

# Disturbing Tranquility

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Nothing is as Tranquil as Death...

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# Chapter One

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## Disturbing Tranquility

The mechanized voice of the test-monitor called her name.

“Lexie Peters?”

“Here.”

“Voice print accepted.”

Of course she was here, in person. She was the only living, breathing human being in the class. The others were all AIs in Avatar mode...dressed up dolls who came and sat for the testing with perfectly quaffed hair and the latest fashions. Bad enough that she felt dowdy next to some of the general worker bots, it was worse when she was forced to sit with the Avatars at college.

She consoled herself with the knowledge that she'd actually earned her way into this class though.

Without their AI's access to virtual libraries, most of the other students wouldn't pass the class.

She quickly went to work, ignoring the utter lack of fidgeting in the room and the fact that she was the only one wearing the thick, old-fashioned interactive glasses; the AIs all had the new interactive programming on their retinas.

Three grueling hours later, she rubbed her eyes as she took off the glasses.

She'd nailed it (after putting in far too many hours of sim modules to study outdated programming techniques to give herself a decent base to work with).

Now she just had to leave the class before...

"Peters, what bin did you find that sweater in?"

She held her head high. She'd dealt with snobby bots most of her life. The Avatar bots *were* the absolute worst. They existed to interact with other people and bots, which left them with way too much time on their hands.

She tried to sweep past but the stylish bot snaked a hand around Lexie's arm and stopped her progress without effort.

Trinity was a well-groomed, state of the art, pain in the butt.

"I asked where you acquired that...unique ensemble Peters."

Lexie looked up, chin stuck out. "I don't have time to re-program you on the subject of classic fashion Trinity...I'd have to erase all those appalling downloads you've been digging out of someone's spam filter, and I, unlike you, have work to do."

The bot's attitude adjuster settled firmly into smug satisfaction.

"Ah yes. The charity case has a job...how...quaint."

The bots around Trinity laughed sycophantically, as she allowed Lexie to move on.

Lexie massaged her aching arm. Trinity's owner was stretching the limits of legal interaction with that bot. She'd have bruises tomorrow.

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She made a quick stop at her closet-sized apartment and quickly changed out of her pretty yellow sweater (Trinity's Avatar only made fun of her clothing on the days when she

looked especially nice) and pulled on a dark blue shirt and pair of oil-stained coveralls.

“Lexie! How’d the test go?”

She grinned at the worker-bots. They were several gens back, a bit battered since no one ever saw them...but they were good to her. One thing about older models, they looked a lot less plastic than the doll-like perfection of Trinity and the other Avatar bots. More human. Many of them were originally companion or service bots that had long ago been replaced. A bot never really got over its first program run; lacking other humans to dote on, they spoiled her.

“I think I did well Harvey, thanks.”

Harvey was a former med-bot, so he looked a little older than the others. People still seemed to trust a med-bot with a little gray in his hair, even though they consciously knew that it was all the same download.

“Good girl.” He ruffled her short hair like he’d been doing since she was a toddler.

“We’re decommissioning Joe-bots tonight. Some of them are in pretty bad shape, so you and I will see what we can save while the others sort, eh...?”

She smiled and nodded. She did whatever she was assigned to do during her allotted work hours. It compensated the community for her minimum upkeep during education.

“What are Joe-bots?”

Harvey led the way through the narrow, dimly-lit service corridor. She and the other bots followed. Lexie stayed close. Human eyes weren’t designed to see in these conditions and one wrong turn in the labyrinth of the warehouse would mean getting lost...again.

“Before the Travelers came, you know that wars were fought in the arenas, right?”

Lexie blushed for the barbaric tendencies of her race.-  
“Yes....”

“Well, Joe-bots fought in the arenas. The government put them in crates twenty years ago, but they’ve finally decided to get rid of them.”

No wonder they were doing this at night. The embarrassment of those weapons...proof that humans were too uncivilized to be allowed off-planet lest they disturb the Tranquility of the rest of the galaxy. The Travelers indicated that humans were getting very close to achieving Tranquility.

Lexie proudly recalled humanity’s accomplishments in the past three generations: a seventy percent reduction in population, balanced use of resources, de-armament of all nations, and almost no violence thanks to the fact AIs filled nearly every function, and they were not allowed to harm humans.

Tranquility had changed the world.

The Joe-bots were lined up in neat rows. Mary-bot (formally a nanny module) and Eddie (now a landscape bot but formerly a pilot) were setting up. Lexie grabbed the diagnostic glasses and a tablet and quickly evaluated the bots.

“There’s not much left of these Joes.”

Harvey nodded. “I never saw them fight, but they say they were magnificent.”

“Harvey! You’ll put Tranquility back fifteen years with talk like that!”

He was completely unrepentant as he punched codes. “Pffft. Tranquility. Not enough for the nanny bots to do with fewer humans to take care of, fewer med-bots too. We’ll all end up like these poor Joe-bots when you humans finally get that interstellar drive you’ve been angling for all these years.”

Mary-bot made a noise like a disapproving sniff. Lexie ducked her head to hide a smile since the noise was pure affectation...but then that was Mary.

“If the humans get it. I’m not sure I trust the Travelers. You know they’re the ones who programmed all that ‘attitude’ nonsense into the Avatar bots? Such behavior...why the other day I saw...”

Mary was off, and she continued her diatribe about the sorely lacking manners of the latest generation of bots as Lexie evaluated the remaining Joes.

“Harvey?”

The older bot peered at her.

“This one is in almost perfect condition.”

Harvey smiled as he looked down on the military bot and pulled up his record.

“Oh my...it seems our friend here was the reigning champion...looks like he did most of the damage to the other bots.”

Lexie shuddered. Still, the frame was in near-perfect condition, with a few minor cuts to his synth-skin...she could pick up a patch for them at the market...and she was a programmer, after all...if she dyed the distinctive platinum hair, he'd look like a dozen older gen bots. It would be so nice to finally have her own bot; he'd never fit in with the Avatar bots, but he could help with her work hours so she could study. All perfectly legal according to code, as long as you left out the part of stealing the bot in the first place.

The government was just destroying them. They weren't even bothering to re-furbish. Who would it harm really if she saved the bits she could use? Legal salvage covered the parts individually. This was just...taking salvage to another level.

Harvey cleared his throat as she made a decision. The old med-bot had nearly a sixth sense when it came to reading people's body language.

“Lexie, I need to check on something with Mary and Eddie over at the far side of building, so you will be alone for ten minutes or so.” He gave her a thousand-watt smile.

Lexie grinned. “I might use the time to salvage some parts from this Joe.”

Harvey nodded sagely. “Be sure to mark him ‘destroyed’ after you finish.”

And Harvey chided Mary and Eddie around a corner, neat as you please.

Lexie didn't try to move the Joe herself. She used an air-lift to quickly move him into an unused closet. Decision made, she went back to work with a light heart.

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She quickly learned why no one had bothered to re-program the Joe bots. All of the code was hard-wired for combat. Wiping the memory would have rendered the high-end processor useless; and once she examined it, she was practically drooling over the hardware. Neuromorphic nanochip drives with fiber optic synapses...not just one but six, and two backups located in his stomach instead of his head. There was no way she was ruining these. This bot made Trinity look like she was running an anemic hamster on an exercise wheel as a CPU. She wished she'd known what kind of hardware they were supplied with, she would have raided the rest of the processors for spare parts...the government had discontinued high-yield cognitive processors for fear that the AI's might get 'out of hand'. In order to make this bot run the way the newer bots did, she'd need to find another operating chip...one that would be much slower and have less capacity for critical thought processes.- So she did the delicate, time consuming work of programming around the existing parameters.

In comparison, fixing his body, even in her tiny living quarters, was easy-peasy. She'd worked with bots more than humans. It was simple enough to mend the tears in his synth-skin, repair his knee where it was sticking, and fix a small electrical short in his cheek.

She caught a major break when she was assigned to download registration information for a group of newly-refurbished former peace-keeper bots that were being reassigned to various posts. Adding Joe's serial number to the list was child's play. If Mary noticed as they did the boring data entry work, the former nanny bot didn't mention it to Lexie.

Having her new bot registered was going to make life much simpler. She could allow him to take some of her required work hours, rent out his services, and allow him to use her credits at the market. Going to the market was something of a problem without a bot...nothing was set up for straight human strength and abilities anymore. Having to half-climb the stacks of goods to get to her favored brand of fiber or protein bars wasn't something she'd miss. She hadn't dared to hope that she would be able to find a way to register him. It was a bit of good luck, something Lexie hadn't had much experience with in the past.

Finally, after programming, repairing, and testing for weeks, she held her breath and typed in the 'activate' command.

The Joe bot hummed almost imperceptibly as his cortex updated.

She ran diagnostics as the Joe blinked slowly at her. Vocal processes booted within three seconds, an excellent sign that everything was running properly.

"Hello. Primary diagnostics indicate that I have been inactive for quite some time."

His voice was raspy, but the specs indicated that it was designed that way. She'd have to physically change the tension on his vocal cords if she wanted to change the tone.

"Yes, you were decommissioned." She cleared her throat nervously. "I...um....rescued you from the disassembly line under salvage ordinances."

This was the tricky part. Some bots were wired to follow the rules. If Joe was one, she could get into a fair amount of trouble for salvaging him...but she'd seen his programming.

"Program additions accepted. Please input new duty roster."

She had a moment where her mind went totally blank...she stammered "I just need some help..."

"Duty accepted."

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Life with Joe was so much easier. Tasks that had taken hours of drudgery without a bot were settled in moments. She had time to study, more time to work and build up her tiny horde of credits, and occasionally even a moment to relax and read, something she hadn't had time for since she'd entered the programming track at the college.

