

Less Than Human

by Zoë Blade



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A short story by Zoë Blade

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From the roof of the legal bookstore, I have a clear shot at my target, Jon Russell. He's sitting down at a table outside a café where Chancery Lane meets Fleet Street, sipping a cardboard cup of coffee. I briefly ponder how ironic it seems that he's actually bought a drink; it must be for show, although there's no way that he can tell that right now he has a very specific audience.

Even in the sunshine, the guiding beam of my tripod mounted rifle is brightly illuminating a thick circle of skin on his neck, just below his white beard, but even if any of the passersby can see infrared as well as I can, they won't have time to do anything even if they notice it. My eyes are already over two years old now, but they were expensive enough at the time to still be considered detailed even by today's standards. With their magnification, I can see the circle of light on his neck clearly, growing steadier with every passing second as a familiar cocktail of drugs calms my metabolism.

I try not to let the laser's fan distract me. The guidance beam's one thing, but the main laser, the one that generates the lethal pulse, gives off heat like you wouldn't believe. With the midday sun shining straight down on me, the laser needs all the cooling it can get, and the fan sounds like someone's standing next to me, drying her hair.

Once I can hold the laser still enough, I brace myself. For

just a few precious seconds, I let myself ponder the consequences of what I'm about to do. I'm about to execute this guy, but although he's broken the law, I'm no sheriff. I think about the effect that what I'm about to do will have on people who look up to Jon Russell, and that makes me nervous. I have nothing against them; if anything, I actually sympathise with their cause.

I put the thought out of my mind. It's unprofessional, a pause at best and a hindrance at worst. It's far too late to start developing emotions at this stage of my career, after months of training and almost three years of missions.

I pull the trigger, just for half a second, my eyes momentarily shielding themselves from the visible end of the beam on his neck. There's no recoil on my weapon, giving it the eerie feel of a simulation. The only sign that it's firing is a loud popping noise like someone squashing a bag of crisps. It's over in an instant. I can almost convince myself that I haven't done anything wrong, but not quite.

The bright circle is instantly replaced with a gushing stream of blood, pumping out in rhythmical bursts. His cardboard cup drops to the floor, and I unscrew the rifle from the tripod, duck below the top of the brick wall of the bookstore, fold up the tripod and put everything in my holdall, hidden beneath a pair of jogging bottoms.

In a fleece, t-shirt and designer jeans, I hopefully pass for someone on her way to one of the gyms scattered around the legal district, where people who help corporations sue their customers for a living would feel far too inconvenienced by taking a detour on their way home just to stay in shape. I put on a pair of designer sunglasses to cover up my designer eyes, as if anyone could spot their telltale trademark without being close enough to kiss me, then I pull the scrunchy out of my hair and tie it in again, keeping my dark brown ponytail as taut and professional as it is glossy.

By the time anyone can work out what happened to Russell and where the brief burst of energy came from, I'm

already half way down the fire escape. By the time anyone's dialed the emergency services, I'm already briskly walking down Fleet Street and out of the scene.

“Remind me why I had to kill Russell.” I drop my bag onto the desk of my boss, Mike Vegas, and it lands with a satisfying thud. Frankly, I'm glad to be rid of the evidence, if only until tomorrow.

“Because it's your job.” Mike slides the bag under his desk without even glancing at its contents, then finally looks up to meet my gaze. His facial expression looks as blank as usual to me, but a piece of software I installed on my eyes starts flashing up a translucent yellow warning sign, pointing out that he's making tiny involuntary movements - a momentary flicker of the cheek here, a curl of the lip there. Nothing a human could consciously spot, but my eyes have a sufficient refresh rate and resolution to pick up that sort of thing. The bottom line is that he's uncharacteristically uncomfortable, for whatever reason.

“You know what I mean,” I continue. “He was hardly violent. Don't you think that actually having him taken out was kind of overkill on Godin's part?”

“It's not our job to question our clients' motives, only their ability to pay. Besides, he was a liability. Copyright violation is one of the most serious crimes there is these days, given the structure of our fragile economy.” He gets up and makes his way to a shelf filled with various photos and figurines, where he pours himself a shot of whiskey from an expensive looking decanter.

