



~Mary~

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(Do Mechanunculai Dream of Clockwork Sheep?)

Lord Pader-Grafton watched the shimmer of moonlight on the water through the large window of the airship. The blank expression on his face echoed his ennui. The soft thrum of the twin Rolls Royce steam turbines vibrated through the deck plates of the cabin and he felt it in his very bones.

It was a well appointed cabin, paneled in fumed English oak (a composite veneer of course, solid oak was very heavy) and dressed out in polished brass hardware. Thick cushions of crimson velvet covered the ample seating, although Lord Grafton was the only occupant of the observation deck and he was standing.

“Refreshment, m'lord?” interrupted a voice. The small mechanuncula, a female shaped, steam powered andriod holding the tray was incredibly unobtrusive. She was tasked as a serving girl, but a skilled Lovelace scriptor could do almost anything with such a complex device. Pader-Grafton thought it a great waste to use it for such a mundane task.

A petite Asian woman had entered the cabin with the servant holding the tray. She was not a serving girl, but a highly trained assassin, one of a small group of were-rats that served the whim of the Chinese Emperor. Pader-Grafton had the incredible good fortune to hire her after her fall from grace. She felt strongly indebted to him, and she was not only one of his bodyguards, but a personal confidant and occasional lover. Unbeknownst to Soon Mai, his Lordship had actually engineered both her fall from grace and his convenient proximity to 'rescue' her.

“Soon Mai, you know I loathe the bottled stuff,” he replied. She offered her neck to him.

“It will weaken me, m'lord, and you may need me at full strength,” she advised.

He took the offensive bottle of plasma from the device's tray, finding it warmed to exactly ninety eight point six degrees. “Yes,” he said blandly, “mother. I shall drink my blood like a good vampire.” He turned the bottle up and drank, then placed it back on the tray. The servant mechanuncula went to it's scripted station at the back of the cabin and, unnoticed, unlatched the window next to it.

“We'll be docking presently, m'lord,” Soon Mai said. “We shall, all of us, have to be on our toes. We are entering enemy territory.”

“As well I know, my sweet, perhaps better than anyone,” Pader-Grafton retorted. Soon Mai knew this, and silently cursed vampires and their continual scheming. If he would let them, his pared down security detail, know a little more they could better protect him. They all knew that the tribunal had sent one of their oldest enforcers to the Americas of all places to 'confer' with the master of Philadelphia, but they didn't know over what. It would have to be a dire matter indeed to draw Pader-Grafton across the Atlantic from his comfortable lair in York, especially today. She closed the cabin door and ensured it's security before returning to her security post on the lower deck.

“At least,” Pader-Grafton said to her receding back, “it is almost midnight. I do so hate the thirteenth of February.”

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Kaomin MacDonald hung onto the rope securing him to the outside of the rigid airship. The air blowing past him was well below freezing. He watched through his spyglass mirror as the security detail left his target, and he slowly lowered himself until he was even with the window. Un-slinging the crossbow armed with a wooden quarrel he carefully slid open the unlatched window. Pader-Grafton turned, feeling the frigid air, just as MacDonald aimed and fired in one smooth motion. Not waiting to see if he had hit his mark, knowing well the speed of an ancient vampire, he released his suspension rope and dropped towards the frigid North Atlantic.

Seeing a body fall past the galley window, Soon Mai cursed under her breath and ran back up to the observation deck of the chartered airship. Upon opening the still secured door to the cabin she found her employer and friend lying in a pool of dark ichor. His centuries-long dead body, pierced with a wooden stake, was already disintegrating. The rancid cabin air was noticeably thinner and colder. Racing to the open window she spied a receding dot of an open parachute. Muttering in Mandarin Chinese she grabbed the closest non-bolted down thing to the window and cast it futilely at the receding assassin. The mechanuncula's Babbage processor whined as it tried to compensate for the sudden weightlessness of free fall and also retain the tray it was scripted to hold.

