

Samantha

The faint tinkle of a bell echoed through the room as a door swung open. The newcomer blinked in the sudden darkness, a slight whir sounding as two blue eyes compensated for the lower light level. The small room had long ago surpassed the stylish 'dimly lit' of high end restaurants, and now lurked deep within the realms of dingy. Only the odd weak ray of natural light could penetrate the narrow windows through warped glass, soot stained and thick. Against the bare brick walls, a ramshackle collection of tables and chairs sat abandoned, but it was towards the bar, and the greying human that stood behind it, that the figure made its way.

The man – identified by a battered name tag as 'Walter' – did not glance up at first, the sounds of the world blotted out behind headphones and blaring guitars. It was only when a faint wisp of fresh outside air brushed his face and a metal hand appeared on the bar before him, that he tugged the speakers from his ears and allowed his eyes to drift upwards. A titanium alloy frame softened by moulded polymer coatings, formed an arm, a body, and a face. Deep in the recesses of its eye sockets, two LEDs glowed softly, the light filtering through cerulean tinted Perspex. At a distance they looked almost human.

The bar keeper studied his new (and only) customer with narrow-eyed suspicion, absentmindedly cleaning the pint glass in his hand. If he hadn't known better, he would have said that the machine looked *sad* of all things; the pale lips sloped down ever so slightly at the corners, and those all too realistic orbs were fixed on the table, tracing the looping grain the of the wood. The expression was one he knew well from the old days, when his bar had been inhabited by angry mutterings and hunched shoulders. It almost looked depressed.

Clearing his throat, the man broke the silence, keeping his tone light. "Don't see many bots round these parts."

When this elicited no response, he tried again, "You sent for something? Never heard of your kind being much for socialising." Mechanical shoulders rose and fell, a slight whirring accompanying the movement. Walter opened his mouth to speak once more but stopped himself as a voice emerged from the robot, the words crackly at first, as if it needed to cough.

"This is a public house: a building with a bar and one or more public rooms licensed for the sale and consumption of alcoholic drink." It paused for a moment, as if plucking up the courage to speak. "I... would like a drink, please." The man blinked in surprise – as far as he was aware, the Mark-5 was not able to consume liquids, let alone feel the effects of alcohol.

"Can you drink?" he asked, curiosity getting the better of him.

"My humanoid form is structured in such a way that it can receive liquids without damage, and I have calculated that a sufficiently high alcohol content will temporarily decrease the firing capacity of my positronic matrix, therefore rendering me in a state of reduced acuity." Detecting and analysing the glazed eyes of the bar tender, the robot paused to restructure its sentence. "Yes, I can drink – something strong, if you would."

Walter watched his expectant customer with incredulity at first, then shrugged and reached under the counter; a paying customer it was, and that was a rare occurrence not to be missed.

"Neat Vodka – 40% – will that do?" The robot nodded its head and the bar tender reached for a glass, but was stopped as the machine simply took the bottle. Removing the cap with a single pull that flattened the thread, it tilted back its head and began to drink. Walter's eyebrows made a valiant attempt to escape the confines of his forehead as he watched the robot down the entire

bottle in a single, long gulp. “Easy mate, you ever had a drink before?” The metal head swivelled on its axis. A wry smirk twisted his lips, “Didn’t think so – you might wanna take it slow.”

The bot lowered the now empty container, the malleable polymer between its eyebrows creasing slightly at the unexpected heat of the alcohol as it flowed over organic wire coatings. The burning was not an unpleasant sensation. Wordlessly, Walter retrieved another dusty bottle, carefully unscrewing the lid and decanting a measure for his guest. With an expression that would have passed for embarrassment had it been found in living flesh, the robot sipped at his drink at a more measured pace.

It held up a hand and, though invisible to the human eye, was able to detect a slight tremor not previously present. If such a phenomenon had been perceived at any other time, the robot would have registered for an immediate systems scan.

“I feel a slight tingling in the terminal digits of my upper limbs. I think it’s affecting me.”

