

The Adjustment

As the darkness gradually faded into light, Alexa could distinguish her landing place as a vacant alleyway. Shadows turned into the stark sides of buildings, windows, doors and garbage bins. When it was light enough, she checked the Space-Time Locator on her belt to make sure the co-ordinates were correct. They were. She then checked the time and date: 0910 hours, 3rd October, 2019. Time was limited, she had less than an hour to set things right. As soon as she had fully materialised, she pulled a laser pen from her pocket and marked a cross on the ground between her feet, then headed out from the seclusion of the dark alleyway into the busy street.

The constant whirl of traffic, the exhaust fumes, and the bustling crowds and neon lights of the city were unfamiliar to Alexa. Where she had come from in 2080 there was no need for these archaic forms of transport and most of the time people spent their nights in virtual worlds. Still, she found it rather exotic as she jostled her way along the hectic sidewalk. She quickened her step recalling the seriousness of her assignment. Her first attempt, the week before, had failed. She had not been able to go back far enough. This time she had made it, so today, it had to be done.

When she glanced around her, Alexa realized she need not have worried about looking out of place. She was amazed at the variety of colours and styles of the attire of the people in the street. Her tall slender body in her white tryellic overalls probably looked no stranger than many of those who passed her by. She also wondered whether any of them could imagine how much science was to change everything, not only their access to resources (which was critical enough) but by the manipulation of the population itself in the effort to make everybody uniform. A scientific quest to create the perfect human being: strong and healthy, obedient and controllable.

Alexa heard a crackling and felt a quiver beneath her feet.

"Hey there, did you feel that?" asked a disheveled passerby who abruptly grabbed her by the arm. Alexa shook herself free. She didn't reply but she knew exactly what it meant: her time in the past was running out. She quickened her pace again until she came to what she hoped was the right street where she interrupted a couple standing in a doorway.

"Excuse me," she said as she pulled out a key with a tag from her jacket pocket. She read aloud from the back of the tag. "159 Regent Street. Unit 4C. Is this the apartment block?"

"Yes. That'll be the basement flat. Down there," the young woman said pointing to a door beneath street level. "But I don't think there is anyone home though," she quickly added.

Alexa thanked the woman politely and scurried down the nearby set of stairs to stand at the front door, key in hand. She thought it curious that Professor Dalton had kept the key all these

years. Perhaps he had always had an inkling of what was to come. *"I won't be home. Use the key, but make it look like a break-in,"* Professor Dalton had told her when they met for the last time. *"Then delete everything on the computer and take the report in the briefcase and destroy it as soon as you can. That may not stop it from being developed but it may slow things down a little."* Professor Dalton might be 96 years old, but he still had his wits about him, Alexa mused, and he, of course, wasn't GM.

The key turned effortlessly and she stepped inside the dark and dingy apartment. She didn't want to turn a light on in case it attracted attention. She looked about and found the computer on the desk and the briefcase leaning beside it. First she tuned on the computer, entered the password and quickly deleted everything on it. Then she checked inside the briefcase and pulled out a tightly bound wad of paper stacked in a folder and ran her finger across the title on the cover – **The Genetic Modification of a Species.**

"Are you sure you are not GM" Professor Dalton asked her emphatically when they met the second time, *"because if you are..."*

"I'm sure," Alexa lied, as she did not know for certain whether she was GM or not. She remembered being taken from her family and placed in the Science Academy quite young but that may have been due to her natural abilities, not man-made ones. Becoming a scientist, even as young as she was, required intelligence and an enquiring mind not a compliant one like most GMs her age. Professor Dalton explained to her how they had been genetically modifying the human population over the last twenty-five years each time they met. Alexa had been horrified.

Before she had a chance to trash the place, Alexa heard another crackling. It was now time to really get a move on, so she ran out and up the stairs, clutching the report tightly under her arm. After a brief survey up and down the street she raced straight back to the alleyway, zigzagging her way through the oncoming traffic on the sidewalk.

