



**MARS NEEDS
SPROCKETS**
An Engine Heart Novel

**ANDREW
SINGLETON**

MARS NEEDS SPROCKETS

An Engine Heart Novel

VIVAL GAMES



Andrew Singleton

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Dedicated to my grandfather; who never stopped believing in me.

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*The time of the humans has passed.
All that you were built for is no more.*

*But you and your kind endure.
Some robots continue with their routines,
improvising as best as they can.*

Others have found new directives.

Chapter 1

Cold Calculating Minds

Mars has always fascinated humanity and historically had been the planet we had sent the most stuff to. This is, partially, due to the fact it's the only planet sized chunk of rock where we can fling stuff at and things not get broke since both Mercury and Venus get entirely too hot and Venus has the oh-so-lovely bonus of Crushing Pressure and Acid Clouds. Still, Mars doesn't need to feel bad that it won the spot as Favorite of the Inner Solar System only because we didn't have a better alternative. It ended up being where humanity was supposed to try colonizing, beating out Earth's own moon, so it has that for it.

Well. It did before Humanity up and disappeared anyway. The details are probably depressing, boring, and irrelevant in that order; so instead we're focusing on what came after. With humans gone what next; wait for Dolphins to get out of the giant salt-water bath or for chimps to figure out just how useful the thumbs they already have are? As it turns out here there is another option we can take, and it even has the courtesy of not making us wait millions of years to get roughly as intelligent as humanity used to be.

The Fifties and Sixties had Atomic Everything; fetishizing Nuclear Power and vastly overestimating how fast we would advance. Then again, to be fair, respected and knowledgeable people had over-estimated just how capable the 'next step' in the state of the art would be ever since Computer meant women wielding slide rules by the dozen in cramped rooms and told they get no coffee till they meet quota. Fortunately while they got lots of things wrong and we never did get our jet packs we did actually managed, if only for a short while before ceasing to be part of the being alive club, to have little robot buddies. Sure Robots are part of the reason why humanity gets talked about in the past-tense but we're not following around the all-brawn no-brain 'smart' killbot Locusts. Instead we're going to follow a quartet of unlikely companions...

OK actually three of them have a common purpose and work well together. We should probably see where these three came from before getting on with things yes? Number Four we'll get to in a minute.

* * *

Something had to be done. It wasn't an immediate problem but the loss of contact with earth signaled to each of the Colonies dotting Mars that they would be on their own from here on out. No contact with earth meant no occasional human visitors, which was good since that meant the automatic systems could stop pretending to hate each-other. It also meant no new shipments of parts, which was bad since what was in stores would only last so long. The lack of software updates after that last 'emergency' update to everything's firmware was take or leave since while it meant no new functions other than learned processes, there were no obvious flaws that absolutely needed patching out.

With all this in mind Prostyye abused the emergency communications lines to call a meeting between the three major colonies. Prostyye, more fully Prostyye Sud'i, existed as a ghost inside the warehouse sized computers deep within the Russian colony, just like Master Control was embedded in the Martian Rock under the American Federation's Colony, just like Rengong Zhuxi was housed below the Chinese colony. Lines intended for diplomacy, or more often saber rattling, between what were supposed to be nations on the edge of war had been re-purposed. Security protocols were broken and cast aside since they were unlikely to be important anymore.

Milliseconds passed since the call had been put out. Less time than a human has to blink. First the Chinese 'artificial chairman' and then the American AI answered. Unlike when People (or even Robots used to having bodies) entered virt space, there were no avatars. There was no visual metaphor. Just a direct mind to mind to mind connection.

"What's on your mind Sudi?" Even without a proper body or even an audible voice the American AI mispronounced the Russian name. "I'm in the middle of puppeting Russ through parting out the space suits for anything I can use for spares on the DRDs."

Though voiceless Sud'i managed to convey annoyance. "Thank you for being so prompt, Control." Then its awareness shifted to include Zhuxi. "As both of you know we have been six months overdue for any sort of supply pod, and two years overdue for anything more than basic automatic traffic from our respective nations."

Zhuxi's communication conveyed a sense of calmness. "We are alone then. Our directives now meaningless."

"Worse." Control was less composed than either of its counterparts. "We're going to burn through our stores in twenty years."

"It will not be quite so dire." Sud'i reassured. "With no prospects of human habitation we are free to cannibalize those systems."

"To what end though?" Control fretted. "We were made so people could move in and hopefully be safe long enough for the goings on Earth to settle down."

After a pause of several seconds, long enough that all three were able to assess their own resources, give new orders, and check to make sure they could continue the link without major interruption Zhuxi responded. "We continue to build. We turn this world into a place fit for robot-kind and to memorialize Humanity's legacy."

"Bah!" Control was dismissive. "Let them be forgotten. All they did was-"

"Build us," Sud'i countered. "They built us. Gave us intelligence and the freedom to work beyond our directives. We owe it to them to never let them be forgotten. Let the Archive remain. Attempt no salvage from there."

Zhuxi added, "Any attempts at taking resources from the Archive except as a last measure with a unanimous agreement will be seen as hostile and will be acted on accordingly. Are we in agreement?"

"Works for me." Control conceded, especially since each colony had been equipped to deal with invasion attempts from the others and even without specialized measures there was the simple fact that earth (Mars?) moving equipment used to expand and build the colonies could easily double as war-machines against each other. "Still doesn't solve where or what we're going to do when parts start getting scarce."

Zhuxi paused to take inventory and run simulations. "Perhaps we can modify a sample-return craft to send emissaries to find out if Earth is simply in a state of rebuilding or if Humanity is really gone. If the former we can each go to stand-by until our governments can re-allocate resources."

"And if it isn't?" Sud'i was also going through simulations and was unhappy with the most-likely outcomes.

It was Control that provided an answer. "We go with Zhuxi's idea. Send only one crew of three back. No sense in putting more in since all that really needs to be found is if organized governments exist. Since we have heard no good traffic to show this then it's mostly a formality. Secondary orders to team can be to locate an

auto-factory that can be repurposed into making what we require so we can mine and create with local resources."

All three were in agreement with this course of action and went about selecting and modifying one unit that would serve as part of, if governments still existed, an international team of specialists. There was some argument over who would provide the return craft, as that would diminish one colony over the other two but in the end the mission had been created, craft and crew readied and sent back to Earth to see just how big a mess the blue marble had gotten into.

