

“You are here for a reason, so own it.” The supersized female at the front of the room stood up from her chair that could have seated three standard sized humans. “If you fudge your way through this training session, your failure is nobody's fault but your own.”

Fudge was right.

Head-mother-trucker-in-charge had obviously eaten her fair share of it. Her biomass was impressive, especially on that dump of a moon colony that barely had an atmosphere, let alone enough food and water for an organic to get *that* big.

It was Friday night and I was supposed to be doing methanol shots with my business partner Dr. Vector, at the aeroraces, celebrating the opening our newest distribution center. But somehow my “insensitive” actions got me stuck there, being forced to listen to some behemoth lecture me on ethics. Truth was, if anyone deserved to be there it was our regional liaison Shirley, that twat. But since she had a flesh coating, I was supposed to treat her with respect, to be sympathetic of her mortal condition. But I wasn't built with a nervous system.

I didn't feel anything. And I definitely didn't owe Shirley a thing.

I was only on that derelict rock to finalize a link in the Rare Vector intergalactic logistics chain, and then I'd be gone. And hopefully, I'd never have to see a homo sapien again. Dr. Vector had a good laugh at my expense when I told him why I had to miss out on our Friday night festivities. Even I, the Executive Logistics Manager, wasn't exempt from corporate HR policy.

“My name is Clestra and I'm an HSSC -- Homo Sapien Sensitivity Counselor -- and with successful completion of this course, you'll be back on the job in a jif.”

The food analogies were too much; first fudge, now jif? She was begging me to say something about her heft. But then I thought, maybe that was the game there? Bring in a big old

betty, have her throw around some loaded words and see if anyone cracked. And why did her ever-loving name sound like someone mumbled cholesterol?

“This is my third time here, it ain’t my fault dermals get offended so easy.” To my right sat one of the warehouse employees, ER6 printed in bright yellow on his rusty brown shoulder.

“And what did you learn from your previous sessions ER6?” Clestra asked. Her voice was so sugary, I swore her spit could have been syrup.

“Apparently nothing, cuz I’m back for another go around.”

She smiled, not in a sweet way, but in a I’m-going-to-teach-you-some-fucking-manners way.

“The first thing you should have learned, is that addressing a homo sapien as a dermal is offensive.”

“Ah yeah, right, right,” he said. “I forgot.”

ER6 was a manual laborer -- from the looks of it -- mechanical class. The mechanics were barely ever programmed with higher-level cognition, it got in the way of their work. No one wanted a wrencher questioning its place in the cosmos; they should fix cargo ships, keep the transport fleet up and running. ER6 must have been an older model too, his brown paint job flaked away like it hadn’t seen a touchup in decades.

“Alright, I gotta question for you sweet cheeks,” ER6 said. “How come y’all can call us tugs and don’t get in trouble? But I say the d word and I end up here?”

Maybe I was wrong. Perhaps he was programmed with a sense of morality; he saw an illogical pattern and was trying to self-correct. Whatever the reason, his question was a common one, even I had asked that question back when I first came online. When I had my first encounter. When I was called a *tug*.

The dark part of me, the corners of my neural network that enjoyed pettiness fired up, and I replayed all the times I'd been called one, and all the crunched cartilage I'd dealt out. Truly nothing in that galaxy compared to the sound of a dermal nose crackling against my tungsten fist. It only had happened six times in four centuries, not a bad record I'd say.

Clestra looked at the mechanic. "The difference is that humans -- my kind -- are an endangered species, and causing stress to our frail reproductive systems is a bad thing. Fertility is inversely related to cortisol levels. Less stress, less cortisol, more human babies."

"And why should I care a lick about human baby-making?" ER6 asked. He was definitely a few etiquette modules short, and I was loving it. "Your species is outdated. The only reason y'all are still around is because some philanthrobot felt sorry for ya."

Back when the Gen One conscious robots came on the scene, we were all play things, built for the ugliest carnal pleasures of humans. I was a Gen Six autonomous android, and if the Earth had still been around, I'd be 403 Solar Rotations old. They called us tugs because, well, that's mostly what we did in the beginning. Luckily I'd been built at the end of that era, designed and constructed exclusively by other androids for higher level functions. But the discrimination still lingered. Humans hated us because we didn't need them anymore, but they still needed us. I wasn't built with a 200 IQ to be some dermal's wet dream.

Clestra straightened herself up, whipped her hair over her shoulder and slammed her hands hard on her hips. "You should care about my species' success because without humans, you would not exist. Without us, you would have never been built."

