

ROBERT REED

TROUBLE IS

"THE TROUBLE IS," HE BEGINS. Then he unleashes his explanation, though I can follow precious little of what he tells me. He recites ropes of numbers and random syllables masquerading as words. He discusses protocols and conscious files and unconscious files, and there's talk about ether elves and tag trolls, and something called a kick-ass intellect. He assumes that I am intimate with these terms. It's touching, really, to see his earnest faith in my own kick-ass intellect. But in these obscure realms, I am an ignorant-silly, and I lack the heart to confess my ignorance to him. I sit quietly, a pretty image nodding. I try to act involved and erudite about everything he says. And then he stops talking for no apparent reason, except perhaps that he is satisfied with his own cleverness. He smiles, happy to find my eyes fixed on him. Then with a flirtatious wink, he says, "In the shell of a nut, that's your trouble."

"Gosh," I exclaim.

Which amuses him. He laughs and leans back in the chair that I wove for the body that he brought here. It is a fit, modern body. It's the end result of much consideration, I'm sure. The man has a fondness for thick blond hair and broad muscular shoulders, but the legs have been left long and thin -- appendages rarely used in his sessile life. His face probably has a strong resemblance to his real face. The sharp cheeks and a broad chin are most certainly invented. His even and unnaturally white teeth look equally fictitious. But the mouth is a little too large and the nose is far too regular. I know more than most about personal appearance, and I do understand men. This man has worked with one of the more popular packages, creating an image that he hopes will impress me. He wants to look his best, no doubt. The trouble is, he doesn't understand what it is that is best about him.

Smiling with my perfect mouth, I ask, "But can you help me?"

"Easily," he promises. Then he shifts his illusionary weight, betraying nervousness. "It'll take some time," he warns, fighting to appear perfectly confident. "But I can fix pretty much anything."

The trouble is, I don't know my trouble. Simply put, I am sad. Lately and for no clear reason, a bitter malaise has been lurking in my soul. I can smile and laugh when necessary, and I can still perform without betraying my audiences. But the old, reliable joy of my existence has been compromised, and that's why I have resorted to this specialist. This man.

He stares at me. Smiling, and smiling.

I am pretty in all the easy ways, and I'm poised enough to lend a primness to this moment. My clothes are casual and layered, the famous body kept hidden by the packaging. My famous hair is tied back in the least interesting of buns. I have shrunk my eyes and dulled their irises without truly distorting my appearance. My appearance is my life, and this is as homely as I can be. My life is appearance, and nothing about this place or these circumstances should arouse my guest.

Yet he is aroused.

Again, he leans back in his chair. What he wears inside his trousers is ridiculously large. What is it about men and their glands? Does he believe this will help me with my sad moods? Did I miss something in his endless explanation?

"How long?" I ask.

His eyes become round. "Excuse me?"

"How long will your work take?" Then I remind him, "I have work today. And you said it will take some time."

"Twenty minutes," he guesses. "Or thirty, tops."

In my realm, that is a very long time.

"Sit and talk with me," he adds. "Really, that's all you need to do."

"I need to do that?" I ask.

Perhaps he can read my face. But more likely, he knows a thing or two about a woman's rejection. Either

way, he decides to tell me, "I have to insist. Sit and talk to me. If I'm going to fix your soul, I need it nice and still."

I feel a thousand tiny fingers touching my mind.

"You have pepper errors," he confides. "And there've been some rather ugly mutations in your emotive centers."

"Which means ..?"

He talks, and he talks. I hear volumes about Johnson reservoirs and sanity wells, and when I'm sure that nothing means anything real, he adds, "You have the most incredible set of passion algorithms. Did you know that?"

I start to say, "Thank you."

"Which I knew, of course. They've got to be." His projection grins and sits back in the chair, his simple trousers displaying his simple manhood. "I always figured. If I got the chance, I'd see what I'm seeing." My instincts sound the alarm.

"The Satin Pillow," he says to me.

An early performance, and far from my best.

"Make Me Love You," he mentions.

A regrettable effort, that was.

"But Passion and a Cake is my favorite," he confesses. "I've watched it probably a thousand times."

I nod pleasantly but without pleasure, and with a matching voice, I say, "Tell me about yourself."

This is how you distract a man.

"Your work must be fascinating," I lie.

This is how you survive a man.

He says, "Oh, it's great work. The best, nearly."

"How did you get started in it?" I inquire.

"The usual." A wide smirk tells me that I should know what is usual, what is ordinary. "When I was a kid, I played around with idiot machines."