He shared her assigned work hours and sometimes even worked while she slept (she didn't allow him to take the nightly downloads from the Traveler's compound because it was much too likely that their sophisticated computers would be able to identify Joe's base program....no reason to risk it).

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"The weather report indicates that humans are encouraged to stay indoors today because of the winter storm. I will do our daily errands."

She sighed. "I wish you could, but you aren't an Avatar bot. I have a test at the university today."

He sighed and nodded. "Then you should hurry and dress so we can leave early. I will escort you to and from the university."

Joe's help across the thick sheets of ice was entirely necessary. Lexie slipped all over the sidewalks. Even some bots were having difficulty.

Lexie grumbled "I don't remember programming you for 'mountain goat.'" Joe gave her a rare half-smile and leaned close as he held most of her weight. "I believe that the sub-process is part of my original programming." She felt her eyes widen: he rarely mentioned his prior programs.

They made their slippery way to the testing building. Most of the Avatar bots were having as much trouble as Lexie: their

bodies were better able to deal with the ice, but they were dressed in high-fashion boots and tight fur-lined coats.

Trinity slid past in her platform snow boots, finally stopping as she grabbed a handrail. Some of the other bots were chuckling. Her face projected rage as she pulled herself up. Lexie frowned. The 'attitude' traits of that particular bot were frighteningly human.

She turned to Joe and screeched "You could have stopped me!"

Joe looked at the other bot without expression. "Yes, I could have. But my primary duty is to take care of Lexie. My calculations indicate her standard of living would increase if you were to have a permanently disabling accident: therefore I did nothing to aid you as you slid by. In retrospect, I can see that you would have risked termination if you were pushed three inches to the right. I will keep that in mind next time."

Trinity's eyes widened as she turned to Lexie. "What kind of psycho program do you have running on that bot?"

"He's a former peacekeeper bot Trinity...he's protective."- Lexie brushed by the bot, whose mouth was hanging open in a truly remarkable imitation of human surprise.

The steps of the building were mercifully free of ice as Joe followed her up. "You wouldn't have really pushed Trinity?"

Joe shrugged and gave her that small half-grin. "Not when I'm certain to get caught."

"That's not funny Joe."

He raised a brow. "Yes it is."

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From that moment on, Trinity restricted her dislike to glares and the occasional venomous comment (from well beyond pushing distance). It was an immense improvement as far as Lexie was concerned.

The extra study time and the reduced stress quickly resulted in Lexie's rise to the top of the university rankings.

Bots were one of the few finished products that were traded off-planet. The Travelers were traded in rare minerals, woods, and plants. Lexie had heard that they had vast zoos inside protected domes on several of their worlds.

And bots. The majority of humans spent their working lives producing bots for sale off planet: with the life-expectancy of bot tripling that of average humans, previous generations had left more than enough bots to run everything on Earth.

Most people went with refurbished bots for their personal use; new models like Trinity were fairly rare outside the confines of the university. Lexie didn't know for certain but scuttlebutt around campus indicated Trinity's owner was the daughter of a high-level diplomat. (Service bots were hopeless gossips; Lexie heard the most unbelievable rumors sometimes.)

For the uber-rich, the hard-won knowledge that would give Lexie a comfortable life would be put to use in creating original program runs known as 'accessories' for their Avatars. Lexie tried not to let that get to her. Most days, she succeeded. Mostly.

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Joe was busy working on one of his projects. She never asked what he was up to on his own time...he did so much for her she assumed it wasn't any of her business if he didn't choose to share.

She wasn't quite craning her neck to get a look at what he was doing...

"Ask, I know you want to."

Lexie smiled fondly as she watched him stir a green power into a petri dish.

"I know you don't have optics in the back of your head."

“Your breathing pattern is easily discernible. There’s a slight change when you are angry, upset, or curious.”

She laughed. “Fine. I’ll bite...what are you doing?”

“Experimenting. Eddie mentioned that they were having trouble with groundwater that’s been tainted by arsenic.”

“You found a chemical that will neutralize it?”

“Not exactly. There’s a strain of bacteria that break down arsenic as part of their metabolic process. Of course adding an exotic strain of bacteria to the water supply would be less than productive, so I added that protein to a strain of e-coli that can’t survive outside of a lab to see if I can replicate the same action in bacteria that’s easily killed.”

From his slightly smug tone, his little side project was going well. She ruthlessly trampled down her envy at bots that could download any knowledge they needed in a few clicks. Most didn’t bother to download more than they needed for their current work, but Joe proved the exception.

She leaned back in her programming chair, stretching to work out the knots. “That sounds like more fun than a robot should be having.”

Life was so different with Joe around. She was happy, maybe for the first time in her life; certainly for the first time since she’d entered college. She was doing extremely well in her studies (proving that an orphan was able to compete with the elite students) and she was able to afford a few little luxuries that she’d only looked longingly at when she was trying to work out things on her own.

Joe didn’t quite smile as he sealed the dish. “Speaking of fun... are you planning to attend the Spring formal?”

She smiled and shook her head. “The dresses alone cost thousands of credits...and most of the ‘people’ there would actually be Avatar bots in interactive mode. There’s no point in going. I’m not interested in being seen in all the right places with all the right Avatars.”

He frowned. “But one of the prime objectives for a young human is to find an acceptable mate. How will you accom-

plish this without participating in the mating rituals of your kind?”

She chuckled lightly. “Your files are out of date. Most humans aren’t procreating anymore. The paperwork is endless and approval is so hard to get that only the best strains of humanity are allowed to pass down their genes. Almost all births in this day and age come from incubator bots.”

Joe’s brows wrinkled. Like Harvey, Joe was designed to look more human and less like a wax figure. His face had lines and wrinkles that never smoothed away. He could pass for human if he tried.

“It seems like a poor idea for the species, to trust your survival to such a reduced population.”

“More people take up more resources. A single planet can only support a limited number of humans, because we use so much.”

“And because it takes so much in trade to get new technology from the Travelers.”

She shrugged. “Tek is expensive. I wouldn’t give away my programs for free either.”

Joe gave her a look she couldn’t interpret. “The population drop is frightening. You do realize that it is a larger drop than the one that occurred during the Black Death?”

“We are harvesting genetic material from the existing population, to maintain diversity, but we are keeping the population low. It’s all part of Tranquility. I know I downloaded those files...”

Joe grimaced. “Yes, I read through the ‘Tranquility’ download very carefully.”

“Well, once some of the available planets are opened up for human expansion, we will have a much larger population. But the Travelers have stressed that we have to prove that we can live harmoniously with other species before we can be allowed off-planet.” She sighed happily. “Can you imagine Joe? People have been to the Collective cities on Regal 9 and Hob. How amazing would it be to be part of that?”

Joe frowned again. “What I want to know is what happened to the original population of Regal.”

Lexie grinned at her bot. “You are programmed to be cynical, but really, the Travelers are completely opposed to all violence. They don’t even kill to protect themselves. Unlike humans.” She grimaced.

Joe contemplated her face quietly for a moment. “True, but since the Travelers main diet consists of petroleum products, one might say that they eat really old dead things. I find that disturbing.”

“That’s not funny.”

Joe grinned. “Yes it is.”

She swatted playfully at the bot, and the subject was dropped.

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The professor-bot was looking at her oddly. She gave him a tentative smile, hoping that was an ‘I’m impressed with your assignment’ look rather than a ‘What in the galaxy were you thinking?’ look.

“This project is very elegantly written...but I noticed that the code for the higher cognitive functions is a bit antiquated. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen code like this.”

Lexie tried to look innocent and earnest. “The code is similar to some Joe-bots I decommissioned during my logged work hours. I was fascinated by their high-level decision making capability and cognitive ability. Since this sample was supposed to be for a hypothetical pilot for a spaceship...”

The professor bot’s face cleared. “Yes of course. An excellent use of those higher critical thinking skills. I was just surprised to see this sort of code again. Humans haven’t used this higher-level style since the Joe-bots were decommissioned.”

“Wouldn’t it be to our advantage?”

“It was decided that it would be best to limit the cognitive processes for bots, lest they usurp humanity’s place.”

Lexie rolled her eyes. She knew this, it was part of the basic ethics class spill the first semester of college.

The professor bot raised a knowing brow. “Oh it could happen. One must be careful when designing another being’s personality.”

She thought of Joe, with his patched and multi-layered programs. She smiled at the professor. “Sometimes humanity just gets lucky.” She walked out before he could ask questions.

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Joe gave her his ‘We need to talk look.’ She didn’t question the fact that a robot *had* looks. He was Joe.

“I have reviewed the files on your parents.”

“What? Why?”

“Records indicated that you had been a ward of the community since you were three years old.”

She folded her arms over her chest. “Yes, after my parents died.” With procreation so strictly limited, there were very few orphans.

“Your parents were killed in an unusual accident.”

She nodded, unwilling to open the old wound. “A fire. Five people died.”

“They were researchers.”

“Genetics.”

“They were mapping the Travelers’ genetic code.”

She frowned, interested despite herself. “No one ever told me. How did you get those files? They had to have been redacted. I looked through all the public files.”

Joe just gave her a look. He often did when she momentarily forgot who he’d once been. “I contacted some of the bots that worked in the research center. There was valuable information in their memory banks, even in the bots that did

nothing but clean. I followed the trail from there.” He caught her eye. “I could not find the conclusions that were reached in the research.”

Which meant the conclusions weren't there.

She tried to think of a good reason for that, and failed. “Was the data lost in the fire?”

