

Souls On Low Battery

By Katrielle Wulff



Photograph by Kya Qvale

“Miss, the tea is ready.”

“Just set it on the table.”

Ana placed the tea-set on the little table beside the mistress’s chair. Everyday, Ms. Morgana would sit and look down on the city, her city, the city she watched grow from the ground up. She would always ask for her Earl Grey tea, holding the cup in her clean hands in her clean room to look down on the dirty city below.

“Don’t just stand there. Don’t you have some dusting to do?”

Ana smiled a little.

“No, ma’am. I already did that twice today.”

“Huh. Well, maybe do it again.”

The caretaker shook her head to herself, amused by their banter, and walked out of the long white room into the kitchen overlooking the living room with a hologram television and bookshelf housing everything from Wilde to King. The supply closet was next right next to the fridge, holding the battered duster. Ana only ever had to dust a little, mostly the rooms that she used herself. As she shuffled around wiping off the non-existent filth, the small penthouse was silent except for Ana’s air-breathing, heart-beating, and dust-cleaning.

When she had made a full loop and had returned, Ms. Morgana continued to sit still. Completely still. Ana knew she was thinking. She hated walking into the room while she was thinking; her silent thinking could be so eerie.

“Ma’am?”

She slowly turned toward the young woman, causing her to hesitate.

“Speak your mind.”

“Why do you ask me to serve you tea when you can’t drink it? And why do you ask me to clean your home when I’m the only one stirring up dust?”

Morgana’s optical lenses zoomed in onto Ana’s face, scanning her faster than she could blink. Her face smirked.

“Because it is so comforting to have these good ol’ synthetic nerves stimulated. And I’m only having you clean up your own mess since dust is composed mostly of skin. And after all, if I somehow were to get dust in my wiring, it could cause some minor issues. Better to avoid it now than to solve it later.”

“Yes, ma’am, that’s true.”

“Questions make the world go ‘round, Ana. Sit in your chair with me, will you?”

Ana felt kind of uncomfortable sitting next to her, despite the numerous hours spent together. Her mistress’s cybernetic body made no noise, except for the slightest hum in the quietest of moments. But she obliged, found herself a seat from the another room, and set it on the other side of the table, still facing out to the city below.

They both gazed out- down- into the filthy lower levels.

“Ma’am, the protestors get bolder everyday. Just yesterday, one was caught scaling the tower.”

“And closer they come.”

“What shall we do?”

“Nothing. They have yet to lay a finger on us.”

“They want you, ma’am.”

There was a minute’s silence.

“They’ve been against me- my transplants, my new bodies,-since the beginning, from the prototypes till now, seventy-three years later.”

“Seventy-three?”

It slipped out before she could stop it, but Morgana did not seem to react.

They both gazed out- down- into the filthy lower levels.

“Yes, since my company started. Fifty-seven since my first transplant.”

Ana couldn’t help looking her up and down, however briefly. Her synthetic skin was grown in a lab, made to harden into a silicone-like shell once dead, but the cells always turned albino white instead of a natural shade due to some difficulty with the melanocytes, or the color-producing cells. Her joints moved smoother than any ‘traditional’ human thanks to rubber in place of cartilage, allowing her to adapt to different environments. Her microscopic optical-nerves, absent of an iris, could scan a room and automatically calibrate for obstacles.

Yet, she insisted on sitting here, day after day, moving only to dress in her plain light grey dresses and a straight, bobbed, platinum-blond wig, to join Ana for her one-sided meals, and to lay on her ‘bed,’ which was actually a charging station, similar in aesthetics to a tanning bed. Though she was by one definition alive, she was by no means living.

“Ma’am?”

“Go on, Ana.”

A brief pause.

“Why did you hire me? You are fully capable of running all of your functions without me.”

Another bout of silence.

“Isn’t part of being human the companionship?”

Ana mulled this over in her mind, recalling all the conversations they’d had, trying to think of an appropriate response.

“What do you consider yourself, Ana?”

“Excuse me?”

“What do think yourself as?”

“Well, I suppose as a ‘traditional.’ My family and I never have had the money to purchase and maintain a body like yours.”

“How much different am I to you?”

This statement caught her off-guard, but after a moment, she answered.

“Ma’am, you’re rather different, but I think the same in the important ways. You need someone to help with your loneliness, at least, right?”

She grinned uneasily.

A little smile crept across Morgana’s face, or what the tiny muscle levers scattered underneath the skin were programmed to portray as a smile.

“That and your ever quick wit amuses me. I must make sure my bantering circuits function properly.”

“You don’t have those!”

Ana giggled, Morgana smiled wider, and then, they both dropped silent. Ana could

swear she heard her friend’s electronics whir back into a pensive frown. She sat, straining to hear these, but twitched when Morgana spoke back up.

“Plus, if I were to walk the streets, I’d be dangerous. If one of the protestors were to attack me, either I’d take some damage, especially if there was the likely mob-”

“But Mistress-”

“And if I defend myself, there’s a good chance there’d be a horrible accident in store for those poor people. Even if they weren’t hurt, the media would be in a frenzy.”

Ana closed her mouth quickly and her throat tightened, suddenly aware of how dangerous a woman she was serving. They didn’t normally talk about things like this, and she was becoming increasingly uncomfortable.

“Ma’am, you’re rather different, but I think the same in the important ways. You need someone to help with your loneliness, at least, right?”

