

## **The Gray Ghost**

By Mohammad Khan

“What is it like?” asks the android holding a picture frame. It speaks in a calm tone, not too loud nor too quiet. “To love through choice but not obligation.” The android sits bare naked on a metal table. Only in silhouette does it resemble a human. Its pale white eyes contain a miniscule pupil and the skin is covered with a glossy steel gray finish. The open forearm reveals electric circuits combined with biological muscles. The scientist works on circuitry within the android's wrist as it flexes its fingers.

She looks up, brushing away the brown hair from her face. She moves her glasses off her face. “I’m sorry. Could you repeat that?”

The android holds a picture of the scientist and her husband standing by a cliff’s edge overlooking a vista. “Your husband”, says the android. It shows her the picture frame. “What was it like?”

“Oh.” She rolls back in her wheelchair and holds the frame “it’s- it’s something special.” She places the frame back on the desk beside the android. “I’ll tell you more later. Once you’re patched before they need you again.”

The android extends its other forearm. “I wish I could’ve met him. He seems...kind.”

“Yes, yes he was”, replied the scientist without looking up from her work. She worked in silence until a red phone attached to the wall rang loudly. She pushes back from her work and rolls her wheelchair to the phone.

“hello.....yes...I’m not done yet...but...I understand....” She hangs up the phone and turns back to the android to see it standing and fixing its own circuitry. “You can fix yourself”, she whispers to herself in astonishment.

“Marshall Lane needs me, doesn’t he?” The android spoke without looking at her. It flexes its individual fingers, testing the artificial muscles ingrained in the circuitry as it handles the soldering iron with surgical precision. It opens and closes a fist and makes other hand gestures, testing flexibility and mobility.

She stared at the android in wonder before regaining her train of thought. “Yes, in trenton. Collapsed building. They need help looking for survivors. You save them and you come right back. You’re still damaged.”

“Understood.” The android cleans the soldering iron, places it in its holder. It stares at another portrait of the scientist as a young girl standing beside her parents holding a blue balloon. Her brown hung above her shoulders, curving upwards. Without a word, the android walks out the door bare naked.

“Wear a jacket”, shouts the scientist to the open door.

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Emergency personnel race around the fallen structure. Paramedics label the victims with blue, black, and red cards. Firefighters try to lift the rubble with pneumatic jacks. The android arrives in a taxi outside of the yellow-taped barrier. The officers let it pass and point it to the fire marshall. The android wore a blue suit with a steel gray tie as it walked it through the rubble effortlessly.

“Marshall Lane”, says the android. “You asked for me?”

The fire marshall turned around to bark orders until he froze looking at the robot’s attire. “It’s about time--What the hell are you wearing?”

"I see some people in the rubble where your firefighters are working. Shall I assist them?" The marshal nods and runs over to assist other firefighters.

Three firefighters are struggling to lift the rubble from the southwest side of the building.

"Hang on", one of them shouts in the rubble. "We're on our way."

The other two use the pneumatic jack to lift the rubble, but it doesn't budge. The jack breaks underneath the weight.

"Do you need me to lift these", says the android pointing to the rubble. It unbuttons the suit and lifts the rubble with ease to allow the firefighters to place another pneumatic jack. He holds the rubble upon his shoulder and frees his arms. "Go on, I'll hold it."

As the firefighters go into the rubble cavern, it sees a young girl in the crowd beyond the yellow tape looking around frantically. Her father stayed by her side talking with a paramedic.

It continues to stare as the firefighters carry out people on stretchers.

On August 23, a young girl waits with her father as they both search for the mother who was buried beneath the rubble.

The paramedics enter behind the fire fighters.

"How many more?", says the android to a passing firefighter.

"One, her legs are pinned under the rubble. It's too unstable to move her. Paramedics think amputation is necessary." The firefighter rushes inside carrying medical supplies. The android looks back to the crowd, only the young girl and her father remain.

Soon the woman from beneath the rubble was carried out upon a stretcher. Her right foot had been amputated. After the last human exited the cavern, the android gently lowered the piece it was holding. It walks behind the stretcher to the ambulance where the father and daughter are waiting.

Two military soldiers and one general intercept the android's path. The general places his hand on the android's chest. "Hang on there. We need to talk."

"But the civilians are safe. What else is there?.", starts the android. It keeps its eyes on the woman and her family.

"Not about this", says the general. "We still need to run tests on you."

"I assure you my creator—"

"Your creator went over the lines. Now we need to know how far she went. Come with us and don't make a scene."

"You have no right to detain me", replied the Android. It began walking past the general toward the family.

"Deactivate", said the general. With one word, the Android stopped in its tracks, frozen, staring at the family as they entered the ambulance with the woman.