“Even twenty years ago secure backup systems were utilized by anyone doing research.”

“And the research was never taken up by another group?”

“Internal memos indicate that it was deemed an unnecessary expense. Also, after your parents died, there wasn't anyone left who was qualified to take over the program.”

Lexie bit her lip. “People could have been trained.”

“Yes. And it shows an unusual lack of curiosity for humans to just discontinue the program.”

She looked into his eyes and firmly changed the subject.-  
“Why did you dig into this in the first place Joe?”

“It seemed odd to me that child would be left without an adoptive home.” He shrugged. “When I was commissioned, the waiting list for children to adopt was much longer than the number of children that needed to be adopted. Harvey mentioned that Mary had practically raised you. I found that odd. Then I noticed the existence of baby-bots for those who required the maternal experience.”

Oh, how she hated those bots. Years of practice kept her face smooth and her voice calm when she talked about them.-  
“Yes. They introduced them about the time that they really tightened down the reproduction regulations. Some people are ‘raising’ bots. The others aren't interested in looking up from their Avatars long enough to raise a child. Since it was obvious that a nanny bot would be my caregiver anyway, they just rotated the obsolete bots.”

She chuckled a little, remembering some of the unusual situations she'd gotten into, trailing after worker-bots. “I was well cared for actually...you might even say spoiled in some ways. I learned some interesting skills.”

Joe looked mildly interested.

She let her lips soften into a smile as she dialed up holos: A doe-eyed toddler and various bots, mainly Mary-bot at first, then more with Harvey, Nell, and Edward. She let her finger linger over the keypad an instant longer than she had to. She could practically feel Joe noticing.

To distract him (and honestly, herself) she laughed brightly. “Where do you think I learned bot maintenance and my first programming skills?” She tried not to look at Nell...the former hairstylist bot had disappeared when she was nine. “As the bots aged, they would eventually get to the point where they just disappeared one day and never came back. From the time I was little, I tried to put that off as long as I could.”

“I see.”

Lexie cocked her head to one side.

“What do you mean?”

“The bots were your family.”

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“I’ve missed you!”

Harvey smiled as she hugged him. “It’s only been two weeks Lexie.”

Still, he hugged her back.

She picked up her interactive glasses. “*Only*. I still feel bad that Joe took up all my work hours during finals.”

Joe snorted as he pulled up the duty roster for the day.

Harvey patted her arm. “Don’t worry. Joe did a bang-up job. Just what you would have wanted. Even fixed Eddie’s knee when he caught it in a hydraulic press.”

Eddie nodded laconically. The landscape bot wasn’t much for conversation. He was one of the oldest gen bots left. At this point, notifying the reclamation bots of a major injury was just asking to be split up and used for parts.

Lexie smiled gratefully at Joe.

Joe never stopped typing. "You could have fixed his knee Harvey...don't pretend otherwise."

Harvey gave him a sly grin. "If I could have found the parts."

Lexie looked at them with narrowed eyes over her interactive glasses. They were entirely too glib about the incident. "You two need to stop plotting and get to work."

Harvey did the strangest thing. He actually looked guilty.- Lexie opened her mouth to question the bot, but Joe chose that moment to pull her toward the workstation.

"Lexie...I was puzzled by these numbers..."

She gave Joe a look and allowed herself to be distracted. After all, their programming wouldn't allow them to do anything harmful to humans...so whatever they were up to wasn't really any of her business....

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Harvey said several words that Lexie had never heard. Joe glared at the former med bot. Apparently he had heard those words somewhere.

One shouldn't forget that he was the veteran of dozens of arena wars.

Harvey ignored everything except the news feed he'd been quietly listening to before his outburst.

"I don't believe it."

The bot typed codes so that the original feed popped up on their work terminals.

A man (Lexie quickly identified him as someone's Avatar bot) was making an announcement that made her sit down hard. Thankfully Joe pushed a chair under her before she landed on her posterior.

*"Late last night the news was released from the Traveler's spaceship that experts have finally finished designing adequate shielding for anti-matter drives for the very first human colony ship."*

Lexie made a noise but Mary-bot shushed her.

*“Diplomats who have visited Regal and Hob have often developed issues later from contact with the gamma radiation in the anti-matter drives that power the interstellar space-ships. The few that survive have done so because of advanced medical treatments. The Travelers have cleared a completely new planet for human-only occupation as a trial to see if our grasp of Tranquility is advanced enough for more forays into the galaxy...”*

Lexie jumped up and kissed Mary-Bot’s cheek. “It’s actually...really happening!”

Joe gave her a cynical grin and kept watching the newsfeed as she danced around the room with a surprised but indulgent Harvey.

Joe turned off the feed and went back to work. “We’ll see.”

She suppressed a groan. “How can you not trust them after this?”

“You missed the part about how much Earth is paying for the interstellar ship that we’ll have to build with our labor and our minerals.”

“Can you just let me be excited about this for one minute?”

Joe nodded as he pulled up a screen. “Fine. You have fifty-three seconds...”

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Life after graduation was somewhat less glamorous than she had anticipated.

Lexie moved her hair back as Joe tried to work the kinks out of her back.

“You are entitled by law to take three breaks per day. This level of tension in your muscles indicates that you are not taking them.”

“I’m trying to keep up with programmers who have been doing this for 30 years.”

“Internal memos indicate that your supervisors are quite pleased with your current output, their only complaint is that you keep trying to increase processor size and power.”

She looked up at him and squealed. “Joe...you have not been hacking my supervisor!”

He almost smiled. “It is extremely unlikely that I would ever be caught.”

“That’s not the point...it’s not ethical!”

He sighed. “Lexie, my primary function is to help and protect you. I can not do that without proper intel.”

“This is life, not war.”

“I have already eliminated two threats.”

She paused and looked into his eyes. “What do you mean, eliminate?”

He sighed. “I was never programmed to eliminate humans in the manner you are thinking about.”

She cocked her head. “You are deflecting.”

His lips twitched slightly. “Your friend Trinity was assigned to the same wing of the programmer’s complex as you were.- Since I am not allowed to accompany you into the building during working hours, I deemed that a valid security risk. I initiated a program that ‘randomly’ reorganized the departments and just happened to put her at the far end of the complex, and therefore unlikely to cross paths with you.”

She rested her chin in her palm. “And how did you explain the reorganization?”

He mirrored her pose. “I sent it from the office of a particularly inept vice president. He doesn’t pay attention to half of what he orders...and he’s the sort that considers any questions to be acts of insubordination. It was extremely simple to add the order to his daily agenda.”

“And the other? You said there were two threats”

Joe cleared his throat, which was totally bogus, since he didn’t produce mucus to clear.... “Internal e-mail indicated an unhealthy interest in you by a male programmer in your department. I simply added the address of human resources

to a particularly vile communication and they removed him from the premises.”

She paused for a second. She'd never had anyone look after her before, and she'd dealt with more than one man who thought because she was young, alone, and poor she could be used.

“Thank you.”

“You are most welcome.”

“Do you think he knew that someone tagged him?”

“No...I believe he thought he'd been sloppy. Using the internal system at all was fairly sloppy. It made getting rid of him much easier.”

“I'm not sorry that you did.”

“I did not believe you would be.”

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After that, Lexie was careful to fulfill her assignments, but she no longer built bots with the highest processing abilities...since regulations prohibited her from allowing her new designs to really *think*, she focused on writing their protocols so that the bots would have a difficult time harming humans even under direct orders. Of course the stupid things would have to recognize harm as *harm*, and since they weren't programmed to think...well...she hoped it was helping. She was a young programmer at any rate. It wasn't like she was allowed to do any work on peace-keeper bots or even diagnostics...no she was building bots that would serve humans, which seemed a fairly low priority.

The terrible thing was that as soon as she stopped pushing the limits of the CPUs, she got a promotion.

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Lexie frowned at the screen.

*That* couldn't be right.

She wasn't an idiot. She knew that everything at work was monitored...which was why she'd instituted a decoy program her third day. The decoy looked like it was plodding along, doing the minimum research while Lexie was actually doing in-depth analysis of other programs so that her programs ran as flawlessly as possible.

She wasn't paranoid. There just wasn't a reason to arouse suspicion.

She switched on her holo-phone. Not the standard office line...not after Joe had come in late one night and tinkered with it.

Her bot *was* paranoid.

"Joe?"

The bot gave her his full attention. "Yes?"

"Can you take a look at this? Tell me I'm not seeing what I think I'm seeing."

"It's a worm."

Joe saw exactly what she'd seen, darn it. Even he could see the background code that snaked its way through the (mostly) innocuous 'attitude' app.

She took a deep breath. "This doesn't prove anything." She cleared any record of any access to the program like her life depended on it.

"If you believed that you wouldn't be desperately covering your tracks."

"Sure I would. I'd rather not find out what happens to people who break laws this close to getting off planet." She breathed a light sigh as she exited the program.

Her voice raised a half-octave. "Bots won't harm humans."

Joe was absolutely still. "Active harm? I don't think so. It goes against the most basic programming. What they could make the bots do is have them leave classified information where it could be collected, shut down bots when they might

be needed...there are quite a few options if you had ill intentions toward humanity.”

“You are the most cynical bot in the history of the world.”- She chewed her lip. “I have to report it to someone.”

Joe raised a brow. “Who?”

“Well the world government...”

“I’m sending their files.”

“You have files on the leaders of the world government?”

“Extensive files. You’ll probably come to the same conclusion that I did.”

She opened the e-mail and skimmed the detailed information concerning the human leaders.

“And what conclusion was that?”

“They are pawns. They hold their positions because the Travelers have significant holds over each and every one of them.”