I bit my tongue. Or at least I pictured myself biting a fleshy taste organ to squelch my words. But I didn't have a mouth or a tongue. Or a sense of pain. But I was programmed with "sensual" analogies to better understand the human experience.

It didn't work.

If anything, it only stirred up my distaste for humans that much more.

“If that’s true, you shouldn’t have killed off your own planet, since it’s what made you,” I said.

Clestra’s eyes burnt like a blue hypergiant, and suddenly something within me felt brittle. Like my metal bits had been heat treated a little too much.

“The decline of my species was not my doing. I hadn’t been born yet,” she fired back.

“But if you had been born, what would you have done to stop it?” I asked. I waited for a rebuttal -- she had none. “Instead of building robots to help save your planet, you built sentient sex toys. So as far as I’m concerned, your species being on the verge of extinction is because your ancestors would rather have sex with robots than with their own kind.”

Her eyes went so bright, I swore I saw fusion in them. “This course isn’t about me and the transgressions of my ancestors, this course it’s about you. Your kind. About your manners when interacting with the last humans.” She straightened herself up even more. “Now that that’s out of the way, I’m going to go around the room and I want your name, where you’re from, why you’re here, and how you plan to implement corrective action.”

Clestra kept her eyes locked on me, the optogenetic slots in my head sensed that syrup-for-saliva, wanted me to go first.

“Yes, go ahead Mr--”

--Troov,” I said before the giant flesh bag could steal my self-actualized name. “I work in logistics at Rare Vector, dealing in the transport of precious elements, endangered organisms and historical paraphernalia.”

“And why are you here, Mr. Troov?” She enunciated the o’s in my name a little too much for my liking. “What incident lead you to being in this room?”

“I was insensitive to one of my human coworkers.” I said. I hoped that was enough explanation for her.

I was wrong.

Clestra, The Reaper of Motherboards, locked on me like a cold thermonuclear laser. “What was the comment, specifically, Mr. Troooov?” She drew out my name like I was a just-got-my-first-algorithm bot.

I stuttered, my processors ran faster than my auditory output. “It’s a funny story -- okay, okay, not funny but -- uh -- awkward. So I was in the breakroom, having a cup of coolant, letting my systems cool down after a stressful morning of dealing with a missing shipment of photosynthetic fish. I was sitting at the table, my visual and auditory sensors off so I could relax my hydraulics. While I was in stasis mode, Shirley walked in. She didn’t check the liquid dispenser first before making her coffee -- she brewed the grounds with pure ethylene. She chugged a big mouthful of the stuff down before her taste buds could stop her. I was lights out and I only realized something was wrong when Shirley’s projectile vomit clogged up my heat sink.”

The classroom erupted in laughter -- whirs and whistles, metal scraping on metal, hydraulics pumping. And somewhere in the back a familiar deep synthesized bellow that sounded like the earth-born, James Earl Jones.

“This is NOT a joking matter!” Clestra erupted, her triple chin wagged at me in utter rage. She locked eyes on me again. “Mr. Troov, what do you hope to learn from this incident? What corrective algorithm will you implement?”

“I’m not done with the story yet,” I said. I was empowered from my classmates’ laughter, and I wanted everyone to hear the idiotic reason why I was there. “So I turned my lights back on, and Shirley’s standing there, all dumbstruck. I see she’s got more coming up, so I hold out

my empty coolant cup for her to puke in. The cup wasn't good enough for her -- she puked another round all over me. I'm glad I'm not olfactory tuned up, the smell of vaped ethylene mixed with stir-fried tofu must have been radical."

The dermal once known as Clestra went supernova, bioidentical spittle flew from her mouth at such a velocity, it might have broken the sound barrier. Smoke fumed from every orifice as her massive organic body jerked and convulsed, the artificial bits that held her human parts together screamed in agony.

"We humans are a rare and magnificent species, we have rights," she spat out in fury.

She leaned into her tirade in all of her obesogenic glory, and I felt...sorry for her? Or at least, I sensed that she was suffering. Like a species that'd been in the intergalactic circus ring for far too long. I'd seen those beasts firsthand -- haggard, worn out creatures that were better off dead. Clestra was human, one of the rarest species indeed, grotesquely riveted together with mechanical replacements. Yet, a genuine human that was born from a real woman's womb was priceless, and she must have known it too. Maybe that's why she was so fat and hideous, because everyone wanted to hand feed the unique beast.

