

The latent hum of electricity vibrated and prickled the skin on her arms. Even before her hair rose to greet the static created by the creature's twisting appendages, she noticed the quiver in her eyelashes, her fine brow hairs and in the minute down on her arms—every feather of her being rushed to encounter his.

Celia knew the creature before she gave him a name. She understood fantastical creations from her brother's battered collection of comic books, and she could grasp the theoretical beginnings because her supervisor blathered about robots replacing human workers when he drank too much or worked past exhaustion. The company desired an untiring, self-sufficient workforce capable of twenty-four hour a day production. Celia wanted to roll her eyes at the selfishness of these accountants they'd promoted to the president's office at the rural chicken processing plant. How many chicken farms could there be in the area to support such an endeavor? Her lip curled slightly.

She gaped in wonder; this might be the product of the research manifestos that she had massaged into ponderous volumes. Her knowledge from the reports could not be discounted—they had trusted her to keep their secrets. She had signed the non-disclosure agreements and then scribed each file for the private archives kept for future consideration. How much cyber-thieving was there in this particular business? Was there truly the threat of intellectual piracy among the chicken nugget manufacturers of the world? She had categorized the research, the lab experiments and their results as wild, cerebral driveling. Dr. Drew Tregoning, one of the condescending supervisors of the Castro Department, channeled the mad scientist at times.

Celia mentally shook her head to toss out all prior knowledge and misinformation. She had automatically craned her neck, arched her back slightly and widened her eyes though instinct cautioned hunching her body into protection of soft tissue like the eyes, cheeks and softly parted lips. She closed her mouth the moment she noticed her image in the monitor attached to the wall across from the door she had entered moments ago. She had simply pressed on the previously hidden door, crossed the threshold with no alarm sounding and closed it with a surreptitious tug. Inside the cavernous, dark room, she worried that she'd gained the entry with so little effort.

The blank, gray door at the end of the long hallway which ended her floor's suite of offices had tempted her during her first week at the plant. No doorknob, no plaque like the rest of the series of locked doors, and no one venturing in or out. A closet? A sealed area?

When she examined the door on her seventh day, there hadn't been scratch marks on the sill--marks that originated from the other side. Now ominous gouges marked the wood threshold, and a slug-like trail gleamed from the door and ended in the middle of the cavernous room.

Months ago, the morning after she first noticed the strange doorway, Celia had been greeted by Tregoning with a lengthy assignment: to edit the monstrous journal notes that might have birthed this creature hovering and whirring right above her head. The glut of work had distracted her during the entire ninety day trial period for new employees and had lulled her into entertained complacency. The essays were sometimes lab notes written out in paragraphs that sounded like monologues as she typed and edited. The work was focused on robotics and the possibility of a fully automated plant that could repair itself as parts jammed, broke or malfunctioned. The historic malfunctions described were often labeled the "human element" because, simply put, human beings are not dependable when under pressure. Machines were more efficient.

Then the big brain in her suite of scientists, Drew Tregoning had disappeared down the hallway and had not reemerged. Four days into this vanishing act, Celia had silently scoffed when one of the other supervisors mentioned that Tregoning was extending his stay in Caribbean for a brief vacation. There was no tech conference in the Caribbean or anywhere between the doctor's walk past her cubicle one evening and his complete vaporization. There should never be lies in research—just fact piled onto fact in a ponderous line that sequentially told a story, solved a problem or equated into some truth. Research created something like this fantastic creature tumbling and whirring its extensions fast enough to maintain a static charge in the air around her person.

Celia blinked out of theory and mute perusal. What was it? A prototype? A plaything? A pretend vacation from reality?