Sudden laughter burst through her thoughts and made the maid jump up from her seat.

The sound was a short alien bark, emanating from the other’s mouth.

“It’s funny, Ana. Once, the idea would make me tear up, but back when I was able to cry, this whole scenario wouldn’t have bothered me. How strange. It’s humorous, right?”

She wasn’t sure what to think. Morgana didn’t laugh, let alone act like this. Ana hadn’t even know Morgana had the ability to laugh. Smile, yes, but laugh?

As she tried to read the mistress' face, Morgana sobered up, turned back towards her city, and said, "Why don't you busy yourself with dinner or you'll end up like last week? What was it you said? 'No nap was worth a terrible dehydrated dinner?'"

The tension released with Ana's huffed and defensive breath. "It was one time! But I suppose you're right. I'll go jump on it."

As she left, she paused and glanced as Morgana stood and walked up to the glass wall, the soft tap of her hand on its surface, looking more like a princess that had waited much too long for her prince.

After a delicious meal of chicken alfredo (not from a plastic container) and an interesting discussion over Ana's school studies on the possible lunar colonization, they prepared to settle down for the night. Ana dressed into her nightgown, brushed her teeth, and braided her hair up. As she did every night, she made her visit to Morgana's room. And as usual, the mistress was already lying on her powering table with the glass lid slid over her. She was nude, only appearing feminine in her choice of curvatures. Despite her chronological age, her pale body seemed to reflect a perfectly healthy youth. The electricity produced a deep hum as it pulsed Morgana's life blood through wires and tubes. Besides the faint glow reflecting on the water coolant inside the bed, the room was dark, meaning she'd already entered hibernation mode. That was the last thing on Ana's nightly checklist completed, so she trotted back to her own room.

After Ana snuggled under the covers, she reviewed the day. Although she tried to focus



Photograph by Kya Qvale

on the most efficient arrangement of lunar habitats, she couldn't help but drift back to the earlier conversation.

She reflected on what she had said. She supposed Morgana was still a person. She'd fall apart without Ana's normalcy, and someone delusional with her kind of power... Yes, she was a person, despite not eating, drinking, or sleeping like a "traditional." A person, yes, but certainly not a human anymore...not anymore...

A sharp crash shattered Ana's sleep. Her heart pounding in her ears, she jumped out of bed. Her first thought was of Morgana's safety as she dashed towards the chamber.

The door was cracked.

She was sure she had closed it.

Just before she reached it, a hoarse voice

from within made her stop.

“Help.”

Morgana’s voice always remained calm. That was the program her voicebox followed.

It meant...

An organic.

A ‘traditional’.

The protesters.

A short, broken cry came just beyond the door.

Then nothing.

Fear gripped her, freezing her hand just a hair before the doorknob.

Ana took a deep breath, braced herself, and stepped through the threshold.

Fluid had leaked everywhere.

Blood.

Water.

An thick unfamiliar clear substance. A body lie there, the source of the blood. She could tell who it had once been. It was the man from the day before who had climbed the building.

She searched for the cause of his death.

There.

The small security-bot in the upper corner.

It’d shot him.

But the bots were programmed to only contact security and the police unless there was an immediate threat of violence.

Violence.

Clear substance.

No.

Ana’s head snapped around, searching the opposite corner of the room.

The bed-

Morgana’s shell was crushed in the chest cavity, the fluid –her life blood –now just dripping from a tube. Ana’s heart roared in her ears in time with the drip-drops of the fluid. She rushed over to her mistress’s side, but the person beneath the machine was already long gone.

Ana avoided looking in Morgana’s wound and choked back tears of fear, anger, despair-

The sirens of the security men.

She gazed blankly into that face.

Those eyes were wide open, almost clear and completely digital.

Numb, she gazed into these mirrors, unaware of the police coming in, pulling her away, and calling into headquarters.

All she heard was that omnipresent drip.

Drip.

Drip went the sink as Ana brushed her teeth.

Drip went the sink in the kitchen as Ana finished washing her own teacup. Drip went the shower as water’s final drops fell to the bottom of the tub. Drip went the tears from Ana’s eyes as they splattered on the kitchen table.

She’d been away from the apartment for awhile, staying with family while authorities investigated the crime scene. It was quickly closed, labeled as a homicide.

Morgana's company board and lawyer had opened her will.

“A monthly allowance shall be allotted for Ana Clarion to pay for her to continue living in the flat, her schooling, and her general health and well-being. Once completing school, she shall inherit my title and position in my company.”

Ana had to excuse herself from the room as she wept again. She knew her mistress had been kind, but this grand display of generosity astounded her. It had been a blessing. Without this, she would've had barely enough to pay for the semester, despite all her best efforts to save up.

A short drive brought her back to the flat. Her footsteps echoed through the hallway. Pulling the keycard from her pocket, a quiet beep signaled her to enter. Again, everything was silent. Ana walked straight to her room, immediately setting to work on unpacking. Her few things didn't take long to put away. Then, she wandered in a daze through vacant rooms, staying awake with the city late into the night.

Eventually, her lost thoughts and feet brought her over to the sunroom, although the city lights illuminated it instead. Morgana's chair still stood, a centurion for a queen.

Ana first hesitated. She dare take the throne?

It was hers, though, despite all wishes.

Slowly, she lowered her weary body into the white wooden chair, took a breath, and gazed down into her new, divided kingdom.



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