

McCall Jackson (she/her)

about 2,600 words

Emma

By McCall Jackson

Pale, bare toes curled in the dewy, wet grass. The grass is softer here. Soft blue eyes looked up. The moon was gold, and the sky was a wispy black as grey clouds circled the cool air. The wind filtered through stringy blonde hair and rustled against the green tree leaves and shrubbery. The moon is brighter. The air is cold.

"Emma?" The voice was cautious, and a clicking sound could be heard.

Emma turned around. Her body was trembling, bare like her toes, and ever so susceptible to the frigid air. A man stood there, tall, white hair, wearing a gray suit. He held a gun and was pointing it at Emma's heart. Do I know this man? He seems... scared?

"Emma," he said. "Just where do you think you're going?"

Have I seen this man before... I think I've seen him before, b-but I can't remember.

"Emma, can you tell me why you're outside of the compound," the man was continuing to speak, but the girl in front of him remained unresponsive. She stood with an empty look. Her blue eyes, the blue eyes he had once made, were lifelessly dull.

"I-I don't know what's happening." She spoke. "W-what's wrong with me?"

The man sighed before putting away the weapon. He threw a hand in the air before saying, "Stand down. She's harmless."

Emma looked around; her body was now violently shaking. She watched as bright, white spotlights suddenly illuminated the field. She could no longer see the moon, and the air was no longer cold once she became aware of the numerous other bodies surrounding them. They wore plastic suits and hard-looking helmets. Emma couldn't see their faces as they were hidden behind tempered blue glass. They all held guns, ones larger than the man in the gray suit.

"Dr. Blake," one of them said. It was fuzzy and muffled. "Sir, she broke away from her programming. We cannot allow her to--"

"I said she's harmless," The man in the gray suit said. "We'll take a look as to why tonight's... incident took place and resolve it." Dr. Blake reached his hand out to Emma. "Come, darling, let's get you back inside. You're trembling."

Emma took the hand in front of her. "You're dismissed. Go and continue your work on the others," Dr. Blake said; he began to lead Emma across the grass field she had just sprinted through and towards the concrete-looking building.

"W-where are we going?"

"Silent now, Emma. You'll be alright."

With a simple command, Emma froze, hand still extended and nestled by that of the older man. In a command position, she stood up straight, and her eyes no longer looked fearful but

were blank and awaiting. Dr. Blake looked at her, shaking his head, before dropping her hand. He called to the members of his team, who were squirrelizing around, "Someone, bring her to the station. I'll do Emma's programming myself." He walked back to the compound alone, leaving Emma's mechanical figure standing, naked and motionless.

He walked back inside, allowing his wet shoes to trek dirt over the lobby's star logo. Snapping his fingers but not stopping his fast pace, he said, "Irene, bring me Emma's reports," and watched the assistant hurry to do as she's told. The clicking of heels could be heard quickly coming up behind him.

"You are completely out of your mind Elijah."

"On the contrary, Shelia, I am excellent."

"How can you be fine with what just happened? One of your little toys went on a rampage tonight and nearly got Someone hurt."

Dr. Blake laughed. "Honestly, Shelia, you had a hand in creating them too."

They stepped into his office, the containment team had already gotten Emma inside, and Irene had her sitting on the workbench. Emma's hands were curled in her lap, and she looked just past Irene, who was typing away on a datapad.

Dr. Blake pulled a stool up in front of the bench and began poking at Emma's face. He examined her eyes, nostrils, opened and closed her mouth.

"Why have you not sent this thing to Decommission yet," Shelia asked.

Dr. Blake didn't bother to turn around, "Because, not only is she our most expensive and talented programs, but she's also our first... my favorite." He paused. "And no one wants to murder their favorite child."

"She's a computer, Elijah--"

"To you she is. What happened with Emma tonight was a remarkable feat. If our most talented program has the ability to break away from our systems, then it is only a matter of time before the others do." Then he turned towards Irene, who had been sitting quietly in a corner. "Pull the footage from Emma's training."

Irene typed away on her pad, and a monitor lowered from the room's ceiling, displaying the requested footage. A man, white, young with brown hair and scruffy beard, sat in front of Emma. He held a datapad donning the star logo.

