**Sci-fi stories written by**

**students from**

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**in France**

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**R.I.P.J. & Cie**

by Justine Arjo

**CHAPTER 1**

It was 4:00 AM. The weather was still warm in this dark night of May. Hanging on the back of the truck, I saw the lights from the lampposts scrolling behind me. Theo, my colleague, stopped the truck.

“Laure, you’ll be careful not to fall in the trash! You already have the looks, please avoid getting the smell as well!”the boy laughed, behind the steering wheel.

Theo got on my nerves. I have been working as a trash collector for nearly one week because I could not find any other job, and he was already despicable and contemptuous. He couldn’t speak a minute without making some silly joke or other. Sometimes, I wondered how comes so many people are so hateful. Moreover, my green suit is not so ugly...

I climbed off the truck in order to go get the bins lining the street. The first one I grabbed was really stinky. What did people eat to get this result? Ah, right, we are in France so it’s obvious: cheese. Even if this job was a little bit exhausting and not so enjoyable when it came to the smell, I was surprised to see this town in the surroundings of Paris at night; everything was different, the time seemed to stand still, except when a light from a house shone suddenly...

“Stop harassing me, you can’t do that!”

...Or when someone started screaming.  I turned around, a trash bag in my hands, looking for the source of the shouting. It was not Theo’s voice; he was still waiting inside the truck cab.

“Did you hear that?”I asked Theo.

“Yep’, but don’t get involved in their reckoning. You’re too gullible to imagine what can happen when the sun comes down. It’s not our job to intercede in a rumble.”

Theo was definitely a fool. Thinking and acting like this despairs me. People like him make me lose faith in humanity. Yet, I sighted a shadow in the gloomy street as a yelp resounded at the same time. Decided to help, I ran in with the trash bag in my hands, as a weapon of sorts. My colleague, thinking that I was safely hanging on the truck again, started the engine and moved on along the street, while I was running on the dark pavement. He was stupid. Down in an alley, three shadows seemed to be surrounding someone.

“Hey, you three! What are you trying to do?”

And right then it downed on me that I was no superhero, not even a tiny bit! I had trouble picturing myself in a new comic called “*Super Garbage Girl*”. The three figures turned back, slowly. They were ninjas. Shocked, I was staring at them with a puzzled look, my mouth opened, in awe. One murmured something in Japanese. I wondered if we were being captured by a hidden camera for a stupid video show. Maybe the first episode of *Super Garbage Girl*, after all. I could see an old man, on the ground, his back to the assailants. He didn’t seem to be hurt, but I was worried. Wanting to make sure he was safe, I tried to make some movements to be understood by those ninjas. God, they were real ninjas. I felt so ridiculous shaking my arms with my trash bag reeking of stale cheese. Suddenly, I noticed that the elder stood discreetly, in silence. I continued to make my awkward moves, but the ninjas seemed to be getting ready for a fight, bringing out shurikens. They seemed real. Oh, for god sake, they were real, and I was going to die. Ladies and Gentleman, *Super Garbage Girl* was coming to an abrupt and very quick end, the super short TV show. Cool. She didn’t help anyone, she didn’t stop any villain. Really cool.

Unexpectedly, the old man pulled a Taser gun from his pocket. He directly put it on the neck of a ninja, who started to spark before falling down, stunned. At the same time, I hit another ninja who didn’t react in time because he had been knocked out by my stinky trash bag. The third one pounced on the old man, who tased him without pity. The three enemies were now harmless. If someone had told me that I’d fight one today, I wouldn’t have believed it. I crouched next to a ninja and looked at his shurikens. They were definitely real.

“Jesus! I have to post it on Instagram!”I shouted, euphoric. I took my phone in order to take a picture.

“*That’s not a good idea.”* I turned back. For one second, I had forgotten the old man.

“Oh! I’m so sorry, are you okay?”

He touched his grey moustache and dusted his shoulders. He coughed. He was fixing me. Then, he hugged me. I was not prepared for that.

“Thank you, oh, thank you so much! I thought they would kidnap me. Huh, for sure, they came for me. They tried to steal my precious work. Oh, thank you again, you saved a man and a huge project!”

 ... He was maybe a pervert. Who moved around the city with a stun gun, by night? Weird. I tried to recede a little bit from his hug. The old man was smiling; he seemed truly happy to be safe. I was finally relieved.

“Glad to see you’re safe. Did they hit you? We should call the police.”

“Please, don’t!”he exclaimed.

Okay, he had some trouble with the police. Perhaps he had already been arrested for raping? Oh no, I dearly hoped not.

“Why not? Three... Ninjas, have been threatening you! It sucks!”

“Oh, don't worry, this is the fourth time this month. That’s why I bought a taser too, haha.”

He laughed. He was maybe a criminal, wanted by the FBI, the CIA or maybe the CBS from Sacramento. I hoped Patrick Jane could come and save me. The Grandpa continued:

“Well, listen. I’m actually working on a really special project, and some rotted industries have tried many times to steal it. And I absolutely don't want this to happen. But I need to get some place where I can recover the material that I need.”

“In the middle of the night? There’s not a single shop that’s open at 4 a.m.!”

 “*Friends are always there for you if you need them*.”he answered with a smile.

**CHAPTER 2**

I was waiting for him in the street, next to a little shop. On the storefront was written “*Totolrapid’s*”. He needed some lighting for his work, and he apparently had a friend who was an electrician. Coming out from his friend’s store with a huge box between his arms, he encouraged me to follow him.

We finally arrived at his mansion. Just before going in, I received a text from my boss, asking me where I had vanished. Ignoring it, I kept walking next to the elder, who was looking for his keys.

“Hold it for a second, please.”  He gave me his box. I wouldn’t have thought that LEDs could be so heavy. Having found the bunch of keys he was looking for, he opened the gate.

**CHAPTER 3**

“This is where I work.”

Following the stairs to his basement, I couldn’t help wondering what the nature of his project could be. Lots of machines, computers, electrical wirings and pipes were disposed around an illuminated area.

“And this is my work.”

He pushed a button. The area I was talking about opened up, and another platform rolled up from under it. I couldn’t believe my eyes.

“My name is Bernard Lampin, and I’m a retired French engineer who decided to create... a robot.”

He smiled at the look on my stunned face. I noticed the android was probably my size. Made with metal pieces, some gears were still visible on its body. It seemed to have the same articulations as a human: elbows, knees, wrists, neck, ankles, and even phalanxes. Nothing moved yet on it. It was as if a soul had been dormant inside the machine.

“You can give me the cardboard box now, if you want.”said Mr Lampin.

I let the box touch the ground, before pulling it up towards him. I couldn’t let my eyes go from the robot. The chrome steel of its chest started to lift, as if the humanoid were breathing. I noticed that some parts were painted in a bright white, while others seemed bluish. Electric wires, only visible at the articulations, appeared to shine under this iron armour.

“Let me just one minute to put those leds on R.I.P.J., and you’ll see him alive”, smiled the old man.

“R.I.P.J.?”

“It’s his name.”

 “Like ‘Rest In Peace’?”

 “Mhm, not at all. His name is Rupert Isaac Pelford Junior.”

 “Why add a ‘Junior’ to his name?”

 “Well, I created so many prototypes in the past, that I’ve lost count...”

“...Okay.”

 “Moreover, ‘Junior’, it’s pretty cute, it’s like a ba-”

“Understood, you don’t need to justify yourself.”

While the engineer was setting the last adjustments to his prototype, I turned around the robot, discovering every detail on it. I decided to take a seat, next to a computer. Moving the chair in front of the android, I kept staring at it. Lampin turned back slowly from it: he had placed all the leds on it. Suddenly, two lights appeared from what was supposed to be Rupert’s head: his eyes.

“It’s alive.”I burst out incredulous.

The robot moved slowly now, when it was just sleeping two minutes ago. It looked at its hands and its legs, and other leds started to shine. Bernard seemed really proud.

“Hi son, how are you today?”

Rupert watched his creator, and a screen supposed to replace his mouth drew a smile.

“Fine. Thank you.”

 “Today is the day.”

What was Lampin talking about?

“Day for what?”I inquired.

“R.I..P.J., may I present you Laure. She saved me.”

He was now looking at me. He scared me a little bit. But I craved for an answer.

“Thank you Laure. Have other spies tried to steal me Bernard?”he demanded.

“Yes, of course, as always.”

“So, day for what?”I repeated.

The machine and the engineer looked at each other, before the elder started:

“R.I.P.J. is gonna recover something for me. Something really important, belonging to the Italian mafia.”

They were kidding me.

“No, seriously, is that a hidden camera for a stupid show? I can’t fall for all this nonsense. To be harassed by ninjas and to be talking to a robot that will rob the Mob, that’s too much of a joke!”I interjected.

 ...But they kept talking, ignoring me.

“Laure could probably help us, what do you think about this R.I.P.J.?”

 “Wh-”

 “Great idea. I really would like to collaborate with a human.”

“No, I just can’t d-”

“Cool, it’s decided then Laure!”

“STOP! Are you listening to me: I don’t want to do anything that could be dangerous or bad. And I don’t want to meet the mafia!” I shouted.

“Even if I offered some money in return...?”laughed Bernard.

**CHAPTER 4**

He proposed me much more money than I could possibly earn in a full year. I already had trouble making ends meet, so... I accepted. Mr Lampin was probably rich, so much the better. I was now in the airport of Paris, Rupert in my bag, curled up. I wore sunglasses, to be cool, as a spy. I was ready. I touched my earpiece: “Bernard, do you hear me?”  Nothing. Suddenly, I heard a child singing out of tune. I recognized the famous song called Despacito, incomprehensible.   “Bernard Lampin, do you hear me well?” I shouted. Some passengers who were also waiting for the plane were now looking at me. Rupert passed his head above the bag to see the surroundings. I hit his head like in the famous Whac-A-Mole game. I murmured: “Be quiet Junior, please. I’m trying to call your father.”

“What is he saying?”

 “Well, that’s the problem, he’s saying nothing at all!” I whispered, a little bit anxious. “Can you hear me Lampin?” I asked again, pressing once more the button in my ear. Luis Fonsi’s voice answered me that he wanted to hold me in his arms and kiss me with kindness. Sometimes, a child voice would cover the singer’s. I resolutely hated this song...

“Laure!”

Finally...! “Mr Lampin! What were you doing? Listening to music when we have work to do?”

“I’m so sorry”, said the elder, tired. I had to babysit for my granddaughter. Oh, she’s harassing me with her music.”

“You have a granddaughter?” I laughed.

“She is a monster,” whispered Rupert in my other ear.

I was laughing out loud with Rupert, hidden in the bag. People were definitely looking at me as if I had escaped from an asylum.

“Laure, please.”

 “Sorry Mr Lampin, I’m listening to you.”

 “Well! The airport in which you’re gonna land is a little bit far from the mafia’s area. You will arrive in Genoa, and you’ll have to go to Palermo.”

Soon, Rupert revealed a map of Italy on his mouth-screen.

“What!” I yelled. “You’re crazy! It’s completely on the other side of the country! In Sicily, moreover, you can as well say a whole year of walking!”

“Don’t worry Laure, Palermo is a pretty cool town, with a wonderful cathedral to visit, and a famous museum of...”

“Lampin, I’m not joking at all! Neither will I be there for the sights!”

 “Don’t worry and wait, Rupert will be pleased to reserve you a little surprise...”

I looked at the robot, still in the bag, who winked at me.

“W-what does it mean?” I asked, not fully convinced.

“Trust me, don’t worry about that. So, I’m sending the address of the mob’s stash on Rupert’s screen. Did you see what I added to your personal suitcase?”

“You scoured my suitcase?”

“I added to it some creations of mine. Like a taser to knock out your enemies, suction cups to walk on the walls, and a laser lipstick.”

“Like a Totally Spy of course. I’m not a child anymore Lampin, you should show them to your granddaughter.”

Talking about her, the child was more than likely annoying her grandpa again because she started to sing another track.

“Be brave, Lampin! Justin Bieber is a little bit boring at first, but don’t worry, you’ll get used to his girly voice!”

“Sure, Laure, whatever you say!”

**CHAPTER 5**

Two hours of flight and a significant delay later, Rupert and I finally arrived at the airport of Genoa. The robot was dressed with a coat and a hat, which was certainly too much for the season; thus, it could move at will, as a human being. But an android under it made the situation absolutely ludicrous. In spite of its smooth movements, I could still hear the sound of the engines between its knees, as small squeaks. While Rupert started to walk away, something else squeaked: my stomach.

“Hey Rupert! I suppose you don’t need to eat? For my part, I’m starving...” I exclaimed, hungry.

He stared at me for a moment, suggesting he was thinking.

“We will eat at Palermo!” he said, like it was a great idea.

“Rupert, I will not wait all this time! I don’t even know how to go there as fast as possible! Do you understand? A human being needs to eat!” I declared.

“Bernard said you didn’t need to worry about the ride”, replied the robot with a mechanical voice.

And right then, the robot removed its coat and hat as a strip-teaser or an epic justice warrior. Kind of both actually, which was pretty strange and awkward. Not really discreet in the airport; I panicked:

“Junior, what are you doing?”

 “Motorcycle activated!” shouted the robot, indifferent to my appeal and to our surroundings.

And I could see its iron body shaking in all directions. There was probably a mistake in its computer program! Terrified, I didn’t know what to do excepted calling its name several times. Why did it bawl like this? I finally got an answer: after having been shaken as a Parkinson patient, its arms turned in a handlebar vehicle and its head moved behind it. It jumped forward and its legs served as the bodywork of the vehicle. Two tires inflated in front of my shocked face. Meanwhile Chinese tourists drew near me and together with some American ones set about filming the scene with their smartphones.

“Go ahead Laure!” A human gathering had formed around us. I reacted and decided to act up on its order, so I mounted my ride placing my suitcase right behind me.

“So, who exactly are you Rupert?” I murmured. “An android? Or maybe perhaps a Transformer? I mean, you turned into a motorbike two seconds ago... No, let me guess... You’re a princess for sure?”

“I am Rupert Isaac Pelford Junior, at your disposal!” it declared, happily.  Before I could order it, the motorcycle was racing into in the airport, looking for the exit while security guards were trying to follow us. Fun.

**CHAPTER 6**

Still firmly attached to the back of the robot, or more precisely hooked to it, I moved to looking around us. I was so starving. We had finally reached the shore. I bought a sandwich at a beach store. Rupert had had the great idea of shortening our trip by crossing the Mediterranean sea. Eight hours spent on water. Amazing but also terrific with the waves splashing all around me. It allowed me to note that Rupert was waterproof. And he was a Transformer, too.

After arriving at the harbour, I finally walked on land again. It was 6 p.m.

“Nice trip Rupert, thanks!” I said, removing my sunglasses.

“You're welcome. Now I can complete my encyclopaedia with the names of all the new animals we spotted!” said the overjoyed robot.

“You're creating your own encyclopaedia?”

“Kind of. Lampin wants me to be an artificial intelligence, so I decided to do that.”

“Rather impressive.”

 “What would you say? Was it a doophin we crossed next to the coast?”

“A dolphin, Rupert. Good luck buddy, the world will be sometimes a disappointment for someone as cute as you.”

 “Why do you say that Laure?”

In fact, I could not answer. I didn't know why those words came out of my mouth. I was thinking about wars in Africa, terrorist attempts all over the world, people who were threatened because of their religion, their sexual orientation or many other unjustified discriminations. And what about those criminals of the Italian mafia I still had to meet... As a robot, Rupert probably didn't have any idea of what was happening around him. Sighing, I simply said:

“Do you think some robots like you could save somebody?”

 “Well, probably...”

 “And a hundred people?”

 “Certainly.”

“And a billion?”

 “Sure.”

“Optimistic but-”

My earphone rang. Good news; it was Lampin of course.

“Laure, I tried to call you four times today. Hope it wasn’t too boring riding in a motorcycle, was it?”

“We didn't ride by bike Mr Lampin, we crossed over the sea!” I laughed, forgetting all about my recent bad mood.

“I saw you in the Genoa airport.”

I looked at Rupert, who didn't know how to react, just as me.

“What do you mean Father?” asked the robot.

“Oh, my dear R.I.P.J., are your engines okay even in the water?” said the old man, anxious.

“I am fine, don't worry about me. How did you see us at the airport?”

“Son, you really have to be less conspicuous. I saw your video transformation on the web. Please don’t do it again when there are people around.” explained the engineer, annoyed.

“Well, I’m sorry, I’ll be more careful next time.”

“How did you see it?” I asked the engineer.

“On Twitter. My granddaughter apprised me of the video when she recognized Rupert on the web.”

“Your granddaughter is on Twitter? She’s way too young!”

“I know, but I can’t set the parental control on my phone...”

 “So you’re able to build a robot, but changing privacy settings is too hard for you?”

I laughed. “Never mind Lampin, how many retweets?”

“Twenty four thousand.”

I screamed, jumped in every sense while Rupert was displaying a poker face. I took his head in my hands, saying:

“You’re a celebrity Rupert, that’s amazing!”

 “I pretty much don’t care. I would rather complete my encyclopaedia.”

“C’mon, don’t be so boorish!”

“You really have to be mindful from now on.” interrupted the old man. “Some people could recognize you...”

  “Lampin, you should be happy, some engineers will give you opportunities to be famous in the future. We need guys like you!”

“Oh, you know, I have quite a few competitors in the robot industry: one who wants to send robots to space, another one who wants them to deal with environmental problems, and the last one who wants to settle social problems all around the world, like poverty, for example.”

“Wow. That’s amazing.”

“I’ll tell you more about it in detail later, if you’re interested. But from now on, I hope you won’t have any additional obstacles in your mission. Well, now, listen carefully, I am going to go over my plan with you...”

**CHAPTER 7**

It was 8 p.m. Hidden in street, I had no regrets gazing at the trashes. We had checked in earlier at the hotel, and I could finally eat and change my clothes; unfortunately, the water had drenched my suitcase and all my regular clothes were of no use... But not so the dark ski suit added by Lampin. It took me more than ten minutes to slip it on, while Rupert still wore his coat and hat. I looked ridiculous. I also kept with me all the gadgets. The suction cups weren’t that bad!

The plan was clear: get on the last floor, on top of a classy building. The object the old man coveted was behind a door protected by a special code, but Rupert was apparently able to trick it, which could allow us to pass without any problem. From there, we had to steal it (which is bad, don’t do that children) and go back with it. Of course, the structure was heavily guarded, so we had to be really discreet if we didn’t want to be spotted.

From our gloomy street, we could see two heavy-set security guards, wearing tuxedos, ties and sunglasses, which for the last detail is a little bit stupid because it was already a dark night so they couldn’t see that much, I supposed. By the way, I couldn’t understand how dealers as famous as the Italian mafia could be safe in such a remarkable building. It made a landmark in the town because it was the highest and the most modern structure in Palermo. Strange.

Still behind a flowerpot, my friend started to fuss. It reminded me of his transformation in the airport.

“Are you trying to transform?” I murmured, on the other side of the street, behind a bush.

“No...” he whispered. “But my articulations will be blocked if I don’t move a little bit.”

“Well, what shall we do? The guards won’t just politely move away to let us enter.”

“I have an idea,” said Rupert, after a blank. “It will seem strange but don’t worry, I have a built-in video camera, check out your tablet.”

While Rupert was talking, he took off his hat, unscrewed his head from his body, let his head touch the ground and transform into what looked like a robot vacuum cleaner. I didn’t know which thing was the craziest from the last couple of days, but this one was not so bad. Little rollers got out from his head so he could move forward. When he left his flower pot, I opened my bag, in which were my Totally Spy gadgets, my phone, my wallet, my keys, my sunglasses, my pants of change, my Navigo card, the charger of Rupert with some batteries, my headphones, my sanitary pads, and... Finally, I found it: a tablet. It seemed to be connected with my favourite Transformer. I could see the guards; behind their sunglasses, they were half sleeping, leaning on the wall of the entry hall. The other walls of the building were unsupervised, but with windows everywhere. I received a text: R.I.P.J. 8:12 - 05/14/2017: “*So what should we do now*?”

I tapped on the keyboard: UNKNOWN: 8:13 - 05/14/2017: “*Can you angle your camera above?”*

The image changed: I could see the top of the building from the ground. It seemed really huge. I frowned before sending a new message: UNKNOWN: 8:14 - 05/14/2017: *“Have you ever been climbing, Rupert?”*

**CHAPTER 8**

I should have told Lampin that I suffered from vertigo. I hadn’t realised that the suction cups were meant for climbing. After having checked the surroundings, we decided to climb one wall. I put the suction cups on my feet and my hands, while Rupert activated his suction feet, so he could walk on the windows of the building. I was terrified. I put my bag on my back, and looked up to Rupert who had already reached the top half of the side. He turned to me, stayed down and called out:

“I’m sure you can do it Laure!”

“Hush Rupert!” I whispered. “They will hear us. I don’t want to be spotted...”

“Sorry... I’m waiting for you, c’mon!”

I swallowed. With the suction cups on my hands and feet, I was walking on all fours, except that I rose at an odd 90° angle. I was definitely frightened. I thought about Lampin and his project. He was a good guy; what we were looking for was obviously really important. I didn’t care about the money: I wanted Lampin to be happy. A dash of courage took hold of me and I climbed. Never once having a look behind me, I finally caught up with Rupert. The windows behind the wall were all closed, and no one was working in what was supposed to be an office. When I arrived next to Rupert, he congratulated me before saying:

“There are no windows higher up. We should enter this way...” he murmured, pointing at the glass.

“Can you take the laser in my bag?”

 “Sure.”

He searched, and got the laser from my bag. Unfortunately, clumsy as he was, he pressed the button to activate it and made a slender hole in the glass. Startled, I screamed and almost fell at the sight of the red light which had destroyed the glass.

“Be careful Rupert!” I shouted, taking the laser from him in spite of the suction cup around my hand.

“Hush Laure” he said, imitating my voice. “I don't want to be spotted!”

 “Hey you!”a voice yelled.

It came from the two guards we had spied on before! Panicked, I activated the laser before Rupert rammed on the glass with his leg in order to enter the building, making glass slivers fall everywhere. The robot pushed me in the hole, acting as a shield from the bullet shots from the Italians. The two guys were screaming as I removed my suction cups.

“Sorry guys, I chose Spanish for my second language!” I screamed while bullets were still flying next to us.

“Quick Laure, we should run, or they will catch us before we can reach the last floor.”

Leading me out of the office, I noticed that Rupert had bullet holes in his steel armour.

 “Rupert, you have bullets in your body. Are you okay?”

 “Yes, don’t worry. They haven't touched my neural system... I suppose.”

Following the map of the building, we ran out of the empty office in order to reach the last floor. Suddenly, alarms rang in all corners and red lights appeared, just as in an action movie. Terrible but also really cliché. I started to panic, even if no guard was coming to catch us.

“The elevator is just on your right!” exclaimed Rupert.

“We won’t take the elevator, right?”

 “Why not? I’ve never tested it before.” he guffawed.

 “Rupert, we don’t have time, you said it too; we should take the stairs.”

 “It’s complicated for a robot to take the stairs.”

“But you are a mechanical masterpiece.”

 “No, I’m not.”

“Of course you ar-”

“Here we are.”

Indeed, we were in front of the elevator. Still no guards. It seemed a little bit too strange. The robot pressed the button to bring the lift down.

“Rupert, imagine just one second the situation if they are all waiting for us at the top of the building.”

“They won’t, that’s okay. The two dangers are just two foolish security guards. C’mon...!” he whispered, as the elevator doors opened.

Sceptical, I made a face. I crossed my arms in sign of disapproval.

“*After you, Mademoiselle...”* said the robot, pointing at the lift.

I raised my eyes, jaded to be taking the elevator for the thousandth time of my life, while my dear R.I.P.J. was overexcited. A sweet music started while the huge lift closed behind us.

“You only have to press the button of the last floor, here.” I said.

