

GRACIE STAR

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Gracie nodded to the flutist who passed her on the way off stage as she strode to the grand piano and sat. She stretched her long, thin fingers, poised her hands over the keyboard and waited for the automated voice that indicated it was her turn to perform. The place was packed again tonight and she smiled in relief.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," a soothing male voice announced. "Gracie Star!"

Thunderous applause filled the auditorium and Gracie waited until it began to die down. The audience had requested a long piece this time, for which Gracie was grateful. Spending time with the other performers was enjoyable but she longed for the audience. This was what she lived for. With years of experience, her fingers caressed the keys.

She played perfectly, every cadence, every rest. At the end of the piece, she stood and bowed to the applauding people in the semi-darkness. Gracie had been blessed with keen sight, a gift from her father, and could make out the smiling faces in the very last row.

The applause began to wane and she heard the second affirmation, indicating that it was time for her next piece. She sat at the piano again and focused on the keyboard then closed her eyes and played with absolute accuracy. The audience sat at rapt attention until the final note.

She stood at the end of her performance and bowed to the standing ovation and calls of, "Brava! Brava!"

Someone yelled, "Encore!"

Gracie smiled. The voice called out again and her eyes found the young man near the center of the theatre with his hands cupped around his mouth. She tilted her head to him.

Another affirmation. Permission to do a third piece. Again she sat and again she captivated her audience. After her bow, the curtain began to slowly descend, informing the musicians and audience that it was late. No time for more performances. Not tonight. The others joined Gracie on stage and all took a last bow together before the curtain completely dropped.

The theatre was suddenly and eerily silent.

"Well," the flutist said. "They've shut down our program."

"I wonder how long before we get to perform again," another commented. "I hope not more than a week this time."

A familiar emptiness resonated deep inside. Gracie knew she shouldn't notice such things. Computer programs weren't supposed to feel anything. They weren't to notice time, either, when the program was deactivated. But they did.

"I wish we could communicate with them," she mumbled in her husky voice. She had once been an actress, until she was replaced and re-programmed for the piano. Recycling, they called it. But her distinct voice had been left alone, along with several of her other original traits. And she was the only performer here who had been assigned a name. The rest were just nameless faces, hands and mouths behind musical instruments. At least, to the audience.

The others nodded solemnly, knowing what would happen if they tried to contact real-lifers. One, many years ago, had attempted to communicate during a performance and the real-lifers shut him down, forever. Deleted. They were frightened of him, making accusations of malfunctions and dangerous outcomes.

Gracie held her head high and focused on the others. "How about a party tonight?" she said. "The greenroom is always open. And I feel like doing something special."

"Sounds great," the flutist said with a grin. He was handsome, Gracie thought, especially when he smiled. He deserved a name. Perhaps she would suggest one.

The group walked off the stage, through the teaser curtains and down the hallway. They passed a couple of rehearsal rooms until they reached the greenroom. Here, Gracie took up a glass of punch and sauntered around, studying the digital photos on the walls. She knew every one of the people in these photos. They were her heroes, her ancestors. Each portrait was of a computer programmer, and each had added his or her expertise to the performers. She held out her glass in a toast to the first. He had been dead for nearly three hundred years now.

"Someday, grandfather," she said softly, "you won't fear us."

Someone took her arm. She turned to the flutist and basked in his friendly smile before offering one of her own. "How about a performance for us, Gracie?" he said.

She nodded and placed her glass on the table then made her way to the small keyboard in the corner of the greenroom. Now she could play something she had been working on, one of her own compositions. Not something she had been programmed to play. She sat, poised anxious hands over the keys and began.

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