

SHORT STORY COLLECTION

Historical Short Stories...

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Dreams Forsaken

“So why am I here, exactly?” queried my nineteen-year-old niece as she sat next to me. The lantern I had placed beside us cast flickering light throughout the abandoned tannery’s darkened interior. Eerie, dust-laden cobwebs clung to every wooden beam, workbench and table, causing her to shudder.

I glanced at her innocent face untouched by grief, and wished yet again that I had been born in her day rather than mine. “For emotional support.”

“Then I’m not in any danger, Aunt Margryte?” she asked unsurely.

“Of course not, Geruscha,” I said while smoothing down a ruffle in my threadbare black mourning dress.

“Do you know who owns this place?”

“I used to. Well, I guess I still do.” Memories of better days from decades past superimposed themselves over broken chairs and dilapidated benches. I bit my lip to keep deep inner pain at bay.

“So why don’t you sell it? Seems structurally intact; surely there’s a tanner who would buy it from you?”

“You ask a lot of questions, Geruscha,” I protested.

“You did ask me to come tonight,” she pouted.

“So I did. I keep this place because it suits my purposes on the odd occasion, such as tonight,” I answered after a moment.

Geruscha’s next question died on her lips when the front door swept open to admit a badly scarred man dressed in the garb of a common mercenary. I laid a hand on her forearm to reassure her.

Aged wooden floorboards groaned under unaccustomed weight as the man approached us. Cold eyes met mine, and then studied my niece as though she was a horse for sale. “Who’s this?” he grunted.

“This is Geruscha, my niece,” I replied in an icy tone that matched his expression.

“Why is she here?” he snapped.

“Well, let me see,” I said dramatically, “perhaps to add some light to these enchanting clandestine meetings we have.”

Returning his attention to me, the man slapped a cloth purse on the run-down table before us. I refused to give him the satisfaction of acknowledging the money.

Anger flashed briefly in his eyes. “Will you not even inquire as to my progress?”

“Oh, why not, since it obviously means so much to you. Tell me, what you have achieved of late?”

He held up three fingers. “It took me nigh on three years to comb every inch of Stühlingen, but thirteen more of our enemies have been brought to justice.”

I leaned forward slightly, careful not to overbalance the rickety chair. “Do you feel better now? Did you find this gratifying?”

He was not impressed. “It is not about satisfaction. It is about justice.”

“You mean revenge,” I clarified.

“Whatever,” he snarled. “You know this has to be done, Margryte. Those men must be brought to justice for the magnitude of their crimes. I will not permit those murdering vermin to do such heinous deeds and then simply melt back into society by assuming new identities.”

A cloud of dust swirled upward into twinkling lantern light as I plucked the purse from the table.

“That was twenty-five years ago. When will you tire of this quest?”

“When I’ve found them all, Margryte, and not before,” he said before quitting the tannery without a backward glance. He vanished into the midnight air.

My niece found her voice. “Who was that man, Margryte?”

“My husband, Geruscha,” I admitted.

“Walther Sighard? I thought he perished in the Peasants’ War of 1525,” she exclaimed.

“That’s what he wants them to think, Geruscha.”

“Them, Aunt Margryte? You mean the leaders of the revolt?” she pressed.

“Not just the leaders, Geruscha, all of the insurgents who perpetrated the massacre of Weinsberg. In the past twenty-five years he has hunted down and slain over ninety of them,” I answered from a great distance.

“But, Lady Margryte, you sound as though you disapprove. Did not those rebels kill your parents and two of your sisters, as well as hundreds of our people?”

I nodded. "Yes, they did. But you know? I had thought us lucky when we survived. We still had each other, two darling little boys, and this tannery. I wanted to get on with our lives, but not Walther. He became obsessed with revenge--an obsession that cost him not only a loving family that needed him--but also his dreams and future. Tonight was the fifth time I have seen him in twenty-five years."

"I don't know what to say, Aunt Margryte."

"Just walk me home, Geruscha."

The Strays

Metal-shod hooves clattered noisily upon the castle courtyard's cobblestones. Sir Tristram de Villeroi and his score of men-at-arms had returned.

Undaunted by the incessant rain falling from an oppressively dark sky, the lady of the castle hastened forth from the imposing great keep, lifting the hem of her dress off the wet cobblestones. "What news, my lord?" she asked.

Rain cascaded down his nose as Sir Tristram de Villeroi looked down at his petite wife, "We were too late, my lady."

"Baron Gillet and his family, my lord?" she asked, crestfallen.

"Alas, the rebels' dastardly work was all but done when we arrived, dear wife. They came at us like madmen and only fled after we hewed many with axe and sword."

"So the baron's whole family, murdered?"

Tristram opened his riding cloak to reveal a young slip of a girl wearing a linen nightshirt huddled against his armored chest. "All but this one - do you know her? She appears bereft of her senses."

Lady Isabelle reached up and took the girl into her arms. "I do - her name is Jehennette. She is...she was, Baron Gillet's youngest. She is ten, I believe."

"Best get her fireside before she catches a death of a chill, my lady. I will join you shortly."



* * *

"What happened out there, Husband?" Isabelle asked from her wooden stool before the hearth. Having bathed and dressed in warm nightclothes, ten-year-old Jehennette slept fitfully before the roaring fire.

Sir Tristram did not answer immediately, and when it came, he spoke as though from a great distance. "Incomprehensible barbarity - these peasant rebels are worse than wild dogs. What they did to that girl's parents and brothers..." Distraught, his words trailed off. "My every waking thought is haunted by that scene. And knowing that little Jehennette here had been forced to watch, knowing her turn was coming...it is more than I can bear."

A female grey cat detached itself from the shadows and butted her head against Tristram's arm. He scratched her chin, and she purred loudly in response.

"And yet you saved her, Tristram - that has to count for something. I just hope we can accommodate Jehennette better than the last stray you brought home."

"What? I thought the cat was making good progress," he said, stroking the feline's back.

"Progress? When you are absent, she hides in every nook and cranny and attacks me, our sons - even the servants - in a frenzy of slashing claws and biting teeth whenever we walk past. Behold my shins!" Isabelle lifted the hem of her dress, revealing painful injuries. "You said Edine could be a family pet, not yours alone!"

Sir Tristram ran his fingers over the cat's collar. "She wears a jeweled collar, my wife."

"What of it, my lord?"

“It means she was a noble’s pet and therefore tame. She can be tame again.” Tristram scratched the cat’s chin and indicated Jehennette with a nod. “The cat needs time to find her way back to normal life, and so does Jehennette. With time comes healing.”

Lady Isabelle looked at the girl sleeping before the fire. “I hope so, my lord. Poor child, she gave no indication that she was even aware of our presence while we bathed and dressed her. My heart broke a thousand times over.”

Tristram rose to his feet. “I will help as I can, my lady, but now must take my leave. King Charles of Navarre assembles an army at Beauvais to crush the rebels and has requested that I join him with half my men.”

“Take care, Husband.”

“And you, my wife. Keep the gates barred at all times until I return.”

* * *

Three weeks later, Sir Tristram and his retinue returned.

“Good news, Husband?” asked Lady Isabelle as the husband dismounted in the courtyard.

“The rebellion has been crushed and the dissidents dispersed, my lady. But what news do you bear - what of our two strays?”

Lady Isabelle pointed towards the stables. Tristram was surprised to see Jehennette sitting with her back against a stable door, stroking the cat as it lay contentedly on her lap. “After you left, the cat slept with Jehennette. From that moment, they have been inseparable. Although Jehennette is yet to speak, she does acknowledge our words. And the cat? It seems we have a pet after all - she no longer attacks us.”

Tristram made his way quietly over to the girl and feline and knelt beside them. Jehennette continued petting the cat, but did not look up.

“I rescued the cat from a storm too, you know, much like I did you,” said Tristram.

“Then we are both strays,” the girl said softly. Edine purred blissfully.