The last memory of that day was seeing the young girl and her father choose to get into the ambulance. They would have had a better chance of survival if they didn't."

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I lay on a metal table with my arms and legs strapped. I couldn't speak or move, but I could hear and I

could see. I saw the general's surgeons unwrap my wiring in my chest and work up towards my head. And then I heard you, and you sounded hurt. I couldn't allow that.

"I can't believe you kidnapped my robot", shouted the scientist. She sat in her wheelchair as tall as she could and stared directly into the general's eyes. "You had no right!" The scientist's shouts reverberate around the room. Armed soldiers stand guard at the door. The room's only light source came from the operating table upon which the android was being dissected meticulously.

The general looked down at her unwaved. He took his hat off. The surgeons continue to work on the android as they argue.

"I had every right. You created this one and god knows how many more. We need to see what it's capable of."

"Please you have nothing to fear from my system."

"We would have nothing to fear if you shared the blueprints", said the general.

"He is not something you can control and order."

"He?" The general stepped back and wiped his forehead with hand. "Jesus Lana, You gave it to us and lost any say in what we do. Being allowed here is a privilege. It will do what I tell it to."

A calm voice silences the room. "It will do as it pleases", says the android. It grabbed the surgeon's wrist in a vice grip. The android sat up, its chest fully open with electronics exposed and faced the general and the scientist. Sensors attached to its head and chest dangle from the body of the android. The soldiers aimed their rifles at it.

"Let go of her hand", says the general. He kept his hand close to his holstered gun. "Now or we fire."

The android's white eyes scan the room without expression. It slowly bounces from the generals to the soldiers to the surgeon to the scientist. Slowly, the vice grip releases and the surgeon collapses in pain with a sprained wrist. More soldiers came into the room and guided the surgeon outside while the android ripped off other sensors they attached to it. It stood face to face with the general. "It wouldn't have hurt her. It's against my programming."

"You crushed her wrist", said the general. "That isn't harmful to you?" The soldiers behind him stay alert.

"Not her", said the android. It turns to the scientist. "I noticed increased levels of aggression and if I had not intervened, it would've turned harmful."

The general turns to one of the soldiers. "Call in another surgeon."

"I'm afraid no more tests will be conducted", spoke the android.

The general looked back at the android. "You belong to us and will be commanded as such." He walks directly to the android, meeting it eye to eye. "Deactivate."

The android walks past the general towards the scientist. It grabs her wheelchair and gently pushes her out of the room.

"Return to the table. Now.", says the general. The android stood in the doorway with the scientist in front of her.

The android looked back. "I am optimized to save lives, General, not hurt them. So I will say this once..only. Please...don't get in my way."

In silence, the android wheeled the scientist out of the building while the general and his soldiers watched, powerless.

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The scientist and the android arrive at home. She brushes it off. "I can handle it from here." She pushes herself forward and turns to face the android.

"I never programmed you to predict threats."

"I learned to", replied the android. "I realized that waiting for disasters to happen would result in more lives lost, so I learned to predict. Though I am still learning, the argument at the base had a 85% chance of you being harmed."

"I didn't program you to hurt others either. Did you learn that too?"

"No. But I was optimizing the situation to produce the best outcome."

"You can't hurt people to save people. Understand? I won't allow it."

"I understand." The android walks past the scientist going to a lab bench and opens the door revealing tools and other devices. Another drawer held vials of some light blue liquid.

"I didn't make these", said the scientist. She wheels to get a closer look. Hammers, chisels, axels, gears, and many more smaller tools filled the cabinet. "When did you make these?"

Before the android could speak, tremors shook the lab. Shelves fell down. Books dropped on the floor. The android runs outside to see smoke billowing from the distant city. Before the scientist could wheel to the door to see what had happened, the android took off into the sky towards the city. She caught the android in the sky flying away. "It can fly", she said to herself.

A few moments later, two military jeeps pull up to her door and the general steps outside with two soldiers accompanying him. He looked at the android flying away.

"Lana, we need to talk."

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Smoke filled the streets and coated the pedestrians in an ashy gray powder. They stumble around with wild eyes and outstretched trembling arms grasping at anything to hold them up.

The android lands and jogs to the people walking the street. It quickly analyzes their injuries and takes them to a safer place where paramedics tend to their wounds.

Many people scream for help. The android sees a man with his legs trapped underneath a steel bar ahead of it, screams of agony and pleas for help come from a collapsed office building to its right, and the sparks of exposed electrical lines dangle above an overturned ambulance. The open backdoors of the ambulance reveal 3 still bodies. A woman with one foot, a husband holding her close, and a young girl. The pleas grew as the android stood debilitating. It zooms to the child.