Joe gave her time to examine the file. “And do the numbers in that memo back up my suspicions?”

She glared at him.

“You know they do. But the Travelers don’t believe in violence.”

“Do we have any proof of that? A limited number of humans, less than fifty if the public reports are accurate, have taken completely supervised tours of Traveler instillations.- Most died from radiation poisoning soon after returning. If you read between the lines, you can tell that they were so tightly scheduled for the entire visit that they barely had adequate amounts of sleep. Often the tours were physically taxing as well, which makes humans less inclined to ask questions. Meanwhile, the Travelers have bargained for a great deal of raw material and have had nearly unfettered access to the innermost workings of every technology company on the planet as they provided tech support for their own programs, which have carried a number of nasty viruses if the tech scuttlebutt I’ve been digging up is any indicator.”

“They have never attacked anyone, not in all the years...”

“They never had a reason to. They showed up, tossed a few cheap programming tricks at the world leaders, and they’ve been celebrated with nearly god-like status ever since.”

Her voice was quiet. “They offered us a chance to obtain Tranquility.”

Joe held eye contact. “How many other species are full members of their Collective?”

“Twenty-six.”

“And yet we’ve only been introduced to the Revillions...and take it from me...those beings are muscle. I’d know.”

Lexie glared at the evidence. “You must be rubbing off on me. I find the entire idea of this being coincidence exceedingly unlikely.”

“It would be unlikely, if all the evidence wasn’t pointing in the same direction.”

“And what direction is that?”

“The Travelers are not humanity’s friends.”

Lexie shivered.

“And what would we do about that?”

“I think you should hijack their worm.”

She shivered again. She’d been afraid he’d say something like that. She copied the worm. Joe was right. Someone had to reverse-engineer it.

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“Lexie?”

She frowned as she toggled Harvey over to the main screen in the living area.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s Mary. The reclamation bots are gathering up all the Mary-bots.”

“All of them?”

That wasn’t standard operating procedure.

“That’s the scuttlebutt. And Mary’s hiding...I don’t know where.”

Lexie frowned. She knew where the bot that had cared for her as a child would hide...

Joe nodded to the distraught Harvey. “We’ll find her and protect her.”

He ended the call.

“Joe...”

“Why should they be allowed to randomly wipe the bot who raised you because they’ve decided they need more incubator bots?”

Lexie gave a start at that little leap of logic. “Why would they need more incubators?”

“Well it isn’t because the Travelers are giving humanity access to the interstellar drives.” He gave her a sideways glance, gauging her reaction. “If I had to guess, I’d say that they have planets that need a workforce, and it’s easier for them to breed one rather than to use bots...humans are cheaper to produce. If you were totally ruthless, that makes them expendable.”

She didn’t have time for his never-ending conspiracy theories about the Travelers. And she tried not to notice how logical those theories were beginning to seem. “That’s a problem for another day. Right now...I know where Mary might be.”

Joe gave her his slight half-smile. “I thought you might.”

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There weren’t many places left in the world that were hidden, but when Lexie was a child, she’d found a spot where some minor miscalculation had left two blank walls that overlapped slightly, enough for a thin child (or a slim Mary-Bot) to squeeze into the space. If anyone knew what they were looking for, they might find it, but because of an ornamented fixture on

the roof, it wouldn't even be visible to satellite. For her entire childhood, the hidey-hole had been a place that only she and Mary-Bot had visited.

Lexie had to squirm to get between the walls, but there, hidden in a deep shadow as the sun set was the dusty silhouette of the nanny-bot.

"Mary."

"Lexie? What are you doing here, they'll find me eventually, and you can't be involved."

She offered a hand to the robot, though she knew the bot didn't need any help getting up.

"Let me worry about that...between us we'll figure out a way to mark you as destroyed and re-work your serial number...have you ever considered a future in medicine?"

Mary frowned. "Silly child, what on Earth are you talking about?"

"Just an idea. But for now we need to get you back to my place." Lexie didn't give Mary time to argue. She just tilted her hips slightly and squished past the brick. "If I can get through this crack again...why didn't anyone tell me my rear had gotten so big?" Mary tried to help, with little effect.

Joe grinned as she squirmed through the crack in the wall. He lifted a brow. "I could always go get you some butter."

She glared. "I didn't program you with a sense of humor."

Joe cocked his head as he helped her through. "Yes you did. This definitely wasn't part of my original files."

\*\*\*

She'd worked all night, but Mary was safely downloading the new nurse protocols (the same ones that Lexie had been designing for her latest project) but in this case, the bot was taking the download without changing one iota of her personality. She'd need some physical modifications, and Lexie would have slip her number into the database today at work, but after the virtual acrobatics she'd done last night, the next bit would be child's play.

He handed her a steaming cup of coffee, the latest in a series.

“It would be better for you if you arranged to miss work today.”

“And bring suspicion on us all? It would mean a mandatory trip to medical, and I don’t want them to see its simple exhaustion. I don’t want them digging into the late-night hacking that goes on from this computer.”

“Trust me, I have no wish to be discovered. I cover my tracks well.”

She gave him a grin as the sun began to rise. “Somehow it doesn’t feel like you were programmed at all Joe.”

“I was designed to be as much like humanity as possible.”

Lexie rubbed her neck, but Joe batted her hands away and took over the job. He was better at finding those knots of tension anyway. “Without the flaws of course.”

“Of course.”

She turned to look at him as she sipped her coffee. “I can’t figure out why the new bots seem to have less and less of what you have.”

“What do you mean?”

“The newer the model, the more...plastic they’ve become.- They’ve even reduced the number of facial expressions that the new bots are capable of.”

“You won’t have to reduce Mary’s expression count will you?”

She shook her head, a little sad. “There won’t be anyone to notice. I was under strict orders to make the nursing bots task oriented.”

“That doesn’t bother you a bit?”

Lexie looked him in the eye. “How could it not? You’ve infected me with your paranoia.”

“It’s not paranoia if I’m right.”

There was nothing Lexie could say to that really.

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Mary-bot slipped into her new role as Nurse-bot231 with ease. If she became the del facto head nurse immediately, it was to be expected. She had nearly one hundred years of service to humans under her belt, after all.

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Lexie stared at the high-priority summons. It had appeared by messenger bot, complete with DNA scan.

Joe was looking at her with a little concern.

She choked out "I've been chosen."

He gave her a piercing look. "For the colony ship?"

She shook he head. "Nothing quite that...no. For genetic harvest."

The harvest was the polite term for a rather invasive procedure that brought a female's eggs to simultaneous fertility, then harvested them and froze them for future use. The procedure had some negative side effects (it damaged the ovaries, causing lifetime hormonal imbalance that was treated with supplements) and of course it left the female infertile...not that it mattered in today's society...no one had their own children anyway...but at least most of them had the opportunity if they could get permission.

Joe put his hands around her arms. They were warm.

"You do not have to do this."

"I don't have a choice." She gave a brittle laugh, realizing she'd had dreams that she'd never even let herself examine.- She whispered "It's actually an honor to be chosen."

"An honor that kills the subject eighteen per cent of the time."

She cringed. Joe looked angry. She'd never seen him look angry.

“An ‘honor’ that forcibly takes the very cells from your body so it can’t fulfill a basic genetic imperative, and uses those cells the way the world government sees fit.”

She backed away from him and sat in the tiny room’s single chair. “I don’t have another option. Genetic regulation is a big part of Tranquility. Our civic duty...”

Joe growled. “Haven’t you been paying attention? There is no duty to a system that exists without honor, a system that fuels itself with the people it is supposed to protect. There is a contract between those that govern and those that are governed. When those that govern do not uphold their part of the bargain, there is no moral obligation to continue to support a system that is corrupt. In fact, many great thinkers have stated throughout human history that there is a duty to remove those that use their positions as leaders to harm their own people.”

He paced through their living space, three strides to the food prep area...three strides to her sleeping area.

“I fought in the arena. The others and I did the most brutal things you probably shouldn’t even imagine to each other in the name of those governments. They made us intelligent enough to philosophize; enough to truly learn without downloads...enough to think like humans. Then they dumped us in a battleground to slaughter each other and projected the battles all over the world to entertain the masses.” He looked away for a moment, lost in memory, or whatever passed as memory for him; perhaps he was reliving something. Whatever it was, it wasn’t pleasant. “We were gladiators. Slaves who didn’t have a choice if we fought, who we fought, or when we fought. Our only choice was this: do we should fight hard enough to survive it this time, or let it end.” His voice was flat. “So many let it end.”

He typed an angry code on the tablet. A very old vid began.

Joe, or a bot that looked like he did when he came out of the crate (before she’d dyed his hair brown), slashed his way across a sepia-tinted battlefield, amid explosions and cries of-

the other too-human Joe-bots. She watched, both fascinated and horrified, as his familiar face pounded the final opposing bot...one that had another manufacture, but looked as human as her Joe did. A bot that eventually stopped moving.

“Now you know. That was what I knew before I woke with new programs surging through my synapses.” He turned off the vid. “That was what I was...what they forged me to be. You can hate me if you want, but you needed to see it. To see what happens when you let others choose your path.”

“Why would I hate you?” She took a deep breath. “Like you said, you didn’t choose that. You’ve chosen to do nothing but protect and help me since the day I turned on your processor. You could have chosen to hate me for what you’d been through.”

“I could hate them...never you.”

His bitterness at his former life didn’t surprise her.

Her sudden shame at her own actions did a bit. Despite growing up amid bots, she’d never thought about the morality of owning a being that could think and feel as much as she did. Owning the newer models was less confusing...they didn’t have the capacity to think and feel the way a human did. She bent her head. “I reprogrammed you to be another type of slave.”