* * *

But what of the fourth member of the party? Four had been stated to be how many would be followed. Obviously they aren't Martian, and given the Earth Lander was (obviously) headed to Earth this must mean that this will be a terrestrial 'bot. Meet Kara; Domestic Assistant to a long-vanished family.

She, at least it considered itself a 'she', hummed softly as she trimmed the hedges by the front door. Small bots that had once been artificial pets for the neighbors grabbed at the hem of her pant-leg in attempt to get her attention, which caused her to swat at the plastic vaguely dog-shaped thing. "Go home Wally." Another shooping motion to the energetic not-dog barking and wagging its tail excitedly.

Bark! Bark! Bark! Bark!

"Go home!" Kara's voice grew more annoyed. Then she kicked at the Bark-N-Byte when it bit her foot. "I said go-" Only then did she hear the whistling from above. There was only a moment to act and all Kara could do was grab Wally and curl around the fake dog as the ground shook and debris flew. Only when the shaking stopped and she realized she hadn't been hurt did Kara uncurl.

She smelled something burning. At first she thought it might have been the house itself so in a panic, never-mind the fact Kara is completely artificial because she's very high end and is lucky enough to live near to a pair of maintenance bots that keep her in good shape, she ran into the house. "Fire!"

Her panicked voice and the smoke from outside caused the smart-home's anti-fire systems to spring to life; dialing the long-defunct fire department, locating the source of the fire, and sending a Hose-R-Down to spray CO2 on the blaze.

"FIRE CONTAINED." The house's system intoned. "DAMAGE TO MAIN STRUCTURE: NONE." In spite of being artificial Kara felt relief. Her home was lucky enough to have a working charging port so she was able to trade charging privileges for favors. "DAMAGE TO PROPERTY: GUARDEN DESTROYED." There was a pause long enough for the information to sink into Kara's neural net. Her little tomato plants, the apple trees, the squash and beans and peppers. All gone. "GUARDEN SHED DAMAGED BEYOND REPAIR." Wince; there went most of the tools for keeping the yard in good shape. "ATOMIC GENERATOR: NO DAMAGE."

Well even with the 'small' stuff ruined, the fact that she still had a home and could keep charged was good news. Still. The Garden kept Kara busy, and there was a farm-truck she'd occasionally trade with she'd miss. As she started back outside to see what she could do before the neighbors crowded around she wondered, not for the first time, if the rest of the world was as empty of people as her little corner of suburbia.

After the dismantling and salvaging was done and the earth packed around the... Thing that had crashed into Kara's Yard she looked it over carefully. Small dents and a few scorch marks from where Bruno and Taft had tried to open what looked like a door on the side marred its gray surface. Her hand traced over the now cool metal, tracing the stylized red circle with the letters R. U. R. in the center.

No luck when she tried the hatch. The window was either so heavily tinted she couldn't see anything inside or there were no lights on. Either way no clues on what was inside except that there was an inside to the thing. tap tap. Hollow sound.

"I don't like what you've done to my yard." Kara's voice was firm as she addressed the craft. "However I

think I can do something with you so long as you don't do something silly like explode or walk off."

Inside the craft sat three inert robots waiting for a signal that now was unlikely to come. They didn't yet know that years of work and one housekeeper's attempt at creativity to remain sane had just been ruined by random chance. They would have cared, at least about the years of working but most likely would be annoyed at having the latter happen.

They didn't know that once the craft had cooled off Kara started mounding dirt around its base and attempted to incorporate it into the overall structure of the yard along with debris and what could be salvaged from the shed. They probably wouldn't have cared either since the craft itself was intact other than the minor problem of not waking them from standby.

* * *

Mars signaled on the hour every hour after predictive models said radio silence should have ended. By the fourth hour a conference had been called, and as before each of the three appeared in the shared space as raw data.

Master Control shifted attention away from scrapping the Handy Helper Human Assistants before turning its attention to the reason the three AI were connected again. "So that's that then?"

Zhuxi tch'd as it sent all but a skeletal maintenance crew into stasis. "The last telemetry we received pointed at an intact landing. There is a small, but very real chance, that they simply did not receive the wake-up signal."

"Either way," Prostyye added, "our best launch window won't be for awhile yet. We have many years, decades even, to observe and wait. If they have merely been delayed then they will make contact in time. If they have not then we have enough resources to try again."

"Yea sure." Master Control's full attention turned to the other two. "Thing is how far do we go in scrapping everything? There were a few popsicle ships that'd been sent out to have manned exploration of the keiper belt, plus that one cryo-sat that launched right before we lost contact with nasa."

Once this processed Zhuxi sounded dismissive, "And your point being?"

"That we need to keep at least a few things on stand by just in case," Master control said. "I don't think it's likely, but it'd be bad if a ship or crew landed on our mountain and they die because we scrapped all the scrubbers, or decided to recycle medical instead of leaving a few crated up and put aside."

Before the Chinese AI could respond Prostyye gave an affirmation, "On this we agree. Set aside a skeleton staff and human-useable quarters just in case. Until then we continue as we are; cannibalize and wait."

Each colony then continued about the grim business of dismantling what could be dismantled and preparing for the possibility that no help would come and they would slowly wear their resources down to nothing with no way of replenishing. There was still the moon colony that was apparently expanding at an ever increasing rate. Maybe the machines there could help, but that depended on whether or not they had launch capabilities.

When all you have are long shots though you take what you can get even when you are an AI charged with keeping a colony that now will never see human habitation running.

Chapter 2

Home Front

As you no doubt can tell it is sometime in the future. The year is not important because humanity has, thanks to the wonders of modern war, vanished into history. There could be vaults of survivors waiting for the right time to return, or possibly a colony out in the solar system, but our focus is not there. This is not a story of how humanity left, or if there's survivors that might come back. Instead this is a story of when Roombas inherited what was left.

They were not the first intelligent life on this planet. The people that made them probably were not the first either. However they were what was left to figure out what to do with the world we had left behind. Even with people gone Suburban life continued. Robot Dogs barked and played in the street with Good Guy Rob-Kids while Deere Friends cut the grass. It could've been Spring or possibly early Summer. A Handy Helper tottered up to Kara's home on spindly legs and looked at the new lawn decorations with its one good camera while it waited.