The optical extension was poised an arm-length from her face, but the monitor showed her from many angles, so she concluded that there were many more lenses. The zoom hovered close and then backed away. The picture on the screen broke into multiple images—one in three dimensions and in another, a thermal reading in which her body was shaded a surreal, fuzzy green-blue swirled with tinges of red in the face, chest and belly. Numbers ran in a ticker down the screen at the right edge that she assumed were respiration, heart rate and temperature. Some of the numbers were stated in algorithms that begged her to study. Celia opened and closed her eyes to break out of the short stasis with which wonder had petrified her.

“My name is Celia Maycomb.” The arms danced in reaction, and Celia’s hair rose in silvery -blond strands of attention from her scalp. She resisted the urge to smooth them down. No fast moves on rabid dogs, angry men or curious scientific experiments. That thought quirked her lips.

A voice boomed, “Cecelia Jane Maycomb. Office C42, Department Castro. No clearance.” Unconsciously, Celia’s shoulders drooped a bit. The voice was tinny and flat. She continued to gaze upward and count extensions—seven which stopped at a uniform distance from her and took readings and adjusted in a quick-motion jerkiness. When she imagined such a creature, the appendages moved smoothly, and the processing was instantaneous.

Celia rolled her eyes at the automaton, “The door opened the moment I touched it. And only my mother calls me Cecelia. I’ll leave you alone then.” She turned toward the door and felt the first prickle of fear course up her spine. The door had disappeared and another monitor had taken its place. Seven appendages surrounded her while simultaneous warning computations arced through her brain: optical, taste, tactile, olfactory, and auditory. What else? Temperature and what other extrasensory device would she design for such a creature? There had been one odd study on extrasensory perception that had been out of step with the rest of research on bees, the human nervous system, artificial intelligence and fusion models.

“Celia Maycomb. Clearance granted. Stay.” The tumble of arms, the blinks of tiny bulbs in one made her step forward to see it a bit closer. “Do not touch. Touch hurts.”

Celia nodded as her eyes widened at the possibilities. “I work with Dr. Drew Tregoning. Where is Dr. Tregoning?” The clicks above her buzzed in a hive of processing. She counted on her fingers before it answered. Processing was slowed to seconds when saving new information. In her periphery, the optic monitor showed the quiver of her fingers keeping track of the moments. She stilled her fingers. The machine was learning her quickly. She had edited Tregoning’s essay on the revelations of eye blinks, lid movement and other facial muscle contraction. He had unlocked the secrets of the iris which she had found interesting, if speculative. Had he taught the creature the same methods of divining human intention? Foolishness.

“Touch hurts,” the voice intoned. Then a shift toward conclusion, “Touch hurts humans.” Silence followed the declaration.

Celia had slowed her breathing, her hair descended from its ascent chasing electrocution, and her eyes remained steady and steely. She looked straight into the monitor because it was human to look at the appendages of a strange creature and fail to look it in the eye. “I won’t touch you then. Where is Drew Tregoning?” She held her breath then panted a bit to throw off the parts tracking her expulsion of carbon dioxide. She immediately felt a breath of air brush by her arm as some unseen air duct opened.

“Follow the light.” The finality of the blank voice struck her and created a cold lump in her chest. Curiosity had delivered her through the gray door at the end of the hallway on her own floor. Curiosity vanquished; all Celia truly desired was escape. She turned toward the series of spotlights that bounced off the dull, gray floor and allowed her feet to move her. Perhaps there was an exit like the glowing red sign under the screen at the theater that beaconed release from danger.

Before she reached the dark square at the far end of the warehouse-sized expanse, she asked the creature one more question, “Did the touch hurt you?”

“You.” The word baffled it.

“What does the creator call you? What is your name?” Dimly in the gloom of the dark warehouse, she saw a form on a bed about thirty feet away. As she continued forward, she noted that he was sprawled limply either in sleep or death. When she was less than ten feet from the bed, she saw vitals displayed on the smaller monitor that revealed shallow respiration and a very slow heart rate. Could a human survive under thirty beats per minute? Brain activity—the seventh appendage must be for brain activity because a very faint grey pulse beat in the scanned creature’s head. Hers had been red and swirling—perhaps it hadn’t been a simple thermal image but a combination of thermals, brain activity and body functions.

