

Skin Deep

By David Creighton

“Where are you taking me?”

“You’ll see. Trust me.”

“I do, Pavel, I do.”

“Are you feeling alright? Do you need more painkillers?”

“I doubt it will matter. The pain never really goes away, and I’d rather be clear of mind.”

“Of course.”

“Tell me Pavel, when you think of me, do you remember me as I was, young and beautiful?”

“You’re still beautiful.”

“Flatterer! Now answer the question.”

“Sometimes.”

"I hope so. For so many years I knew this time would come. I feared it. Hated it."

"No-"

"Yes, I did. I was so renowned for my beauty, no matter what else I did, no matter what I accomplished, I always thought if my beauty went away I'd be nothing."

"You know now that's not true."

"I suppose I do. But young me still lives inside me. And sometimes I can feel her disgust."

"You have nothing to be ashamed of."

"I'm not. It's just... I feel like I've lost something I loved. And I'll never have it again."

"Ve're about to land. Buckle in."

"Land? Where?"

"Somewhere ve haven't been in a long, long time."

"I hate this chair."

"It will help you get around."

"I don't recognize this planet. But it's pretty bleak."

“Yes, yes that’s odd.”

“What next?”

“Next, I yell. HELLO?”

“I know my hearing is fine, because that hurt.”

“It hurt me too.”

“Who’s there?”

“That voice, I recognize it... It can’t be.”

“But it is, dear lady, Harcourt Fenton Mudd, at your service.”

“Then we’re on the planet of androids?”

“What was once, the planet of androids.”

“What?”

“They’re gone. All of them. It’s just me now.”

“How could a planet full of androids be gone in less than a generation?”

“You can thank your captain.”

“Don’t you dare speak ill of Captain Kirk!”

“I speak the truth, though I doubt you’re used to that from me.”

“Please, tell us what happened.”

“Your precious captain created hundreds of new androids in the shape of my *lovely* wife, Stella. Very true to your precious Prime Directive there. He never gave a thought to how that would imbalance the androids’ central power source. How androids would begin to fail. How the Stellas, designed to be self-serving, would turn on the others. How a civil war would rage for decades until Norman, you may remember him, was forced to detonate the power supply to keep it from falling into the Stella army’s hands.”

“That’s... that’s horrible.”

“And you?”

“Neither side wanted to see me dead. Norman sought to protect me, while the Stellas planned to torment me for all eternity. In the end... I suppose Norman won.”

“You’ve been here, alone ever since?”

“Yes.”

“You must be so lonely.”

“I suppose I deserved it, after all the things I’ve done.”

“No one deserves that. We can take you away from here.”

“No, no you can’t.”

“Why not?”

“The Stellas, wanted to torture me for all eternity. They transferred my consciousness into the a self-powered android body. It draws power from this planet’s magnetic field. Leave that, and I will cease to function forever. But, more and more, I’ve come to desire that.”

“There must be something we can do.”

“These few minutes of company have been the happiest I’ve had in many years. I can at least thank you for that. But tell me, why did you come here at all?”

“Yes, Pavel, why did we come here?”

“I... I...”

“Spit it out man!”

“I remembered how Norman offered to give Uhura an android body. Young forever.”

“What? What made you think I would want that?”

“You said it yourself, you felt you lost something.”

“But eternal life? Outliving all my friends? Everyone I know? I don’t think I’d want that.”

“It doesn’t matter anyway. The androids are gone.”

“All but myself, that is. And...”

“And?”

“And there was one android body left untouched. The Stellas built it as a last recourse, so at least one of them would survive. But I managed to steal it. One of the few things I was ever good at.”

“Are you saying?”

“Yes. I could give her exactly what you wanted. Eternal life and beauty, trapped on a deserted world.”

“Not... quite deserted.”

“I’m sorry, I wasted your time.”

“No, I’m sorry.”

“Why?”

“Sorry that I’ll be staying here without you.”

“What? Why?”

“Yes why?”

“Because it’s not about being young. It’s not about being being beautiful. It’s about being wanted. Wanted and needed. And I think, Mr. Mudd, that you need me.”

“I couldn’t ask-“

“Then don’t, just accept it as kindness you’ve long needed.”

“You’re, you’re staying with him?”

“I’m sure we’ll find a way to get along. He never was all that bad.”

“At least let me stay to see your new body.”

“It won’t be much different than this one. I’m not going back to being a young woman. That’s the past. I’ll take the present, and perhaps a long future.”

“I’ll never be able to repay you for this.”

“We’ll see.”

“Then... is this goodbye?”

“Yes, and Chekov, no one can know we are here.”

“But why?”

“There’s too much ancient technology still buried here. We can’t have half the quadrant dropping by to raid and pillage.”

“I suppose not.”

“Thank you for bringing me here, Chekov. I have purpose again.”

“I’m glad.”

“Now, go find your own.”

“Vill do!”