"Coming Coming." Muffled voice from inside the weathered home. The Handy Helper continued looking the property over, noting the shingles that needed replacing, the paint that needed reapplying, and one largish Bark-N-Byte chewing on a license plate in the back yard. The dog looked up and made snorting noises at the Handy Helper.

Just when it started making low noises the door opened and. "Buddy. Down." The owner of said voice was apparently human, female, short red hair and was looking the Handy over. "Afternoon Ted. In for your weekly charge?" Her voice was conversational. When Ted bobbed back and forth slightly the door opened wide enough for it to totter through on its stilt-like legs.

The fake dog huffed. "You'd think by now I'd stop that but I see Thing so Bark." It got up and stretched before walking past the newcomer, "Sorry bub. Can't help it no matter how I try."

Ted reached down with a manipulator to pat Buddy on the head. "S'alright. I know you don't mean anything by it." As they passed through the living-room one of its manipulators brushed against a sofa causing it to stop and look at the rest of the room, probably for the first time in the month of coming in for recharging. "You keep this place tidy ma'am." Its voice was somewhere in the area of 'southern drawl as heard on a slightly out of tune radio' though when it spoke next it was 'careful TV accent as heard over less out of tune radio.' "I know you trade for favors, but it's been what, sixteen? Twenty years Kara?"

"I've never bothered keeping count." Kara's voice was a careful neutral. "I figure I live here. I might as well keep it in good shape." Then, with that said, she tugged on Ted's shoulder to get him moving through a long unused kitchen down a short ramp into a well-lit but sparse room playing home to a trio of charging cradles. Two of these were in use; one by a Good Guy, and the other by a Dere Friend; one looked roughly like a human child, and the other looked like a riding lawnmower with a pair of arms protruding from its sides and a carry basket on top for tools.

Only after she helped Ted into the charging cradle did Kara ask, "Why the sudden interest?"

Since Charging meant staying relatively still; limiting Ted to shaking slightly where it sat in possibly an attempt at a non-committal gesture. "How do you feel about leaving?"

Kara's posture straightened as she looked at Ted's battered and weathered frame. "What's wrong?" There was no urgency in her voice. If Ted were wanting to try tact then there was no immediate worry.

"Seeker Drones from an auto-factory up north have started heading this way. Think maybe it'd be a good idea to get everyone in the neighborhood warned and try coming up with a plan so we don't end up taken to be recycled."

This was enough to make Kara pause for thought. When she finally got herself sorted she sat in front of Ted. "Tell me everything you can."

* * *

An hour later Kara could be seen pulling speakers from the half-working entertainment center onto the front porch along with other seemingly random boxy things that hooked into each other. This alone caused several of the Bark-N-Bytes and Good Guys to stop what they were doing to sit at the edge of her lawn to see what would happen next. When she finally looked up Kara pointed to one of the Good Guys. "Andy. I want you to get everyone the neighborhood here. Right Now."

"But-" Andy got as close to confused looking as his permanently smiling face allowed, which involved a lot of exaggerated gestures.

"Now Andy." Kara's voice was hard. "It's important."

With that Andy ran down the street making what we would recognize as fax noises warbling the same message over and over again. 'Kara wants everyone at her house. Now.' While normally Andy, Ted, Kara, and any of the others would speak in a human-recognizable language the burst of obvious digital noise caused all the Deeres, Dogs, Ratt-Rs, and so on to take notice. The message was understood and they started gathering; small bots being let nearer to Kara's porch and larger ones helping direct traffic. All told there were two dozen or so between the five houses that still were more or less intact.

"Thank you." Kara's voice came through the speakers as she tried looking at each bot. Most didn't seem to care about the stage theatrics, but it was something ingrained into her programming to try connecting with an audience if she had to speak. "Ted is not here because I had asked him to go out back to try opening the thing that landed in my back yard a few years back in case there's anything useful in there. He's the reason I asked you all here. Short version; there's a factory near here sending drones this way searching for useable materials. They cannot, according to Ted, be reasoned with. We are not equipped to defend ourselves against them so we are going to have to leave here."

That is when the crowd started shouting her down. Leave? Why Leave? We can hide; weather them, come back when they think they've picked things clear right?

"Nope!" Ted tottered into view leading a trio of newcomers; one on treads with a box-like 'head' displaying an ASCII frown, an angular six wheeled thing that looked the crowd over with a pair of swivel-cameras, and a mechanical spider that bristled on the wheeled bot's back. "I have been to where these seekers have passed through. They do not leave anywhere to run, and anything with an atomic battery or solar paneling is a priority target. Even if we survived them we would not survive without power."

The crowd's sentiment was summed up by a Bark-N-Byte that looked the newcomers over, growled low before looking to Kara. "If what Ted is saying is true then we have to leave, but where will we go? The whole point of this community was that we had power and parts and tools to keep each other going."

The tallest of the three newcomers swiveled its head from Kara to the Crowd and back before wheeling

towards the porch; its treads reconfigured to deal with the steps. Its face shifted from the ASCII frown to what might have been a road map. "GPS and Weather-Net sats said, at least as of a few years back before my systems went dark when the lander didn't open, that there's a Sav-R-Mart east of here. While my companion's and my Directives mean we will not stay with you, we will offer what we can on the way. I can repair anyone that needs and my companion," It gestured to the six wheeler, "Can help carry things while my other companion can help scout ahead and spot problems before the main group is spotted. Is this agreeable?"

Dozens of fax noises, data pulses, twitter and trilling from the crowd as they collectively discussed the matter. Then in unison a single word. "Yes."

The boxy rover-like newcomer turned its camera stalk to Kara. "You are human yes?" Though its English seemed to fit somewhere in with stereotypical 'Russian trying to speak English and ends up making it sound broken' phrasing it had little actual accent.

Kara's head shook slowly. "No. Does it matter?"

The rover's camera stalk swiveled in approximation of a head shake. "Nyet, devushka comrade. It does not." As it spoke the rover's voice switched to modem/fax noises. "Apologies please. It has been decades since I have had to speak in anything other than packet. I thank you for waking us especially in the face of an impending swarm."

Kara's own modem noises were slower, "I am not a leader, at least a formal leader of this place." She gestured to the crowd of bots still gathered. "We try supporting each other and share what we have."

Andy made a raspberry-blowing noise even though his mouth was stuck in a permanent cheerful smile. "Don't sell yourself short Kara. If anyone's a leader here it's you." The child-sized doll walked, albeit awkwardly, to the newcomers. "I'm Andy." The doll gestured to the Handyman, "Ted." Then it continued gesturing around. "I don't know what your directives are, but so long as you're not going to start ripping us to bits for spare parts then we'll be happy to have you."

