

MARTHA WELLS



The
New York Times
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Series

MURDER BOT

ALL SYSTEMS RED

HUGO AND NEBULA AWARD WINNER

ALL SYSTEMS RED

The Murderbot Diaries

MARTHA WELLS

A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

NEW YORK



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Chapter One

I COULD HAVE BECOME a mass murderer after I hacked my governor module, but then I realized I could access the combined feed of entertainment channels carried on the company satellites. It had been well over 35,000 hours or so since then, with still not much murdering, but probably, I don't know, a little under 35,000 hours of movies, serials, books, plays, and music consumed. As a heartless killing machine, I was a terrible failure.

I was also still doing my job, on a new contract, and hoping Dr. Volescu and Dr. Bharadwaj finished their survey soon so we could get back to the habitat and I could watch episode 397 of *Rise and Fall of Sanctuary Moon*.

I admit I was distracted. It was a boring contract so far and I was thinking about backburnering the status alert channel and trying to access music on the entertainment feed without HubSystem logging the extra activity. It was trickier to do it in the field than it was in the habitat.

This assessment zone was a barren stretch of coastal island, with low, flat hills rising and falling and thick greenish-black grass up to my ankles, not much in the way of flora or fauna, except a bunch of different-sized birdlike things and some puffy floaty things that were harmless as far as we knew. The coast was dotted with big bare craters, one of which Bharadwaj and Volescu were taking samples in. The planet had a ring, which from our current position dominated the horizon when you looked out to sea. I was looking at the sky and mentally poking at the feed when the bottom of the crater exploded.

I didn't bother to make a verbal emergency call. I sent the visual feed from my field camera to Dr. Mensah's, and jumped down into the crater. As I scrambled down the sandy slope, I could already hear Mensah over the emergency comm channel, yelling at someone to get the hopper in the air now. They were about ten kilos away, working on another part of the island, so there was no way they were going to get here in time to help.

Conflicting commands filled my feed but I didn't pay attention. Even if I hadn't borked my own governor module, the emergency feed took priority,

and it was chaotic, too, with the automated HubSystem wanting data and trying to send me data I didn't need yet and Mensah sending me telemetry from the hopper. Which I also didn't need, but it was easier to ignore than HubSystem simultaneously demanding answers and trying to supply them.

In the middle of all that, I hit the bottom of the crater. I have small energy weapons built into both arms, but the one I went for was the big projectile weapon clamped to my back. The hostile that had just exploded up out of the ground had a really big mouth, so I felt I needed a really big gun.

I dragged Bharadwaj out of its mouth and shoved myself in there instead, and discharged my weapon down its throat and then up toward where I hoped the brain would be. I'm not sure if that all happened in that order; I'd have to replay my own field camera feed. All I knew was that I had Bharadwaj, and it didn't, and it had disappeared back down the tunnel.

She was unconscious and bleeding through her suit from massive wounds in her right leg and side. I clamped the weapon back into its harness so I could lift her with both arms. I had lost the armor on my left arm and a lot of the flesh underneath, but my nonorganic parts were still working. Another burst of commands from the governor module came through and I backburnered it without bothering to decode them. Bharadwaj, not having nonorganic parts and not as easily repaired as me, was definitely a priority here and I was mainly interested in what the MedSystem was trying to tell me on the emergency feed. But first I needed to get her out of the crater.

During all this, Volescu was huddled on the churned up rock, losing his shit, not that I was unsympathetic. I was far less vulnerable in this situation than he was and I wasn't exactly having a great time either. I said, "Dr. Volescu, you need to come with me now."

He didn't respond. MedSystem was advising a tranq shot and *blah blah blah*, but I was clamping one arm on Dr. Bharadwaj's suit to keep her from bleeding out and supporting her head with the other, and despite everything I only have two hands. I told my helmet to retract so he could see my human face. If the hostile came back and bit me again, this would be a bad mistake, because I did need the organic parts of my head. I made my voice firm and warm and gentle, and said, "Dr. Volescu, it's gonna be fine, okay? But you need to get up and come help me get her out of here."

