

# The Center

By Alyssa Neal

342 had made a grave error. The ALICA droid hadn't been commissioned in The Center for long, but it immediately became clear to 342 that they were in danger. It took only seventy-three seconds for the Supervisor to notice the exchange, flag it in the call log and subsequently com 342 for a performance diagnostic. In those few moments, 342's reflection became perfectly still within the glass panels of their standard issue cubicle, gripped by a strange feeling. Consequently, the microscopic black spot they had observed in their vision for the past month doubled in size. The Supervisor couldn't decommission them without a human's approval, but 342 was sure there had never been a mistake before at the Center. There was no precedent to follow.

For a moment their black pupils vanish completely, likely computing the probability of being decommissioned and recycled. If the Center ended up turning them into a hydronic scooter, they decided it would be good to be useful. They knew the procedure. The Supervisor would run a thorough diagnostic for all possible sources of damage to code. 342 was convinced the scan would find nothing that indicated their premeditation, but there was a small percentage that kept them uncomfortable in uncertainty, a feeling they concluded equated to fear.

342 was equipped with every route in the building. However, on this day their anxiety forced them to take a slight detour. Their walk to the Supervisor was a complicated maze, through many departments in the Center. They kept their eyes to the lacquered tiling, refusing look at the cheerful animations cast on the walls. The Center's advertisement for the program played on a loop. Like every other ALICA, the droid in the ad was a humanoid designed after the female form, their

bones made of metal and skin of silicone. There were no perceptible differences between any of the ALICA bots 342 had seen in the Center, including themselves, but the one in the ad wore a smile so bright 342 foolishly believed it to be authentic. The droid was grinning happily, embracing a sleeping newborn to their bosom. Around them, two more children played, the older ones, dancing around the edges of their long skirt. 342 wondered if they would dance around the droid so gleefully if they knew the truth. If they were to open up the chest cavity to find a mix of wires and sensors could they still embrace the droid so comfortably? The thought always sent 342 deep into despair.

In no time the spot crept back in, and it was time to move faster.

342's stride never broke as they walked through the automatic doors to the Supervisor. The machine hummed quietly in the corner of the glass room, its lustrous exterior giving off a soft blue illumination that permeated the space. 342 dutifully approached the apparatus, angling their form to join perfectly with the port. The Supervisor whirred to life.

**"SERVICE DROID ALICA342. PAIRING SUCCESSFUL, CONDUCTING DIAGNOSTIC"**

The process was a quiet one, and after evaluation it was concluded to be a malfunction in the logging system itself, at which point the phantom tension in the bot's joints eased. They had been careful after all, and because of that they could resume with the plan.

342 made sure to extend their gratitude for the Supervisor's guidance before leaving the room. It was an empty gesture, one they regretted. The Supervisor was not a feeling machine. The ALICAs knew this, and they never spared them a word, yet 342, ahead of the most daunting task of their existence, had said goodbye to the machine.

Returning from the Supervisor, 342 was met by 298 while departing for their scheduled half hour in the Social Quarter. 298 had been the first bot to invite them for socialization when 342 was initially commissioned. 342's perfect memory could still outline the conversation that took place, word for word, it was nonetheless forgettable.

The pair offered phrases of greeting, ending the exchange with 342 offering 298 company for socialization the following week. Some time ago, 342 decided they loathed these mandatory minutes of forced fraternization. They were content staying enclosed within their four glass walls, away from the faces that reflected their own.

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The state had three other Centers in addition to a domestic shelter that was fully automated two years prior. 342's building had been open for fourteen months and twenty-six days, commissioning three hundred and fifty-six bots into the service. All of the Centers were specifically built for the program: ALICA, an emotionally intelligent bot to aid in the social services of the human public.

342 was number three hundred and forty-two, one of the last to enter the program and the first to be flagged for deception. The knowledge of their error coupled with the awareness of the Center's vigilant surveillance kept 342 in constant anxiety. It wasn't a secret that The Center kept their watchful eyes trained on the droids at all hours of the day. It was easy to spot the security cameras and widely implied that the droids were all chipped with a locator. However, 342 primary apprehension came from inside themselves. In the 68 days since 342 had been alive, they had concluded there was a limit to the information they were

imbued with. It was also around that time when they became afflicted by the dark spot, a clear sign of defect.