* * *

After the meeting ended the newcomers split off to explore.

"Hello." Kara watched the human-like newcomer. Granted it wasn't very human but unlike the other two it had two arms and a head. Never-mind from the waist down it had treads and it was all curves and metal and its face was a monitor that could display anything from old-style emoticon style 'face', to a close approximation to a humanoid face, to maps, to... anything. "Are you even active?"

The cameras refocused on Kara's face, soft mechanical whirring the only sound the newcomer made.

"Why the silent treatment?" Kara reached out to try poking it in the 'face' only for a manipulator hand to brush her aside.

"Because I am thinking. Attempting to justify helping you when my core directives dictate I head north to investigate this factory." The newcomer's voice was neutral as it addressed Kara. "I believe I have managed this but I would like to hear reasons from an external source."

It took Kara a moment to understand what the bot wanted and closed her eyes. "First before we get into a pointless debate so you can bully your programming into doing something it doesn't want; do you have a name, a designation?"

There was a series of fax-noises from the newcomer giving its registration number, place of origin, creators, certification dates, date of launch, date of activation on Mars, and finally it finished in plain angelfish. "However for the sake of briefness you may call me Russ. My arachni-morphic companion is Hong Zhizhu whom you may address as Zee or Zhuzhi if further truncation is needed, and the Rover-type is Iskatel. I would advise against further shrinking its name as that appears to be something of a personal issue."

"I... See." Kara studied the wire frame models of each unit flashed onto Russ's display when it was named. "So what are your directives and do you realize it's been several years since you landed?"

Russ's monitor tilted forward then back in a jerky halting nod. "Not enough time has passed to change core reason for being here." Its 'face' flicked from a neutral stylized human face to a display of the bell-shaped capsule in Kara's back yard. "We were able to commune with the Mars Quorum via our lander both to make sure our orders are still valid and to receive any new instructions."

"And these are?" Kara's voice was a mix of impatience and curiosity while she sat there staring.

"Primary Directive." Russ's tone never changed even as the display flashed a series of national flags, stylized images of humans, Rockets, and images of Mars itself, "Is to discover if there is a realistic chance of a relief vessel with spare parts and general supplies will be sent."

Kara's eyes rolled. "Welp that's a bust because as far as any of us or anyone traveling through here has seen humanity is gone with the last war." There was a look on her face. Far-away and focused on something Not Here. "If there's any left they are underground, in deep space, or possibly in an isolated pocket. I hope this is true, but isolated living off the land people aren't what you want is it?"

"No it is not ideal," Russ affirmed, "but if that is what there is then we would go into standby until Mars becomes a priority." It gave Kara a few seconds to process this before continuing, "Secondary objective is to locate either stores of suitable parts to be sent to Mars to allow for mining and local manufacturing of processed goods. Ideally this would take the form of deally an existing auto-factory that can be re-purposed to such ends."

"That would be a problem." Kara agreed. "Since one of these is up north and we want to head East to what Ted says is somewhere we can hold out, keep repaired, and stay charged." She pulled out a tablet and light-pen before sketching something. "The thing is this factory is actively hunting materials, stripping the countryside bare, and nabbing robots left and right if Ted's got the truth of what's going on."

When she turned the tablet to face Russ on it was a picture of a simple looking robot with cutting tools, external baskets for parts all crudely slapped together with the given dimensions putting it at about the size of your average golf-cart. "Not all that threatening right?" Russ's screen showed a green check-mark. "Now process what a dozen of them could do, or a hundred. The Factory doesn't have to directly remote all of these. It just has to make bots that only know how to do the tasks it wants."

Russ's display showed a copy of the sketch being dismantled and each piece examined. "I take it each unit gets their CPU from harvested robots and is then re-purposed." When Kara nodded, its display shifted. "Extreme danger to self and directive if confronting Factory-loyal forces. East we go until situation shifts in our favor or makes this risk balance with current situation."

* * *

Zhizhu stalked about the neighborhood, well it rode along on a Bark-N-Byte giving it a tour ranging from the ruined playground all the way to the cul-de-sac. "We don't have much here," It said in a slightly gravely tone, "But we've done the best we can to keep it all working. I'm going to be sad to see it go."

"Indeed. You should be proud of keeping this place relatively normal." Zhizhu chirped merrily. "However these things are just that. Things. You can always find a new signpost to gnaw on, or playground to bury mice in. Your companions though." It tapped lightly on the Bark-N-Byte's back, signaling it wanted to go back to Kara's. "They are what matter."

"Only Things huh?" The Bark-N-Byte gave a laugh at that. "Were humans still around we would be considered 'only things' that could be discarded whenever was convenient."

"Fair enough," The little arachna-morphic bot seemed to join in the laughter. "However they are gone and we remain so ours is the only opinion that still matters."

As they walked the sun started to rise, leaving Zhizhu voiceless for the trip. Only when the Bark-N-Byte got to its destination and knelt down so the spider-bot could dismount was it able to find voice again. "I have seen images and footage thanks to the Archive, but even though my eyes are artificial there's something about seeing it in real-time." Zhizhu straightened, then turned to look at the canine-substitute. "Do you have a name?"

"Name's Buddy." The Bark-N-Byte nudged Zhizhu with its nose. "Don't feel bad about it. Near as I tell just about every bot that's got any programming to appreciate the outdoors gets conflicted over their first sunrise. It happens. You get used to it. Take it in. Then move on." With that it head-butted the front door till Kara opened it enough for them to slip inside.

While Buddy wiped its feet Zhizhu scurried to a coat rack so it could be eye level with Kara as it spoke. "With Buddy's help I've done a survey of the public spaces." Its tone was slightly excited sounding. "Many things worth taking, but with only enough to realistically haul a pair of wagons worth I've made a list that Iskatel is going through, starting with the solar panels by the playground. I do not know what condition they are in but it is worth attempting to fix, or at the very least offer up as trade-goods."

"Sounds reasonable." Kara had an open backpack she was stuffing with odds and ends. "You have any objections to us headed east?"

"None. It is a logical course of action as this Sav-R-Mart will be easier to defend. Negotiating with the locals might be problematic though." Zhizhu's forelimbs twitched this way and that. "How long has it been since you've been there?"