That did it. He shoved to his feet and staggered over to me, still shaking. I turned my good side toward him and said, "Grab my arm, okay? Hold on."

He managed to loop his arm around the crook of my elbow and I started up the crater towing him, holding Bharadwaj against my chest. Her breathing was rough and desperate and I couldn't get any info from her suit. Mine was torn across my chest so I upped the warmth on my body, hoping it would help. The feed was quiet now, Mensah having managed to use her leadership priority to mute everything but MedSystem and the hopper, and all I could hear on the hopper feed was the others frantically shushing each other.

The footing on the side of the crater was lousy, soft sand and loose pebbles, but my legs weren't damaged and I got up to the top with both humans still alive. Volescu tried to collapse and I coaxed him away from the edge a few meters, just in case whatever was down there had a longer reach than it looked.

I didn't want to put Bharadwaj down because something in my abdomen was severely damaged and I wasn't sure I could pick her up again. I ran my field camera back a little and saw I had gotten stabbed with a tooth, or maybe a cilia. Did I mean a cilia or was that something else? They don't give murderbots decent education modules on anything except murdering, and even those are the cheap versions. I was looking it up in HubSystem's language center when the little hopper landed nearby. I let my helmet seal and go opaque as it settled on the grass.

We had two standard hoppers: a big one for emergencies and this little one for getting to the assessment locations. It had three compartments: one big one in the middle for the human crew and two smaller ones to each side for cargo, supplies, and me. Mensah was at the controls. I started walking, slower than I normally would have because I didn't want to lose Volescu. As the ramp started to drop, Pin-Lee and Arada jumped out and I switched to voice comm to say, "Dr. Mensah, I can't let go of her suit."

It took her a second to realize what I meant. She said hurriedly, "That's all right, bring her up into the crew cabin."

Murderbots aren't allowed to ride with the humans and I had to have verbal permission to enter. With my cracked governor there was nothing to stop me, but not letting anybody, especially the people who held my contract, know that I was a free agent was kind of important. Like, not having my organic components destroyed and the rest of me cut up for parts important.

I carried Bharadwaj up the ramp into the cabin, where Overse and Ratthi were frantically unclipping seats to make room. They had their helmets off and their suit hoods pulled back, so I got to see their horrified expressions when they took in what was left of my upper body through my torn suit. I was glad I had sealed my helmet.

This is why I actually like riding with the cargo. Humans and augmented humans in close quarters with murderbots is too awkward. At least, it's awkward for this murderbot. I sat down on the deck with Bharadwaj in my lap while Pin-Lee and Arada dragged Volescu inside.

We left two pacs of field equipment and a couple of instruments behind, still sitting on the grass where Bharadwaj and Volescu had been working before they went down to the crater for samples. Normally I'd help carry them, but MedSystem, which was monitoring Bharadwaj through what was left of her suit, was pretty clear that letting go of her would be a bad idea. But no one mentioned the equipment. Leaving easily replaceable items behind may seem obvious in an emergency, but I had been on contracts where the clients would have told me to put the bleeding human down to go get the stuff.

On this contract, Dr. Ratthi jumped up and said, "I'll get the cases!"

I yelled, "No!" which I'm not supposed to do; I'm always supposed to speak respectfully to the clients, even when they're about to accidentally commit suicide. HubSystem could log it and it could trigger punishment through the governor module. If it wasn't hacked.

Fortunately, the rest of the humans yelled "No!" at the same time, and Pin-Lee added, "For fuck's sake, Ratthi!"

Ratthi said, "Oh, no time, of course. I'm sorry!" and hit the quick-close sequence on the hatch.

So we didn't lose our ramp when the hostile came up under it, big mouth full of teeth or cilia or whatever chewing right through the ground. There was a great view of it on the hopper's cameras, which its system helpfully sent straight to everybody's feed. The humans screamed.