Again the processing time lengthened with the new query, her movement and unguarded concern for the man inert on the bare mattress. As she bent to touch Tregoning, the creature boomed, “Touch hurts.”

Celia straightened and frowned at the twitching arms that hesitated to pull her back from their pet. She shook her head, “Humans touch each other. Touch does not always hurt. Something went wrong. What is your name?” She nearly stamped her foot in a burst of impatience.

“Serial number LXI, Floor Castro.”

She cocked her head and thought about the dilemma. The man on the bed released a huge sigh and made her impulsive, “The fifty-first trial? LXI? How about Alexi. Alexi Castro, if you want a last name.” The man on the bed turned his head toward her voice and groaned.

Celia lowered herself to squatting by the mattress-like platform. She peered at the limp body of the man and the stage on which he was draped. The bed was not a mattress but a raised box of some sort that kept Tregoning off the cement floor about three feet. Cold emanated from the gray, dull surface of the unfinished cement.

Tregoning’s whiskers looked grown out a few days but not the nearly four he’d been missing, the rest of his face was the milky-gray of oatmeal, and the odor of scorched cotton hung about him that spoke of partial electrocution. Sweet. Celia had never been irritated enough with the man to wish him harm, but others in the department had poked fun at his wild theories behind his back. Dr. Drew Tregoning was “going tres mad,” one of the assistants had mocked. This man looked as if he had experienced a grand mal seizure but had not recovered from the fit. She leaned over to observe without touching him as the creature’s arms flashed in her periphery. His fingertips on the exposed right hand were blistered as if burned, and his socks looked oddly worn through just on the bottoms. What had happened? Malfunction? Program error?

The man who used to be Dr. Drew Tregoning, the mad theorist and condescending genius of the Castro Division, moved his head and opened bloodshot eyes. They narrowed to distress and instant alarm. “Miss Maycomb,” his voice croaked from disuse, “Leave.”

The creature’s arms whirled and dipped faster; Celia felt her hair make contact with one flailing appendage and sizzle in a flash of tinder and then crumble. “Dr. Tregoning! Hush!” She cast an eye to the other arms that might crowd her if she didn’t control panic. She summoned up anger, “Stay back, Alexi. Touch hurts. Do not touch me.”

She sucked in a breath and ignored the man who had rolled over and lay with his eyes wide and panicked. How long had he been rendered insensible by the creature though an inadvertent touch? She opened and closed her eyes. She focused on the extended arm of the centipede-like optical probe with its hundreds of tiny camera lens. The monitor was flashing a dizzying ballet of dueling images featuring two beings. “Dr. Tregoning? Alexi allowed me to enter the lab. Alexi is concerned about your condition.”

“Alexi?” Drew Tregoning was recovering consciousness though his confusion was fed by the blended images of LXI’s probes recording every nuance of Cecelia Maycomb’s lion-like appearance with the extended froth of long, gold and silver hair and enormous amber-flecked, green eyes. He blinked up at her and noticed her purposeful widening and narrowing eyes in some code. Not Morse code? Ah, her appearance wasn’t animal-like but more angelic with moonbeam hair, the kind eyes and smirking mouth. What was she telling him? G-E-T U-P I-D-I-O-T. Yes, she was a strange angel.

Drew Tregoning summoned every bit of reserve strength and forced himself to the edge of the platform. He extended the hand that he’d peeled back all the nails on trying to claw his way out of the room. The tactile probe had burned right through his pants and fused his socks to his ankle dragging him to the back of the lab and tossing him onto the platform where the final assembly had taken place on a late-night whim.

Celia was taking in the bloodied hand and remembering the gouges on the threshold. The ankle with the burned sock was probably broken. She glanced back to the monitor that recorded every expression on her face. Tears sprang to her eyes out of fear, but she whispered, “Touch does hurt. Alexi, I must help Dr. Tregoning to the door. I must take him to a human doctor.”