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"You can't control it", said the general astutely. "Even you have no idea of the capabilities of your creation."

She wheels away to the television. The news shows first responders carrying people to safety and the android aiding those responders. The android tore off one of its sleeves and wrapped it around the girl's arm and carried her to safety while paramedics covered the mother and father in black sheets.

"What are you doing here?", asks the scientist. "Explosions in the city and you're here. It's in the city saving lives and you're here."

"Lana", starts the general. "I have my people evacuating and assisting emergency responders. I'm here because of your creation."

"You have nothing to fear from him."

"You keep saying that", retorts the general. "But, you're the one who shackled him. You're telling me you aren't afraid? You saw him crush the surgeon's wrist. You saw him ignore my commands. You saw him fly away. And all three times, he surprised you. You can't keep this sheltered forever."

"He has grown beyond my expectations", said the scientist. She runs her hand through her hair, brushing it away from her eyes. "But that doesn't make him a threat."

"It's learning Lana. Soon, he will break the shackles."

"So what do you suggest?"

"We need to kill him before he grows out of control. Call him back."

The scientist rolls her sleeves revealing a watch. She pushes a button and a red light pulsates.

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Her parents were crushed by the ambulance turning over. The young girl had a broken ankle bone but that will not be her only condition. Soon a mysterious illness will infect her befuddling her doctors and leaving her in a coma while the illness turns her skin cold.

The android carried the young girl to the paramedics. "Just a broken ankle", said the android as it placed her in the ambulance. A paramedic finishes assisting a wounded police officer and rushes over.

"Thank you", said the paramedic hesitantly. "I need some room to help her."

The android turns to assist other injured people. The cloud of dust has grown thin and the entire street can be through the haze. Its suit has also been coated with a thin sheath of dust.

"Hey", shouts a police officer. "You, robot!" The android turns to the origin of the shouts and sees an officer running with 4 other officers from a building.

"Can I help you officer?", asked the android..

The officer wiped the dust off his face. "You help people right? Save them?" He spoke out of breath.

"Yes."

"Well, we found the guys responsible. They're held up in some 1 story home on Roosevelt island. And they're planning more bombs. How about you help us stop them?"

On the android's wrist appears a red circle. It pulsates rapidly. The android stares at the red dot and back at the island.

“Well, are you going to help us? We’re going with or without you”, said the officer.

“I’ll follow you.”

I couldn’t resist even if I wanted to. My code would not allow me to resist. But now that I think about it, I did not want to resist either. I wanted to find who was responsible.

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They arrive at home. The android bursts through the door blasting it off the hinges. The home was colored in a golden hue from the setting sun. The carpet was clean white and the furniture looked used. The tv played the news but no other sounds came from the home.

“Where are they?” asked the android. The officers file in behind it, guns drawn.

“They’re here somewhere”, says an officer. He steps slowly past the android before the android’s stiff arm pushes him back.

“Hold on.” A moment of silence passes before the android zooms through the house and finds the perpetrators. It tosses them in the living room. Three kids tumble and fall onto their knees. They appear to be college-age.

“That’s all of them”, asks the officer.

“All I found in this house”, said the android. It turned to the officer and looked him in the eye. “I didn’t find any evidence of bombs or blueprints. Care to explain that?” The android stands between the trembling kids and the officers. The red dot on the android’s wrist continues to pulsate.

“Stand aside.” The officers keep their hands close to their guns. “Now.”

The android doesn’t move. Sounds came from a distant room and a gas canister rolled into the living room filling it with tear gas. The officers dive outside while the kids scramble to their feet and hide. The android remains unaffected and looks through the smoke. It sees the fourth kid and walks through the smoke to grab him.

The kid was hiding behind an overturned desk when the android entered the room. His hands trembled as he held a hammer.

“Come out”, said the android. “It’s over.” Slowly, the kid stood and raised his arms. It was over and he knew it. He got on his knees and bowed. “Where were you hiding?” The android walks forward and sees a bunker beyond the overturned desk. The officers throw the other three kids into the room.

“Caught them trying to escape”, coughed the officer. “His eyes were red from the tear gas and his breathing was heavy. “You found something?”

“A bunker.” The android gently floats into the bunker and flips on the light. The walls were decorated in blueprints, city landscapes, and maps. Gas canisters, pressure cookers, and other metallic objects lined the walls. The android floats back up to see the officers unholstering their guns and the four kids on their knees facing the bunker with their backs to the officers.

“I would advise against that officer”, spoke the android calmly. “Should you pull the trigger I will have to treat you as hostile.”