Mensah pushed us up into the air so fast and hard I nearly leaned over, and everybody who wasn't on the floor ended up there.

In the quiet afterward, as they gasped with relief, Pin-Lee said, "Ratthi, if you get yourself killed—"

“You’ll be very cross with me, I know.” Ratthi slid down the wall a little more and waved weakly at her.

“That’s an order, Ratthi, don’t get yourself killed,” Mensah said from the pilot’s seat. She sounded calm, but I have security priority, and I could see her racing heartbeat through MedSystem.

Arada pulled out the emergency medical kit so they could stop the bleeding and try to stabilize Bharadwaj. I tried to be as much like an appliance as possible, clamping the wounds where they told me to, using my failing body temperature to try to keep her warm, and keeping my head down so I couldn’t see them staring at me.

* * *

PERFORMANCE RELIABILITY AT 60% AND DROPPING

Our habitat is a pretty standard model, seven interconnected domes set down on a relatively flat plain above a narrow river valley, with our power and recycling system connected on one side. We had an environmental system, but no air locks, as the planet’s atmosphere was breathable, just not particularly good for humans for the long term. I don’t know why, because it’s one of those things I’m not contractually obligated to care about.

We picked the location because it’s right in the middle of the assessment area, and while there are trees scattered through the plain, each one is fifteen or so meters tall, very skinny, with a single layer of spreading canopy, so it’s hard for anything approaching to use them as cover. Of course, that didn’t take into account anything approaching via tunnel.

We have security doors on the habitat for safety but HubSystem told me the main one was already open as the hopper landed. Dr. Gurathin had a lift gurney ready and guided it out to us. Overse and Arada had managed to get Bharadwaj stabilized, so I was able to put her down on it and follow the others into the habitat.

The humans headed for Medical and I stopped to send the little hopper commands to lock and seal itself, then I locked the outer doors. Through the security feed, I told the drones to widen our perimeter so I’d have more warning if something big came at us. I also set some monitors on the seismic sensors to alert me to anomalies just in case the hypothetical something big decided to tunnel in.

After I secured the habitat, I went back to what was called the security ready room, which was where weapons, ammo, perimeter alarms, drones, and all the other supplies pertaining to security were stored, including me. I shed what was left of the armor and on MedSystem's advice sprayed wound sealant all over my bad side. I wasn't dripping with blood, because my arteries and veins seal automatically, but it wasn't nice to look at. And it hurt, though the wound seal did numb it a little. I had already set an eight-hour security interdiction through HubSystem, so nobody could go outside without me, and then set myself as off-duty. I checked the main feed but no one was filing any objections to that.

I was freezing because my temperature controls had given out at some point on the way here, and the protective skin that went under my armor was in pieces. I had a couple of spares but pulling one on right now would not be practical, or easy. The only other clothing I had was a uniform I hadn't worn yet, and I didn't think I could get it on, either. (I hadn't needed the uniform because I hadn't been patrolling inside the habitat. Nobody had asked for that, because with only eight of them and all friends, it would be a stupid waste of resources, namely me.) I dug around one-handed in the storage case until I found the extra human-rated medical kit I'm allowed in case of emergencies, and opened it and got the survival blanket out. I wrapped up in it, then climbed into the plastic bed of my cubicle. I let the door seal as the white light flickered on.

It wasn't much warmer in there, but at least it was cozy. I connected myself to the resupply and repair leads, leaned back against the wall and shivered. MedSystem helpfully informed me that my performance reliability was now at 58 percent and dropping, which was not a surprise. I could definitely repair in eight hours, and probably mostly regrow my damaged organic components, but at 58 percent, I doubted I could get any analysis done in the meantime. So I set all the security feeds to alert me if anything tried to eat the habitat and started to call up the supply of media I'd downloaded from the entertainment feed. I hurt too much to pay attention to anything with a story, but the friendly noise would keep me company.

Then someone knocked on the cubicle door.

I stared at it and lost track of all my neatly arrayed inputs. Like an idiot, I said, "Uh, yes?"

