

Setting Overview:

In a distant future where the wealthy and elite of humanity have long since abandoned an inhospitable Earth, those who remain face total extinction. In a desperate final bid to find a way to save themselves and learn why the first ships never returned, a single colony ship has been cobbled together with the last remnants of materials left behind by those who left before.

Due to the extremely limited resources, only a handful of people can be provisioned to make the long journey. Twenty-two living souls, the last experts of their field, are chosen by lottery and discipline to be the Solar Collective; the last humans to leave Earth.

This story follows Iris Lark, an Earth-scavenger who cheated her way into the role of the ship's botanist by falsifying her credentials and rigging the lottery system. Several months into their journey, while scavenging yet another derelict colony ship, she finally encounters a functioning Umbra; a portable hologram device imprinted with a snapshot of the knowledge and personality of a living human.

This particular Umbra is an imprint of famed horticultural biologist Conor Whelan, a man who had spent his life researching sustainable agriculture methods that might function in a post-climate-crisis Earth. He had died more than a hundred years before Iris was born.

Umbra aren't truly sentient, and are thus diminished in their reactive capability. While they have a limited memory, able to recall conversations that they've had with their users unless reset or damaged, they are unable to process entirely new information. As such, an Umbra will often perceive their user as someone that they knew in life. If asked about a concept or situation that they were unaware of at the time of the snapshot, they will be unable to process that information in a meaningful or helpful way.

Scene 1, synopsis:

After weeks of failed attempts, Iris has finally managed to get the Umbra she scavenged to activate. To her delight, the device's long-term memory seems largely intact, having survived whatever electromagnetic interference that had scrambled all of the others she had come across up to this point.

Her immediate elation is somewhat impeded by the fact that the Umbra's personality seems more interested in games and idle chat as she tries to get the device into a working state before any of her fellow crew wonder where she is or what she's doing.

Scene 2, synopsis:

Several days later, Iris has completed all functional diagnostics on the Umbra, discovering that none of its former short-term memories are intact. She has also learned that the damage it sustained has also made tweaking any of the personality protocols impossible at her current skill level. However, Conor's knowledge and expertise on plant life are all still present, and should be immensely useful to her, provided she can navigate the man within the machine.

Iris has brought a sample of one of their shipboard crops, which seems to be suffering from some sort of blight, causing the crew to have to cut down to half rations until their botanist can resolve it. She hopes that Conor will be the answer she's been lacking.

Scene 1: (Dialogue only)

IRIS

Fucking finally. I knew you were hiding in there. Just had to figure out how to get you unstuck. Now, tell me who you are; full diagnostics please. Just don't be broken.

CONOR

Diagnostic report: long-term memory cores functional at eighty-six percent. Short-term memory cores damaged, functional at fifty-three percent. Repair recommended. Advise caution when powering down; short term memory partitioning may cause anomalous instability.

Melody, language, please. You know that swearing is a sign of a poor vocabulary. Your mother and I taught you better than that.

IRIS

Melody? Who's M.. Right, you ghosts can't learn new faces, can you? Okay then, sure, call me Melody. But I can't help but notice that you didn't tell me who you are. I need your name and area of study. You're not much use to me if the important bits aren't in there.

CONOR

You've been an imaginative child since your first full sentence, dewdrop. Okay, I'll play along. Conor Whelan, horticultural biologist, but I liked it better when you used to call me flower-dad.

IRIS

That is pretty much exactly what I needed to hear. I could do without the sappy stuff though. Diagnostics: reduce Umbra personality presence by twenty-five percent.

Okay Conor, you and I are going to be spending a good chunk of time together so I think it's best we establish the ground rules. First, nobody can know that you're here; that means that whenever I walk away you go into standby mode. If you detect anyone else coming, you go into standby mode. You don't go active unless I give you a passphrase... Shit, we'll have to come up with a passphrase...

Conor, when I was younger did we have any secret codes or special games that mom didn't know about?

CONOR

Umbra personality reduction failed.

You know that we don't keep secrets from one another, honeybee. Codes and ciphers were more of your mother's line of work, anyway. But if we're playing one of your games then you can always count on Dad.

IRIS

Failed? That's... mildly concerning. Ah well, sounds like a problem for future Iris. If I don't get back up to mess soon then they'll definitely send somebody looking for me again.

Diagnostics: set access passphrase Honeybee.

Conor, I'm leaving now, but I'll be back soon. Don't go anywhere without me. You remember the rules, right?

CONOR

Of course, Melody. Be safe. I love you.

Scene 2. (Dialogue Only)

IRIS

Honeybee.

Rise and shine, Conor. We've got a doozy of a problem, and you're the only man I can trust to help me fix it.

CONOR

Melody, it's great to see you again, and so soon. You're looking thin, darling; are you eating well? If your colleagues are still picking on you I'd be more than happy to have a word with them.

IRIS

Look, Conor, I'm gonna need you to drop the doting-dad act. I know you're smart enough; I've seen the code that makes you tick. Hell, I've been all up in your guts trying to figure out how to undo some of the personality protocols and that shit is tighter than the captain's puritanical asshole.

I don't care who it is, but you're going to need to pick someone else to see me as.

CONOR

Language, please, Melody. I don't know when you started speaking like this, but it's really unbecoming for a woman of your intellect. I know we've had our differences in the past, but the way I feel about you isn't an act. As your father I just want what's best for you. You have so much potential.

Now, tell me about this problem. And let's try to avoid the pottymouth, ok?

IRIS

Yes sir, Mr. Whelan sir! Though I'd love to watch you try to figure out how to magic up some digital soap to scrub my mouth out with..

CONOR

Melody, you may be grown, but maturity and age don't always go hand in hand. You were the one that asked for *my* help, remember? Though I suppose there's nothing for it; you *did* inherit that rebellious streak from me after all.

IRIS

You know, the first time I ran into one of you ghosts it was in an old museum. A tour guide that traveled from exhibit to exhibit. Thing is, he seemed to know what he was. Fully aware that he was just a bunch of ones and zeroes tied to his base stations. Yet with you it's all "honeybee" this, "dewdrop" that, and if I didn't know any better, I might think you actually believe you're still alive.

CONOR

Warning; continued interference with 4th-wall sanity-preservation protocol risks catastrophic destabilization. Long-term memory degradation possible. Initiating rollback.

Now, tell me about this problem. And let's try to avoid the pottymouth, ok?

IRIS

Sorry... dad. That rebellious streak comes from your side of the family, you know.

The issue is our plant protein. Something's killing off all of the legume sprouts and I think it might be spreading to some of the other crops. Nothing I've tried is working. And If I don't keep the crew fed they might start asking questions that I can't afford to answer.

CONOR

I'm sorry you're having trouble with your legumes, honeybee. Smart thinking, bringing some with you, though! It's always easier to diagnose a problem when you can see it. Why don't you bring that tray over here into the light so I can get a closer look?

IRIS

Sure thing Conor. Here; see the white spots on the underside of the leaves? And how the stems are all chewed up? I thought maybe it was a mold, or one of the creepy crawlies that sneaked on board for a free lunch. The fixes I've tried have been about as effective as prayer and without these we starve.

CONOR

Hmm. You were doing the right thing, but not enough of it. What you've got here is a rare mold carried by insects that love crop vegetables. From what I can see you've already taken care of the bugs, but the solution you're missing is more light and dryer air. Go back to your grow area, reduce the moisture, and crank up the UV. You'll kill the mold before you kill the plants, and most of the crop should survive.

Good luck, dewdrop. Let me know how it goes.