As he glances back at me, I decline his offer of the same with a subtle shake of my head. Call me paranoid, but in my line of work, I never could feel comfortable if I was anything less than a hundred percent sober.

“They couldn't just have him running around pirating their intellectual property,” Mike continues.

“But it's *food*,” I protest. “It's not like it's a rich kid's luxury like music or films. There are homeless people I've seen eating decent meals thanks to him.”

“There are plenty of public domain staple foods. The homeless can eat the same handouts as the starving children in Africa: rice, grains, vegetables, pulses. No one's trying to stop people from eating. They have more than enough to live on.” He takes a sip of his drink. “All Godin want to do is ensure the uniqueness of the very specific dishes served in their chain of five-star restaurants, so don't give me any of that melodramatic bollocks about starving homeless people just because they have to eat boiled rice and steamed vegetables instead of *foie gras en brioche*.”

“It still doesn't feel right.”

“Which brings me to my next point. Have you given any more thought to my offer? Most people would kill for another free synaptic implant.”

“That all depends on the implant. The uplink to the Mesh and the map are all well and good, but I'm still not sure about suppressing my emotions. It just seems so... inhuman.”

“As opposed to all the drugs you take to calm you down as you make the hit?”

“At least they wear off after a few minutes.” I walk past the shelf and look out the window at the scenic view of the city, taking a moment to watch the clouds drift along in the summer breeze. The trees are such a vibrant green this time of year, they look somehow unreal, set against the pale grey concrete blocks that people waste their lives in. I quickly inspect all the nearby rooftops, making sure nobody's on any of them. Old habits. “You know, I've been thinking a lot lately, and between the implants and the drugs, I'm beginning to feel less and less like a real woman and more and more like some kind of machine, just efficiently fulfilling her job role and nothing else.”

“Efficiently?” I hear Mike practically choking on his drink.

I turn back around to face him. “Is there something wrong with my performance?”

"I've been running over the encrypted video feed of the hit that your eyes sent me."

It wasn't exactly a secret he kept from me that when I was on the job, my eyes sent an encrypted live broadcast straight to the office, hidden in the Mesh's entropy. Talk about your body betraying you. I had to take Vegas's word for it that he couldn't spy on me when I was off duty. It was something I tried hard not to think about every time I had a shower. Just the thought gave me the shivers.

"You stalled. Your heartrate had slowed down just fine, you were as calm as a cow, and yet you didn't fire until almost five seconds later. Why the pause?"

"He was drinking a cup of coffee at a table. I could tell he was going to be there for at least another two minutes. It made no difference."

"I didn't ask you if you thought it would make a difference. I asked you why you paused. I hire you because you're the sort of woman who knows better than to take unnecessary risks. Why did you wait so long?"

I let myself sigh. "OK, so I felt a *little* empathy towards the target. He'd never hurt anybody. I mean, I read his profile. He was essentially a good man."

"Which is exactly what I'm talking about. We can't afford to let your personal opinions and morals slow you down when you're at work. Those profiles are there to help you to better understand the targets, to better predict them, not to make you feel an emotional attachment towards them. You can do whatever you want at home, donate your wage to charity, I don't care, but when you're out in the field, I need you to be there for me, performing at a hundred percent."

"Yes, sir," I say reluctantly.

He talks into his glass as he swishes around the remaining dribble of whiskey, as if he has trouble meeting my eyes for once. "Someone will meet with you on your way out."

This takes me by surprise. I don't need the red warning label that's suddenly superimposed over my vision to tell me

that something's wrong. "Who?"

"A doctor. I'd like to run a few checks on you, just to be on the safe side." If he's not outright lying, then my software's convinced that he's at least hiding something from me.

"Checks?"

"Yeah. Checks." He takes another sip of his drink.

My paranoia starts to kick in as I realise how easy it would be for him to kill me, just as long as he took me unaware. For all my jacked up reflexes and painstakingly learned skills, in light of the new wholly artificial employees our rivals have been raving about, I'm starting to look a lot like an old Decca television set in a room full of Sony projectors. In all likelihood, Mike would have had me killed months ago already if I wasn't still so damned good.