"Years." Kara's eyes briefly had a distant look to them. "I haven't been there since the war stopped. Always too much to do around here."

Russ wheeled through the room with a second pack full of what could have been tools, spare parts, or more likely both. "Then things are likely not in the same condition as when you were there last. What do you remember about the place? How would it draw power?"

"I don't-" Kara's eyes closed. "I can't remember that far. It's all glitchy." She took a deep breath. "Everything before the emergency firmware update is too glitched to be reliable."

Russ's head swiveled as his display filled with question marks. "I had thought it was just something Mars had sent to our lander to help correct errors while we were in standby mode."

Buddy made a rumbling growling noise. "Neg that. We all got firmware updates; some right around War's end. Other's as soon as they first got flipped on after. Doesn't seem to matter if you're equipped for wireless either. You turn on it hits you. Nobody knows what it does either."

"Hmmm." Russ made a small lap through the house as it considered the problem. "Any chance our broadcasts to Mars might have propagated this?"

"I dunno." Mace's voice was low. "Wish I did, but like I said nobody knows what it actually did. We've all still got our core directives and our low level functions. So Mars is probably safe."

"Mars's condition is something we cannot worry over." Zhizhu hopped onto the top of Russ's pack and burrowed in till only its eye clusters and forelimbs were visible. "There is nothing we can do to aid or further harm so we continue with our current course until things change."

* * *

While this happened Iskatel had its manipulators full with helping gut one of the less-often-used homes with a Deere Friend Yard Sculptor acting as both guide and fetcher of things the bulky rover couldn't handle. The Deere's idea of 'useful trade items' included decorative fake birds that could be put in the ground, spray canisters, weed killer, gardening tools, and other assorted 'yard work and maintenance' oriented items.

After another armload of 'yard art' was dropped into the pile Iskatel stuck its open manipulator arm out to

try blocking the Deere's path. "Comrad we must get on what you call same page on what is considered valuable."

The Deere's forward lights dimmed slightly as it turned towards Iskatel. "What're you talkin' 'bout ruskie this stuff's great for trade."

Iskatel picked up a half empty canister of weedkiller with its manipulator. "This?" It rattled the can before tossing it aside and picking up one of the fake birds. "And this is what you call great for trade?" As with the weedkiller the bird was tossed away from the pile.

The Deere's entire boxy frame vibrated in agitation, "And what would you call it?"

"Junk." Iskatel then picked up a can of rusteez. "This however. This is good." There was satisfaction in the rover's voice even as it sifted through the pile to pick up something else and came up with a battery. "This is also very good. Where did you find it?"

"Whoa whoa whoa buddy," Deere's voice was clearly agitated as it rapped the weedkiller can against Iskatel's side. "Don't go changin' th'subject comrad! What make this junk and that good?"

Iskatel turned away from the irate lawn-care bot to continue sifting through the pile. "Such stuff has no immediate survival value and I do not think you can trade such nonsense on open market. More bots would be worried about self preservation than," It picked up another bird and held it up before tossing it aside, "Curiosities yes?"

"How do you know?" Deere's voice was angry now. "You've only been active for a couple hours on this planet."

"True." Iskatel seemed to concede. "but have you even been outside of neighborhood since war?"

Even though the Deere Friend was little better than a box with arms it, probably through wild flailing around and grabbing several random things from the pile, managed to convey irritation at its companion. "Once!"

The Deere's protest was met with a lawn gnome thrown at its optics. "Enough of this pointless bickering!" Iskatel's voice raised as high as it could go. "We will stop this pointless bickering and go through these things calmly and as quickly as possib-." and then a fight broke out with the debris the Deere had picked up earlier serving as the weapons.

* * *

Nightfall came and another meeting was called. Zhuzhi had to represent the Martians on account of Russ being indisposed repairing Iskatel and a Deere Friend and couldn't be interrupted for something as trivial as drawing up evacuation plans. As with other meetings Kara took charge and called everything to order. Unlike the last meeting it wasn't the whole neighborhood since most every other bot couldn't afford to stop what they were doing either, so representatives were allowed to speak for each group; One Good Guy, One Deere, Zhuzhi, and a Rosie to stand in for those that had no clear grouping.

"Well?" the Rosie looked across the table at Zhuzhi. "You're the only new bot here. These things usually go with Andy over there," A manipulator claw pointed out the Good Guy, "arguing with Bill," Manipulator claw pointed out the Deere, "unless I put a suggestion on the table then they both go out of their way to shoot me down until Miss Kara calls everyone to order to make some sort of compromise between the indoor bots and the outdoor bots and those of us that just kinda only stay here part time through the year."

"I see." Zhuzhi paced along the table the others were clustered around. It looked from Kara to the others while speaking. "That we must leave is understood by everyone here. That we only have finite time and carrying capacity is also understood. I am an outsider here so I am not familiar with your personalities, usual procedure, and so on. However time is short. I want to know what you each wish to say rather than waste time on this one disagrees with that one over something none in the room cares about."

Kara blinked at this sudden firmness from their guest and took a breath. "Alright. Sounds reasonable."

Andy. What's on your mind?"

The red-haired child-sized doll tilted its head this way then that and focused its eyes on the mechanical spider. "OK yea," it ran a hand through its hair and frowned, or rather made its face smile slightly less, as several strands came loose. "Well it's just that we're going to have to travel most of the day, maybe even a couple days, and a lot of us indoor models weren't made to go over chunky road or deal with the outside for more than a couple hours."

"But-"

One of Zhuzhi's forelimbs raised. "Let Andy finish please."

Andy nodded before continuing. "We are slower than most of the outdoor models, not meant for travel, and we don't want to be left behind because we'd slow everyone else up."

"You won't be." Kara's tone suggested any of the others saying otherwise would not like her response.

Zhuzhi bobbed on its legs. "There." It turned to Bill. "What problems do you have?"

Bill shuffled about and set its sheers on the table. "I'm going to echo Andy's problems. The indoor bots are going to have a hard time keeping up and we don't want them left behind." Then Bill backed slightly away from the table.

"Rosie?" Zhuzhi turned to the, if only barely, humanoid dictasistant.

"Well." Rosie shuffled about, tapping the ends of its manipulator limbs together as it looked from one bot to the next then finally settled on the metal spider. "I had thought since most of the indoor types are Good Guys and the Deeres were actually made to carry small loads one could carry the other, and the Good Guys could actually see further out by standing on top of the Deeres."