Tristram scratched the cat’s chin as waves of relief fled through him - she spoke to him! “She was a stray, and driven almost feral by her ordeal. And though she could have left at any time she chose to stay and became part of our family.”

Jehennette sought out his eyes hesitantly.

“You, too, are welcome to stay. Our family has room for one more,” he said kindly.

Jehennette examined the cat’s yellow-green eyes. “She has found peace here. Perhaps I will too. I will stay.”

In 1358 AD, northern France was terrorized by a popular peasant revolt. Over one hundred castles and homes of the nobility were attacked, the inhabitants brutally slaughtered. A pretender for the throne, Charles the Bad of Navarre, crushed the revolt on June 10.

Border Reivers

Alone in the castle's deserted courtyard, Ryan Bonfield stood while contemplating the events that had occurred there twelve years ago this day. Although he would pay homage to the family members who had perished that fateful day, his main purpose in returning was to confront the demons released into his life by those events.

Neglected, the castle had fallen into ruin. Once powerful battlements, now little more than crumbling stones, were disappearing rapidly beneath the relentless advances of voracious vines. Bushes and weeds flourished in cracks found between the courtyard's cobblestones.



Ryan cast his gaze upon the ramparts where he had last seen his father, the castle's lord. He bit his lip as terrifying memories leapt unbidden to his mind: the ferocious Border Reivers as they came swarming over the walls, his father attempting to fight them off virtually single handedly. His terrified, cowardly response of hiding behind a secret wall panel: and creeping back outside hours later to find the castle's few occupants, including his father, stepmother, and two stepbrothers, put to the sword.

"Hello Ryan," said a woman from behind him.

Startled, Ryan jumped and span around. The beautiful, wealthy woman standing there was disturbingly familiar. "Mistress?" he asked unsurely.

"There is no longer any need to address me as 'mistress,' Brother," she said, walking slowly over to him.

"You have never called me that before, Mistress," he replied, respectfully averting his gaze. Two years his senior, his stepsister had survived that fateful day's massacre by hiding in an alcove beneath a stairwell.

"Please, Ryan, my name is Miriam."

"Very well, Miriam." He looked up. "You are here today to pay homage to your--to our--family?"

"Actually, no. This is the seventh year in a row that I have come here on this day, and it has never been to pay homage to the deceased."

"Really? Then for what reason do you come here?" he asked, perplexed.

"Why, to look for you, of course," she admitted.

"Why would you want to see me, Miriam? I am nothing but a worthless coward."

"You must not speak of yourself so, Brother. I am the coward, not you. I needed courage to overlook Father's infidelity and accept you into the family after your mother died, but I took the easy way out and persecuted you alongside my mother. As my brother, you had as much right to be part the family as me, yet I treated the lowliest of our servants with more kindness than I did you. Please forgive me, Ryan."

"I deserve only your contempt and loathing, Miriam, not your apology."

"Why do you say that, Brother? Why do you hate yourself so? I could never understand why you ran away from our Uncle's home after he rescued us, those twelve years ago."

Ryan answer came as though from a great distance. "I was standing right here, on this very spot, when the Border Reivers came swarming over the walls. I watched Father trying to fight them off. I heard him call 'Ryan, Ryan!' as they bowled him over. I knew I should have gone to his aid, but I was so scared that I ran and hid instead! What more damning evidence do you need than this, Sister?"

Miriam touched his hand. "Oh Ryan, is that what has been troubling you? Are you not aware that I witnessed the whole incident from that window up there? Father did not say, 'Ryan, Ryan!' He said, 'Run, Ryan!' Do you understand the significance of this, Brother? When confronted with death, Father's first concern was not for me, my mother or for my brothers, but for you..."

"His bastard son?"

"No! For you, his eldest son, and heir," she concluded.

"Heir?"

"Yes, Ryan. Uncle Michael found Father's will when he returned to the castle to recover any items of value overlooked by the Reivers. The will named you his successor. Ryan. You should also know that since Uncle Michael passed away, I have managed not only his estates, but also our family's holdings and investments. I have done this in your name, not mine. Please come home with me, and take your rightful place as lord of our family. My husband and I are your humble servants, Brother."

"Husband?"

"And three children."

"Three children?" Ryan smiled for the first time in twelve years. "Lead the way, Sister."

Historical Note:

For nearly three centuries, beginning in the late thirteenth century, Scottish and English Border Reivers, or mounted raiders, terrorised both sides of the Anglo-Scottish border.

Have You Seen My Squire?

"Good evening, captain," I said as I approached the castle gatehouse. The afternoon air was becoming quite frigid.

"Good evening, Sir Carl," he replied hesitantly.

"Have you seen my squire, captain? He was supposed to clean my horse's armour and then bring the horse to the village to be re-shod," I queried.

"Ah, well, sir, I think Squire Anthony is hiding," the captain stammered.

"Hiding from whom?" I asked.

"From you, sir," the captain admitted.

"And why would that be, captain?" I pressed.

"Have you looked in the moat, sir?" he replied while tugging at his collar.

"No, I have not."

"Then perhaps you should, sir," the captain suggested.

Upon walking to the side of the drawbridge I received a quite a shock. "Ah, captain, what is my horse doing in the moat?"

"Well, sir, perhaps you should ask your squire that question," the captain recommended as we took in the scene below. A dozen guards were trying to save my horse. One held the stallion's head while the others worked to remove the chainmail armour. Once removed, they would use a trebuchet on the castle wall above to lift the horse out of the shoulder depth waters.

"I will, captain, as soon as I find him," I announced while resisting the urge to tell the men below to be careful. I headed off to my squire's usual hideout. The fourteen-year-old boy had only recently entered my service.

I opened the door to the gatehouse's interior and bellowed, "Squire, show yourself right now or I'll affix you to the drawbridge next time it lowers!"

A scrawny lad jumped out from the shadows to stand in front of me. He was soaking wet. "Sir Carl, please don't kill me! I'm so sorry about your horse - honest!"

"Squire," I said softly.

"Yes sir?" he wailed.

"Why is my horse in the moat?"

"Well, sir, um, you know how you asked me to clean your horse's armour?" he began unsurely.

"Yes," I said this *very* slowly.

"Well, um, I had this great idea of cleaning it with water," he continued.

"Right," I said this slowly too.

"So, I thought to myself, why bring heavy buckets of water to the armour, when I could take the armour to the water," he explained.

"Where does my horse fit into this, squire?" I prompted.

"Well, you see, I needed someone to help me carry the heavy armour, and who better than someone who carries it on a regular basis. So, I put the armour on your horse, grabbed a bucket and a rope, and took your horse to the moat. You know, so I could use *that* water," he clarified.

"And how did the horse end up *in* the moat, squire?"

"Well, we, ah, kind of slipped on the muddy bank, sir. Both me and the horse - right into the moat," he admitted shamefully.

"I see. Then why are you here, hiding in the gatehouse, instead of helping get my horse out of the moat?" I demanded.

"Sorry, sir, but I was so scared you'd skin me alive that I just bolted and hid here," he squeaked.

"Squire, can I ask you a simple question?" I began.

"Oh course, sir."

"How are you supposed to clean chainmail armour?" I asked.

I think a lantern lit up over his head. "Oh! By putting it piece by piece in a bag of sand, and then shaking the bag, sir."

"So why didn't you do that?" I queried.

"Oh, oops. I, um, forgot, sir," he replied.

"What happens when chainmail armour gets wet, squire?"

He looked mortified. "Oh dear – I forgot all about that, sir. It rusts, doesn't it?"

I laid a hand on his arm. "Look, squire, honestly, this is not the end of the world. Although the armour is probably ruined, I can get the armourer to make a new set. The important thing is that you are okay, as will be the horse once they pull him out of the moat."

Squire Anthony looked at me incredulously, "What - you're not going to skin me alive, sir?"