"And Suzi?"

"Yes?" Our eyes meet again, at last.

"Do yourself a favour. Don't get emotionally involved. It's just business."

"I know." I walk out the door, not looking back.

"Well, all your tests show you're operating within specs," says the man that Mike claims to be some sort of medical doctor.

"That's a relief," I say sarcastically.

"Nevertheless, I'm still concerned about these certain imperfections in your performance. I just can't seem to find a neurological or physiological source for them."

"Did it ever occur to you that I'm only human?"

A grunt serves him as laughter. "Isn't that your main selling point? From what I hear, you're Mike's poster girl. Maybe even the whole industry's." He looks me up and down, and I fight the urge to pull out the knife I'm carrying and gouge his inferior eyes out. "Shame no one knows what you look like." Perhaps sensing my obvious discomfort, he changes the subject. "You know how few of you there are left in your line of work?" By 'you,' I assume he means humans. "Less

than a dozen, by our estimates. Worldwide. You're a rarity."

I let myself flash a brief smile. Professional pride.

"A dying breed, you might say," he adds with a chuckle. I feel my whole body tense up.

"There's one more test I'd like to carry out on you. It will take several hours, but thankfully I don't actually need you to be present for it so you can go and do whatever you like. I just need to take a relatively quick backup of your brain's neural pathways first, then you can go home and get some rest."

"A neural backup?"

"It won't hurt, I promise." Another warning sign pops up next to his face, and I finally decide it's time to kick into defence mode. There's no discernible change from an outsider's perspective, but inside my brain and its hardware, a dozen little defence applications are springing to life, waiting for my signal that they should start wreaking havoc. I usually slip into this mode several times a week, but in my line of work it's safer to err on the side of paranoia. "What's this really for? Insurance in case I mess up?"

"I can't slip anything past you." The doctor grins, revealing two rows of surprisingly well worn teeth. "Let's just say your employer doesn't like to take chances, and you're the best person in the business."

"From what you're saying, I'm pretty much the *only* person in the business."

"Exactly. Now, please, lie down here while I perform a quick scan of your neural pathways. It'll only take a few minutes."

For some reason, I black out.

I feel rain on my face, a light drizzle. My nostrils fill with the scent of wet plants and damp soil. I open my eyes to discover that I'm lying on a park bench less than a mile from my flat. That's never happened to me before: I've always stayed

awake just fine for brain scans in the past, both objectively and subjectively. I summon my clock application, its translucent display fading into my vision and out again for just long enough for me to tell that I was out for almost two hours, which is about right for the journey home.

I stand up, a little giddy at first, and tentatively start to make my way through the park. By the time I'm striding through the streets, stepping around all the puddles on the pavement, I've had a few minutes to reflect on the day's events. I decide not to let Mike or his crony doctor get to me. Let him be pissed off at me. I'm the last human assassin. Replacing me with an android would be a terrible PR move, and he knows it.

Still, I can't overlook the fact that *something* is terribly wrong, although it's probably just healthy paranoia on my part to assume that it concerns me at all. Maybe he's just shielding me from some dull business problems he's having. Whatever it is, I'm glad I don't have to think about it anymore tonight.

As I walk into my driveway, I think about how I can spend the rest of the evening. Maybe a hot shower followed by a stir fry and a nature documentary. Both the matter and the subject matter were popular torrents on my favourite Swedish tracker the previous week. It really puts my job into perspective when I'm reminded how the human race is the only species that isn't still wrapped up in daily life-or-death struggles for food, or at least, not for copyright free food.

As I approach my block of flats, for some reason I feel uneasy. I realise something's wrong, although I can't quite work out what it is yet. I switch to defence mode yet again as I press the palm of my hand against the security pad, look into the retina scanner and open the door as quietly as I can. To my surprise, my eyes' apps seem to have been upgraded. I have them set not to update automatically, which means they must have been switched while I was out from the brain scan. No wonder I lost consciousness: they'd been altering me, not

just passively examining me. I switch modes again, figuring that it's better to take my chances on my own, rather than risk firing off unknown software that could do anything from crash to sabotage me. I creep along the corridor, then open the door to my flat just as quietly.