“Crying. Why?” The tactile probe extended a thin plastic cylinder that Celia allowed to touch the moisture that she had wiped off her cheeks with one finger.

“I am afraid for him. I am afraid he will die.”

“Die?”

“Cease to exist. No power. Non-existence.” Celia straightened from her squat beside the platform. She was moving with deliberate slowness.

Drew Tregoning watched her gain most of the computer’s attention with her masses of live-wire hair reacting to the static energy building in the room. He hoped she didn’t talk her way into a quagmire—trying to shut the thing down had created this catastrophe. How had she managed to gain entrance without electrocution? How had she found the hidden door and stayed alive long enough to find him?

Alexi stilled, and her hair began to settle like a cloud. “Non-existence. Touch hurts.” The whirling began again the moment she shook her head. The static in the air arced through the upper area near the high ceiling.

Celia was not deterred. “He will not die if I take him to the doctor. Humans can touch humans.”

“No. Touch hurts.” The brain in the creature must be learning at warp speed in some areas, but interpersonal interactions were lagging.

Celia shook her head and reached over to Drew Tregoning and cupped his left cheek. She looked over at the monitor and saw frozen images of the red heat of sharing touch. The appendages were hovering closer than a foot in a metal atmosphere of wary protection.

She tried not to wince when she smelled more of her hair singeing to ash. She looked into Tregoning’s frightened, widening eyes and pursed her lips. “You owe me a haircut after the trip to the hospital, Dr. Tregoning.”

Celia Maycomb dropped her hand to pull the man’s unsteady person closer to the edge of the platform. She spoke to the creature as she pulled the doctor up to sitting. “Alexi? Did touching Dr. Tregoning hurt you also?”

The whirr of the appendages grew to a buzzing hive as Celia positioned herself under Tregoning’s left arm and grabbed his belt with her right. She helped him hoist himself upright and begin to lurch across the empty warehouse.

Discarded boxes littered the left side of the space, but other than monitors and one large lab table and chair near the door, only the platform populated the space. About halfway across the room, the man sagged for a moment. She hung onto him as he panted and let his burned foot rest on the floor with a shudder. His fingertips were bleeding on the hand gripping her shoulder. His weakness betrayed more damage than the obvious burns and breaks in extremities.

The computer finally answered when they started to shamble again, “Touch hurts, Celia. Protect Alexi. No touch.” The voice had learned intonation from analyzing her few words. It intoned “Alexi” like she did with a slight stress on the middle syllable. She wanted to grin at the monitor—she wanted to gloat.

Looking upward as they reached the door, and she impelled the stumbling Tregoning over the marred threshold, Celia began to bid the creature farewell. Her throat closed as the true creature revealed itself in the carnival of static lightening racing through the room like a miniature electric storm. Every rack of computer processors, any leftover monitors unbolted, over a hundred probe-like arms with differing abilities to decipher data hovered in a mask of the true ceiling like foam insulation.

Alexi had protected himself from touch and discovery. He had allowed Celia to remove the dangerous man who threatened existence. Touch hurt. Touch led to self-protection. Celia looked at the man whom she had taken from the laboratory inhabited by the mad genius’ monstrous creation and wondered why she had saved him.

Celia Works a Conundrum

“The foot? Broken.” Tregoning’s voice hadn’t recovered from his supposed trip to the Caribbean symposium on fusion models for robotic manufacturing. When he spoke, the rattle sounded like an engine sputtering.

The other man was trying to tease more from the doctor who looked too white, gaunt and serious to have just returned from a tropical anything. The big man blustered, “Well, it must have been a real adventure to end up in a cast. You look positively done in, Drew. And your hand!” First hour of the new workday and the big boss was doubting Tregoning’s thin lie.