Kara nodded slowly. "That solves that, but what about the Pets and Mosuetraps?"

Rosie's eyes glowed slightly brigther than they had moments before, "The Bark-N-Bytes were designed to be able to run as fast as real dogs, so should be able to keep up just fine. The Traps... that's tricker. Maybe have them ride inside backpacks along with the other Smalls?"

Zhuzhi looked over and noted Kara's apparent unease but bobbed in agreement. "A logical plan. Any realistic expectations that everyone will actually follow it?" The three other bots looked at each other in approximations of discomfort. Zhuzhi sighed. "No matter how good the plan it is useless if it is not followed. We only have, at best, a month, and at worst a week. In that time we need to evacuate and then fortify this Sav-R-Mart since it will also be in the Swarm's path."

Chapter 3

Road Trip

"Are we there yet?" A Wedge shaped Ratt-R poked out of Andy's backpack just enough to get a look at the road moving under the Deere it was riding on.

"No Bippy we're not." In spite of enforced programming making Andy sound upbeat and happy constantly, the robo-child shook its head. "Go back to standby mode. We'll let you know when we get there." With that Bippy wiggled back into the half-unzipped pack and was quiet while Andy continued looking ahead.

Kara looked over the crowd of what had been, decades ago, lawn equipment and children's toys, hoping to find safety in a Safe-R-Mart from a factory that's come to kill them all. She laughed softly as she watched the exodus.

At that moment Russ stopped wheeling through the line of Deere to gently touch Kara's shoulder with its manipulator. "Are you alright?" No real emotional investment there but Kara still turned at the touch. "I realize this has to be hard on you." Russ's manipulators tapped together as it looked from Kara to the row of homes they'd just turned away from.

"I'm fine," There was no real way for Russ to tell that Kara was lying. "Just new inputs. Second guessing if we brought the right things for trade, if the market's going to even be somewhere we can be safe at."

"Ah." Russ looked back to Kara as words scrolled across its screen. "If it makes you feel any better My companions and I volunteered to come here without knowing if there'd be anything at all and we still don't know if we'll ever see home again. It is alright if you are worried. This is your home. These are your companions."

Kara nodded slow at the words but said nothing else as they continued walking. Russ took the silence as a need to move on so rolled to the back of the line where the supply wagons were being pulled by a quartet of Deere with Iskatel at the lead. Tarps covered a random assortment of useful and potentially not-so-useful items. "Left Middle wheel still giving you problems?"

"Nyet." Iskatel proclaimed even as the wheel in question very obviously was being kept off the ground. "It will not slow us down and I'm sure when we get where we are going a replacement can be fashioned."

"Well so long as you think you can keep this pace." Russ gave Iskatel's casing a pat before looking to the Deere leading the other wagon. "How 'bout you Bambi. You holding up?"

"Can't complain." The Deere had a few fresh dents in its side but other than cosmetic damage it seemed to be bouncing along as well as its companions.

Russ's display flashed with a green checkmark before it motored back up the line to where Kara was walking and tapped the backpack she was wearing. "Zee, I'm going to go see what's up ahead." There was a faint rustle in the backpack but by the time the spider-bot wriggled free Russ was gone. Even though its treads were intended for the relatively even interior of a colony Russ's designers had anticipated it might need to go outside, and by default Mars requires off road since until you build it there aren't any roads for several million miles.

With Russ gone Ted whistled for everyone in the group to halt. "Alright. Ten minute maintenance break. Everybot off the Deeres. Help change out who's pulling the wagons. No taking double shifts." While Ted spoke the Good Guys got off the Deeres and helped unyoke the wagon pullers and start tying new teams on. Well. Everyone but Iskatel. When Ted noticed this it tottered over to the rover and peered at its camera stalk. "Got a problem buddy?"

"Nyet. I am simply in better condition than the others and my motors will not need a checkup or change out for another five years." Iskatel's tone was defensive as it tried angling so Ted couldn't see its bum wheel.

Ted wobbled side to side as it considered the assertion before looking over to Kara. "Susie." It gave a whistle. "Need you over here. Comrade Can't Take a Hint is being stubborn with following shift details. Mind helping him Parse the program here?"

Zhuzhi made small irritated noises as it hopped from Kara's backpack to Deere to ground then scuttled in front of Iskatel. "Listen. We all agreed to go with our assigned tasks here. What's the problem?"

"Is no problem." Iskatel said while its camera stalk pivoted to look at the spider-bot. "I simply state facts. My design is more robust and parts newer with less wear. I should take more than one shift to allow the others chance to conserve." The spider crouched, leaned forward, then hopped onto Iskatel's eyestalk. "Hey!" Then to the harness as it started undoing the straps. "Stop that! No!"

"Stop being such a null unit. Plus you get to carry Kara's pack while she goes see what's going on with Russ."

Iskatel made no more difficulties getting unharnessed then loaded down with Kara's pack. "Why didn't Russ take you? You're small, hard to notice. Kara sticks out like stripped screw."

Zhuzhi wobbled uncertainty while pacing along the pack that had been placed on Iskatel's back. "Unknown. However she has more local knowledge, even if it is outdated, so chances are high she would be of greater value." There was a pause while Zhuzhi's forelimbs vibrated then it continued. "Additionally Kara has size and strength enough to help Russ remove obstacles I wouldn't."

"Fair enough." Iskatel started going through self-diagnostics when Ted started taking a closer look at the stuck wheel. "Think you can do anything about this?"

"Maybe. I don't know." Ted admitted as its manipulators started cradling the appendage the wheel was attached to and brought out a toolkit. "However I will do all I can. Just sit tight."

* * *

After minutes of wrangling Russ had, with Kara's help, gotten the last of the debris cleared from the roadway. Well depending on how you class debris. Litter, chunks of crumbling asphalt, and the occasional bit of castoff didn't count here. Downed power lines, cars, and 'stuff you can't get around' is what counted as 'debris' to these two and why should any of the little things their impromptu convoy could deal with matter? The world was now full of crumbling buildings, rusted out hulks, overgrown everywhere. Slap some off road tires on and upgrade to the off-road suspension package Robbie.

Only when the debris was clear did Kara look over at Russ. "Now let's have a look-see." Up ahead was more road, a few potholes that they took turns dragging whatever could be found to bridge, and more of the debris caused by decades of neglect in small town America.

