

MARISA AT THE BEACH

A Short Story



ALEX SCOTT

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By Alex Scott

Now that fifth grade was finally over, Alice and her family were taking a long-awaited trip to the beach. Her new adopted sister gazed out the back seat window with bright green light-bulb eyes at the palm trees and resorts along the road. Her head turned so much Alice thought it might swivel all the way around. Marisa had originally been built as a companion and guardian for an old man, and had

never been able to travel so far from home before. She'd never seen the ocean.

"Alice, aren't you excited?" Marisa said, her voice tinged with a soft electronic buzz. "We're almost there! It's gonna be so much fun!"

"Of course I'm excited." Alice lay sprawled in the backseat behind her mother. "I'm just tired. It's been a long trip. And it's not like we're gonna go

swimming tonight anyway. The sun's setting."

"I know, but still! There's gonna be sand and seashells and crabs and—ooh, maybe a shark!"

"Whoa, hey, careful what you wish for! I like my legs, and I don't intend to lose them."

Marisa giggled. Alice had never seen her quite so bouncy and bubbly before. All her emotions were simulated, and normally she took everything with serenity and calm. But of course, that didn't mean her feelings weren't real to her. And since she was designed to simulate an eight-year-old girl, those feelings could be powerful.

Being artificial also meant that Marisa was quite possibly the only kid Alice had ever met who did not get bored during a long road trip.

Her dad parked in front of the condominium, and they all took their luggage out of the car and carried it up to the third floor. The condo belonged to Alice's uncle's father-in-law, who was kind enough to let them use it for the week. Dad unlocked the door, and the girls ran upstairs as soon as he turned the lights on. There were two rooms with freshly-made beds, each big enough for both of them, but they went further up, and found another four whole beds taking up the top floor.

"Check it out!" Alice said. "Now we

don't have to fight over blankets."

Marisa set down her suitcase. "I love it." She wandered over to the window and pulled the blinds. "Oh, wow." She turned her head to the side. "Alice, look."

Alice stood next to Marisa. From up here, out past the other sections of the condominium and past the dunes, she could see the ocean, and the waves rolling over one another beneath the dusky sky. "It's beautiful."

"I know it's too late to go swimming," Marisa said, "but can we at least go out for a closer look?"

"Right now? Can't I at least lie down for a minute?"

"If I give you five, can we ask Mom if it's okay? I'll watch the waves until you're done."

Alice backed up toward the nearest bed. Marisa's brain was basically a clock, so when she said five, she meant five. "Okay. But you can't start the timer until I'm on my back."

The five minutes ended, and they went back downstairs, and Mom said it was okay to go out as long as they stuck together and came back before it got too dark. So Alice and Marisa put on their flip flops and headed down and around the building. There was a swimming pool with an older couple taking a dip in the shallow end, but Alice and Marisa wanted the ocean, the real thing. They ran down the boardwalk past the dunes and

onto the beach. Sand dusted Alice's feet as salty air filled her nose. She wondered if Marisa smelled the same thing.

Marisa took off her flip flops and ran into the water and let the waves wrap around her knees Alice followed her in. "Don't get too deep. You don't want your clothes to get wet."

"I know," Marisa said. "It feels so nice, though. Haha, my toes are sinking."

Alice's toes were doing the same thing, and Marisa was right, it did feel nice. She wished they could just dive in and start swimming right away.

Marisa stared out over the horizon. "It just keeps going."

"Imagine if we could swim straight ahead without stopping. Where do you think we'd wind up?"

"Either Yucatan or Honduras."

"You checked a map online just now, didn't you?"

"Well, you asked." Marisa looked over her shoulder at Alice, then blinked and twisted herself toward the beach. "What's that?"

"What's what?" Alice turned, and just then a particularly strong wave caught her off guard and she lost her footing. She tried grabbing onto Marisa's tank top, but all she did was pull her sister down with her. They both dropped together into the water. If any part of them was still dry, another wave came along and finished

the job.

Alice lifted herself back up, her hair a soggy rag over her face. Marisa was on her knees, coughing. Alice helped her up. "You all right? I'm so sorry."

"I'm fine. Just swallowed a little." Marisa coughed one more time. "Tastes awful." Water dripped off her short, silvery hair and her soaked clothing. She swung her arm, splashing water in Alice's face.

Alice splashed Marisa right back, and they both laughed as they continued splashing each other, letting the waves crash where they may. They couldn't get much wetter, so why not? They could always dry off and change at the condo. To think, the first time they met, Alice had refused to play with Marisa! Now playing with her was the most natural thing in the world.