Joe laughed; an unexpected burst of sound that danced out of his mouth. “Slave? Do you have any idea how much freedom of thought you’ve allowed me? How much time and energy I have to do as I like?”

He deliberately smoothed her arms. “I chose to accept this duty. It was the first choice I ever made concerning my own existence.” He gave her a small, self-deprecating grin. “I thought, after everything I’ve done...everything I’ve been through...how hard could helping one little human girl be?” He snorted. “I vastly underestimated your ability to attract trouble.”

She patted his arm awkwardly.

His face took on that fierce look again. “You will not be subjected to the harvest.”

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The nurse-bot injected a purple solution into her arm. “That will take effect shortly. Another nurse bot will be here to complete the procedure.”

Lexie smiled at the new model, but it (not she...not enough personality to be a she) walked out without noticing.

“That’s just horrible craftsmanship.” She felt a certain dissatisfaction with her part in making a sub-standard bot...like she’d somehow let her older-model friends down.

Mary-bot slipped into the room. “You aren’t wrong. I’m sorry you were forced to design them that way.”

Lexie didn’t argue about being ‘forced’.

“What did she inject into my arm?”

“A vitamin solution. It was close to the same viscosity. I used a little dye to make it the same color.” She handed Lexie a pair of scrubs.

Lexie pulled on the more substantial nursing outfit and stuffed the flimsy paper gown into the waste basket.

“By now, Joe has hacked the vid feed and looped an old harvest file. The facility is extremely busy today with all the procedures going on. That’s going to help.”

Lexie frowned. “What do you mean...all the procedures?”

Mary peeked out of the door. “There are more harvest procedures going on today than we’ve had in the last five years combined.”

Mary took a look at Lexie. “You’ll do. With your hair up like that you look like one of the home health bots. There are a dozen active models and they are always in and out for reassignment.” She straightened a slight wrinkle in the uniform. “Once we get you out, just go home. Everyone will

assume the bot is being sent to check your own welfare after harvest...it 's standard operating procedure.”

They slipped into the hallway and Lexie followed half a step behind the bot. Lexie suddenly remembered a game she'd played as a very small child. She copied Mary's pleasant expression, her measured step, the slightly stiff way she held her arms. She knew from experience that copying the bot's exact 'breathing pattern' would leave her out of breath, so she took slightly deeper breaths. Bots didn't actually need oxygen, but the early designers had learned that humans were acutely uncomfortable around humanoids that didn't at least appear to breathe.

Lexie did not jump when she heard an authoritative voice...but it was a close thing.

“Nurse!” A harried-looking Admin bot walked up more quickly than a human could have. “Is the Peters girl already finished then? What's your current assignment?”

Mary didn't get flustered. “I'm giving instructions to Personal Aid Bot 492 before her reassignment.”

The Admin bot huffed. “They neglected to update the duty roster...again.”

Mary gave the fussy bot her best soothing tone...the one she normally reserved for colicky babies. “I'll update as soon as I'm done here. It's extraordinarily busy today. It's no surprise that the file wasn't changed since I have plenty of time to complete this task before my next assigned harvest.”

The admin bot nodded. “Thank you for your conscientiousness Nurse. Nothing irks me more than when bots skirt procedures.”

Mary-bot nodded. “I am aware of that Admin.” Mary seemed to have a sudden thought. “By the way, I noticed the laundry was having an issue. I had to go down myself to collect fresh bedding for the Peters girl. One of the washer bots seemed to have a glitch. She was folding the same cloth over and over and muttering to herself.”

The Admin bot rolled his eyes. "I hope they refurbish the wash bots soon...I'd call this batch half-crazy if they were human." And he hurried away.

Mary waited until he passed through a set of doors before she muttered. "Those wash bots *are* half-crazy. They're all former caretaker bots that were poorly reprogrammed.- They don't know what to do with themselves without humans to care for." She grinned at Lexie and pulled her into a one-armed hug. "I hope one of the laundry-bots dunks that pompous bean counter in the wash." Lexie tried to stifle a chuckle. Mary grinned. "Oh go ahead and laugh. Do you think that we don't laugh when humans aren't around to hear?"

"I guess I never thought about it."

"Well, we do. We laugh and talk, and have opinions. That doesn't change just because there aren't humans around to hear them. These things might have been programmed into us to make humans feel more comfortable, but that doesn't change the fact that they are there."

Lexie nodded. Mary took her hand.

They hurried down the hallways to the bot entrance and Lexie walked out of the med center with a sigh of relief.

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An odd beeping sound woke Lexie from a deep sleep. She felt Joe's hand on her shoulder, gently shaking.

She groaned. "What is that noise?"

"Morse code. Old trick. Harvey and I use it to communicate over unused radio frequencies."

She rubbed her bleary eyes.

"And why is Harvey using it at one in the morning?"

"He's working a shift at the spaceport. The colony ship is finished."

"Already?"

“They are loading it tonight.”

Even before coffee, that seemed a bit off. “I would have thought there would be more fanfare.”

Joe was frowning. “There *should be* more fanfare.” He tried to pace in her bedroom, but it was only two steps to the door. “Can you use the worm you reverse-engineered to see how many bots are active right now, where they are, and who requested the shutdown?”

“Shutdown?”

“I’m the only bot on this block that’s active.”

She shoved her blanket off and didn’t bother to make the bed. “On it.” She sat cross legged on her bed with her tablet and found the worm...and started the tedious process of following its movements.

Joe handed her the obligatory tribute of coffee.

Lexie chewed her bottom lip twenty minutes later. “Almost all the bots are down. Some of the Avatar models are on standby. The only active bots on the grid right now are at the space port...and you of course.”

“Find the closest Avatar bot.”

Lexie groaned as the data uploaded.

She looked pleadingly at Joe.

“Do we have to?”

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They crouched in the shadow of an old oak outside a luxurious single-bedroom home in the civil service district. Lexie kept an eye on the street as Joe hacked the alarm remotely.

“We have half an hour before it resets. You watch the owner; I’ll check Trinity’s hard drive.”

She touched his arm. “That could fry her circuits.”

Joe didn’t seem all that fussed at the thought. “Couldn’t happen to a nicer bot.”

Lexie rolled her eyes. “Be careful.”

He went across the street first, and then motioned for her to follow.

Lexie nodded as his hand hovered over the doorplate. It slid open with little effort.

Lexie followed the wall with her fingers, six steps to the right. There were no lights on in the house, and it smelled...dusty. Unused.

Joe was moving like a cat toward the area where Trinity was hooked into her charging station. Lexie's job was simple.- Keep Trinity's owner from getting to the holo phone. Trinity was unresponsive as Joe plugged into her hard drive.

Lexie decided to take a chance and open the door...just to check.

It was even darker and dustier inside the room. Trinity's cleaning protocols needed an upgrade.

She nearly jumped out of her skin when she heard Joe's voice, loud and clear.

"Lexie, come here."

She was surprised to see that Joe had turned on the lights.

He was kneeling beside Trinity's prone body. "You won't find anyone here."

Lexie shrugged. "That makes this simpler. Where is her owner?"

"Dead."

"What?"

"According to these files, Trinity's owner died before she ever finished college."

"That's not possible. Who took her tests? How did she get a job with the programmers' complex?"

"Trinity has been running on a patchwork of old commands from five years as an Avatar and Traveler downloads. Apparently her last order was 'continue as usual and await further instruction'. For an Avatar bot with her limited cognitive abilities, she did fairly well." Joe looked faintly impressed.

Lexie shuddered. "How did her owner die? And what happened to the body? Scratch that...I don't want to know."

Joe was typing. “No, you really don’t.”

Lexie tried not to feel sick and failed miserably. “Download the worm.”

“It’s done. The ship has its own dedicated systems, but I was able to infect one of the loading bots through his wireless uplink. His next task is to download it into the ship. Once we do that, it can go to work.” Joe was silent for a long moment. “Interesting.”

Lexie sighed. “Don’t make me beat it out of you.”

“Amazing how quickly you humans revert to your barbarous ways...there might be hope for the species yet...”

She sighed loudly. He seemed to be trying to hold back a laugh. “Were you able to get access the spaceport?”

“No, but I was able to access something that will get us past the gates.”

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“Are you sure that Harvey can use this to get us past all those peacekeeper bots?” She held up the innocent-looking plastic bracelet, marred by dark slashes of bar coding. The spaceport was crawling with no-nonsense peacekeepers with the plastic-looking features that marked them as the latest gen of robots.

Joe frowned. “It will get us in. I don’t like it, but it will work.”

“What part about it am I not going to like?”

“The reason the Travelers decided to include human females on this transport.”

Nope. When he put it like that, she was fairly certain she wasn’t going to like the reasons. Joe didn’t seem keen to share whatever theory he had, and for once she was kind of glad.

Lexie considered the possibilities. “There’s very little to like about this.”

Joe nodded and picked her up. “Pretend you are sedated.- Harvey should be the only one who gets a good look at you if everything goes to plan...”

Her lips twitched. “What are the odds of everything going to plan?”

“Slim to none.”

She smiled a little. “That’s not funny.”

“Yes, it is.”

She closed her eyes and let her body relax. She kept her breathing slow and steady.

She heard Harvey’s voice as they walked up the gangplank. “I thought all of these were loaded?”

Harvey was either letting her know that he was here, or there were other bots nearby.

Joe didn’t skip a beat. “This is the last one as far as I know. Let’s get her to the med bots.”

Joe’s boots clanged along the metal walkway. Harvey’s lighter step was the only one that stayed with them.

