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Enforcer Blues

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

ENFORCER BLUES

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

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in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Jessica Borsi

2019

To: Dean Michael Heithaus
Colleges of Arts, Sciences, and Education

This thesis, written by Jessica Borsi, and entitled Enforcer Blues, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Lynne Barrett

Vernon Dickson

Lester Standiford, Major Professor

Defense Date: March 7, 2019

The thesis of Jessica Borsi is approved.

Dean Michael R. Heithaus
Colleges of Arts, Sciences, and Education

Andrés G. Gil
Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2019

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

ENFORCER BLUES

by

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Florida International University, 2019

Miami, Florida

Professor Les Standiford, Major Professor

The science fiction novel ENFORCER BLUES follows cyborg and mob enforcer Gregory Rikard as he becomes involved with a conspiracy on Mars.

Ex-soldier and cyborg Gregory Rikard and his partner Platina work unwillingly for a crime syndicate until a charismatic stranger offers them the chance to rebel in the hope of claiming a better life. But when Rikard steals a dangerous prototype for the rebellion, he'll be forced to choose between his own interests, the future of Mars, and a single innocent life.

Like Phillip K. Dick's "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep," ENFORCER BLUES explores the relationship between the biological, the technological, and those caught in the middle.

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Enforcer Blues

Chapter One:

On the morning of the Burr Laboratory job, I chose to watch the sun rise over Lake Superior. I kept the vantage low, roughly head-height, so it might feel, just for a minute, like I wasn't standing in my efficiency's kitchen, on Mars, staring at a screen. There was a chop to the water that suggested wind, and I tried to imagine what I'd hear and smell if I were standing on that beach, on Earth. The natural white noise of the rolling waves was easy to imagine. Maybe a gull or two flew overhead, crying out. There was a chill in the air this early, but I could still smell the sun-warmed water and—

The air filtration system hissed, long and loud. Ozone-tinged air puffed past my face, and I caught the sharp scent of iron. Smells like Mars.

I focused on the screen again, on Lake Superior, but whatever pre-dawn magic that had been there was gone. Some days the illusion worked better than others. Today I was a planet away and it felt like it.

“Do you have to do that now?” I asked over my shoulder.

“Elevated levels of carbon dioxide detected in the kitchen,” Binks, my little robot butler, replied. “Continued exposure will harm your lungs, Gregory Rikard.”

“That's because I'm standing here. Breathing.”

Binks looked like a toy, two feet tall and all rounded edges. He balanced his cylindrical, pill-shaped body on a single wheel like a unicycle, rolling back and forth to self-balance. He was a prototype model (read: cheap) of an obsolete Personal Attendant line. All PA robots were programmed to monitor living conditions on Mars. Apartments not part of mission complexes or corporations, especially older ones like mine, were

notorious for fluctuations in atmosphere. Binks detected and fixed those problems before they affected my ability to breathe. Aside from my tablet, stun gun, and cybernetic eye, he was probably the most important piece of equipment I had to my name.

He hummed. The air filtration system hissed again.

“Could you do that later?”

Binks’ blue digital eyes focused on my face and narrowed. “Please excuse my attempts to prevent you from suffocating to death.”

And that right there was probably the reason his line was cancelled. It was also why I only paid a grand for tech easily worth five thousand credits. No one wanted a passive aggressive nanny-bot. I probably should have haggled. But—

“Binks,” I said, “you know I didn’t mean it that way.”

“Do I?”

His voice sounded stiff, but that might be because I was used to his moods. Aside from snapping at me a few times a week, he did an excellent job regulating my living space. Since I brought him home, I hadn’t once woken up gasping for air.

I turned from Lake Superior to face him properly.

“Well?” Binks bobbed back and forth.

No doubt he was trying to look severe, but his rose-pink shell and large eyes made that impossible. After all, he had been designed to look friendly and care for children. Plus, his near-constant self-balance bobble gave him a kind of drunken swagger. As if robots could get drunk.

Binks sure couldn’t, but the tech companies were always looking for the next big way for machines to relate better to us human types. They’re just like us—only not at all.

I resisted a smile and put on my best serious face. “The air in my apartment was never this clean before you were here.”