After a few minutes they rode the waves back to shore and put their sand-coated feet back into their flip-flops. The beach was mostly empty except for the two of them, and another group of kids listening to a 1990's rock song.

Marisa tugged at Alice's hand, and pointed at an object under a blue tarp several yards away. "That's what I was looking at earlier. What do you think it is?"

It looked about the size of a car, but the only hints to what was underneath were the three protrusions in the front.

The other kids weren't too far away from it. "Let's ask them," Alice said, then yelled, "Excuse me!"

The other kids paused their music, looked up at Alice and Marisa and waved excitedly. One of them had glowing green eyes.

"Oh my gosh!" Marisa said. "Another robot!" She started swinging her arm in the air.

They all ran toward each other. The two younger ones were boys, both Marisa's height. One was indeed a robot, with light-bulb eyes and seams in his skin, just like Marisa's. He hesitated to come forward, but the other boy grabbed his hand and pulled him along. The older one was teenage girl with a bob cut, jogging right behind them.

The human boy gave the robot a shove in the back. "Go ahead, say hi."

"Um, hi," the robot boy said, knitting his fingers together, not looking straight at either Alice or Marisa. "I'm Morris McLeod, and this is my brother Darrell, and my sister Nina."

"I'm Marisa, and this is my sister Alice. It's so nice to meet you! You're a model K-X9, aren't you? I can tell by your seams." She told Alice, "He's got more RAM, and his processors and digestive equipment are more efficient."

"Yeah, but you're a K-170, so you're a lot easier to customize. Are you

adopted, too?"

Marisa nodded. "They took me in after my Grandpa died. He equipped me with a jolt charge launcher, so technically I'm also the family's security system."

"Whoa, an arm cannon?" Darrell said. "See, Morris? I told you they'd be cool. Can we see it?"

"Absolutely not," Alice said. "Remember what Mom said, Marisa. No arm cannon unless it's absolutely necessary."

"Yeah, yeah, I remember," Marisa said. "Sorry, guys, but those are the rules."

"Believe me, I understand." Nina patted Morris on the back. "We have to restrict this guy's internet access, otherwise Darrell and his friends'll make him hack the refrigerator."

Morris withdrew a little behind Darrell and folded his arms. "I only did it twice."

Marisa chuckled. "I've always wanted to try that, but I know I'd get in big trouble if I did."

"Just be careful I don't change the wifi password when we get home," Alice said.

They chatted further. The McLeods had flown in that morning from Columbus, Ohio, and were staying at the Marriott next door to the condominium. Morris had joined the family three years ago, after his original keeper had rejected him. "He

ordered me, then changed his mind while I was on my way."

"Oh no, that's awful," Alice said. She'd wanted to reject Marisa when she arrived, too, though at least she warmed up pretty quickly. She did always want a little sister. "Lucky you guys came along."

"It's thanks to Darrell, really," Nina said. "He was five, and he saw a PSA about abandoned robots, and demanded Mom and Dad get him a robot brother. Just would not take no for an answer."

"He's better off with us anyway." Darrell flung his arm around his robot brother. "Just think, he used to be my big brother, now he's just my brother, and in a few years he'll be my kid brother. He's three brothers in one."

"Anyway, we don't wanna keep you too long," Nina said. "It's getting dark, and you two look like you need to change."

"Oh yeah, of course, but before we do, we wanted to ask you something." Marisa pointed at the object under the tarp. "We were hoping you'd know what that is."

"As a matter of fact, we were wondering the same thing," Nina said. "It turned up while we were out for dinner. Wanna go for a closer look?"

"Sure, just real quick," Alice said. "Mom's gonna start wondering where we are soon."

"Right, let's look, and then we can

go," Marisa said.

Cinderblocks weighed down each corner of the tarp. Now that they were up close, it was a lot easier to see the underlying shape of whatever was underneath. There was a ridge behind the three protrusions, and behind that, a few bumps sticking out on each end, almost like shoulders. Alice had a feeling she knew what this thing was, but didn't want to say for certain.

Darrell stooped down, lifted up a part of the tarp, and crawled underneath.

"Whoa, hey," Nina said. "Whoever this belongs to, I don't think they'd want us—"

"OH MY GOSH!" Darrell pulled his head out. "It's exactly what I thought it was! Morris, Marisa, you gotta see it!"

Marisa immediately stooped down, and Morris descended a little more slowly, and let Darrell raise the tarp over their heads. Alice knelt beside them as Nina was still trying to warn them, but Alice didn't care. She was only poking her head in for a second, and besides, she just *had* to look. "Oh wow."

