

The Cyborg de Milo

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Her real name (said Achmed of Alphard) -- or, rather, her original name -- was Venus Delmonico, and back when I first met her, she was as pretty and polite and refined a girl as you'd ever want to know. She had passed the entrance exam for Aristotle -- that's the university planet, you know -- and she was specializing in something terribly esoteric. I can't remember exactly what it was -- Poetry of the 3rd Century of the Galactic Era, perhaps. Anyway, she was supposed to already be such an expert that there were only two people in the whole of the Monarchy who could teach her anything more, and both of them were professors on Aristotle.

But three weeks before she was scheduled to leave for Aristotle, thieves broke into her parents' home. Her father tried to stop them and was killed for his trouble. Her mother fled, screaming for help, and they killed her too. Then, to cover their tracks, they set fire to the house, destroying everything she and her parents owned, including her collection of incredibly rare volumes of poetry. The only reason Venus herself wasn't killed was because she was studying at the local library.

I was a neighbor, and I was there, looking at the smouldering ruins, when Venus arrived. The police told her what had happened. I expected her to become hysterical, or perhaps to faint, but she did neither. Her face became expressionless, her voice became softer, and she questioned the officer in charge until she realized that she had nothing to learn from him.

Then she spotted me, walked over, and asked me to contact Aristotle and tell them that she would not be attending, either during the coming semester nor in the foreseeable future.

"But what will you do with yourself?" I said. "You mustn't withdraw from society because of this tragedy."

"I'm not withdrawing," she said calmly, almost coldly. "I have work to do."

"Your studies?"

A look of contempt crossed her pretty face. "No, Achmed," she replied. "Important work." She paused and took one last look at the ruins of her house, then turned back to me. "I will see you again before it begins."

And then she was gone.

I didn't hear from her for almost a year. I made some inquiries, but nobody else seemed to know what had happened to her either. Then one evening she showed up at my house without any warning.

"Venus!" I said. "Where have you been?"

"Preparing," she replied, as I ushered her into the living room.

"You haven't changed a bit," I said, staring at her.

She chuckled. "Thank you, Achmed. That is the first time I've laughed since my parents were slaughtered."

"What did I say that was so funny?" I asked, confused.

"I have changed more than you can imagine," she replied.

I looked her up and down. "I can't see it," I said. "I doubt that you've gained or lost as much as two pounds."

"I've lost more than two pounds," she said. "I've lost two arms."

I stared at her arms. "I don't understand."

She tapped the fingers of her right hand against her left arm. They made a strange, clicking sound.

"I had my arms replaced," she said.

"But _why_?" I asked, shocked.

"Because I didn't need them," she replied. She held her arms out. "I needed _these_."

"For what?"

"For my work."

"I thought your work was studying poetry."

"My work is killing people who deserve killing," she replied. She spread out the fingers of her right hand. "This finger shoots lasers. This one shoots sonar. This one is an energy pulse gun. And this one shoots bullets." Then she displayed the fingers of her left hand. "Flamethrower, atomic drill, spring-loaded knife, and a light that will not only illuminate the darkness but also pierce through fog and opaque alien atmospheres."

She tapped a finger against her beautiful blue eyes. There was that same noise.

"My eyes not only see everything you see, but they can also see into the infra-red and ultra-violet spectrums. The left one is also telescopic and the right one can become a microscope."

"My God!" I exclaimed. "What have you done to yourself?"

"I've circumvented millions of generations of evolution and become totally efficient," she answered. "From this day forward I am no longer Venus Delmonico. I am now the Cyborg de Milo. Like the Venus of old, I have lost my arms -- but unlike her, I have replaced them with something better."

"We have police to hunt down criminals, and out on the Frontier there are bounty hunters like Gravedigger Gaines."

"They work for money," she replied. "I work for justice."

"But -- "

"The police have been hunting my parents' killers for a year. Have they made any progress?"

"I don't know," I admitted.

"I do. They're no closer to solving the murders now than the night they occurred."

"I don't know what to say," I told her. "I feel that you have thrown your future away."

"Perhaps you have thrown yours away," she suggested, walking to the door, "by not doing everything within your power to guarantee that you live to _have_ a future."

It took her three days to track down her parents' murderers. I don't know what she did to them, but I heard that there wasn't enough left of them to bury.

She stayed in the Alphard system for another month. Then, after she'd hunted down our most wanted criminals, she decided to seek greater challenges, and she left for the Inner Frontier.

From time to time I read about her, or hear rumors of a cyborg woman who has killed men that even Catastrophe Baker would think twice about facing, but I do not know for an absolute fact that she is still alive.

But if she isn't, I sure wouldn't want to be in the same room, or even on the same planet, with the man who could kill her.

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"Einstein says she's alive, all right," said Big Red, reading his screen. "He met her just last week on Greenpasture II."

"Why?" asked Max. "What could either of them possibly want with the other?"

"She wanted his advice, of course," said Big Red. "Why does anyone meet with Einstein?"

"What kind of advice?" persisted Max.

"She still has two very human legs. She wanted his opinion concerning what to replace them with."

"How the hell many more built-in weapons does she need?"

"She has enough weapons," answered Big Red. "But that doesn't mean she can't improve her efficiency. Does she want legs that can stand up under four gravities? Legs that can let her jump forty feet into the air? Feet with suction cups on the bottoms, for walking up walls and across ceilings? Legs with compartments to hold energy packs, or possibly with refrigeration units to store food when she's away from civilization?"

"Okay, okay," said Max irritably. "I get the point."

"You know," mused the Gravedigger, "I _have_ heard of her. I never knew her name -- and some of the feats she pulled off sounded like tall tales. But I've been hearing about a cyborg woman for years now, a woman who can do all the things that Achmed says that this Cyborg Venus can do."

"Cyborg de Milo," Achmed corrected him.

"Yeah?" said Max, still looking for someone to argue with. "Well, if she's so close, how come she hasn't shown up at the Outpost?"

"Maybe she's not thirsty," said Nicodemus Mayflower.

"Or maybe she planned to, and either the navy or the aliens blew her ship to smithereens," added Little Mike Picasso. "There's a war going on out there, you know."

"If anyone took a shot at her, I hate to think of what would happen to them if they missed," said Achmed.

"How long as she been a cyborg?" asked Nicodemus Mayflower.

"Eighteen years," said Achmed.

"That's a long time to go around with a mad on," said Hurricane Smith. "Maybe she just needs someone to love her."

"She's not your type," said Catastrophe Baker.

"How do you know?" asked Smith.

"She's human."

Langtry Lily began hissing at Smith.

"It was just an academic question, my dear," he said quickly, prepared to duck if she spit at him again. She glared at him, and he took her hand in his and began stroking it gently. After a moment she relaxed and went back to scouring the table for those few grains of sugar she'd missed.

"Anyway, she sounds like one tough lady," said Little Mike.

"Can't argue with that," agreed the Gravedigger. "I thought I'd met the toughest women on the Frontier, but this Cyborg de Milo sounds like she could wipe up the floor with them."

"Who were they?" asked Willie the Bard, looking up from his notebook.

"You ever hear of the O'Toole Sisters?" asked Gaines.

"Nope," answered the Bard.

"I did," said Nicodemus Mayflower.

"Me, too," said Baker. "Weren't they named something weird, like Silk and Satin?"

"I thought it was Rubber and Lace," said Nicodemus.

"Close, but no cigar," said the Gravedigger.