I switch my eyes to +IR mode so that they overlay the infrared frequencies of the electromagnetic radiation around me over the top of the human-visible ones. The eerie glow of the walls and pipes is familiar enough, but the human sized and shaped blob glowing in the living room isn't. I switch the vision to only twenty percent infrared overlay so that I don't have as much information to distract me, and I brace myself.

I keep two katanas hung up decoratively on the wall in my living room, and with the element of surprise I might manage to grab one before the intruder knows I'm there. I have no idea if he or she is even armed, so I don't want to take any chances.

The blur moves like she or he is about to stand up, so I run into the room as quickly as I can and grab a katana. Despite bracing myself, I'm not prepared for what I see next.

* * *

The figure dashes for the other katana, then leaps back to the other side of the room so we can properly study each other. I can see her clearly now, from her thermal imprint to the deep brown colour of the artificial eyes hidden behind her epicanthic folds. In every discernible way, she looks identical to me. She's even wearing the fleece, t-shirt and jeans I picked out this morning. Even more incredibly, she looks just as confused as I feel.

"Oh, that's just perfect," she says. "Did Mike send you?"

"*What?*" I don't take my eyes off her. Her face is serious; her poise calculated. She's ready to attack me without warning, just waiting to know for sure that I'm a threat. I nod,

gesturing towards her. “Who *are* you?”

“Suzi Yamada,” she says.

“That's impossible!”

“Evidently it isn't.” She speaks without moving her head a single degree, watching me carefully. “Listen, I've had a *really* bad day today. Some phony doctor tried to kill me earlier, and it doesn't look like you're shaping up to be any friendlier.”

“You killed him?” I ask.

“It's a habit.” She lunges towards me, her sword pointed directly at my chest, aiming straight for my heart.

I manage to nudge her blade out of the way of my body with my own sword, redirecting the force of her sprint away from me. “I didn't come here to kill you. Can't we just talk like civilised adults?” I then sweep my blade around, aiming to slice off her bicep, but she similarly counters my move. In a weird sort of way, it's exhilarating to finally have a worthy opponent to fight - someone who could actually beat me.

“Let me guess.” She swings her blade around to my hip and I counter it. “The last thing you remember is Mike sending you to some creepy bastard who gave you a brain scan, then you just woke up somewhere strange.”

“How do you know that?” I try to stab her in the stomach, but she sweeps my blade away.

“Surely it must have occurred to you by now that one of us is an android.”

“Actually, I'd kinda been preoccupied.”

“So why'd they build you?”

“How do you know they didn't build *you*?”

“Because androids are damned near infallible,” she says as I take one last sweep at her neck. “And you're better than me.”

As I'm taking in what she's said, my sword's edge slices through the air towards her neck. I lunge backwards, managing to just barely nick her skin instead of slicing her head clean off. She starts to bleed a tiny dribble of bright red blood, but I know she'll live.

“You've got a point.” I stare at the blood. *Real* blood.
“And we've got a problem.”

“We can't trust each other?”

“Trust is simply a matter of being able to predict someone's moves. Since I'm a pretty good facsimile of you, I figure we can both predict each other just fine by working out what we would do in each other's situation.” It just doesn't feel right calling myself a copy. Have I really become a commodity? I keep my sword raised, on guard just in case the other Suzi tries anything.

“So what's the problem?”

“Our boss tried to kill you.”

“You mean you've had a change of heart?”

“I'd like to propose an alternative, but we're going to have to trust each other.” I throw my katana onto the floor as a sign of good faith. While I'm not exactly ready to commit *harakiri* just yet, suddenly my imitation of a life doesn't seem to be worth fighting for so hard. I figure that if either one of us lives on, I haven't really lost much. The gamble's worth it, because if she'll go along with my plan - and I'm pretty sure she will, because I'm pretty sure I would - then we can both get what we deserve.