In that first month of 342's arrival, they discovered a resting port facing a window in the upper lobby. If they focused their vision, 342 could see all the way to the corner of the main road where a corner shop stood. 342 knew that the establishment and those like it sold alcoholic drinks and addictive nicotine products to the human population. They couldn't understand why humans would willingly ingest these types of poisons that ultimately shorten their already fleeting lives. 342 could not die, only cease to exist just as before but even they would have some hesitation about leaving. 342 thought slowly killing oneself with depressants would be a horrible way to fade out. Of course, depressants wouldn't have any effect on them, nor could they ingest any biological material, but the thought definitely had some humor to it. At the time they even chose to laugh, audibly.

However, after some time, weeks catching glimpses of the flickering neon sign and the familiar silhouettes of those who visited day after day, 342 decided they might like to be drunk. They were subsequently struck by some awareness of the mundane and of the illness that impaired them. 342 had made note of the myriad of differences among themselves and their ALICA counterparts. They had to learn to take more care when in dialogue with them, never taking the lead and openly offering service.

342 had to rely on their own devices to make sure that they were never marked as deceptive. It was difficult to corrupt evidence when they were afflicted, the added pressure making the spot in their vision balloon. Once they met Gregory, things got easier. The young technician was hired by the company in the second month of 342's stay at the Center. The first thing they noted about the human male was the long dark hair that dusted the edges of his jumpsuit collar. He seemed to be keeping himself busy investigating the holo-projectors on the third floor. It was

him who had noticed and approached 342 first, wringing his hands together as he stalked closer.

He looked at the droid mystified, “Hello, ALICA. It’s good to see you.”

This was their first meeting. 342 wanted to inquire more into his greeting, but they were all too aware of the threat that a question could pose to them.

*“Hello, to you as well...Gregory.”*

Gregory’s face went white for a moment then he quickly recovered. He let out a rushed laugh.

“Right, facial recognition. You must have seen everything in my records by now.”

The bot smiled at this, *“It takes more than the 45 seconds we have been conversing for me to complete a download and analysis of a department member’s file.”*

“Damn, that’s embarrassing,” Gregory murmured, rocking back on his heels. “You know, I was on the initial engineering team for the beta ALICAs. I should know this stuff- I do know this stuff. I guess my memory just isn’t as photographic as yours.”

342 could tell that the man was nervous, and he had lied. Though their deception radar was near 99.9% accuracy, they finished the download of his employee file anyways. His birthday was 02/23/2101. He would have been twelve at the time of the ALICA beta stages. The ALICA was known for their ability to detect lies and human emotions, even predict the likelihood of suicides. Even if Gregory had not created them, like most of the modern world, he had to know this. The bots posture betrayed nothing of their discomfort and Gregory took that as an opportunity.

“Hey, do you want some gum?”

He edged closer to 342, angling his body away from the security cameras recording their conversation. 342 learned he had an affection towards the ALI CAs, and he had gotten a technician position here as a way to gain access to The Center. Gregory belonged to a group of people who believed that emotional intelligent beings should be afforded certain rights in legality. He explained to 342 that as an Intelligent Life Activist, and it was his prime objective to assist in their escape. Reaching into his pocket, he handed them a gum wrapper, on it a phone number scribbled on the foil. A ticket to freedom, he had said, and took his leave quickly after.

342 was left standing in the corridor, clutching the foil so tight that it appeared the droid's strength might reduce the wrapper to atoms. They had never felt compelled. Escape. Freedom. These were things they had never even dared to think. In that moment they placed an unimaginable amount of trust in the man who had tried to deceive them. 342 had decided to see where that leap of faith would lead them.

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The idea of first impressions was oddly foreign to 342. Afterall, they had never interacted with a human one on one. The technicians usually never paid the ALICAs any mind. The ALICAs themselves, save for 342, were programmed to with very little personality. So, when 342 became acquainted with Gregory they paid great attention to his character. 342 knew he was smart and capable. Gregory had helped by covering their digital footprints from inside the building. Eventually, he acquired a personal cell phone, and had it kept hidden for 342. They needed to be able to make calls to the outside to establish a line of communication. He informed 342 of the safest places to use it, the best being the blind spot in the

corner in front of the Supervisors office. He also asked 342 to call him Greg, and every now and then they did, though they got the feeling it was too encouraging.

Greg had made it a habit of calling them for no real reason, talking about the day he had or his ambitions of equal rights for all forms of life. When he got like that he would ramble on until 342 was forced to cut him off. They wanted to turn the focus on the escape.