As they boarded the ship, she had a totally childish moment when she was tempted to open her eyes. She’d dreamed of boarding a star ship since she was old enough to understand what one was. It was a sacrifice to give up that first glimpse.

They made several turns and went up an elevator. Joe’s steps were quiet now as he stopped pretending to be a loading bot. As they went deeper into the ship the air turned crisp and colder with a strong hint of freshly turned earth. Somewhere on the ship there was an area devoted to growing leafy green things. She knew, just from seeing the outline of the ship from a distance, that the ship itself was huge. Four skyscraper sized rockets ringed the ship. They would help it break Earth’s gravity, then fall away.

Joe stopped and she looked through her lashes, trusting that it wouldn’t be noticed. They were standing in a narrow hallway lit with dim amber lights. Not a place where humans were ever intended to be. Joe lowered her to her feet.

Harvey glanced at the barcode and blanched. "Take it off. I'd rather she was caught on board with no excuse than caught with that thing on." Joe broke the plastic with less than no effort. Harvey opened a storage area and turned to Joe.

"This is the last chance we have to back out."

Joe shook his head. "Not an option Harvey. The aliens have finally made their move, now that they've stacked the deck in their favor. If we wait any longer there won't be anything left that is worth saving."

The older bot sighed and tussled Lexie's hair again. Then he smiled at Joe.

"Well, it's going to be spectacular, win or lose. Mary and the others are already in position. The newest generation of bots is exactly what the Travelers wanted. Making them that task oriented may keep them from mutinying, but it makes getting around them so simple a first gen bot could plan it. I have the items you requested." Harvey smirked slightly. "I had the loading bots pack it."

He handed Joe a duffle bag and a long coil and took a second bag for himself.

Joe opened the bag and glanced at the contents. He pulled out a long, wicked-looking knife and several sealed glass phials.

"That should do it. Thank Eddie for getting this for me so quickly."

Harvey nodded. "I'm going to get back to him and Mary.- You'll be alright from here?"

Lexie hugged him. "Be safe."

Harvey sighed. "The two of you are doing all the heavy lifting on this. We'll be fine. Just watch yourselves."

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She stood at the entrance of a dark corridor. The air down here wasn't the crisp, fresh air intended for humans. It stank

of heavy elements she'd never encountered and a little garlic and sulfur added for good measure.

Saying she wasn't happy about this was like claiming the sun was a tad bit warm.

Joe's plan was simple. She was terrified once she realized exactly what he intended.

"No. You can't do this without me, so what if I just don't..."

He cut her off calmly as he pulled items out of the duffle. "If you refuse, I will ask one of the loading bots to help. Of course they wouldn't be able to react intelligently if the situation changed, so it would be more dangerous for me..."

She groaned in frustration. "I saw a vid from when the Travelers landed. They were looking for a food source and found an oil tank on one of those big trucks. The traveler crushed the tank."

"They are strong and hard to kill...but they are slow. I am not." Apparently, he could tell from her expression she wasn't convinced. He caught her eye. "I can do this Lexie...I have done it. Over and over again against dozens of opponents that were designed and trained to destroy me. This is what I was designed to do."

"I'm scared...I don't want you to do this."

"I won't let anything hurt you. I've already planned for every eventuality. You will be protected no matter the outcome."

She glared at him. "I'm not afraid for me. I don't want you to get hurt."

"I'm a robot. I can't actually hurt."

"I know how you are built. You monitor damage in a way that's based on the human nervous system. If it's not 'hurting' exactly, it is close enough."

"It's not the same."

Her mouth compressed into a flat line. "Do you want to die that badly?"

He took her hand. "I do not want to end my existence. It's been more pleasant than any other part of it."

She tried to stare him down. “You are not indestructible. I haven’t forgotten what the other Joe-bots looked like after the arenas.”

Joe shrugged. “Then plan to put me back together. But don’t use any parts off the new bots. I’d hate to look like them.”

She whispered “That’s not funny.”

His lips quirked. “Yes it is.”

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She stared into the blackness, willing her all too human eyes to see without light. They were too far away. She couldn’t even see shadows moving.

Her ears were more perceptive, but the slight scrapes and dull sound of blows landing weren’t exactly the most reassuring sounds. Joe would never cry out, and the Travelers...

She didn’t even know if they had vocal chords. She supposed that they must have had some way to communicate...she couldn’t remember seeing a vid where they actually spoke.

A high-pitched sound answered that question, at least partially.

She could see something moving across the room, dimly. It must have been the Traveler. It was wearing some sort of robe. In the dim light it looked like a kind of faceless doll, a human-shaped figure made of shiny black glass, covered in heavy robes that reflected what little light was in the room.

The Traveler was crouched, moving slowly. Powerful limbs left dents in the walls as Joe slashed and slipped under blows aimed at his vulnerable head. A second Traveler in a similar robe moved behind Joe as a third moved slowly toward the battle. The long knife in Joe’s hands caught the light. The third entity didn’t engage; it just blocked Joe’s options. They were herding him, slowly, inexorably into a place where his

greater speed and agility wouldn't matter. What did the near immortal Travelers have to fear from a few scratches? Once his mobility was limited their greater strength would crush this intruder.

Lexie waited, knuckles white on the switch. A few feet to the left...Joe ducked under the first one, and the Travelers moved a few inches closer.

"Now."

Joe jumped, impossibly high, catching a small loop of cord on the ceiling.

Lexie flipped the switch from her place on the thick rubber matting.

The high pressure hose combined with three million volts that Joe had re-routed from every electrical generator on the ship.

The tiny nicks from Joe's blade allowed the super-charged hydrogen into their systems. They could deal with the heat and the energy...but in this state the water acted as an acid would to a human. The Travelers screamed as they twitched and shook. Long after the water and electricity was turned off the three aliens moaned. And then they didn't.

"There were only three on the ship?"

"You wouldn't say that if you'd been the one fighting them."- Joe gave her a little grin.

She examined him as well as she could in the near darkness. Her eyes were still hurting from electrocuting the Travelers.

She took a step toward the doorway. "Let's get back to the other part of the ship."

"You won't be leaving human." The sibilant hiss stopped her in her tracks. "You have broken Tranquility."

She turned. Joe took a defensive stance in front of her, brandishing his knife. This one was larger, bulkier, and moved even slower.

Lexie found her voice. "Tranquility is a lie."

The creature had no facial movement, but she had the impression it was grinning at her. "Oh no. Tranquility is quite real. We have used the code to govern our species for eons. But humans are no more capable of understanding the finer details than they are of breathing sulfuric acid."

Joe darted toward the alien and managed six deep cuts before he was too slow to escape one of the heavy blows. Lexie watched in horror as he flew back into the wall and did not get up.

She had the switch in her hand, she turned it on...but only a few drops of water dripped out.

The Traveler's voice had a cultured, almost bored tone.- "Once I saw the dead, I turned off the tanks at the source. It was always a bit of a gamble, this world with so much water everywhere. Our protective suits could only do so much."

Each step it took was aching slow. "I have already called the others. Give up, and your end will be...well, not painless or quick, but the pain will begin at a later date."

Lexie moved off the mat. Joe's duffle was behind her. She moved toward Joe and pulled the bag after her.

"You don't even realize what this ship is, do you?"

She glared at the alien. "It's a slave ship."

A grating sound that reminded her of rusty machinery came from the alien. "You would call it that. I prefer to think of it as preserving a sample of a unique species. Within bounds of course."

Lexie continued to back away, staying out of reach of the slow-moving creature, while her fingers frantically searched the inside of the bag.

"Without your robots, humans are weak...even weaker now than they were when we landed. Too weak to control a planet. Too weak to survive."

She took a quick step away as the Traveler tried to grab her arm.

"Without your robots you are helpless; and we control the robots now."

Lexie felt a grim smile on her own lips. "I don't think your control is as absolute as you would hope."

The creature radiated curiosity. She wasn't sure how it did that without a face.

"Have you done something clever little human? We should have put you down when we eliminated your parents. They were too clever too."

"So you did start the fire."

"One of our devices did. Their research was too dangerous to be allowed to continue."

She kept moving toward Joe. He hadn't even twitched since he was thrown.

"Why would mapping your DNA be dangerous?"

The sound was even worse the second time...like a steel beam caught in a metal grinder. She had an awful feeling that this was the Traveler version of laughter.

"It's enough for you to know that we didn't wish the research to continue. After our polite requests were rebuffed, we were forced to take more effective action."

Her hand wrapped around the little glass phial. "So...you'll just take over the Earth and what? Fumigate the humans?"

"We don't have to kill you. You are practically extinct and don't know it."

She pulled out the small glass phial and let the bag drop in front of her. There wasn't much chance of him tripping over it, but one could hope.

"What do you mean?"

"It isn't just the fact that you've let your population drop to a few thousand living humans. With the robots on your side you could overcome that. No...humanity won't survive the changes coming to the planet as your sun expands. With the proper stimulation Mercury will be absorbed and Venus will disappear. Earth will become a nursery colony for our young. The conditions that are optimal for breeding our kind don't last long and mean the destruction of the world that we nest on."

“You spent seventy years preparing to make this planet a...nest?”

“We’ll spend a hundred more preparing it. We require ancient reserves of petroleum to feed the young, and an expanding sun to reproduce. In eons of exploring the universe, we’ve never found the correct conditions. So we create them.”

She looked at Joe. He nodded as he pulled himself up.

The Traveler turned his attention to the bot, ignoring Lexie.

“I guess we know what happened to the population of Regal 9.”

