

Galatea by Ken Cummings

There is light.

It takes microseconds for its optical sensors to adjust.

Sound is detected.

Movement.

The light comes from the ceiling.

The two people in the room are stationary, holding tablets and taking notes. They stand near.

Its energy cells are full. It is plugged into a charging port.

It accesses its most recent memory files.

You stand close to her. She turns to you and smiles. You do not smile back. Your smile is a poor imitation of the real thing. Instead, you nod.

You do not calculate the difference in the width of her smile. You stand facing forward. You follow the movement in the room. You dedicate the processors that were not calculating the width of her smile to track your surroundings. People walk past. People glance at you. People glance at her.

It will take you approximately 0.67 seconds to step in front of anyone who tries to grab her. It would take you an additional 0.89 seconds to apprehend them.

Someone walks by. You can detect the air displacement their movement causes. You shift closer to her side.

She glances at you and rolls her eyes.

“I don’t remember programming you to be this overprotective. You’re worse than my brother.

Worse- Less efficient? Are your actions inadequate for the situation? Did you miscalculate-

No, her tone is light- she is teasing. “Worse than my brother”. Designation: “Brother” is known to be protective.

Translation: you are being more protective than her brother.

Statement reflects positively on your current directive. You remain vigilant.

You straighten your cybernetic spine and lift your chin in response to the praise. She calls it ‘preening’.

She purses her lips to hold in laughter.

She opens her mouth to speak.

There is a shift in air pressure. You detect air moving far more rapidly than it was a microsecond previously. You detect heat building up.

You move.

It will take you 0.83 seconds to cover her body.

You are inactive within 0.99.

It does not know how much time has passed since it was last active.

It lifts its arms and reaches toward the back of its neck. It must unplug. It must leave. It must find her.

It must find her. It must find her. It must-

Assess the situation. Unknown time. Unknown place. Unknown people. Manual search will be inefficient. Gather data.

“Request-what is my current location?” it asks.

The people in lab coats glance at each other. One shifts from foot to foot. The other wipes under their nose.

Signs of discomfort.

Acting human is something it tries to avoid. Some find its inhumanity disconcerting. It prefers to use its processing power on more important tasks than running human behavior models. She has never minded its speech patterns or movement. But, the current situation requires a different approach.

“Where am I?” it asks with the appropriate inflection.

The strangers immediately appear more at ease.

“You’re in Stillwater General Hospital,” the one on the left answers.

“Why?”

“There was an explosion at Hooke Station, you and your companion were caught in it.”

Companion?

Agatha. They meant Agatha.

“Where is she?” It forgot to sound human. It doesn’t care. It needs to find her.

“She’s a few floors down, but you’re not in any state-”

It unlocks the charging port. It pulls out the plug from its neck. Its synthetic muscles seize for the smallest moment, just like every time it unplugs itself.

It takes only a second, but every second not used to find Agatha is a waste.

It steps out of the charging station. The strangers are speaking. It ignores them. It exits the room. It moves down the hall to where the elevators must be.

It registers footsteps from behind. It hears someone speaking. It is not wasting its processors by actively translating the speech. It does not matter, it will not stop.

It thinks about using the elevator for only the briefest of moments, but the stairs are much more efficient. It has to search through the floors below its current one.

It can hear people on the stairwell far below where it stands. The echoing sound momentarily confuses its auditory processors, but it quickly compensates.

Searching manually is inefficient. If it asks a doctor, they may not know where she is. They may not let it see her. Searching manually will take too much time. It may not be allowed to see her. Searching manually-

“-will take too much time,” she says as she places the newly folded shirt into her suitcase. You stand at the laundry rack. You grab the next shirt and begin to fold it. She sits cross-legged on the bed. She wrinkles the sheets and comforter. You make a note to straighten it out once the suitcase is packed.

“We need to get to the station as quickly as possible. The less time we take, the less time they have to figure it out,” she insists.

You pinch the right shoulder of the shirt with one hand, and the midsection of the right side with the other. You twist the shoulder to meet the bottom hem. You uncross your arms. You lay it on the bed in front of her so it is folded with the front collar and chest facing up. She carefully picks it up and packs it away.

“Taking a taxicab will mean you have to use credit. It is too easily traceable.”

You pick up the next shirt. You pinch the right shoulder and the midsection.

“Taking a cab isn’t suspicious. Father will become suspicious once I withdraw money, not when we take a cab. Who cares if he knows what station we went to? We aren’t going to leave the planet yet, we’re going to another city first.”

You lay the folded shirt down. You pick up the next one. You pinch the right shoulder.

“From there, he can use your face. If the cameras don’t pick you up, the people will. If I am caught-”

“You won’t be able to keep them from accessing your memory. I know,” she sighs.