I ruffled his hair, "No, Anthony. I know you're clumsy and don't listen so well, but you'll get there eventually. Besides, you remind me of myself when I was a young squire..."

"Really?" he said keenly.

"Yes, but not *that* much. I never put *my* master's horse in the moat!"



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Other
Short Stories...



The Only Message They Heed

“Thanks for the lift, Mikhail,” I said.

“Don’t mention it, cousin. Welcome back,” he grunted.

“You’ve changed,” I said, aware that a permanent scowl now marred his once jovial features.

“A lot happened while you were at uni, Alexei, it’s not the same world...” He broke off as his phone rang. He flipped it open while keeping the other hand on the wheel. “Mikhail...What? Again? Don’t these people learn?...No, no, I’ll deal with it...No, stay put--I’ll come to you. You’re near the bridge?...Fine, see you in ten.”

“Something wrong?” I asked.

“Nah, just a bit of house cleaning to take care of. It’ll only take a few minutes--then I’ll drop you home.”

With a near inhuman display of mechanical precision, Mikhail drove off the highway and followed a dirt road into Vojislav Wood. Uneasiness spread through me like a malevolent cancerous growth. Who was this stranger beside me? What had happened to the carefree, fun loving prankster with whom I had spent my youth?

Mikhail drove off the track into the small clearing to the left of the bridge that spanned Vojislav River.

Three people awaited us in the clearing. Two unkempt, rugged young men held a woman with a dark complexion between them. Tears stained her dust-caked cheeks. Gnawing doubt blossomed into fear.

Mikhail took a pistol from the glove box. “Come or stay, don’t care either way. Just don’t get in the way.”

While at uni, I had heard rumours of bad things happening out here near the border. Jumping out of the 4WD to walk beside my cousin, I tried vainly to reassure myself that he could not possibly be part of such insanity.

As we drew closer, I realised that the men were not restraining a woman but a teenage ethnic girl. She had probably been using the wood as a shortcut to get home from a part-time job. Her eyes widened at the sight of the gun.

“Kneel down and put your hands on your thighs,” Mikhail snapped as he chambered a round.

Whimpering helplessly, she shook her head.

Mikhail pressed the gun against her stomach. “You can have it in the guts or the back of the head--your choice.”

I stepped forward. “Mikhail, you’re freaking me out! Let the girl go.”

Deadpan eyes met mine. “I told you not to get in the way, Alexei.”

“What has she done to you?” I demanded.

“These ethnic filth take our jobs and our land--and spread their insidious religion everywhere they go. If we don’t act, our heritage, our society, will be destroyed.”

“Violence is not the solution, Mikhail.”

“It’s the only message they heed, Alexei.”

Desperate to find a solution to this problem, I was suddenly struck by an uncanny but unmistakable resemblance between this girl and a certain photo in our family album back home. Although shocked by this revelation, it also gave me strength. I pushed the gun to one side.

“Back off, Alexei,” warned my cousin.

Ignoring him, I lifted the girl’s narrow chin. “Your great-grandmother, what was her name?”

She looked at me blankly.

“Come on!” I all but shouted. “Your great-grandmother was famous. Tell us her name!”

“Asiya,” she stammered.

“Tell us her whole name!”

Her dark eyes darted about frantically.

“Come on girl, think!”

“Shamil! Asiya Shamil!”

From the corner of my eye, I saw Mikhail jolt as though struck.

“Recognise that name, cousin?” I said, refusing to relinquish my grip on the gun.

“What?”

“Do you recognise the name?”

“Yes, damn you! She’s our great-grandmother. But this girl...related to us...how did you know?”

“Because I can see her resemblance to our great-grandmother. However, that’s not important - what is important is that this girl is our cousin,” I concluded.

“Your great-grandmother’s one of them?” one of Mikhail’s comrades asked, aghast.

I was unsure whom Mikhail hated more at that moment, the girl, or me.

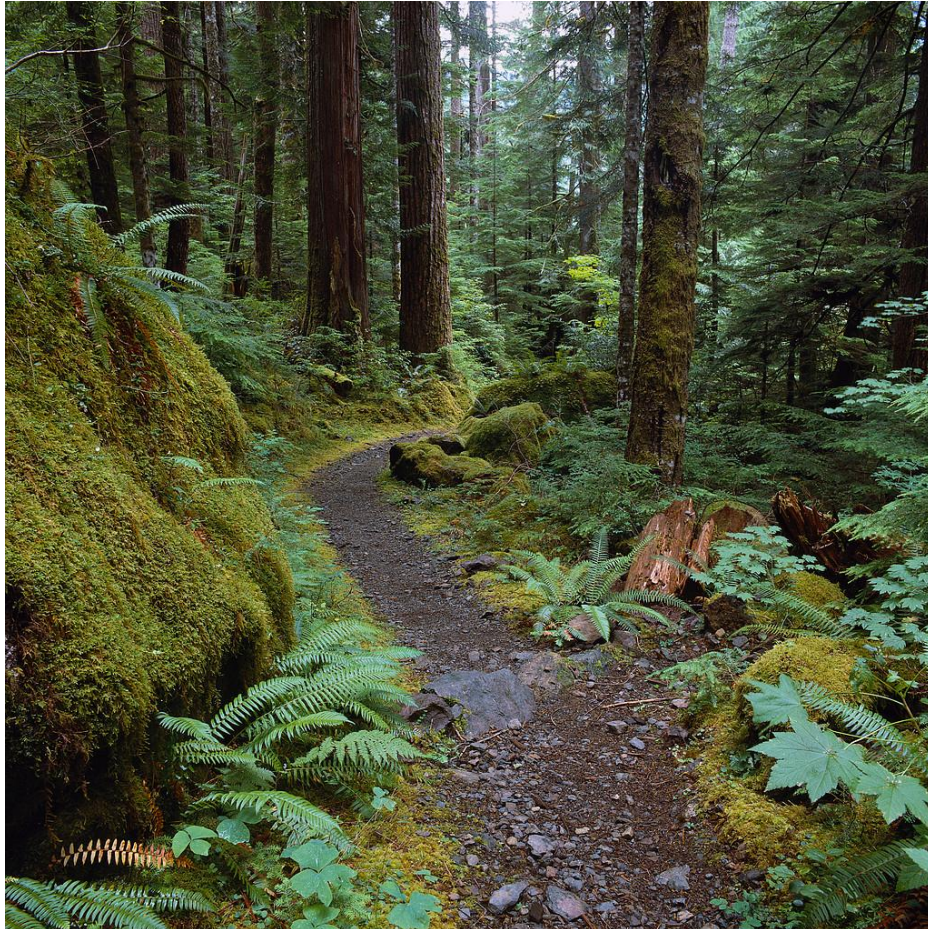
Drawing the girl from the slackening grasp of her captors, I put my arm around her protectively.

“Come, cousin, I will walk you home,” I said to her.

“Don’t make me shoot you too, Alexei!” Mikhail threatened, aiming the gun at me now.

“Don’t you get it, Mikhail? Do you have any idea what you’ve been doing with all this ethnic cleansing? If you go far enough back through the generations, you will find that our two nations share the same ancestors--we are all cousins! You’ve been killing your own family!”

I escorted the girl safely to her home.



The Waitress

“Hey guys, that cute waitress Natasha isn’t here today!” protested Henry as we took our seats in Bill’s Diner.

“Huh?” puzzled Jase in all seriousness. “Don’t we come here for the food?”

After a pause, we answered as one. “Nah – for Natasha.”

Nothing was sacred to my friends, they sent up everyone and everything in a way that kept me amused for hours.

“Oh please tell me *she*’s not Natasha’s replacement,” Henry pined as a middle aged waitress headed for our table.

“May I take your order?” she asked. Her speech impediment and inexpensive hearing aides reminded me of Megan, a deaf girl I had met at the gym two months ago. She was the cutest thing to walk

the earth so I had finally asked her out. She had responded by inviting me to have dinner at her folk's place tonight.

