**The Internship**

**By Elfy**

Katie sipped on her cup of coffee as she opened the newspaper straight to the jobs section. She didn’t care about tensions in the Middle East, she didn’t care about the latest celebrity divorce, she just really wanted a job. She NEEDED a job.

Katie sighed as she saw all the usual stuff. Cleaning jobs, construction jobs and everything else that the recent college graduate considered beneath her. It wasn’t that Katie didn’t respect those jobs, but she had just got a college degree and had spent the last couple of months fruitlessly looking for work that put her new qualification to good use.

The small, blonde woman shook her head as she looked through the classifieds and felt the familiar feeling of disappointment. Katie really needed to find something soon, her Mom was insisting that if she was going to stay at home that she had to contribute to the household income.

Just as Katie was going to give up looking she saw one advert that caught her eye. A small advert in the bottom corner was talking about a very short term contract with a relatively large sum of money upon completion. All it said was that it would last for five days at the most and you had to stay on site. It was something at least, Katie thought, it certainly wouldn’t hurt to have some time out of the house and to return with some extra money.

The advert gave very little idea as to what the job was for. It just said it was an “Internship” that had the chance to lead to further work. If Katie had been in work, she would have ignored the vague advert but she was desperate enough to give the listed number a call.

“No time like the present…” Katie said to herself quietly as she grabbed her phone.

Dialling the number, Katie heard the phone ring just a couple of times before being answered by an older man.

“Hello?” The man said as he answered.

“Hi, my name is Katie.” Katie replied, “I saw an advert about an internship in the newspaper. I’m quite intere-”

“Oh! Good, good.” The man interrupted Katie, “Why don’t you come right on down.”

“Right now?” Katie asked suddenly feeling rather flustered.

“No time like the present!” The man replied eerily echoing what Katie had said before picking up the phone.

Katie grabbed a pen and wrote down the address of the place she was to visit, thanked the man on the phone, and started immediately filling a bag with some changes of clothes and other necessities. She scribbled a quick note telling her Mom what was going and that she would call her later and ran out of the front door.

Thankfully her car came with built in satellite navigation that she was able to use to guide herself on the half an hour drive across town and out into what felt like the middle of nowhere. She was just thinking that she must have put the wrong address in because there was nothing here but fields when a large warehouse started looming large in the distance.

Katie felt a small pang of nervousness as the building got closer and closer. She started running through possible scenarios in her head, answers to questions, reactions to tasks. She really had zero idea what was coming and so didn’t know how to prepare.

Turning into the car park, Katie drove slowly across the gravel path and up to the front of the building. She pulled into a spot near what seemed to be the entrance that had a sign for “Guest Parking” in front of it.

Katie took a deep breath to steady her nerves as she stepped out into the bright sunshine. She smoothed out her clothes a little bit and got her suitcase out from the backseat. Katie looked around the car park and frowned a little at the fact that there seemed to only be one other car parked up. It looked very expensive and must belong to some executive or something. Katie looked at her shabby old car and kind of wished she had given it a wash at some point.

“Where is everyone?” Katie said quietly to herself.

It was Monday morning. 10am to be precise, this car park should be full of people working. What kind of internship happened at what seemed to be an empty warehouse in the middle of nowhere?

Katie turned to face the building again and felt a slight chill run down her spine. There was something quite eerie and spooky about being at a seemingly abandoned warehouse in the middle of nowhere. The warehouse looked well maintained and fairly modern, the grass and flowerbeds outside the entrance even seemed to be well maintained. The building gave the impression of being a modern and busy facility that inexplicably had no one there at this moment.

Shaking off the sense of foreboding and remembering how much the pay check was needed, Katie turned to the entrance and started walking towards the glass doors in front of her. She put her hand out to push the door open but just before she touched it she found the door swinging open on its own.

Katie stepped into a mostly white lobby area. There was an empty desk against one wall with a large numberless clock behind it. Opposite the desk was a glass table with a collection of magazines on and some large, white leather couches. The lobby was very still and silent. Apart from Katie’s footsteps there wasn’t a single sound in the high ceilinged room.

With no one at the desk, Katie walked tentatively over to the couch. She pulled her bag behind her and sat down. Almost exactly as she touched the very comfortable seat there was suddenly a buzzing noise followed by a male voice. Katie jumped at the sudden intrusion into the stillness.

“Katie Adams, please come through.” The voice boomed out of speakers that must have been hidden in the walls.