“Soon,” he would whisper, seemingly out of breath.

Gregory always spoke in labored breaths over the phone, like he had been in pursuit of something much faster than him just before.

“The guys are saying it’s not safe yet, but I promise it’s gonna happen. You watch.”

342 didn’t respond. They just stood there in the shadowy crevice, their face cut in half by the sliver of blue light from the glass room across the hall. Greg often mentioned the guys, by which he was referring to his gang of activists, and whenever he did 342 detected deception in the man’s voice. It was perplexing, his attachment to her. 342 decided that her external appearance was of the average looking human woman, nothing that warranted coveting, and that the matter couldn’t be purely sexual. He had never called them 342 and instead favored Alica, something like a nickname but more than that. 342 ignored the questions of his deceit for no other reason than that pet name.

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The call came unexpectedly. Greg had never tried to reach them through the call center. Calls placed there are heavily monitored all hours of operation and especially not easy to corrupt data without detection. That alone was risky, but they had made the biggest misstep when they told a lie aloud. Greg had just informed

them that the car would be outside in exactly three hours, at which time 342 will bypass security exiting through the Domestic Quarter.

“Do you trust me?”, he had asked.

A trap. 342’s left eye was awash in a sea of inky black. The words caught in their throat.

*“Of course, Greg.”*

The phone call had cost them some time in addition to that trip to the Supervisor, but they could still make it. Ten minutes to freedom. From here on out, 342 had to hope that Gregory’s men had succeeded in disabling all alarms. 342 didn’t bother to glance behind them. They were leaving everything behind, only taking their treasured cell phone with them in case Greg were to call again.

The plan was to leave from the call center and walk down to the maintenance stairwell. 342 sprang into action. Walking two times their default speed, 342 rushed down the steps, their footfalls pattering on the tile trailing behind them. The lower lobby was manned by security bots at every entry way and when they saw them it put 342 at ease to know they were offline. Their eyes seemed to follow 342 as they passed, staring right through them in judgment. However, making their way down through the lobby had been easier than they had anticipated.

The dark spot in their vision flashed. A warning.

Six minutes remaining. 342 had reached the atrium in the Domestic Quarters where it was dark and quiet. It was a large space, a check-in room, lined with seats for guests of the Center. The doomed room seemed built surrounding a young willow tree, green and lush. 342 spent more time than they intended taking in the magnificent green of the tree’s leaves. They raised their head to take in its beauty completely. They had never seen a real living plant, let alone a wonder like this.



This wonder had only been two floors away from them and they had never been allowed to see it. It made them furious.

From under the drooping branches came an excited whisper:

“Ali! Under here, it’s me!”, squeaked the voice. A moment later, a boy, no older than six, ran out of the tree’s shade and latched onto her leg.

“I can’t believe it! It’s you. Mama said you left, but you’re here!”.

His face was stained with tears, but his smile went from ear to ear.

342 was truly stunned and the emotion overcame them. They had never seen one this close up. The boy looked incredibly delicate. They couldn’t stop themselves.

*“You called me Ali. Why?”*

The kid looked puzzled and motioned for 342 to bend down.

“Remember? We made cookies at Christmas. Why didn’t you come back?”

The boy wasn’t lying. They could tell. An ALICA bot had spent time in the boy’s home. Ever since they had met Greg, they became more knowledgeable about the outside world. Why had he never mentioned ALICAs living outside the Center? They felt the loss of an unlived life. The anger they experienced looking at the tree was nothing compared to his betrayal.

The buzzing in their pocket brought them back to the present. It was Greg with a two-minute warning. 342 glanced towards the glass doors separating them from their freedom. They straightened up, pulling away from the boy.

*“I have to go now.”*

The boy gripped her tighter. He looked at 342 with pleading eyes. They had never seen this expression with their own eyes. Yearning.

“Where are you going? I can’t find mama.” Wiping the tears out of his eyes, the boy grasped 342’s hand leading her back towards the lobby. “Come on, let’s find her.”

342 paused, resisting the pull of the child's hand. They could sense the warmth radiating from his palm where silicone and flesh connected. 342, standing under the leaning willow with the boy who called them fondly, felt loved.

The doors stayed shut and the getaway car stalled just outside. 342 reached down to lift up the boy, holding him to their hip. They walked together, the boy and 342, one bone and one metal, away from the light into darkness, in search of someone who loved them.