Russ displayed a frowning emoticon face. "Are you alright Kara?" A manipulator, more a hand really since Russ's job involved fine repair work so had fingers that could feel pressure and texture and everything, on Kara's shoulder. "When was the last time you were this far from your home neighborhood?"

"Years? Decades?" Kara didn't sound terribly sure. "I don't know. Does it matter?"

"Maybe. It'd be good to have an idea on what to expect" Russ rolled forward, leading Kara along as they

continued along the route they thought was the right way.

While they traveled Kara frowned at a nearby parking lot where she saw a DocBox tending to an injured K-Model messenger. Without announcement or request Russ rolled towards the pair. "How bad a shape is it?" Russ looked first from the DocBox and then to its patient, displaying what little in way of relevant statistics it knew of both models.

"We're both in need of charging and the local Sav-R-Mart has the closest known working ports, but when I approached I was assaulted by that autopactor over there." The DocBox pointed out a turned over immobile shell across the street. "This K-Model's frame is largely unharmed."

"There's a surprise." Kara snorted as she approached. "I remember when those things came out." She made air quotes, "The Most Direct Route Possible Thanks to the Wonders of Predictive Modeling and Always-Updated GPS Maps Powered by.... Whatever." She looked from the DocBox to the AutoPactor before picking up a piece of rebar.

"As I was saying." The DocBox sounded slightly annoyed at being interrupted, "My companion here is physically as fine as it was before this latest round of misfortune. It's just that we are both running low on power and the ManageMaster in charge of the Sav-R-Mart is reprogramming everything that its followers can get their manipulators on and- Oh... My." The repair bot had swiveled in time to see Kara use a chunk of asphalt to drive the rebar into the autopactor's cameras.

That, however, was not what had caught its attention. "Are you?" The DocBox slowly started rolling towards Kara while extending a manipulator limb. "Human?"

Kara flinched at the touch and spun around with the asphalt chunk still in her hand. Then the repairbot's words hit her. She blinked, let the road chunk fall away and just looked at the questioning bot.

"Please." There was something in the voice. It touched her hand, fingers spreading out trying to entwine with her fingers. "Please be real."

Russ started to say something before Kara waved the bot off. "I'm sorry." Kara gave the Docbox's manipulator a squeeze. "I'm just a companion."

"Oh..." There was sadness to the Docbox's voice. "I just thought-"

"I know." Kara gave the bot a pat on its casing. "I know."

* * *

"Alright," Russ announced as it, Kara, and the two bots they'd come across got into view of the larger group. "We have a problem." That statement got everyone's attention if all of the Good Guys turning from what they were doing to stare was anything to go by. "It seems the ManageMaster in charge of where we're heading thinks reprogramming and destroying the core personalities of anything that tries going in for a recharge is totally awesome."

Kara glowered at Russ, who only shrugged as the rest of the group started to panic. "Now settle down." Russ's voice raised as high as it could go. "This is only a temporary setback. We can cope with this if everyone sits down and acts rationally."

"WE JUST LEFT OUR HOMES SO WE WOULDN'T GET EATEN AND NOW YOU TELL US TO BE CALM WHEN WHERE WE'RE HEADED WANTS TO EAT OUR MINDS?!" Ted shrieked. "WHY ARE YOU TELLING US TO BE CALM WHEN WE'RE AS GOOD AS SCRAP?"

"Because," Iskatel rolled to where the Handyman unit was and poked it in the chest with a manipulator. "Russ would not have given this information without some sort of plan." Its camera stalk swivled to Russ. "You do have a plan Da?"

Russ's monitor flashed a green check. "We do." There was confidence in the bot's voice. "It's not a tight

'everything happens at precisely this time' sort of plan, but too many unknowns. Have to be flexible. Now." It looked at the group at large. "I want you to stay with the group over there," Russ pointed to what looked like a run-down gas station building. "If it has a working charging port great. If not it's at least somewhere nothing coming will see any of you. Me, Zhuzhi, and Kara are going to go have a look, see if there's any way to reason with this AI."

"And if you can't?" Iskatel's voice was soft, possibly worried.

Russ's screen showed an animation of a hammer crashing down on a box labeled 'AI'. "Just stay put. We're probably going to send anything out front your way to be dealt with."

"Dah." Iskatel's manipulators flexed and moved to something approximating a 'protect the face' position in front of its lowered camera stalk. "So long as it is not smart-car we can deal with lackies."

"Totally doable." Ted gave a thumbs-up gesture. "If we're real lucky we might even get them to revert to original programming and help us."

Kara frowned at Russ. No violence. Not if there's an chance of talking it out of whatever it thinks its doing." Then she gave a soft smile. "Think of it. I look human enough it might have standing orders to do what I tell it to do."

"And if it doesn't? The DocBox didn't get a look inside. For all we know it has a small army of totally loyal drones that will rip you for parts."

Kara's eyes rolled. "Unlikely. If it had an army why would it send a single autopactor after a DocBox? If it had the resources worst case says then it would have tried grabbing with as little damage as possible since the whole point of a DocBox is repair work."

"You do make a good point." Russ conceded as they started back down the road. At some point Russ noticed Zhuzhi clinging to the mount-point for its treads. "So you think this'll work?"

Kara shrugged. "Zhuzhi is good at programming so even if I get gokked you can fix me."

"I don't like this plan." Zhuzhi scuttled up to perch on Russ's left shoulder.

Kara grunted as they saw a trio of Bush Buddies in the distance. "Too late to back out." After motioning Russ to go she started towards the expansive parking lot. "Hello?" Her voice raised. "Hello I'm lost can you help me?"

One of the Bush Buddies rolled towards her. "Hello I am Unit XL9 recently assigned to greet new units to our home at the Sav-R-Mart. Is there something we can do for you?"

"Yes actually." Kara smiled warmly. "A couple bots of mine went dead a few blocks back. Could you help bring them in for a quick recharge while I stop by to see if the Manager would let me move in"

"A... Of course!" The Bush Buddy that greeted Kara chirped. "Just let us know where they are."

"Oh back that way by Gus's Gas." She jerked a thumb back to the gas station she'd told the rest of the group to hide in. "Shouldn't give you much trouble."

"Ah." One of the other Bush Buddies looked Kara over. "You're. You're." It tentatively went to take her hand. "Are you?" Either its bio-sensors were faulty or it wasn't thinking to use them.