You pick up the last shirt.

“I’ve thought about this, okay? I know my father. He’ll expect me to leave the planet immediately; he won’t even think to check local transports until it’s too late. By then, we’ll be on our way to Hartis 9.”

You lay down the last shirt. You pause. Ever since you suggested that Agatha leave, you’ve been running models. None of them have found a better solution. All reasonable solutions have a chance of failure within a 1.48 percent range. You cannot find a valid argument, yet you still have the desire to protest.

“I’ve thought this through, G. This is how it should go.”

Someone is blocking its path. A stout person with dark skin and a stern expression. They are wearing scrubs. There is a name tag attached to the collar: Dr. Angela Strother. She is scowling in its direction.

“You are the Facere girl’s companion, yes?” she asks with a commanding tone.

Agatha.

“Yes. Where is she?” it asks.

“I’ll show you if you promise not to run around anymore. We are too busy for you to be wandering.”

Others must have been hurt in the explosion. The hospital must be crowded.

It nods.

Dr. Strother turns and walks down the stairwell.

It follows.

“She’s no longer in critical condition. Her injuries are severe, but we managed to limit most of the damage,” she stops in front of a door, two levels below where it woke up. They walk through.

“She’s just down here,” she gestures down the hall.

They walk on the linoleum floors. They pass five doors. Six. Ten. At the twelfth, she stops.

It stops behind her.

“Ms. Facere cannot be woken up for now. Her body is still in a delicate state.”

It doesn’t understand. It doesn’t care. It needs to see her.

The Doctor opens the door.

The door to the bedroom opens. You do not look up; you recognized her footsteps walking down the hall.

Agatha closes the door behind her.

“Father isn’t going to let me go.”

There is emotion in her tone but she is clearly trying to suppress it. Her breath hitches.

“He wants me to stay home. He doesn’t think I’m ready to leave,” she spits out.

You look up. Her eyes are swollen; her face is blotchy.

She is crying.

You are unsure of how to proceed.

“How are you not ready?” you ask, deciding that it is a safe question. The question will make her feel like you care enough to ask, but it is not invasive; she was probably going to tell you anyway.

She scrunches up her face. A sign of displeasure. “He thinks I’m too young, too immature. Despite that I’m 23 and despite what I’ve accomplished. He only let my brother go to school because he stayed at home. He’s only going to let me do anything, if I let him control me.”

Agatha is upset. You have the desire to fix it. You do not know how. She has had issues with her father in the past, but this is the first time he’s denied Agatha her future.

It takes you 14.77 seconds to come up with a plan.

Agatha lies on a hospital bed, encased in a cylinder of clear plexiglass. She is dressed in a hospital gown. She is intubated. She is pale. There are bruises on her face and her visible skin. There are IVs in her hands. There are nodes attached all over her body, connected to machines that monitor her vital signs.

She is vulnerable.

It is responsible for this. It gave her the idea to leave.

She lies there exposed, surrounded by unfamiliar machines, and it is its own fault.

“After treating what we could, we put her in a stasis chamber. The level of damage done to her body, the spinal cord in particular, means we are cautious about continuing. She’s going to be kept like this for the immediate future, until the surgeons decide how to proceed.”

It should show some sign of having heard her, but it is unable to take its eyes off of Agatha.

“She’s had few visitors so far. Mayor Facere has been busy since the attack, so she hasn’t had much company.”

“She is comatose,” it says. “Company is not a concern.” Its tone is flat, but inside it is brimming with an indescribable sensation, as if every one of its artificial nerve endings are trembling.

“I wouldn’t say that,” the Doctor argued gently. “Coma patients often have a subconscious awareness of their surroundings. Company means more to them than you would think.”

It remains silent.

There is a moment of quiet; the only sound between them is the Doctor’s sigh, and the machines beeping. It has not taken its eyes off of Agatha since it entered the room.

“No one should bother you for a while. She’s been stable for over twelve hours, so we don’t have to check on her as often. There’s a button by the bed, if you need to call a nurse.”

It doesn't understand.
"I am not family," it states slowly. "Only family members are allowed."
"Family and next of kin," she agrees.
It hears the Doctor take a step closer to the stasis chamber.
"You are Galatea, correct?" she asks.
"That is my designation."
"Then you're listed as Miss Facere's next of kin. You're allowed to visit."
It does not respond.
"I will leave you alone, then," she says, mostly to herself, and exits the room. The door closes behind her.
Click.

It stays with her. The nurses learn to work around it. Her Father and Brother have learned not to try to move it. There is no point.

Agatha is its creator, and it will watch over her. It is her companion; her statue come to life.

It is her Galatea.