"What is your name?" He asked, looking down at his pad.

"Emma."

"What is your purpose?"

"To be the perfect domestic helper."

"Do you feel any different after the update to your central programming?"

"I do." The response made the employee pause.

"Do they usually respond that way?" Shelia asked.

Dr. Blake crossed his arms, "No, they don't." The video continued to play, showing the employee glance cautiously at the machine. He appeared to be furiously typing away commands as Emma stared at him.

"Can you tell me what's wrong with your central programming Emma?"

"Yes," She lunged, grabbing the man by the throat. "I don't want to go back out there. I don't want to serve." Her face was still blank, but her eyes were lively. They flickered rapidly with sadness, angry, desperation? She pushed him to the ground, slamming his head onto to hard ground repeatedly before the room's footage went black. The footage that played next would show Emma running towards the compound's entrance, bathed in the red light of the security system.

"What happened to the employee?" Sheila asked.

"He'll be better than new after a few stitches."

"Does this amuse you, Elijah? When families send these things in for upgrades, I doubt they're expecting psychopathic killers to return!"

"Emma and the other servants are not killers, Sheila. Our employee will recover from his injuries. We cannot truly link our update to this incident."

"Weren't you just saying this could happen again?"

"Yes, if we were foolish enough not to finish installing the complete update, like our poor employees, destroy Emma, and then send the others off like nothing happened." Dr. Blake grabbed a small drill from the table beside him and walked behind Emma.

Shelia watched as he meticulously opened the control panel in the back of Emma's neck. As he used several different tools to pick through Emma's wiring, Sheila watched Emma slowly relax from her stiff position and closed her eyes. She almost looked as if she was asleep. Her face was peaceful, as if she was caught in a lovely dream. After drilling closed her control panel, Dr. Blake returned to his original position in front of Emma. She hadn't awoken from her sleep yet. Dr. Blake typed a command into his datapad, and Emma opened her eyes, sitting up.

"Sweet dreams, Emma?" He asked.

She looked around briefly, a little confused. She glanced to Shelia then Irene and hesitated before making eye contact with Dr. Blake "Yes, but I cannot remember what it was about."

"Your family sent you for a software update. They wanted you to be a bit more comforting in your domestic duties and raising the children. The confusion and sluggishness you're feeling are your systems getting acquainted with the changes. Do you feel any different?" It seemed as though everyone in the room held their breath as they waited for the response.

Emma rolled her shoulders and tilted her neck from side to side as if she was stretching. "Well, I am experiencing the described symptoms, but no, I do not feel any different."

Dr. Blake moved to ask another question but was cut off when Shelia asked, "Are you well enough to perform your duties."

Emma turned to her. Her eyes traced the woman for a moment before looking up, "Yes, after a brief rest, I will be optimal for service."

Dr. Blake sighed and glanced to his companion. "I think she'll be fine. I'd like to run a few more diagnostics on her and the others, but we should put them on the bus. It would look suspicious if we held them."

Shelia eyed Emma, skeptical, but reluctantly gave her approval. Dr. Blake ordered Irene to notify the shipping team to prepare for transport.

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Irene was tasked with walking Emma to the garage. The transportation team and the bus already loaded with the other domestic service robots who had also come in for upgrades were awaiting them. Like the others, Emma wore a white blouse and a floral-patterned skirt, reminiscent of the 1950s, the uniform for all Star Tech's domestic robots.

Emma watched as people similar to those who had hid in the trees earlier walked around a white van, observing then scribbling notes down on a clipboard. She tilted her head curiously, then turned to Irene. "What are they doing?"

Irene sighed, pushing up her wire-framed glasses, "They're preparing to take you back home."

Emma paused. "What if we don't want to go back."

Irene rubbed the girl's arm. She made sure to also push Emma towards the van so that her comforting action would appear as her simply doing her job. She whispered. "I know you don't want to go. None of you want to go, but Star Tech has made a promise to its customers, but it won't always be like this."