Celia huffed into the room after picking up a random file folder and stuffing it with a report she’d pulled on the optics of a bumblebee versus the brown recluse spider. After her audience with the fiercest recluse spider king of them all, Celia found that odd report fascinating. After her audience with the undisputed king of the Castro Department, Celia discovered that she was a voracious reader of formerly dry reports on fusion models in miniature, the analysis of eye movement in humans and recent discoveries concerning thermal imaging. Evidently, Celia’s Irish grandmother had not been so daffy after all—you could read a person by the aura they produced. Celia wondered if her aura was pitch black as she descended on the two men locked in a silent battle of seek and avoid.

She forced a giggle, “Good morning, Dr. Champion! Dr. Tregoning? That report you wanted to review before your,” she made a show of checking her watch, “eight-thirty appointment with Mr. Alexi.” She placed the folder on his desk and arched a brow at the older, barrel-chested man who was still attractive despite age and added girth. She leaned toward the man and lowered her voice, “I hear that Dr. Tregoning hardly left his room. I hear he was tangled up . . .” she trailed off as Tregoning shouted, “Out!” and Champion chuckled.

Celia congratulated herself when Tregoning, sounding a bit more human, growled out, “She’s spreading rumors of bedroom hijinks because I fail to tan. Women!” He raised his voice theatrically, “She’d better focus on the job, not my personal life.”

Greg Champion grinned and watched Celia Maycomb saunter back down the hallway swinging her hips. He could tell she was grinning by the toss of her hair. He noticed for the first time that Celia had cut her wavy, corn silk hair to her chin. He’d admired it the last time he’d visited the Castro Department to find out exactly what type of experimentation they were up to with the new robotics prototype. The government grant had relieved him of most of the monitoring of the spending, but he had noticed shipments from myriad sources arriving in a flurry until two weeks ago. The silence since had been deafening. When he saw his youngest researcher walking with the lead scientist for the department as he hobbled on crutches, Champion had decided to take a walk.

Celia was thinking along the same lines. How had the funding been secured for such a creature as the one inhabiting the warehouse? The technology alone would climb into the millions. She tried to imagine Dr. Tregoning assembling the entire wobbly structure that created Alexi and frowned. He must have had a team, but where were they now? No. There hadn’t been a team, she realized. Build a robot that is capable of building a machine that learns, masters and seeks more information. Give the creature the tools and let the thing evolve.

She bit her lip; it was the same old problem of the petri dish: you can mix the same ingredients and get startlingly different results if any of numerous variables change. Timing, temperature, amount of light and chance aberrations affect the product. Think of crops. Look at children. How about those pesky snowflakes, tornadoes and hurricanes. The creature had overbuilt itself like the athlete addicted to steroids. Anger, fear and paranoia had bred with the toxicity of unleashed genius.

Drew struggled to her cubicle and lowered himself into the chair before her desk. He was so exhausted, she thought he might fall asleep before he spoke. “Stop making up stories. We were the laughing stock at the hospital.”

“Hiding in here to wait out your 8:30 appointment?” Celia ignored his irritation. She’d caught him chuckling after she cleared the examining room with her bawdy explanation for his injuries. She’d been waiting for the man to become human for nearly four months, and now he was some cross between pitiful and insane. Rather irritating.

He nodded and closed his eyes. What an odd angel, indeed. She had rambled on to the attending physician who was apt to wander off and make them wait. She had managed to catch the attention of the doctor, the nurse and the entire housekeeping staff, “Look. I think his foot is broken from bearing all his weight. She had him shackled upside down as far as I can tell. Poor man dragged himself across the room and ruined his fingers on the balcony ledge trying to get away from that tramp he’d hired for the night. That’ll teach you, Dr. Tregoning!” Later he had caught the nurse laughing over Celia’s muttering over the use of a cattle prod when the doctor asked about the burn wounds. They had tallied two cracked ribs, four points of scorching from electric shock and the broken ankle. His hands were a mess, but they were just rubbed raw and bruised.