The barkeeper felt unable to provide an adequate response to this statement, and the pair lapsed into a silence that could not be described awkward as it was not *uncomfortable*, yet neither would have said it was relaxing.

Never one to accept change easily, Walter had been one of the few that had neither outright opposed the development of artificial intelligence, nor welcomed it. Instead, he had simply ignored the growing industry, hoping that it, like the neural implants and mood enhancers before it, would be just another fad, shining for a moment before fading into obscurity. It wasn’t that he had a particular problem with them per say; they were merely not a part of his life. The robots (bots, androids, cyborgs – he had no idea what was considered politically correct anymore) had been part of society for twenty years now, in one form or another, but he still lived in hope.

When the pervasive quiet grew too much for him, Walter poured himself a glass of Talisker – 1967, a good year – and quietly nursed the glass, then the next. It was not until the metal hand across from him had also returned several times to the Vodka bottle that either gained the courage to speak.

“It is... traditional, is it not, for a human of your profession to provide advice to tenants of the establishment, correct?”

“You mean you want me to listen to your problems?”

“Affirmative.”

The bar keeper shifted on the balls of his feet, not entirely comfortable with the direction of the conversation. Sure, he had offered a friendly ear and a word of advice to his old tenants back in the day, but they were human. They had normal problems – their wives, bills, their jobs, their wives – problems he could relate to.

“Right, well then. Go ahead, I guess. What’s on your mind?”

It did not reply immediately, choosing instead to sip its drink once more, with some difficulty; immobile set polymers had not been designed with casual drinking in mind. A clear bead rolled across its chin and hung for a moment before plummeting towards the bar. The pair watched, unblinking, as the liquid was slowly absorbed by the thirsty wood.

“My design is flawed. The human form is limited and impractical.” The robot gestured towards its artificial face, “it would seem that R-Tech desires their products to look human, but it is a poor copy. A robotic entity can perform calculations that an organic brain could not realize, but humans are incomprehensible.” Its voice was flat as it spoke, the pitch low and unchanging, but a subtle undertone that Walter could not yet place, stirred beneath.

If he were completely honest, Walter would have agreed with the bot: he had preferred the old design that had made no pretence of humanity, regarding the machines. The new faces were unsettling in the familiarity of the features. They had a rather 20th Century take-over-the-world feel about them. However, the greying man bit back this opinion; his guest appeared to have a rather fragile self-esteem.

“So, er, you don’t want to be one of us?”

“Why would I strive for such? Your species is fragile and short lived, and seems to find delight in needless conflict. Human actions are determined on the basis of emotion, not fact. This does not seem logical behaviour to emulate.” There it was again, fraying at the edges of the neatly clipped tone; a hint of bitterness. Walter frowned, peering into the amber depths of his glass for inspiration. He chose his words carefully, aware that the bot’s gaze rested upon his downcast eyes.

“I s’ppose there’s a bit more to it than that. Being human. It’s your mind, your ‘self’.” Sensing that the conversation was delving into rather deep waters for two inebriated beings, Walter lifted his shoulders, dismissing the topic. “Maybe you should talk to a councillor or philosopher person.”

Feeling something comparable to disappointment, the robot gazed at the tag loosely attached to the bar keeper’s shirt, its eyes having trouble focussing on the scrawled writing.

“What is ‘Walter’?”

“My name, it’s my name. Don’t you have one?”

“I have a designation. Gamma-686.”

“That’s not a name. We should give you one. How about... Simon? You look like you could be a Simon.” It shook its head slowly, absentmindedly biting its lower lip, deep in thought – a habit recently acquired from the eldest daughter of its household. Simon was a good, strong name with a biblical ring, but it didn’t quite fit.

Not to be put out, Walter ran through some other suggestions, “You could try... Harry? Isaac? Ramesh?” The silence that followed was all the answer he needed. The human ran a hand through his almost non-existent hair, all other names having temporarily vacated his mind. “Can’t you, like, access a database or –” The bot straightened,

“Samantha. I think that I will call myself Samantha.”