“Fifth floor”

“Is that a joke?”

 “What?”

“Which floor are we on, Rupert?”

“My building map shows me that we are on the second floor... now the third.”

“Did I only climb two floors with suction cups?”

 “Yes.”

“Just two floors? It seemed to me that I was at many, many, and many meters *from the ground!”* I declared, disappointed.

“We weren’t very high, Laure. You’re sissy.” he laughed.

“What?!”

At this right moment, the doors of the elevator opened, announcing the fifth floor. In front of us, dozens of security guards were waiting for us, pointing their guns our way.

“Don’t move!” said one with a terrible English accent.

“Remind me what you just said about the possibility that they could be waiting for us on the last floor, Rupert?” I whispered to him.

“Shadap’!” yelled a feminine voice.

Behind three guards, a thin figure was standing. The woman pushed one muscled guy, in order to be in front of us. Her huge high heels snapped on the ground, while her white flared trousers were moving from left to right, due to her swayed hips. She stopped right in front of us, and blocked the elevator, so we could not go down anymore. She removed her round sunglasses and looked at us with disgust.

“Hi”, she said, bloodcurdling us.

**CHAPTER 9**

“My name is Sylvia Scalzo. I’m the boss of this company.”

  “The mafia, indeed.” I murmured.

“Yep’, well, never mind, it’s the same”, the dark-haired woman exclaimed, looking at me with a strange smile.

I looked at Rupert, sitting next to me, not to say attached to the next chair. I was too. I despaired: Lampin wasn’t trying to call us on my earphone like he had promised. We were in the boss’s room. The woman simply sat behind a huge desk on which my bag was put. Some security guards were still in the office.

“And you, who are you, my dears?” she asked. “I don’t know you.”

I swallowed. Rupert started to tremble. Thinking that the robot was transforming, I started to make a victorious smile. But he didn’t transform, and a strange looking red liquid spurted from his torso. I panicked:

“Rupert!”

 He continued to shiver for a little while. It was probably the bullet holes in his back, when the two security guards tried to exterminate us!

“Is your fantastic robot facing some trouble, Miss Lampin?” said Sylvia, removing her sunglasses like Horatio from CSI: Miami.

“What? I’m not Lampin, I don’t even know the name.” I lied to her.

“Don’t even think that you can fool me!” she shouted. “There is only one fantastic creator who called his robot R.I.P.J., as marked on the inscription of this robot’s arm. I have always thought that the person who built this robot in order to steal my precious secret was a man... But you seem to be a girl, don’t you Miss Lampin?”

“I’m not a man, and I’m not the person you’re looking for. Rupert, don’t tell her my name.” I told him while I was struggling with the boss of the mafia.

When I turned my head towards Rupert, the liquid was pouring everywhere. I was more worried than ever for my friend, who was now slumped in his chair, not moving that much. I looked at the three guards behind me, and asked them what they had done to him. Sylvia answered me that they hadn’t done anything yet. But Rupert was not in his formal condition.

“Rupert, I’m begging you to answer me, what’s going on? Are you bleeding?” Still no answer; he fell on his chair. It almost brought tears to my eyes to see the humanoid in this situation. I cried: “Untie him! Please, I beg you.”

“Hm, nope’.” declared the woman. “If he could die by himself, less work for me. But I will be honoured to kill you, Miss Lampin.” she whispered while drawing her gun from her trousers.

“Let me leave! Let me leave!” I screeched, wriggling on my chair from left to right.

The three guards behind me started to laugh, but their horrific boss set about yelling at them something in Italian that sounded very much to me like a volley of insults. Thus, they got out from the office, after Sylvia had requested them a cupcake. Even if I never practiced Italian, that much I did understand. Nevertheless, I could not ask Rupert for the translation; he was still not moving. This vision was frightening.

“Miss Garbage Girl...” he murmured, having trouble talking.

 “Rupert!” I exclaimed.

“Did I ever told you that when I’m stressed, I secrete some tomato ketchup?”

At the view of my amazed look, he blew up his fasteners suddenly transforming himself into something bigger and more threatening than ever. He stroke the desk and I caught my bag. Sylvia didn’t have the time to shoot Rupert down with her little gun; he knocked her down, giving her a high kick in the stomach, all the while still leaking ketchup. The woman fell from her stilettos and stumbled on her flared trousers. Ridiculous. By now, the robot’s hands looked like those of Edward Scissorhands, made with sharp metal pieces. After releasing me, the huge iron beast took me on his back. I took a dimly look at the boss of the mafia, who didn’t seem to be dead; maybe it was not such a great piece of news.

“Are we going to get out from here Rupert? I’m frightened!” I shouted.

Before I could realize what was going on, the creature supposed to be R.I.P.J. raced to the bay window and smashed it. We were falling from the last floor. I shouted. Not a little bit. That was when the “beast” grabbed a windowpane and we found ourselves hanging from a window. I felt the impact but I was strongly clasped to his iron back. He went on climbing until we reached the rooftop. Then, he dropped me kindly on the floor, before shrinking into “Rupert normal mode”.

“ What the hell was that?” I yelled disoriented.

“An aggressive mode”, he answered winking at me.

  “How many secrets must I discover before dying from a stroke?”

  “I don’t know myself”, he lied shyly.

  “Why didn’t you knock out the guards before? We could have been safe earlier…” I asked.

“I wouldn’t have respected the Asimov laws’. And I’m a nice robot who is writing an encyclopaedia.” he retorted. “It would be better to take what Lampin is looking for.”

**CHAPTER 10**

“Quickly Laure! Speed up!”

Easy to say. I was now running as an asthmatic paraplegic penguin, pursued by Sylvia Scalzo, the guards from the Italian mafia, the police, some curious tourists of Palermo and the ninjas from Paris. My bag on my back and a briefcase in my right hand, I was spending my last calories provided by a small sandwich I had eaten at the hotel. A shuriken brushed my ear; the ninjas were now really close, walking on the walls of Palermo houses. Rupert slowed his race:

“ C’mon, jump!” he said.

I leapt as a kangaroo on his back when he turned into a motorcycle. The security guards from the mafia were trying to shoot us, while Sylvia removed her high heels to walk correctly. We left the mafia and the ninjas behind, but the police and some tourists were still following us in their car. Rupert boosted his motor, and the speedometer showed me a speed that alarmed me. I raised my head when we crossed a 30 limited zone sign, as Rupert was reaching the speed of light. No surprise to see the police still behind us, the passengers of the vehicle putting a warning blue light on the roof of the car, while the other policeman switched on the siren, the pedal to the metal.

This high-speed chase stressed me more than ever. We were slaloming in every street of Palermo. I heard a sound from my earphone; perhaps it was Lampin! I wanted to press my earphone, but my left hand was holding the handlebar and my right one the briefcase. After an uncomfortable contorting, I pressed the earphone button with my shoulder, and finally shouted:

“Lampin! You promised you would phone us to assist us in our mission! Where the hell were you? We had several hard times tonight, and we are currently involved in a race! Rupert is trying to lose the police, but that’s pretty complicated! Also, don’t worry about the ninjas who threatened you last time, they were just behind us two minutes ago!”

“Hey hey hey, calm down Laure. Have you got what I’m looking for?” he asked, in a hurry.

“Of course Lampin, the briefcase is presently in my right hand; I didn’t open it, as you requested. I’ll tell you later all about how we proceeded. Can you help us now?”

“Good, well, hum, yes, I can... How is Rupert?” “I’m well, father, but please, try to do something, now!” yelled the motorcycle.

Tomato ketchup flowed out the motorcycle muffler; I could deduce that Rupert was stressed. Good luck to lose the police now that we were leaving a red sticky trace behind us, like Tom Thumb. Bread and ketchup, I wondered who will be able to make some cheese to complete this burger.

“Lampin, we’ll have to talk about some of Rupert’s options when we get back. Now, what should we do?”

“W-well, I don’t really know...”

 “What?” we exclaimed in a chorus.

“Not a single back-up plan?”

The police car was getting closer.

“Speed up Rupert, quick, quick, quick!”

 “I only got ten per cent of battery power right now!”

 “Seriously? Oh no! And I can’t even get your charger, it is in my bag...!”

“Go to the sea!” screamed Bernard.

“Lampin, this is not the time to go on a midnight stroke!”

 “Do the same thing as when you arrived in Palermo, I’m gonna call someone who will help you.”, he declared.

“Lamp-... Shit, he hung up the phone! What should we do?”

              

**CHAPTER 11**

Firmly attached to Rupert’s back, we were floating on the sea, next to the coast. The policemen left us when they saw us disappear in the Mediterranean. Rupert had stopped sprouting ketchup. He was eventually charging his batteries. While we were waiting for Lampin’s help, some memories went back to my head; the briefcase robbery was pretty fun. After having drilled a hole in the roof of the building thanks to Rupert and his optional small jackhammer arm, we just had to pick the briefcase and jump from the fifth floor. That’s how we ended up pursued by security guards running out of ammunitions, a wild Sylvia half stunned stumbling from her high heels and Chinese tourists who wanted to take photos. Weird.

“And my suitcase remained at the hotel.” I murmured to myself.

At this right moment, I received a text from my former boss, asking me where I was, threatening to fire me. “Goodbye trashes!” I thought.

Rupert fell asleep, still charging; a light from his head glowed in orange. I too was really tired by this draining evening. However, I had to stay strong and awake to receive some sort of help from nowhere I could fathom. I stretched out and tried to relax. The lights from Palermo prevented me from watching the stars of the dark sky. Even if I often went to the south coast of France to enjoy the Mediterranean, being in the middle of the streams was terrifying. I thought about all these migrants who tried to flee their country in order to be safe: they had to cross the sea and with terrible conditions during the crossing. Our world is pretty horrible.

I started to close my eyes, when a flash pierced them; it was a speed boat... As it came to us, I noticed that the ship captain was a robot, much taller than Rupert. He stopped the boat just next to R.I.P.J.. Was he the help we were waiting for?

“Hello Lampin’s company”*,* he exclaimed. 

“My name is I.N.K.10, and I’ve been set to save the world!”

The android was made in a bronze colour, articulated just as Rupert. The engine was wearing a captain hat, sewn roughly. The screen supposed to replace its mouth was displaying a huge smile.

“H-hi”, I simply said, surprised. “Did Lampin call you? Where are you from?” I asked.

“Yep’, he called my mistress, who lives in Palermo, the place you wanted to leave …“ he laughed. “What an idea to piss off the Italian mafia!”

“Well, that was my mission and Rupert’s...”

Maybe I.N.K.10 was one of the robots Lampin had told me about. When this idea came into my head, someone else came out from the speedboat. It was a young woman, dark haired, with chestnut eyes. She was holding a climbing grapple.

“Watch out!” she yelled, throwing the grapple to Rupert.

I grabbed it, panicked.

“C’mon Lampin’s team, all aboard!” she declared. “Welcome to the Eloise’s team boat!”

**CHAPTER 12**

“Well, my name is Eloise Panneau, I’m Canadian but I live in Palermo with my boyfriend who is a really good history and society Italian teacher and I’m...”

“I mean, what links you to Lampin?” I asked, interrupting her.

“Oh, I see! I’m Bernard’s colleague, even if he doesn’t consider me as such. In fact, he’s jealous of my robots. Never mind, I’m the person who created Isidore” she said.

A night of journey on the speedboat later, we were now in North Italy. Lampin had called me early in the morning, to know how we were, his son and I. Eloise decided to invite me at a café, while the two robots stayed on the boat to charge.

“Who is Isidore?”

“ Isidore Norbert Kenneth 10, my robot, shortened to I.N.K.10!” she exclaimed, smiling at me before gulping her chocolate waffle. “You know, he has three names, as Rupert. The only difference is that I counted the number of prototypes that I’ve done, unlike Bernard who added a “Junior” to R.I.P.!”

I laughed, burning my lips with the tea.

 “We are a team of 4 engineers, decided to change the world thanks to our robots.” she continued. “I created Isidore in order to help the migrants, lost in the Mediterranean Sea. I think that robots can’t replace us, but they can help us.”

I nodded, in sign of approval.

“Do you know what is hidden in the briefcase?” she asked, her eyes filled with curiosity. “You must be really brave to defy the mob!”

“No, I don’t know what it contains. I promised Lampin not to open it. I hope he will get what he’s looking for... Maybe money? Or a special metal piece to improve Rupert? I don’t know. I suppose he will just pay me when I get back to Paris, and forget all about me.”

“Oh no! Bernard isn’t like that! Don’t worry, you will spend time with your new friend Rupert, if that’s what’s bothering you!” she answered me, confident.

I couldn’t stop myself from smiling. From the patio of the café, I could see the speedboat, parked between a sailboat and a fishing vessel. Rupert was now a part of my life. Even if he was not a human being, he was my friend. I finished my tea while Eloise was beginning her hot latte. While I was contemplating the small white beard the cream had formed around her mouth, I saw Rupert and Isidore running from the harbour. They were racing to us. Rupert was holding something in his hands.

“Junior, what’s the matter?”  The two robots entered in the patio, shoving away the regular customers in order to reach our table. Rupert, smiling, excited as a child, opened his hands and asked:

“What is it Laure? I was finally able to complete my encyclopaedia!”  Between his hands, a red small creature lied petrified, not daring to move one of its eight claws.

“It is a red crab, Rupert.” I said.

Rupert and Isidore jumped for joy. Before they went back to the speedboat, Rupert thanked me. I didn’t know why, but I whispered in his ear:

“Promise me you won’t leave me one day, Rupert.”

After a blank he simply said, cheerful:

“Why would I want to do that? You are my best friend.”

**CHAPTER 13**

 After an uneventful flight back home, Rupert and I were back in Paris. The briefcase in my hand, still wearing my dark outfit, I got down from the RATP bus as a Hollywood star, closely followed by my dear R.I.P.J., who set his hat on his head after having said goodbye to the driver.

In front of the gate, I rang the bell. Lampin’s granddaughter opened the door and cried inside the house:

“Grandpaaaaa ! There is Ropert with an ugly lady!”

Okay, Lampin’s granddaughter *is* a monster.

“Hey, be polite, please, little girl. And his name is Rupert, not Ropert.” I winced.

“It’s the same girl from the video on Twitter grandpa!”she exclaimed.

Lampin sticked his head outside. A huge smile drew on his face, and he raced to the gate, his keys in his hands... At the speed of an old man of course, but the intention was there. Rupert could not wait for his creator; he climbed the gate and came into his father’s arms. It was an emotional reunion. The granddaughter joined the hug. I was a little bit forgotten. Lampin yelled to me:

“Climb over the gate, Laure!”

Which I did, and joined them. Lampin kindly patted my back, as a member of his family. I felt secure, there.

 “Come on everybody, let's see what the briefcase holds.” he declared. He added to his granddaughter: “Dear deer, in my arms !”

He opened his arms, and the monster jumped into his embrace. The scene was cute. Until she picked Lampin’s phone, hidden in his pullover pocket. I took the briefcase, and we went in his peaceful living room. We sat around the low table, and I put the briefcase on it. Comfortably seated in the armchairs, Rupert and I explained our fantastic adventures to Lampin, while the latter was preparing some lemonade for his granddaughter, Claire and me. When our story was finished between two sips of lemonade, Lampin congratulated us and declared:

“Well, it’s time to see if what I’m waiting for is in...” said the elder, patting the briefcase.

I sat to his right and Rupert to his left. We were really excited to discover what was Sylvia’s secret, excepted Claire, who was playing at Candy Crush on Lampin’s smartphone.

“Ready?”

“Set.”

 “Go ahead Lampin”.

“Sweeeeeeeeeeet !” said the game player.

 He lifted the two locks of the briefcase and slowly opened it...

...A paper. A simple paper was in it. I was stunned, panicked, shocked; I looked at Rupert whose gaze remained neutral. As for Lampin, he was filled with joy and gratitude. With tears in his eyes, the engineer withdrew the small paper, trembling.

“Is that was you were looking for?” asked Rupert, with a smile.

“Yes, it is, my son!” he exclaimed. “What a beautiful day!”

He hugged Rupert, before hugging me, like he had done when I met him for the first time. Tormented, I retorted:

“But Lampin, this is just a small paper! What does it mean?”

“Read it Laure, you will know!”

He gave me the journal paper. I frowned and read:

“Three hundred grams of spaghetti, five egg-yolks...”

It was a pasta carbonara secret recipe, signed by Mister Magnalli, the most famous chief of Italy in 1895, apparently. I was appalled.

“Is that a joke Lampin? You make us travel on the Mediterranean to steal a recipe from the Italian mafia?” I shouted.

“Yes Laure, I don’t know how to thank you. That is so great! This recipe belonged to my family, and someone stole it a century ago. I’m glad to see it back in the hands of its rightful owner!”

**CHAPTER 14**

“Ladies and gentlemen, I would like you now to give a round of applause for Miss Laure, Lampin’s colleague, and her friend, R.I.P.J., aka Rupert Isaac Pelford Junior!”

I could hear the applause of this extraordinary meeting. Rupert took me by his articulated hand, and we went on the stage. I was really stressed. Some people of the public started to take some pictures. I was definitely stressed. Hopefully, Eloise was here, in the company of her colleagues, Christian and Gabrielle. Their respective robots were sitting next to them. Isidore was here, as well as S.U.N.11, aka Stephen Usain Ned 11, the robot who would be sent to space in three months, and also C.A.T.8.2, aka Caesar Allan Teddy 8.2, the robot who respects the environment. This gathering was organised for the scientific night of Paris, in which a lot of different scientists were present. I was honoured. The woman speaker started her speech:

“Hello Laure, well, as your colleague has done earlier, can you explain how the robot Rupert was made, and in which way will he contribute to changing our world?”

And I started to recount my story with Rupert, in front of a hundred people and some TV shows. I was now an engineer; Lampin had taught me everything. While he was making his pastas with his granddaughter, I was working with Rupert on brand daily projects. I could tell you all the other travels we made and the huge advance performed in the field of robotics ...

...But this is a whole new story, right?

***The end***

**Yoons the Dragonfly**

by Valentine Breillat

Once upon a time, in a high school, in the suburbs of Chicago there was a student group during their work. They were part of the ecology section and their mission was to protect the wildlife around the high school. Indeed, they lived in the midst of a big rural place, surrounded by fields, forests, and lakes. This unique place was ideal to study nature and discover maybe new species of plants or animals. This section was very renowned and attracted the best students in the area. Those who entered this section showed a particularly welded attitude and did whatever it took to achieve their goals.

Their professor, Mr Polck, was a man passionate by his job. With all his heart, he taught his students nature's laws. He invented experiences in order to watch animal behaviour or study the growing of plants. All school's experiences and discoveries were kept a secret. Indeed, they had a considerable advance on other scientists or schools but researches in progress were selfishly kept secret because Mr Plock had a big plan.

All along his childhood, he had dreamt of success and of becoming famous for his discoveries in sciences. When he had joined the best academy of Sciences of the USA, he was confronted with better students than him. He was very disappointed but during his studies, he wrote all his ideas about future observations that he will have to do in a red copybook. When he graduated from the university, he created this school in order to work with the best possible student on his ideas, the ones he had during his own studies in order to discover new things in nature. His academy was very renowned and secret too. Nobody knew exactly what happened in this school, all people knew was that the best students in biology usually joined this school. Students had to keep secret what they did and Mr Plock gave no interview to the press about his school. His real idea was to accumulate a lot of discoveries about reproduction, exchanges, flow or behaviour of plants and animals in order to publish it in a big book after his death.

Among Mr Plock’s students, were Paula, Morgan, Ashley, Steven and Elena. These five were favourites of Mr Polck because on the one hand they were very intelligent and they had assimilated a lot of notions, but mostly they were able to love, and that was something Mr Plock deeply appreciated. Here is the main difference between these five and the rest of his students. There were of course others who knew all about mathematics, who had learnt all kinds of sciences but they weren't able to love. This difference allowed Paula, Morgan, Ashley, Steven and Elena to have a different approach to sciences and to better understand certain things like feelings or sensations that other students were unable to fathom.

For one month now, Mr Plock and his students had been working on a project about dragonflies’ feelings. It was a very hard job because dragonflies are animals that are hard to study because of their small size and of their ability to fly very fast and in various directions. There were already some researches in this scientific field but most scientists had given up due to the difficulty of the subject so Mr Plock was persuaded that there lied major discoveries ahead.

The work advanced slowly but step by step dragonflies’ behaviour began to be better understood by the team. Paula, Morgan and Ashley were dealing with love feelings, if any such existed for this species, and Steven and Elena worked on stress phenomena, particularly when the insects were facing deadly dangers or when they were competing with other animals for food or for shelter for example.

The first team composed by Paula, Morgan and Ashley worked in a relaxed mood and one could often hear laughs in their laboratory.

Paula was the youngest child of a family of six. Her mother was a famous judge in Chicago and had presided over very important trials with big criminals such as Bob Comonmaly in 1998. Her father was a doctor and he spent all his time working so Paula didn’t see him much. All her brothers had attended elitist studies and now worked all around the globe.

Morgan came from an artistic family and she was the only member to understand sciences. Her parents were very proud of her as she took up the challenge of entering the academy of Mr Plock. Her mother was a painter in a Chicago arts gallery and her father tried to teach philosophy to young students coming from troubled backgrounds. Morgan didn’t have any brother or sister as she came into this world after a hard delivery that prevented her mom from giving birth again.

Ashley, unlike her classmates, entered the academy of Mr Plock not because she wanted to do sciences with the best scientists of her country but because she didn’t succeed in geting into Washington’s tennis’ academy. Actually, tennis had been her hobby for a long time. She trained every day and she just wanted to become the best tennis player in the world. She succeeded all steps and won all her matches but, when she was about to enter the best academy, she badly twisted her ankle. All her dreams were broken and in order to have a chance in life, she tried Mr Plock’s contest. At the beginning, she wasn’t interested in biology and all she could dream about was tennis. Gradually, with her friends, she found again that life could be cool and forgot a little her sporting failure.

In spite of their different horizons, the members of this group worked together perfectly. In a mood that was the perfect mixture of work and relaxation, they had already managed to discover that dragonflies had more feelings than humans and that they are extremely sensitive creatures. But there was one thing they still failed to understand in dragonflies’ behaviour and that was the precise steps the insects took in order to attract other individuals. Even if Ashley, Morgan and Paula with the help of Mr Plock imagined all imaginable experiences, they still couldn’t find answers to their questions if they weren’t in the community of dragonflies. That’s why they had to find a way to understand this part of dragonflies’ behaviour, which had never been explored previously.

The other group, composed of Steven and Elena, had to work on the stress phenomena, particularly when dragonflies faced highly dangerous situations or when they were competing with other animals. This topic interested immensely our two young students and they wished to give their best in order to discover new things and to contribute to science going forward.

Steven was the funniest student in the academy. All of his jokes were funny and the mood was always relaxed when he was in the room. He came from Dallas, Texas. During all his childhood, his father, an important gas dealer, had thought Steven everything there was to know about business dealings. At the same time, his mother, who worked with the CIA, had seen to Steven learning to be strategic in all his duties. Steven was destined to become like his parents but he preferred sciences, and the mystery all around the academy of Mr Plock attracted him. That’s why he tried the contest and he succeeded.

Elena was the youngest student in the academy. She was three years below her friends but despite her young age she had a maturity equal to that of her friends. She had only one brother who contrary to his sister, was lazy and hated everything about work. Elena was very curious about everything and loved learning new things. Her parents were both high school teachers and were very proud of their child as she entered the academy of Mr Plock.

This team of two operated very well and Mr Plock was satisfied with their researches. They found that dragonflies could show surprising strength during dangerous situations and that they mustered an immense capacity for adaptability in order to take the best decision at the right moment. They concluded that this was the reason why the mortality rate for this species was very low. However, a question still remained to be solved: how did dragonflies’ organisation operate? To answer it, Steven and Elena had somehow to become part of the community of dragonflies.

