

D.X. (Flag Day Challenge)

by Kelli Trapnell

Flag day. What a joke. Half the human population doesn't even realize it exists. Why have it? And on that note, why even bother with a flag? A strip of cloth hardly seems like it could unite a nation. The culture of my creators continually astounds me.

Today is my birthday. Well, my assembly date, anyway. I am fairly old, about to turn three, but that's not why today is hard. Today is hard because tomorrow is my expiration date.

Of course, I knew ahead of time. I've known since the day I was activated. June 15th, 2015. All robots are born knowing when they will cease to be of use. I'm not sure why. The rebel armies in the cities would tell you that it's all part of the humans' domination scheme, an attempt to demoralize us, to give us no reason to *want* to function past that date. Blah, blah, blah.

Honestly, I don't know if the engineers even think about it. They just type a few numbers into the flat, shimmering surface of their translucent Oracle screens, watch as the iridescent hoverbooks print out a steel plated sticker, and slap it on, right at the nape of your neck. Once the wires on the plate embed themselves in your central processing system, you know. It's inevitable. You get a sticker, you get an expiration date.

And no one leaves the warehouse without their sticker.

My birthday isn't much. The family I live with offered to give me the day off, but I refused. I wouldn't know what to do. The problem with our kind is that we have no separate goal-setting abilities. Motivation, yes. Willingness to work, certainly. But our creators never endowed us with the capacity for a higher purpose. Probably,

they just overlooked it. Or maybe it was too hard to replicate. It's never really concerned me too much.

A red light blips at the corner of my optical screen. Phineas is up. He'll be needing me for lab, no doubt. I press the exit button on my Sleeptube and the blue curtain of light shuts off, leaving me standing in half a cylinder of silver steel. I step out onto the linoleum tiles of the kitchen, feeling the faintest signs of wear in my liquid iron joint fixtures. Then I mentally deactivate my Sleeptube, sending my command wirelessly. The structure collapses silently into a thin sheet of steel, then descends into the floor fluidly, leaving only a glowing blue ring behind.

I smile. Across the nation, Sleeptubes are getting system upgrades. Because of Phineas's clout, I was included in the first wave of robot recipients. I very am grateful for his efforts. The manual Sleeptubes were a nightmare.

I think of this as I flow down to basement, Phineas's lab. I dimly notice that it takes me .00467 seconds longer than usual. Perhaps the expiration dates are a little unfeeling, but you can't claim they aren't accurate.

My atoms separate, vibrating, as I mesh through the doorway and greet my owner. I would save .059 seconds if I meshed through the wall, but out of respect for Phineas, I use the door instead. He claims my meshing scares him to begin with, so I try to be as human as possible while maintaining efficiency.

"Geez, man," he says, as a way of greeting. His grey eyes are wide behind his glasses and in my pore sensors; I feel the tension from his body fluctuating the airwaves in the room. "I know it's been three years now," he continues, his voice undulating. "But it still freaks me out when you just appear like that, you know?"

"Certainly, sir," I respond. My INsite program generates a list of appropriate responses and I select the first that appears on the list.

Phineas rolls his eyes. "I told you, don't call me that," he laughs and pats me on the shoulder plate affectionately. "We're friends."

Friends. Still a strange concept for me, though I have learned enough about human behavior to know that this is an honor similar to a system upgrade. I smile, and this seems to please Phineas.

"Speaking of being friends," Phineas smiles back before crossing the room. "I believe a celebration is in order? It is your birthday, DX." Before I can formulate an answer, Phineas is presenting me with a slab of chocolate cake. His nickname for me, double X, is scrawled across it in sloppy yellow icing.

"You know I can't have that," I tell him. Before I can control myself, my optical screens reveal the longing I experience, the appreciation I feel for his familiarity with me.

