

MARTHA WELLS

A
MURDERBOT
DIARIES
SHORT
STORY

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING SERIES!

HOME

HABITAT, RANGE, NICHE,
TERRITORY

HOME

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MARTHA WELLS



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“Is this really a good idea?”

There is no way to honestly answer that question without being insulting, so Ayda Mensah opts for, “If I’d known the survey team might almost be murdered in a corporate sabotage attempt, I would have picked another planetary franchise.”

She’s in one of the Planetary Council offices on Preservation Station, talking to Ephraim, a fellow councilor who was planetary leader last term and should know better than to have this conversation. The office is a bland one meant for temporary work, the chairs are comfortable but it’s undecorated, the walls a default cool silver blue. It’s making her uncomfortable in a way it hasn’t any other time she’s been in here. Maybe someone’s adjusted the local environmentals badly; the air feels still and oppressive, though it’s not warm. It makes her skin creep.

It’s the exact same size as the room she was held prisoner in on TranRollinHyfa.

It would be unbearable, if not for the message packet pinging in her feed.

Ephraim sighs. “That wasn’t what I meant.”

She knows it wasn’t what he meant, and her answer is a lie, anyway. Knowing what would happen, she wouldn’t choose a different planet, a different bond company. Because then SecUnit would still be someone’s property, would be waiting for the contract where the negligence or greed or indifference of its clients got it killed.

If not for SecUnit, Ayda Mensah would be dead, her body dumped in a recycler somewhere on TranRollinHyfa or some other supposedly neutral transit station, for the value of neutral that meant “whatever the highest bidder wants.” It’s difficult for Ephraim and the other councilors and her family and almost everyone else she’s spoken to since returning home to understand that. But none of them have any real experience with the Corporation Rim, except as a source of cartoonish villains in media serials.

Ephraim adds, “No one is questioning your response to the original situation.”

Ayda’s lost the thread of the conversation and unlike SecUnit, she can’t run back a recording to see what she missed. She needs to suggest that they leave this room and go up to the council office with the windows looking over the admin foyer but they need privacy for this talk. And even though Ephraim is a friend it would be a sign of weakness she can’t afford. Oh yes, she was unfairly intimating that he had said that her choice of survey world was at fault. It’s not and that’s not what he meant, but she wants to make him say what he does mean. She steeples her fingers. “That was the inciting incident.”

Ephraim is frustrated and he only wants the best for her and for Preservation, which is what makes this so awkward for both of them. It’s hard to make a proper argument when you’re both on the same side. “You’ve brought a corporate...” He hesitates. She wonders if he was going to say *killing machine*. He finishes, “A product of corporate surveillance capitalism and authoritarian enforcement to the seat of our government. I agree your reasons were good, but this is a situation that has to be addressed.”

There we go. That's something she can work with.

The killing machine in question has just sent her yet another message packet. They're piling up in her feed and if she would stop encouraging SecUnit by opening them, it would probably stop. They're all formal requisition forms for Preservation Station Security, requests for increasingly improbable armaments. She responds to the latest with *I don't even know what that is*. It's a good thing she understands SecUnit's sense of humor. To Ephraim, Ayda says, "The situation is a person who saved my life, multiple times, and the lives of the rest of my team."

SecUnit is also a person who is not supposed to have access to the requisition forms or to Station Security's systems at all. She knows SecUnit is not so much taunting her with its abilities as refusing to pretend to be anything other than it is. And that's for the best, because being honest about that is the only way forward.

If she's honest with herself, which she hasn't been, not since arriving back home, she would admit that being in this room has put her in a cold sweat. It helps that Ephraim's here, but she would have to get up and walk out if not for those message packets.

Ephraim is a good person and he won't make the argument that SecUnit is not a person, not qualified as a refugee under Preservation law. Because they are all refugees in the Preservation Alliance, descended from people who were left to die because rescue was deemed not cost-effective. Because they stand on this station built from the ship that saved their grandparents' lives, that helped them for no other reason than because it was there and it could. Instead Ephraim asks her, "Can you separate that person from the purpose they were created for?"

Now that's an argument. SecUnit is a person, a potentially very dangerous person. But right now, Ephraim and the other councilors who agree with him have no evidence to suggest that SecUnit would act on that potential.

The problem is that part of her mind still believes she's on TranRollinHyfa, held prisoner by corporate murderers. Being aware of that should help, but it doesn't. The message packets echo that moment when SecUnit pinged her feed and she knew rescue was possible. The moment she became a herself again and not a bargaining chip. That helps. Ayda spreads her hands, palms up and open. "I couldn't. The person separated itself."