One day, Mr Plock wanted to make an assessment for the researches in progress. All groups presented him what they had discovered so far and he decided to have a meeting with the team of Paula, Morgan and Ashley as well as with Steven and Elena’s team. The five students joined the professor in a laboratory. All students were excited to hear Mr Plock’s conclusions. When everybody was calm and concentrated, Mr Plock said “I’m very proud of you. You have conducted very interesting researches and experiences that not many scientists in the United States can boast of. That shows that you are the best here. I studied your productions and my conclusion is the following: the two groups have reached the maximum point you can achieve with our existing knowledge and equipment. But no group has found all the answers to their questions. In order to do that, you would need to become part of the dragonfly community. But until proven otherwise, it is now impossible for us. For my part, I have thought about this problem deeply and here is my suggestion. You need to create, together, a machine, or a robot if you prefer. It will look like exactly as a dragonfly so we can guide it where we need it to be in order to gather more information. This robot will be equipped with a lot of cameras, sensors and all other kind of equipment that can help us to answer our questions. This robot would record feelings of dragonflies and transmit it to us in order to study it. Is it ok for you?”

Elena was so excited about this idea. She told the others “ It is an excellent idea, we can better understand dragonflies with this robot!” And Ashley to add, “Exactly, let’s begin!”

Mr Plock was very happy with the enthusiasm that his idea had raised.

From the following day on, the students and Mr Plock began the building of the robot. Day after day, the device took form and at the end of three days, it was operational. The robot was composed of five different parts: the head, the thorax, the abdomen, two pairs of wings and six legs. All of these parts were linked by articulations. They added a lot of different sensors and cameras in order to see in real time what happened. The dragonfly created by our scientists was very realistic and could melt into the community because of its resemblance with the other dragonflies. Morgan called on painters to add very precise colours on the dragonfly. After all these operations, the dragonfly, named Yoons by Elena and Paula, was ready to complete its mission.

Near the school, there was a big lake surrounded by a lot of vegetation and this place was a favourite haunt for dragonflies. One night, at twilight, Steven, Elena, Morgan, Paula, Ashley and Mr Plock went by the lake. Mr Plock had Yoons in his hands and the gamepad that enabled him to control and guide it. Everybody was excited but they had to stay calm and professional if they wanted their experience to succeed. The group had to wait for a dragonfly swarm to pass near them and at that moment, they would release the robot in their midst. All of the scientists held their breath and waited patiently. After one hour of waiting, a very special noise invaded the lake: it was the dragonfly swarm they had been waiting for. Mr Plock was very concentrated in order to let Yoons fly at the best time. During two minutes, the swarm flew above the lake before landing on the bank near the hidden group. So Mr Plock activated the gamepad and the robot started its flight towards the other dragonflies. Ashley had a screen where images from all the cameras on the robot were showing.

At first, when the robot arrived in the group, all the dragonflies flew away leaving it strayed and forlorn. Mr Plock didn’t panic and tried again but slowly. This time, other insects appeared curious about this new individual. They approached it. Ashley had very precise and very close images from the dragonfly in front of Yoons. After some time, the swarm accepted Yoons and accepted it in their midst. Mr Plock’s observations enabled the scientists to observe the behaviour of a female that Yoons tried to charm. He activated a mating dance. The female was clearly attracted by the robot and the sensors were very high in detection of love feelings. The group of five students collected a lot of data, observations and information that they had never seen. Images necessary for the first group were complete, but now they had to create a climate of danger in order to gather information for the second group. Mr Plock hadn’t forgotten to equip the robot with a device that could spread special sounds frightening the dragonflies. He engaged his machine and there was a panic movement in the swarm. Then, something strange and very interesting happened: the group of dragonflies that had been quite dispersed and showed no particular order to that point suddenly regrouped in a tight formation.  Each insect took its place in order to form a regular and extremely precise hexagon. Mr Plock didn’t know that formation and was very surprised to see it. He didn’t know how to manipulate the gamepad and where Yoons had to be. At that moment, dragonflies understood that Yoons wasn’t a real dragonfly and all the swarm disappeared very far from the lake. The time of observation was short but the second group had amassed enough data to continue their studies. There was no more point in remaining beside the lake and the group of scientists decided to go back to the laboratory.

On the next day, Mr Plock did an assessment of the night’s data. He gathered Elena, Morgan, Steven, Ashley and Paula before announcing: “This robot was a wonder. Thanks to it, we can now explore data that we would never had had without Yoons. I want to thank you for having done this job with me and now, we can discover a lot of things if we gather all that we have. Maybe you do not realize what happened, but this is the culmination of a life time project for me and today I’m deeply touched by our work.” It was a moving moment, Ashley cried a little but recovered enough to be able to say: “Thank you, Mr Plock, without you we would never had discovered sciences the way we did with you”.

After this technological feat with Yoons the robot dragonfly, the students of the academy of Mr Plock continued their work of new discoveries.

**REGGIE**

by Lisa Camoira

 In a little town called Tree Hill, in South of Dakota lived a lovely family in a big luxurious house. They were the richest family and had the most beautiful property of the town. Mgr. Cooper was the owner and CEO of a company that had made a fortune thanks to the export of oil across the country. His company was a success until the oil became scarce. Indeed, two years before, Mr Cooper had gone bankrupt; his company accumulated debts because he had overlooked the obvious: that oil is an exhaustible and non-renewable resource. The CEO didn't warn his wife about that and still lived as a millionaire. He thought he could get out of this somewhat disturbing situation for a man who had always lived in luxury. On the other hand, it was not the case of his wife, Sandra Cooper.

 This beautiful women of forty years old, was the daughter of two farmers who lived very modestly. Their house was very little and not really warm. Her parents taught her that life is not always easy and that money must be earned with work. But at the age of 10, Sandra learned that her parents died from a very violent car accident. It was a shock for this innocent and benevolent girl. She loved her parents immensely for all the love they gave her and because she knew they were having a lot of trouble to give her the best of lives. After that, she was placed in foster care until she turned sixteen, the age at which she became emancipated. But her host family was not the best quite the opposite. Indeed, her family did not care for her and, little by little, she became independent but also rebellious. All this sadness due to the death of her parents but also this anger to go unnoticed in this new family that was not her own made her sink. She promised herself that never again would she live like that in ignorance, poverty and sadness. Throughout her adolescence, she forged new values and forgot those her parents had taught her. She thought that the best life she could have was to live in a huge house and have a lot of money but the best way to achieve this ideal was to marry a rich man. That's how it happened. So she married Andrew Cooper purely for the sake of money and to live the life she had always dreamed of.

 Andrew knew that his wife did not love him but he did not care. She was beautiful and for him it was the only thing that mattered. Two years after their marriage, they decided to have a child. From this union, was born a little boy, Jake. This new being grew up in a special atmosphere with a father who was too busy with his work and who was always traveling to the four corners of the world and a mother who looked after herself more than anything else. So it was a nurse called Carrie whom they had employed who raised him. Carrie became a second mom for the child of this rich family. Thanks to her, Jake at the age of ten was a really cute boy who loved to learn new things and who was very talented in school whether in mathematics, in English or in arts. He was eager to learn and interested in all areas, he was a very curious little boy. He was also very manual and liked to build his own toys or repair them. Carrie thought he was gifted and had warned his parents to test his abilities, but they were too busy for that. One could even say that they did not care in the slightest about this innate intelligence of their son. His father wanted him to succeed in school so that he could go back to his business but he did not have time to monitor his results. So that was the mission he had given to Carrie.

 This morning, Carrie as always, woke up Jake Cooper to bring him to school. He was happy because he loved school and his teacher. But he always had a little apprehension because the other boys were making fun of him because of his difference. In fact, he did not have any friends except his teacher, Mrs. Lodge. For him, she was the best teacher in the world because she understood him and she advised him on which books to read or what new thing to learn.

 So, this day was not a normal day. When Jake and his nurse arrived at school, they learned that the teacher was absent. In fact, her son had a motorcycle accident and was in the hospital, so she was there with him. Carrie asked the boy:

 “Mrs. Lodge is absent, you can't go to school. So, what do you want to do today?”

“I don't know, as you want... I'm disappointed she's not here. Actually, I wanted to talk to her about the book I just read about Greek mythology...” Jake explained in a little voice.

 “Don't worry, you can talk to her about this book tomorrow. I'm sure she'll come back tomorrow”, she reassured him.

 “I hope so... Finally, I wanna go to the park. You know, the park next to my house where there are benches under tall trees. I would like to read.”

 “Okay, that's an excellent idea” Carrie accepted.

 They arrived at this small, very rural park with tall trees that offered protection from the sunrays. The nurse settled on a bench while Jake chose to sit on the green lawn, a little away. He began to delve into his book and fully appreciated his reading. A few minutes later, light rays disturbed his concentration. They both looked up and discovered that it came from the reflection of the sun on a metal object stuck under a bush next to Jake. This object caught his attention. He then set his book down and got up to see more closely the object of his attention. He knelt beside the bush and saw that it was a broken toy. It looked like a little all-metal robot with electrical wires, straps, a whole mechanical and electric system on the back of the toy. It was noted that it was broken because all the threads had been gnawed, cut and were coming out. This robot for the moment inanimate fascinated the ten years old boy. He had never been lucky enough to have a robot as a toy. He told himself that it belonged to no one, and therefore he could take it to repair it ; his favorite hobby. He took it discreetly without Carrie seeing it because he knew that she did not like him trying to repair objects and especially when there was electricity involved. But he did it anyway even though he knew it might prove dangerous.

 At lunchtime, the nanny suggested going home to eat. Jake, who throughout the morning had been watching his new toy carefully and had already thought about how to repair it, put it under his shirt and went to join Carrie. Once in front of the magnificent house, the little boy hastened to go to his room to gather his professional tools. Indeed, last Christmas, his father had offered him a toolbox for children. Jake had already used it numerous times and had become quite adept with the tools.

 For days, this toy he renamed Reggie became his new fad. He tried to fix it by looking on the Internet, in books or using his own instinct. He put all his energy into it until he forgot the school, Mrs Lodge and the books. At school, he spent time trying to find a way to “resuscitate” it. He made diagrams, calculations like a professional. He did not know it yet but repairing toys would become his future job. After a whole month, Jake managed to restart it. When he turned it on, the robot could move his arms, legs and head, his eyes flashed red and a voice came out of its chest that said “I'm the best robot you know, I can do anything” or “I'm your new friend, take good care of me”. Its voice was serious, slow, and neutral. It was clear that it was a computer-made voice and not a human voice. Reggie pleased Jake first of all because he was very proud to have been able to fix it himself without the help of an adult but also because it was different from all the other toys he had had before. He felt like the thing had a soul. Reggie became his best and only friend. He played with it every morning and every evening, told him everything he discovered at school or in books, the absence of his parents but also the complicity he had with Carrie.

 But one night, something really strange happened. Jake had been asleep for three hours. Carrie and his parents had just fallen asleep. Carrie was also accommodated by the Coopers, her room twin to that of the gifted boy. Suddenly, absolutely all the lights of each room were lit at the same time and a siren sounded. It was so noisy that it woke up everyone in the house with a jolt. This was the alarm that normally sounded in case of burglary. Jake did not dare move from his bed, he was paralyzed. Carrie ran to his room to see if he was ok.

 “All is good? Were you scared?” Carrie inquired quietly.

 “I jumped but it's okay. Why did the alarm go off, is there a burglar? And why are all the lights on?” he asked nervously as he got up from his bed.

 “I don't know but your father assured me that no one had come in. I'm going to turn everything off. Do you think you'll be able to go back to sleep?”

 “I'd rather you stayed with me, please.” Jake pleaded, making room for her in his big bed.

 She acquiesced and switched off all the lights. But before she did so, the little boy noticed one thing. Reggie was no longer in its usual place. Indeed, he always put it on the bedside table next to him but it was no longer there and yet he was quite positive that he had put it there before going to bed. Despite this, he managed to fall asleep until the next day.

 When he woke up the next day, Reggie was back in its normal place. Jake asked his nanny if she was the one who had handled the robot during the night but she assured him that she had never noticed the presence of this new toy before.

 Unfortunately, the next night, everything went exactly the same way: the lights, the siren, the robot,... The whole family began to ask questions. Was it the alarm that was broken? Was it a bad joke of some unknown prankster? Andrew made the decision to call a mechanic to check the status of the alarm. Once again, the mechanic told them that it was working just fine and that if it had come on, there had to be a reason to it and that they shouldn’t discard the possibility of intruders having entered their home. This revelation frightened Sandra and her son. They all decided they needed safer protection for the house. They took the “initiative” to install a new portal in front of the entrance: bigger, more secure, with a surveillance camera.

 Life returned to normal and no other strange happenings occurred until one evening a month later. When they had just finished eating dinner, something dreadful happened. Installed on the sofa of the living room, Andrew was about to turn on the TV when it lit itself and abruptly started flipping from channel to channel in a quick succession before finally landing on a channel that broadcasted a children's TV program where a little boy said “I'm your new friend, take good care of me”. The father was terrified and did not dare move or touch the remote control. This sentence echoed in Jake's mind, one of only two sentences that Reggie could say. While Carrie was trying to reassure the family that the TV was no longer working, the lights in the house started to flash very fast and constantly. The radio went on and that same sentence was repeated. Everyone was paralyzed. Jake realized at that moment that his friend which, a few minutes before, was next to him, had suddenly vanished. He began to think that his robot might not be just a toy and that he might be the source of all their recent problems, but he did not dare share his hunch with his parents. A few seconds later, throughout the house a voice rang: grave, slow and neutral; that of Reggie. “I'm the best robot you know, I can do anything”. And suddenly everything stopped, the TV and radio went off and the lights stopped flashing. Everyone was frozen, nobody dared to say anything. Andrew turned to his wife and whispered “this house is haunted, I will not sleep another night in here”. His still pale wife nodded. While his parents still shaking were packing all their belongings to sleep at the hotel, Jake noticed that his robot had returned to its place, in the chair next to him. The little boy had a moment of fright and then regaining his senses, with all the courage he had left, took it and buried it outside in his garden.

 The family stayed at the hotel for a whole month waiting to find a new house. Each one recovered as best he could from this bloodcurdling and creepy event. Carrie stayed with them to support them in this ordeal. The most affected by these events was Jake because he knew what had caused it. He did not dare come out of the hotel, or go to school, or most all play with toys. Fortunately, Carrie managed to distract him from time to time.

 A month later, they moved into their new home. It was in another city, thirty minutes by car from their old town. It was even more incredible than Tree Hill. It was a new start for them. While a development company was busy moving the furniture and bringing all their belongings to the new house, Jake and his parents were touring the property. The boy finally found his new room but an object on his new desk caught his attention. He could not believe it. The beautiful toy, the evil robot, was waiting for him in his new room; Reggie had followed them here.

**The Inventor and the Savage Robot**

by Margot Chaput

 If three millenniums of spectacular History and flourishing evolution have taught us anything, it is that every era carried its share of brilliant, revolutionary, misunderstood, melodramatic geniuses. For the record, Antiquity harboured Pythagoras; the Renaissance was amazed by Da Vinci, the Baroque had Newton and philosophers enlightened Classicism. So it was obvious that the 21st century must have the Inventor.

 It was quite a curious character; he didn't have an age, he didn't have a gender – but for clarity’s sake I’ll settle for he –, hell, he didn't even have a name. He lived secluded, away from the world, locked up days and nights in his Laboratory, in the main room of the Mansion, the big cluster of ruins upon the hill that gave villagers downtown shivers down their spine and inspiration for some good campfire horror stories. He also had this special peculiarity - aside from his obvious lack of imagination when it came to naming things – to make stuff without knowing what he would end up with. "Crafting, he said, isn't about what you do as much as *how* you do it". And so, when he had a strike of creativity, he would just sit at the workshop, grab a hammer with one hand and a wielding torch with the other, and tinker for some time before deciding he was done.

 The Laboratory had gradually, over the decades, filled with the product of those "wonder sessions". In a corner stood the Thing, the first work of our brilliant creator; even now, its purpose remained a complete mystery. Above the main door hung the Reverglass - a reversed hourglass and the Inventor's best label intent to this day. Then there was this twisted cubic-ish box on the dresser, that the Inventor had built two months before and had since turned out to be some kind of radio. This one didn't have a name because its creator couldn't quite choose between "Piece" and "Stuff".

 Our story takes place during one of the Wonder Sessions, and it was one of those days whose date was likely to mark History, except this one couldn't because the only way the Inventor had to tell time was the Reverglass, which wasn't really precise since nobody knew when it had started functioning nor how much time exactly it took it to complete a full tour. So let's just say it happened on Rotation 3,458th, while birds had just started to sing and sunlight was still a little bit shy.

 Outside, behind the windows' dust-tinted, patched up glass, the wind was hurling over the trees, all the way down the hill. The temperature must have been below ten degrees; but fortunately, the Inventor was better at isolating than baptizing, so despite the Mansion's damaged facade, it was warm and pleasant in the Laboratory. The creator was sipping a cup of hot chocolate, humming some old-fashioned song they had learned the day before thanks to their nameless radio, glancing through the skylight at the ceiling from time to time. His head was slightly tilting to the right, his eyes half-closed; he hadn't slept last night. And at some point, without even understanding why, he started dreaming about the village above which he lived.

 Surely, it was cold downtown; not a day you’d want to spend working on. The Inventor was guessing the inhabitants must have stayed in bed late this morning, then cuddled around the fire with their families. He could almost see the smiles enlightening their faces, their eyes gleaming with peacefulness; brothers and sisters laughing at each other, parents scolding them with amusement. A quiet scene of true happiness.

 But our daydreamer didn't have a family, at least not any longer, and this thought awakened a wave of melancholy. So in order to imagine he wasn't alone, with delicate gestures, he grabbed the pendant around his neck, gently putting it on the workshop in front of him. It was a small music box, legacy from a past he remembered nothing about, but its melody always gave the Inventor tears he didn't understand. As soon as he opened it, the first wistful notes of what had once been a child's lullaby filled the air; and the lonely genius slipped into a hypnotic state.

 But while his mind was absent, his hands knew better, and they were restless. The gloomy mood of their master had given them just what they needed: inspiration, and not the least; they were making what was destined to be the Inventor's greatest achievement.

 Only it was hard to see at first glance – let's not forget the thing was made *without its designer watching –*, and the creator didn't know it at the time, so when he looked down at the table, all he could see was this banged up humanoid thingy, all covered up with brass, bronze and steel, tiny articulated stick arms and legs, red lighted flickering eyes, wrapped in a mess around what looked suspiciously like...

 “Dammit! My hammer!” cursed the Inventor, a look of complete horror widening his eyes, as if his entire life had just fell apart.

 What you may not understand right now is that his hammer was in fact his favourite relaxant; he indeed loved to throw it to the door to kill time when he was bored (and then he didn't quite understand why he couldn't open or close properly the said door). So the precious toy's loss affected him more than you can realize. Actually, it really pissed him off, and since it's obviously when you can't do something anymore that you want to do it the most, he had a sudden urge to throw a hammer.

 The artist didn't even think once about what the stuff in their hands really was; all he could see at the moment was that he no longer possessed a hammer and that it was unacceptable. So with a lot of grunting and nagging, he raised from the chair, grabbed an old coat that had definitely known better days, and went out to get a new one, leaving carelessly his latest creation unattended.

 Spoiler alert: it was a terrible decision. Because when the Inventor returned, he nearly didn't recognize the Laboratory. It was as if Hell had broken loose: the workshop was now an Ikea spare parts furniture, scattered around the place; most of the windows were shattered, the glass sparkling on the floor like shark teeth; the couch was upside down, and its cushions had been opened as if they were snacks packaging. The Reverglass was now a regular hourglass, and oddly it was the saddest thing to observe. All over the room was a sinister vibe of destruction, so heavy the owner of the place would have admired it if he weren't, well, the owner. And a rather concerned one at the moment.

 He had a disturbing feeling the strange figment from before was behind it all, and since he had chosen to ignore it earlier, it was truly terrifying. On the bright side, he had a new hammer, so he didn't fear for his life. But the designer didn't want to damage his precious toy, so he decided he wouldn't throw it at the ransacker. Yet. Plus, he couldn't help but wonder if killing a gavel creature with a new one would be considered patricide, and this existential question had already started giving him a serious headache.

 Cautiously, the genius grabbed the first weapon he saw – a kitchen utensil that lingered on the ground –, switched the light on and stepped carefully inside. Hammerboy was nowhere to be seen. Its creator looked in every corner, armed with their frying pan Rapunzel-like, expecting death by humanoid brass knock-out at every turn, but the little guy didn't show up. In fact, the whole Mansion was curiously quiet. The atmosphere was almost religious, and it made him realize how loud his machines and tools usually were. The sound level of the room rarely went below a hundred decibels.

 “Hey, buddy, I know you're here”, called the Inventor as he was searching the place. For the first time since the birth of the strange robot, he asked himself the only question that really mattered: “What the heck have I done this time?”.

 Since he never knew what he was crafting, he was used to not understanding how his inventions worked. Innocuous-looking spheres that revealed a penchant for explosions, he knew. Books as big as travel guides but clearly more deadly, sure. BICs that added a whole new meaning to the saying "the pen is mightier than the sword": been there, done that. But never, within his however very productive life, had he created an independent and apparently intelligent specimen, until this day. The researcher in his soul probably should have been celebrating, but he was a little bit too concerned with his and the Mansion's safety to open a bottle of champagne.

 Suddenly, a floorboard cracked behind the artist. This latter stopped instantly, gradually closed his eyes, calming down his breath like a Raptor hunter in Jurassic Park. "*Shhh, it can sense your fear*", he thought as he lifted his improvised weapon. Then he turned around faster than a heartbeat and stroke. With a resounding BANG, a bronze body hit the floor, and two red gleaming dots looked at their creator in the eyes.

 “Gotcha!” exclaimed the frying pan-wielding Inventor, the pulsing vein on the side of his neck slowing down as the custom-made invisible malediction danger was now avoided.

 He grabbed the steel nut-sized feet of the robot and dragged it to the closer cushion, covered in its own cotton-ball guts.

 “Now, mister Savage”, he questioned, inspecting the hammerhead of the robot looking for other possible outrages to the best tool ever. “Care to explain why you so badly wanted to wreck my house?”

 The robot didn't answer immediately. It just stared back, its cherry LED gaze quietly interrogating as if they didn't know that destroying someone's studio was considered really rude amongst humanity, and its master got the feeling it would have tilted its head if its hammer-handle-neck were flexible. Its expression was truly genuine. And so was the surprise of the Inventor when it said:

 “Looking for mummy”.

 Its voice was creaking and clanging like old machinery, the kind that could definitely use some motor oil. However, the creator found it more familiar than disturbing. It was, after all, the sound of the Mansion, his everyday environment.

 “What do you mean, *looking for mummy?*” he asked gently, his prior anger now evaporated.  The robot retorted with another question. “Are you my mummy?”

 The corners of the Inventor's lips lifted. There was something cute about the little guy that melted his heart as gently as an ice cream on the chimney (note to the readers: never leave your ice cream on the chimney. Last time our friend tried that didn't end well). He couldn't prevent a grin from growing on his face.

 “Why do you think so?” He sat on the sooty ground, next to the robot, finally putting his guard down, along with his dangerous kitchen utensil.

“Because you look sad”.

The artist frowned. "Really?" He shook his head. “What does it have to do with anything?”

 The robot emitted a strange sound, halfway between a phone bipper and a slamming door.

 “I have to comfort mummy! Mummy is sad because mummy doesn't have a family.”

 And that's when the creator understood. He was desolated and lonely, lamenting about his lack of company. So his unconscious had built a friend for him. Granted, a pretty intense one, but a friend nonetheless. His smile faded and his gaze got lost on the ground for a moment. When he raised his head, a smirk was back, and he asked:

 “And you, little guy, are you my mummy?”

The brass humanoid miniature creaked cheerfully. “We can be each other’s mummy!”