Binks’ eyes opened fully again. “Good. All I ask for is a little appreciation.”

I upgraded my expression to imperious. “I appreciate you.”

Apparently satisfied, he rolled to my bed on the other side of the room, hunting for dust. “Don’t just stand there all sol. You need your medicine,” he said.

He was right. I had a job to do, too. “Thanks, Mom.”

I watched him zip along my bed, pushing the blankets under the mattress with his pincher hands. For a little guy, he was pretty strong. His designers had been shooting for “nurturing” with Binks’ AI enhancements, but they went past it. That didn’t surprise me. Programming emotions was tricky, no matter how limited. In the last few years, Positron Design had nailed a few, but they were all negative. Anger, sadness, panic. Positive ones were harder. I’d never seen a convincing one—they were all too upbeat. Saccharine. Maybe people were just more inclined to believe the bad around them. Or maybe that was just me.

Turning back to the sink, I picked up where I left off. I measured a scoop of coffee beans and set about making my morning espresso. My ritual hadn’t changed much in the time I’d been on Mars—almost six Mars years, about eleven years Earth Standard. In fact, if my math was right, I was about two weeks out from my “haven’t set foot on Earth in this-many-years” anniversary. Maybe I should throw a party, just me and my old buddy Neil and Binks. My partner Platina, too, if she’d come. She wasn’t big on parties.

The coffee finished grinding. I spooned it into a mesh capsule and used a tamper to pack it in tight. I ran water through the purifier twice out of habit. By that time the

machine had gotten hot enough. I loaded the grounds in, flipped the switch, and the warm, nutty smell of coffee chased the ozone away.

I could feel myself really wake up as I stood there, breathing it in.

When it was ready, I picked up the cup with my mechanical right hand. I took my time adjusting the fingers so I wouldn't spill or crush the little glass cup. I concentrated fully on it, testing the grip.

My prosthetics allowed for a full range of movement despite the loss of my right arm and left leg in the war—the Unification, they call it now—back on Earth. And I could see, kind of, with my false right eye. It was more like impressions of the world, not as sharp as my natural eye, but somehow more exact, like looking through just one side of a binocular. My depth perception wasn't great, but the replacements allowed me to see, run, and function like a normal human. Well, cyborg, technically.

My artificial parts weren't as sophisticated as top of the line versions, in function or look. But my prostheses weren't there to look pretty. They worked just as well as exposed metal, wire, and mesh as they would if they were fitted with expensive fake skin. The cheap stuff burns right off. I have empirical evidence.

I balanced the cup between thumb and forefinger. Keeping my arm under control, I brought the cup to my nose. This close, the smell was heady and a little bitter.

Crushing things on accident happened more often than I liked to admit, so I gave myself this test every morning. All it took was for my attention to wander for a moment and voila. I had a whole toolbox of broken stuff. And I avoided shaking people's hands.

But, hell, I didn't have to worry about burning myself.

Lake Superior was still rolling in and out on the monitor. I caught another look at it out of the corner of my prosthetic eye and this time it wasn't magic. Nostalgia hit me like a sledgehammer to the gut. The last time I was home—

“You're not doing yourself any favors,” Binks said.

I drew in a lungful of coffee'd air. “I don't know what you mean.”

“You live *here*.”

“Not my choice.”

“But it is your reality.”

I lowered the cup. Binks was uncharacteristically still. “I know.” I shut Lake Superior off.

Binks went back to his tidying. Maybe it was easy for him to accept where he was because he was a robot. But I thought it had more to do with Binks being developed and built here. This was home to him. Even after all this time, Mars wasn't home for me. It was exile.

The espresso was cooling off and the smell wasn't as strong. Behind me, my tablet chimed once, then again a few seconds later.

I set the cup down and crossed the room to my bedside table. I stepped over Binks and he sent an indignant burst of static my way.

My tablet was folded, so I opened it to about the size of my hand and woke up the screen. The first message was from Laird, my superior. It contained a time—0900 Mars Standard—and a set of familiar coordinates. I didn't have to check to know they were for the boss's headquarters in Marathon Valley. I was only ever called there when something major was about to go down.