Morris and Marisa had both switched their eyes to bright white, giving them enough light to see the chassis, the joints, the frilled head, the horns, and the tail.

"I've heard of these!" Marisa said. "These mechanics take old dirty-

engine cars, put new parts on them, and make them into robot dinosaurs. And then they take them to parks and let kids ride them."

"It's even certified by the American Dinofitters' Association." Morris pointed at a plaque on the hind leg. "'Marko's Dino Rides.'"

"And it's a triceratops," Alice said. "My favorite one! This is so cool! Marisa, we have to come back and get a ride tomorrow! We *have* to!"

"HEY!"

The voice barked at them from down the beach. Nina reached in and pulled Darrell out, and Morris, Marisa, and Alice all wriggled from under the tarp. A burly man with hair like he'd just hopped out of bed came marching up toward them. "What do you think you're doing?"

Morris ducked behind Darrell, who ducked behind Nina, who raised her hands up. "I'm really, really sorry, sir. I tried to get them to stop, but—"

"Shut up. You kids think you can do whatever you want with other people's property? What if you damaged something? Hell, what if you stole something? Where the hell are your parents?"

Darrell sheepishly pointed at the Marriott, Alice at the condominium.

"Oh, of course, they're too lazy to do their jobs, so they expect the rest of the world to babysit you little brats. You're all lucky I don't call the cops."

"No, that won't be necessary," Nina said. "We were just about to leave."

"We really are sorry, sir," Alice said, clinging to Marisa. The man set his furious eyes on her. Alice's legs were shaking so bad she thought she'd fall if she let go of Marisa. She didn't even know why she was speaking up. He was so scary. "W-We didn't touch anything, honest. And anyway, you have a really nice triceratops. We'll be happy to come back tomorrow and pay for a ride. Full price!"

"Like hell you are," the man said. "All of you are banned from ever riding my triceratops."

The smaller kids all cried out. "No!" "That's not fair!" "We said we were sorry!"

"You can't do this!" For a quick moment, anger got the better of Alice's fear, and she raised her voice. "How do we even know this is *your* triceratops?"

He stepped up in front of her, towering over her, blocking out the sun, and his stare seemed to add a hundred extra pounds on her shoulders. This was a man who would not hesitate to snap a girl like Alice in half like a pencil. The McLeod boys huddled behind Nina. Marisa stretched out her arm, ready to break out her cannon. Not that it would do much good, without jolt charges.

The man grinned, then barked out, "BOO!"

First Alice ran, then he barked again, then she ran faster, with Marisa close behind her. Looking back, she saw the McLeods going the other way. Alice let Marisa catch up, and kept her hands around Marisa's arm until they made it to the boardwalk. She could hardly stand up straight. She had to sit down on the ground to use the foot shower.

Once they got the sand rinsed off, they trudged back to the condo, damp and cheated by their own curiosity. They hadn't even been on the beach half an hour, and already someone had come along to ruin everything. How were they supposed to enjoy this trip now? Whenever they came back to the beach during the day, they'd see every other kid along the coast lined up to ride the triceratops, while Alice, Marisa, and the McLeods could only stand back and watch. The man was mean enough that he'd probably have them arrested if they got too close.

At least when Alice and Marisa got back inside, Mom didn't mind too much how soggy they were. "I kind of had a feeling that would happen."

And at least they might still run into the McLeods tomorrow.

"I hope we do," Marisa said on the way up the stairs, after Alice mentioned them. "I sent Morris a BuddyLink request before we left, but he hasn't answered yet."

Alice had heard of BuddyLink, but this was the first she'd heard of Marisa

actually trying it out. Only robots could use it, and there weren't a lot of other robots in their neighborhood back home. "I'm sure he will," Alice said. "They all seemed nice."

They put on some clean, dry clothes, and Alice took their salt-watery laundry down to the washing machine, all while thinking of things she could have said to that man. Things so incisive, so vicious, so gleefully venomous, he'd surely let them ride for free just to make it stop. Oh, if he were here right now and had duct tape on his mouth...

Marisa, on the other hand, had hardly changed her expression since they left the beach. She didn't seem angry or sad or anxious. Her face was flat and neutral, as if she'd shut her emotions off entirely. Alice was never sure whether robots could do that. But if Marisa did, she turned them back on once they settled down upstairs, and smiled and laughed while they watched cartoons.

However, when Alice went to bed that night, Marisa was standing beside the window, gazing out toward the ocean, the green in her eyes bouncing off the glass.

Later on, before Alice even had a chance to dream, Marisa woke her up. "Wha? What's wrong?" Alice checked the clock. "It's one AM."