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Kaomin free fell through the frigid, high altitude, February air. He felt the vampire die and realized he had reached the apex of his life, the last of William of Orange's vampires was dead. It had taken over three hundred years, but vengeance was served and his grandfather's spirit could rest. The crossbow, forgotten after it's firing, fell towards the Atlantic below him in the darkness. He silently cursed the needs to kill on February thirteenth. "Why couldn't the bloody original crime have been perpetrated in August?" he mused wryly to himself. Finally, his chronometer pinged and he pulled the heavy brass lever on his chest releasing yards of silk into the cold air. With a loud 'foomp' his parachute caught and his descent slowed. He watched the crossbow continue on until it disappeared.

Reaching above him with numb fingers he struck the flint auto-starter on the small steam turbine attached to the parachute. Without this he would probably drop into the icy north Atlantic, but it would propel him well inland to his contacts and he could disappear in the crowds of New York city. It took three tries, but the little engine caught and began to work up a head of steam. Suddenly the silk of the parachute was struck with a flailing device.

Kaomin looked up to see the thrown mechanuncula entangling itself in his shroud lines. "Bloody stop!" he screamed over the cold rushing air. The device did stop entirely, freezing in place, but it was too late. The turbine broke free of it's straps and tumbled into the ocean. Kaomin reached for it instinctively, burning his hand, and in the process lost his satchel to the frigid darkness as well. He could see, far off on the horizon, the scattered gas lights along the New Jersey shore taunting him. It was too far to get to without the little turbine pushing him along. It wouldn't matter anyway, with his shroud lines hopelessly tangled he would fall into the Atlantic far short of his goal and without his satchel he wouldn't outrun his hunters a full day if he did. After several moments of profuse cursing he realized that he too, like the crossbow, turbine, and satchel, would die tonight in the cold dark Atlantic.

"Forgive me, father," he said lowly as he reached up and released the brass latches on his parachute. The expanse of silk, unencumbered by his weight and forgotten, continued to flutter on the frigid breeze carrying the mechanuncula with it towards the shore. The device, following it's last

assigned task, remained 'bloody stopped'.

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Kaomin awoke. He lay on the sand, cold, wet, and barely alive. Relying on his dhampiric nature he fought the desire to slip into Morpheus's arms and he stood. Looking around in the cold, gray, predawn light he saw only a few piles littering the shoreline. He began searching for his satchel. Without the money and papers it contained he would be unable to last long in this foreign land, especially if he were pursued. He would need food and warmth as well, but again he could purchase neither without the money in his satchel.

The first pile he came to was the parachute, and entangled in it was the mechanuncula servant girl. It was this device that was surreptitiously tasked with unlatching the window to allow him access, and also the missile that had thwarted his escape. "Piece o' shite," Kaomin cursed, kicking it.

"Incorrect," the device whined in reply. It was severely damaged, but still apparently functional. "This device is a Babbage Mark Eight autonomous mechanuncula capable of high level tasking. A 'piece of shit' is a unit of biological excrement."

"Alright, smartass, stand up an' find me bloody satchel then," Kaomin challenged. The mechanuncula stood with some difficulty. Several linkages had been bent or broken and she stood with a list. One of her oculars was jammed with beach sand and would not iris open, and her right arm had been twisted and was inoperative. It scanned the beach, turning slowly.

"I have misplaced my tray, sir," it commented blandly.

"Forget the bleedin' tray," Kaomin said. "Find me bloody satchel."

The tray was forgotten as if it had never existed. Accepting it's new task the mechanuncula began scanning the beach with it's single good ocular. "Can you please refine the parameters of the search, sir? Also, I am apparently in need of maintenance, fuel and water. I apologize for allowing myself to become so damaged, sir."

"Ummm, you're forgiven," Kaomin answered. "The satchel is a medium sized brown leather pouch, about thirty centimeters by thirty by six with rounded corners and a long strap. It should be along this stretch of shore, near the surf, if it survived. You head northward along the beach and I'll go south. If you find it return to me."