Ephraim's mouth turns down, as if he wishes she had a more definitive answer. She knows he doesn't like this conversation any more than she does. They would both like to pretend that everything is all right.

Ayda wishes she could separate herself from everything that happened. She can't.

They talk for another twenty minutes, back and forth, and reach no conclusion but a wry agreement that the rest of the council will also want to have this conversation, probably several times. As Ephraim gets up and Ayda can finally walk out of this damn room, she replies to SecUnit's latest requisition form. It's for a gunship nearly the size PortFreeCommerce's transit ring: *I think you made this one up*.

★ ★ ★

The Corporation Rim has always been a slave state, though it calls its institutionalized slavery "contract labor." The production of human/bot constructs is just a more horrific twist, a mental

slavery as well as a physical one. At least victims of contract labor are free to think their own thoughts. But we tell ourselves that constructs aren't aware of their predicament. What SecUnit makes us realize is that this is not true; they are all aware of what they are and what's been done to them. But the only choice they are ever offered is obedience or pain and death.

Ayda transfers her attention from the feed document to Bharadwaj seated in front of her. They are in her office lounge, on the comfortable chairs near the balcony that overlooks the station admin's central atrium. The large space is lit by floating overheads that imitate the natural glow of the system primary, and the office lights are tuned down to take advantage of it. It's quiet out there, except for footsteps or fragments of conversations as people pass by. No music, no babble of advertisements forcing their way into your feed. Ayda tells Bharadwaj, "It's good work. I think you have a chance to persuade them."

Bharadwaj smiles a little, looking out toward the atrium. Ayda has a flash of her sprawled on rocky ground bloody and torn, Volescu screaming somewhere off camera, and winces it away. Bharadwaj agrees, "I think I can persuade them to enact more protections in our own territory. But it feels like so little."

She's right, of course. "Until bots have full autonomy, this problem is not going away."

And the other problem is that SecUnits aren't bots and aren't human; they fall between the cracks of the existing protections even in the Preservation Alliance. But Bharadwaj's idea for a documentary series has real potential. It can influence people in every corner of the Alliance and, if they're lucky, infiltrate the Corporation Rim in a way nothing else can. But in the best case scenario, it will take years. And even then... "It's going to be difficult. The propaganda has been so effective."

Bharadwaj's smile turns wry. "It worked on us."

"It did." Ayda had known what constructs were, but the full reality of it hadn't hit until she had listened to SecUnit coax Volescu out of the pit as the jerky video had played in their team feed. Along with the horror of what had just happened, there had been the dawning realization that they had fallen into thinking of their SecUnit as a faceless machine, a convenience, an interface with their security system. But it had taken a sentient being who understood fear and pain to talk its way through Volescu's blind terror.

Bharadwaj's expression turns serious. "We can't ignore the fact that SecUnits are capable of being very dangerous. Glossing over that is just going to make our argument look ridiculous." Her mouth twists. "They're every bit as dangerous as humans."

Except humans can't fire energy weapons out of their arms, calculate the exact right moment to jump off a rushing vehicle and survive, or hack the systems of an entire transit station port, Ayda thinks. Then answers her own point: No, humans have to hire someone to do all that for them, or enslave a bot/human construct. She makes a note of that in the open work document in her feed. It's a theme that Bharadwaj might build a persuasive argument around.

Her feed notifies her of a message packet, addressed to her and Bharadwaj. It's a link to some sort of catalog weapons supply service. Ayda sighs, mostly amused. "It's listening to us right now." It must be hard to respect other people's privacy when you've had to fight and scheme for every minute of your own. Hard not to be paranoid when you remember all the times your paranoia was justified.

It's about being treated as a thing, isn't it. Whether that thing is a hostage of conditional value, or a

very expensively designed and equipped enslaved machine/organic intelligence. You're a thing, and there is no safety.

And she tells herself: you're being very foolish. Because you were a hostage for a period of days, and it was a minor inconvenience compared to what Murderbot— No, SecUnit; she's never been given permission to use that private name. What SecUnit went through.

And if someone else was in her position, she would tell them how unhelpful comparisons like that are, that fear is fear.

Bhawardwaj squints as she reads the message, and she laughs. "I don't even know what that is."

