



Menagerie

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It seemed only a few months had passed since the COVID-19 pandemic was nearly over. While communities were returning to normalcy, without warning, a new outbreak of a variant of the virus sparked fears of another international pandemic that might be even tougher to defeat than the original COVID-19.

Like many military families with husbands and fathers stationed overseas, Annalise and her two teenagers, Petra and Travis, decided to shelter-in-place in relative isolation from the base and town until they knew how dangerous this new virus might be. They didn't have time to plan. Annalise made a few calls and sighed when she put down the phone.

"My parents had some neighbors who decided to live off the grid in the foothills not far from here," Annalise said. "They've invited us to stay with them. They're retired inventors, a bit eccentric, but very nice. We should be okay there."

Travis groaned. "I'm going to be sooo bored."

Petra's eyes brightened. "Is it a ranch or a farm? Do they have animals?"

Annalise shrugged. "I heard they have animals, but maybe not what you'd expect."

The following day, after filling a borrowed van with supplies and belongings, they drove to the mountains. After they parked in front of the large ranch house, Petra saw a German shepherd sitting on the porch by the door. It didn't bound down the steps to greet them or bark at their arrival. A moment later, a tall, slim couple stepped out of the house. They both smiled.

"Welcome to our humble abode," the man said. "I'm Isaac, and this is Athena."

After Petra introduced herself, she watched the shepherd twitch its tail but otherwise didn't move.

"That's Dora," Athena said, patting the dog's head. "Dora, speak."

The dog barked and then said, "Welcome to our humble abode. I'm Isaac, and this is Athena."

Petra stared, her mouth agape. "The dog talks like Isaac."

"That's because it's programmed to repeat what it heard. Dora's a robot. We named it Dora because it sits at the front door. It communicated to us inside when you arrived."

Travis grinned. "Cool! Do you have more animals like Dora?"

"Come inside and see our menagerie."

They carried their belongings and cartons of food into the house before settling in the den for refreshments. The den was connected to an airy patio and a backyard of well-kept trees, plants, bird feeders, and squirrel feeders.

“Doesn’t encouraging the squirrels make it hard to keep fruit trees and vegetables growing?” Annalise asked.

Athena smiled. “The garden is for the animals so we can record their sounds for the robots we build. If they leave us any food, we eat it.”

“My parents said you’ve been inventors for a long time,” Annalise said.

Isaac nodded. “We started designing these robots when we contracted for the government during the last few administrations, until the current president cut us off for what he called ‘making toys’. We called our inventions ‘bug bugs’ because most of them were designed to look like insects that carried recording hardware.” He picked up a plastic millipede about four inches long from the coffee table. “Millie was one of our earlier robots. She can’t crawl very far, and her communication channels are limited. She’s a more traditional bug.”

“With drone technology, we design flying and scampering animal robots,” Athena said.

“You don’t work for the government, so who will buy these robots?” Annalise asked.

Isaac took a deep breath and let it out. “It’s true we don’t currently work for the government. We live on the royalties of past inventions, but we continue to invent robots that might be useful for gathering intelligence for federal agencies. We have an unofficial network of engineers like us.” He paused. “What do you know about the big house in town called the Manse?”

She arched her eyebrows. “It’s an old house that used to belong to a parsonage. Someone bought it recently, and no one seems to know what’s going on in it. The people entering and leaving don’t wear uniforms, but they have a military bearing. People say they’re former soldiers who never really moved on after their enlistments terminated. There are rumors of unofficial connections to currently enlisted soldiers and the military establishment.”

“That’s what we heard. Anything else?”

Annalise nodded. “My husband said to keep an eye on them, like a neighborhood watch, but don’t be obvious. We have some private communication channels to report things. To tell you the truth, they’re kind of scary. Are they paramilitary or a private militia?”

“We don’t know, but our team would like to find out.”

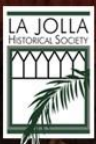
Athena opened a box and pulled out a toy stuffed animal. “This is our squirrel drone.” She tapped some keys on a computer, and it chattered like a real squirrel before running across the room. Next she pulled out an acorn. “It’s a video recording device the squirrel can move around.” Finally, she pulled out a large, black fly with big eyes. “It can fly and communicate with light. Compound eyes and multiple light wavelengths are like having an alphabet with thousands of letters, good for encryption. We’ll deploy these robots near the Manse and direct them around the property. With so many people staying inside in quarantine, maybe the Manse won’t have many guards vigilant for intruders. We hope they won’t look for small animals that are really robotic spies.”

“The new virus is unfortunate for public health, but the quarantine is fortuitous for our bug deployment,” Isaac said. “When you return the van to its owners tomorrow,

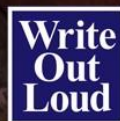
I'll follow you in my truck. You can watch us deploy the menagerie to do their jobs.”

Travis' eyes lit up. “Cool! Spying robots! As long as we stay healthy, I won't mind this quarantine at all.”

Petra nodded. “Not at all.”



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