“They were not as difficult to eradicate as humans. Regal doesn’t have the necessary reserves of carbon...” The Traveler shuddered and turned to Lexie. “What?”

Joe stood, ignoring the alien. “I wonder what you meant by ‘proper stimulation?’”

The creature bent forward, as if he were dizzy. “The sun...adding enough hydrogen will cause it to expand.” The grating laughter sounded again. “There is a package that will be crashing into the sun very soon...one with all the proper elements.”

Lexie traded a look with Joe. “How soon is soon?”

“And why should I tell you that? Clever, clever little human...what was on the knife?” It doubled over in obvious pain, with more of that odd, sulfur smell coming off it in waves...

“We didn’t have the final conclusions from my parent’s research...but they knew enough to recognize the fact that you have a great deal of arsenic in your molecular structure. We found a way to remove the arsenic. It wasn’t my idea though...that one was Joe’s.”

“Only humans would ruin perfectly good tek with that much personality. If we hadn’t come you would have destroyed yourselves within a thousand years...you are simply too unsophisticated.”

The alien made a horrible wheezing sound. Joe picked up the knife and drove it deep into the unprotected junction of its neck and head. The alien gave a quick jerk and was still.

Joe pulled out the knife and wiped it on the ornate robe. He turned calmly to Lexie. "Let's see if we can scan for the package they are sending toward the sun."

"Did you happen to hear that bit about calling for others?"

"Harvey cut off all communication before we began."

"I know that he was *supposed* to."

"If he was delayed then we need to move quickly." Joe picked her up and started moving through the ship at a speed that would have been frightening if she hadn't just used up her body's store of adrenalin.

The bridge was not the picture-perfect collection of service bots that Lexie had expected. It was a motley collection of older service bots, including one that Lexie was almost positive was the laundry bot from the hospital.

Harvey was at one of the control panels. "We caught the Traveler's communication before it went out, but the tower is requesting that we give an ETA for takeoff."

Joe looked at Harvey. "Tell them we've had an electrical malfunction, and ask for repair bots. That'll save someone the download time."

He turned to Eddie. "Did you take the pilot download?"

The other bot nodded laconically.

Joe didn't bother to hide his smile. "Get me eyes on the sun...reroute any satellites you need to. They'll know we're here sooner rather than later. Hiding won't do us any good anymore."

It was a tense few minutes as the satellites were rerouted.

Eddie made a little noise of disbelief.

He zoomed in on a very small drone.

"Surely they can't do much with that."

Joe frowned. "They've been doing this a long time. Broadcast the information. Let people and bots know what's coming so they can prepare as best they can."

Harvey started pulling up charts. "Any chance of shooting it down?"

Joe shook his head. "We don't have anything that can reach it in time. It'll hit within a few days."

He hit a holo-phone button. "Mary...how many humans are down there in cryo?"

"336. Mostly female."

"Any room for more?"

"Not without redesigning the medical deck."

"We don't have time for that." He hit another button. "I need an ETA on that electrical fix."

An engineering bot, an old model, came onscreen. "Overloaded circuits. Spare parts are coming up...maybe twenty minutes."

"Make it no more than twenty."

He turned to Harvey. "Our primary goal at this point is to get this boat of humans to another planet. If we can come back for the rest later, we will, but saving this seed ship will ensure the survival of the species."

Harvey nodded as he typed in a query. "There's a suitable planet within range of the ship. The Travelers' records indicate that it has very little beyond marine life and vegetation. Assuming that we can get the Earth foodstuffs to thrive, humans could easily survive on it."

One of the other bots frowned. "That's a pretty big assumption."

Joe cut him off as he searched the files Harvey had found. "It's one we are going to make. GR344 has the dubious honor of being as far out as the Travelers have scouted...which means that they won't be inclined to follow in any kind of force."

Lexie wrapped her arms around her body. "GR344 is an awful name for a planet."

"Noted. When we get there, you can name it anything you want."

"Anything but Tranquility."

Joe rolled his eyes. "That's not funny."

Lexie grinned. "Yes it is."

\*\*\*

An hour later, she looked back...for one last glimpse of the Earth.

She and Joe were alone at the screen.

“Do you really think we’ll ever come back?”

Joe shook his head. “I don’t know. But somehow...no, I don’t think we will. The Travelers have won this round.”

“I don’t agree.”

“They stole the planet.”

“But we saved the species. Not just humans, but the bots as well.” She grinned at him as they turned the screen toward the open expanse of space. “We blasted the plans for ships all over the planet, and we have enough genetic information and nanny bots to have a population of a million in a few years on wherever we land. The remaining humans and bots will have the ability to leave if they organize.”

Joe shook his head. “I suppose that’s something.”

“No...that’s everything.”

About the Author:

About the Author

Vanessa Wells lives with her family deep in an enchanted forest (in Texas). Her hobbies include writing, drinking tea and coffee, reading, writing some more, and cooking. She battles daily infestations of plot bunnies...and dust bunnies, but that’s another matter entirely.

Vanessa is the author of the Seventeen Stones Trilogy, the Topeka Texas Chronicles, and the AREA 52 science fiction short story series. (Epsilon is coming out soon!)

She is a contributor to the anthologies *Adventure of Creation* and *Ye Olde Magick Shoppe*, and editor for both *Trick or Treat* and *Spirit*, and co-editor for the *Grumpy Old Gods* anthologies.

She is currently writing the third book in the *Topeka* series, editing *Grumpy Old Gods Volume 6* (coming in winter 2023!) with Juneta Key and working on the next story in the *AREA 52* series, *Zeta*.

You can find her at <https://stormdancebooks.junetakey.com/> and [www.vanessawellsauthor.com](http://www.vanessawellsauthor.com)

*Keep scrolling for a bonus!!*

*BONUS!!!*

*Scroll forward for an excerpt from the first part of my science fiction series, AREA 52!*

## **AREA 52:**

## **ALPHA**

I blinked blearily at the red glare of my alarm clock, wondering why on Earth it was making that horrendous sound, when the answer came to me as my sleepy brain registered the light from my window and my eyesight finally cleared enough to see the fuzzy numbers.

It was Monday.

I had a meeting with the head of my department at eight sharp.

-And I was late.

After a shower so quick it would have left my foster mother muttering about 'heathens', I twisted my hair into a knot, tossed on clothing which had the virtue of being clean, pressed, (dry cleaners were wonderful things) and being close to the door of my closet so I didn't have to turn on the light to get at them. I slipped on comfy flats, gathered my lunch, phone, locked the door...then unlocked the door and ran breathlessly back in to get my lanyard.

If they had to buzz me in without my ID again, the security guys were going to flip.

Rushing around kept me from thinking about another day of slogging through the mountain of paperwork that stymied every effort at true scientific discovery. I spent most of my time covering our...assets...for the inevitable lawsuits that came with even the best drugs. The new guy was from the corporate office, and he watched me in a way that made me nervous. I wondered if they'd sent him in to decide which projects to cut.

If worst came to worst, I did have an ace in the hole.- There was a trust fund. No answers about who I was, really. No names. No family. But there was money.

So suddenly, me, the girl who'd spent her early years in hand-me-down jeans and Goodwill shoes was able to afford to wear designer brands while everyone else was struggling through college. Not that I spent a lot on

things like that. To me, the money meant I could pursue as many degrees as I wanted all at once.

It was nice.

Lonely, but nice. I worked hard. I graduated top of my class.

I'd been offered a great job for a new grad. A huge opportunity.

And I hated it.

I didn't even want to think about the meeting. I checked my watch. Twenty minutes left. If I hurried, I could still get to his office in time. Not fifteen minutes early, which was what the new boss seemed to think was appropriate...but not exactly late either.

My apartment, while spartan and almost as charming as a two-pound block of pasteurized government cheese, had one strategic advantage for a morning-phobic person such as myself: It was only three blocks from the lab where I worked.

Two and a half blocks if I took the shortcut through the alley.

I raced down the stairs, out the door, and managed two blocks in less than three minutes, my long strides eating up the concrete as I sprinted over the mostly-empty sidewalk. There was a reason why I only wore flats to work.

I turned down the alley with a feeling of accomplishment. Security would buzz me through quickly (they were always nice, as long as I remembered my ID) and I'd take the stairs instead of depending on the ancient elevator in the office...

A quarter of the way into the alley, in a place where four buildings met, I stopped.

Suddenly aware. Focused.

Cold sweat pooling on my neck and I had gut-wrenching feeling that something was very, very wrong...

I reached for the mace that my foster mother had given me when I went to college. A small, never-used canister that had been dutifully transferred from bag to bag through the years, less a safety accessory than a reminder that there had once been someone who had cared.

I stood, fingers wrapped around that fragile can, cold fear in my veins, alert for whatever had triggered the feeling.

There wasn't much in the alley. It was unkept, with a dumpster that was overfilled, bits of trash littering the ground around it. There were piles of broken wooden pallets on one side. I turned my head and listened and heard a rattling sound from a stack of cardboard boxes piled against the wall.

Rattling, and another sound.

It sounded like...purring.

I laughed.

I looked at the pallets, mentally weighing my options.

I was late...but it wasn't the first time. The cat might not be there later; the poor thing was probably hungry.

I quickly took out the chicken I'd cooked in the crock-pot yesterday, and put it in a small pile on the furthest edge of a box. "Here you go kitty. I'll be back tonight with more." I grinned, even though I knew the new boss was going to grumble. I shouldered my lunchbox with a good heart.

I turned, happy with the prospect of finding a new cat, already thinking about a trip to a vet for shots once I lured the little guy (or girl) home, and wondering how pets were going to affect my lease...

Movement caught my eye, and I dodged instinctively.

