



# Evil Robot Monkey

by Mary Robinette Kowal

Sliding his hands over the clay, Sly relished the moisture oozing around his fingers. The clay matted down the hair on the back of his hands making them look almost human. He turned the potter's wheel with his prehensile feet as he shaped the vase. Pinching the clay between his fingers he lifted the wall of the vase, spinning it higher.

Someone banged on the window of his pen. Sly jumped and then screamed as the vase collapsed under its own weight. He spun and hurled it at the picture window like feces. The clay splattered against the Plexiglas, sliding down the window.

In the courtyard beyond the glass, a group of school kids leapt back, laughing. One of them swung his arms aping Sly crudely. Sly bared his teeth, knowing these people would take it as a grin, but he meant it as a threat. Swinging down from his stool, he crossed his room in three long strides and pressed his dirty hand against the window. Still grinning, he wrote SSA. Outside, the letters would be reversed.

The student's teacher flushed as red as a female in heat and called the children away from the window. She looked back once as she led them out of the courtyard, so Sly grabbed himself and showed her what he would do if she came into his pen.

Her naked face turned brighter red and she hurried away. When they were gone, Sly rested his head against the glass. The metal in his skull thunked against the window. It wouldn't be long now, before a handler came to talk to him.

Damn.

He just wanted to make pottery. He loped back to the wheel and sat down again with his back to the window. Kicking the wheel into movement, Sly dropped a new ball of clay in the center and tried to lose himself.

In the corner of his vision, the door to his room snicked open. Sly let the wheel spin to a halt, crumpling the latest vase.

Vern poked his head through. He signed, "You okay?"

Sly shook his head emphatically and pointed at the window.

“Sorry.” Vern’s hands danced. “We should have warned you that they were coming.”

“You should have told them that I was not an animal.”

Vern looked down in submission. “I did. They’re kids.”

“And I’m a chimp. I know.” Sly buried his fingers in the clay to silence his thoughts.

“It was Delilah. She thought you wouldn’t mind because the other chimps didn’t.”

Sly scowled and yanked his hands free. “I’m not like the other chimps.” He pointed to the implant in his head. “Maybe Delilah should have one of these. Seems like she needs help thinking.”

“I’m sorry.” Vern knelt in front of Sly, closer than anyone else would come when he wasn’t sedated. It would be so easy to reach out and snap his neck. “It was a lousy thing to do.”

Sly pushed the clay around on the wheel. Vern was better than the others. He seemed to understand the hellish limbo where Sly lived—too smart to be with other chimps, but too much of an animal to be with humans. Vern was the one who had brought Sly the potter’s wheel which, by the Earth and Trees, Sly loved. Sly looked up and raised his eyebrows. “So what did they think of my show?”

Vern covered his mouth, masking his smile. The man had manners. “The teacher was upset about the ‘evil robot monkey.’”

Sly threw his head back and hooted. Served her right.

“But Delilah thinks you should be disciplined.” Vern, still so close that Sly could reach out and break him, stayed very still. “She wants me to take the clay away since you used it for an anger display.”

Sly’s lips drew back in a grimace built of anger and fear. Rage threatened to blind him, but he held on, clutching the wheel. If he lost it with Vern—rational thought danced out of his reach. Panting, he spun the wheel trying to push his anger into the clay.

The wheel spun. Clay slid between his fingers. Soft. Firm and smooth. The smell of earth lived in his nostrils. He held the world in his hands. Turning, turning, the walls rose around a kernel of anger, subsuming it.

His heart slowed with the wheel and Sly blinked, becoming aware again as if he were slipping out of sleep. The vase on the wheel still seemed to dance with life. Its walls held the shape of the world within them. He passed a finger across the rim.

Vern's eyes were moist. "Do you want me to put that in the kiln for you?"

Sly nodded.

"I have to take the clay. You understand that, don't you."

Sly nodded again staring at his vase. It was beautiful.

Vern scowled. "The woman makes me want to hurl feces."

Sly snorted at the image, then sobered. "How long before I get it back?"

Vern picked up the bucket of clay next to the wheel. "I don't know." He stopped at the door and looked past Sly to the window. "I'm not cleaning your mess. Do you understand me?"

For a moment, rage crawled on his spine, but Vern did not meet his eyes and kept staring at the window. Sly turned.

The vase he had thrown lay on the floor in a pile of clay.

Clay.

"I understand." He waited until the door closed, then loped over and scooped the clay up. It was not much, but it was enough for now.

Sly sat down at his wheel and began to turn.



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