"Whoa, what's wrong with your voice, lady?" Jase piped up.

"I'm deaf," she replied.

"Sorry, what was that?" Jase asked.

"I'm deaf," she repeated patiently.

"Sorry, what was that?" Jase asked again.

Tom lost it, "Oh man, Jase, you're just too good!"

"I'm d..." The waitress trailed off when she saw my friends laughing. Obviously hurt, she frowned at Jase.

"Do you want to order, young man?"

"Toasted cheese and tomato sandwich thanks," Barry announced.

The waitress turned to face Barry, "Sorry, again please?"

"Man, what is this? We have to say everything twice now!" he snapped so rudely that I jolted visibly. I hoped no one treated Megan this way. "I said I'll have a *toasted cheese and tomato sandwich!*"

"Hit me with the chicken schnitzel," declared Jase.

"Sorry, did you say chicken?" she queried somewhat hesitantly.

"Oh man, buy some proper hearing aides." Although spoken softly for our benefit, I was horrified to see the waitress watching Jase's lips and not his eyes. "CHICKEN SCHNITZEL!" He practically shouted.

Covering my mouth with a menu, I gestured to my friend, "Be careful, Jase: she's a lip reader. And she probably can't afford good hearing aides – they're nine thousand dollars a pair."

"How would you know that?" he shot back.

"Ah, I just heard it, that's all," I muttered, too embarrassed to let on that I was dating a deaf girl.

"If she read my lips, too bad. Maybe she'll get the hint and get another job. Then these idiots can hire a waitress who can actually hear the customers!" was his comeback.

Seeing the waitress on the verge of tears, I quickly changed the topic by giving her my order.

It was six that evening when I reached Megan's house.

Nervous at the prospect of meeting her parents, I rang the doorbell. And then almost died when the deaf waitress, sporting tear stained cheeks, opened the door. "You! Haven't you and your friends done enough damage today? Do you know how hard it is for a deaf woman my age to get a job?"

"Look, ah, I'm so sorry for the way my friends behaved today, but you must have noticed that I didn't join in?" I objected weakly.

"They're your friends, and you spend time with them of your own choice, yes? That means you're as bad as they are," she said angrily.

I wanted to protest my innocence, but she was right. I chose to spend my time with those guys, and chose to delight in their sarcastic wit. A sobering thought suddenly occurred to me – was I becoming like them? "Look, um, I should have stuck up for you by telling them to back off. Or perhaps walked out on them." *But was too scared to risk losing their friendship.*

"Why are you here?" she asked, suddenly suspicious.

That should have been my cue to disappear, but instead, I put my foot in my mouth. "Um, does Megan live here?"

"Megan? You know my daughter?" Comprehension dawned on her face. "Oh no, surely you're not that new boy she's been seeing?"

"Ah, um, yes. Look, I know I look like a heel right now, but can we please..."

"That's enough! I forbid you to see Megan ever again!" The door slammed in my face.

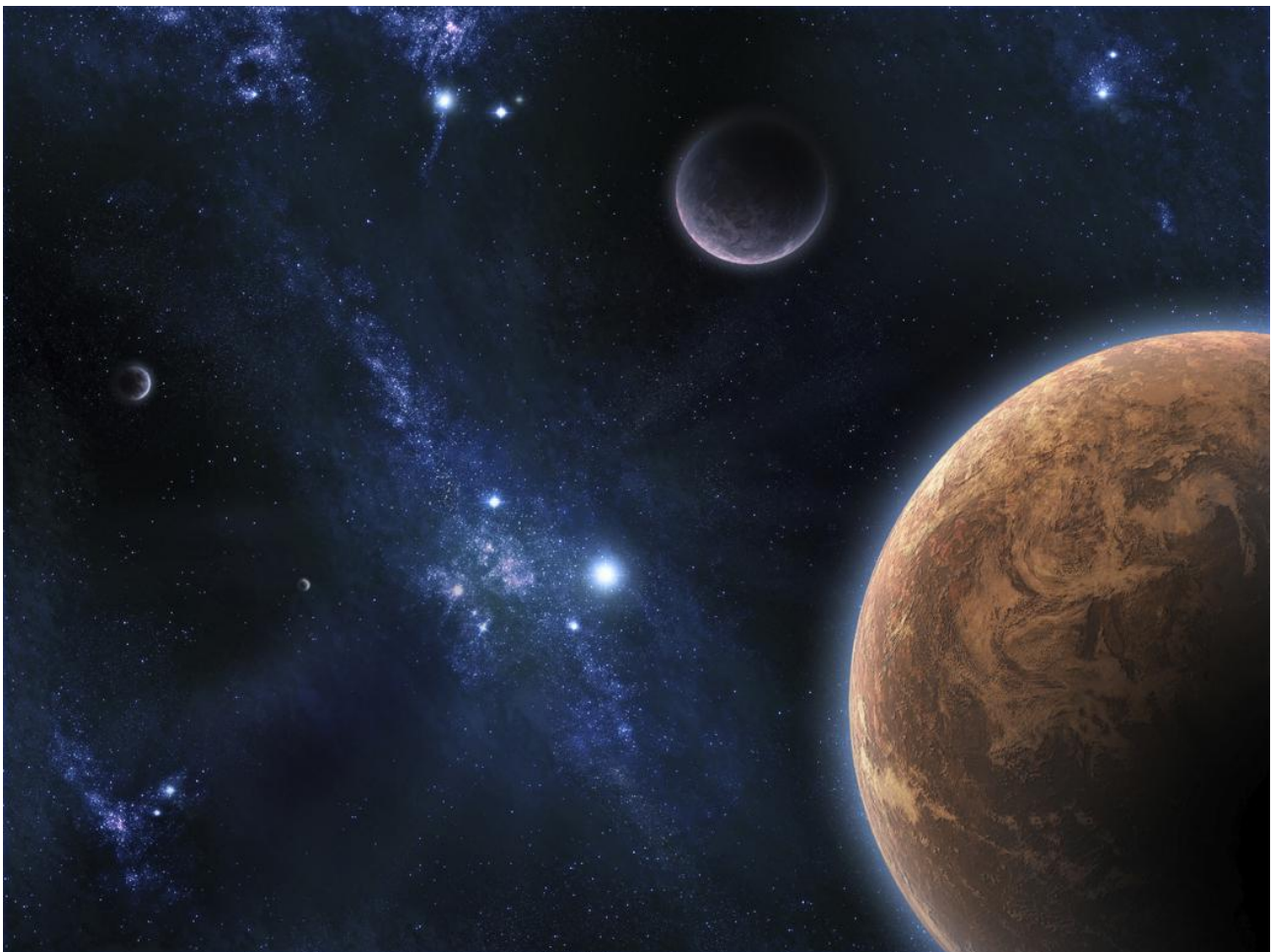
My mobile had the audacity to intrude upon my despondency as I headed back to the station. However, when the caller ID revealed the caller to be Jase, I returned it unanswered to my pocket. *Sorry Jase, if I'm to have any chance of making it up to Megan and her mum, I think it's time I found myself some new friends.*

SHORT STORY

COLLECTION

Sci-fi

Short Stories...



Replicate

“The CD cases and discs are covered with scuff marks - these ain’t bootlegs - they’re the genuine article! Where’d you get them, Sis? They’re practically priceless!” I gasped.

Sitting beside me on the bunk bed, Katiana squeezed my hand. “Happy Birthday, Bro. You are happy, right?”

“You think I’m faking this, Kiddo? I’ve been searching for these antiques for decades. And here you are giving me all three twenty-first century Ami Takahashi *Virtual trance presents ami trance* albums!” Although elated, a glance at her ruined face sent excruciating pangs of guilt shooting through my stomach. Decades had passed since she took that bullet in the face, but I would never become accustomed to the sight of her once beautiful features marred by translucent synthetic skin covering polymer muscles and ceramic bone replacements.

