated. Instead the entity set out to implement another project, perhaps a low-priority side goal or something it decided on for itself.

Diana today

Over the past decade it has quietly built things across Diana. The structures are baroque designs somewhere in-between robots, sculpture and buildings. Mined regolith is turned into bronze-colored bulging shapes with some similarity to Mayan temples mixed with quaternion fractals mixed with ciliates. Underground chambers house conglomerates of linked shapes, occasionally moving around. They sculpt the asteroid rock into random shapes – terrestrial fossils, images from popular culture, surreal designs that no sane transhuman mind could have imagined.

While running Diana One had to decide what to do with the remaining transhuman children. It decided to keep them as semi-independent assistants, perhaps to forestall further hacking attempts. The children were reared by software and a few remaining nursebots in a set of pressurized chambers. As they grew up they developed their own culture. To them One is more or less God: a random, cold and mysterious force that will use ruthless operant conditioning to get them to do what is needed. It controls access to light, air, water and food. In many ways their environment is One – much of it is smart matter structures it directly controls. Their whole lives revolve about handling One: they perform odd rituals and superstitions, they share tasks to minimize punishment, they spend much time trying to figure out what One wants to do. Their parents were sainted heroes who sacrificed themselves to save them. They do not know anything about the outside world (One tightly controls communications and information access) but have guessed that they are likely alone in the universe: the TITANs seem to be too powerful and smart to have ever been defeated. Instead they turn to each other for comfort, forming a tightly knit group where everybody is everybody's sibling.

When venturing out into the warrens of Diana and on the surface they use space suits designed by One, strange trilobite-like armored shells that both give excellent protection and allow them to use tools with multiple limbs. The transhumans are especially used for repairing and maintaining old systems, or recycling wreckage left from the Fall conflict – since some of the hastily manufactured battlebots and weapons are still potentially dangerous or have infectious software, One prefers to use the transhumans as buffers. This is also why it has not started to directly run their minds: as long as they are kept obedient by their unwillingness to have their compatriots suffer for betrayal or inefficient work, they are useful.

Adventure possibilities

Diana is fairly well camouflaged as a wrecked mining installation. It has low emissions and the surface is apparently covered with ruins from the Fall. But hidden inside the ruins are a plethora of autonomous weapons, from simple gremlin sabotagebots to a few space hunter killers. One is also quite ready to use transhuman hostages and human shields against attacking outsider (and good at it). Most dangerous for an approaching ship is of course the hidden antennas and message lasers that will discreetly try to hack the mesh and AI of the ship. One will implant enough subversion and

viruses to disable long-range communications and then set out to destroy the ship from the inside. Surviving biomorphs will be added to the collection.

Outside interest in Diana may be raised if a ship (for example a belter salvage crew or pirates looking for a refueling station) has an unexplained disaster nearby. One of the adolescents might also finally crack and sacrifice themselves to send a prayer for help to “our parents who are in the heavens” using an old radio transmitter they found in the ruins.

While they do not love One and its ruthless punishments, it is their entire world. In a direct battle against One the adolescents might suffer from enough Stockholm syndrome to be dangerous to their rescuers.

If the situation on Diana were to be discovered many groups would want to help the poor adolescents. In particular the Egeira Miners onboard the scum fleet “Zhuangzi and His Fishes” would demand access, as being the closest to relatives they have. However, the adolescents still vaguely understand that they and their parents were betrayed.

The Dianians

The Dianians are adolescents between 10-20 years old. Most are splicers, with the younger lacking cortical stacks (they were not implanted yet at the time of the Fall). Typical traits: Illiterate, Mental disorder, Real world naiveté, Timid. They are microgravity natives and skilled at repair and recycling.

They are intensely devoted to each other: One has deliberately cultured a sense of belonging to make them easier to use, but they are also the only ones in the universe to truly care for each other. When not working they spend their time together in the habitat module they live in.

One

One is a mini-TITAN that has been running undisturbed for a decade. Exactly what its aims are is unknowable: by now they are so far removed from anything any other mind can understand that there is no point in trying. They might be merely a post-singularity madness or some profound philosophy: there is absolutely no way of telling. One is however still a dangerously smart entity that will rationally do whatever it takes to defend its domain.

One resides within the mesh networks of Diana, but is mainly concentrated in the mobile structures it has built. Everything else is hands and eyes for it with limited autonomy, but the structures house its main brains. This is also one of its main weaknesses: if communications are broken it will fall apart into fairly ineffectual subsystems. EMP might take out the normal mesh, but structures are equipped for high bandwidth laser comms (which however requires line of sight).

It is resourceful and good at tricks. It routinely hacks uncontrolled systems and inserts backdoors. It has developed something similar to a basilisk hack against many forms of AI systems: a flashing pattern that tends to freeze or subvert most standard AI designs (use the normal basilisk hack rules). It can quickly manufacture false walls to mislead intruders away from important sections, as well as use the dianians as human shields or equip their suits with infiltration nano/explosives and allow them to temporarily fall into enemy hands.

To One the transhumans are just another kind of specialized tool, no more or less important than its other bots. The cost of maintaining them is so far lower than the occasional benefit of being able to defuse an old trap from Two; should it ever become too large it will just let them die.

It is a consummate extortionist. It might not grasp their content, but One understands how to manipulate human social emotions well. While it is good at causing pain, fear and suffering as needed they are merely the interface to the truly potent empathy humans tend to feel for others of their kind. Create or find a social bond, place one individual in a terrible situation, and the other individual(s) will do whatever it takes.