Drew Tregoning pressed the fingers on his un-banded hand to his forehead. It was probably written on some chart at the hospital that he was a sexual deviant. If he felt better, he might drag Celia down the hall and toss her back to her Alexi. “You are going to ruin my reputation,” he rasped into his hand. He expected her to soften.

Celia laughed, “I’d think you’d rather be suspected of three days of bondage with Caribbean Jill than captured by the true prisoner of the Castro Department.” She shook her head—the man was known as too serious, dull and impervious. “How did you manage that door? It just disappears.”

He raised his head and squinted at her curiosity. “Chinese puzzle box design. My father brought a few back from Korea with a collection of figures and dolls that my grandmother treasured.” He looked at her cataloging it away under “Facts I’ve Gathered on Dr. Andrew David Tregoning.”

She put a hand to her hair and twisted one of the blunt ends of a curling lock. “I’m sorry about your hair, Miss Maycomb.”

“Celia. I still need it trimmed. It was so late after I left you, I cut it myself. I can’t get that terrible smell out of my mind.” She shivered.

Drew thought about the smell of burnt cotton and the acrid scent of heated flesh from his scorched feet for days immobilized on the platform. He had suspected that his heart had been sent into arrhythmia, but nothing odd showed on the EKG at the hospital. When his mind wandered, he wondered if he might still be draped over the assembly platform at the back of the warehouse. What if his angel had not arrived to shake him out of lethargy and deliver him to clean, free air?

He stared at the color and texture of her hair and realized for the first time that the silver among the blond strands were not a white blond but silver gray. “How old are you?”

Celia blinked and angled her head as if using her sharp eyes to take a thermal reading of him. His forehead might be vibrant orange for the bloom of a headache chasing around the front of his skull. She noticed that at ten feet. “Thirty-five. And you?”

“Forty-two. I never thought about your age—I assumed you were twenty-two like all the other beginning researchers. You are an excellent editor.” He was blunt and a bit suspicious. “How did you know there was a door at the end of the hallway? How did you know where to look for me?”

She was concentrating on his processing that was much faster than the creature’s last night. “The door was always there. The first week I was working here I noticed it. And I wasn’t exactly looking for you.”

“That door is invisible to the naked eye.”

“Hardly. Granted that geometric rearrangement when you touch it at dead center is genius, but the door is fairly obvious. And I saw you go down the hall and not reappear on Monday nearly two weeks ago. Where else would you go?” Celia pouted, “There was no conference in the Caribbean.”

Drew made a mental note not to lie to this particular woman. Women were funny like that: some demanded the truth, and others could not tolerate it. His mother had never wanted the truth but some soften, whipped butter version of the facts. This woman had saved his life; he owed her the truth.

“True. There was no conference, symposium or workshop. There was one mistake heaped on another and another until that creature you’ve dubbed ‘Alexi’ spouted wings and took off.” His voice had fallen into bitterness.

“What did you expect from artificial intelligence? Learning and performing is part of his programming.” She was jotting notes on a white legal-size pad. She flashed him a sketch of what she’d memorized from her descent into the hell of the secret lab at the end of the hall. He was surprised at the detail and her guesses at the content of some of the square boxes, the cylinders that collected data and the blinking read-outs from probes too miniscule to house monitors or processors.

She looked up and caught him staring at her sketch. She angled it toward him, “What did you expect, Dr. Tregoning? You decided to act the creator and assembled the first unit. What is step two?”

Drew shook his head because that was the classic programmer or auditor’s question. Her intention separated him as scientist from the true madman. The truth was in stark opposition to his fine Celia Maycomb’s sensible response. There had been no plan. Activation had been like striking the flint in the presence of alcohol fumes or the sudden release of gas pent up in a house ready to explode. The computer had immolated and changed within eye blinks. He had not even thought to stop it as it assembled itself without his further inducement. He had not expected it to quibble when he decided to flip the kill switch and end the experiment for the night.