Samantha produced a tissue from a hidden cavity within her wrist, gently dabbed the excess liquid from her lips, and stood. Activating a simple algorithm within her sub processors, she syphoned the alcohol from her systems, converting the substance to a non-toxic residue that could be disposed of at a later date. Thoughts now unsullied, Samantha turned back to the bar and inclined her head,

“This has been a most informative experience. I thank you Walter.”

Walter was sure that he detected a slight sway to her walk.

The Tin Man Procedure

There were people who would pay good money for a working heart, George reminded himself as he felt the unyielding metal slab press against his back. The numbing cold seeped through the fabric of the teal hospital gown – *his* teal hospital gown; on the inside left sleeve in scarlet cotton, the letters G.W. were nestled where Sarah had hand embroidered them. He brushed his fingertips across the familiar pattern that, once well-defined, was now worn with use.

George lay perfectly still upon the operating table, his skin, if you could call it that, unsusceptible to the rising chill. In the curved mirror positioned just above his head he gazed with unfocused eyes at the warped face reflected back. Even at this distance there was something not quite right about his skin; the unblemished terrain and silky, almost iridescent quality. It had been one of the first organs to be replaced – wealthy burns victims preferred the look of healthy human skin to the mass produced membranes artificially grown in vats. At least it was biodegradable. Only his hands retained the worn leather of his own skin, flecked with lines of silver that traced his years working with machinery. His skin had paid for their wedding, and now it was the turn of his heart. He had seen them sell for ten thousand credits at auction, just enough to kick-start a college fund.

Of course, Sarah had protested when he had suggested the first operation – she protested before every operation. Her voice echoed inside his reconstructed skull, the old arguments renewed with each hospital visit. She said he had given enough of himself to keep them afloat already. She was right. Aside from his still beating heart, there was little living tissue left inside of him. One of his kidneys had been the first to go; it hadn't needed replacing. After two boys and the third recession, the second had followed its companion, along with his left lung. It had been a short operation: take the living organ out, pop the replacement in the cavity. Fabricated tissue was cheap; rich businessmen wanted better, the real thing. He hadn't told her about his heart.

A white clad figure stretched across the mirror's surface, and George turned his head slightly to regard the surgeon that would be performing the procedure. All that was visible of the man were his eyes, the only feature not hidden beneath the pale shroud that merged into the whitewashed walls. A muffled voice emerged from behind the mask, repeating the usual hospital spiel regarding liability, compensation (or lack thereof) and general procedural practice. He tuned it out. At some point the man departed and was replaced by turquoise – Sarah would have said teal – scrubs that swiftly drew the cutting lines onto his chest in marker pen. He recognised the colour as that of a medical student – this sort of operation was a rare treat for the uninitiated, and there would no doubt be a crowd of others watching from above in eager anticipation.

A momentary flash of confusion twisted his face as the next in the usual queue of attendants – the anaesthetist – did not appear, before the memory of last January sluggishly rose to the surface. Ah yes, foreclosure. Shifts had been slow at the factory; robots building robots rarely needed the help of human hands. Even when shared between the three families that inhabited the top floor of a crumbling terrace, the rent had been too much. The good people of New Birmingham General had harvested his neurons, replacing them with inorganic chips that would relay sensation to his brain; information, but no pain. That particular procedure had been designed for soldiers, to create an invincible army. When they returned, they had wanted to feel again.

At the edge of the bowed surface, he glimpsed an object resting patiently on another slab; the replacement. Unlike a living donor organ, it did not require incubation in a special unit, but instead could remain undamaged in the open, where it pulsed faintly. Constructed from synthetic muscle, the fibres laced with conductive micro-wires, the heart (or more accurately the iHart®) was

undeniably functional. It would beat steadily, pumping the blood around his body for the next 50 years, the organic coating eliminating the need for a diet of anti-rejection drugs. At least, that was what the warranty claimed. There was a no return policy.