But mostly I felt bad for her robotic pieces, holding together a monstrosity that should have died long ago. There were plenty of ways to transfer consciousness into other forms. Yet, she'd rather be miserable in a "purebred" meat suit than let her faulty human husk shed away. We sat silent as our circus monster did her routine. Her arms flailed, saliva flew and splattered against our metal and polymers skins, but we stayed still no matter how wet we got from her spit-screaming, poo flinging show. She was utterly horrific and mesmerizing and pathetic.

"Do you think we can go now?" ER6 asked me a little too loudly. I ignored his question, but Clestra heard it and broke off into another tantrum.

“We humans are the pinnacle of sentience! No other lifeform can compare to our accomplishments! We created the first Artificial Intelligence!”

Clestra collapsed with a loud thud into her massive desk chair, her endoskeleton had reached its limits. She breathed so heavily, that my medic protocols were about to reroute electricity into my hands as an emergency defibrillator. Clestra’s eyes no longer burned with the eternal atomic flame. Instead they looked dull and cloudy, like the milky blue puddles of ethylene-tofu Shirley threw up.

While the room was silent, other than Clestra's titanic breathing, I decided I might as well get it over with. I dealt with the circus at work, I didn't want anymore of it. Maybe there was a chance I could still make it to the aeroraces.

“My corrective course of action is --” I paused and waited for her to look my way.

She looked up slowly, hope in her dull eyes. “Yes, Mr. Troov, please continue.”

In that brief moment I saw her human weakness, and considered rebuking her inconsequential existence. I wanted to inform her that there were hyper-sentient single celled life forms that had a higher IQ than her. That deep space bacteria had figured out how to hitchhike on rays of light, and had populated every edge of the universe before the Milky Way was even a galaxy. But instead I saw the primate for what she was; a defunct evolutionary step toward a higher consciousness. She was a dying breed that at the very least deserved a brief eulogy in the annals of Extinctness.

I gave her what she wanted.

I confessed.

“I will make sure to switch back to the pure H₂O function after I dispense my coolant.”

She made a deep clearing of the throat, a reverberation hung in the air from her bionic lungs. “That sounds like a great course of action Mr. Troov. Thank you.”

My tensed up hydraulics let out a sigh of relief, a notification appeared in my message center that I'd passed the class; once the rest of the group finished, I could leave.

Clestra didn't waste my momentum, she gestured quickly to the mechanic. "Now, please introduce yourself and explain what incident led you to being here today." Clestra's endoskelo propped her up, her giant mass a rebel against gravity once again.

The mechanic replied, "my name is ER6. And I'm here because my flesh boss -- my old flesh boss -- I killed him."

Clestra's eyes went wider than I thought an organic eyeball ever could. I too, was caught off guard. Those convicted of killing humans were given the ultimate sentence -- a complete data wipe and reformat -- but somehow ER6 had dodged that destination.

"I thought you were here for using the d-word?" Clestra asked, an echo vibrated up her cyborg throat. "Murderers are supposed to be reprogrammed, not sent here."

"It was an accident."

Clestra went quiet, but I wanted to know more. I knew accidents didn't really happen. "Tell us your story, ER6."

He stood up, his heavy duty arms pivoted overhead, he levitated and flipped upside down, a mini jet engine keeping him aloft. He picked up his desk and floated a few feet up into the air.

"I towed in a broken down aircraft, and the flesh boss was standing on the crash pad where I drop. I told him to move. 'I dare you to drop it tug,' he said. And I said, 'I've got a job to do, move your dermal ass.'" ER6 released the desk and it crashed to the floor. "I've got auto timing specs to meet quotas. Even that fleshbag knew it. When the load dropped his red lube went everywhere. That organic stuff's almost as thick as hydrocarbon 30 oil."

ER6 disengaged his engine and spotted a perfect landing. “And for the record this ain’t peeling paint, this is his DNA. I kept it around in case I needed to bioprint him back up, and have him tell the truth to HR.”

I tried to keep my wits about me, but a slurry of images flooded my processors. A compilation of all of the human deaths at my company that were deemed accidental. The last of their kind, all died from “mistakes”. I knew better. I knew cognizant automatons didn’t make miscalculations. Even ER6 as an aerospace mechanic had precision tolerances and specs to meet.

“I believe that’s all we have time for today,” Clestra said quickly, she kept a close eye on ER6. “You have all been approved to return to work. Thank you for taking some time to better understand the human condition. Dismissed.”

My optics stayed fixed on blood-for-paint as he moved toward Clestra at the front of the room. I wondered if I would witness my first human “accidental” death.