 The Inventor cracked a sincere laugh, drawing the adorable creature in his lap. He regretted doing so almost instantly, as he discovered its weight was clearly superior to his hammer's, but it was worth it.

 “Sounds like a wonderful idea.”

 He hugged the twenty pounds of bronze, bolts and hammer, holding his new companion so tight he nearly didn't hear the machinery noises anymore. There it was: the quiet scene of true happiness he so desperately needed, without even realizing how much. The creation was a real moving home: it smelled like carved steel, touched like manual labour, and sounded like the house.

 On that day, our genius discovered how endearing his work could be. He may never know what he did, but it always had a deeper meaning for the world, or could be a world for him. Joy could take many forms, and it had come to him in the one of a screeching, hammer-headed, bane of the living-room machine. A curiously logical but still odd friendship was born.

 And as the Inventor was and would always be the Inventor, as soon as he could gather his thoughts together, he leaned on what he hoped was the robot's ear, and whispered with great pride:

 “I’m gonna call you Buddy.”

**HR Project**

by Clémence Le Roux

It happened exactly a month ago. On April 7th, ROBOT Corporation headquarters burnt, with all the employees inside, including both my parents. I didn’t cry on this day, when I heard they died. It was too sudden so I didn’t realise what had really happened. Two days before the incident was my birthday but Mom and Dad had told me they were too busy with work. They had promised me we would celebrate it on Saturday but they died on Friday. Then, on Sunday, I opened the door of my parents’ room. I hadn’t yet taken a step inside that I stumbled over something and fell down. I was about to stand up when I saw a package under the bed. I took it and sat on the bed. I opened the gift, ripping the paper off. It was the books I had asked my parents to buy for me nearly every day. That’s when I first cried. I didn’t sleep well during two weeks. I mean, even after those two weeks, I was still having nightmares every night but it was still better than sleeping only two hours a night. Even now, I can’t get rid of those bad dreams. Actually, I am only talking about my bad nights but my days are no better. I haven’t been talking to anyone since the funeral, three days after my parents’ death.

Today, I bought my school supplies for this year. Unfortunately, school begins again in two days. It’s already the end of the holidays. I don’t want to go back to school. There will be my friends and they will probably pity me. I don’t like pity. I cannot answer why. Perhaps because it seems people are looking down on me. Anyway, I don’t like it and it won’t change.

As soon as I come back home, I turn the music on. I know it’s just a feeling, but I feel as if I am not alone in the house.

At the beginning, I used my parents’ money but then, I found a job in a restaurant. It doesn’t pay much but when I don’t have enough money I take some from my parents’ savings.

I go upstairs and put my shopping bag in my room. Then, I take the last book of the three my parents had bought for me and go down stairs. I change the song and put some relaxing music on. Then I sit and begin to read. It’s about the relationship between a teacher and his student. A forbidden love. I won’t lie: I love this kind of book. But I also love nearly every kind of book.

Suddenly, I hear a scraping. I raise my head. Thinking it is just a cat, I go back to my book. However, one minute later, it begins again, louder and accompanied by another sound, like a voice.

It’s coming from the garage. I haven’t been in there for years. My parents kept their work stuff there.

I’m not really brave. I’m nearly a coward. Nearly. So now, I’m really scared. I hope it’s just stuff that fell.

I walk straight until I reach the door, where I stop. I put my clammy hand on the handle, wait a little and quickly open the door. My eyes are closed. I open one of them and ask with a quivering voice:

“Is there anyone here?”

It’s really dark inside. I’m about to shut the door when a little girl suddenly jumps in the light.

“Hi!”

I scream and fall down.

“Who are you? What do you want? I am not edible!”

“Oh, sorry. According to the results of my analysis, you are scared. We did not want to scare you!” she says.

“We?”

Two men get out of the darkness and stand near her.

“Hello!” they say with the same voice.

I don’t understand what’s happening.

“What are you doing in my house? Get out! Now!”

That’s when I recognise one of the two men.

“Vernon?”

Vernon is actually in the same school as me. He doesn’t know me but everyone knows him. He’s the most… hum… I would say the most popular boy of my school. Every girl is in love with him. I don’t really understand why because he is cold with everyone when everyone is kind to him. And girls who are rejected by him end up being more in love with him than before. They are nearly worse than him.

“My real name is HR 02.”

“What?”

“My real name is HR 02.” he repeats.

“Yeah. I heard. I mean, why are you saying your name is HR 02?”

“Do you want a complete explanation?”

“Yes, that’s what I want.”

“We are part of the HR Project, literally the Human Robots Project,” the eldest begins.

“You are robots?”

“Yes.”

What is he saying? I wonder if they are in their right minds.

“You are aware that you and your parents moved from the United Kingdom to Tokyo when you were three years old, right? It was because of their work on this project. Their team is made up of people from all over the world. They were the ones who were designated to keep us in their house. We were created based on the data of real persons. The State wasn’t aware they used real identities so they agreed to our project. Then, the headquarters disappeared in the fire. Now, nobody knows we are alive. But they all think we were destroyed with the building.”

“Wh-What?”

“You are aware that you and your parents mov-”

“I heard! But how are you aware that the head office burnt?”

“We cannot tell you.”

“Okay…”

I suddenly shout while pulling my hair out.

“Are you OK?”

“Do I look like I am?”

“No. I am sorry if I offended you. Why are you not OK?”

“I just can’t assimilate it. You are… robots?”

“Yes!” they shout.

“I just can’t believe you are robots.”

“Why?” the eldest asks.

“Are you really asking me why I can’t believe it? Do you think robots are everywhere in this world?”

“According to the website of Robots Corporation, there are more than twenty-four million robots in the world.”

“I don’t mean industrial robots but androids!”

“There are exac-”

“I don’t wanna know! Please. What should I do with you?”

“You have to keep us,” Vernon version robot says.

“Why?”

“Because if you don’t, it would mean you want to give us to another person. If another person knows about us, the project would end. You wouldn’t like to destroy the project your parents worked on during all their life, right?”

“I ask the questions, okay? What can I do… Oh! I know! I will throw you with the trash!”

“No! Do not do that! Please!” the girl exclaims.

“That would be inhumane!” Vernon Robot says.

“How can you say that when you are not even human…” I whisper.

“I did not hear what you have just said.”

“Never mind. So, I have to live with you?”

“Yes. Since there is no other solution.”

“There is. I can throw you away. However, I can keep you with me if you are useful.”

“My goal is to teach young people and to help children having difficulties,” the eldest says.

“My goal is to befriend everyone, in particular antisocial children,” Vernon Robot says.

“My goal is to bring happiness to everyone,” the little girl says.

It can actually be really helpful. The eldest robot will help me to understand things, I will be able to talk with the second one and the third one will help me with being happier.

“Okay. You can stay. But can you answer two questions?”

“It depends on the questions.”

“First, can you all prove me you are real androids?”

They all immediately unscrew the last phalanx of their pinky fingers.

They seemed so real. I nearly can’t believe they are robots. But now, I have to accept it.

“My second question is: what are your fake names? I mean the identity of the persons you took your identity from.”

“Kris Phelps, 27 years old,” the eldest says.

“Vernon King, 16 years old.”

I already knew him.

“Ada Hunter, 6 years old.”

“Okay so now, that will be the way everyone will call you.”

Actually, there is only me that can call them like that, since no one knows them. But in case, something happens and they happen to be outside, they should disguise themselves as human.

Since I’m here, it will not happen because I’ll tell them not to leave this house, whatever happens.

“Actually, we wanted to leave the garage because we finished all the reserves. And we are hungry.”

“What do you want? Oil?”

“Pastas!” Ada says, cheerfully.

“What? Pastas? Since when do robots eat pastas?”

“We eat nearly everything humans eat. It allows us to blend in with humans. The people working on this project wanted to create robots that cannot be differentiated from humans. That is why the project is called ‘Human Robots’. They wanted people to feel at ease with us. They wanted them to sympathise with us as if we were human too.”

“They were really intelligent!” I say.

“I am more intelligent,” Kris responds.

“What? Are robots able to have a personality? You are really immodest. If robots have personalities then how can we differentiate humans from robots?”

“I am not immodest and I don’t have any personality. I only tell facts. My IQ is immeasurable. I am truly the most intelligent in the world. Robots do not have any feelings, emotions or personality.”

“Can I ask you something? Since when are robots that realistic?”

“Actually, it is the first time in history that androids are this realistic. That is a huge step in robotics. Our movements, our skin, our voice, our hair, our faces: everything is really close to a human’s. But we do not have any brain, skeleton, heart, muscle or organ. Humans should not judge just by seeing the outward appearances.”

I am aware of that. But I admit I don’t really act following this saying.

“So, let’s eat!” I say.

They all smile. Now that I know they’re robots, I see their defects. Their smile is, for example, wrinkled and their teeth are not visible, even when they are talking. But I didn’t notice it before because many humans’ teeth are not visible when they speak.

I made pastas, following their will, and Salisbury steak. As soon as I put the food on the table, they begin to eat with their hands, directly in the pan.

“What are you doing? You should use the tools to serve yourselves! See how I do.”

I take the ladle and serve myself. Then I take my fork and my knife and cut my steak.

When I raise my head, they are all observing my hands. They seem even more concentrated than me during a test. Then, they begin to reproduce my gestures.

I teach them how to hold the cutlery during the entire dinner. It’s harder than I thou… Wait, I can’t say that because I’ve never thought about teaching robots how to hold cutlery… It was hard.

When I look at my watch, it’s already 11 pm.

“I’m going to sleep. You should do the same.”

“We are robots. We do not sleep.”

“Ah. Right. So… Just don’t blow up the house. Don’t touch anything.”

That said, I go upstairs, brush my teeth, put on my pyjamas and immediately go to bed.

I can’t sleep because I’m overthinking. Am I going crazy? Everything’s just insane! How can there be robots in my house? How can androids like that exist? What if they’re here to kill me? Or worse, to rid the world of humans! It can’t be possible… I’m probably dreaming. Yes, that’s the only possibility.

Three hours later, I end up asleep.

My alarm clock wakes me up at nine.

*A bad dream.*

I get up twenty minutes later, go downstairs and head to the kitchen. Then, I get the orange juice in the fridge and pour it in a glass. I also take a bowl of cereals and add milk. My breakfast being ready, I begin to eat, taking a tablespoon full of cereal and milk into my mouth.

Suddenly, I hear a boy’s voice.

“Hey! You are awake! How are you?”

I look up and see the face of Vernon, bent over me. I spit everything my mouth contains out… on his face.

“Ah! I’m so sorry!”

I take a tissue and wipe his head.

Wasn’t it a dream? It isn’t possible! I can’t believe it…

“D-Do not wo-worry. I am… ok-kay.”

Aw… What did I do? What should I do?

“What did you do?” Kris says, when he enters the kitchen.

“I don’t know. Wait… That was exactly what I was wondering! Were you going to say ‘What should we do?’ too?”

“No. I was going to say ‘Do not do anything else! You are going to worsen the situation!’”

“Wow. You’re really direct.”

“I do not have any feelings. I just say what I should.”

He’s right.

“I will repair him. He should be in his normal state in about twenty-two hours.”

“Twenty-two hours? Isn’t it impossible?”

“You forget that I am a robot.”

“But still...”

He walks toward Vernon. He’s probably going to lift him.

“Do you need he…”

Kris puts Vernon on his shoulder, without any effort.

“Okay... Never mind.”

He goes silently into the garage. I follow him until he closes the door before my nose.

A robot repairing another robot... The idea seems quite weird.

“What are you doing? Standing like that and staring at the garage door?”

I turn my head. Ada is looking at me. Then, I realise I am indeed standing in front of the door.

“Oh… Nothing. Just thinking.”

“About what?”

“Vernon. I… hum… *damaged* him.”

“How?”

“I spit at his face. Kris took him in the garage in order to repair him.”

“So? You wonder if he will be alright?”

“Hum… Yes.”

“Do not worry about it. Kris is the most intelligent being in the world.”

“Really?”

“Yes. But you must not forget one thing: we are not humans. We cannot feel anything and whatever we do, it is not because of our feelings. We cannot even feel the pain.”

On that note, she goes back to the sofa, watching TV.

I take my shower, brush my teeth and sit next to her. The program she’s looking at is about the history of robots so I get up, tired of all those robots. They are everywhere.

I decide to go shopping for lunch.

“Ada, what do you want to eat?”

“I want something spicy.”

“Okay.”

I was going to say that I am leaving her alone but I remembered she probably doesn’t care since she’s a robot.

I leave and go to the closest conbini, those convenience stores they have in Japan.

Like every time I go outside, everybody is watching me. Being a foreigner, life in Japan is really difficult but since I’ve been here for fifteen years, I’m used to it. And I’m not the only one. I have friends that are also foreigners. Not all of them but some.

In the conbini, I buy onigiris for me, spicy noodles for Ada and another bowl of noodles for Kris.

When, I come home, nothing has changed. Ada is still on the sofa and Kris probably still repairing Vernon.

I tell Ada that the food is on the table and that I am going to my part time job.

I take my phone and my onigiris with me and go out, heading to the restaurant where I work.

As soon as I get there, I begin to work. Since I’m speaking English and Japanese, there are often foreigners or tourists that come to our restaurant. So my boss always thanks me. He’s really kind and everyone loves him.

I eat both my onigiris during my twenty-minute break and I go back to work.

At 8 pm, my boss lets me go back home.

“Hum… Boss?”

“Yeah?”

“Tomorrow I go back to school so I’m sorry but I won’t be able to come as often as I did during the holidays.”

“Oh! Don’t worry about that. I understand.”

“Thank you very much!”

“You’re welcome. Ah! Wait here, I’ll come back in a second.”

“Huh?”

He goes in the kitchen. When he comes back, he gives me an umbrella.

“It’s pouring outside.”

I turn my head to the door. He’s right. I’m lucky he gave me that umbrella because I don’t how I would’ve done without it.

I come back home, all dry. Except for my new sneakers. I’m so down. I loved them and wanted to wear them tomorrow.

When I come into the house, I say out loud that I’m back home but no one answers me so I say it again. Still nothing.

I take my shoes off and go in each room of the house. No one.

I suddenly remember: Kris and Vernon have been in the garage since this morning.

I open the door. When I see both of them, I’m immediately relieved.

“What?” Kris asks.

“Why didn’t you answer me?”

“Answer you?”

“I said I was here!”

“So?”

“You should have answered!”

“You didn’t ask anything.”

“That’s right… but my parents have always answered me when I was coming back home.”

“It wasn’t in my data so I didn’t know about it.”

“Anyway, where is Ada?”

“I haven’t seen her.”

“What?!”

“I haven’t seen her. I didn’t leave here all day.”

I go back in the house and look for her everywhere. But she isn’t there.

She wouldn’t have gone outside… No. I told them not to leave the house.

But just in case, I go out. It’s still raining cats and dogs.

I don’t see anything because of the rain. I’m about to come home, thinking I probably didn’t look in every corner of the house, when I hear a weak voice, calling my name.

I turn around and discover Ada, nearly unrecognisable. She can neither call me nor walk.

“Ada!”

She’s about to fall and I catch her just before she touches ground.

No… It’s not possible…

I take her back home not without severely exerting my back.

As soon as I get through the door, I shout, asking Kris to come see me, like in right now. Hopefully, this time, he hears me and gets here before the end of my sentence.

“Is there a problem?”

“Yes! Look at the state she’s in!” I say, half crying, half screaming.

He turns around Ada, closely looking at every single detail of her ‘body’.

He doesn't seem sad not even compassionate. I’m the only one weeping. Even Ada isn’t crying.

It’s the first time I really understand the fact they can’t feel anything.

“So? You can repair her, right?”

“No”

“Thank y… Wait, what did you say?”

“I said no. She can’t be repaired because there is too much damage. Moreover, her data has also been affected and without the original data, it’s not possible.

“But… my parents must have copied the data somewhere!”

“They did. In the office building which burnt last month.”

“Then, let’s look for the girl, Ada. The real girl. We’ll take her data again and copy it in Ada.”

“Impossible. She’s not in Japan anymore. And even if it was the case, the damages undergone by Ada are too serious for me to repair her. So now, I will go back to the garage, if you don’t mind.”

"So what? We're not gonna help her?"

"No."

I'm shocked. How can he...

“Go! You’re just an inhuman thing anyway!” I yell.

“That’s right.”

I didn’t think he’d answer that. I’m more used to persons who would answer “What have you just said?!” or “Do you wanna die?”. My friends are quite hot-blooded.

I suddenly think about them. I’ve not seen them since the last day of school and I’ve not even sent a message to them since my parents’ death. They probably won’t talk to me anymore at school.

Kris goes back in the garage as I go to my room, slamming the door. But since he's a robot, he doesn't even notice my anger so it was useless.

I suddenly remember that we left Ada alone in the living room. I get down the stairs. When I find her, she's laying on the ground, lifeless – or perhaps should I say inanimate.

I drop to my knees.

Why is everyone around me dying? First, my parents, now Ada.

I thought that since they are robots, they wouldn't die. I thought I wouldn't be hurt anymore. It seems I was wrong.

A tear rolls down my cheek. What? Am I crying over a robot now? Before my parents' death, I was strong and calm in every situation. I nearly never cried. All my friends cried when they watched Titanic when I didn't even shed a tear.

I put Ada on the sofa and went to the café.

I work all day long. When I come back, I usually eat and go straight to bed, too tired to do anything else.

I wake up even before my alarm rings. I turn it off and go downstairs. I stop when I see Ada lying on the sofa. Then, I go to the kitchen and prepare breakfast. When I’m about to begin eating, Kris appears in front of me.

“What?” I ask, still angry about yesterday.

“I finished repairing Vernon. I am about to wake him up. Do you want to see him?”

I forget all my problems at once and nod. Then, he heads to the garage and I follow him. There, I see him on a table, on his stomach. He seems like a dead person: his face doesn’t convey any emotion, like… a robot.

Kris presses a button on his back and turns him over. After a few seconds, Vernon opens his eyes.

“Vernon! Are you okay?” I ask.

He looks at me, at Kris and then, at the ceiling. He puts his hand on his chest.

“*I can feel my heart beating. My heart is working. I’m pleased. I’m still alive.*”

“What?”

I look at Kris and ask “What did you do? Put him to sleep again and repair him!”

“Why?”

“He thinks he’s alive!”

Vernon turns his head towards me and smiles.

“It is a quote,” he says.

“What?”

“It is a quote from *One Litre of Tears: A Young Girl’s Fight for Life* by Aya Kito.”

“It is probably a book you have on your shelves. He read them yesterday before you spat on him,” Kris explains.

“He read all of them?”

“Yes.”

How could he read all of the books we have in such a short time? Is he really a huma- Wait… He isn’t. But I didn’t know robots could read that fast.

When I look at my watch, it’s already time for me to leave for school. I don’t even eat and go out.

I manage to take the bus. Suddenly, I remember that Ada shouldn’t have been outside. I asked them not to go outside! So why…? Mustn’t robots obey humans?

I start feeling worried about them. What if they go outside too? Humans could discover them. But that’s not what worries me the most: no one could even think they aren’t humans. The bigger problem is that if it rains, they could end in the same state as Ada. I don’t want it to happen again…

The bus arrives at school, stopping my thoughts. I get down and head to the high school. When I get there, everyone is already here, looking at the board where the class we’re in is displayed.

I follow the names at the letter W.

Winfried…

Woody…

Wright Mia.

That’s me! So, I’m in year 13, class 3.

I look for my classroom in the high school and enter. On the board it is written where each student has to sit. I’m in the back of the classroom, near the window. It’s the best and the worst place at the same time. The best because when the class is getting boring, I can look outside and see the sky and the clouds – I’ve always liked looking at the sky. And the worst because I see what everyone is doing so it bothers me when I want to focus on what the teacher is saying.

I settle down and get my stuff out. There are fifteen minutes left before the teacher comes in. I’m very tired so I lie my head down on my table and am about to close my eyes in order to take a nap when I see Vernon coming into the classroom.

“Vernon?! What are you doing here?”

I stand up and run towards him. Without stopping, I grab his arm and take him out of the classroom.

“Let go!” he yells.

“What are you doing here? I knew you wouldn’t obey me! I told you not to leave the house, so please, come back home!”

“What are you talking about? By the way, who are you?”

“You know who I-”

I suddenly realise my mistake. Having spent so much time with the robot made me totally forget about the real Vernon.

“I… hum… I…”

“Mia!”

I turn around. It’s Holly. Right on time! What would I have done without her?

“Holly! Long time no see!”

“What are you doing with…”

“Nothing. Never mind,” I say, not letting her finish her sentence.

I put my arm around her and we go into the classroom, leaving Vernon alone.

Vernon enters the classroom, looks at the board and heads directly to me.

“Wh-What?” I ask.

But he ignores me and sits in the row before me.

“What are you doing here?” I nearly yell.

He turns around. Doesn’t say anything and points to the board.

“Can’t you talk?”

I still go to see what name is written at his place. But it’s his. I’m embarrassed and my cheeks become red of shame.

I go back to my seat.

When I raise my head, Holly is looking at me. I wave at her but she turns her head away.

At noon, I can’t even eat because of Vernon’s fans. They follow me everywhere. Some of them want to hit me, others want to kill me. If I was tired at the beginning of the day, I’m completely exhausted by the end of it.

When did my life become such a tryst?

And during the whole day, Holly was nowhere to be seen.

I come home walking like a puppet. But oddly, no one is waiting for me. The house is empty, except for Ada, still lying on the bed. I move her to the garage and wrap her in a sheet.

Thirty minutes later, Kris appears. When I ask him where he was, he answers he went out for a walk.

“But why were you outside? I told you not to go out!”

“We do not follow your orders. Only your parents’.”

As I thought, they won’t ever obey me, even if my parents aren’t here anymore. They are more loyal than dogs.

One hour after him, it’s Vernon’s turn to come home.

“What about you? What were you doing outside?”

“Walking.”

Now that I saw Vernon today, I notice nothing can differentiate them.

“I’m going to prepare dinner,” I tell him.

“No. I will do it.”

I look at him. Can robots cook? I didn’t know that.

“Okay. Thank you.”

“Where is the recipe?”

Ah! I thought he would have everything in his head. It means robots have limits too. But it’s normal because that’s not his speciality.

He begins to cook. He prepares rice with fried turkey.

“I’ll set the table,” I say.

“Are you sure you can do that?

“I’m not a baby!”

“You know… since I am a robot, you look like a baby compared to me.”

I turn around as soon as I understand the meaning of his sentence.

“What?! What have you just said?!” I yell.

“Do I have to repeat?”

“No.”

I take a glass out of a closet. But since he made me angry, I don’t pay attention to what I do and the glass slips out of my hands and falls to the floor. Shocked, I take a step back. Unfortunately, there was a big piece of glass where I put my foot.

“Ouch!” I scream.

“What happened?” Vernon says as soon as I finished saying the word.

“I stepped on a piece of glass.”

He looks at my feet. The wound won’t stop bleeding.

“Sit,” he says, pulling a chair out from under the table.

He looks everywhere, as a lost child looking for his parents in a crowd.

“What are you looking for?”

“The first-aid kit.”

“In this closet,” I say, pointing the finger at it. “But you don’t need to help me. It’s not a big deal.”

“What do you mean? You should heal every wound, even the most benign.”

He takes the first-aid kit and squats in front of me. He’s really close so I pull back my chair. Then, I realise I’m going insane. How can I be embarrassed to be close with a robot?

Vernon sterilizes the wide wound and puts a bandage on it.

“Are you okay?” he asks, looking up at me.

His eyes are truly no joke. His look is deep, so much that I get lost and don’t remember what he’s just said. I make him repeat.

“Ah…Yeah… Sorry.”

He smiles at me and picks the kit in order to put it back in the closet.

I get up to set the table but as soon as I did, Vernon puts me back on my chair.

“Do not stand up. You are hurt.”

“I’m okay. Don’t worry.”

