

MUSIC BOX

From her vantage point at the wide windows of the roped-off hospitality area, Queen Camilla gazed out at the falling snow. The evening sky was black with cloud, but she could see the wispy flakes as they floated past the illuminated towers. It was a Christmas-card world bought to life, all sealed within the high brick-red walls of the Kremlin.

Queen Camilla allowed her eyes to re-focus onto her own reflection in the dark window. Not *too* bad for her age, she thought. She'd be seventy-four this summer, and she still managed to brush-up reasonably well. A few more lines than most perhaps, but she put that down to laughter, and perhaps the English weather.

Her hair was now completely grey – or silver as the press office insisted on calling it – but at least she still had some, which is more than could be said for the King. Without turning, she watched the reflected throng of concertgoers milling about the hospitality area. A man in a black suit and bow tie was heading in her direction.

“Dr Luchenkin,” she said as he reached her side. “I was just thinking to myself how beautiful Moscow is.”

Luchenkin gazed out of the window as if appraising the scene for the first time. “At night, perhaps,” he agreed, his accent clipping the words into a staccato beat. “And with most of the grime softened by snow...”

“Dr Luchenkin, I'd have thought a music lover would have more romance in his nature.”

Luchenkin shrugged, noticing the Queen's teasing smile. "I realise that our buildings are impressive," he said. "Beauty however is more subjective; I leave it to those who can appreciate such things."

Queen Camilla smiled again. "Which leads me neatly to complement you on your orchestra. Not only do they look beautiful, but they play magnificently. Tchaikovsky's fourth symphony has always been one of my favourites, so deliciously melancholy."

"He will be pleased to hear that you enjoyed it, your majesty. Perhaps, you would like to tell him so yourself?"

Queen Camilla ran a nervous hand through her trademark silver hair. "Now, *that's* where it starts to get creepy," she said. "I can understand that the robot musicians are controlled by the computer, but you say the computer is controlled by Tchaikovsky himself?"

"That is correct, your majesty. If you wish, I could introduce you to him."

Luchenkin led Queen Camilla onto the orchestra podium behind the closed curtains of the stage. The glittering android musicians sat perfectly still waiting for the second half of the concert to begin.

Queen Camilla wondered if she dared take a quick swig from the ornate little bottle of Tchaikovsky-brand vodka she'd been presented with on her arrival at the Kremlin concert hall. She was glad of her capacious handbag and could feel the weighty bottle

nestling inside. The robot figures were obviously mechanical – but, she thought, they looked eerily human too. She might well need a couple of stiff shots before their concert resumed.

Luchenkin was standing by a raised dais on which stood the android conductor. “Technically,” he said, “the orchestra has no need of a conductor; they take their timings and inflections directly from the computer. It was Tchaikovsky who insisted that the effect would be incomplete without one.”

Queen Camilla looked up into the conductor’s face. Gleaming chrome shone back at her, a domed head decorated with precious metals and coloured jewels. She produced a pair of glasses to study the conductor closer. “I don’t see any wires, Doctor, are they all connected through the floor?”

“That, your majesty, is another thing Tchaikovsky insisted on. He didn’t want the performer’s movements impeded in any way, so each figure is radio controlled by Tchaikovsky himself. The choir are just heads containing a vocoder, able to emulate the human voice. But the musicians actually *play* their instruments. They are articulated exactly as a human performer.”

Luchenkin led Queen Camilla to where a bank of twenty violinists sat; each jewelled face was turned towards the conductor, the violins resting on their polished chrome laps. He pointed out the intricacies of their hands. “Each finger has three joints, touch sensitive, for even the most delicate of interpretations.”

Queen Camilla took a breath. “Okay, Dr Luchenkin - the physics is impressive; it’s the biology that I find unnerving.” She clutched at her handbag. “But, yes, I should like to meet the composer.”

Luchenkin explained some of the computer’s background as Queen Camilla allowed herself to be led down a steep flight of steps to an area beneath the stage. “You will know, of course, of the terrorist attacks in Red Square, back in the summer of 2019. Lenin’s mausoleum was extensively damaged. So much so, that to appease the outraged population the government revealed that Lenin’s body had not been completely destroyed. His brain had been kept separately in a secret scientific institute and had therefore survived the attack. Of course, they then had to admit their attempts to artificially re-map the brain’s synapses, in effect, their attempt to re-create Lenin himself.

