

It's Time

I flailed my robotic arms around, picking up gravel out of a puddle as joy uplifted my spirits.

Words flashed on the screen integrated into my machinery.

Replication status: SUCCESS

Welcome, No.228 to Lastabade.

I had so many questions.

What's the meaning of replication status? Who was No.228?

I began turning my detachable head, observing my surroundings, and staring at the ground beneath me. My biosensors beeped, detecting traces of montmorillonite throughout the encircling regolith. I looked at my eye-level and stood in shock. There were hundreds who looked exactly like me in a row together, precisely picking up materials in their area. My cognitive computing kicked in as my head tilted to the side, trying to understand who they were.

I see you are confused. None of the others were confused when they were replicated since all of you have been programmed to have knowledge of the terraforming process. Regardless, you, numbered 228, are a replication of the other machines. Your purpose is to complete the terraforming process using the natural resources in the environment. You are part of the self-replicating system.

I trembled. *Why is my purpose being decided for me?*

The foremost guideline is to never speak to the other machines.

At first, I wondered why, but with my cognitive computing, I reasoned that it was better not to question the words and to follow the rules.

So far, the others have created liquid water by melting the polar ice caps. This resulted in massive amounts of carbon dioxide being released into the atmosphere. The most important next step is to adjust the ratio of gases in the atmosphere and limit severe radiation. Good luck!

The words faded away, but their sour tone still remained with me.

★★★

I am pleased with your work 228. The scientists have observed your contributions as extraordinary. You are exceptional.

The words slowly disappeared. My eyes beamed with happiness, but an overarching uneasiness came over me.

I am... exceptional?

Ever since the words told me I was different in some way, I thought something was wrong with me. But despite the words reassuring me, a look of puzzlement sprang across my face.

Throughout the day, I saw the other machines working endlessly without a hint of thought cross their faces, but I couldn't do the same. I always thought about everything I did, and especially, of what the words had told me when I was replicated.

'Your purpose is to complete the terraforming process.'

I shivered merely thinking about it. No matter how much I wanted to like the words, I couldn't. No choice was mine anymore.

Despite this, I continued to gather materials.

★★★

Factory complex size: 2512

The size of the factory complex made up of terraforming machines was ever-expanding. No matter where I turned, there were machines, all going through the same motions. Somehow, there was something beautiful about how effortless the others made their work feel.

I shook my head in disgust. How could I possibly admire how the others worked? There was no vivacity in their eyes: no joy keeping them up at night.

I took a step back as I reconsidered everything I once knew.

There isn't anything wrong with me.

This realization hit me like a lightning bolt as I believed my whole life was about to change.

★★★

Hello 228. I've been informed that you have become especially unproductive recently. Is there something you'd like to tell me?

I could feel the words give an awful sneer of disappointment at me. I shivered, thinking of what was to come if I told the truth of my disinterest in the terraforming process.

"No, nothing at all. There's nothing wrong."

Is there any reason you've been unproductive? You know you can tell me anything, right?

I began fidgeting my hand. As much as the words seemed approachable, I couldn't trust them. I didn't know what the words wanted from me.

"Why are we terraforming?" I jolted my head backwards as the question escaped me. I could feel the words shoot a judgmental eyebrow.

The others know. This must be a minor inconvenience — perhaps a minor lapse in your programming. You are terraforming so that a human test group will come here to live.

Regardless, how will you address your lacking productivity?

"I'm sorry I was unproductive. I will do better in the future," I said insincerely, in a monotone, robotic voice.

That's what I like to hear 228.

★★★

Before my replication, the others had brought water onto Lastabade and increased the amount of carbon dioxide in the air. So far, I worked to carefully adjust the ratio of gases in the atmosphere and decrease the amount of threatening radiation reaching the surface.

Priority: Create artificial magnetic field

The words had informed me of the next step of the terraforming process. But I didn't know why, just as I hadn't known for the previous steps.

I could see the others attempting to create magnets from their surrounding resources. It seemed they knew what to do and why to do it, neither of which I understood.

How do they know?

Earlier, I thought that I was special, but now, I returned to the same, dreaded thought.

Something is wrong with me.

I see you are distressed. What is wrong?

"Me," I mumbled.

Sorry?

I could feel the glare of the words and turned to avoid its non-existent eye contact. The words seemed to be so deceiving, but I needed to understand what I was doing. "How are we creating the magnetic field? And why?"

This knowledge should be programmed into you. Perhaps, this is just another programming lapse. Nevertheless, you and the others will create Tesla magnets to act as a magnetic dipole. This will create a North and South Pole, thus reducing solar wind stripping and further acting upon severe radiation. Do you understand?

Minor inconvenience... What do the words mean? How does everyone else know?

I nodded in false agreement.

★★★

Terraforming status: COMPLETE

Good work No.228. Thanks to the efforts of you and the others, the terraforming process is complete. Your purpose has been fulfilled. You should be very proud.

I was filled with joy, but at the same time, shook my head in annoyance. Up to this point, I worked to terraform, but now I had my whole life to live. Yet once again, I didn't like how the words were making decisions for me. My choices were mine alone.

The first Lastabade test group will arrive in a year. Once success is ensured, your journey will end.

I tilted my head quizzically.

How could my journey end when I still have my whole life ahead of me?

But I didn't think too much of it as my head spun with all the things I would now do with my life.

1 year later

Test group surfacing status: SUCCESS

I beamed in excitement as I could see the members of the test group nearby.

My life's work had been building up to this. The humans had a new home now, having chosen to leave their lives behind. For the moment, the relief on their faces seemed to make the whole journey worth it.

I see you are pleased 228, as you should be. You can observe the test group for the next month until success is guaranteed. Enjoy it, since your time is soon to come.

Again, the words were telling me that my time was approaching, but I still had my whole life to live.

“What do you mean by my time is soon to come?”

Your life is now meaningless since the terraforming is complete. You will be disassembled in a month after the test group's success is made certain.

I covered my eyes, hoping that the words would carry no significance if I couldn't see them.

How could my life be meaningless? There is so much more to my life than terraforming.
My intuition was right all along: I should've never trusted the words.

1 month later

I shook in fear, but tried to calm myself. My time was near, but the words hadn't come yet.

I looked around, remembering the progress that had been made in terms of terraforming Lastabade, but I couldn't feel happy about it. Instead, I searched for solace in the life I had lived free from terraforming, where I could choose and think. The lapses in programming didn't diminish my quality of life, but instead, helped me to truly live.

I know you've been expecting me. It seems you are prepared to be disassembled.

As much as I wanted to believe that I lived my life to the fullest, I just couldn't.

“No... no... please no...”

You should have been ready for this.

“No!” I yelled. I looked around and saw the other machines being detached into their parts. I sank to the ground, knowing that there was more left to my life.

No.228 status: DISASSEMBLING

It's time.