"Task accepted," it replied, and began moving northward examining the expanse of sand.

"Right then," Kaomin muttered under his breath as he headed south. "If ye get to New York turn around then." He scanned the sand himself, finding a great deal of flotsam and seaweed. Twice he picked up the shells of horseshoe crabs because of the similar size and color. After an hour and a half he was defeated, at the end of his strength. He sat down on the cold, wet sand.

"Father," he said looking up, "is there a reason I survived? Have I frittered away all o' your grace and me own good luck?" He heard a mechanical clunking approaching him and he turned. "Bloody hell what now," he asked himself. The mechanuncula approached him with the satchel in it's one good hand. The parachute had once again become entangled in it, and was being dragged behind.

“I have completed the task, sir,” it said almost cheerfully. “My apologies for the delay, I have allowed myself to become both damaged and encumbered. May I request maintenance now, sir?”

Kaomin considered the device as he took the satchel. He thought about simply tasking it to await his return, and then abandoning it. Still, it was not beyond repair and rather versatile. He could probably do the repair work himself, after all he was well schooled in mechanical repair and was quite skilled. Besides, it seemed to him that for some reason his heavenly father had saddled him with the thing. “Aye,” he told it. Untangling it from the silk shroud he tore off several sections. He fashioned a makeshift hooded cloak for the mechanuncula, belting it with a scrap of the same material. “There,” he told it, “nobody will look at ye too closely. Don't speak unless I tell ye. Now follow me.”

“Task accepted,” it replied as it took a position three paces behind him and followed him southward toward the town that he hoped was there.

Kaomin walked into town around dusk carrying a silk wrapped bundle over his shoulder. The mechanuncula had run out of denatured alcohol hours earlier, and Kaomin found himself still unwilling to simply abandon it. Somehow, he felt his fate was tied to the complex device. Finding a run down motor lodge on the outskirts of town with a fueling station, restaurant, and an available room for rent was sheer luck. Luck, it appeared, was coming in the form of the mechanuncula over his shoulder. The proprietor was also unwilling to ask why he showed up without a vehicle and carrying a deactivated mech. Perhaps this was because he paid in cash. He paid in lots of cash.

The next morning Kaomin awoke and finished the repairs he had begun on 'his' mechanuncula the night before. Oiling it, he wiped the remaining sand and debris from its brass finish and fueled it. Finally, having done all he could for it, he lit its tiny steam plant and waited for it to work up a head of steam.

He was drinking his second cup of coffee when its oculars, both of them this time, irised open and it exclaimed, “Good morning, sir. How am I tasked?”

“Functional checkout and report,” he told it. Kaomin finished his coffee as the machine went through a series of tasked movements and functions that tested it entirely.

When it had finished the mechanuncula stated, “Task completed. All functions are operational, however I am in need of several minor adjustments and require routine lubrication. May I perform a routine lubrication task now?”

“Proceed,” Kaomin told it passing the rags and oil to it. “When completed, await my return for additional instruction.” He knew the lubrication would take it a while, so he returned the 'borrowed' toolset (if ye give it back t'aint stolen) and got himself some lunch. As he left he noted the lithe, nude brass woman carefully oiling its slender left leg. “Been in the aether way too long,” he muttered to himself.

He was halfway through his lunch when he dropped his sandwich on the table. “Bloody hell,” he muttered when he realized that the mechanuncula was referring to itself as 'I'.

The mechanuncula was sitting placidly on the edge of the bed when Kaomin returned. He carried a bundle of clothing under his arm that he had just purchased at a local thrift store. “Alright,” he

confronted the mechanical girl, “what are ye really?”

“I am a Babbage Mark Eight autonomous mechanuncula, serial number MA7-2123. I am capable of high level tasking and can perform complicated tasks with little instruction,” it responded automatically.