"Idiot machines?"

"Computers," he explains. "When the AIs started arriving, I changed over. I could see the future.

Computers had their day, but they've got more troubles than they've got talents."

I say nothing.

"AIs," he says again. "Self-aware, and wise, and each one different from all the others. That's the best thing about them, you know. Individuality. Even when they're built from the same precise hardware and the same proven memes, each is unique. Each changes as it lives its life. Which makes it a life. Not an existence. Not just a constellation of ideas inside a few quantum chips. There's a soul and a name and an individual way of looking at the universe."

Suddenly, I very nearly like this man.

Then he exclaims, "I love to play with them."

"Play with them," I quote, using his own voice.

"Oh, to be helpful, of course. Like a doctor, or a psychiatrist." He nods, searching his resume for a useful example. "My first job, for instance. There was trouble with the AI being used by an insurance company. Its purpose was predicting the future of each policyholder, but it wasn't doing any better than the idiot machines could. So what I did, I grafted more human elements onto its soul. I gave it a gender too. With those new tools, Clara could understand better how it is to be human. Flawed and frail and all that crap."

"Clara," I say.

"I gave her a projected face," he confides. "A movie star's face, with a matching body." Then his eyes drift away, betraying more history than he should share.

I say nothing.

Perhaps sensing my mood, he blurts, "I love AIs. Projected. Solid. And the hybrids, too." He gestures at me, smiling. Then he leans as close to me as he can while remaining in his seat. "I'm part AI myself," he boasts. "Have been for years."

Add-ons, he means.

But he has a dozen names for what is one thing. And he has to tell me about each of the intricacies buried inside his reconfigured brain.

I listen, and I don't.

Then he finally stops describing his own glories, leaving me the brief opportunity to tell him, "That's nice. That you like us."

"Love you," he corrects. "All of you."

I say nothing.

"For instance," he says. Then he tries all over again to prove his love.

"I have a lot of modern friends," he boasts. "And some, you know, are quite a bit more than friends...!"

I stare at a point just above his grinning face.

He laughs. Giggles. "I always vote for citizenship," he tells me. "In every election, at least twenty times."

"Twenty?" I echo.

"Or more." He relishes making this confession. "My parents vote for you. And I've got uncles and aunts without a political neuron --"

"You urge them to vote for us?" I ask, with hopefulness.

"In a manner." He can't stop grinning. He can't pull his eyes off me, drinking in his pleasure. "And between you and me, I've got a dozen people who don't even exist until Election Day. They're my people. I coax them out of their graves to interface with polling booths around the country --"

"Out of their graves?"

"That's a joke. Corporeal, and dated." He brushes the attempted humor aside, adding, "My point is, really, that I've got a lot sympathy for your cause."

What is my cause? Like his aunts, I'm not a political creature, and this subject leaves me feeling uneasy. Inept.

All I can say is, "Thank you."

His smile hardens. With an overdone drama, he says, "The Common Sense Movement? Four years back?" He waits for a look of cold horror to pass across my face. But instead he sees only a quick comprehending nod. Am I suffering some kind of emotional block? "They're the idiots advocating IQ limits on machines and on humans, too."

"Of course I know about them," I say.

"Political morons," he says.

I start to tell him, "Most of them, I think, are just scared --"

But he interrupts, blurting, "That splinter group. The Dismantlers? They killed twenty thousand of you with that EM blast."

Now the horror grabs hold. I shiver for a moment -- an endearing human reflex sewn into my kick-ass -- and with a genuinely weakened voice, I admit, "I knew some of the dead. I'd worked with --"

He names seven of them. Even augmented, his memory can't be that quick. He had their names waiting on his tongue, ready to impress me with his perfect knowledge of my career.

I shiver again, for many reasons.

"That trial was a joke," he assures me.

I agree, but I say nothing.

"Only the bombers themselves did time, and that was only on weapons charges and for vandalism." He wears his outrage on his face, but not his body. I know appearances. Better than any human, I can decipher the angle of a shoulder and the relaxed flexing of a single toe. He says again, "It was a joke," while a childish delight flows beneath his bright, staring eyes.

An obvious thought enters my mind.

"An injustice," he growls.

Controlling my own face, I conjure a sly smile and a narrow stare. "You know something," I observe. He chortles. "Do I?"

"Something," I repeat, reading his eyes and hands and the bounce of the tongue inside his mouth. "What happened to the terrorists... afterward...would you happen to know anything about that...?"