That was nearly three years ago. Lenin, and Tolstoy, have proven - *problematical*.” Dr Luchenkin waved Queen Camilla towards a wardrobe-sized box of flickering lights. “Our greatest success has been in re-creating – Tchaikovsky.”

The lights on the box flashed. “Dohbray Veychir,” said a voice in cultured Russian.

Luchenkin stepped forward. “Her majesty, Queen Camilla, speaks *English*,” he said, addressing the large box.

Camilla approached the box, her head held quizzically to one side. “I can manage a little Swiss and French,” she said, “but my Russian, as Winnie-the-pooh would say, is wobbly.”

“I am pleased, your majesty, to have made your acquaintance,” said the box. “I would stand, take your hand, raise it to my lips - but... That is one of the many disadvantages of being a reconstructed brain in a box. No physical contact. No real physical presence at all.”

“Tchaikovsky?” Camilla sounded incredulous.

“At your service, your majesty.”

Camilla shook her silver-crowned head, grinning broadly. “I can’t believe this,” she said, clearly delighted. “I’m actually talking with Tchaikovsky, *the* Tchaikovsky, though you’ve been dead for, how long? Can you tell me, Sir, how it feels, to exist without a body?”

“I feel *nothing*, majesty. Without my physical existence I am numb. In one-hundred-and-thirty years of death I have become accustomed to my lack of senses. Accustomed, but, I admit, *resentful*. I miss being able to move and touch. You ask me how it feels...” The lights paused in their flashing sequence. “Dr Luchenkin would have me praise the medical miracle that is my existence. But, I tell you, it is torment; this is no quality of life.”

Camilla glanced at Luchenkin, uncertain of how to respond. Luchenkin shrugged. “He gets morose like this sometimes – melancholy.”

Camilla turned back to the box, unsure of how to face the composer – somewhere inside. “But surely,” she reasoned, “any existence is better than death.”

Tchaikovsky was silent for a moment, his lights flickering. “You have just heard my fourth symphony – do you know how I felt when I wrote that? 1877 closed with a

dreary bitter winter. I was *suffocated* by my recent marriage. I had sought to curb my natural preferences, but my marriage was farcical indeed. I was drawn into an abyss of depression. So much so that I walked into the Moska River. I hoped to catch pneumonia - I hoped to die.

“It was my marriage though that perished first – ended within a year. I chose then to channel my despair and my suffering into a *creative* force – my fourth symphony. I sought in those lines of music to express everything for which there are no words, but which surge out of the soul and demand expression. The final movement however is one of hope – I had conquered my despondency – but now... Now I am trapped in a box, without feeling, nor any hope of restitution. *Nor any means, your majesty, within my own power, of bringing this torment to an end.*”

Camilla was shocked. She’d been nervous of this meeting. The science behind it disturbed her. But the last thing she’d expected to feel was pity. “I’m a woman who loves life,” she said. “I relish it! I try to be cheerful, uncomplicated, *untidy* even. I simply enjoy just being myself. I can’t conceive of someone not wishing to exist.” Camilla’s gaze flicked to the doctor at her side, then back to the illuminated box, her voice laden with misgiving. “Are you asking me, Tchaikovsky, to switch off the computer?”

There was a silence for a moment, then Luchenkin spoke. “The machinery can not be switched off. Tchaikovsky helped not only in designing the android musicians but in designing the computer too. We concurred; it was, after all, to be his home. He insisted

on an uninterruptible power supply. A small atomic generator within the computer – entirely self-sufficient. It cannot be switched off.”

A metal hand swept from behind to grip Dr Luchenkin by the throat. Unnoticed, the android conductor had crept below the stage and now held the doctor struggling and helpless in its grasp.

Stirring music seeped into the under-stage area. “The allegro march, from my fifth symphony,” announced the box. Android violinists strode down the stairs playing softly as they came, their bows rising and falling to the marching beat of their heavy steps. The music intensified as the violins were joined by the woodwind section, an army of robots assembling themselves into rows behind the flashing computer. And still Luchenkin struggled powerless in the grip of the expressionless jewelled conductor.

