

My Glass Heart

Chapter α

Water exhales a breath of fog into the bay. From the top of the lighthouse, Glass stares off into the distance, illuminating sleeping sailors of bone and ash. For centuries, they had been preserved over their frozen vessels; how and when they reached the secluded fjord is still a mystery to her. The world beyond the tundra is an even bigger mystery, even at this age. By design, Glass is fit and well-endowed; mahogany skin and flowing auburn hair complement the craftsmanship of the model's dark brown eyes. Her body is regulated at a constant temperature, drawing most of its power from light. The high albedo surface of the arctic landscape ensures Glass, or *Model VIII*, as the HoloScreen refers to her, never ceases functioning due to a power shortage, but no safeguard could prepare her programming for a mental collapse.

Despite having awareness, Glass never acquired the upgrade enabling autonomy before being assigned to the lighthouse. Regardless of how far she travels from her assigned dungeon during the day, come dusk, Glass always finds herself staring down at the harbor. It's been like this for over a century. Come dawn, against her will, Glass swims into the frigid ocean, searching for signs of life. The dead float alongside her, sometimes mocking her, other times questioning the nature of her existence. If she doesn't return to the lighthouse within an hour of her morning patrol, an alarm triggers, roaring for miles in the arctic wilderness until silenced via HoloScreen input. That damnable contraption.

The HoloScreen is a series of panels that can be summoned from anywhere within the lighthouse's silver walls through two claps followed by simultaneously snapping with both hands. Thumb alignment after the snap determines the size and placement of the main screen, which rests in the center of the other four: one screen hovers above, one to the left, another to the right and one below. Simple, modular design and programming make it possible to instantly re-summon the HoloScreen in a new location. It can also be set to follow the user via gestures. Glass is a system admin, but the HoloScreen is her supervisor, manager, and, for lack of better term, master.



U.S. HoloScreen 2.4

Glass observes the sun yawning as it stretches over the horizon. She absently walks back inside the lighthouse and down the iron, spiral staircase, passing several empty rooms along the way. At the base of the tower, she claps twice, snaps her fingers and summons the HoloScreen. She logs her morning patrol.

Glass effortlessly moves the sturdy platinum doors of the lighthouse. “Scanning,” she blurts out in a robotic voice. Glass covers her mouth, but her programming overrides her reaction. Her sight switches to “Thermal Processing” and she examines footprints in the snow. “They’re too faint... I can’t —Unidentifiable creature detected! —Ugh! If someone’s out here, show yourself... Please,” Glass sighs. Though she has not been programmed to feel fear, self-preservation or even curiosity, Glass has slowly developed traces of them, along with loneliness. If there is someone, or something else, her programming will force her to identify the threat they pose to the lighthouse and handle the guest accordingly. But, what if it is a person? What if she could talk to them? Her thoughts scramble as her head and body mechanically jerk in search of answers. She balls her hands. Glass’s perfect skin stretches and contracts at the creases of her fists.

Buzzing and whirring follow a loud click. Glass collapses on the snow, struggling to keep her vision from fading. “This machine, model VIII, is designated to protect logistical services to Anta-Bzzt! — ca Lighthouse 00721, in accordance to global law established by the Uni-Bzzt! Bzzzzt! Crrrrsh! — my circa 2101 the year of-Bzzt!” She musters all of her strength and stares at the aggressor: a horrified, balding, pale man in a bulky, sterile suit. “Please! —State your intentions! - Don’t kill me! — Or, be subdued—Zzzt!”

“Waaaaah!” The man shrieks, taking off toward the lighthouse. Glass stands up as her voice continues to fluctuate between desperate human and cold automaton. A large foreign symbol on the back of the man's suit is captioned, “NASA.” He struggles to open the doors enough to get inside, and has even more difficulty shutting them.

Glass pries the doors open. The name tag on his chest is recognizable. “I mean no harm, Erin. You speak Sathese. I can read your cerebral pattern, and your name tag.” Glass smiles. “Your cognitive algorithms indicate that your mental activity follows a sequence nearly identical to my preprogrammed grammatical structure.” She stops forcing the doors open and shows her palms as a gesture of peace. “I know you can understand me.”

Erin examines Glass’s face and drops his guard. “Programmed?” He asks, struggling to pull the door open. “Are you—”

“Sentient?” Glass nods. “Yes. I am a General Light-Absorbing Synthetic Sentient. Created solely to defend this outpost.” She extends her hand. “But, you can call me, Glass.” Her smile seems authentic, despite the matte appearance of her cold, perfect gaze. “I can read your biometrics. Are you like me, Erin? A functioning synthetic sentient?” Glass asks. “That ring around your collar, and that suit...”

Erin pensively rubs his beard. His bald spot glistens under the fluorescent light. He shakes Glass's hand. "I'm sorry, but no. I'm not like you, at all." She's definitely built to code. She might as well be human. Those eyes...

"You're so—lifelike," Glass responds. "I mean, that's what you were thinking of me, correct?"

Erin nods. "How—"

"I told you, I can read your cerebral patterns. They are... unique." Glass closes the door to the tower. She guides Erin to a dining area in the center of the first floor. He notices a storm door welded shut beneath the iron table. "What's that about?" Erin asks, pointing at the hatch.

"Unfortunately, I am not programmed to access or share that information. I can only say that keeping it from opening is part of my purpose."

Erin takes a deep breath and sighs. Now's probably not the time to ask anyway. He locks eyes with Glass; nonetheless, it's still incredible that this technology even exists. "Where am I?" Erin asks, scanning the sterile room. His eyes follow the spiral staircase leading to the top of the well-crafted lighthouse. Without considering why, how anyone was able to put together such a heavy infrastructure in this landscape was a wonder in and of itself.

"Here," Glass responds, devoid of any perceivable emotion. "You are here." She points at the ground.

"Clearly. I meant, where exactly is here—on a map?" Erin asks, his curiosity gnawing at his tongue.

"The fourteenth and centermost continent of Sathed—the United Lands of Sathed, to be exact. On the planet N'Sola, in the Jade Galaxy. Are you an ambassador, or scientist?"

Erin smiles. He contains his happiness and shakes his head again. "Nope. Just a curious traveler." He sighs. "I can't believe it... It worked."