In this darkness, Marisa was only a pair of floating green eyes. "I couldn't

sleep, so I've been looking out the window. And just now... I don't think that man actually owns the triceratops."

Alice rubbed her eyes and flipped on the lamp beside her bed. "Whyzzat?" There was time to worry about that creep tomorrow.

"Well, for one thing, I finally got a response from Morris, and he said he looked up 'Marko's Dino Rides.' He'd seen the name on the American Dinofitters' certification earlier. Marko's is run by three people, and two of them are brothers."

"And none of them were the guy who chased us off?"

Marisa nodded. "And I just saw him in my night vision driving the triceratops down the beach with the headlights off."

Alice sat straight up. "What?!" There was no reason anyone would drive anything in the middle of the night with no lights on... unless he didn't want to be seen! "He's stealing it!"

"Shh, shh. You'll wake Mom and Dad. But you're right. And we have to do something. I think that man's taking it to where he can strip it for parts. There's a spot where he can do that not too far away. I can't let that happen."

"What are we supposed to do?"

"Well, I'm meeting Morris out at the beach. We'll figure out what to do down there. Are you coming?"

Alice stepped out of bed. "You can't go out there in the middle of the night! It's dangerous."

"It's okay." Marisa stretched out her arm, and it unraveled and spooled together into her arm cannon. "I've got this." And she let it transform back.

"You don't have any jolt charges," Alice said.

"He doesn't know that." Marisa headed toward the stairs, slipping on her shoes on along the way. "I'm going no matter what. You don't have to come with me, just don't tell Mom and Dad."

"Are you kidding?" Alice rammed her feet into her sneakers. "I'm not letting you go alone. Mom'll kill me." She had to reach down and tug the backs of the shoes over her heels. "Let's go."

Marisa switched her eyes to full white. "Turn off the lamp. I'll be your flashlight."

Marisa's eyes sent out beams bright enough to make their path clear all the way down the first flight of stairs, past the other bedrooms, around to the next flight. She moved in an unnaturally smooth way, quite unlike her usual self, reminding Alice of when they'd first met, when everything Marisa did seemed downright eerie in how real yet not-real it was. Sometimes, even Alice forgot just how much of a machine Marisa was.

Marisa took the condo keys from the kitchen table, and passed them over to Alice, who locked the front door behind them on the way out.

Morris and Darrell were waiting at the end of the boardwalk, Morris with only a dim glow in his eyes. "That was fast," Morris said.

"Where's Nina?" Alice said.

"She's asleep back at the hotel," Darrell said. "Can you believe Morris didn't even want me coming along? As if I'm letting him have all the fun."

Morris hunched his head. "I didn't wanna get you in trouble. But listen, the triceratops is still moving. He's just out past that next hotel over there."

Marisa's eyes dimmed. "I see it. He's taking it down to that area past all the hotels and condos, where it's mostly trees." Marisa gasped. "I knew it! He's gonna take that poor thing apart! The tools they use to disassemble those dinosaurs are really noisy, so he's taking it to a place where no one can hear him."

"And the trees'll make it hard for police drones to find him," Alice said. "So what do we do?"

"Stop him." Marisa broke off running.

Alice chased after her, crying, "Wait!" But it was so dark that Marisa was only a shadow ahead of her, with the light from the buildings nearby only giving her a faint outline. They

made it past a whole other condominium before Alice even began to gain on her.

Morris dashed past her, his eyes having turned blue. He formed Marisa's name on his lips, without even the slightest sound—and yet Marisa stopped and looked back, and began to wait for the others to catch up. He kept speaking without using his voice.

Alice asked Darrell about it. "Nothing to it, really, he just used BuddyNet. You don't have to use your voice on there."

When they reached Marisa, she said, "I'm sorry, it's just, I can't let that awful man tear apart that poor triceratops."

"Poor triceratops? Marisa, you know that's not—" Alice stopped herself before she said *real* or *alive*. It was a machine, but that didn't mean as much with a mechanical girl that Alice definitely considered alive. "It's not an animal. It's not even really a robot. It's a vehicle. It's a car with a dinosaur head on it. He might ruin it, but he can't really *hurt* it."

"Of course I know that," Marisa said. "But it's not that simple."

"She's right," Morris said. "There are robotics chop shops all over the place, and they take apart all kinds of robots. Robot animals, robot workers... even robot kids. A guy like that could come after us next." He took a step closer to

Marisa. "But that's why we can't afford to be reckless."

"Honestly, what are we supposed to be doing out here?" Alice said. "We're just kids, and we didn't make a plan. How are we going to stop a guy like that?"