Ayda looks at the catalog image. It's the thing that fits on a backpack or harness, and has giant extendable spikes. She sends back, *All right, I believe that it's real, but it doesn't look very practical.*

* * *

Ayda is in the station hotel suite that they took for SecUnit and the members of the survey team while they were all reporting to the council. Pin-Lee, Ratthi, and Gurathin are still staying here with Arada and Overse, who are back now after a quick trip down to the planet to see their family. Bharadwaj, who has her own quarters on the station, has dropped in, and Volescu who is on planet now has been sending them his own work via the station comm.

Now that the furor over corporate murder and abduction is dying down, the survey needs to finish its reports so the council can decide if they want to pursue their claim on the planet. Ayda could work with them on the feed from her office, but she likes being here, sitting on the couches in the common room and talking face to face, the floating display surfaces filled with their data and collated notes. SecUnit is tucked into a chair in the corner, probably watching media in its feed. It's good to have it there, too.

"It's a relief to finally be getting this done." Pin-Lee flicks between different displays. She's working on the contract they would offer to the corporate body who "owns" the planet in question. In the Corporation Rim, everything has to be owned by someone.

Overse, sitting with Arada's bare feet on her lap, gestures in frustration. "It would be closer to being done if Ratthi's tables weren't all over the place and all the links broken. What were you thinking, Ratthi?"

"I was planning to sort it all out the day GrayCris started trying to kill us, it was very distracting," Ratthi protests.

"I'll do it," Ayda finds herself saying. "Can you send me that file?" She shouldn't do it, at least not now, so late in the station's day. She should go back to her family in her quarters soon. But it's easier here, where everyone knows what happened and no one feels the need to ask questions or is trying to get her to tell them everything is fine and she is exactly the same as she was the day she left. Work is a good excuse.

Pin-Lee has already pulled up another file and is frowning slightly. "I need to review our billing, too. Oh, this is ridiculous, we're not paying for their extra power overrun, there's no way they can prove that was us..."

SecUnit must be watching Pin-Lee's feed where the billing documents are, because it says

suddenly, “You didn’t get the Retrieved Client Protocol?”

They had offered it to Ayda on the gunship after the attack, standard for clients who survive traumatic incidents like being abducted and held hostage by corporate rivals. “No, no, I didn’t.” She didn’t want a corporation’s excuse for a trauma support specialist poking around in her emotions. She almost adds, *I didn’t need it*, which would be a dead giveaway. And then it occurs to her, *a giveaway of what?* What is she worried about giving away, here among these people she trusts with her life.

SecUnit is looking at the far corner, as it usually does. But they installed cameras for it in these rooms so it probably is watching her expression. It says, “Why not? Is it free here?”

“It’s not free in the Corporation Rim?” Arada, brow furrowed in concentration as she studies the display surface above her head, is still editing her own report.

Pin-Lee flops back in her chair in exasperation. “The stupid bond company lets you get abducted and then wants you to pay for medical assistance afterward?”

Still not meeting anyone’s gaze, SecUnit’s expression flashes through a brief, eloquent ironic twist. Ayda hides a smile. Of course you have to pay for it. She adds, “We don’t have the Retrieved Client Protocol here.”

Overse glances over at her, bemused. “Well, we do, it’s just not called that.”

Bharadwaj looks up from her feed. “Yes, the trauma unit at Makeba Central Medical has a whole section for emotional support. Volescu said he’s been attending regularly. The one at Station Medical isn’t as extensive, but I find it helpful.”

That was taking the conversation to a place Ayda didn’t want to go. “I might have time later,” she tells them easily, and pours herself another cup of tea.

When she glances up, SecUnit is actually looking directly at her. Their gazes lock for what seems a long moment but knowing SecUnit, is probably only a second at most. As its gaze shifts back to the corner, Ayda feels her cheeks flush, as if she’s been caught in a lie.

Well, it was a lie.

Gurathin, still wrapped up in his feed and reports, expression distant and internal, gets up to fumble for the carafe on the sideboard. “Is there any more syrup?”

“I’ll get it.” Ayda takes the chance for a brief escape. “I need to stretch my legs.”

She walks out of the suite, down the corridor to the small lobby area. It’s empty and quiet, though the doors to the larger public hotel section are open, where there are potted trees and a wood and canvas art installation meant to invoke a traditional Preservation camp house. It’s getting on toward station-night, and hotel visitors on local time will be out looking for entertainment and food.