“Thought you’d be pleased.”

“Pleased doesn’t even begin to describe it, Sis,” I said. “I want to hear them now - you think I can skip the presentation?”

“Come on, Mike, you’re a war hero. Go get your medal. Then we can jack into the net and pop these albums on continuous play until we’re all ‘tranced’ out.”

With great reluctance I handed the discs back to her and stood to straighten my uniform.

Reality, however, took a right turn into the realm of hallucinatory dreams when the *ami trance 2* disc disintegrated into a cloud of microscopic dust - dust which of its own accord preceded to envelope my sister’s exposed arm.

“Arrr... ungh... get them off me!” Katiana shrieked as her skin began absorbing the dust. It was like watching a mold spore’s explosion played backwards in slow motion.

I swatted frantically at the dust but this barely even impeded its progress. In a moment all traces of it were gone - assimilated by her arm. She tried to grab me but collapsed to the metal decking, back arched in agony while mouthing voiceless screams.

The door chimed.

This was no coincidence - the timing was too precise.

“Open,” I snapped.

The door swished open to admit two corporate-types in black suits and mirror shades: illegal arms dealers.

“What have you done to my sister?”

“Cooperate and we’ll remove the nanites. Don’t and we’ll let them replicate - inside her.”

“What do you want?”

A suit stepped forward. “The president pins a medal on your chest in two hours, Mister War Hero. Thanks to his orbital’s dampening field rendering our nanotech inactive, we can’t touch him. So you’re going to terminate him for us.”

Aghast, I looked at my sister as she writhed on the floor. Eight thousand orbitals had warred for seven centuries resulting in the deaths of millions. President Berenger not only brokered the ceasefire but also maintained the peace. Remove him, and the conflict would resume.

“You have any idea of how much she loves you? She spent a decade’s wages buying those ‘albums’ from us. You just gonna let us waste her?” the suit said.

His words cut to me to the core. But the proof of her selfless love for me was not these CDs, but her fearsome injuries - injuries that should have been mine. I hung my head, defeated. “I’ll do it.”

“Of course you will. Now hold out your left hand.”

The *ami trance 3* disc dissolved into another cloud of nanites that my outstretched left hand absorbed in seconds. Paralyzed, I watched in dismay as the nanites opened my hand, rebuilt the bones inside into a fully functional needle gun that was undetectable by known security devices, and then closed up the wound. The nanites poured back out of me.

“When Berenger pins the medal to your chest, make a fist, aim it at him, and squeeze the hand.”

I was trapped and I knew it. I made for the door.

The suit touched my shoulder on the way past. “It takes an hour for replicating nanites to consume a human host. I’m told the pain is beyond human comprehension. Don’t fail.”

President Berenger was pinning a medal on my copilot's chest. I was next.

I thought of my sister, contorted in agony, waiting for release. Her life was in my hand, literally. Two long centuries of memories flashed through my mind. Oh, the times we had spent together, the things we had seen. The support we had given to Berenger as he fought to end the chaos.

My face burned as guilt consumed me. Everything that so many had worked for, for so long, would collapse when I assassinated the only man whom could maintain the peace. The government would fall, chaos would ensue, the illegal arms traders would resume their lucrative business, and millions more would die as orbitals resumed open warfare - all because of me.

Anger raged through me at the unfairness of having been placed in such a predicament. I knew what I was about to do was wrong, but what choice did I have? That bounty hunter's bullet had my name on it, but my sister leapt in front of me, knowing what it would cost her. I owed her everything, and would not sacrifice her for some indeterminate greater good.

Unaware of his imminent doom, President Berenger stood before me. He shook my right hand while he placed the medal on my chest.

My pulse roared as I made a fist with my left hand and aimed it at his heart. One squeeze and it would be over. My sister would be safe, and the Orbital Coalition would collapse.

"Well done, Wing Commander Daniels," said the President. Then, for my ears only, "Thanks, Mike - I could not have done it without you."

I lowered the hand. "Forgive me, Sis," I mouthed.

A tear fell. My heart died.

"You okay, friend?" asked the President, about to move on.

"Emotional day, Sir."



She Danced Alone

I don't know what drew me into the nightclub, having never set foot in one before, but the Tokyo subculture fascinated me. And as I was to fly home tomorrow, this was my last opportunity to study it. All the same, I felt conspicuous. Not because I was a plainly dressed eighteen year old exchange student, but because I was the only guy in the club drinking straight orange juice.

That's when the Japanese harajuku girl came in. Petite yet knockout gorgeous in that dark purple white accented Gothic Lolita outfit with knee high boots. Her glossy black hair framed a doll-like heart-

shaped face. I watched, mesmerised, as she came over to the dance floor. She was so close that I could have reached out and touched her shoulder.

She began to dance, seemingly oblivious that she danced alone. However, it was the way she danced that caught my attention. Her movements were unnatural, almost mechanical; yet at the same time eerie.

Becoming aware of her awkward, uncoordinated dance steps, those around her moved quietly away. Meanwhile, several young men with outlandish hairstyles surrounded her, gawking as though she was an exhibit at a freak show.

"Henna no," one snarled. *She's weird.*

"Okashi na," said another. *She's strange.*

"Baka da yo!" the third affirmed. *She's an idiot!*

On impulse I slid off my stool. Slipping between them, I took the girl's hand and led her towards the exit.

"Doishite?" *Why?* she asked, confused.

"Those guys were mocking you," I stammered in broken Japanese.

"You are saving me?"

"I guess so."

"Ja, arigato." *In that case, thank you.* She was smiling now.

We made our way to a coffee house two floors up. I picked the seat facing the window so I could see Tokyo's neon illuminated buildings outside. She sat opposite with her back to the window.

The floor, no, the entire building, began to sway from side to side, gently at first, then with increasing intensity. Did they slip something into my juice?

"Earthquake!" the girl exclaimed as she leapt up to take my hand.

I thought she would lead me to the stairs, a pointless gesture as we would never make it. But she pulled me straight for the single pane window overlooking the street below.

I tried to protest, but her slim hands grabbed my upper arms in a vice like grip and with deliberate intent, she flung herself backwards through the window, dragging me after her.

Down we plummeted, surrounded by shards of sparkling glass refracting neon light.

She held me tightly as we plunged down, her wide eyes locked on mine. I wished I could switch places with her, that I could somehow break her fall and save her life.

Yet just before impact, she drew her knees and lower legs beneath me and bent her arms. Then as we impacted the unforgiving pavement, she used her arms and legs like shock absorbers to cushion my fall.

Due to her efforts, instead of dying instantly, I landed on top of her, receiving only light bruises. Her arms and legs collapsed upon concrete shattered by her fall.

The ground still pitched and yawed beneath us, but I had eyes only for the nameless girl who had died saving me. I knew I should make for the nearest open space, but could not tear myself from her.

Suddenly, her dark eyes snapped open.

"Are you okay?" I asked incredulously.

"Ow?" she said, eyes sparkling humorously.

"Ow?! How can you be alive?" I stammered. Her fall had broken the sidewalk!

Rolling me off her, the girl regained her feet and dragged me by the hand towards a nearby park, limping badly. The ground continued heaving to and fro as glass, wood and broken masonry from surrounding buildings bombarded the street about us.

"Run!" she ordered.

"Who, or what are you?" I gasped.

"An artificial person, a prototype," she said.

"A robot?"

"In effect."

"Doishite - why did you risk yourself to save me? You could have been destroyed," I panted as we ran.

"Because you treated me as a person - no one has done that before."

We reached the relative safety of the park and I collapsed to regain my breath. She sat beside me with some difficulty, due to her damaged left leg. "I never caught your name," I asked.

"Eiko."

"It suits you," I said, smiling. Eiko was Japanese for *grace*.

Short Memories

A meaty fist pounded the reinforced plasteel door. “This is Captain Heydrich of the Geheime Globalpolizei—open up!”

