

## Protector

by Juliet Robinson

I wonder how many people I have looked at all my life and never really seen? Because the child who has just thrown herself like a shield over a rotting synth causes me to pause. Forces me to see her. She lies draped upon the cowering machine and she glares at me. She's scared, but defiant. I shift my rifle, make sure she can see its aimed at her. She takes a jagged breath but doesn't move.

'Step away from the synth.' My voice is sterile and authoritative.

She shakes her head. She's terrified, but she still doesn't move.

'I am here for the synth,' I say. My gun doesn't waver, but neither does this small half-starved human shield.

'Not Polly.'

I stare at her from behind my visor. She's shaking, her whole-body rattles, but she doesn't back down. She's tiny, malnourished, no different from any other slum rat, except that she's brave enough to defy me, she's able to overrule the animal parts of her brain that are probably screaming for her to run, to flee into the twisting alleys that make up the Pritech Quarter.

I am used to people protesting when we come for the synths. But not like this - Who's going to look after me now? How am I going to get work done around the store without it? That thing cost me a lot of money. Am I going to be compensated?

Polly, an odd and soft name for a synth.

There's chatter over the comms, other patrol members reporting in, synths being brought back to the convoy, and I am still standing here considering this street rat and her Polly. I have a job to do, I have orders, not worth the trouble of not doing my duty, I need this job.

I lower my rifle and pull my holstered stun pistol, aim it at the child. I will use it, I would rather not, but I am here for the synth, and she is in my way.

'You have till the count of five,'

She doesn't blink.

'One,' I pause giving her chance, 'two,' another pause, 'Thr ...'

The synth moves. With practised ease I holster my stunner, swing my rifle up and aim it at the pair, not taking any chances. The synth gently curls a hand round the girl's bony wrist, its missing fingers, the index and the pinkie and the synthetic epidermis on its hands looks rotten. It can't rot, its not real, but this synth is old and that's why I am here for it. Another virus, the work of yet another smart-arse hacker is doing the rounds. The older synths have less protection, so it struck them harder, for the most part its just affected their motor functions causing erratic twitching and immobility. But others the virus has more dramatic effect on, like the service synths at Sukara Sushi the virus managed to take full control of their systems, and it weaponised them. After attending that mess, I won't be eating sushi any time soon.

'I will come with you Protector,' the synth says.

Its voicing is rasping and weary. It possesses a human like quality, the melancholic echoes of a life long lived.

'No!' the girl wails. It's the first time she's let fear and panic take control. Her stick thin legs scabble for a purchase on the synth as it rises to its feet, a desperate attempt to hold on. 'No, no, no!' Her arms tighten around its neck. 'Polly, please!'

The synth is now standing, the girl wrapped around it like a primate infant clinging to its mother, I have seen those in reruns of centuries old documentaries, visited them in the artificial zoo. With its full form unfolded, I can see the extent of its deterioration, the ravages which time have worked upon it. Its an antique, a Mark Two, maybe even a relic from the Mark One era. How is this ancient machine still functioning? Its survived decades, perhaps even a century.

'It will be ok. You will be ok,' it assures the girl whose face is buried in its neck.

Slowly and with great care it starts to detach the child. Initially she resists, fighting this removal with the same tenacious ferocity from earlier. But then as if a thread has snapped, a dam broken the fight goes out of her, her tiny body falls limp, the fierce spirit dissolving.

Her surrender fractures something within me, a shard of empathy pieces the calloused armour of my rank and role. Protector, here to collect, to bring the hacked synths in for repurposing, stripping down, recycling.

My rifle is heavy. 'I can't do it,' the words scrap against my throat.

With a shaky breath I lower my weapon. My mind races – scrub the data from my helmet cam, I've done it before, but for lesser sins. It's a gamble, I've a lot to lose.

I turn my back on the pair, heading away from the heavy shadows of this alley, the synths voice follows me through the gloom.

'Thank you, Protector.'

