



Chapter 12 ~ Bad Company

Responding to Eleni's request, I jump to my feet, dutifully slide a chair in from the vacant adjoining table, and place it across from me. "How much time did you get?" I ask Haley.

"Twenty-four hours."

"Yes," I pull one down for the Wog team. "Water?" I offer Haley my glass.

"Thank you, Robot." Haley graciously accepts. She studies the tiny droplets of condensation and then takes a sip.

"Her frame is powered by water. Oxygen and hydrogen, actually," I explain.

"Haley and I had a nice talk," Eleni says.

"Good, what did you gals talk about?" I have a rough idea, but I retake my seat, resisting the urge to run.

"The things we have in common, like resort hospitality, overbearing mothers, and you."

"What about me?"

"I told her about the nasty black scorpion game you played on me this morning, and she asked me if I knew about your friend, Miss Nyt."

Haley shrugs and gives me a little smirk.

"Correction, Nyt is not my friend; she is my toy."

"Robert, you told me Nyt is an evil goddess, and that I'm never to speak her name. Does that sound about right?" Eleni asks.

"That pretty much sums it up," I nod in agreement.

"No, you left out a few details. Is there something more you want to tell me about, Miss Nyt and her Nytmare?" Eleni asks.

"No."

"Robert, don't you dare say no to me," Eleni bares her teeth.

I close my eyes and touch my lips in thoughtful contemplation. "Did I tell you Nyt was once a friend of mine?"

"You most certainly did not."

"Maybe you weren't listening."

"Robert, tell me about her this instant," Eleni demands.

"I was going to tell you." I take my fork and poke at my plate.

"Robert, don't lie. Look at me and answer the question. Is there something more you want to tell me about Miss Nyt?" Eleni probes for a truthful reply.

"Yeah, I used to hang out with Nyt and her nerd sisters, and despite their good looks, all three are pretty much pure evil. Did I mention half of all time in this universe is Nyt time?"

"No," Eleni says.

"Did I mention Nyt wants to kill me?"

"Nyt is a bitch," Haley spits. "I will kill her. I warned you to stay away from that creature. You did not listen. I am not sorry for stupid Robots," Haley shakes her head in disgust. Sound of silence.

"In all honesty, the triplet's thing was only partly my fault. I made a few bad decisions, and things turned out badly. But they," I say loud enough for all to hear, even those lurking in the late morning shadows, "tricked me."

"They tricked you?" Eleni challenges. "Who are they?"

"The Nyx triplets, Nyt, and her sisters tricked me with their irresistible feminine charms."

"I see," says Eleni.

"Come on, give me a break. I was twelve. Eleni, remember when Father said, do not leave the planet?"

"Yes, last night after we said goodnight to Sara," Eleni agrees. "Daddy said something about never again."

"Exactly, you see, my first off-planet solo was in Father's old transfer truck. I took it without permission while he was on patrol."

"Where did you learn how to pilot a transfer truck?" asks Sara.

"It wasn't complicated. I learned by watching Father. I used to help him haul stuff to the dump. I'd planned on visiting my friends Rick and Marty on C-137, but somehow ended up in the Black Stygian. I fell into a lower dimension and was lost in shadow."

"Stupid, Robot," Haley remarks. Behavioral assessments are in her personal perspective programming.

"I asked you to co-pilot, but you said no, I have to work, so technically speaking, my getting lost is your fault."

"Not my fault. You lie. Bad Robot." Haley defends herself. Self-preservation is part of her defense programming.

"How did you get home?" asks Eleni.

"I almost didn't. Twenty-one days after leaving Sybaris, the triplets found me drifting in the deep. I was near death." I sit back in my chair. "They were friendly and carried me to their island deep in the dark. They fed me, bathed me, and nursed me back to health. They entertained me. They made me feel welcome in their home. They gave me a guided tour of the Black Stygian," I bite my knuckle, reliving a moment of terror.

Nyt whisperers in my ear, "You may not reject my embrace. I will follow you. My Guardians will meet you at the gate. You will feel my sting. I will burn you with my breath."

"I learned a lot while living with Nyt, some good, some bad. I learned how to traverse the nebula, get my ship in and out of the Black Stygian, how to slip through the Hell-Space dimensions, and such. That kind of information and education is beyond value. I stayed as long as I did because I had the selfless long-term best interests of mankind in mind. And to be totally honest, I thought the triplets were kind of cute." Case closed.

"Witches," Haley stands to condemn, "are not cute. They are non-corporeal, pernicious, self-serving entities that are unimaginably evil psychopathic mass murderers, committed to the eradication of you and all of humanity," Haley reminds and publicly reprimands.

Haley knows the triplet's hypnotic beauty masks a cruel, unspeakable evil, and so what? Haley's an AI. She's not afraid of Nytmare's. She wants to 'erase their program' for attempting to harm me. It's in her mothering nature program. I like to take a cautious approach when dealing with Nytmare's and their furies.

"I wouldn't call them witches to their face, and I hate to pass judgment before all the facts are in. Maybe the triplets are just misunderstood. I want to share my side of the story.

It's long and might be disturbing in places, so why spoil a pleasant lunch? I wanted this day to be nice. I wanted everyone to meet and be friends. Can't we all get along? I'll tell you, girls, the true story after we bid farewell to our dear father, and the brave crew of the Bone Fish, I promise," I lie.

I promise to recount the 'true,' that's a laugh, story of Nyt, Newt, and Nee. I will, of course, gloss over the graphic sexual details. I don't want to shock my shiny new sisters. Haley knows the 'true' story and is unsympathetic to my ongoing girl plight. It's written into her tough-love program. She says, 'Learn from your mistakes.'

"Robot, I am not warning you again," Haley threatens, but will always seek to defend me.

"Haley, what is your prime directive?"

"Keep Robot safe."

"Haley watches over me. She has ever since she found me chasing Su through the flowers in the atrium eleven years ago," I explain to my sisters.

"Why didn't you take Su's warning seriously?" Haley shakes her head in exasperation.

"I will next time."

"You no next time, bad Robot," Haley scolds and scowls.

"You haven't told us about Su," says Eleni.

"Yes, I have, Su's is Flower Flower Lady's secret Sybarinian spirit name."

"Follow your dreams, Robert," Eleni says. "You claim that Su introduced you and Sara."

"Yep, I guess so," Sara says.

Eleni studies me, then smiles. "Father said you would be a handful to handle."

Motta laughs, patting my arm. "Beeg handful Robots. Hangry. Rip now?"

"Rip." I snag my dinner plate and make a beeline to the buffet.