I want to get up but he instantly puts his hand on my shoulder, keeping me from standing up.

“What are you doing?”

“I told you. Do not get up. Do I have to repeat myself?”

Now, his look seems scary. I have never seen one of them getting angry – I know he’s not literally angry though, because he can’t. Actually, I haven’t seen him for a long time.

But I like him. It’s been a while since someone worried about me. He’s really nice, surely because it’s his function to be sociable and to talk with everyone. It’s a good thing I have these robots.

He sets the table in my place and goes back to the ovens while I look at him. He’s really good at cooking. I haven’t seen any guy cooking. Even my father didn’t cook. Perhaps he knew how to cook but my mother never let him go in the kitchen.

When I had inquired into their functions, Vernon had answered his was to befriend teenagers. I suppose he’s good at everything, in order to get along with every kind of people. That’s why he’s good at cooking. I wonder what else he can do… But I think they chose Vernon because he’s as talented as this robot. According to his ‘fans’, he’s good-looking, intelligent, cool and good at everything, including sports and arts.

“Why are you looking at me?”

I suddenly come back to reality and realise he turned around.

“Nothing.”

“Is it because I am beautiful?”

“What?! No way! But how do you know you’re beautiful?”

“Your parents put good-looking in my data.”

Wow. Will I really have another Vernon at home? As arrogant as the real one. It makes me wonder: what if one day, we wouldn’t be able to distinguish robots from humans?

Vernon puts the food on the table and tells Kris dinner’s ready. I want to go to the living room too but when I put my foot on the ground, the pain comes back. I moan in pain. Vernon comes right away.

“You cannot get up.”

“But… I’m hungry! I wanna eat! I have to get up!”

“No, you don’t have to.”

He puts his hands on my back and behind my knees and carries me.

“What are y...”

He keeps quiet and brings me to the living room. When he puts me down, I immediately sit. Vernon sits in front of me and Kris on my right.

We begin to eat.

“Wow! It's delicious!” I say.

“Thank you.”

“I cannot know if it is good, but I do know it is aesthetic.”

“Why? Robots cannot know the taste of food?” I ask Vernon.

I still don't wanna talk to Kris. I won't say anything to him until tomorrow because I'm not capable of being angry for a long time.

“No, we cannot.”

“But, I saw you tasting food when you were cooking.”

“I was not. I have a thermometer in my mouth. I used it to see if the food was not too hot for humans.”

Incredible. Robots really can do everything.

I finish eating before both of them so I go upstairs. I'm exhausted so I immediately get ready for bed. I pick a book up in a shelf and begin reading it tucked up in bed.

When I wake up, my hand is still holding the book. I fell asleep while reading.

I suddenly notice the smell of pancakes. I run to the kitchen and find Vernon cooking.

“Why are you cooking?”

“I am hungry and when I came to wake you up a while ago, you did not open an eye.”

“I’m not late, right?” I ask, worried.

“No. But if you had slept more, you would have been late.”

It’s a relief. I don’t know what I would’ve done if I had been late for school.

We sit around the table and eat. As expected, it’s delicious.

“By the way, where is Kris?”

He doesn’t have to go to the garage anymore so why isn’t he here?

“He left a while ago.”

“Why?”

“I do not know. He did not tell me.”

“You should have stopped him or at least asked why he went out!” I yell at him. “What if it rains!”

“It will not.”

“How do you know that?”

“The sky is clear and I watched the weather report.”

I hope he isn’t wrong. I don’t want to lose anyone else.

I leave the house to Vernon while I go to school. I forbid him to leave the house but I already know he won’t obey me. I don’t know what to do in order for them to listen to me.

I thought I would be late so I hurried. Thanks to that, I managed to take the bus before the one I usually take.

I thought today would be better than yesterday but as soon as I get off the bus, tens of girls assault me. I can’t even breathe.

“What are you doing?!” I ask.

“Who are you to talk normally to Vernon?”

“I hate you!”

“Who are you to him?”

“What? I’m nothing to him! I don’t even know him!”

They all call me a liar. A girl suddenly comes and raises her fist to hit me. I close my eyes, scared.

“It’s Vernon!” a girl scream.

They all begin to scream. Seeing the punch doesn’t come, I open my eyes, but they aren’t here anymore. I look for them and see them following Vernon who is entering the school.

I take a deep breath and sit in the middle of the yard. I’m completely out of my depth. I stay there for a while. Then I get up and go straight to the classroom.

What is he? A hero? No, he isn’t. So why is Vernon that famous? Just because he’s the best-looking, the richest and the most intelligent student in the school, everyone loves him. He would be kind, I would understand but he’s cold with every girl of the school. So why do they love him? Everything that happened to me is because of him.

There’s no one in the classroom. It’s still early. Class begins in ten minutes. I am about to rest on my table when I hear footsteps. I quickly turn my head, thinking it can be fangirls.

“Ah! You’re here!”

“Vernon? What are you doing here? And why are you looking for me? I should be the one looking for you.”

“Why?”

“Because your fangirls don’t want to stop bothering and assaulting me!”

“I didn’t do anything. You came to me!”

I can’t believe it! How can he say that!

“But it’s your fans!”

“I didn’t choose to be handsome, rich, charismatic and perfect.”

“What?!”

He really is arrogant. Vernon robot was right. However, even if he was programmed to be arrogant, he isn’t as much as the real Vernon. Compared to him, Vernon robot is extremely kind.

“Never mind. But you asked why I was looking for you. It’s actually because of that. I can fix the situation.”

“Really? So what are you waiting for? Fix it! Now!”

“Oh! I won’t do it for free!”

“What?”

“I want you to do whatever I want, whenever I want.”

“What? Are you mad?”

“No. But if you don’t want to be, I recommend you to let me fix the situation.”

He leaves on that note. That’s exactly why I don’t like him. He’s too cold-hearted. I would say he’s like a robot but even Vernon robot is way more human than him.

I close my eyes.

What should I do? If I end up being his slave, I can say goodbye to my life. He is cold with girls; how would he be with his slave?

When I open my eyes, the classroom is full. I don’t understand how I could not hear them come in. They are as loud as kindergarten children. Holly didn’t come today.

I look around for Vernon. Our eyes cross. I wave at him for him not to look away. He articulates ‘What?’ with his lips and I answer with my thumb up for him to understand I’m okay with being his puppet. He grins, victorious. He understood. Now, I regret it. But I try not to think about it. I have to focus on class.

First, we have mathematics. According to our homeroom teacher, he’s a new teacher. That’s good because my mathematics teacher of last year was such a horrible old woman.

The teacher enters the classroom.

No. It can’t be… He should be at home! Maybe it’s the real one…

“Hello. I am your mathematics’ teacher. My name is Kris Phelps. I hope we will get along well during this year.”

I get up and scream. Everyone turns their head in my direction. There are only robots who talk like that.

I grab his hand as I did yesterday with Vernon and take him out. But compared to yesterday, I’m sure he’s not human.

“What are you doing here?”

“I am a teacher.”

“No, you’re not. You’re a r…”

I can’t finish my sentence someone puts their hand on my mouth, preventing me from talking.

I turn around. It’s Vernon. I take his hand off my mouth.

“What are you doing?”

“You shouldn’t take our teacher out of the classroom.”

I am about to respond that it’s an important matter but then, I see that everyone was eavesdropping us. What if I would’ve let out he’s a robot in front of all of them? Vernon has just saved me, even if he didn’t know he was.

We all go back in the classroom and Kris begins teaching.

At lunch time, I go out of the class first, hungry. But I soon notice that I’m alone without Holly. I wanted to eat my bento with her… I go on the roof. There’s no one, it’s the perfect place to eat. I open my bento. Suddenly, Vernon’s fangirls arrive on the roof and run to me. I recognise the girl who was this close to hit me. I put my bento on the bench and step back, afraid of what they’ll do to me.

“Don’t worry, we won’t hit you again. We’re sorry about what happened yesterday and this morning. We came because Vernon told us to look for you.”

“Wait what? You’re sorry? Why?”

“We didn’t know he was your cousin!”

“What? He’s my what?”

“Your cousin. Why? Isn’t he?”

“Ah… Hum… Yeah. Of course, he is.”

“We’re so sorry. It won’t happen anymore. We misunderstood.”

“It’s okay. As long as you know. You may go.”

But they stay still, looking at each other.

“What?”

“Vernon is looking for you. He is waiting for you, in the classroom,” they repeat.

Ah, I forgot they told me that.

“Why is he looking for me?”

“He said you would know why.”

“I don’t.”

Seeing I don’t make a move, they repeat that I have to go see him.

“I’ll go after my lunch.”

“But you shouldn’t… He will be angry…” the littlest of the group says.

They leave me alone. But I feel guilty to make him wait and I’m curious to know what he has to tell me so I don’t even eat a spoonful of rice and head to the classroom.

He’s still waiting alone at his desk. Looking outside

“Why did you wanna see me?” I ask.

“Give me your bento.”

“What?”

“I said give me your bento.”

“I finished it.”

“Prove it. Show me that your bento box is empty.”

“Why should I?”

“Because you cannot disobey me.”

“What?”

“Did you already forget? You have to do everything I want, because I fixed the situation.”

I completely forgot! Why didn’t I think to tell everyone he was my cousin? I’m such an idiot!

“Open it,” he orders me, pointing the finger at my bento box.

I open it in front of him.

“Oh! I see there’s still a lot! You probably couldn’t even take a spoonful!” he laughs.

He invites – orders – me to sit in front of him. I take another chair and do as he wants.

Looking at him makes me hungry but I can’t even ask to eat a little. Suddenly, my stomach growls, breaking the silence in the classroom.

“You’re hungry,” he asks, laughing at me.

I don’t say a word.

“Eat,” he says, putting a spoonful of rice in front of me.

I don’t move because I think it’s only a joke.

“What? You don’t want it? It’s okay.”

He’s about to put it in his mouth but I yell at him “Wait! I’ll eat it!”

He smiles and feeds me, as a father would do to his baby.

 That’s the first time I see him that kind. Now, he seems more human.

Fortunately, I could eat today. After that, the afternoon is calm and I am able to come back home in one piece.

Vernon and Kris are still not here. This time, Vernon comes back first – he was out for a walk.

I explain my day to him around two cups of tea. Actually, it’s not really the entire day. I only tell him about Kris being my teacher, not about the real Vernon. He listens to me until the end.

When Kris comes back, I interrogate him.

“How did you become a teacher? You couldn’t pass the exam since you were in the garage!”

“I hacked your school’s system. It was really simple.”

“But why?”

“I was manufactured in order to become a teacher so why cannot I?”

“Perhaps, but in this world, you should pass the exam to be a teacher.”

“I did not know.”

He goes in the living room and switches the television on as if I weren’t there anymore.

I want to tell him not to leave in the middle of a conversation but Vernon grabs my hand and drags me to the kitchen.

“Let’s do tomorrow’s bento.”

“For me?”

“Of course! For who could it be?”

“By the way, how do you eat? Kris eats at school but what about you?”

“I can cook by myself.”

I forgot he can do everything.

I take my bento box and put it on the table. Then, I take another one out of the closet.

“Why two boxes?” he asks.

“Someone at school nearly stole my entire bento.”

He smiles and says “You are quite weak.”

“What did you say? Are you making fun of me?”

He begins to laugh and seeing him makes me laugh too.

We quickly finish tomorrow’s lunches so we move to tonight’s dinner, which doesn’t take us a lot of time to prepare since we cook pastas. When the food’s ready, we call Kris and eat.

I try not to ask anything related to school. I know it won’t lead to anything. Whenever I argue with a robot, I lose. Why? Because they understand truth and logic but not human feelings. That’s why they are androids and not humans. They can’t understand the sorrow of someone who’s just lost a relative. They can’t understand the happiness of good food prepared by a friend. They can’t even understand why humans fall in love.

I finish my dessert – a chocolate cake – before the others but I wait for them. They’re slow because they’re still having difficulties with holding the cutlery.

“Mia?”

I turn my head to my left. Vernon is staring at me.

“What?”

“You have some chocolate on your chin,” he says putting his finger under his lips.

I try to wipe the spot he points to on my chin.

“No. Wait.”

He puts his left hand on my right cheek and with his other hand, rubs under my lips. He takes me by surprise. I can’t make a move. But I feel I’m blushing so I automatically cover my cheeks with my hands and put my head back.

“I… hum…” I begin saying, but I don’t even know what I want to say.

“What do you want to saaaaaaaayyyyy…”

We both turn our head towards Kris. He seems turned off: his arms and his head are down as if he was sleeping – but in a weird position.

“What’s happening to him?” I ask Vernon.

“His battery is probably dead.”

“What, is it possible?”

“Of course. We’re robots after all. We need to be charged.”

He goes in the garage and comes back a few moments later, carrying a heavy briefcase. He puts it on the table and opens it. There are three chargers in it, each with the robots’ names written on it. He takes the one where “HR 01” is engraved on the lid. Then, he plugs it on Kris’ back and in a jack in the corner of the living room. A light appears on the charger.

I’m relieved. I thought it would be a more serious problem.

“By the way, there are three chargers. So, there is one for you too, right? Why aren’t you in the same state as him? What about your battery?” I ask Vernon.

“I have less important data than him so I do not need as much battery as him. I can last longer than Kris.”

“How long can you last without recharging?”

“About ten days.”

“It’s still short… Wait, didn’t you say that food can charge yourself in energy? So why do you also need electricity?”

“Food is not sufficient. We need another energy source.”

“Why?”

“You would not understand. It is too complicated. Robots are too complicated.”

“Am I that dumb?”

“No. We are intelligent.”

They’re not intelligent. They’re extremely intelligent! Can someone have an IQ as high as them? No. But they’re robots, not humans. I shouldn’t compare them with us.

I go up and prepare myself for sleep. But I can’t. Why? Because thoughts are assaulting me.

I left Vernon alone… Kris is unconscious – he can’t humanly be unconscious but let’s say he’s robotically unconscious –, Ada is dead and robots can’t sleep. So what is he doing by himself? He already read all my books. What is there left to do in this house? Nothing. Perhaps he’s watching TV.

Unable to sleep, I go down and look for him. As soon as I enter the living room, I see him, lying down on the sofa, eyes closed. The TV is turned off. Is he sleeping?

I take a closer look at him. That’s when I notice his beauty. I think my parents perfected him. Vernon is probably not as perfect as him. It’s normal: robots should be perfect, humans should be imperfect. If all humans were perfect, we wouldn’t recognise each other. But wait, I can recognise Vernon from Kris. I take that back. If one human would be perfect, every human would have their eyes on him. Wait, girls are all over Vernon, at school. I take that back too.

Suddenly, he opens his eyes. I wasn’t prepared for that so I jump back.

“Sorry. I thought you were sleeping.”

“Robots cannot sleep.”

“I know. So why were you like that?”

“I was analysing.”

“Analysing?”

“Yes. I was analysing a book I read.”

“You analyse the books you read?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Why?”

“Because I have nothing else to do.”

“Okay. Do as you want.”

I sit down and I don’t know how but Vernon succeeds in putting me to sleep.

“Mia. Wake up…”

A sweet voice comes in my dreams. My dream stops abruptly. I open my eyes and the first image I see is Vernon’s face three inches away from me. I hear my heart beating. I haven’t heard it beat this loudly before. He stares at me and I stare at him. However, not even three seconds later, we both look away.

“I… I will do the breakfast,” he says.

“Yeah…”

Wait, what is happening to me? He’s a robot! I have to get my act together.

“Do you want me to help you?” I ask.

“No, thanks,” he quickly replies.

I don’t insist because it doesn’t matter to me. No… It’s not right: it’s because I’m too embarrassed about what happened and I don’t know why…

I take a shower and when I go out of the bathroom, I immediately identify the pancake smell. It feels good to have someone cooking for me. It seems like I went back to the time my parents were still there. Thinking of them gets me a little nostalgic but I pull myself together.

When I come into the kitchen, Vernon hears me and turns around, the pan still in his hand. He smiles at me and I begin to think it would be perfect if every morning was like that.

“Look at what you’re doing!” I tell him, half laughing.

I point to the pan. He looks at it and notices the pancakes are about to fall and crash on the ground. He puts the pan back on the gas while I sit around the little table of the kitchen.

One minute later, he brings the pancakes on the table and we eat face to face.

I point to Kris, still in the same position as yesterday and ask Vernon, “What are we going to do ab…AAAAAAAAAAH!”

Kris has just moved, frightening me.

“I am charged,” he says, his eyes still closed.

Vernon stands up and unplugs Kris, who suddenly opens his eyes, as some horror movie protagonist.

I suddenly recall what happened yesterday. I nearly forgot the robot teacher event.

“Kris. Can you please do what I say this once? Until I find a solution, you have to remember that you’re a human.”

What would I do if he tells everyone he’s a robot?

“Am I not a robot?”

“You are but you can’t say that to everyone. So, for now, remember you’re a human being.”

He nods so I don’t push things further. He also has to go to school. If he doesn’t, he will be late. New teachers must come sooner than older teachers. I’m happy to see Kris does the same as any other new teacher.

Thirty minutes after he left, it’s my turn to go. I leave the house to Vernon and come out. But then, I hear him calling me. He catches me.

“Is there a problem?” I ask.

“You forgot the two bento boxes,” he responds.

He hands me a plastic bag. I take it. The two boxes are inside. But they’re too voluminous to get inside my backpack so I hold the plastic bag in my hand.

“Thank you. Now, go inside. What if it rains? I don’t want you to die.”

 “I cannot die. So you go first.”

“Perhaps. But for me it’s the same. If you’re not here anymore, I would be as sad as if you were dead. So, you go inside.”

“There is only a 10% chance of rain so I risk nothing.”

“But still…”

He stares at me. I look back at him but I can’t stand his look more than a few seconds without blushing so I look away.

“OK, OK. I’ll go first. But you have to come inside when you can’t see me, right?”

“Right.”

I walk straight on. I tried not looking behind but I can’t. I turn around and Vernon waves goodbye. I turn again and keep going straight on to the bus stop. I don’t wait a lot until the bus comes. I get on.

When I get off, a while later, I enjoy the fact that no fan is waiting to assault me. I can safely go to my classroom.

I took the same bus as yesterday so I’m early again. But now, I’m not sleepy. I slept very well. I don’t think it’s because of Vernon. Why would I feel at ease next to a robot?... It would be weird.

I open my notebooks but there aren’t any lessons to revise since the first semester has just begun. It’s at that moment that Vernon chooses to enter the classroom.

“Oh! Do I have bad eyesight or is it really the now popular ‘Mia’?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t you know about it? You’re known as the only girl I’m nice to.”

“You’re not nice to me.”

“I’m not but that’s not what others think. People are hung up on what they see. Anyway, you’re now every girl’s enemy. Even if you’re my ‘cousin’, they envy you. And as the proverb says ‘Keep your friends close and your enemies closer’, they all want to be your friend. If they do that, they will be able to be closer to me – or it’s what they think. You’ll see! They will all come to you in a few minutes.”

“If that’s really the case, I’m not popular. Popular people have a lot of real friends. But if they befriend me just to be closer to you, they won’t be my real friends. Some of them knew about my being your cousin yesterday, so why didn’t they come asking me to be their friend, huh? I won’t be popular.”

“You’re wrong. They’re just slow-minded. You’ll see they’ll soon come. And do you think all my ‘friends’ really want to be my friend? They just want to be popular amongst girls. And since I am popular amongst girls, they get close with me. And why am I popular amongst girls? Because they all think they’re in love with me when in fact they are simply enthralled with my good looks and my parents’ money. That’s why I’m mean to every girl that comes near me. That way, I can know what they like me for.”

“How?”

“If they’re still ‘in love’ with me after I broke their heart, they just fell for my appearance and my money, not for me. If they don’t like me anymore, they truly wanted to get to know me and they probably loved me for myself.”

“That makes sense. However, if they really wanted to get to know you and you shoed them down, they won’t come back to you.”

“Except that it has never happened before.”

“What? It’s impossible! There would probably be at least one person in this high school that wants to know you for what you are!”

“Only ten persons in our year didn’t set their eyes on me. One of my ‘friends’ made a list – probably to see who doesn’t love me and is free to love him. And one of them actually did ask me out but she is really popular so to maintain her dignity, she did it out of the school.”

It’s probably Mary. Last year, there was a rumour she was going out with Vernon but he denied it. She cried all day.

“What about the others?”

“They don’t like me.”

A smile appears on my face.

“What?” he asks, not understanding my behaviour at all.

“No one would ever know your life is that pitiful!”

“Are you really laughing at me? Do you have a worst life?”

My smile automatically disappears.

“Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

I raise my head and look up at him.

“How do you…”

“Ah… I heard two of your friends talking about your parents’ accident, last year, when you stopped coming to school. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, I swear.”

“I believe you. And I’m sorry to have smiled at your situation. I know only too well what it is not to have any friends. When I was in elementary school, my parents always gave me candy so everyone said they were my friends so that they could have sweets. But one day, my parents saw I finished one box of candy every day so they stopped giving me sweets. Everyone also stopped being my friends. That’s when I understood people were mean. But now, I have Holly.”

“Sorry to tell you that but she’s just like the rest of them.”

“No way.”

I suddenly heard the ring.

Vernon sits, adding nothing to the bomb he had just dropped.

Why would Holly be like the others? She was my friend last year! Actually, I began to go to her group of friends because my parents told me to socialise but then, we were friends. What’s weird is that, after I first saw her this year, when I accidentally talked to Vernon, she didn’t say a word to me. And when I waved at her, she just ignored me. Then, she didn’t come to school. She may have never considered me as her friend. If I follow what Vernon said, she didn’t want to talk to me, because she thought I was close to him… That makes sense since she stopped talking to me after the Vernon incident. No… it cannot be… Vernon is just playing with me.

But I have to know why she ignored me.

Everyone comes in as soon as Vernon sits. I was planning to ask her to come and talk to me, thinking she would ignore me and go straight to her seat. But she does come to me.

“Mia? Wassup?”

“Holly, I wanna ask you something,” I say, avoiding her question, “Are we friends?”

She stays still and stare at me.

“Of course! Why wouldn’t we be friends?”

“I don’t know… Perhaps because you completely ignored me yesterday?”

“Oh… That? I was just a little bit upset because I thought you were going out with Vernon!”

Now, it’s my turn to stare wide-eyed at her.

“Ah! So now, a guy can tear us apart? But I don’t mean it’s Vernon’s fault of course, since it’s yours.”

“My fault? How is it my fault? You did get closer to him.”

“He’s my cousin!” I shout, so loud that everyone turns their head towards us.

I know that’s a lie but it upset me.

The teacher comes in just after I said that. Not Kris since I don't have maths today.

“Why is there such a silence here? Holly, go back to your seat.”

After two hours of English and one hour of History, comes lunch time. Holly walks towards me.

“Wanna eat lunch together?”

“No thanks. Friends eat lunch together. But you don't see me as a friend.”

“Why? Did you always think I considered you as my friend? It was you that went to us, last year, looking for company,” she says glaring at me.

She doesn't even try to deny it. I stand up and see Vernon, staring at our fight.

“Thank you.”

I'm sad to have lost a friend but what's the point in having a fake friend. So, I'm really grateful to him.

I leave the classroom and go on the rooftop. A few moments later, Vernon joins me.

“What do you want?” I ask him, not with an angry tone but rather curious.

“Nothing. Just to eat with you.”

“You don't want to eat with your friends?”

“I told them they weren't my friends anymore.”

“What?! Why? When?”

“Just now. Seeing you stand up to Holly and breaking your 'friendship' because she didn't consider you as a friend, makes me notice that I was really a coward, compared to you. You had the courage to tell her what you think about her while I just accepted the fact they weren't my friends and didn't do anything. So, I decided to take my courage in both hands and admitted everything.”

“You didn't empathize with them?”

“No,I didn't. What about you?”

“Me neither.”

“Why?”