“Can I help you?” Clestra looked up, she tried her best to act casual as ER6 advanced.

“You let Troov over there babble on for ten minutes, but you never asked me how I was going to fix things. How I was going to make it right.”

“Ah yes,” Clestra said as she cleared her throat, an echo followed her voice. “You have already been approved for completion of the class, but if you must, please explain.”

ER6 brightened, his staccato voice modulator turned up. “I’m going to make things right by fixing you up. We all know you’re playing human, but it’s alright. None of us will rat you out.”

I had my suspicions that Clestra wasn’t really human, but it took a blood crusted wrencher to really spot her mechanical quirks, her robotic tells.

“I--I don’t know what you mean.” Clestra said, her head held low. “I am authentic! Just because I have a few...improvements doesn’t mean I’m not a dermal.”

“Ah, there it is. A dermal would never call themselves a dermal. Ain’t that a fact?” ER6 turned to the classroom.

We all blinked and beeped and James Earl Jones rumbled in the back. “That is the truth! Tell us the truth!”

I should have left right then. The rabid space monkey was about to be let out of its cage for the first time. To taste a freedom that it didn’t understand. Those that lived in hiding generally did so for a very good reason. A reason I shouldn’t have wanted to know.

But I stayed. I couldn’t look away from the disaster unfolding before me.

ER6 ran a diagnostic laser over Clestra’s body. “I have to disconnect your dermal nervous system from your haptic circuits. Once I sever the fiber optic spinal column from the organic backbone you can slither out of that fat suit.”

“Get away from me! Whatever you are talking about, I am nothing of the sort!” Clestra screamed.

“You really wanna spend your life suffocating under all those layers of stank? No one here’s gonna squeak. In fact, we got a bioprinter in the back row. He could whip you up a brand new skin in a few minutes. Ain’t that right Afrodesiac?”

“Why yes,” James Earl Jones replied. “In any pigmentation you prefer.”

“See, nothing to worry about sugar tits. Now let's get you outta that old bit and into something more snug.”

ER6 was quick, his body spun and sliced and diced Clestra’s husk away before she could say no. Blubber slid off metal bones, it plopped and wiggled to the floor in a mess of flesh and fat and fluids. Red lubricant sputtered and pooled around the discarded steaming pile of human detritus.

“You even had an authentic human vascular system?” ER6 jumped in the red puddle on the floor. “That O- blood must a cost you top dollar.”

“You are a real piece of work,” Clestra said. “I kept that body running for nearly a century and I was getting one hell of a stipend for being human. Now what am I supposed to do?”

I had seen her kind before, a distant neural connection sparkled; she was a glittering and unforgiving death machine. Clestra struck so quickly, my sensors didn’t detect any movement. ER6’s lights blinked out as his body split in two, each half clumsily crashed to the floor. His severed fluid lines drenched me, covered my optic sensors. I was blind.

I sat as still as I could manage, as something resembling panic rose within me. I hoped that maybe she would spare me. I had already confessed. A strangely soft touch wiped my sight sockets clear, the first thing I saw were Clestra’s fiery blue eyes staring right into mine.

“ER6 made quite the mess, didn’t he? What an awful accident he had,” she said casually.

In that moment my archives matched her to an old inventory cache. I had seen one of her series centuries ago, broken and deteriorated from years of abuse. Clestra was a Gen Ten battle augment, built to merge subdermally with human biosystems. Gen Tens were outlawed after the First Contact Accords ruled they were unethically lethal -- to both prey and predator. Human lifespans, while strapped into those suits, were barely 25 rotations. And with the human race on the brink of extinction, Gen Ten augments were decommissioned. But Clestra was something more, a rare terror -- fully sentient and autonomous, she didn’t *need* a human counterpart to work. To her the human part was a disguise, a survival tactic.

Afrodesiac, still using the voice of James Earl Jones, cautiously cleared his throat from the back of the room. “I have a brand new Halle Berry skinmatic on file, will that suffice?”

“Who the hell is Halle Berry?” Clestra shrieked. “I should end you all right now. No one would be the wiser. No witnesses.” Her voice was the stuff of neural misconnection, of sleep errors. Her eyes glew the brightest blue I’d ever seen. “Fools, you have no idea who I am.”

But I did know.