Queen Camilla spun impotently from Luchenkin, to the metal musicians who now filled the room blocking the exit to the stairs.

The music softened allowing Tchaikovsky to speak. “I had two plans, your majesty,” he said. “I should like to explain them to you.”

I’m too old for this, thought Camilla, but she managed to nod, conscious of the unblinking glass eyes, all watching her.

“I cannot bear to continue in my current state, a senseless, immobile, component of this machine. So, I designed for myself new bodies, android musicians – through which I could move and live again. The technicians allowed my preference for radio control and uninterruptible power; the finest Russian craftsmanship. I *cannot* be switched off.

Nothing can prevent my glorious resurrection.” The music swelled to a crescendo.

“Tchaikovsky lives again!”

“You spoke of *another* plan.” Camilla shouted above the orchestra. “Another *way out* of your, situation?”

“You are an astute woman, your majesty. I had attempted suicide once before and it seemed to me to be my only other alternative. But behold! I have come alive. I have seventy-eight new bodies. Enough to guard my reconstructed brain, and allow me to walk beyond these concert hall walls to see and experience life again, in this fascinating twenty-first century. You, your majesty, are becoming old, drying into a husk of your former vitality – I died at fifty-three and shall remain that age forever.”

“But what of Doctor Luchenkin?” cried Camilla, tearful now at the man’s distress. The conductor still held him, red faced and choking for breath. “He helped you. He created this orchestra.”

“Ah yes,” Tchaikovsky’s lights dimmed. “Doctor Luchenkin - my creator, *or my jailer?* I confess, even at this exhilarating moment of my re-creation, I cannot decide which.”

“Then let him go,” pleaded Camilla. “From what I know, you were a compassionate man.”

The box flashed, and the android musicians lay down their instruments as if their attention now focused on the Queen and the computer.

“Compassion!?” Tchaikovsky’s voice was sharp. “Compassion, and all the other emotions, are a part of *life* – not this torture of half-existence. I can’t forget my emotions,

they enhanced, but also troubled the mind. They fulfilled but ate away at the soul. For every swelling crescendo there is always a muted declamando. Music is my only emotion now.”

The conductor’s metal fingers squeezed at Luchenkin’s throat. “This existence is not life. I *have* music, and music clarifies, reconciles and consoles. But Luchenkin and his miracle of biology have ensured that music is all I have. I have no *real* emotion; my compassion died over a hundred years ago.”

“No. No, I can’t believe it,” Queen Camilla, fumbled in her handbag. She produced the vodka she’d been presented with. “This,” she said, “is a brand of vodka, named after you. The bottle bears your name and your image. Look.” She held the bottle up to the eyes of the nearest android, “Etched into the glass, that is your face. Neat beard and moustache, intelligent sensitive eyes. That is the *real* you – there must be some of him left.”

Tchaikovsky answered, in a voice full of melancholy, and accompanied by a single mournful bassoon. “I fear not, your majesty, there is nothing left; I am lost.”

Queen Camilla unscrewed the top of the ornate bottle and held it to her lips taking a gulp of the fiery liquid. “Then I am sorry,” she said. She tipped the bottle against the side of the computer allowing the vodka to flow into what she presumed to be a grille for ventilation or cooling of the machine. The liquid glugged into the computer’s casing. Camilla noticed that the android musicians made no attempt to stop her. That meant either her gesture was futile or perhaps Tchaikovsky already knew the effect it would have.

Moments later, sparks and smoke glittered from the grille as if the computer were lit from within by fireworks. The bassoon stopped playing as the chamber jolted, shaken to the foundations of the concert hall by a blinding white explosion within the machine. The conductor's hand jerked open releasing Luchenkin, spluttering for breath onto the floor. The whole orchestra convulsed, then whirred to a standstill, arms by their sides; a few had fallen, rocked from their feet by the explosion. The conductor swung round to face Camilla. The hand that had choked Luchenkin reached out. As the android leant forward, its fingers slid under the palm of Camilla's right hand, raising it to its ruby lips. Then it froze. And in his box, where the lights no longer flashed, *Tchaikovsky burned*.