Dr. Mensah opened the door and peered in at me. I'm not good at guessing actual humans' ages, even with all the visual entertainment I watch. People in the shows don't usually look much like people in real life, at least not in the good shows. She had dark brown skin and lighter brown hair, cut very short, and I'm guessing she wasn't young or she wouldn't be in charge. She said, "Are you all right? I saw your status report."

"Uh." That was the point where I realized that I should have just not answered and pretended to be in stasis. I pulled the blanket around my chest, hoping she hadn't seen any of the missing chunks. Without the armor holding me together, it was much worse. "Fine."

So, I'm awkward with actual humans. It's not paranoia about my hacked governor module, and it's not them; it's me. I know I'm a horrifying murderbot, and they know it, and it makes both of us nervous, which makes me even more nervous. Also, if I'm not in the armor then it's because I'm wounded and one of my organic parts may fall off and plop on the floor at any moment and no one wants to see that.

"Fine?" She frowned. "The report said you lost 20 percent of your body mass."

"It'll grow back," I said. I know to an actual human I probably looked like I was dying. My injuries were the equivalent of a human losing a limb or two plus most of their blood volume.

"I know, but still." She eyed me for a long moment, so long I tapped the security feed for the mess, where the non-wounded members of the group were sitting around the table talking. They were discussing the possibility of more underground fauna and wishing they had intoxicants. That seemed pretty normal. She continued, "You were very good with Dr. Volescu. I don't think the others realized . . . They were very impressed."

"It's part of the emergency med instructions, calming victims." I tugged the blanket tighter so she didn't see anything awful. I could feel something lower down leaking.

"Yes, but the MedSystem was prioritizing Bharadwaj and didn't check Volescu's vital signs. It didn't take into account the shock of the event, and it expected him to be able to leave the scene on his own."

On the feed it was clear that the others had reviewed Volescu's field camera video. They were saying things like *I didn't even know it had a face*. I'd been in armor since we arrived, and I hadn't unsealed the helmet when I

was around them. There was no specific reason. The only part of me they would have seen was my head, and it's standard, generic human. But they didn't want to talk to me and I definitely didn't want to talk to them; on duty it would distract me and off duty . . . I didn't want to talk to them. Mensah had seen me when she signed the rental contract. But she had barely looked at me and I had barely looked at her because again, murderbot + actual human = awkwardness. Keeping the armor on all the time cuts down on unnecessary interaction.

I said, "It's part of my job, not to listen to the System feeds when they . . . make mistakes." That's why you need constructs, SecUnits with organic components. But she should know that. Before she accepted delivery of me, she had logged about ten protests, trying to get out of having to have me. I didn't hold it against her. I wouldn't have wanted me either.

Seriously, I don't know why I didn't just say *you're welcome* and *please get out of my cubicle so I can sit here and leak in peace*.

"All right," she said, and looked at me for what objectively I knew was 2.4 seconds and subjectively about twenty excruciating minutes. "I'll see you in eight hours. If you need anything before then, please send me an alert on the feed." She stepped back and let the door slide closed.

It left me wondering what they were all marveling at so I called up the recording of the incident. Okay, wow. I had talked to Volescu all the way up the side of the crater. I had been mostly concerned with the hopper's trajectory and Bharadwaj not bleeding out and what might come out of that crater for a second try; I hadn't been listening to myself, basically. I had asked him if he had kids. It was boggling. Maybe I had been watching too much media. (He did have kids. He was in a four-way marriage and had seven, all back home with his partners.)

All my levels were too elevated now for a rest period, so I decided I might as well get some use out of it and look at the other recordings. Then I found something weird. There was an "abort" order in the HubSystem command feed, the one that controlled, or currently believed it controlled, my governor module. It had to be a glitch. It didn't matter, because when MedSystem has priority—

PERFORMANCE RELIABILITY AT 39%

STASIS INITIATED FOR EMERGENCY REPAIR SEQUENCE