

Futures

What big teeth you have

A shot at redemption. By Bo Balder



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

It's hot in the subway. Since my T-Rex body is larger than everyone else's, this is an issue. Being a different colour also helps because most people shrink away from me. That's why I'm a down-scaled *Tyrannosaurus rex*. It helps me to stay under the radar. Because people look away.

Most people, that is. That little girl across from me is the exception to the general cold-shoulder.

She stares openly, legs kicking. Don't kids read dinosaur books anymore? I did, long ago. She waves and smiles. I could smile back, but my teeth are pretty fierce. For some reason, I don't want to scare her. I could wave, but my stumpy forearms are embarrassing.

I choose embarrassment. Turns out, she takes it as encouragement. I should look away from her. But she's flanked by my targets, and I don't want them to notice me.

I'm a pink robot assassin. Somehow the pink makes people think I'm cute and harmless, although the law requires me to state my

profession on my tag. And I'm shaped like a T-Rex. You'd think that would give people a clue, no?

But here I am, stuck across from a friendly child on the long subway ride. I can't undo my mistake, I have to continue the fake friendliness. It's a mystery how this little girl interprets my unmoving (and also T-Rex shaped) face as friendly. It's incapable of expressing any kind of emotion.

When they rehoused my brain in a robot body, the choices were mammal or dinosaur. I chose dinosaur, not realizing they only had the one model. I would have preferred to be a Triceratops. I regretted it until a new person joined robot assassin class. She wore a meerkat. Apparently, that was the only mammal choice in apparel. Imagine having to go through life as a meerkat. Small, fearful, stepped-on, everyone's prey.

Except right now would've been better in a little, easy-to-hide meerkat body. I suppose they picked me because I'm the kind of girl who

holds grudges. Assassination feels like revenge for high school and life in general.

Okay, that doesn't make me a nice person, but I never claimed that. As old people show their character in every etched-in wrinkle, I show my character in the pink T-Rex choice. Not ashamed of it. Or maybe just a little. Revenge gets old. Assassination gets old even quicker. It's just a job, you know. Who wants to fraternize with a giant pink dinosaur? I'll let you guess the answer.

Except, apparently, little girls with kicky legs and curious eyes. She isn't even that cute, a bit chubby, cheap clothes, limp hair. She could have been me. And yet she's beautiful. Because she's young and fearless, there's a glow about her. Maybe only subcutaneous fat and oversized facial features, the trick that makes mammals care for their young, but by golly does it work. And I'm not even a mammal, like a meerkat. I'm a reptile.

I smile before I can stop myself.

She shrieks. I twitch all over, ready to run or

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kill everyone in the subway car. But then she launches herself at me and feels up my teeth. She touches every single tooth, molar and bicuspid or what the hell else these things are called in T-Rexes.

"I wanna be a tiger dentist when I grow up," she says. "And for crocodiles." She's awesome.

She plants a sticky kiss on my steel cheek. I know it's sticky not because I have sensors there, but because my cheekbone camera shows the saliva in gruesome detail.

A ping to remind of my goal. As if I need that. Target 1 is a dumpy preoccupied woman peering at her iPhone, the other a skinny harassed-looking youngish man intent on picking his nose. Well, I don't have to like my job. I just have to do it, for the next 98.9 years, until my contract's been paid off. Let me give you a little bit of advice: just stay dead. It isn't worth it.

But back to the assassination. I position my

wrist guns just so, ready to fire, when Miss Giggles hurls herself at Target 1 and kisses the woman's annoyed face. The mother angles her phone so she can keep looking at it.

I almost kill the mum out of sheer rage at this treatment of her amazing child. But then I cool down, because we robots don't have rage, just the memory of the thing. I contemplate an unheard-of option. Maybe I don't *want* to kill tiger-dentist's mum?

I haven't had a moment that I didn't want to kill everyone around me since I became a robot. Maybe I'll just kill the dad. I move my wrist gun a fraction of an inch. Just the dad. And maybe the person on the other side of him, so I can be absolutely sure to miss Giggles.

My wrist shakes. It never shakes. It's made of a titanium steel alloy with superconductor nerves. I have no emotions. My wrists never shake, my shots never miss.

Giggles sits stock-still on her mother's lap.

Her quivering lip tell me she's glommed onto the badness. But how?

Her feelings don't matter to me. It's my own life, the miserable slivers of pleasure that are still left to me that matter. But my wrist gun doesn't fire.

At the next stop, Giggles and her parents get out. I stare straight ahead, paralysed by my own actions. In passing, a sticky hand rests briefly on my pink titanium knee.

I decide that I will lacquer the handprint and never ever steam-clean it. I should have picked the meerkat body. I'm a total loss as a dinosaur assassin.

Bo Balder lives and works close to Amsterdam. She is the first Dutch author to have been published in *F&SF*, *Clarkesworld* and *Analog*. For more about her work, you can visit her website (www.boukjabalder.nl) or find her on Facebook.