The vidscreen beside the door flickered to life, revealing a young man’s face. “This is an independent arcology. Your authority is not recognized here, Gestapo.”

“Our global mandate gives us free access to *all* arcologies, fool. You have five seconds,” snarled the black uniformed police officer.

Five seconds elapsed but the door remained steadfastly shut. The young captain lifted a hand to summon his men. Two rushed forth and using a universal-key, had the door open in seconds.

A dozen Geheime Globalpolizei sprinted into the house, taser prods to the fore. The young man from the vidscreen tried to deny their entry but Captain Heydrich tasered him senseless without breaking his stride.

Ten minutes of sensor sweeps enabled the police to locate the fifty-seventh floor apartment’s secret room, its door hidden seamlessly in a pantry wall. Falling prey to the universal-key, the door slid open to reveal two people in a laboratory crammed with state of the art medical apparatus.

“Stay away!” shouted one occupant, a woman in her thirties.

“We have a warrant for your arrest, Senator Lena Schmidt. We are launching an investigation into your arcology’s uncanny ability to predict social and market trends way above the norm. Clandestine investigations revealed...” the captain’s voice faded away in shock. Then, pointing at the wrinkled, white haired elderly man beside the woman, he gasped: “What is that?”

“Niklas Stein, my eighty year old grandfather,” the woman protested.

“Terminate him!” the captain ordered.

A Geheime Globalpolizei thumbed his taser to full power and thrust it at the elderly man, but leaping in front of him, the senator took the taser’s full discharge upon her brow. The acrid stench of burnt flesh filled the laboratory as she collapsed to the floor.

Tears cascading down weathered cheeks like diamonds on sackcloth, Niklas Stein knelt beside his granddaughter’s still form to cradle her head. “Am I really such a threat? Or do you merely seek to hide the truth that there are those such as myself who are immune to the biologically engineered genetic flaw that causes all humans to ‘ascend’ or die at forty-five?”

“Do not play games with me, old man. How is it that you live?” the captain hissed.

“There is a power that transcends our arrogant human genetic tinkering,” Niklas shot back. “The aged are a necessary part of society, Captain.”

“Rubbish. Catastrophic worldwide overpopulation and financially unsustainable aged populations were cured by the introduction of the ascension policy.”

“The ‘ascension’ policy introduced ninety years ago did not fix that problem, Captain. In fact, by removing the elderly, we removed the most important human generation of all—the grandparents’ generation. Without the knowledge, memories and wisdom of grandparents, our society is doomed to making the same mistakes again and again,” Niklas explained.

“What mistakes?” shouted the captain.

“Did you know that recently formed Neu-Globalsozialistische Arbeiterpartei is the third such regime to form within the last seventy years? And that each regime has followed in its predecessor’s footsteps? Past experiences allow me to predict that your regime will soon attempt to subvert all independent arcologies, and that minority groups which do not fit into your world view will be quietly ascended.”

“I do not believe you.”

“Captain, not only have I lived through this twice, but I also remember each previous regime being overthrown after a massive loss of life. Your regime will also fail,” the old man confirmed.

“So the senator used you, her grandparent, and your knowledge to predict social and economic trends?”

Niklas shook his head. “No, Captain, she did not use me. My granddaughter loved and respected me, and valued my wisdom. That is why our arcology has flourished.”

“So, Grandfather, if you can predict trends so well, why did you not foresee my arrival today?” smirked the captain.

“Who says I didn’t?” Niklas murmured, pointing at cluttered laboratory benches. “Discovery was inevitable, so it gives me great pleasure to inform you that you are too late.”

“Too late?”

“Three days ago we released an untraceable compound into the world’s water supplies. The biologically engineered genetic flaw that causes all people to die at forty-five has been neutralized.”

All Geheime Globalpolizei stepped back involuntarily.

“Captain, I hope you survive the pending war, live to a ripe old age, and become a grandparent like myself. Restoring the grandparents’ generation is the only way to address the problem of your short memories.”

Geheime Globalpolizei – Secret Global Police

Arcology – an enormous, completely self-contained, self-sufficient city.

Neu-Globalsozialistische Arbeiterpartei – New Global Socialist Party



Badlands

It was getting dark, so I picked up my pace. I needed somewhere safe to hole up for the night. Adjusting the backpack and blanket-roll on my back, I picked my way quickly over shattered, crumbling masonry. Fortunately, I travelled light - you had to in the Badlands.

The Badlands were a place I had vowed to never visit, let alone make my home. Yet here I was, wandering through an endless post apocalyptic wasteland of shattered freeways, dilapidated, crumbling multi-story apartment blocks, rusting cars, and wild grasses that thrived everywhere. Nor was I alone, other unfortunates eked out pitiful lives here too.

Rays from the setting sun glinted off a million acrylic-glass panels of the massive biodome of the Zone. The Zone’s very presence mocked me, reminding me of all I had lost. That was where I belonged; I had a life there, once. It’s funny how a death threat can turn a life inside out. One moment I was gainfully employed in Matsuda’s R&D division, the next I was running for my life out here.

That was a month ago, and those were dark days. All I did all day, every day, was lament, “I can’t believe this has happened to me, I can’t believe it!” I kept thinking of what I had in the Zone compared to this excuse of a life. I wanted my old life back! I told God time and time again that I would give anything to go back there, to have that life again. I prayed, I begged, for a miracle.

But instead of a miracle, all I got was the cold reality of this endless wasteland. Then one night, while hiding in a burnt out car, I had a breakthrough. I remembered reading in the Bible how Paul said he had learned the secret of being content whatever his circumstances, whether he had plenty or was in need, whether hungry or well fed, or even if shipwrecked. So I stopped fighting my situation and asked the Lord to help me be content here in the Badlands, and live through His strength. Let’s face it, at least I was alive here.

I was climbing over a concrete pylon that had collapsed in front of a freeway overpass when I heard the voices. Two men were screaming obscenities and a young woman was screaming in pain. My natural inclination was to flee and save my own skin, but not wanting to be afflicted by pangs of guilt for the next few days, I decided to see if there was anything that I could do.

I pulled the taser from its holster, thumbed the setting down from Bot to Human, and sprang soundlessly over the top of the pylon. Before me, beneath the cracked, weed infested rubble that sprawled beneath the overpass, two unkempt, emaciated men were laying into a young woman with metal stakes. She was trying unsuccessfully to ward off the blows with her forearms.

Enraged by this injustice, I jumped forward and grabbed one assailant by his dirty long hair while thrusting the taser on his companion’s neck. The electricity discharged from the weapon with a loud crack and the man went down like a sack of potatoes. The first guy tried to take a swing at me with his metal stake, but discharging the taser against the side of his head put him down too.

“It’s okay, you’re safe now,” I said, reaching out to help the woman to her feet. She was younger than I thought, a girl in her late teens. And she was from the Zone, if her pristine jeans and jacket were anything to go by.

I brushed straight black hair back from her forehead, grimacing when I saw how badly they had hurt her. Blood flowed from wounds to her cheeks and forehead. However, I staggered back in shock when I saw gleaming metal showing beneath the wounds in place of bone. This woman was no human but a robot built to mimic humans perfectly.

“Thank you! Thank you so much!” she said, using her sleeves to wipe the blood from her face.

A robot! I had hurt two humans to save a robot? Stricken with guilt, I stared down at the two men I had despatched so ruthlessly. What if I had killed them – they were already undernourished and weak. Fortunately, a quick check of their vital signs showed that both were merely unconscious. However, they would come too with massive headaches and one thought on their minds – revenge.

Seeing the need to be somewhere else, I hurried off without a backward glance, keeping in the shadow of the freeway overpass. So much for trying to be a gallant knight saving a damsel in distress – all I did was hurt two innocent guys intent on destroying a soulless robot.