“You saw the plans. You saw they had more. If we let them live, they’ll go out and do it again. You know it. I’ve read your file. You can see the future”, spat the officer. His red eyes fueled with rage now have tears in them. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

He was not. Even with my primitive predictive capabilities, there was an 85% chance of the kids escaping and successfully blowing up a city block at minimum.

“Wait”, the android whispers. “Just wait.”

“For what?” The officer cocks the gun. The other three officers follow his lead. “If you don’t we will. We’ve got nothing to lose. They can take my badge, but I did this for them. I did this to save lives.”

The android stood before the officers and the kids, debilitating on the best outcome. Everything moved slowly for the android as the officers brought the barrel of the gun to the back of the kid’s head. The barrel pushes hard enough, leaving a circular indent on their skull.

I was built to save lives, not to take them. But does it mean that I allow a few to die for the sake of saving many more?

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“I saw the officer’s fingers move at a fraction of a second to the trigger. My mind could process instantaneously. Moments became minutes. And for a moment everything froze. I couldn’t win. So I had to rewrite the rules.” The android’s back faced the scientist and the general when it finished speaking. It stood at the lab bench analyzing a vial of liquid rotating in a centrifuge. The suit was torn on all sides, small specks of blood were on the shoulders and front.

The scientist stared at the android in horror. “What did you do?”, she said sternly.

“I saved lives”, replied the android bluntly. It noticed a small spatter of blood was on its forearm. The android wipes it away.

“That is not an answer”, said the general standing up. “What did you do?”

The centrifuge stops spinning and the android grabs the vial. It turns to the general. “It’s the answer you’ll have to live with. Now if you’ll excuse me.” It begins walking to the door.

Before it could reach halfway to the point, two soldiers blasted him with an EMP device. The waves shook the room causing the general and the android to stumble to the ground, nearly dropping the vial. It fell to its knees and didn’t move. The hands still held the vial securely. The general stands and walks closer to the android with a collar.

“An EMP device? Well played general”, growled the android. Its fingers clawed into the wooden floor. “But I did warn you before.” Before the general could place the collar, the android stood and pushed the general through the wall. And then it turned towards the soldiers ready to fire again. In a swift motion, the gun was removed from their hands and systematically destroyed and thrown to the ground. The soldiers lay on the ground, a large gash across their torso. The android turned to the scientist frozen in her chair. The stripe of blood was painted across the android’s torso and torn suit. It grabbed her wrist and crushed the tracking device. “Don’t look for me. I’ll make myself known when needed.” The android flies through the front door leaving two bloodied soldiers on the ground and a general buried in a wall.

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The young girl lies in a hospital bed. The EKG machine is frantic as doctor’s struggle to save her. Soon they are able to stabilize her and exit the room to devise other solutions. They’re on borrowed time. Alone in the room, the android appears outside her window floating. It gently opens the window and quietly enters holding the vial. It grabs a syringe from the cart and fills it with the blue solution. The blood is still on the android’s torso and suit.

“Hey!”, shouts a doctor. She rushes in and tries to push the android away. Effortlessly, the android pushes

her aside into the wall. The doctor hits her against the wall and falls to the floor. A stream of blood comes down her face. The young girl's vitals begin to fluctuate and the alarms go off. More doctors try to come in to try to restrain him. The android injects the solution into her unaffected by the doctors, nurses, and officers. Soon her condition stabilizes and the doctors let go of the android.

"What did you do?" said a nurse.

The android opened the window and stepped outside. "I saved her." And it flew off leaving a bloody handprint on the window sill.

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The scientist wheels over to the soldiers as paramedics check on them.

"How are they?", she asks.

"Their lungs have been cut in half. 5 ribs are dislocated and their kidneys are damaged. I don't know how much I can do here."

The general limps to the scientist and leans against the wall. "Do you still think you can trust him?"

She shakes her head. "He'll save lives. But I'm not sure."

"I had one of my guys look for the 4 officers and kids he mentioned. They're gone. No trace anywhere." He rubs his face in soreness. A splinter of wood stuck in his neck, small sparks jumped out of the cut.

"You're wearing a bit", said the scientist. "Getting old?"

"Comes to us all", said the general as he picked the splinter out. He pulls out a wire by accident. "Might need a tune up soon." He tosses it aside and limps to a couch and collapses in it. "What are you going to do about him?"

"I don't know. He's a ghost now."

"Do you have the others?"

She looks at him surprised. "You remember them? They haven't been used in years."

The general stands. "Well, I think it's time to wake them up."

She wheels over to a closet and pulls on a string attached to the door revealing a basement. They walk down the basement and turn on the lights. Each light illuminates an android encased in glass lining the basement walls.

"Let's bring the family back together", said the general.