Katie jumped back to her feet, quickly rounded the glass table and approached the desk. She had hoped someone would be there, or maybe there would be some instructions for her to follow. She wasn’t really sure where she was supposed to go.

“W-Where do I go?” Katie asked. She didn’t know if there were microphones to pick up what she was saying and she spun around looking for a door or something she had previously missed.

As soon as Katie finished speaking she heard the sound of a key turning in a lock and some squeaky hinges. Squinting down the long hallway opposite the entrance, Katie could see a door at the end of the hallway swing open slightly.

With no other options, Katie started walking towards the door. She assumed that even if it wasn’t where she was supposed to go that there might be someone that she could at least ask what was going on.

As Katie walked down the hallway she started wondering whether this was all part of the interview for the job. Maybe this was some kind of test of her initiative or problem solving skills. If that were the case, she hoped she was doing a good job, she didn’t like the idea of being tested without her knowledge but she disliked even more the idea of failing such a test.

When Katie reached the slightly ajar door, she carefully peered around it before tentatively pulling it open. The room was rather small with just a table and chair in the middle of the room and a mirror against one of the walls. On the table was a black plastic bag and on top of the bag was a small note, a typed out message addressed to Katie herself.

“Good morning, Katie.” Katie read, “To start this process you will need to get dressed in the clothes in the bag. There are no cameras or other recording equipment in this room, your privacy is secure. Please leave your current clothes and any belongings in this room.”

Katie was perplexed but she upended the bag and let the clothes inside spill out over the table. As she sorted through the different items she wondered why this was a requirement, there didn’t seem to be anything too outrageous in the bag. A skirt, a white button up shirt, a red and blue striped tie…

Katie suddenly realised that what she was looking at was basically a school uniform. Was this some kind of sick joke? Was the person running this place some pervert?

Turning to the door she walked through to enter, Katie’s first thought was to just walk out but she almost immediately had second thoughts. Maybe she was over reacting, it was a uniform but it wasn’t necessarily a school uniform. This place was strange, was it that unlikely that they had an unconventional dress code?

“This job better be worth it.” Katie muttered to herself and, after glancing all around the room for any obvious signs of a camera, she began undressing in the small and cramped room.

She felt very vulnerable when she had removed her clothes and she did not hang around in getting dressed in the new outfit. It all fit her perfectly which she found strange. The skirt was a little short but long enough to not be obscene and the button-up shirt and tie completed the look.

Katie looked in the mirror and was rather surprised at what she saw. She really did look so much younger when dressed like this, she was transported back to her own school days as a teenager and had to shake herself a little to remember she was a graduate looking for a job.

With no other options, Katie stepped back through the door and out into the hallway. She glanced around at the still deserted building and then stepped out closing the door behind her. As requested, she had left everything she had arrived with in the small room.

Just as Katie was wondering where to go next she heard a creaking coming from round the corner. She walked to the end of the corridor and peeked around the corner to see another door hanging slightly open in the otherwise abandoned hallway.

Katie was still considering that all of this may be some kind of test so she didn’t wait to be told to move, instead she used her initiative and started walking along to the new room. When she peered into this room she was rather taken aback to see it was laid out like a classic elementary school classroom.

“What the hell!?” Katie exclaimed as she slowly walked inside whilst gazing at the strange and unexpected room.

After she had taken a few steps inside the pseudo-classroom, Katie suddenly heard a creaking and the door that she had entered through slammed shut.

Katie ran back and grabbed the handle to try and wrench the door open but found it stuck fast. It was locked tight and there was no way she would be able to prise it open on her own. Now this was definitely getting weird.

“Please sit down.” Came a sudden voice behind Katie causing the girl to spin around.

Katie’s mouth flew open as the door at the other end of the room opened and in walked an older woman. Katie squinted, something seemed off with this person, the way they moved it was almost… Mechanical.

Katie gasped as what she thought was a person turned to face her. The face was not that of a human but a robot. A shiny metallic front with two piecing red lights where the eyes would be. A speaker was behind lips that didn’t quite move normally and a face that didn’t move an inch. It was the eeriest thing Katie had ever seen. She could hardly believe her own eyes.

“Please sit down, Katie.” The robot repeated as it stood in front of the white board at the front of the room.

Katie just shook her head slightly and turned back to face the door. She pulled on the door in fear and still it wouldn’t budge. She was scared and just wanted to leave, screw this job!

“I said sit!” Katie felt a plastic hand on her shoulder that turned her around.

“No!” Katie cried out as she kicked and wriggled trying to free herself.