On the far wall there’s a pantry, the cases stocked with cold drinks, soup and tea bottles, packaged self-heating meals, seasoning packets, and net bags of fruit and vegetables from the planet, cubed or peeled and ready to eat. Ayda has been in the Corporation Rim long enough to appreciate the fact that it’s free not only to the hotel’s guests but to anyone who walks in. And what a marvel that is. Just like the station restrooms with showers where the only requirement is that you put your towels in the cleaning unit before you leave. She opens the door of a cold case to look for syrup and nut milk.

When she closes the door, there’s a stranger standing there. A stranger not wearing a station uniform or an access badge, his clothes not the colors or cut common to the planet. Even before her brain processes all that, she gasps.

He says, “You are Dr. Mensah, aren’t you.” It’s not a question. He knows exactly who she is.

She takes a step back and bumps into someone’s chest. Before she can panic, the words are in her feed: *It’s me.*

It’s Murderbot — SecUnit — who was monitoring her feed or watching on a surreptitiously installed camera or had simply heard her gasp from down the corridor and through a room full of conversation.

The stranger has had time to process the fact that there is now another person in the room. He raises his hands hurriedly. “I’m a journalist! I didn’t mean to startle—”

“Station Security is forty-seven seconds out.” SecUnit’s voice is even and conversational. And confident. This is a confrontation it knows how to handle. It’s slipped in front of her, reassuring lean bulk between her and the intruder. Its also somehow managed to catch the syrup bottle she had dropped without noticing, and it sets it on the counter. “Forty-six. Forty-five. Forty-four—”

The journalist flails and runs.

The others arrive in a noisy mob, questions, worry, Ratthi exclaiming, “SecUnit jumped over my head!”

“It was nothing,” Ayda assures them. “Just a journalist, he startled me, I was distracted and didn’t hear him— It’s nothing.”

She hands Ratthi the syrup and shoos them back toward the room. “I’ll talk to security. It’s fine, really.”

They go, reluctantly. The fact that she’s a current planetary leader weighs less than that she’s also their survey captain and they’re use to following her orders.

As they move noisily back down the corridor, Station Security is already in her feed, reporting that they caught the journalist leaving the hotel and will verify his identity, and release him if it checks out. They will meet her here in a few minutes to make a formal report. She needs to compose herself before they arrive. SecUnit is still looming over her, radiating warmth. It must be able to do that at will; normally its presence is cool. She’s trembling, which is idiotic. Nothing happened, the journalist meant no harm. It could have been a hotel guest or a hungry visitor or the person who stocks the pantry or—

SecUnit is looking down at her. “You can hug me if you need to.”

“No. No, that’s all right. I know you don’t care for it.” She wipes her face. There are tears in her eyes, because she’s an idiot.

“It’s not terrible.” She can hear the irony under its even tone.

“Nevertheless.” She can’t do this. She can’t lean on a being that doesn’t want to be leaned on. Of all the things SecUnit needs, the only ones she can give it are room and time in a relatively safe space to make decisions for itself. Becoming a prop for her failing emotional stability won’t do either one of them any good.

Or maybe there’s something else she can give it. She looks up, keeping her eyes on its left shoulder, leaving it the option of meeting her gaze or not. “In all those requisition forms you’ve been sending me, is there something you actually want?”

There’s a considering pause. “Drones. The small intel ones.”

Drones, of course. Like the ones they had on the survey, which had been extremely helpful. They

would be eyes for SecUnit, in the many places where Preservation has no cameras. “I’ll see what I can do.”

It’s looking down at her still, and she could meet its gaze to make it look away, but that won’t make it retreat. “Is that a bribe?”

She can’t help a smile. It does sound like a bribe, just a little. “Depends. Will it work?”

“I don’t know. I never had a bribe before.” She thinks she’s deflected it, but then it comes right back around to its target. “Maybe you should go to the Station Medical like Dr. Bharadwaj.”

I can’t, I’d have to tell them what was wrong, is her first thought. And yes, she’s aware that’s the problem. She can’t bring herself to lie, so she only says, “I’ll try.”

There’s a quiet, skeptical snort above her head, and she knows SecUnit isn’t fooled.

Station Security is in the outer lobby, and SecUnit slips away down the corridor before they reach the doors.

end

About the Author



Igor Kraguljac

MARTHA WELLS has written many fantasy novels, including *The Wizard Hunters*, *Wheel of the Infinite*, the Books of the Raksura series (beginning with *The Cloud Roads* and ending with *The Harbors of the Sun*), and the Nebula-nominated *The Death of the Necromancer*, as well as YA fantasy novels, short stories, and non-fiction. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).



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