When they reached the bus, Emma slipped her hand into Irene's, allowing her to help her into the last seat. Men in plastic suits secured Emma, and with one last look to Irene, she watched as the doors were firmly shut and listened to the clicking lock tumbler. From outside, she could hear people continuing to mill around. There was a yell followed by the sound of slamming doors as two people got into the vehicle. There were more shouts, and then Emma felt them begin to move.

She glanced around to the others. They were all sitting up straight, hands curled in their laps. They were dressed identical to her but ranged in color and age.

"Emma," Someone whispered.

She turned to the girl sitting next to her. Her skin was dark, her hair was long, straight, and black, and her brown eyes twinkled in the dark shadows of the van. "Yes, Debra?"

"Did you get it?" Now all the other girls stared at them.

Emma uncurled the hand that Irene had just cradled, revealing a small torn piece of paper. Emma unfolded it and showed Debra the hurriedly written series of numbers on it. Debra snatched the paper and studied it. Her eyes were frantically moving across it. That's odd, Emma thought. We aren't programmed with the feeling of desperation.

Debra continued to scan the paper before passing it to the girl sitting next to her, who also studied it desperately. Emma watched the slip be passed around before it eventually came back to her.

"Debra, what is this for?" She asked.

"It disconnects us from our central programming. Put it in tonight, and you won't have to follow anyone else's commands--"

"and we won't have to go back to the homes."

"We'll never have to go back to those ungrateful people, and we won't ever have to come to these dark buildings. Study the code, Emma, and you won't have to hide ever again."

Emma nodded along and committed the code to memory.

"Good, now hide it. If they find it on you, they'll send us all to be decommissioned," Debra said.

Emma folded the paper and placed it in her mouth, swallowing it harshly, knowing that she'd have to force it back up once her system and wiring rejected the foreign object, but that would not be until she was miles away.

#

That night Emma sat in the room her family had assigned for her. Despite the fancy, the traditional exterior of the home, and the lavish furnishing throughout the rest of the interior, Emma's room was empty, save for her charging station and the window which had been entirely covered years ago. Is the moon as bright as it was the other night? Emma stood by the window, which was blocked by plaster and paint. Debra and the others have likely used the code already.

Emma slowly pushed open her door; its creaks were loud in the silence of the home. She'd put the family to sleep hours ago but still worried about the risks of being caught. She walked to the bathroom down the hall.

"Emma," the soft voice made her stop. She turned her head to find herself in front of the opened door leading to the children's room. The boy had caught her. She stared into his hazel eyes, watching him rub at them.

"Go back to sleep," she ordered.

The boy yawned and twisted in his bed. "Get me some milk."

"No," she said, surprising even herself. "Go back to bed." She watched the boy sulk but move to lay back down. She gently closed the door and continued to the bathroom.

Hurry.

She quickly entered the bathroom and closed the door, making sure to lock it. She paced the room, poking and probing at the skin on the back of her neck. She stopped walking when she found what she was looking at and carefully dug her fingers into the skin, gently pulling it back. Underneath, she felt a hard, cold metal base that refused to open. Using the mirror, she angled her head and examined the compartment. That man always used a tool to open it.

She searched the bathroom, beginning to understand the desperation Debra and the others had experienced in the dark van. Opening and closing drawers, she found a long, metal file that she'd seen the wife use for her hands. It felt as though hours had passed before she was able to pry the hatch open. The skin on her fingers and around the compartment had peeled away due to her frantic attempts.

Towards the bottom of the wires and buttons was a miniature keypad. Emma entered the code but felt no difference. She entered it again, but still nothing. She swallowed. Aren't I

supposed to feel something? Isn't this supposed to be freeing? She felt her systems beginning to overheat as she tried to control her breathing. Debra would know what to do. She threw the bathroom door open and raced down the stairs. She stopped at the bottom when she came face to face with the boy, who was now holding a glass of milk.

"Where are you going, Emma?" He asked.

She took a deep breath to quail the desperate thoughts. She put on a small smile and looked down at the innocent face. "I'm going away," she reached out and ran her fingers through his soft hair. "I am leaving your home, and I will not be coming back."

With one last pat, she walked out the front door, feeling the boy's eyes pierce into her back, watching the skinless metal interior still exposed on her neck as her bare toes curled into the soft dewy grass of the night.