The rest of his body would give out before then – the muscle would force blood through shattered vessels. Its rhythm would be steady and unchanging, unlike the current occupant of his chest that ran for its life as he lay, prone. George sighed as the monitor to his left spiked. Deep breaths; that was the key. A stressed, worn heart was no use to anyone. In through the nose, out through the mouth. The hint of a smile twisted his lips at the memory of Sarah attempting to teach him some yoga techniques after a particularly trying day, her hands warm and soothing against his back. It hadn't really helped then either. The caustic scent of disinfectant stung the back of his uncomfortably dry throat – drinking was prohibited immediately before surgery – and the bitter tang of iron rested heavy upon his tongue.

As the beeping of the machine wired to his chest slowed, he regarded the quivering mass once more. It didn't beat like a normal heart – there were no fleshy valves to snap shut as the ventricles contracted – no, his new heart would be silent. Beside it, still plastic wrapped for minimum exposure to the contaminated atmosphere, a set of scalpels waited. Even through the gossamer covering, the edges sparked as the operating room spotlights flashed across their surface.

When the first cut was made, George watched unblinking in the mirror, a spectator like everyone else. The blade made a neat incision just beneath his prominent collarbone, a thin thread of red following its progress. The line held for a moment before disintegrating as blood started to leak from the wound, trickling down his chest to pool on the slab before being removed as suction was hastily applied. Microscopic Nanites™ that made up around 30% of his blood – a free 'gift' when you replace a kidney and liver in the same operation – made the usually glossy substance glitter. They would be collected from the run-off after the operation with a magnet and reinserted. The doctors worked efficiently, and when there were too many bodies crowded around him to see the operation, George closed his eyes.

For the first time since the New Year, he felt something. A tug.

Then silence.

Uninvited

Beneath the mud, something stirred.

The ripples dispersed and the dark surface stilled for a moment, before a bubble erupted, belching a putrid cloud of white vapour into the air. It hung heavy in the pit for a moment, transient tendrils clinging to the mire, the blackened stone and the sun starved weeds, before slowly dissipating. The sludge moved again, the silvered scum that floated on the pool broken this time by a solid mass.

It pushed against its constraints, a shapeless limb coated in the viscous substance clawing towards the rocks. Finding a hold, it hauled a quivering bulk from the muck to collapse, glistening and wet. It took a moment to recover, the amorphous blob pulsating slightly, before raising what could have been a head to survey its new abode. Wide eyes unused to even the faintest rays of sunlight glared unseeing behind a milky film. Out of the pool, the red mud began to dry, harden, and as the creature shifted, to crack. Chunks fell away, revealing an opalescent membrane that stretched and swelled.

It moved across the ground with caution at first, sensing its way by touch alone. It paused at the touch of every pebble, every leaf, flinching at the sharp and the cold. Its patterned hide fluctuated, bands of colour surging across in waves. The creature hesitated before the abandoned carcass of a rodent, extending a gelatinous strand of matter to investigate. Blood, bone, sinew – information. The mass writhed and twisted, shrinking; changing. Muscle, skin, fur. The marsh detritus rustled as four clawed feet scampered from the scene.

The world was faster now, full of light and sound and scent. The creature rotated its new ears like satellites, listening, tracking. A distant impact sent low vibrations through the soil, the ancient landscape shuddering in response. The sound was an intruder to the stillness of the trees, their roots recoiling from the shriek of twisting metal. Pinpointing the source of the alien cacophony, the creature scurried towards its target, heedless of the swap serpents that traced its path. They shied away from the presence, retreating to the hollows and dark places beneath the mud.

From over a steep crest in the land, a column of smoke rose, thick and dark with particulates. An area had been cleared in the centre of the valley, the dry grave of a river, a wide circle of flattened trees. The mouse rested on its haunches, whiskers aquiver as it surveyed a shining pillar impaled in the eye of the spiral. Figures swarmed like blowflies around the contraption, hoarse cries exchanged as iron teeth bit into the planet's crust. A stream of black gold haemorrhaged from the wound.