The robot teacher would not be denied and she wrapped her impossibly strong arms around Katie’s waist. Katie was carried to a seemingly random seat in the middle of the room and placed in the chair. She tried to escape but the teacher held her down.

“Naughty girl!” The robot chastised Katie who suddenly felt something wrap itself around her ankles.

The robot backed away and walked back to the white board. Katie immediately tried to get up again but quickly realised her legs were now restrained against the chair which itself was fastened to the floor.

“What are you doing? What’s going on!?” Katie cried out. She could feel tears in her eyes that she tried to blink away. Panic began to set in very quickly.

“I’m going to teach you.” The robot replied dispassionately, “Did you bring a pen?”

“Wha… No…” Katie said confused, “Wait… Is this a test?”

“Didn’t bring your own pen? Are you sure you are in the right classroom? Maybe you would be better off with the younger children.” The robot said as it made the mechanical steps back to Katie’s desk with a bunch of papers in its hand, “And yes. This is a test.”

Katie looked down as the teacher-bot placed a large stack of papers on her desk. The top page had the words “Basic Educational Test – Grade 7” in big red letters. A pen was placed next to the stack of paper and the robot turned towards the front of the room again.

“You have one hour.” The teacher said as it sat down at the desk. It stared at Katie and never moved. It was spooky in the extreme.

Katie was going to ask what she was meant to do but the thought occurred to her again that maybe this was part of whatever internship process she was now going through. Besides, this was a test meant for young teenagers, surely Katie could breeze through it. Since she was trapped in the seat anyway, she picked up the paper and turned to the first page of the test.

Katie could feel her heart rate slowing down as she took some deep breaths and she tried to calm her frayed nerves.

Katie read through the opening question and furrowed her brow. The question was almost incomprehensible in its complexity. It was some crazily long equation with more letters in it than numbers. Katie had done a degree in English Literature and this math was way out of her league. This was supposed to be a test for young teenagers but these questions looked like they belonged in a post-graduate course.

Katie flicked through multiple pages and found that the questions only seemed to get more and more complex.

“I… I… Can’t do this.” Katie said as she felt her panic rising again and she looked up at the robot in the corner.

The teacher stood up in its mechanical way and picked up some more papers. It walked around the desk and over to Katie’s seat.

“Maybe this is more your speed.” The teacher said with a clear condescending tone.

The robot picked up the previous test and dropped a new one in front of Katie. The robot walked back to the teacher’s desk and sat down again.

Katie shook her head slightly in confusion about everything that was happening. For the first time she really looked around the room. A large window against one wall was allowing sunlight to stream inside and providing a lot of natural light. Outside the window was just empty and flat desert, no sign of anything other than a few small plants.

The interior of the classroom was just like a school that Katie would have attended years ago. As she shifted in her seat she was reminded of the restraints holding her ankles to the chair, that was the one obvious difference between this classroom and the ones Katie remembered… That, and the robotic teacher of course.

Katie turned over the first page of this new test and was almost insulted by what she saw. Instead of the advanced calculus and algebra, now it was simple sums that any small child would be expected to know.

“What’s going on here?” Katie asked, “If this is some kind of test for the job… I can’t do really complex math but I can do better than this.”

“No talking during the test, little girl!” The robot teacher said with a slightly angered tone, “You have been nothing but trouble since you arrived.”

“But…” Katie felt victimised. She had no idea what was going on and was still just trying to keep herself together.

“Shh!” The robot teacher said causing Katie to close her mouth.

Katie wiped a tear from her eye and sniffed but did as she was told. She picked up her pen and meekly started answering the questions. She tried to distract her distressed brain by doing the sums on the paper. It’s amazing how when you are feeling so overwhelmed, doing something so simple can just consume your mind.

The sums weren’t hard but they were extremely boring. Time ticked by at a snail’s pace and Katie found herself almost drifting off.

For an hour Katie found herself torn between sleepiness, confusion and embarrassment about what she was made to do. She cursed her own timidity that stopped her from resisting harder. She still thought this could all be some kind of test about pressure situations or something and she was doing her best to stay composed.

“Time’s up.” The robot said rather suddenly causing Katie to jump.

Katie had been almost asleep when the robot suddenly spoke up and she quickly put her pen down. She closed up the papers and watched as the teacher walked over to pick them up. She hoped that maybe now she would get some answers but the teacher just took her test papers and turned around again.

“Is that it?” Katie asked tentatively.