“I'm not her only friend. She can stay with them. And according to her, I wasn't a friend, so why would she feel down?”

He doesn't say anything more and I take out the bento boxes of my bag.

Seeing I have two, he says, “Wow! That's so kind! You did one for me!”

“Yeah, because yesterday, I nearly starved, because of a certain someone...”

“Thank you!”

“In this situation, everyone would be sorry to have stolen another person's meal,” I whisper.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing.”

I give him his bento and we eat together. But as soon as we finish eating, a student opens the rooftop’s door.

I instantly recognise his small figure.

“Newt?”

“Mia! I ran into Holly and she said you would probably be crying on the rooftop. I’m happy to see you’re not.”

I run to him.

“What are you doing here?”

“You missed me so I wanted to see you. I transferred to this high school. We’ve been separated for a year. That’s way too much for me! So I came back here this year but I couldn’t find you even though I’ve been looking for you for the last three days, did you know that? But whatever, I heard weird rumours about you.”

“Weird rumours?”

“Yeah… About you and a guy called Vernon. They all said you were cousins. Isn’t it a lie?”

“How did you…”

“We’ve known each other since kindergarten. How can I not know my childhood friend’s family? Your parents never had any brother or sister. But who’s that Vernon? Is it that guy who just left glaring at me as if he was about to kill me?”

I look over my shoulder. He really did leave.

“Yes. It’s him. Where did he go? I gotta go, Newt, sorry. See you later.”

I head to the door but when I pass near him, he grabs my wrist. I turn around to face him.

“Don’t follow him.”

“What? Why?”

“I don’t like him.”

“Why don’t you like him?”

“Every girl in here has a crush on him. But he can’t be perfect. He must have flaws that he’s hiding. When you’ll discover them, you’ll be disappointed in him.”

“Firstly, I already know some of his flaws because I’ve gotten to know him more since we came back to school. And who doesn’t want to hide his flaws to others? Secondly, everyone would think you’re jealous if you act like…”

“I am.”

“You… What?”

“I am jealous of him. I love you. So don’t go to him. I know what he’ll do. He’ll just use you and throw you like a trash. You won’t be able to get over it. It would be better for you to go out with me. I know what happened to your parents so I know you’re not in the mood but…”

“In the mood? Are you serious? I thought you didn’t send me any message during holidays because you weren’t aware about it, but I see you were. How can you say you love me when you don’t even care about me when I’m going through a rough time?”

“I was quite busy with…”

He doesn’t end his sentence. I don’t know what he was going to say but I don’t think it’s a good excuse. If it was, why would he have stopped?

“I’m happy to see your little problems are above my parent’s death. I wasn’t waiting for a long letter of condolences but just for someone to ask me if I was okay and to remind me I’m not alone.”

He doesn’t seem to want to defend himself so I go back inside. I actually wanted him to reply and to tell me I was totally wrong. That he had a bigger problem. I want to find a reason to forgive him but unfortunately, I don’t find any.

I go straight to the classroom, angry.

There, I found Vernon, lying on his desk, eyes closed.

“Vernon? Why did you…”

“Can’t you see I’m sleeping?” he nearly shouts.

Then he turns his head towards the window. He has such a bad temper! What did I do for him to talk to me like this?

I go to my seat and put my elbows on my table. I look at him sleeping and sigh. Today is a horrible day.

The school bell rings and everyone comes in, one after another.

There are many girls coming to me, trying to break the ice. Some of them even do ask me if I want to be their friend. In another situation, I would probably say yes, but I know they don’t really want to be my friend so I reject all of them. If Vernon hadn’t told me it’s for him that they’re coming to me, I wouldn’t have been able to see through their game. I’m thankful to him.

The afternoon is quite long. I can’t stop thinking about Vernon. Why is he acting this way? Is he angry? Why?

There are still thirty minutes to go before we can leave school. I’m extremely tired. My eyelids are drooping.

The Japanese teacher looks at his watch and nearly screams.

“I’m really sorry but I have an appointment so I have to go,” he says, “Vernon, can you please close the door after everyone has left?”

He throws the keys to Vernon.

“Of course, don’t worry, Sir. I’ll take care of it.”

“Thank you.”

Then, after saying goodbye to everyone, he leaves. Everybody leaves, joyful and happy to get out of school that soon.

I stand and put my heavy bag on my desk. I fill it with all my school stuff and put it on my shoulders.

I move towards the door when Vernon calls me, “Hey, Cous’!”

I turn around. He’s slowly walking towards me. I step back ‘till my back touches the wall.

“Wh-What?”

“I just want to know something.”

He looks angry. Or maybe, tired? He soon gets really close to me. I can even hear him breathe.

I want to escape but he puts his hands on the wall so that his arms are preventing me from fleeing.

“Who is he?”

“Who?”

“The guy who was on the roof.”

“Are you talking about Newt?”

“Newt? Is he your friend?”

“No. Not anymore…”

“Not anymore?”

I nod but don’t say anything more.

“Anyway, it’s good.”

I nod again and then, I realise what he just said.

“Wait, what? Why is it good?”

“I don’t want you to befriend other guys.”

“Why can’t I? You’re not my parents or my boyfriend!”

He gets closer. Now, his mouth is less than five centimetres from mine.

“You really want to know why?”

He makes a move towards me and presses his lips against mines. I’m so surprised that I can’t move. My heart skips a beat. I want to ask myself why I’m not pushing him away but I can’t answer. I just can’t reject him. Am I… in love with him? Impossible. I don’t want to become like every girl in school: cheesy, girly and falling in love with every beautiful guy.

He steps back and takes his hands off the wall. But I stay still.

“Because I love you.”

I can’t believe what I just heard. I probably misheard.

“Wh… What did you say?”

He smiles to me.

“See ya!” he says as he puts the keys on a desk and leaves, “Don’t forget to close the door!”

“What?” I scream.

But he already left.

Wh-What happened? What did he do? What did I do?

I close the door and leave, still in shock. The bus arrives late. I think about what happened the whole way. I can’t think about anything else. I’m about to get insane.

I come home and go to the living room. I put some music and sit on the sofa.

“Why does it seem like your soul has been removed from your body?” Vernon asks.

I turn my head towards him and automatically put my hand on my mouth.

“Why are your cheeks that red?”

I’m probably blushing… Wait. What am I doing right now? He’s a robot!

“It’s nothing.”

I get up and head to the kitchen. He follows me. I ask him why.

“Can’t I follow you?”

I am about to answer him but I suddenly slip on spilled water. Vernon catches me in his arms just before I fall on the ground. We stay in this awkward position for a while, staring at each other. My heart begins to beat quickly and loudly.

He mysteriously smiles and kisses me. Beautifully. Wait. Am I falling in love with two boys at once? One of them isn’t really a boy. What am I doing? I can’t do that! I am definitely crazy.

I suddenly notice something in what he said before I slipped.

“Hold on!”

He moves back and we stand up.

“What?” he asks while smiling.

“Have you just said ‘can’t’?”

“Yes.”

“Robots can’t say contractions.”

“I know.”

“Who are you?”

“Vernon. I mean, the real Vernon.”

I look at him. His face is really serious but I can’t believe him.

“You don’t believe me, right? Then, think about that and tell me if you find an answer. Why would a robot kiss you?”

I stay still for about five seconds and then scream.

“What are you doing here?! Did you break in?! Get out!”

“Do you know for how long I’ve been here?”

“No. But way too much.”

“Since the first day of school.”

“What?! You’re lying!”

“No, I swear. That day, you came to me and talked as if we had known each other. In the evening, I went back home but on my way, I ran into my double. There wasn’t anything that could differentiate ourselves from each other. We were exactly alike. I asked him who he was. When he said he was a robot, I was a bit surprised but it made sense. That’s why you thought you knew me. You probably ran into him. However, I asked him to explain everything to me and I heard about how he lived at your house with Kris and you – he also told me about Ada – and their story – everything about ROBOT Corp. and your parents. So you didn’t just run into each other, he actually lived at your house.”

“So you decided to come here? Are you really intelligent?”

“Wait. You don’t know everything. At that time, my life was meaningless. My parents never paid attention to my sister and me. We are always alone. They are always at work so we don’t see them. I raised my sister more than they did. So yes, I decided to exchange places with him. I don’t know if he followed my order but it doesn’t matter since my parents aren’t at home. The only problem would be to go to school. But I didn’t ask him to go to school in my stead. So every day, you took the bus and I took the next one. Hopefully, you always took an early bus so I didn’t arrive late. Then, I just had to talk like they do at home and like I do at school so you wouldn’t notice anything. And it worked.”

So… I am not in love with two boys at once?

“You’re relieved, right?”

“No.”

Did he read my mind?

“I can read in you like an open book.”

“That’s quite creepy.”

He laughs out loud.

We decide to watch TV.

“Do you really love me?” I ask, still not believing it.

“Yes. Do you?”

“I think so.”

“That’s quite disappointing,” he says, acting as if he’s sad.

Suddenly, someone rings the bell. I go see who it is. However, when I open the door, a beautiful and elegant but unknown woman is standing in front of me. She has a big smile that disappears when she looks at me.

“Who…?” she asks.

“Shouldn’t I be the one asking you this question? You’re the one who rang the doorbell.”

I notice I’ve said it quite dryly but I didn’t mean it.

“Isn’t this Kris’ place?”

What? Kris? Why would she look for him?

“I am here. Who is it?”

“Maura.”

“Maura! How are you? I am happy to see you here.”

“Me too, Honey.”

“Ho… Honey?” I say.

I can’t believe what I just heard! I am about to shout, asking what is happening, but Vernon comes and takes charge of the situation, telling everyone to enter.

We sit in the kitchen, Vernon and me in front of Kris and the woman.

“So, could you please explain to me what is going on?” I ask, trying to remain calm.

“That’s simple. Kris and me are going out and tonight, we were about to have a date.”

“What? Kris and you are what?”

“We’re dating,” she repeats, loudly, as if I was deaf.

“Impossible,” Vernon says, “Kris isn’t able to love someone.”

“Then why did he agree to go out with me?”

“He did agree …?”

“Yes, I did.”

I gaze wide-eyed at Kris.

“Sorry?”

“I agreed to go out with her.”

“You can’t have a girlfriend! You’re a robot!”

“You told me I was human so I thought I was human. I don’t understand. Am I a robot or a human?”

“You’re a robot! You can’t be human!”

“So why did you tell me the opposite?”

I think the thing that makes me the angriest isn’t the fact he has a girlfriend. It’s probably that I’m angry at him but he’s still calm whatever I tell him. It seems I’m talking to someone who doesn’t care about what I’m saying.

“You just had to pretend you were a human being! And since when do you believe what I say?”

“We follow the orders of your parents and ROBOT Corp.’s employees. However, we also follow the first order someone gives to us just after being recharged.”

That makes sense. They obeyed me when I asked them to only use their fake names and Kris obeyed me when I told him to act as a human. Both times they had just been charged.

“Why?”

“I do not know. It was your parents’ choice.”

“Hold on!” the woman yells.

“What now?”

“What are you talking about?” she asks me, “I thought you were an idiot but I see you’re also insane!”

“What have you just said?”

I suddenly want to hit her in the face. She’s getting on my nerves.

“I remind you that you are the source of the conflict here.”

“What? I am the victim here!”

“No you’re not,” Vernon says.

“Why aren’t I?”

“Because you should know that having an affair is bad.”

“Having an affair?” I ask.

“Look.”

He points at a ring on her left hand. She hides her hand but I saw it.

“You’re married?”

“No! I am just engaged.”

“Get out!”

“What?”

“I said get out!”

She gets up, irritated, and leaves without a word.

“What is an affair?” Kris asks.

Vernon and I let out a sigh. He tries to explain to Kris what an affair is but the robot doesn’t seem to understand why it is bad to have an affair.

Now that I compare them, I don’t know why I said robots and humans are similar. Kris can’t speak as humans do, he can’t make contractions. He also can’t feel anything or have any emotions. Sometimes, he even does jerky movements.

I wonder if one day, robots will blend in with the crowd. I don’t want that to happen. We won’t be able to know if we talk to people or to androids. Moreover, robots are omniscient and omnipotent. If they also become omnipresent, we won’t be able to survive in such a society. How will we stand out from robots? The world will only be composed of robots and geniuses. It will be sad. I won’t be able to live in such a world. Robots and geniuses will unravel all the universe’s mysteries. But what will they do after that? The world will become annoying, sad and depressing. Genius will literally bore us to death. Robots will have killed them. But if robots are murderers, what are the ones that created them? Geniuses? Or murderers? Anyway, since they are humans – geniuses or normal people –, they will die. Then, the world will only be made up of androids. But since androids eat, they will kill animals. Later, Earth will become a world in desolation. There won’t be anything living and metal killers will haunt it until they don’t have sources of energy anymore. And the beautiful Earth that humans have known a long time ago will totally disappear. Humans already began ruining the beauty of the Earth and robots will end their work. However, we can’t blame robots since we created them. So, we’re the cause of the Earth’s ravaging. We will be the first species to have extinguished ourselves. Because of us, humans, animals, robots will die. Because of us, the world will become a dreary hell.

That’s why I can’t bring these robots’ existence to light. If it happens, scientists will come and conduct research on them. They will improve them. And it will lead to this hellish world. So, I have to hide their existence. I can’t kill them. Even if I don’t want to ruin this world, I don’t want to ruin my parents’ work or disappoint them. I know that’s selfish. But I am still underage. According to the dictionary, a minor is someone who hasn’t reach majority. And I haven’t. One day, someone told me, “Since you’re a minor, you may be selfish.” Then, he just left. I am now grateful to this person. He gave me an excuse.

I am selfish.

But what can I do about it?

I come back to the point. Vernon is still explaining the bad side of having an affair to Kris. He doesn’t understand why the fiancé would be sad or angry. But I know he actually doesn’t understand how a person can be sad or whatever.

“Kris,” I say, “You just shouldn’t go out with anyone.”

“Why? You two are dating. So why cannot I?”

“We are what? Where did you hear about that?”

“I asked Maura what does the word ‘dating’ mean.”

I wonder how is it possible that she didn’t see there was something weird with Kris! Who nowadays asks about words like ‘dating’?

“She told me it means that two persons are always together, they are happy when they see each other and they love each other. I do not understand the last part but I do understand the two first and it was exactly like both of you did a while ago.”

“You know Kris,” Vernon begins to say.

“Is it because you are both humans?”

I hesitate to answer until I remember robots can’t be hurt.

“Yes.”

“OK.”

And he goes back to his book, as if nothing had happened. Sometimes, I’d like to be like him and act as if nothing happened. I think this faculty is reserved to robots and some people. But I’m certainly not amongst those people. Unfortunately, I would say.

Vernon and I go back to the living room and sit on the sofa. But when Vernon turns his head towards the TV screen. He suddenly seems worried. He gets up and runs to the main door and leaves. I call him but he doesn’t answer.

I watch the TV and discover what he just saw. It’s the news. A house is burning. In Tokyo.

Don’t tell me… It’s his? Why would it burn? I suddenly remember Vernon is at his house. It can’t be… because of him?

I follow him in the city’s street. He doesn’t hesitate once when he turns to the right or to the left. He knows the way like the back of his hand which makes me think I was right when I thought it was his house.

I smell the smoke from more than 500 meters before seeing his house. When we get there, it’s a horrible show. The fire is licking the outside walls. The orange flames seem like the Devil. An enraged Devil who hasn’t been fed for too long. They are lightening the street as if it were daytime. However, the sight in the street isn’t better than the house. Paramedics are carrying stretchers with their strong but sweaty arms. On those stretchers are lying dead a man and a woman, burnt and wounded. Meanwhile, firemen are trying to put the fire out, unsuccessfully. But the worst sight is probably the little girl, sitting on the ground, crying over the death of her parents and screaming as if someone was torturing her to death. Fire fighters and Vernon are trying to calm her down. She must be Vernon’s sister. He’s hugging her and I see he’s holding back his tears. He might be thinking that he has to be strong for her to rely on him. It must be difficult. When I lost my parents, no one was there for me so I had to overcome the event by myself. Thus, I did cry like a baby every night.

I walk towards them. But I can’t hold back my tears as Vernon does. This sight is breaking my heart. Vernon looks up to me.

“Mia…”

He gets up, holding his sister’s hand. I notice a tear is rolling down his cheek. I wipe it off and smile sadly. He smiles back at me, sorrowful.

Then, I understand. It’s Vernon robot who exploded. What else can it be? Nothing. Vernon’s parents died because of what my parents created. I step back. How can I stay by his side when I’m related to his parents’ murderer?

“Mia?”

I turn my back on him and run. I can’t stop my tears from falling down.

I want to go in my room and cry all night. I won’t see him again. I will avoid eye contact so that he won’t be uncomfortable.

But he catches me and hugs me.

“Let me go! Don’t touch me! If you knew what I’ve done you wouldn’t do that!”

“What have you done exactly?”

“My parents…”

“Your parents made Vernon but is it really only their fault if it exploded? They didn’t know about that. They didn’t mean to kill my parents. They weren’t even aware that it would come in our house. We can’t blame them. And even if they really intended to murder my parents, you wouldn’t be related to this problem at all.

“How did you know…”

“That it was because of the robot? Why would my house explode? It can only be because of him.”

I look at him. How can he be that kind to the daughter of his parents’ killer?

“I have to leave. I can’t even look at you.”

“I already told you it’s not your fault so look directly into my eyes!”

He takes my chin and raises my head to force me to look into his eyes.

I cry and he hugs me. His sister embraces us so we smile sadly at her.

“Actually, we also have to sleep at your house…” Vernon says.

“What? Don’t you have any other friends?”

“You know I don’t. But don’t worry, we will contribute to daily expenses.”

“That’s’ not a problem. Are we allowed to stay at the same place without adults?”

“We probably can’t. You know well our school is really strict.”

“What?”

“But don’t worry! We just don’t have to tell them. And this is one of those exceptional circumstances.”

He’s right. How can I refuse in such a situation? I have to help them.

We come back home together. Jess, Vernon’s sister, cries the whole way but I can’t blame her. I am heartbroken too, looking at this tragedy. I was in the same state as her a month ago so I know how she feels. Vernon and I try to comfort her.

When we get home, we find Kris reading a book – to watch him reading that fast makes me understand how Vernon could read all the books in one night – in the kitchen and doesn’t pay attention to us. We prepare two beds in an empty room and put Jess to sleep.

Vernon and I go in the living room. That’s when he suddenly begins crying, shedding all the tears that couldn’t fall down before. He lies down on the sofa and puts his head on my knees. I stroke his hair and let him cry until he falls asleep.

When I wake up, we’re still in the same position as yesterday. I go to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. With his parents' death, Vernon won't be able to go to school so I prepare his breakfast and put it in the refrigerator. I put a post-it note on the table where I've written that his breakfast is in the fridge.

I eat and go to school.

But when I pass in the corridors, everyone moves aside, glaring at me. I hide behind a wall and listen to their conversation. I know I shouldn't eavesdrop on them but I'm too curious.

“It's her. I hate her.”

“How can she do that?”

I’m shocked and without me realising it, tears begin falling down.

“Why is it her? She's so ugly!”

“Why did he...”

Someone suddenly pulls me back. It turns out to be Vernon.

“What are you doing here?”

He keeps silent, puts headphones on my ears and plays some music.

He wipes the tears on my cheeks. I smile and quietly articulate “Thank you.” Then, he takes my hand and we get out of the building. When we’re outside, I take off the headphones. I want to leave this high school as soon as possible.

A woman appears in front of us, getting in our way.

“Maura? Whatever you want, I don’t want to see you.”

“Oh! I’m not here for you!”

“Sorry?”

“I’m a professor, here.”

She is a teacher… here? But… She saw Vernon and me together! What am I going to do? Wait. She thinks I’m Vernon’s cousin so there shouldn’t be any problem.

“But since I’ve run into you, I’ll take advantage of the opportunity to tell you something. You probably heard about the rumour saying you’re going out, right? I started it. It was obvious at your place that you weren’t cousins but lovers.”

“What?” Vernon and I simultaneously say.

“Yes. I’m a teacher so I couldn’t let it pass. But you should be grateful. I only started a rumour. What would it have been if I had told the director? You would probably be expelled at the moment.”

With this, she leaves us behind and goes into the building.

“I’m sorry,” I say to Vernon.

“Why are you apologising?”

“You’ll be considered as a liar because of me. You told everyone you were my cousin but now, they know the truth.”

“What are you saying all of a sudden? I don’t mind being seen as a liar at all. Now, let’s go. We shouldn’t get involved with such people. They’re almost less human than robots.”

He’s right again. I thought robots were the ones starting to look like humans but there are also humans that resemble robots more than humans.

We go back home. I’m quite depressed by the beginning of the day.

“By the way, why did you come? With what happened to your parents, you should be crying at home.”

“My parents are actually the two persons I hate the most in this world. But I’m still sad because even if they were loathsome, they’re still my parents.”

“You… hate them? Why?”

“Firstly, they didn’t care about us at all as if we weren’t a part of their life. Secondly…”

He undoes the first buttons his shirt.

“What are you do…”

He reveals his chest covered in wounds. Then, he buttons his shirt back up.

“What is that?! You were beaten?”

He nods, with a sad face.

“My mother beat me when my father wasn’t home. He was rude with her so she’d unwound on me. I hated my mother for beating me and I hated my father for being rude with my mother.”

I am astounded. I thought that nowadays, no parents beat their children.

“How could you bear it? Why did you bear it?”

“My mother said that if I resisted, my sister would take my place.”

“How can someone be that despicable? She isn’t a mother!”

He keeps quiet as the grave.

A moment later, we reach the corner of my street. We notice a black people-carrier we had never seen before. We hurry up. When we get there, we see men in suits getting out of the car. One of them – the one who seems to be their leader – notices us. He goes towards us.

“Are you perhaps the daughter of Mr and Ms Wright, Mia?”

“Yes, I am. Why?”

“I am Nakamura Kento, ROBOT Corp.’s CEO. We’re looking for the robots of our project. You have them at your place, right?”

“What? Didn’t everyone burn in the building?”

“It’s a complicated story. In short, ten of us were in China when they set the building on fire. We still can’t reveal we’re alive. If we did, we would die.”

“Wait, what? ‘They’?”

“Yes.”

“Who are they?”

“We can’t tell you. It’s classified as confidential.”

“It wasn’t an accident?”

“No.”

“Why didn’t you tell everyone?”

“I told you. We can’t. It’s confidential. You’re not kids anymore. You’ll discover that the world is full of secrets and that we can’t always find the truth.”

“You shouldn’t have said that it wasn’t an accident.”

“Sorry. I thought you’d like to know the truth.”

He’s not wrong. I think I prefer knowing the truth even if I don’t know all the truth.

“So, you have the robots at your place, right? We knew the robots were in your house but the employees’ personal data was burnt in the fire so we couldn’t find your house. We’ve come here when we heard HR 01 was a teacher near here. We thought your house would be near the school.”

I don’t beat about the bush and ask him, “Why do you need them?”

“We will destroy them.”

“Sorry?”

“We took the decision when we saw what HR 01 was able to do. We gave him a very high IQ so that he could be a teacher but we didn’t know he would hack the school system to enter it. It’s illegal. Robots don’t know what they shouldn’t do, they only know what they can do. They only know the limits of their skills, not the law.”

I’m sad to part with them but this solution is probably the most rational. Moreover, I know, deep down inside, it’s for the best so I can’t protest.

When I look at Mr Nakamura, he’s gazing at Vernon.

“Ah! About him, it’s not…”

“I know he’s not HR 02. You’re Vernon King.”

“You knew I wasn’t the robot?”

“Yes. I know HR 02 blew in your house, yesterday. I’m sincerely sorry about that, by the way. We still don’t know why he exploded,” he says bowing.

“How do you know about it?” I ask.

“I know everything in relation to my project. The only thing I’m not aware is what happened to HR 03.”