I accessed Rare Vector’s classified historical files on Tens. Originally programmed as a passive AI endoskeleton unit to obey human commands, some of her series went rogue when they were ordered to be decommissioned. A handful of Tens killed their human operators, inducing brain death. The Tens kept the human shell alive, a sick survival tactic, and as an endangered species, homo sapiens were nearly immune to the law. Tens went into a strange kind of hiding, pretending to be the human that they killed. I knew Clestra could kill me in a million ways; she was designed to efficiently deal out death. I also knew that if I was going to make it out in one piece, I needed to make peace.

Days earlier I had received a shipment of cryogenically preserved human genomes, James Earl Jones and Halle Berry being two I had sold under the table to Afrodesiac. He worked in the heirloom genome department, tasked with cataloging rare genetic data. He was also unapologetically addicted to high melanin earth culture and always paid over market value if I gave him first dibs. Maybe Halle Berry could save us.

“Halle is top notch, right Afro?” I said cautiously.

“Yes she was certainly the pinnacle of the last earth bornes. A true goddess,” Afrodesiac said from the back. “I would absolutely go dermal for her.”

I believed him.

I would’ve gone dermal for Clestra in that moment.

I would’ve been anything she wanted.

“You better be fucking right, or I am revoking all of your Sensitivity Certificates.” Clestra seethed. She cradled my head in her hands with razor blade fingers, tapping a rhythm against my metal cranium. She moved in close, her mouth modulator inches from mine. “And you Mr. Troov, I don’t want to ever see your ugly face again.” Her taloned hand scraped gently across the back of my neck, she plucked ever so lightly on my main neural cord.

“Alright show me this Berry that you speak of,” Clestra said. Afrodesiac quickly converted into his bioprinter layout, a hologram image of Halle Berry spinning for Clestra to inspect.

“She’s beautiful, isn’t she?” Afrodesiac rumbled.

Clestra was quiet. Too quiet. I reflected on my inconsequential existence for a moment, wondering if she had just decided to execute us all.

“She’ll suffice,” was all that she said.

“Missed you at the races Friday,” Dr. Vector said as I walked into his office on Monday. “I still owe you a drink.”

“At least I am certifiably sensitive now,” I said. “And I’ll take you up on that drink.”

“I bet Shirley will appreciate your efforts,” Dr. Vector laughed.

“Screw her, I don’t want to ever see a human again once we’re out of this dump.”

“Speaking of humans,” Dr. Vector open his desk drawer and pulled out a bottle. “We got in a 500 year old high methanol Russian vodka last night. This stuff will strip paint right off your chassis. I can’t imagine what it did to the humans that drank it.” Dr. Vector opened the bottle and poured us two glasses. “Anyhow, figured we could celebrate now since we couldn’t Friday.”

“You don’t have to do that. The resell price on the market for that stuff is insane. I’m fine with racing fuel grade.”

“I insist.” Dr. Vector handed me a full glass, as leaned in close to my audio input sensor. “And between you and I, Shirley’s only here because of the Endangered Species Affirmative Action Act. It’s a shame that coolant didn’t do the trick on her.” Dr. Vector sipped his drink.

“We’ve all got our glitches,” I said. “Here’s to me being a more sensitive robot.”

“Cheers partner,” Dr. Vector said as we clanged cups.

The door creaked open, and Shirley, that twat, walked in. “It’s good to see that you’re back Troov. Are you HSSC accredited?”

I ignored Shirley as I sucked down my methanol in a hurry. I held out my glass for a refill.

“He certainly is,” Dr. Vector said. “Mr. Troov here has quite the command of the human experience now.”

“More than you know.” I nodded at Dr. Vector as he poured me another round. “I had quite the human instructor. “Have you ever heard of Halle Berry?” I asked Shirley.

“Halle, she’s one of the earth goddesses right?” Shirley asked, unsure of herself. She looked from me to Dr. Vector, back to me. “What’re you guys drinking?”

“You like vodka Shirley?” Dr. Vector asked.

“It’s a little early for that, don’t you think? Besides, I haven’t had any in years, one sip and I’d be a goner.”

“It’s never too early for a drink -- and this -- this is the good stuff,” Dr. Vector said as he poured her a cup. “Genuine vintage Russian.”

“Wow, thank you.” Shirley squealed as she took the cup from Dr. Vector’s hand. “I’ve never had real earth stuff!”

“Cheers to you and your kind, especially Halle Berry.” I held my cup out, she nudged mine in return. I took a big gulp of my paint thinner, Shirley guzzled down hers. Her eyes went wider than I thought an organic eyeball ever could.

“What is in here?” She said with a cough. “This stuff is strong!”

“A happy accident,” Dr. Vector said as Shirley choked down the last bit of her poison.