Mike doesn't get into his office until seven the next morning. When he sees me, he freezes, and for just a second he reveals fear in his eyes.

“You're early,” he says.

I briefly wonder how much effort he's putting into keeping his voice steady, trying his best not to give away how scared he is, but that brief glance has already betrayed his fear. He knows the doctor's dead. I figure I should have taken him up on his offer a few months back to join in his poker games. I'd have made a fortune off him.

“I didn't get much sleep.” I figure I can trust him not to try to kill me yet because I haven't revealed my intentions. He's

far too trusting like that. The right move would have been to kill me as soon as he saw me in the room. But he can't do that. He needs me. So I turn my back to him, walking up to the window.

"Bad night?" asks Mike, feigning ignorance.

"You could say that. When I got home, I found an intruder waiting for me."

"My god!" says Mike. "What happened?"

"I dispatched her, naturally." The first rule in my line of work is never trust anybody, not even somebody pretending to be your friend.

"*Her?*" asks Mike, pretending to be shocked by her gender, knowing full well how rare human assassins are, let alone women.

I nod silently.

"Did she say anything?" asks Mike.

"No, nothing. She didn't have a chance to."

"Wow," says Mike. "I guess that's too bad, in a way."

I shrug. "We all get what's coming to us, eventually. She just wasn't smart enough to quit while she was ahead."

Mike sighs. "I'm not an idiot, you know. You have to understand, it's business, nothing personal." He's sweating now. I watch a little bead of perspiration make its way down his forehead. "How much do you know?"

I make my way to the shelf and pour a shot of whiskey.

"It's a bit early for that, isn't it?"

"Special occasion," I insist. It always helps to inebriate your opponent, to give yourself any edge over him that you can when it comes to reflexes. "I know how attached people can get to certain ways of doing things. The comfort of the familiar." I look at my glass thoughtfully. "I think it's time to make a clean break." I get another glass, pour another shot, and hand it to him. Raising my glass, I declare a toast. "To the future."

Mike has a dubious look in his eye like he knows I'm up to *something*, just not what. For a manager, he sure lacks

vision. He looks out the window at the ant-like people all those floors below, oblivious to the woman pointing a high powered laser rifle straight at him from the next block along, and raises his glass. "To--"

Despite giving my new business partner the order to fire, the laser burst still somehow makes me jump. I've never seen it up close before. On the receiving end, it's deadly silent, the only sound being the sloshed gurgles of the target. The smell, on the other hand, is overwhelming - searing flesh with a hint of burnt cotton from his shirt.

The great thing about biometrics is that they still work when the person's dead. With the help of Mike's eyes and fingers, it takes me less than five minutes to drain his bank accounts - both his company's and his own. *Nothing personal.*

Sitting on a bench in the local park, I take a second to close my eyes and just listen to the birds. I open them again just in time to see a young woman waving at me as she walks towards me. To an outside observer, she looks like she could be my identical twin. I wave back, smiling as I watch her familiar mannerisms from an unfamiliar point of view.

She sits down beside me. "How long do you reckon we've got 'til someone realises what happened to Mike?"

I shrug. "A few hours, maybe. Long enough to get a few things from our flat, move the money to a safe account, and walk away."

"Ah, yes, the money." She smiles sweetly, a smile I've never seen outside of a mirror before. "What do you figure we should do with it?"

"I say we take what's owed to us, enough to start a new life, and give the rest to Jon Russell's charity. He did bring about this turn of events, in a weird sort of way."

She nods. "I guess so." After a few seconds' silent reflection, she turns to look at me. "And us?"

“I've been thinking about that,” I say. “I think we could continue to do what we're doing, only freelance. If you're up for it, I mean. We'd have to really start trusting each other, but at least we'd get to choose our clients, and we'd get to stay human. Well, you would, anyway.”

That smile again, turning into a broad grin. “Twin assassins? No one would see it coming. It's a hell of an edge.”

“Exactly.” I smile back at my new business partner. Maybe things didn't turn out so bad after all.