“That is the end of the test.” The robotic teacher said as she placed the test papers on her desks.

So Katie was right! This had all been a test. Katie smiled to herself, she was glad she had stuck it out and maintained her composure for the most part. She sat and waited for the leg restraints to undo. She expected some man in a suit would come through the door and explain everything to her, maybe shake her hand and let her know how she did. It really was a very strange way of testing potential applicants though; it must be a European method or something.

“So… Can I go?” Katie asked when nothing had happened for a minute.

“No.” The teacher stated simply.

“Ugh… Can I use the phone then?” Katie asked as she slumped in her seat slightly. She was telling herself not to get angry, “So I can let my Mom know I’m OK.”

“No.” The robot replied.

“Why not?” Katie asked as her irritation started rising.

“You were informed that the process is around five days long.” The robotic teacher said, “No contact with the outside world is permitted during the process.”

“What is this?” Katie muttered, “A prison?”

The door at the front of the classroom opened and the leg restraints withdrew. The teacher stared at Katie with her unblinking face and raised her arm as if to show her the door.

“It is lunch time.” It said dispassionately, “This way please.”

Katie stood up and walked reluctantly forwards. The door she had entered through was still shut and sealed so she walked to the front of the room and slowly walked out of the door in trepidation. She could hear the mechanical footsteps of the robot behind her. The corridor only had one door at the end of it so Katie made her way forwards and towards it.

Katie just couldn’t get over how truly surreal all of this was. Where was everyone else that must normally work here? Why did it seem set up for so many people when there was only one person here? What was all this for? There were just so many questions that Katie could hardly believe this wasn’t all a dream. The fact she was told she wasn’t allowed contact with anyone made her really concerned though.

Pushing open the door, Katie found herself walking into a fairly large cafeteria. There was a bunch of long tables with chairs to the sides of them. A red rope showed where the queue was supposed to be and with the robo-teacher breathing down her neck she followed the rope, grabbed a tray and walked up to the counter.

Behind the counter were more robots, almost exactly identical versions of the one that had been trying to teach her and she shuddered as she looked around at them all staring at her. Tentatively, Katie held out her tray to the canteen machines.

The machine closest too her took the tray and shovelled a large ladleful of a strangely lumpy mush on to a plate that was then placed on the tray. The tray was passed down the line of the robots who contributed a small amount of vegetables and a couple of slices of bread to the tray. The last machine added a small apple juice box with a straw on the side.

Katie took the tray back and looked down at it with a mixture of disgust and revulsion. The food looked anything but appetising, she wasn’t even sure what the lumpy mush was supposed to be.

Katie looked around at all the empty seats in the room before taking one at random and sitting down with her tray in front of her. She poked the creamy mush with her plastic fork and tried to imagine it was something a lot more appetising. It wasn’t easy to do.

Katie looked to the side of her and saw all the canteen robots were staring at her. The one that had been with her in the classroom was standing a little way behind her. The way they stared at her made Katie extremely uncomfortable.

As Katie considered the food in front of her and thought about not being allowed to make contact with people outside the facility she felt a deep sense of foreboding. This was not a good situation, the idea of this being a test was increasingly disappearing and being replaced with the idea that this was some kind of sick experiment.

Acting on impulse, Katie stood up. The chair she was sitting on pushed behind her slightly as she looked around at the sinister faces that were staring straight back at her.

“Please sit down, Katie.” The robot closest to her said. It took a menacing step forwards.

“To hell with you!” Katie shouted.

Picking up the chair she had been sat on, Katie threw it as hard as her small body frame would allow at the machine. The chair hit it square in the chest and bounced off, it staggered backwards slightly but didn’t fall.

“You are being unruly.” The robot said without a hint of emotion.

Katie looked around at the machines around her and realised that taking down one of these things would be very difficult, taking down all of them would be nearly impossible. The robots were advancing on her slowly. It was clear they wanted to quell the threat and they were slowly trying to surround the young woman.

Looking around the room, the only exit that Katie could see was the one she had come through in the first place. She took off towards it, running hard and fast she wanted to find an exit and wanted to find it now. To hell with the money, there was something really weird about this place and Katie needed to leave.

The only door Katie could find was the one that lead to the horrid classroom. Remembering the door at the back of that room that went to the lobby, Katie hesitated for a second and then shoved the door open.

“What the…” Katie began running through the classroom but slowed and stopped in the middle of the room.

Katie knew that she had come back to the same room as before, there were no other doors to go through after all. So why was this room so different to the classroom from the morning?