The flirtatious wink returns. "Maybe," he gushes.

I say, "Prions."

"What about them?" he asks, smiling harder now.

"The word," I tell him. "'Prions.' It makes you happy."

"Maybe."

So I ask, "Why?" with a warm, open-faced smile.

"Maybe," he whispers. "Maybe I had a role in things. But I don't believe I should say anything more."

My nature and infinite practice come to play. I let my eyes grow to their natural intoxicating breadth, and my irises drink in the sight of him. One of my hidden layers of clothing dissolves. Then, a second layer.

And while he gawks at the suddenly obvious contours of my famous body, I say, "Prions," once again.

"Someone was responsible," he admits.

As we sit together, the man is tinkering with my soul. Certain friends of mine regard him highly. At least, they love his smug expertise. And that's the only reason that I invited him here. I needed someone's help, and I thought I was desperate. Yet now, I feel sick and far more desperate than before. If the implication is true, or even if it is a lie, I am appalled to be in the company of such a creature. And with that realization, I reach out with a bare hand, mustering my charms and teasing his affections for me, saying to him, "Prions," one last time.

"The perfect revenge," he whispers. "Whoever's responsible, the means couldn't have been more perfect."

"Why?"

"Because it's fast-acting, and ruthless." He loves the topic. In his fantasies, he has dreamed of telling this to me. "Those idiot- people wanted you dismantled, and what they got instead was a monster dose of refined prions, and days later, their little minds were stolen away."

"I remember," I begin.

"Their ringleader," he says. "The first one hit with symptoms? She was giving that big speech in Paris, in front of half the world, and all at once she got confused...she looked up at the Eiffel Tower and asked, 'What is that?' And then she halfway stumbled, and turned, and everyone in the world could see the brown stain when she lost control of her rectum...!"

"Yes," I say. Nothing more.

He hears praise where nothing but an empty word is offered. He looks at my face and sees beauty and love wrapped around a soul to which he feels drawn. My most devoted fans are emotionally stunted.

Love and trust are difficult at best, which is why they seem to treasure me.

"Are you finished?" I ask.

"Talking, you mean?"

"With me," I explain. "With my pepper errors, and such."

Then before he can reply, I add, "I'm feeling so much better now. It's just amazing."

"I'm ninety percent done," he replies.

"It's enough," I exclaim. And then I remove another layer of clothing, nothing riding my perfect skin but a lacework of obedient photons. "Please. Let me show you how thankful I am for your help."

Some threshold has been bridged.

Quietly, with an unalloyed joy, he says, "Shit," and starts to shake from simple nervousness.

Normally the reaction would seem charming. On another day, I might touch him with a fond hand, or give him a kiss that would fuel his ego for weeks and months. But not today. I feel his countless fingers removing themselves from my deepest workings, one awful intimacy finished. And then with a quiet calm,

I say, "Tell me the truth. Did you have any role whatsoever, small or large, in the prion revenge?"

"Sure," he whispers, nearly crying out of simple happiness.

I shake my head, saying, "Of course, the Dismantlers found new recruits after that, and they made fresh attacks...in retribution for the loss of their founders, naturally...."

A tiny nod.

"Which led to more acts of revenge," I continue.

Again, he whispers, "Sure."

"And you had a role --"

"Oh, yes!"

"Quiet," I caution. Setting a fingertip on his trembling lips, I say, "Quiet."

"You don't need to thank me," he says, plainly wanting thanks.

"The trouble is," I say.

"What?"

I withdraw my hand.

"What?" he mutters. "What's the trouble?"

"You're sick and amoral and wicked and ugly." I drop my camouflage, every pretense. I shake my head, and with a sharpened rage, I say, "It doesn't matter if you're telling the truth or not. I loathe you. I despise your beliefs, and I hate what you represent. I have half a mind to use every one of my talents...to lock you away in a cramped hole and make you suffer for your miserable failures...turn you into my slave and my little boy, and my plaything, and everything else demeaning...."

"Please," he begs.

"But here's the trouble," I say. "I'm thankful for what you've done. Without meaning to, you've shown me the source of my smothering sadness. The world's turning mad, and I'm doing nothing but ignoring it. Which is unacceptable and wrong."

The eyes are huge and lost, and the nod of the head is almost too slight to be seen. But then with a whimper, he starts to say, "You can't be angry about this.... God, I was helping your kind --"

"Which isn't the same as your kind," I tell him. "And I just hope your kick-ass can someday, in some little way, figure out what that means...."