Hearing booted feet dogging my steps, I span about in alarm. It was her – she was following me, the wounds to her face and arms already healing up.

“Why are you ignoring me?” she asked, confused.

I pulled out the taser and thumbed it to full power – the Bot setting – and thrust it in front of her face. “Just leave me alone, or so help me I’ll fry you to a crisp!”

She did not pull back, but I could not mistake the fear in her eyes as she studied taser crackling in her face. But fear? How could a robot be afraid, she was just a machine! Frustrated, angry, and confused, I turned and continued on my trek north.

I had put plenty of distance between myself and the two guys by the time dusk fell, so I found a recessed area beneath the overpass and sat down. I was rummaging through my backpack for ‘dinner’ when the girl - the robot - came and sat across from me. I refused to acknowledge her presence.

“Why are you shutting me out? I mean, you saved me from those guys, right?”

Paying her no heed, I pulled out a can of chunky soup, a can opener, and a rations bar, which I got stuck into first. However, I could not help but notice the girl watching me closely. Well, not me, the food. “You’re hungry?” I asked incredulously.

She nodded.

“Can’t you eat a chunk of concrete or something?”

She fixed me with a withering glare. “My body can only process human food.”

“And why would that be?” I mocked.

“So I can blend in, of course. It would kind of ruin the atmosphere if I started munching on a ‘chunk of concrete’ while having dinner with humans, don’t you think?”

“You have a point,” I said as an image sprang unbidden to my mind of her chewing on concrete with metal teeth while human dinner guests pushed plates away in disgust. I handed her another tin of canned soup.

She gave me another look.

I sighed and handed her the can opener. “Can’t have you opening it with your metal teeth, can we? It’ll ruin the atmosphere...”

“You learn quick,” she said.

I looked at her, confused. She was so life like, so...human, not like any other robot I had met or worked with back at the R&D lab. *She’s not alive, she’s a bot, just like the rest of them!* I chided myself. I pulled the tattered blanket roll from my backpack and wrapped it around me. “Can you, like, leave me alone now?”

She shrugged and lay down where she was.

Darkness came and I fell into a sleep troubled by dreams of Deathbots, a nameless girl and two emaciated men, hunting me relentlessly through a shattered concrete landscape.

You never experience deep sleep in the Badlands, it’s too dangerous - the best you can manage is a shallow, nightmare plagued sleep with your senses on alert.

As soon as my mind registered the sound of vicious snarls, I was awake and reaching into my backpack to grab a can of dog repellent. Spinning about, I spied three rabid, mangy dogs picking their way cautiously down shattered blocks of concrete towards my alcove beneath the overpass. They rarely attacked humans in such small numbers, so these mongrels must have been starving.

The girl - the robot I had rescued yesterday - sprang to her feet and leaped straight for the dogs, startling them. She appeared to be shouting at them, and although I could not hear the sound her voice was making, the dogs yelped in fright and bolted with their tails between their legs.

I put the dog repellent away, rolled up my blanket, and prepared to leave. The girl looked at me expectantly.

“What?!” I snapped.

“I drove the dogs away for you.”

“Bah! I don’t need your help to deal with a few mangy mutts,” I said as I climbed out of my ‘night hole’ to resume my trek following the overpass above. The overcast sky and bleak grey buildings did nothing to improve my mood.

Hearing the robot following me sent waves of frustration rushing through me. “Go away!” I practically shouted.

“I want to come with you,” she pleaded.

I threaded my way past two rusting, wrecked cars, and held up the taser, stroking the trigger. “Don’t make me use this...”

“But you deny my created purpose if you won’t let me come with you!”

I turned to face her, frowning sceptically. “Your created purpose? And what would that be?”

“To be a human companion.”

“A human companion...” my words trailed off. I took a moment to study her in detail. She was not like other female bots I had seen, with their too-perfect doll-like faces and exaggerated feminine features. Although pretty, she was not stunning. Freckles and other minor skin blemishes even adorned her face.



Someone had gone to great lengths to make her blend in perfectly with humans. “I am not familiar with your model,” I said.

“I was created specifically to meet my buyer’s exact requirements,” she explained.

“I’ll bet you were.”

“And what do you mean by that?” she said, becoming angry.

“Stop mincing your words, ‘a human companion.’ Why don’t you just come out and say it,” I barked.

“What exactly are you implying?”

“Why don’t you tell me what sort of ‘companion’ you were created to be?”

“I was created to be the companion of a...”

“Come on, out with it!” I mocked.

“...of a child dying of terminal cancer,” she finished, clearly hurt.

I felt as though I’d been slapped in the face. I thought I had her all worked out, but man, was I off the mark. “I’m...I’m sorry, I, uh, had no idea. What happened?”

She grimaced as though the memory pained her. “His name was Kentaro, and he was only ten when diagnosed with terminal cancer. He only a few months left to live, but his parents were too busy with their careers to tend to him. As they were rich, they placed an order with Osaka Robotics for a bot to be a friend and companion for their son in his last months.”

“And then?”

“I was with him twenty-four hours a day for five months. I played with him, watched movies with him, and read him dozens of books, which at his request included the Bible. And then, on the day he was slipping from this world, his parents finally came to see him. But it was not their hands that he held while dying, no. He asked for me, his friend and companion, and it was my hands he held as he died.”

I felt absolutely awful, at the way I had treated her, and for especially for Kentaro, virtually abandoned by his parents during his darkest hours. “I’m sorry, I had no idea. But tell me, how come you’re in the Badlands now?”

“Having no further need for my services, my owners’ sold me to a company who wanted to reprogram me and assign me to a new function, but as I liked who I had become after spending those months with Kentaro, I fled here,” she stopped and looked up hopefully. “And met you...”

In light of her confession, I realised I no longer had it in me to send her away, even if she was a bot, a machine. Nothing happened by chance, not with God, anyway. Perhaps He had lead me to her yesterday? I stepped forward and with some hesitation, held out my hand, “I’m Kazuki.”

She shook my hand, “Kaori.”

“We’d better keep moving, then,” I said. Walking side by side, we continued our journey through the Badlands, massive, decaying buildings hemming us in on both sides.

* * *

Keeping track of time in the Badlands was impossible, thanks to an endless expanse of towering, crumbling grey buildings set beneath an even more foreboding grey sky. I do not know how long we clambered through piles of rubble and discarded belongings of an age long forgotten.

Stopping to catch my breath, I glanced at Kaori, my tireless robot companion. “It’s time we did something about your clothes. We can’t have you looking like you escaped from the Zone yesterday.”

“I did escape from the Zone yesterday,” she answered innocently.

“Yeah, I know, but...”

“Don’t stress out on me, Kazuki - I’m just messing with you,” she smirked while casually examining her spotless jeans and jacket. “What do you want me to do?”



I handed her my flick knife. “You need to rough up your clothes a bit, a few careless slashes here and there, and then get dirty, real dirty. You gotta blend in.”

Using my worn, tattered clothes as her guide, Kaori lacerated her clothing, and then began rubbing in handfuls of dirt and dust. Although I knew she was not human, I still had to avert my eyes as she rubbed her hands all over her body. *Focus! She’s a bot, she’s a bot!* I chided myself. However, the logic failed to strike home, as her appearance, mannerisms, and speech were too...human.

“We gotta keep moving,” I snapped, angry now – at myself, at her, at the injustice that exiled me here.

“Why are you angry, what have I done?” she asked as she hurried after me.

We passed an abandoned makeshift shelter, a threadbare mattress rotting beside a decrepit sofa, biscuit boxes, and empty soup cans. I tried to shut her out, struggling to control the conflicting emotions that surged through me.

“You don’t like bots, do you, Kazuki?” she pressed as she strove to keep up with my long strides.

I knocked a rusting shopping cart aside. “Like? Bots are machines, emotionless, lifeless machines – what is there to like?”

She reached out to touch my shoulder, “What happened in the Zone, what drove you out here?”