“You referred to yourself as 'I,'” Kaomin stated, “instead of 'this device'. Explain the anomaly.”

The mechanuncula became silent, closing it's oculars as if in thought. It did not need to, nor did it need to close them while dormant, but humans found the machine a bit creepy if it did not. Finally, processing complete, it's oculars opened. “I am unable to detect any anomaly, sir. Shall I deactivate myself until I can be returned to my plant of manufacture for further diagnosis?”

“No,” Kaomin told it. “Malfunction is minimal, continue operation and report additional asymptomatic anomalies.”

“Background task accepted,” the mechanuncula acquiesced.

“Your serial number begins with MA,” Kaomin continued, “I will refer to you as 'Mary' and you will refer to me as 'Kevin'.” He passed the bundle of clothing to it. “Put these clothes on, Mary,” he told it.

“Task accepted, Kevin,” it responded. It quickly donned the dress, cloak, boots and gloves. When it was finished it said simply, “task completed, Kevin. Thank you for the lovely gifts, Kevin.” Before him stood a young woman hidden by heavy, worn clothing. As long as one did not look into the hood she would pass as a human woman. Unless, of course, she spoke.

That evening Kevin MacDoughal and his young wife Mary, (who was a wee bit 'touched' in the head poor girl and did not speak) checked out of their room and boarded a train to New York City.

Once they were seated Kaomin told the mechanuncula to lean against him, covering it's face, and go inactive to conserve fuel. He hated to admit it, but it was actually kind of nice to have a woman, even a mechanical one, sleeping against his shoulder. Soon Kaomin had drifted off into a fitful sleep himself, and did not wake until they arrived in Penn Station.

Kaomin ensconced the mechanuncula in a cheap room in Brooklyn and slipped out to meet with a 'paper hanger'. If he was to continue traveling with it he would need paperwork to validate ownership, and also to support his claim as her husband should he choose to travel as a married couple. He returned long after midnight, inebriated, with forged passports, a marriage license, and a bill of sale from Babbage, Ltd. for a model eight mechanuncula, serial number MA7-2123. He also had a half full bottle of whiskey in a paper sack, two liters of denatured alcohol, and a small can of oil.

“I am low on both fuel and water, Kevin,” the mechanuncula reminded him. “I require routine lubrication and have several malfunctions that have not been addressed, Kevin. May I perform routine maintenance tasks now, Kevin?”

“Yes, fer chrissakes Mary,” Kaomin replied passing it the oil and a washcloth from the bathroom. “Inform me of any maintenance issues.” The mechanuncula disrobed and began lubricating itself. Kaomin watched as the nude brass girl, incapable of modesty, went over every centimeter of it's

plating, cleaning it's surface until it shone with a warm luster. "Why in God's name," he muttered to himself, "did they make that damn device so lifelike?" Finally, it lubricated and exercised every exposed linkage and joint that it had.

"Kevin," Mary said as she finished, "the hamstring linkage in my left leg has failed and my right arm requires recalibration."

Kaomin filled her fuel, she took a liter and a half as she was nearly empty, and topped off her water reservoir. Then looked at the failed linkage. It was indeed broken. It had probably been damaged in the fall and then stressed during use until it had snapped. A replacement part was out of the question, to purchase one at Babbage's office would expose himself. Kaomin improvised by very carefully splinting the linkage and lashing it tightly with fine wire. He ran his hand over her warm, smooth leg to check for any sharp edges that may catch on her clothing.

Looking at the arm Kaomin muttered "Sweet Jesus, Mary, were ye trying to hold on to the tray as ye fell?" His prior attempt to fix the arm had resulted in a misalignment of the elbow joint. Mary's right hand was now rubbing against her hip as she walked. Using all of his exceptional strength he was able to bend it enough to stop the rubbing, but it would need to be disassembled and rebuilt. Once again he ran his hand along her plating to check for burrs, this time at her hip with his cheek resting against her smooth brass buttocks. He felt himself becoming aroused and quickly stopped.