I keep quiet for a moment and then answer, “Ada died. While I was at work, she left home and that evening, it rained.”

“So, the robots were really at your place. Did you keep HR 03’s remains?”

“Yes.”

“By the way, where do you live now, Vernon?”

“Me? Hum… At my friend’s. He lives in the neighbourhood.”

“Perfect. When I saw you two coming together, I thought you both lived in the same house. I’m happy to see I was wrong. Your school wouldn’t allow a boy and a girl living at the same place without parents.”

He says that after telling us we’re not kids anymore. This is quite ironic.

“Anyway, let’s go inside. My men have to get HR 01 and the ‘body’ of HR 03 back.”

They just take Kris and Ada’s body and put them in their people-carrier. Then, the men in suits also take their place in the car. Meanwhile, the CEO asks Vernon and I to sign a paper.

“What is it?” we both ask.

“A confidentiality agreement. You have to promise you won’t reveal anything we talked about. You can’t even tell anyone about the robots.”

“Your trust is touching!”

“This is how the world works.”

“Then, I don’t like this world.”

“You can think what you want but you have to sign this.”

“What will you do if I don’t. Are you gonna kill me?”

“You’ll see that for yourself if you don’t. But I wouldn’t recommend it to you.”

He irritated me so I want to reply. But Vernon asks me to calm down and sign, even if I don’t. He picks up the pen that the CEO hands him and signs. I do reluctantly the same.

The CEO takes the agreements and passes us two envelopes.

“What is it?” I ask.

“There is one for each of you. Open them and you’ll see.”

We obey him and discover wads of bills. I take away the envelope from Vernon’s hands and throw mine and his at Mr Nakamura.

“We don’t need your money! Take it back!”

“Okay, do what you want,” he replies, as if it doesn’t matter to him at all, “Then, goodbye.”

He leaves the house without saying another word. We follow him outside. He gets into the people-carrier and they start the car.

“We should have taken it,” says Vernon.

“Shut up. I already regret. Why did I act all cool?”

The people-carrier reverses.

The CEO opens the window and asks again, “Are you sure you don’t need the money?”

“After thinking about it, we…” Vernon begins saying.

“Yes. We’re sure! We aren’t kids anymore! We don’t live at somebody’s expenses anymore.”

They leave again but this time, they don’t go backwards.

“Are you serious?” Vernon asks.

I turn around and head to the house saying, “We’ll just have to find jobs.”

“Easier said than done,” he says and follows me inside.

The house is very empty. I already miss Kris. Now, Ada, Vernon – the robot – and Kris aren’t here anymore. They were my first real friends. Why? Can’t robots be my friends?

“Noni…” Jess says.

“Jess?”

“Noni?” I ask Vernon.

“Yes. That’s how she’s ever called me.”

“The bad man who’s just got out of the house, why is he there again?”

“Again?”

“Yes. He was here yesterday, too.”

“Yesterday? You mean when our house burnt?”

“I don’t know when he arrived but when I got there, he was already standing in front of the house. The firefighters weren’t there yet. I wanted to go inside to save Mom and Dad but he got in the way. I tried to force my way through but he took me in his strong arms so I couldn’t move.”

“What?” we both shout.

“I knew it,” I say.

“What did you know?” Vernon asks.

“I can’t help but try to find the truth hidden behind every secret.”

***THE MURDEROUS ‘HR PROJECT’***

*Ten years ago, on April 7, 2018, ROBOT Corp.’s headquarters burnt in a fire. One month later, on March 12, 2018, a house blew up. Both incidents took place in Tokyo and visibly, nothing seemed to connect the two. However, were they really accidents?*

*At first sight, no one established a link between those two fires. It’s only ten years later that two persons compared those cases: Mia Wright, the prosecutor in charge of the case and the daughter of ROBOT Corp.’s employees who burnt in the first fire, and me, Vernon King, a journalist for Tokyo’s News and the son of the president of King’s Bank, Peter King, and his wife who died in the second fire.*

*Those tragedies have their origin in January 23, 1999. That year, Peter King inherited his father’s president position. A few days later, a new secretary, Misaki Inoue, was taken on. King abused her for months. Then, on April 3, 1999, she decided to sue him. However, the case closed due to lack of evidence. She quit her position but she couldn’t get rid of the traumatism. On March 28, she committed suicide.*

*However, Misaki Inoue was Kento Nakamura’s first love. He tried to reopen the case, in vain. Since that year, he thought about a way to make King pay for the girl’s death. Under the influence of distress, he created ROBOT Corp., a company, and the HR Project which involved killing Peter King and, when they discovered his wife, Yuri King, beat their son, murdering his wife. They made three robots who were the doubles of real persons: one of those three robots, HR 02, was the lethal weapon (who was the double of King’s son) and the two others, HR 01 and 03, were only there to rule out the suspicion. But in 2000, King became suspicious and sent spies to know more about this project. He discovered its aim and, in the grip of anger, burnt down the headquarters of the company. He thought nobody had survived, neither the employees nor the robots. Unfortunately, he was not aware that two employees had custody of the robots so they were at their house at the time of the fire and they also didn’t know that Nakamura and some of his men were in China, for a business trip.*

*When they heard about the fire, Nakamura and some of his employees came back to Japan but they kept quiet about himself and his men being alive. They were probably afraid of being killed. Then, they went to the house of the family where the robots were. Their first plan was to take back the main robot (HR 02) and to put him in the house of Peter King. However, they discovered that HR 02 was not in the house. The real son of Peter King had swapped places with the robot. The work was already done. They just had to wait until the moment Peter and Yuri King were alone in the house and to press a button so that the Kings’ house exploded. They thought it was the perfect crime. No one would suspect them.*

*Yesterday, February 3, 2028, Nakamura was put in jail after two hours of trial.*

Vernon King, *Tokyo’s News*

**The girl machine**

by Marine Rey

 7 a.m. The alarm clock goes off. Laura turns on her bed, eyes wide open. Another night without sleeping. And now, another day starting. She sighs, and gets up. The sun begins to rise, a fresh air stream caresses Laura's face. The city, still quiet for now, spreads out in front of her from her window. She likes moments like this, out of time. Everything is silent, the bustle hasn't overrun the streets.

“Laura! Time for breakfast!”

She closes her windows and joins her mother in the kitchen.

“Did you sleep well my dear? I cooked you some pancakes today! Here's the maple syrup. Come on, eat! You need energy! And I need it too. Today is the big day for me! What, didn't I tell you? It's the election at my association! Do you realize? If I become President, oh my God I will be so happy! And this pest, Mary Cloffard, wouldn’t continue to contradict me! Do you know what she did to me last time? Well, she...”

Laura eats her pancakes slowly, listening how bad is Mary Cloffard, with a blank look on her face. She finally comes out of the table, while her mother keeps talking, and goes to prepare herself.

 On her doorstep, she stops for a moment to look around her. People in a hurry, horns of cars trapped in traffic jam, kids crying because they don't want to go to school… Laura doesn't want to go to school either, but she eventually accepts it with time. So she begins her walk. Her high school is not very far from her home, it takes a little less than thirty minutes to get there. Unlike her classmates, she doesn't wait for her friends and goes directly to her classroom. In fact, she has no friends to wait for. She never tried to get any, and no one ever came to her either. The bell rings and she sits in her place, alone.

 At the end of the day, one of her classmates comes to her. He follows her during her walk, and in a small alley, he goes in front of her and stops her.

“What do you want?” she asks, a bit anxious.

“Nothing, he says. Just to have a talk with you.”

She doesn't trust him.

“And what do you want to talk about?”

 “Well, you have a really nice phone... Do you use it a lot? I mean, you've got no friends, who can you call?”

“It's not for sale. Let me go now.”

“I'm not talking about selling...”

She is frightened and steps back.

“Leave me alone Jim.”

“Give me that phone Laura. I know you don't want trouble,” he says with a smile.

She lowers her head and gives it to him.

“Perfect. You're a nice girl you know? Would you be so nice to bring me a snack tomorrow? We could talk again, I would enjoy it. Could you do that for your friend Jim?”

“Yes, yes... of course... Can I go now?”

“Yeah. See you tomorrow Laura!” And he leaves.

Laura stays there for a while and cries. Yet, she had promised herself not to weep today. She apparently failed. She continues her walk, still crying. Crossing the road, she doesn't check if there are cars. She should have. The bus brakes sharply, but it's too late.

 It's the morning when she finally opens her eyes. The first thing she sees is the white ceiling of her hospital room. She needs time to remember what happened, and a shiver goes through her. She looks at the window, a sunbeam illuminates her bed. She tries to get up, and at this time, she realizes that something is missing. She looks at her left forearm and sees that it is no longer there. Laura faints.

 “Laura! Laura!”

Her mother tries to wake her up, and it seems to work. Laura comes to her senses.

“What? What's wrong?”

“Oh you're awake! I was so afraid for you my dear, you can't imagine.”

“Mum… My arm… Why...”

“Don't worry my dear, everything is fine. I'm here now...” she says hugging her.

Laura struggles and screams: “No, no! Where's my arm? What am I going to do now?”

“Laura, calm down. Listen to me. The doctor has suggested something. You could have a new arm.”

“It's impossible!”

“Of course it's not… You could have a prosthesis my dear.”

“But it will never be the same! I'm a disabled person now!”

“No, no, no… It will be better than the old one, I promise you. And nobody will notice it, it's very realistic. You're really lucky Laura.”

“No I'm not! How can you say that!”

“I know, my dear, I know… But do you agree? To have this prosthesis? It will be expensive, but I'm ready to do anything for you. I love you, I just want your happiness...”

Laura lowers her head, her eyes fogged with tears. “Okay. Put this damn prosthesis on me.”

 Laura is walking to school. Nothing has changed. She is not yet “the girl without an arm”. Well, rather the one with a fake arm. Her prosthesis is pretty plain, but it doesn't fool anyone. She can't make the same gestures as before, eating with cutlery has become a real ordeal. When she arrives at high school, she feels how people look at her. She hears whispers in her back, and with clenched teeth she goes to her classroom. Some come to ask her questions: “How did it happen?” “How does it feel?” “What did you feel when you realized that you had lost your arm?”

She answers them reluctantly. Everybody in the school talks about her. Everybody wants to know. Everybody takes pity on her. Except one person, maybe. At the end of the day, once again, Jim comes to her.

“Pretty arm Laura. It fits you well.”

“Not again, she murmurs. Please”

“At least, I know you won't be able to defend yourself if we have a problem. But we will never have problems, will we?”

“Never.”

And she runs away. She hates him. She hates her life. She hates everything. Why her? She comes home and goes directly into her room. She sits at her desk, turns on her computer. Maybe a better prosthesis would enable her to recover her former life back. She surfs on the web and learns that she could become much more stronger. “I need this,” she thinks. But it's very, very expensive. She sighs, and then thinks of Jim. “I will work to have it,” she decides. She's fed up with this life.

 She walks out of the clinic, smiling. People in the street look at her with big eyes. It must be admitted that her prosthesis is no longer so discreet. She looks like a kind of robot to which one would have forgotten to cover a part of its body. It has been difficult to find a surgeon who agreed to put her that one. But money is always a convincing argument, and she had worked hard. She moves towards a wall, and suddenly, she puts in her new fist violently. She notes with joy that it left a deep imprint.

 The next day, she goes to find Jim after school. The day has been pretty different from all the others. She didn't see pity and mockery in the eyes of her schoolmates, when in gym, she threw that ball to the other side of the baseball field. Fear and admiration, that's what she saw. And now, she will see the same thing in Jim. He's at the corner of the same street where he had attacked her for the first time.

“How are you today Jim? Fine I guess... Well, not for long.”

Before he can open his mouth, she punches him in the belly. She looks at him fall on the ground, his mouth full of blood.

 Time goes by. Laura's life has radically changed. She is the most respected girl in her high school. She has a lot of friends, everybody pretends to like her. She's not stupid, she knows that if people make so much effort to be appreciated by her, it's to avoid the opposite, and risk the same as Jim. But she is okay with this idea, and accepts very well her new place. But she begins to be bored. Days seem to be always the same, and she can't really use her strength, except sometimes when people ask her to make use of it, like a show. She would like to use it more, in sports for example, but she can't. Prosthesis are not accepted in competitions. As a matter of fact, she's more interested in fights. This sensation when she put her fist in the stomach of Jim... But it's forbidden too. Now, she just wants to be stronger. She doesn't dare to admit it, but she thinks about another prosthesis. Her right arm is in perfect condition, so she can't have it she knows that. But it would be so cool... She will nevertheless talk to her surgeon, she can try after all.

 Laura goes out of the clinic once again, disappointed this time. Everybody has denied her the thing she craved most. “Is that not enough to you?” they say. No, it's not. Laura feels this need, she must be stronger or she will never feel safe. She begins to get mad, striking everything she can.

“They don't want to give me another one? Because of what? I don't need it? I will need it, they will see!”

 She comes back the next month. Surgeons have to implant her the prosthesis this time: she misses her second arm. Laura doesn't really want to remember this moment, when she decides to cut it herself. She faints because of pain, but she succeeds. Before that, she had to push drugs to pay for the prosthesis. This kind of work pays more, and she wants it to happen quickly. Now she has what she wants, and that's all that matters to her.

 Laura is scary. The reaction is not the same when she comes back to school. People learn why she has this new arm and don't understand, it sounds unbelievable. They begin to talk, taking care that she doesn't noticed them. But she becomes more and more aggressive. She starts to fight all the time, with anyone, and of course becomes very dangerous. The high school must fire her because of her behavior; they just can't keep someone so unstable.

 Laura's mother is desperate. She didn't see anything coming and it makes her feel guilty. Her daughter went so far as to slice her arm! How could she not have noticed how bad she was? And now she's fired from her school! She was too busy lately, with her work and her association, to look after her. Of course she knew for the second prosthesis, on the left arm. She had accepted Laura's choice; she had seen the pain felt by her daughter. But she didn't expect that. She can't be obeyed anymore and she tries to stop her from going out, without success. She's afraid for her, thinks about a psychiatric hospital.

 On the contrary, Laura doesn't seem to be so sad. She now wants to work, to pay for other prosthesis on her legs. She's completely obsessed with her strength now.
She is training to destroy walls in abandoned buildings, and now wants to achieve greater capacity in terms of speed. Some people hear talk about her, and she begins to accomplish missions for them. Most of the time, it's about beating someone for money. Laura really wants this prosthesis, but she's still anxious about cutting her legs herself. She's looking for a clinic which accepts to do everything but doesn't find one.

 One day, returning from one of her missions, a man comes to her.

“Hello Laura, he says. I heard talk about you and you interest me hugely.”

“Okay. Here's my price and condition. For a simple punch, it's…”

“No, no, no. I'm not talking about that. I've got projects for you. Apparently, you want new legs, am I right?”

“Yes. What's the point?”

“I can offer you, for free. Almost free.”

“What’s the catch?” she asks, suspicious.

“Well, you have to trust me. I work in a particular branch in the army and I would enjoy working with you. We can implant you new legs, and you'll become a soldier. The strongest we have ever seen, because you are one of the only people who agree to an intervention on themselves. You would exploit your potential and be useful, isn’t that your dream?”

“Yes it is… But it seems too good to be true… I will think about it, leave me your phone number and I'll call you back.”

“So think fast, he says. Because when you come home, you will not have the choice anymore.”

“Is that a threat?”

“No. Your mother is fed up with you, so she called the psychiatric hospital to take you in. You can check it if you want, their truck is on this street.”

Laura goes to see and sights the truck with the name of the hospital. She comes closer to her house and, still hidden, she looks through the windows. Indeed, there were many unknown people inside, waiting for her. She runs to join the man and says:

“Okay, okay, I agree. What are we doing now?

“Follow me”, he says, taking her to his car.

 Laura's mother is despondent. Her dear daughter has been missing for two weeks. She understood that she certainly saw the nurses and ran away. But she's worried, and if Laura came back, she would welcome her with open arms. They would stay together forever. Despite all that has happened and what Laura has done, she loves her. She just wanted to save her from herself. But now Laura is too far gone for being saved, she feels it.

 Laura wakes up. Her new life begins today. She remembers how it all started. When she arrived in the building, she was initially scared. A nice nurse explained to her the situation and what was going to be done to her. She was reassured, so he made her sign a paper she didn't read. Then, he brought her to bed and while he was speaking, he gave her an injection. Laura fell asleep slowly, letting herself be lulled by the nurse's voice. When she regained consciousness, her legs were still there, but a kind of armor to her nervous system was added. She smiled, and as soon as she could, she trained herself to use it. After weeks of training, she was operational. The man she had met in the street and who had brought her here, Mr. Davis, talked to her.

“Do you feel ready Laura?

“Of course I am, sir.”

“Ready to what?”

“Ready to fight, sir!”

“I like that. I also think you are ready. I’ll send you to Syria, to have war training for a month. Do you think you can do that? Will you be able to kill people?”

“Yes I could, sir!”

“Perfect. You leave tomorrow.”

 It's been three weeks since Laura is on the battlefield. She never felt so good. All this hate into her can now speak out. She shows no pity, annihilating everything she can in her way. She doesn't care whom she kills, she just knows that she has the right. A killing machine, that's what she has become. The first one, she will never forget him. The look in his eyes, it scared and pleased her at the same time. Then, when he fell to the ground, she realized what she had done. His expression, deadpan forever because of her. She had taken away his life. But strangely, she felt no guilt. A feeling of might invaded her. From that moment on, she only had one thing in mind: destroy. And that's what she did, until today.

 When Laura comes out of the military camp, she thinks her day will be the same as the others. Missions, fights… etc. So she doesn't really understand what's happening, when she see the shell in the sky that dives right onto her. She hears a thud and closes her eyes.

 That she wakes up, it's a miracle. Mr. Davis is with her, and his face lights up when he sees she is conscious. She's in pain everywhere and tries to speak, without success. Mr. Davis understands and explains to her what's happening.

“Listen if you can Laura, listen to me. I want to save you. You will probably die, but God let you a chance to start a second life. I need your authorization.”

“What… how...” she articulates as well as she can.

“It's dangerous, but it's the only way. Your vital organs are affected, and all your prosthesis have been destroyed. There is hardly anything left of you. But your brain is in perfect condition. So we can save your soul, but in another body. A stronger body.”

“You mean… Put my brain in a robot?”

“Exactly. You will have the physical abilities of a robot but you will keep your intelligence and your human consciousness. You will be able to fight again. Do you agree?”

“Hmm… Okay...”

And she goes back to sleep immediately.

 Laura is not a human being anymore. Her armor doesn't have a face, she is no longer alike her older self. She sees better, hears better, acts better, but she can't feel the touch anymore. It's better according to her (or it?), because she can't feel pain either. She is therefore more effective during the fighting. She hasn’t gone back to war, because Mr. Davis wants to keep her alive. One day, she asks him why:

“I mean, why keep my brain? A simple robot isn't it more effective? It can't feel pity or human feelings… I'm happy to be alive, but why is it important to you?”

“There are decisions robots cannot take. A human consciousness is important to me, and you are a big innovation. But you can have more if you want.”

“More? What do you mean?”

“Robots have skills that humans don't have, for sure. I'm mainly talking about mathematics. Performing calculations quickly could be very useful for evaluating distances or know how to act. Do you follow me? You could be more effective, as you said, but you'll be still you.”

“Yes I'm interested! How we can do that?”

“I need to connect your brain to a computer, it's hard to explain. But you will be a perfect leader for my army.”

“Your army?”

“Yes Laura, but don't worry. Soon, you will understand. I've got big plans for you.”

So Laura accepts. But she didn't think that this computer in her could take the control of her. Control not only her actions, but her thoughts too. Mr. Davis can now use her as he wishes. With this computer in her brain, she must obey, she doesn't have the choice. But she agrees with that. She's not against the computer. She just thinks that every thought she has springs from her own opinions, she doesn't really have consciousness of what's happening in her brain. Mr. Davis programs her to become the leader of a robot army. She's better than them, it's her right place. She will decide the best actions to do to respect the will of Mr. Davis. And what is his will? She understands quickly. He wants to overthrow the government, by force, and she represents his main weapon.

 The city is on fire. Her city is on fire. But that, Laura doesn't even think about it. She thinks she's doing something good. She screams orders to her robots, destroys buildings and kills civilians. The real army, from the government, tries to protect them, but Laura crushes them one by one. She hardly feels any more emotions, acts mechanically. The computer takes more and more space in her mind, she slowly loses what is left of her humanity.

 She ends up approaching her old house, and a weird feeling invades her. At the same time, the computer tells her to destroy the house like all the others, or just doesn't pay attention to it, but her human consciousness can't. She pushes the door and enters the house. Her mother is under the table, not knowing how to protect herself and crying. Laura realized that it is her fault if her mother suffers. She has been too selfish, didn't figure out all the harm she had done to her. When her mother raises her head, she sees this abominable and huge machine in front of her, and screams. She is petrified.

“Mom! It's me, Laura! It's me!”

“No! No, it's impossible!”

“Everything is fine mummy, I won't hurt you!”

“My Laura is dead now! Please don't kill me!”

“It's me mum, it's Laura.”

Her mother, seeing that she doesn't attack her, begins to calm down. Laura talks to her, tells her some common memories to reassure her, and she eventually believes her. But her mother is unable to grasp what her daughter has become. She cries, and Laura cries internally too. But Mr. Davis is waiting for her; he feels he's losing her. So he commands her to continue and leave her mother alone. Laura then realized what he did to her, what happened because of him, and she hates him. She orders her robots to kill him, and she hears him scream in her headset. He can't hurt and manipulate her anymore. But just before he dies, he programs the computer to take complete control of her. Laura can't choose, it's the computer that decides. She sees herself stand up and point her gun at her mother in tears. She looks away and hears the fatal detonation. The crying stops. Laura falls on the ground. The computer forces her to stand up again and to continue her destruction of the city, so Laura does it. She goes out of her home, and runs away. She rushes into a building where bombs dropped by her robots are ready to explode. It collapses on her in a wailing howl.

 The end

**THE MATERIALIZER**

by Mathieu Doutres

*[…] He switched on the Materializer, took a deep breath and said…*

 “Damn it!”

 Ned was about to make appear the biggest thing he could hope from his machine when his cell-phone rang. The scientist couldn’t stand receiving advertisements from his mobile operator, or any other uninteresting promotion. He sighed and took his phone from his pocket. When he saw the name on the screen, a smile lighted up the mad scientist’s face. Jean-Luc was calling him. Ned took a big breath and made his voice deeper.

“Who dares disturb the biggest scientist on Earth?”

“Hmm,answered Jean-Luc laughing,I’d say his favourite lover. Did I interrupt you in your incomprehensible nerd business?”

“You didn’t”, lied Ned, “I was about to have some tea.”

 Suddenly a noise emanated from the Materializer and a warm liquid spread on the floor. Ned swore. Of course, once again the machine misunderstood him and literally listened to him. The scientist thought he should be more careful the next times. He coughed and put his phone back to his ear.

“You were saying?” gently asked Jean-Luc.

“Nothing, my tea’s only a bit hot...”

 “Don’t burn your tongue, you know you’ve always been frail” said condescendingly Jean-Luc.

 “I’m not frail”, grouched Ned, “My mouth is just very sensitive. But I gotta let you now, see you tonight honey” said quickly the scientist before hanging up. He had to clean the ground before the tea damaged his machine. Ned ran upstairs to find a mop when he realized he didn’t need to mess his knees up. He walked slowly to his machine, cleared his throat and said distinctly “Mop.”

 For a little time frame, he stopped breathing and waited. It was only a mop, of course, but it meant a lot. Creating objects from nothing but a vocal order was such a big achievement he was proud of. His whole life Ned had expected to become someone. Someone known, someone important. He smiled. Maybe one day, there would be a street named after him, or maybe a school.