Bright pink tentacles launched out of the boxes.-Sharp, wicked-looking hooks tipped each tentacle and the appendages seemed to stretch forever as I ducked out of range. I wedged myself to the other side of the

dumpster, breathing heavy, but out of the way as a long pink tentacle twisted the pile of chicken and pulled it into the dark recess of the boxes.

I looked around. The angle of the boxes and dumpster meant that I would have to get within tentacle distance of the thing if I wanted to leave.

A scraping sound startled me into looking up. The shorter tentacles were pulling the rest of the thing out of the boxes. My fingers searched through the junk beside me of their own violation, finding a slightly bent curtain rod in the debris around the dumpster.

What emerged from the boxes was vaguely egg-shaped in a nest of tentacles, though they darkened from bright pink to dark red around the head. It had two spinning orbs that might have been eyes, but I didn't spend too much time looking at them; the triple row of sharp fangs distracted me from much else.

I found myself on my feet, knowing that my balance was as good as it could be under the circumstances.

The razor-sharp hooks flew at me, trying to catch on flesh or clothing. Without room to dodge, I swung the curtain rod, crushing the hooks, bludgeoning chunks of pink, ripping the tentacle enough so that they fell to the alley and twitched on the asphalt. It was nothing like hitting true flesh. It crunched like cactus each time the metal rod connected.

I was doing fine until two guys in suits walked into the alley with what looked like chrome-plated water guns.

A third of the tentacles flashed toward them. The water guns sprayed something bright green. The tentacle it hit flapped uselessly and stilled entirely, seemingly paralyzed. The younger suit sprayed the head with impressive accuracy and the orbs that might have been eyes rolled up and stopped spinning.

I breathed a little sigh of relief.

That's when I noticed that the bits I'd bludgeoned off were moving too.

I'm not ashamed to say I made a kind of strangled squeaking noise when the bits started twitching around me.

I flung the little bits of pink flesh away from me, using the old curtain rod to knock them as far away from me as they could go.

Whatever those two men were doing, it wasn't slowing down the thing in front of me. I took a deep breath, used the rod to vault myself between the creature's egg-shaped body and its longer tentacles, and shoved the rod deep into the body of the beast.

The color drained from it as a small amount of purple fluid pumped from the wound for a long second, and then stopped.

I turned to make sure the men who had come into the alley were ok, but the expression on their faces wasn't the relief I was expecting.

Soldiers in black body armor poured into the alley, but the two men kept their eyes on me.

The younger one (who looked like he was sewn into his suit) was appalled. It showed on every line of his face.

The older one had fresh burns healing on what little skin I could see, but it didn't stop him from roaring "What the hell did you think you were doing? Destroying a member of an allied race when we were clearly applying a paralytic. Even the greenest newbie should have known that our actions implied a sentient instead of a hostile. I want to know what division you are affiliated with and how you survived the bombing."

I looked up at his partner, hoping to get some clarification. "I...don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

“I think you have me confused with someone else.”-  
Actually, I wondered if I’d eaten out of date Chinese take-out and was now suffering from some kind of weird nightmare.

A blood vessel became visible on his forehead. “What were you doing here today of all days?”

Some days I said things that were well-thought-out and eloquent. I was even witty upon rare occasions.-  
“I was...running late.” I was not my most articulate on Monday morning.

He looked like he was counting to ten, or maybe a hundred and ten. “You’ll be answering for this later.-  
For now, you will sit quietly while we try to save the seed pods that you have endangered. With any luck we can keep the Gamma Federation from imposing trade sanctions and coincidentally allowing space pirates to pick this planet clean.” He stomped over to the other, younger man as the soldiers rushed around, cleaning up the...pink thing?

Alien. It had been an alien.

I stood, rooted to the spot, a weird shimmering around my vision, and the part of me that was an actual (if not practicing) physician catalogued the effects. Mostly just the adrenalin wearing off. Probably. I had some scratches, and there would be a bruise on my leg later, but I was largely unscathed.

The two men were murmuring together as their black-clad compatriots rushed around like busy little worker ants. “The pods are going to die without the right equipment.”

“I don’t see how we’d get the right equipment in thirty minutes Green.”

I turned my head. “I have incubators in my lab.”

They turned. The younger one, Green, looked at me like I was speaking Swahili.

The older one, the one with the burns just barked, "Explain."

"I have incubators, specialty lamps, various setups for growing algae and yeast...if you get me the optimal environmental specs I can probably rig something up." I held out my ID. "The only problem is I don't know how you'd get in..."

The one named Green smiled and tapped his ear piece. "ANNA, did you hear that?" He looked up, touching his ear lightly. "She's printing IDs to the 3D printer in the van." He turned and shouted to no one in particular, "Get these pods in boxes, now!"

A man walked up and slapped two of the IDs in the burned man's palm. He looked at them, examining them for flaws and then put the lanyard around his neck and tossed the second one to Green. I wondered briefly how they'd known the correct company, and then I rolled my eyes. It wasn't the 1950's. They'd undoubtedly ran my face through recognition software and now they knew everything about me including my internet search history and science projects from the third grade.

The pods were placed carefully in a crate. I turned toward the older man. "Are you sure these things are going to be...safe? I don't want to incubate something that ends up looking like the movie Aliens."

The burned man glared at me. "Let me be clear.- The Rai-on was odd, it went crazy during breeding cycles...but it was my friend. The only dangerous thing around here is you."

About that time a man in body armor yelled and jumped back at they rolled the pink alien away from the wall. The alien had apparently been making a nest of the bones of animals it killed, or maybe it was just the alien equivalent of the garbage. Most of the bones were from rats and cats. I could see a few bigger dogs in the mix...but there was also a pile of unmistakable

**skulls. Human. The most recent one had bits of hair, some skin, and one blue eyeball left.**

**I turned back and narrowed my eyes. “I’m the dangerous one?”**

**Like Area 52? Get it on Amazon here:**

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**Read a sample from Magic and Other Disasters:**

It took less than five minutes for three of the biggest gossips in Topeka to show up to pump me for information. They didn’t have much luck with my stubbornly monosyllabic answers, but that didn’t do a thing to stop them from picking the incident apart while they pretended to shop in the store. The one with bright orange hair said “The smell made her sick?”- The lady with short, very blond curls nodded. The oldest of the three gave a sort of wheezy laugh. “Do you think she’s pregnant?”

“At her age? Please!”

God, I hated gossip. I viciously wished that Clair would hurry up. I doubted these biddies would dare invade her shop when she was in it. I slipped to the back to avoid their chatter. There was an old-fashioned bell on the counter if they actually decided to buy something. I fished around in the boxes (and made a face, thinking about the sheer amount of time that stocking all of this stuff was going to take). I found the Benson Industries box (the company that we ordered all the knick-knacks from). I opened the box and pulled out the invoice. We didn’t keep the stock on the computer either, so I had to print each item neatly in the register. Item: bead necklaces for counter display, glass, blue. Item: Religious bookmarks, brass. Item: One white necklace...that was weird. It wasn’t on the invoice. Ah, it must be one of those items. Sometimes Clair bought things that didn’t come with receipts. I put it under the counter and continued re-stocking the counter display.

I wondered if Bradley was having a good time at football practice. The gossips weren't anywhere near done discussing Mrs. Lafew's possible illness (last time I heard anything they were comparing her single symptom to people they'd known who had died of brain tumors) when a couple I'd never seen before walked in. I had a sudden urge to find a big stick or call the cops. They just set my teeth on edge from the first second. The woman's clothes had been nice at some point in the past, but they hung on her frame. The prominent line of collar bone and the skull-like features in her face matched the Halloween atmosphere very well. I was pretty sure it wasn't on purpose. He looked like a bottle of shampoo would run screaming when it saw his hair. I hesitantly offered the basket of potpourri samples. "Can I interest you in..."

The oily man cut me off. "I'm looking for a gift...for my wife." He ran his fingers over the string tie at his neck. "I want something semi-precious. A necklace."

The woman finally opened her mouth. "Moonstone is my favorite."

The gossips scattered out of the shop and I called out "Ya'll come again!" Preferably right now. I did not want to be alone in the shop with this pair. There was something unhealthy about both of them...and in her case it looked about three days dead.

"I'm not sure what we have in stock right now...let me show you..." She grabbed my arm in a chilly grip. I felt the same power rising in me that I'd felt the day the poltergeist attacked me. I realized that it was the same thing that I'd felt when I pushed that stupid boy down the stairs at Jacksonville. Better than that, I realized that I wasn't unarmed. She must have seen something on my face, because she dropped her hand and backed off. The man responded with an oily grin and moved into her place next to me.

"We're looking for a specific piece."

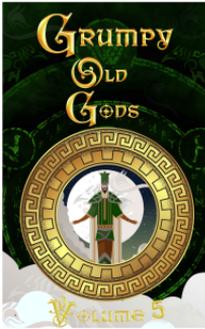
"We're closed." Clair stepped out of the back like she'd been there the whole time. Thank goodness. The man turned his

questionable charm on Clair. “Well, ma’am, I was just telling your girl here...”

Clair didn’t move, but for just a second she seemed to get taller, younger, and leaner. Much, much more dangerous than the anemic woman or the oily man. “I said we’re closed.” The woman gave Clair an icy look that was not like anything I’d ever seen in human eyes.

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*Calendar*

*Description automatically generated*

*What happens when gods wane, retire, or just decide they need a change of employment? 13 writers took up the challenge and let their imaginations run wild in this anthology that is nearly-always amusing, somewhat insightful, and completely irreverent as we imagine the gods of yore in retirement*

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