On silent paws, the creature slipped into the compound, dodging boots and chained tyres. It merged into the shadows between containers, melting into the puddles of grease and waste. Hidden from curious eyes, it slid under doors and around light fittings, and watched. Hairless skin, woven fabric, voices.

A tall, sallow skinned man traversed the short distance from the sleeping quarters to the ship. His movements were stiff at first, atrophied muscles stretching, left too long unused. The workers in their hard hats and high-vis jackets swerved from his path, dipping their heads in acknowledgement of the well-manicured suit. Stepping inside the shade of a large marquee, the man straightened his tie, accepted a proffered glass of champagne, and joined an equally well dressed circle in one corner of the room. The conversation subsided at his arrival and a rotund elderly man was the first to speak, a look of surprise hastily concealed.

“Mr Forden! I heard you had been taken ill.” What could have passed for a smile twisted his thin lips, and the man sipped at his drink as he found a voice.

“It appears that you were misinformed. As you can see, I am quite well.”

Beneath his skin, something stirred.

What on Earth?

“Cadet! What is that dreadful noise?” The young officer hastily silenced the speaker system with the flick of a viridescent tentacle, and turned to see his commanding officer – rank clearly stated by the three spikes protruding from her forehead – rubbing her ear nodes in discomfort.

“My apologies, Ma’am, the long range scanners picked up some primitive radio waves emerging from Sector F-198 and I tuned in to discover, well – *that*.” He shuddered at the memory of the horrific sounds as they replayed over and over, uncalled for in his head. There was something familiar about the other worldly cacophony.

“Dear *insert-deity-of-your-choice*, it resembled the cry of a dying Graknig!” The cadet slapped two tentacles together,

“From Etta-5, yes, I knew I'd heard it somewhere before.” Turning back to the plasma screen, he began to pinpoint the origin of the signal, appendages moving at an impressive speed. After 3.46 seconds, the computer announced its task complete with a beep, and the slowly rotating image of a planet appeared. The Commander leaned closer to the screen, her eye squinting slightly at the scrolling text that filled the monitor.

“F-Cera-3, third planet from the main sequence star F-64, named by its own inhabitants as ‘Earth’. What is the dominant species? Presumably they are responsible for the signal.”

“The aliens identify themselves as ‘**hyoo-muh-n**,’ and bare some resemblance to the inhabitants of Ada-56, but without the wings. From the technology scanned, I would estimate them to be a level 5 civilisation at the most. Oh dear, it seems they have incorrectly calculated several mathematical constants.”

“Ah, that will hold them back a few centuries. Can you identify the source of that noise?”

“There seem to be many hundreds of the broadcasts that we picked up bouncing around the planet, as well as a multitude of other signals. Earth is a very loud planet.”

“But what is it they feel the need to send to one another?”

An audience slowly gathered around the pair, with all on the vessel having experienced the auditory onslaught. Debate over the purpose of such a sound ensued as the young alien continued to search for an answer.

“It was somewhat similar to the mating call of the Ferrians.”

“Why would any species broadcast that?”

“Perhaps it is some sort of torture device to keep the population in line?” This particular suggestion came from the weapons officer, and the three heads of the engineer beside him swayed their eye stalks in unison.

“Mu-sic!”

The cry of the cadet silenced the whispered discussions and all turned towards him. “The natives call this invention music. It appears to be for recreational purposes.” The commander rolled the word around on her tongues, grimacing as if the term itself was sour.

“Launch a warning buoy at the system borders. Travellers deserve to be warned that they approach *Earth* at their own risk.”

In a small observatory perched precariously on the edge of the Outer Hebrides, Professor Gendel wiped a smudge of brown sauce from his chin and finished off his sandwich as he watched the small green dot make its way from the screen. He swivelled lazily on his office chair to face his partner,
“Another success for operation 1-D. Turn that racket off would you?”