"You're the best cadet for this job. It should be seamless," Professor Dalton said at their very first meeting, about a month ago now. *"Since hearing of your involvement in adjustment research and the adjustment device I had to see you as soon as possible. I would like this to be done and then I can die with a clear conscience. The mistakes we make...without knowing it...now it's time to set things right."*

"It's only a prototype at the moment," Alexa explained. *And I don't have a lot of access to it when it is unattended but I will see what I can do,"* she had then added as she watched Professor Dalton relax into his chair, a disheartened old man. As it turned out she had been able to talk the others into giving her the key to the lab so she could work on it in her spare time. This, she hoped would be the last time she would need to use it.

As soon as she reached the alleyway, Alexa threw the paper version of the report into the nearest garbage bin and set it alight with her laser pen as quickly as she could. Now it was time to go home. When she got back; if she got back, she would also have to destroy ten years research (a year of which she had been involved since progressing into Level 2 at the Academy) and the adjustment device itself. Then her conscience would also be clear, despite the possible consequences. She stood as still as she could on the cross that she had marked earlier directly beneath her feet. Then, as she watched the flames dance high in the bin, she hastily typed the settings to send him back to the future into the remote keypad on her belt; pressed the control button and felt her body dissolve into the darkness again.

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When Alexa opened her eyes she was standing, looking out through the front glass panel of the Adjustment Device into the lab just as she had stood when she left. The familiar sight, stark and bare compared to where she had just been, reduced some of the anxiety she had been feeling since her return. She felt a little dizzy, which was to be expected, so she waited for a few minutes to allow her nervous system to recover before releasing the latch.

It seems I am not GM after all, she thought. She was pleased. Then she congratulated herself for a job well done as she stepped out of the Adjustment Device. She took a few deep breaths, unfastened the remote from her belt, switched it off and hung it on the wall. Everything seemed the same. The lab was just as tidy as it was when she left it. She glanced across and out of the window. Nothing outside seemed different. The monorail was sitting at the passenger stop and a dozen people were stepping onboard. Overhead she heard the gentle whirring of a couple of sky-riders zooming around town. Relieved that there wasn't much change, she concentrated back to the task at hand. Although the first part had been accomplished, there was still something else she needed to do.

The Adjustment Device authorized by the Regime to be developed to adjust historical events that did not fit their ideology. However, as part of Professor Dalton's secret plans, a self-destruct mechanism had been built into the Adjustment Device right from the start. For a day just like this. All she now had to do was to punch in the exit code. A red light would then appear and the timer would be set. In three minutes the central operating system would shut down permanently and the whole unit would be destroyed. She took a few more deep breaths reflecting on in the magnitude of what she had just achieved and now what she was about to do. *Professor Dalton will be so proud of me*, she thought. Then she remembered the last thing her old professor had told her: *"Report back to me as soon as it is done."*

No time like the present, Alexa found herself thinking, smiling at the irony of the thought. It didn't take her long to recall the exit code. It had been imprinted in her memory for so long, waiting for that very day. Giving it no more consideration, she took the main lab computer that contained the blueprint, all the paperwork she could find on the shelves and her belt and placed them in the machine. She then hastily punched the exit code into the keyboard on the main Adjustment Console. But before she had time to think about it further a small blue light flashed next to the speaker by the door. Alexa waited patiently as the automated system announced an incoming call.

"Alexa," the familiar voice said. *"Are you there? I tried contacting you at the dormitory but I was told you were working in the lab."*

She immediately flicked a switch beside her desk and a small rectangular space on the wall converted into a video screen. Professor Dalton instantly came to life in vivid 3D.

"Yes. Good Timing, Professor," she replied. *"I was just about to call you. It's done!"*

"But I thought you were going tomorrow. Sunday. Isn't that what we planned?"

"Tomorrow," she queried. *"Isn't today Sunday?"* Alexa countered with a rising sense of panic. She then gasped at Professor Dalton's reply, *"No, it's Saturday."*

Alexa glanced over at the dying Adjustor Device. The red light had just begun to flicker. It was about to go out. She was supposed to re-connect with the exact moment she left, closing the time-loop. In her rush to return home she inadvertently came back one day earlier. No wonder everything seemed the same. Nothing had changed: she hadn't actually gone yet. Alexa just reached the control panel in time. She flicked the switch to reverse the command and breathed a deep sigh of relief. Not as seamless as Professor Dalton had suggested. Now it just meant she had to do it all over again but she knew now that she could do it ... successfully... the next time.