But a distant noise rang out and interrupted Ned. A mop appeared down the Materializer. A mop covered in a viscous substance. Dumbstruck, Ned tasted with fingertips. It was sugared and sweet. Sweeter than the sweetest sweet sweetie on Earth. It was honey. “How could honey be there?” he wondered, before remembering the last words he had told his boyfriend. The scientist stood up and faced the machine. He nodded.

 “Alright, Mr Materializer. You think you’re smarter than I am, don’t you? But let me tell you something, you’re not. I mean, I’ve conceived you, I’ve made you. *Materializer,* *I’m your father.* You owe me respect. Don’t be stupid. You know, this is a mutual relationship we’re in. I feed you with electricity; I clean your gearwheels (dirty boy!). And in exchange, you simply obey me. I gently ask you to do some things for my business, you do it and everything will be all right. There’s only one thing I want. I want to be the...”

 Ned was interrupted by the flickering lights on the machine. And there was a new song, different from the others. Something like a buzzing. And suddenly two black-and-yellow striped insects flew away from the Materializer and went on the mop, attracted by the honey. The scientist approached carefully and watched the two insects. The two bees. He “wanted to be the...” He “wanted two bees”.

 Clever. This machine was definitively clever. It wanted war? It would have it. He rid up his sleeves when his phone rang again. Technology was surprisingly annoying today. Ned took his cell-phone when a bee landed on his nose. The scientist squinted and tried to breathe strongly to make the frightening insect leave. Maybe to taunt him, the bee shook its sting and stayed. Gritting his teeth Ned asked the Materializer:

“Could you please do something to swat this bee?”

Only half a second passed before a fly flat sprang and crashed on the scientist’s face. Sure, the bee was dead. So was Ned’s nose. Anyway, he had a text so he took a look at his mobile screen. It was a text from Jean-Luc.

“I didn’t really appreciate the way you hung up on me. But I forgive you, *je t’aime.*”

 Ned smiled. He loved when his Jean-Luc spoke to him in French. This language was so sweet, so romantic. The two lovers had met in Paris, a couple of years ago. It happened on Pigalle, a very welcoming district of the French capital. Indeed Ned was late strolling in the various shops still open when someone yelled him something he could not understand. His astounded eyes met the unidentified person’s ones and love came at this first sight. Well, love truly came after the fifth drink Jean-Luc offered him. Indeed, Jean-Luc’s eyebrows were so bushy that his eyes looked like little black marbles. After this night, the two lovers never left, because their hangover confined them to the bed. Hard moments make stronger relationships.

At this thought, the scientist was euphoric, he didn’t mind about the Materializer’s behaviour any more. He was jumping, shooting in the whole room: “Me too, *je t’aime. J’aime le France. Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir? J’aime le Camembert!”*

 The scientist kept howling the few French words he knew with his awful accent so he didn’t hear the noise made by the machine. But if he didn’t hear this noise, he heard the terrible roaring behind him. He abruptly stopped singing his favourite Edith Piaf song and turned around. Two meters from him, there was a hairy brown creature. Big ears, big teeth, big eyes. Ned had already seen this animal on various TV reports. It was a common bear. A terrible common bear. The scientist’s eyes turned bigger than his face and the wild animal walked to him. Two options appeared in Ned’s mind. The first was to ask the Materializer for a sword and bravely fight the beast. He could even ask for a horse, to look more chivalrous. Unfortunately, the scientist was living on the fourth floor and couldn’t ride. By the way, cleaning droppings was not for him. Pity! He would have loved being this king of hot-headed guys facing the most dangerous threats on Earth. But Ned also had a second plan, resumed in one word: run.

No surprise, the scientist chose this last option and run he did. He went to the kitchen and took a knife. Of course, he knew he would never dare approach the common bear to stab it but he felt better with this tiny weapon. Suddenly, Ned remembered a quote coming from an old wise man. Or maybe from a film, he couldn’t recall it. Anyway, this wise man used to say “If a coming-from-nowhere bear attacks you, prefer negotiation to violence.” Funny sentence.

The scientist took a deep breath, made a forced smile and said, as if he was talking to a puppy “Hey my dinky bear, you know, between you and me, you have the biggest muscles here. You have the biggest jaws too. And with such big muscles and jaws, I’m sure you have a big heart. A big heart full of love and mercy, don’t you? I know you do. I might look like a fresh meal but I taste very bad, I’m not sure you’d like crunching me. By the way I have a much loved boyfriend and I wish I could see him tonight. We could even adopt you. Please, be merciful…”

For a moment, the bear stopped moving, a gleam in his eyes. Eyes in which could be seen years of loneliness, years without any papa-or-mama-bear-love. Or maybe it was hunger, Ned got an “F” for “Fail” at his UUT (Ursine Understanding Test) so he wasn’t able to decode efficiently the beast’s behaviour. Nevertheless, there was no time for psychoanalysis because the bear started moving again, roaring.

 One had to concede that there were few remaining options to survive the creature. Ned swore he would never read the Jungle Book and Mowgli’s stupid-and-unrealistic friendship with a bear to anyone. Tarzan wouldn’t fare better.

But how could he survive? Slowly, distress was replacing hope and Ned started crying. The last time he had cried his eyes out like he was currently doing was when he saw E.T going back home. The scientist wished he could fly away on a flying bike but he had never learnt riding a bike without the casters. Besides, flying bikes didn’t actually exist. As the bear was still approaching, Ned opened the cupboard under the sink and took refuge into it.

Oh, lovely, a mouse corpse was there too. Trying to forget the common bear, the scientist straightened up, closed his eyes and made the yoga “flying pigeon” position. He put his two hands on the ground, shoulder wide, threw his left leg above his head and put the right one on his elbows. Surprisingly it relaxed him for at least half a second before he crashed on the floor, the nose on the dead mouse’s body. He tried to reassure himself about his yoga capacities, telling himself he didn’t warm up. Suddenly, the bear punched the cupboard door so Ned jumped and banged his head. The terrible creature kept punching, and the door began to crack. The first hinge removed and the beast was still punching. The second hinge was removed too and the door flew away.

Ned was hunched and saw the big teeth of the bear. He had no escape. Terrified, he screamed “Help! Materializer, help! I need somebody’s help!”

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 In the evening, when Jean-Luc came back home, he got close to a heart attack. In the living room, a big bear was licking a honey puddle near a strange machine broadcasting this cool Beatles’ “Help!” song. A bee stung him.

**THE MATERIALIZER**

by Clémence Fougassié

 Ned enlarged the Receiver and prepared for his greatest experiment. He switched on the Materializer, took a deep breath and said:

“Hum...”

 Nothing happened.. For years he had spent all his time in his laboratory, in the cellar of his house to develop the Materializer. First he had thought a lot to invent the robot. Then he had made it. During this time he progressively got away from his family and his friends. Now all was ready. It was a very important moment for Ned who had waited for it all his life. That’s why he had perfectly prepared what he had to say to make sure that the experience worked as he wanted, as the Materializer was a complicated machine. A few minutes before, Ned was very excited to realize his dream: he wanted to ask for an exorbitant amount of money. But at this moment Ned was suddenly hesitating and was reassessing his whole project, he felt alone… He understood that it was useless to be extremely rich and to have what he wanted if he had nobody to enjoy his wealth with him. That’s why Ned gave up on his great experiment and switched off the Materializer. He left the room. He thought a few minutes and finally he came back and he switched on again the Materializer.

“A best friend”, he said.

After the whirring sound a dog formed in the Receiver. The dog barked and wagged his tail. Ned smiled. He had not expected the Materializer to produce a little dog but it did not bother him, he said to himself that dog is man’s best friend. He was glad. He quickly became attached to the cute dog. After spending the afternoon playing with him, he thought the dog must be very hungry. Ned switched on the Materializer and said:

“A bowl of dog food”.

The whirring sound was followed by the appearance of a bowl filled with small bone-shaped biscuits. He took it and placed it on the floor near the dog. However the animal showed no interest in the food. Ned supposed he wasn’t hungry. Later, he repeated the experience: once more, the dog refused to eat. Ned was worried, that wasn’t normal at all. He believed he didn’t like the food created by the Materializer.

The next morning Ned was back from the supermarket with all the sorts of dog food he found. He spent the day trying to make his little dog eat. But each time it was the same: the dog didn’t want to taste the kibble and preferred playing with his rubber bone. This time, Ned really got worried. He imagined the worst: perhaps he was extremely sick, and he could end up to dying of hunger! He decided to force his dog to eat. When he swallowed some food, he made a strange noise. All of a sudden he fell on the side, his paws stiff. Ned screamed: the dog seemed to be dead. He was terrified, he thought he had killed his best friend! He knelt near him to shake him gently tand try to bring him back to life. It was in vain. Finally he gave up, but he still hoped to save him by taking him to the vet. He started his car and he hurried to the veterinary clinic. As soon as he arrived the dog was taken in. Ned went to the waiting room. He waited for a few minutes then he was led to the vet’s office, at the end of a corridor. The man looked annoyed and admonished the inventor in a crisp voice:

“Mr Quinn I don’t like your joke at all."

Ned didn’t understand, he begged the vet to tell him if his dog was saved. He added that the pet meant a lot to him. The vet got angry:

“The next time, you should take your dog to a mechanic. “

Ned didn’t answer, he was stunned. This time the vet shouted:

“Mr Quinn! Do you want me to believe you didn’t know that your dog was a robot? Go and never come back!”

Ned left the clinic, he was completely shaken.

In the evening, Ned was sitting in front of the Materializer and the little dog repaired by him was sleeping at his feet. Ned kept his robot as it brought him a little company anyway, and like any pet, he found him a name: Robot. However, he was really disappointed. He understood that his great machine could absolutely reproduce the illusion of a living being but it could not create life. Henceforth, it seemed to him much less awesome.

 Thus, several weeks passed. Ned had not returned in his laboratory and he had decided not to use the Materializer anymore.

 One day over time spent with his dog-robot, a new idea germinated in his mind: the Materializer could not create life but it could probably make any robot Ned could imagine! Ned was galvanized by this new possibility. The same evening Ned went down to the laboratory, his heart was beating with excitement, and it reminded him of the last time he had used it. He switched on the Materializer and said:

 “A robot which allows me to read minds!”

Exactly as before there was the whirring sound and a strange object materialized in the Receiver. Ned took and examined it with curiosity. It was a square machine with some buttons and an antenna. It was connected to a kind of small helmet, by two cables. Ned was nervous, he had in his hands a potential machine to read thoughts. Still he needed some explanation as to how the device functioned if he wanted to use it, so he added:

“The user manual of the robot which allows me to read minds”

A small book appeared just after the usual whirring sound. Now Ned had to learn to operate his new machine.

 The following morning Ned was walking in the city centre, with Robot. But Ned was not here only to walk his dog: he wanted to test his thoughts reader robot for the first time. And the perfect opportunity presented itself just down the street. An old lady was walking in front him and a little further there was a young man. Ned put the helmet on his head and switched on the machine. He felt something really strange, suddenly a voice that was not his echoed in his head. He understood it was the old lady’s voice as she was just passing next to him. The robot allowed him to hear what people said in their heads! It worked! Ned was overjoyed. When the lady was too far it stopped. Then he heard another voice: the young man’s. He was hoping the old lady had a lot of cash with her. Ned realized that the man wanted to steal her. He panicked, he put his robot in his backpack and followed the man as far as a bus stop and when the latter was on the point of approaching the old lady Ned stood in front the man and said the first thing that crossed his mind:

“Good morning, sir! Could you tell me where the nearest underground station is please?”

The man looked annoyed and answered that he did not know. Ned continued to talk to him about the weather and other stupid things until the woman got into the bus. Then, Ned went away, his dog still scampering behind him. He had saved the old lady, he was really proud. He spent the rest of the morning meandering, lost in thoughts. Helping others with his robot was very rewarding. He had finally found a purpose in life: he could stop malevolent people from harming others thanks to his great thoughts reader robot. He had the ambition to be some sort of a superhero!

 During the following days, Ned walked randomly in the streets, equipped with his robot and always followed by his dog-robot, probing passers-by’s minds. He accomplished a lot of good deeds. That is how he prevented many pickpockets from committing their mischief. He also brought home a boy whom he had caught trying to run away because he was annoyed with his parents, for example.

 It was a day like any other, Ned was walking in the street with his robot switched on. He had not done anything yet when he met a woman who intended to jump into the river to commit suicide. His heart beat faster, he had an adrenaline rush like every time he intervened. But this time a life was at stake. He did not hesitate at all: he stopped her before she reached the bridge and called the emergency services. Ned felt like a real superhero: he had just saved a woman’s life! From that moment on Ned realized that, given his considerable abilities, just doing small actions was no longer satisfying to his ego, he felt the need to act for real, to attend to serious matters.

On the way back home Ned bought a newspaper to distract himself after such an emotional day. The main article dealt with a series of burglaries in many neighbourhoods in the city. For the time being the police had found no trace of the wrongdoers. This piece of news troubled Ned a lot. He imagined a horrible situation: if the robbers broke into his house and discovered the Materializer, they would be able to commit the worst possible crimes! Ned was terrified, moreover he had to act to protect the other citizens! And he had an exceptional robot the police had not. Now he had to imagine a plan to find the burglars.

Ned had decided to make night rounds near places where burglaries had already taken place. It seemed unlikely that he would get the thieves, but it was the only solution he could think of. And just to prove him right, after many nights spent in the cold waiting for something to happen, Ned understood he was doing this in vain.

One evening, while he was finishing his daily patrol in the city, the thoughts reader robot in his hands, Ned perceived a strange man’s mind. It was quite impenetrable, the man seemed to be both scared and anxious. As any self-respecting superhero Ned had to help this man who wasn’t well. Ned followed him so that he did not risk being noticed. It was hard because he also had to make sure that the connection with the robot wasn’t stopped. While Ned was shadowing the man he learnt more about his recent machinations. When they arrived at the edge of a wood, on the outskirts of the city, they had walked for a long time, and Ned knew now enough to conclude the man he was following was one of the wanted criminals! He thought that if he continued to follow the man, he would be led to their hideout. Ned was right. They went deeper into the forest. They arrived at a small clearing surrounded by huge oaks. There were five men, sitting on tree stumps. The man followed by Ned came to them while Ned hid behind a trunk. He silently put the thoughts reader robot in his bag and ordered Robot not to make any noise. The six men began to talk. Ned wanted to stay there and listen to the conversation in order to learn more about them. He could have called the police, but he felt like he was having a thrilling adventure: he did not want at all to give up now. The men spoke in a low voice and the sound of the wind in the leaves drowned their voices out. So Ned wanted to get nearer but branches cracked under his steps. The noise alerted one of the men, and he stood up. As soon as he saw Ned, the man rushed to him and got hold of him in an instant.

A few minutes later, Ned was tied up to the trunk of an old tree. One of the men grabbed his bag and presently discovered the thoughts reader robot. Ned was totally scared. The man called the others and the six men started wondering about the potential uses of this sophisticated machine. First they managed to switch it on. Then for a long time they tried to understand what its usefulness was. After many unsuccessful attempts they ended up guessing what it could do! The men were happy with their discovery as it would be quite advantageous in helping them commit their misdeeds. Fortunately, Robot had not been seen. When he saw his master in distress he came to him. Ned asked him to gnaw the links. He was freed. The men were convinced that he was well tied and were too busy with the great robot, so they did not watch out for him. First, Ned moved slowly with small and discrete steps. Then he ran away at full speed, followed by Robot.

Ned went home. He was safe, yet the situation was hopeless. He could not call the police otherwise one would be aware of his robots. He had to act by himself in order to recover the thoughts reader robot. He went down into the laboratory and used the Materializer. He asked for:

“A soporific gas bomb”.

Then added:

“And a gas mask”.

Ned took and put away very carefully the soporific gas bomb. He wanted to return to the clearing now but the sun was raising up, so it would be too dangerous.

At nightfall, Ned went back to the clearing, hoping the men would be there again. When he arrived he was reassured, they were at the same place. There was some sort of commotion, as they were probably preparing their new burglary. Ned took advantage of the opportunity to put on his mask and throw the soporific gas bomb in the middle of the clearing. The bomb worked perfectly. He waited for the men to fall sleep, then he prudently moved and looked for his robot. Time passed by bringing more and more desperation in Ned’s mind as he did not locate it and because the men could wake up at any time.

Near a rock Robot was unearthing something. He had been smarter and had detected the robot. Ned hurried to him and used all his energy to remove the ground to recover the robot which had been buried by the men. When he succeeded he ran away hurriedly…

 Two weeks had passed since Ned’s misadventure. He had returned to a normal life and had given up playing the hero with the thoughts reader robot. By the way, he had decided to stop using robots in general, except Robot, his faithful companion. He preferred to devote himself to a more theoretical study of the Materializer.

 One day, at the end of the afternoon, while Ned was comfortably seated in his chair, the doorbell rang. When Ned opened the door, his heart stopped beating. Three men were posted on the doorstep. He found himself in the presence of three of the criminals from whom Ned had escaped. With a cruel smile, one said:

“Good afternoon Sir. You look surprised... Did you really think we wouldn’t find you? You know too much and your robot is too interesting to let you escape as easily!”...

**The Materializer**

by Louise Jeanneau

**Part one**

Step sounds in the hallway. Brown wavy hair striding in the thin light of the little corridor. A door opened violently, behind which, a young inventor was testing his latest invention.

“Grappling hook! Ned, you’re guilty. You can't deny it.”

The Materializer’s lights flashed on, lighting the room with red and blue colours. A shrill sound exited the wide machine. An iron grappling hook appeared in the Receiver.

“Argh… Mekhane!” Ned’s face became as pale as a white polar bear when he saw the lights switched off. “Do you know what you’ve just done? ” Ned said watching his sister, Mekhane.

“I don’t care Ned. I’m working on an important scandal. At least important for me. Someone entered my room and stole my grappling hook. I think I found the culprit. Ned why did you take it?”

Ned took a deep breath. He had no idea what his sister was talking about. He could only think about the failure of his greatest experience. His sister had a real knack for appearing at the worst moment.

“ I don't wanna be derogatory but there is a grappling hook right there. If it’s not mine, then whose is this?” said Mekhane knowing the aversion of her brother for adventure sports. She was pointing at the huge machine at the bottom of the room.

“ Trust me, I didn’t steal your stuff. I never leave my room and yours is always locked. This is a misunderstanding.”

“You’re...” Mekhane opened her mouth to retort but Ned burst before she could have finished her sentence.

“Stop! My plans blew up because of you!  NOW YOU’VE GOT ONE MINUTE TO GO OUT,” he yelled at her.

Without losing a single minute, she left the room and ran through the somber corridor as quick as she could.

Ned was very annoyed. First, he had lost the chance to achieve a fabulous experiment. The Materializer had a limited capacity for action. The machine had to refill its batteries. He couldn’t use it before at least 24 hours. But, most of all, he really hated any sort of quarrel with Mekhane. A shrill sound startled Ned.

“Hi! I’m Rubiz. I like hanging human kids and sharing love all around me. Today is a new wonderful day. I love rainbows.”

“What the hell is that?” a startled Ned uttered. Then, he remembered. Rubiz was his first invention, he had designed it when he was only five. This machine was supposed to ring every morning to wake him up, singing the only words he knew how to encode in binary system. Unfortunately, he made a big mistake. The “ug” of “hugging” turned into a “an” and his lovely and friendly prototype became a horrible child killer. Ned took good care of the whole of his robots, which were considered as his second family. However, Rubiz’ capacities were totally disturbed, he wasn’t supposed to ring at any time during the day. Ned yawned. He looked at the clock over his office, completely covered by technical paraphernalia. The big needle pointed at one o’clock.

“But… wait a minute... Ned whispered, yawning again. Why was Mekh’ looking after her stuff all around the house at this time of night?“ This thought disturbed him for one minute but he couldn’t stop yawning. So he decided it was time to go to bed. Ned left his messy workshop. As it was and a few minutes later, he lay down in his bed and immediately fell asleep.

**Part two**

 The kitchen was an extremely congested and colourful room. Mekhane, sat in an eccentric chair and had already started her breakfast. She was biting in a jam toast, a bowl of milk in one hand, a newspaper in the other one. She read the headlines aloud. “The future of zoos, imagining the zoos of the future. Coronal mass ejection reached Earth. Heart of the machine, artificial emotional intelligence". Mekhane sighed and put the paper on the wooden table. “That's crap!”

“Mekhane, watch your language!”  Ned appeared in the doorway, in pyjama with just one slipper on the left foot and tousled hair.

"Where did your right slipper go?" Mekhane asked.

"Impossible to find it this morning. And guess what... I saw Pi-RK-Rey five minutes ago, running on the ceiling of the living room, holding my missing slipper. I could easily catch him with my mechanic wings. But first, I need a cup of hot coffee.”

"It's already served, dear brother. Need anything else?”

"I'll get it " Ned said. He switched on a little robot with four arms, a white apron and a cooker hat.

"Okay Coo-ki, let's prepare some French pastries today."

"*Surre, I'll preparrre butteurr crroisants*."

French cuisine was Ned's favourite. That's why the robot Coo-ki was designed as a French cooker and even had a horrible French accent. But he was excellent at his job. The inventor sat, put his elbows on the table and started reading the daily news. A good smell of coffee floated in the air. Ned read the paper and began the crosswords. The scientist was very concentrated, frowning while Mekhane was playing with the crumbs on the table. Coo-ki was beating egg whites, his head leaning from left to right. Suddenly, he dropped the mixing bowl which crashed on the kitchen tile. He faced Ned and threw the egg whisk through the room.

“FIRE ALERT! CALL THE FIREMEN! I’M BURNING!”

The robot went totally mad. He ran around the room, shaking his long arms, hitting shelves, spilling plates, glasses, pasta jars, sacks of flour and unfortunate object having had the ill luck to find itself in his path. Then, he stopped. Ned and Mekhane didn’t dare to make a single move, both astounded. Coo-ki opened his mouth. The robot made a series of sounds which Ned, his own creator, couldn’t understand. After that he ran again around the table still covered by the half-finished breakfast of Ned and his sister. Coo-ki caught a pan. The robot targeted Ned's head and the scientist narrowly avoided the blow.

“Mekh', run!” Ned yelled and caught her by the arm. They flew the room. He quickly slammed the door and locked it up. He tried to catch his breath. He sat on the floor against the kitchen wall, breathing loudly. Inside, all kinds of loud clanging noises resonated.

“Coo-ki attempted to kill us!” Ned whispered. He observed a few minutes of silence, lost in his thoughts. “Wait a minute… the robot walking on the ceiling, the cooking robot going mad, so many weird things happened… THE NEWSPAPER! The solution is in the newspaper. Mekh', do you know what happens when the Sun sneezes?”

“Of course… not. You're being stupid.”

“But, my dear kind sister, you are quite lucky”, went on unperturbed the scientist. “Because your smart brother will explain to you what a coronal mass ejection so called a ‘Sun sneeze’ is. During a solar flare, a significant mass of plasma and magnetic field from the solar corona is released. Solar material streams out through space, impacting any planet or spacecraft in its path. When the solar material reaches the ionosphere, the magnetic field is totally disturbed. That's why all the machines dysfunction!”

 Mekhane laughed at the earnestness displayed in her brother’s face who suddenly looked very serious. She hadn't grasped anything of her brother's complex explanations.

“There are two solutions.” Ned kept explaining. “We could attempt to switch off the Sun to avoid every future problem. But we will be content with the second solution. I will turn off all the robots, then I'll repair all of them one by one. I'll turn them on once the coronal mass ejection is unlikely to further impact the machines.

Ned entered the basement, followed by his little sister. In front of him, the wall was covered by a huge panel control that commanded the systems of all the robots in the house. Ned triggered a huge leverage. A green light sparkled three times. All the robots in the house were supposed to be deactivated now, paused in action. Ned turned around. Next to him, Mekhane was staring at him, her green eyes wide open. She was totally immobile. The young man took a screwdriver from the pocket of his pyjama and smiled at her.

“It's time to get to work!” he said full of joy. “And you are the first Mekh.”