"Mary," he told it, "go inactive to conserve fuel. Awake in," he glanced at his chronometer, "six hours."

"Task accepted, Kevin," she seemed to purr. Her nude form swayed gently to the corner of the room, turned seductively, and stood like an undraped caryatid. Her small feet were pointing straight out and exactly one meter apart, her arms hung straight down. Her oculars irised shut with a tiny 'click'. Kaomin realized that he had been ogling her.

"Got ta' be the bloody whiskey," he admonished himself as he fought down his libido. He forced himself to sleep, and awoke in the morning from a dream about living Greek statues and little clockwork children toddling around his legs.

Kaomin was hung over and ached. He poured the last of the whiskey into his flask, taking a swig. He then rinsed the bottle and filled it with the half liter of mechanunculae fuel he had left. Someone might question him carrying denatured alcohol, but nobody would question a Celt about having a bottle of whiskey. He had just about finished gathering his few belongings when the mechanuncula's oculars snapped open.

"Good morning, Kevin" it chimed cheerfully. "How am I tasked?"

"Put your clothes on, Mary," he replied passing it the clothing, "we have a train to catch."

"Thank you for the lovely gifts, Kevin," it replied as it accepted the bundle of dingy clothing and began dressing.

Later, on a train to Albany that was the first leg of a trip that would put them among friends in Nova Scotia, Kaomin pondered the previous night. The mechanuncula was 'sleeping' against his right side as it had been yesterday in New Jersey. He idly wondered why someone, even a rich and entitled

someone with plenty of disposable cash, would buy a Babbage Mark Eight for a single trip and then return it at the end. He was aware that the units, mostly refurbished, were sold by a subsidiary company at many airfields as traveling companions, and bought back pro-rated at the end of trips. Very few passengers actually retained them post voyage, although they certainly could.

He had been in one of the shops before and seen them, standing along the walls gleaming like so many brass plated Greek statues. He wondered then, as he was now, why the insistence on such anatomical correctness for a device that was created to basically serve beverages and fetch trifles? There was no one else in their car, so he 'woke' the mechanuncula.

“Mary,” Kaomin asked, half knowing the answer already, “what is your purpose?”

“Please refine your query, Kevin,” it responded.

“I have a job,” he told it. “A series of things that I do towards a common goal, a complex of tasks. It is a purpose. Do you have a purpose?”

At first he thought that he had broken it, the mechanuncula had become so very still. Then, long moments later it said simply, “Yes, Kevin.”

It took him a minute to realize that it had answered only his second question. “Mary,” he repeated, “what is your purpose?”

“The Mark Eight series of mechunculae are designed as personal companions, Kevin,” it recited. “They can perform all of the basic duties of human companions in the absence of such, up to and including intimacy.”

Although he had already begun to suspect it, he was still surprised at her information. Wealthy people would 'purchase' her, use her for all manner of deeds during their travels, and then simply sell her back. She was little more than a mechanical whore screwing her way back and forth across the Atlantic. Kaomin corrected his thought, she was actually a sex slave.

“Mary,” he said, “how many times have you 'accompanied' someone on a journey?”

“I have only been on one journey, Kevin,” she replied, “Mark Eight mechanunculae are reset during refurbishing. I have only been utilized to serve drinks on a journey, Kevin, I have not accompanied anyone.” It sounded almost sad at that admission. Kaomin realized that she had been stroking the inside of his thigh as she spoke, and his interest had been growing.

“Stop, Mary,” he told her. She did, but somehow he thought reluctantly. Ridiculous, of course, her responses to him were scripted in Lovelace code by highly skilled engineers. “Mary, do you desire intimacy?”

“Adjusting your query, Kevin, I do not desire. I am a device.” It paused and added, “I am rewarded for successfully completed tasks with extra power supplied to my processor core. The more complex the task, the greater the reward. Intimacy is one of my most complex tasks. Perhaps the reward of extra power would be considered pleasure.”