"That's what I was just telling Marisa through BuddyNet. While we were waiting, I went ahead and called Marko's Dino Rides, managed to get them on the phone. Somebody's supposed to be on their way right now."

"But what if they don't make it in time?" Marisa said.

"We can still tell them what we know," Darrell said. "And then they can follow the footprints. After that, we'll just have to watch and—"

A light shone on his face. And it was bright enough for them to all see each other, and to make Marisa scrunch her eyes, still in night-vision mode.

The triceratops had turned around, and the headlights under its horns were pointed straight at them. Its feet were pounding into the sand, lumbering toward them with the thief in the open-air driver's seat. It stopped just a few feet away.

"Well well well," the thief said, standing up, drawing a weapon with a long, wide barrel. "You little brats again. You really want a ride that badly? Well, I might be able to work something out for those robots."

It took a second for Alice to recognize the weapon, but it was clearly a jolt charge launcher, just like Marisa's! And he was willing to use it!

Marisa and Morris stood together, refusing to budge, even when Alice and Darrell tried to pull them away. "Come on, he's serious!" Alice pleaded. "I know you're mad, but—"

"Put that dinosaur back!" Marisa yelled. "The police are already coming."

"And why should I believe you?" The thief pointed his charge launcher. "Come on, get in. You're not banned anymore. It'll be fun. This used to be a Beetle, you know."

Morris finally relented and ducked back into the darkness with Darrell. Alice backed away as well, but couldn't leave Marisa behind.

Marisa, however, turned her eyes red. Her hand and forearm disassembled themselves, and reformed into her jolt charge launcher, which she pointed back at the thief. "Get out of there."

"Nice mod, brat. Is that squirt gun of yours loaded?"

"Is yours?"

She stood frozen in front of the triceratops, and the thief sat frozen inside it, charge launchers trained on each other. In all the time Alice had known Marisa, she'd never actually seen her sister *fire* the arm cannon, much less against an actual criminal.

Now they'd actually run into one, and she couldn't actually fire. Everything depended on him not calling her bluff.

Alice couldn't take her eyes off the thief's charge launcher. The only thing she knew for sure about jolt charges was that they *stung*, badly, and could leave you on the ground for a few minutes. And robots were not invulnerable. One shot would give more than enough time for this man to sweep Marisa up and drive her to his chop shop. Or trample her.

Even so, Alice stayed in the light with Marisa.

There was a loud pop. The thief tensed and convulsed, and fell back unconscious, as a spent jolt charge rolled off his chest. A police drone shone a spotlight on him, smoke wafting from its launcher.

Some android officers swarmed in, climbed into the triceratops, and pulled the thief down to handcuff him.

"That's it!" a voice said. A figure came running up, kicking up sand in the darkness. "That's my triceratops! Thank God we got here in time."

For a moment, Marisa still had her eyes and her arm cannon on the driver's seat of the triceratops. For a moment, Alice thought Marisa might have had a system crash. But then the arm cannon changed back into an arm, and Marisa let it relax by her side. She hobbled up to the face of the triceratops, and laid her hands on its

metallic beak. "You hear that?" she said. "You're safe."

A human officer who'd accompanied the androids scolded the kids for interfering, but Marko of Marko's Dino Rides was so overjoyed that they'd distracted the thief that he offered all four of them free rides for the entire week. He even agreed to include Nina when Darrell asked. An android officer escorted the girls back to the condo, woke up Mom and Dad, and explained the situation, and their faces took on a strange mixture of pride and horror.

"Anyway," the officer said, "we're grateful for their contribution, but please don't let this happen again."

The next morning, the girls strolled with their parents to the beach, where the triceratops that had once been a Beetle trod in circles on the sand, with Marko driving and children of various ages in the other seats, waving and calling out to friends and families who were taking pictures. As soon as Marko saw Marisa, he stopped, stood up, and pointed to her. "That right there is the amazing robot girl who made all this possible. In the dead of night, little Marisa and her arm cannon helped stop the thief that was taking my precious triceratops away. Everybody give her a round of applause!"

And everyone around the triceratops began to clap, and Marisa

gave everybody a big smile and waved back.

A group of smaller kids ran up asking to see her arm cannon, but Alice pressed her hand on Marisa's shoulder and said no.

"Oh, I don't mind," Mom said, "I think Marisa's earned a little fun. As

long as it's just for a second."

The kids' faces lit up, and so did Marisa's, and she opened up her arm.

Alice had to admit, she knew Marisa would have plenty of fun on her first beach trip, but she didn't expect her to have quite *this* much.

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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