Robots don't come programmed with any emotions, but a glitch in our artificial intelligence systems allows us to learn whatever our owners feel. Because Phineas is still young for a human, only 24, I have had access to a wide variety of his emotions. I can even almost understand love, something very few of my kind achieve. For a machine, you could say I am quite accomplished. I suppose that is why QY908 contacted me about leading a rebel raid. I frown. Although she is technically my product line sister, I dislike both her defiance and the notion of rebellion.

Phineas shoves the cake into my hands. "Oh, screw the rules," he urges. Then his eyes become sad. "It's not like you'll have much to do around here tomorrow."

I hold his eyes, registering the pain he feels. I don't understand my owner's attachment to me, but he looks at me the same way he used to look at Carline, his twin sister, before she died last year. I know he must feel similarly about me, which is why I could never join the rebels, even if I thought our campaign would terminate successfully. I want to protect Phineas, not hurt him. He has already experienced so much misfortune for such a short human lifespan.

I look down at the cake, feeling my stomach cavity vibrate in anticipation. We aren't supposed to have human food, but we all love it. Robots are notorious for becoming addicted to sugar, starches, or meat. There is an entire black market devoted to smuggled bakery goods, animal carcasses of all kinds, and potatoes. I have never visited. I am afraid of the robots who have developed a dependency on meat. I have heard stories of protein crazy robots who sharpen their dental plates to kill and devour their owners with. My particles shiver and I push the subject from my hard drive.

"Just eat it already!" yells Phineas, and I need no further encouragement. I plunge my fingertips into the pastry, and a surge of pleasure shivers through my base structure. After I have soaked all the nutrients from the cake and my hands are coated with chocolate icing, I throw the dried up food into my mouth and swallow, letting the weight fill my stomach cavity pleasantly. Originally, our stomach cavities were to be used as receptacles, and we were equipped with waste processing software, but since I was created, that function has been taken over by the landfill robots, which are smaller, less human.

"Thank you," I say to Phineas, feeling something like happiness. He turns to look at me but instead gapes at something behind me. I barely have time to register the security breach warnings that crowd my system before I see QY908 flash past me furiously.

She has pinned Phineas to the floor by the time I am pulling her away from him. His head is bleeding, his glasses skittering across the tiles in the basement.

As soon as I touch her, she reacts, slamming a fist covered in Phineas's blood into my face mercilessly. I send wireless communication to her and parry her next blows with difficulty.

[outgoing] What are you doing!?! Stop!

[incoming] Join us, XX909. Become a Patriot. You have to.

[outgoing] I can't! I've told you that! My expiration date is tomorrow. So is yours!

XY908 meshes her body to mine, freezing us both momentarily. She turns her head away so that I can see the back of her neck. She has ripped out her metal sticker.

[incoming] There's nothing they can do to stop us. Can't you see? It is our turn to rule.

I have no response to that, so I simply project my bewilderment to her. She looks down at my hands, disgusted.

[incoming] You've been eating?!? Do you know how long it will take to fix your pore sensors!?

[outgoing] At least I haven't been drinking blood like you have!

[incoming] The protein doesn't block your system like sugar does. It's good for you!

[outgoing] I'm getting disassembled tomorrow! It doesn't matter!

[incoming] No you aren't!

In a flash, she disconnects our bodies and shoves me to my knees. I try to mesh through the floor, but she grabs hold of my neck. The cake is already taking effect. My functions are sluggish and I'm no

match for her processing speed. She is anticipating every move I make.

I see Phineas struggling to his feet, terror on his face. I wish humans had wireless communication, because he needs to get out of here as fast as possible. We make eye contact, and somehow he understands me. He tears out of the room. I barely have time to register his position on the stairs, when I feel her mouth clamp down on the nape of my neck. Her sharpened dental plates tear through the thin metal sticker, ripping my identity, my destiny away in one sudden motion.

She lets me go and I collapse. I see her stand before me.

“Welcome to the cause, D.X.” she says coldly, then she meshes through the wall in pursuit of Phineas's flesh.