“Thank you, Mary,” Kaomin told the mechanuncula, “revert to inactive mode.”

“Task accepted, Kevin,” it said as its oculars clicked shut.

Kaomin used the rest of the train ride to ponder her as he couldn't sleep. He found it sad that she had been created for one purpose, and was used for that one purpose with little input as to her disposition. He began to feel akin to the mechanism, for he himself had been created by his father strictly to kill vampires. There had been no love between his parents, nor from either of them for their dhampire son. He had no input in his life's task, and no escape from it. Once his task had been completed he, like the mechanuncula, was disposable. He was even more disposable than was Mary, as his own task was already completed.

He reviewed his options. If he returned to Scotland he would be considered a liability, or even a threat. A threat that Alexander MacDonald, his vampiric father, wouldn't hesitate to remove. If he stayed in one place too long he would become a sitting duck for Pader-Grafton's colleagues. His only hope would be to ditch the mechanuncula and slip sideways, leaving it on a train headed for Canada and taking off west on foot.

Arriving in Albany, Kaomin once again rented a cheap room in a questionable establishment and left Mary there while he gathered supplies. Returning drunk, he once again he fueled her, using up the rest of her denatured alcohol. When it came time to clean her and oil her he consigned himself to the task rather than watch. He was getting used to having her follow him around, and perhaps wanted to remember her. As he wiped the oil along her smooth brass skin he found himself becoming aroused.

The mechanuncula responded, and silently began removing his clothes. This time, throwing caution to the wind, he did not task it to cease. Perhaps it was the whiskey talking, but Kaomin felt that if some rich bastard could partake of the device then why should he not? Someone would find Mary on the train tomorrow and return her to her world, cleaning, repairing, and resetting her in the process. Perhaps, deep inside himself, Kaomin silently wished that he, too, could be so easily restored.

He entered her quite easily, as she willingly drew him in, and he held her smooth brass hips under him as he thrust.

Later, as he lay on his back having rolled off of the mechanuncula, he was surprised to feel the smooth, warm brass of its hands caress his thigh. Renewing his interest, it then proceeded to climb on top of him and continue. It was, as the saying goes, 'like a machine'.

“I desperately require fuel, water, and a level two biological cleansing, Kevin,” Kaomin heard as he awoke shortly after dawn. Apparently Mary had used up a great deal of fuel the night before, and he himself was hung over and quite worn out. Even with his supernatural dhampiric stamina and constitution he was beginning to feel the stress of being on the lam. It took him several long moments to focus on his surroundings. He took a swig from his flask of whiskey and had an epiphany.

“Mary, can you burn an ethanol solution, or does your fuel have to be denatured alcohol?” he asked the mechanuncula.

“I can burn un-purified ethanol, Kevin, but doing so is ill advised as it can void my warranty. The impurities will contaminate my power train,” the device replied. Considering that he would be abandoning her soon, he poured the rest of his flask into Mary's fuel reservoir and then topped off her water.

“Get dressed, Mary,” Kaomin told her, “You've a train to catch.”

“Thank you for the lovely gifts, Kevin,” it replied as he passed it the bundle of clothing.

The February dawn was gray and raw as they slipped into the alley behind the flop house. Mary wasn't doing well, she was unstable due to the inconsistent power being supplied by her tiny steam turbine. The impurities in the fuel mixture were beginning to build up inside her turbine, slowing it down. In addition, Kaomin's hasty repair of her hamstring linkage had failed and she was limping badly. It was becoming difficult for the mechanuncula to keep up with him, but Mary followed along as well as she could. As the pair hurried down the narrow alley, dodging piles of refuse and rubbish bins alike, a shadowed female figure stepped into the alley behind them.