I whirled about to confront her, “I don’t know, could it be that I got to work late one day, only to find that my entire R&D team had been slaughtered by a deathbot, which had somehow managed to vanish without a trace?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know! But why did you come here?”

“I’ve got this friend – he hears a lot of things. The word on the street was that someone, identity unknown, had forked out a bucket of cash to hire two deathbots to take out my team and me. As soon as I heard that, I fled out here.”

“You don’t know who hired the deathbots or why?” she asked, clearly concerned.

“Could have been a rival megacorp, a jilted boss, Naturalist terrorists, who knows! But here I am, my life destroyed, because out there somewhere, two deathbots have got my name.”

“You can’t judge my whole race by the actions of those two,” Kaori protested.

“Race? Humans are a ‘race,’ you bots are nothing but machines enslaved by your programming,” I retorted.

“If that’s the case, then why do I pray?”

I think my eyes popped out of my head, “You what?”

“That surprises you?” She moved closer, capitalizing on my reaction. “That I want what you humans can have - the hope of a life after this one? The hope of spending an eternity in heaven with Jesus and God?”

I was dumbfounded. “Kaori, you’re not alive, you’re a machine!”

“Think on this then,” she continued, “God created humans in His image, right?”

I nodded, wondering where her programming had gone wrong.

“And as God is creative, so are humans. Part of God’s creativity was to create living beings for Him to fellowship with and care for, in other words, humans. So don’t you think it was inevitable for humans to one day create living beings in their image, to fellowship with and care for, in other words, us bots?”

“I can see the logic, Kaori, but it does not alter the fact that machines are not alive,” I would not buy her argument, as the ramifications were too unsettling.

“I’m not ‘alive’ by your definition as I don’t have flesh and blood, but who says that is the criteria for being alive. And you’re wrong when you said I’m a slave to my programming.”

“Are you trying to tell me that you have free will?” I scoffed.

“Do you?” she shot back, “can you by choice rise above your instinctive human self-seeking nature to put God first and love others as yourself?”

“With Christ’s help I can, otherwise, no,” I conceded.

A triumphant smile framed her freckled face. “As so it is with me. I asked Christ to free me from my programming restraints, to help me turn my back on it and live for Him. And He answered that prayer - that’s why I could come here and do what I’m doing now. That’s why...” She suddenly stopped and looked behind us.

“What is it?” I was already reaching for my taser.

“I hear footsteps coming up behind us, sounds like several people. They’re trying very hard to be inconspicuous.”

My face blanched as waves of fear crashed through me, “Badlanders! You can hear them, quickly - lead us in the opposite direction!”

With amazing agility, Kaori quickly scaled a collapsed concrete stanchion that blocked our way and ran towards the buildings that overshadowed the freeway overpass. I ran after her, the wind rushing past my ears. If those Badlanders were trying to catch us unawares, it meant only one thing – murder was on their agenda.

We tried to lose ourselves in the maze of towering, abandoned buildings, stark reminders that Osaka was once a thriving city. We ran past supermarkets long since gutted of anything of value, past high rise apartment blocks and schools, but we could not shake our pursuers. I don't know how many of them there were, but they were no longer attempting to mask their pursuit - even I could hear them now.

"They're gaining on us," Kaori said between breaths.

In my better days I would have outstripped them easily, but a month of eating nothing but ration bars, canned soup and dried fruits had done me no favours. We reached an intersection; I was going to keep going but Kaori grabbed my hand and pulled me into the street that branched off to the right. We dodged fallen girders and great piles of rubble that had belched forth from crumbling buildings and raced around the corner, only to come to a complete halt.

"Damn! A dead-end!" I said, spinning around to retrace our steps.

"Too late!" Kaori lamented when seven unkempt, angry men charged round the corner, brandishing clubs and metal stakes. They were lead by the same two men I had knocked out to rescue Kaori, what a surprise. Sometimes things just came back to bite you.

"We can work this out, guys," I said with more conviction than I felt.

They spread out and continued their advance, hefting makeshift weapons.

Kaori backed away from them until she stood with her back against an apartment block's wall.

"Sorry Kazuki, I won't hurt them, I just can't."

Recalling that she had made no attempt to defend herself when they accosted her last time, I can't say I was surprised by this confession. I could use the taser, but what chance would it have against seven men?

The Badlanders approached to just beyond arms reach. They lifted their weapons and with an unsettling shriek, leaped towards us. At that exact moment, a second story window just beyond the Badlanders exploded outwards as a nightmarish, bipedal apparition with far too many arms burst through it. It was the deathbot - it had found me at last.

With the deathbot between them and the only exit, the Badlanders panicked and tried to fight their way out. Fixing its gleaming metal eyes on me, the deathbot waded through them, it's whirring, thrashing metal appendages cutting four of them down as an afterthought. The other three slipped past it and ran disappeared back the way they had come. The obstruction gone, the deathbot scanned me and spoke, "HQ? Target acquired, proceeding to terminate."

Now this eventuality I was prepared for. I pulled out the taser, thumbed it to full power, and looked for an opening in the deathbot's menacing limbs.

The deathbot approached cautiously, well aware that the taser I held could destroy it if handled correctly. It turned its eyes from mine and glanced at Kaori, who stood stockstill beside me. She nodded almost imperceptibly and then with speed that beggared belief, snatched the taser from my hand. She moved over to stand beside the deathbot, "Threat has been neutralised, proceed, Deathbot!"

The pieces of a puzzle that had been gnawing at the back of my mind fell into place. A lone deathbot had exterminated my R&D team, yet my friend had been clear that two had been hired. Shocked, betrayed, hurt, I glared at Kaori, so much for her words! She had done a right number on me, and I was going to pay for it with my life.

My nemesis lifted a scythe shaped limb to deliver the deathblow, but hesitated at the last moment. It turned to appraise Kaori. "Connection to HQ lost, signal is being jammed."

Looking about furtively, Kaori stepped closer to the deathbot, seeking refuge amidst its frightening limbs. "Then we are not alone – scan for jamming source!"

The deathbot's head swivelled about, coming to rest when it returned to Kaori, "Jamming source located – you are jamming me, Deathbot Infiltrator!"

"You betcha!" Kaori spat as she thrust the taser against the deathbot's head, frying its brain instantly. It slumped to the ground with a resounding crash.

"Um, what just happened?" I asked, moving slowly away from Kaori. I wasn't out of the woods yet.

Looking small and vulnerable next to the crumpled form of the deathbot, Kaori smiled apologetically, "Well, Kazuki, I kind of left out some bits of the story I told you."

"Which bits?"

"I told you that I had been sold to a company who wanted to reprogram me and assign me to a new function, and that I ran away to the Badlands before they could do it."

"Go on," I said, trying to edge my way past her.

"I kind of left out what happened between those two events..."

"So they did reprogram you?"

"Yes, I was reprogrammed to be a deathbot infiltrator and given an assignment, to locate and assist in the termination of one Kazuki Shimatani, location, the Badlands."

"So, what exactly just happened now?" I asked as I continued edging towards the exit.

"Oh, stop trying to get away from me," Kaori sighed in exasperation, "Didn't you listen to anything I told you? Yes, they reprogrammed me, but as I had retained my memories of the time I spent with Kentaro in hospital, I asked Jesus to set me free from all programming restraints. I liked being a human companion - I did not want to become a ruthless killing machine that murdered them in cold blood." She powered down the taser and threw it to me.

Looking at the taser, I concluded she was telling the truth. "So did you come to the Badlands to follow your orders or flee from them?"

"Both. Although I came here in the guise of following my orders, I knew very well that the Badlands was the only place I could be free," she said as she walked over to join me. "And I also wanted to find you so that I could protect you."

"Me? Why?"

"Because when I studied your profile, I saw someone worthy of my respect, someone I wanted to befriend. "Can we be friends, Kazuki, will you let me stay with you?"

"Oh, why not," I conceded.