“Kaomin MacDonald,” the woman stated quite clearly. Kaomin stopped suddenly, his back ramrod straight. He had somehow been discovered. The mechanuncula almost plowed into him, but it too stopped. It's little turbine was whining plaintively by now with the stress not only from burning whiskey instead of proper fuel, but also from the high level of activity. Kaomin palmed a small throwing dagger into his right hand, his only weapon. Spinning quickly he grabbed the mechanuncula as a shield and raised the knife simultaneously and at inhuman speed.

Three puffs of steam emanated from the luger in the assailant's hand. Three fletchettes buried themselves deep in Kaomin's chest in a neat, compact pattern and shattered his heart before the knife was raised. He fell to the pavement, already dead, dragging the mechanical girl down with him.

The mechanuncula stood back up on it's wavering legs. “I am malfunctioning and require maintenance, Kevin,” it complained. “May I perform routine maintenance and request additional repairs, Kevin?” Soon Mai, the assassin formerly in the employ of one Lord Pader-Grafton, strolled up to the device and said something to it in Mandarin Chinese. 'Mary' turned to her.

“What task do you require, Mistress Mai?” it asked.

“Cease background task, 'aether tracking',” Soon Mai told it.

“Task complete,” Mary replied.

“Truncated diagnostic and status report.”

“This unit is malfunctioning. This unit has allowed itself to sustain damage to it's left leg and it's right arm. This unit is in need of routine lubrication and a level two internal biological cleansing. An improper fuel was used in this unit, voiding it's warranty and damaging it's power plant.” A disgusted sneer crossed SoonMai's face when she was informed of the required level two cleansing, but she was silent while the unit proceeded to compile an assessment of itself. The mechanuncula continued almost sadly, “this unit has allowed itself to be damaged beyond fiscally responsible repair. This unit should be scrapped.”

“Oh, heavens no,” Soon Mai replied. “Unit MA7-2123 should be commended on an incredibly complex task completed far beyond expectation. I had no idea how versatile the Babbage Mark Eight was.” The mechanuncula felt 'pleasure' as a wave of extra power was added to it's processing core, it had performed it's task well. Soon Mai looked down on Kaomin's body, “Were you not already in Hell

and beyond my reach,” she told the corpse, “I would shoot you again, this time in the balls. You got my mechanuncula drunk and screwed it, you perverse bastard?” She spat on him.

Almost gently Soon Mai reached behind the device's neck and toggled a hidden linkage. “And now, my dear,” she said coldly, “you won't have to remember any of this horrid ordeal, especially who gave you the command to unlatch that window.” Somewhere deep inside her own black heart Soon Mai wished that she, too, could be reset so easily.

As the device processed the reset, Soon Mai considered her options. She had already accepted a new 'contract', having completed the Pader-Grafton one. The fact that she had all of the paperwork drawn up to become his widow prior to his demise was an incredible windfall. The problem with older vampires, she mused, was that they had so many damn enemies. His underutilized mechanuncula would be a welcome tool, the device was incredibly durable and versatile. A wealthy widow of substance would be expected to have an extravagance such as an underutilized Mark Eight mechanuncula following her about. An accomplished assassin could utilize the device fully as a tool of her trade, and Soon Mai was considering an upgrade to it as well. There was a 'bodyguard' package in Babbage's literature that looked interesting.

“Good morning,” it finally replied cheerfully, “This unit is a Babbage Mark Eight mechanuncula. How is this unit required?”

“I am the Lady Mai Soon-Grafton, your owner, unit MA7-2123. You will refer to me as Lady Mai, and will respond to Madeline.”

“Rename task accepted, Lady Mai,” it responded. “How am I to be tasked?”

“Follow, Madeline, you are badly in need of repair and maintenance.”

“Task accepted, Lady Mai. Thank you for considering my needs.” The pair stepped over the corpse of Kaomin MacDonald and headed for the nearest Babbage, Ltd. branch office. The mechanuncula dutifully followed Lady Mai Soon-Grafton exactly three paces behind, limping badly and wobbling.