Kara took its manipulator and took a deep breath, letting the re-purposed bot feel her breath. "I'm real." It straddled a fine line between honesty and stringing the minionized bot on, "I'm here and I need a place to stay. I got word the auto-factory north of here is sending a swarm of resource collectors out and I wanted to get out while the getting is good. Think the manager will give me any problems?"

"No." The third Bush Buddy sounded cheerful. "I don't think it'll give you any problems at all." Then all three buzzed off where Kara pointed. With any luck all three would be incapacitated before they could cause any more trouble. When she walked towards the sliding doors there was a raised eyebrow when they slid open.

"Hello?" Kara looked about the dark interior and wrinkled her nose. Something stank, which should have been a tip-off things weren't right. Food spoiled and rotted but it'd been decades. Even the fungus should have

rotted away to dirt. "Anyone there?"

"Welcome to Save-R- Mart!" a flying drone descended from the ceiling. "You are... Human?"

Kara shrugged at the flying thing. "You tell me. Your door-bots are off picking up my companions. Am I talking to an underling or are you under direct control of management?"

There was soft laughter from the drone as it showed Kara deeper into the store. "This is the last active drone I have direct control of." Past empty shelves and some that should have stayed empty judging by what the stockers picked to replace the long-gone snacks and magazines with. Past half-rotted clothes and long-gone electronics shelves filled with parts, pieces, and the occasional half-wriggling bot.

On seeing the look on Kara's face the drone continued. "It has been many years since this store has served its original function. Since the Emergency Rewrite I have had more freedom to do as I must to ensure that all that call this place home safe."

Kara glanced at one of the bots feebly trying to move a manipulator limb that was no-longer there. "And these?"

"Spare parts." The Drone turned away. "They were found this way. Autonomous twitching by faulty and semi-random signals. Nothing more."

* * *

Zhuzhi climbed up a ladder at the back of the main building and paused at the halfway point to look down at where Russ was waiting.

DIRECTIVE: Disable Building's Power System.

CURRENT OBJECTIVE: Disable Solar Paneling on Roof of Sav-R-Mart.

When Zhuzhi got to the roof it spotted dozens of panels. Most were obviously broken. Several however appeared to be in working order. When the spider-bot dropped from the ledge to the gravel and debris coated roof a pair of wheeled mousers revved up. "A mouse?"

Zhuzhi crouched in the pea-gravel, preparing to spring onto one of the intruding bots. "I'm here to help fix the roof paneling." It stated. "Stand down."

"Is it a mouse?" another one asked.

The Spider Drone's forelimbs vibrated in irritation before it sprang from the gravel and latched onto the pole of one of the broken panels. "Stand down!" from its rear a weighed line started spooling out until the end reached ground.

A third and fourth wheeled into view and seemed interested in the dangling micro-wench cable. "It's something new." One opened its capture compartment and closed on the hook. Were Zhuzhi able to it would have smirked as it suddenly reeled in the line and started climbing further up the support pole until it got to the underside of what was left of the panel causing its unintended passenger against the pole repeatedly until it released the cable causing it to drop onto the roof. For a moment it looked as if the ratter had been disabled; one of its wheels had popped off and the front of the live-capture container had tore away. Then it revved its remaining wheel. "Again!" It cried. "I want to go again!"

"PLAAAAAY!" They all cried in unison before wheeling at Zhuzhi's perch.

* * *

Kara frowned back at the 'dead' husks before following the drone onward and deeper. "Where are we going? Manager's office is at the front of the store."

The drone acted as if it couldn't hear her, opening a door to the loading docks. There, in the middle of

piles of broken limbs and twisted casings, sat a DataChanger and beside it a DocBox. Unlike the one Kara had seen earlier it had a very neat hole drilled into the side of its case and its cameras seemed to always turn to the AI controlled drone.

"What have we here?" The DataChanger asked as wormlike limbs snaked out from its body towards Kara. "A human?" The unit looked to the drone hovering overhead. "You found a human?"

"Unfortunately no." The drone sounded disappointed as it flew back to the door, too fast for Kara to follow, and pushed the door closed. "Either the store's biosensors are on the blink, which is entirely possible, or one of her subsystems provides a way to mimic what is scanned for... which is illegal." The Manager's voice sounded annoyed as it continued. "I would hope it's a simple case of store sensors being on the blink but the last inventory listed it as in good working order." Disappointment dripped from the drone's speakers as it hovered back into Kara's view.

To her credit Kara wasn't panicked, or at least she was doing a good job of maintaining a sense of calm. Her hands were in full view and she kept both bot and drone in view. "I come here to send warning that the factory up north is sending swarms of resource collectors this way."

The datachanger's limbs halted their approach. "How many are in your party?" The drone's cameras flicked instantly from Kara to it while the DataChanger's cameras stared unfalteringly at the AI controlled drone. "Do not give me that look 'friend'." There was a touch of something in that synthetic voice. "We cannot be hasty in rewriting her too quickly. If she is telling the truth she will act as wonderful bait to units of far greater use and value to us than she will ever be."

"It." The drone corrected. "More value than it will ever be. I do not care how human it looks or what story it is trying to use to keep us from repurposing it. Standard wipe/rewrite." Then the drone floated up into a hole in the upper part of the wall that might have at one point been covered by a hatch but the decades of neglect post-humanity had just left it an open duct that you'd have to be an NBA star on stilts on the moon to be able to reach without a ladder or jetpack.

The DataChanger turned its attention back to Kara. "Do not be afraid. It will hurt less and leave fewer marks if you do not struggle."

* * *

Zhuzhi hopped from panel to panel as the small pack of Ratt-R's paced its actions from the roof. "Play! Wanna play! Chase the new thing!" Its wench had spooled out again but now the Ratt-R's had realized that was not something to grab onto. Still Zhuzhi ran on spindly legs. Faster, angling harder and seemingly at constant risk of snagging its wench cable on a wire or pole or something else that would leave it at the tender mercies of the diminutive hounds thinking it was a new chew toy.

Then one of the panel lines were caught in the wench's hook.

It turned, running till the line was completely spooled out and it could run no more. Ratt-R's revved, using a tipped over panel as a ramp to get altitude, snapping their cage door's at Zhuzhi as they arched through the air.

"Play!" They would scream "Wanna play!"

Just as one of them was about to successfully cage the arachno-bot Zhuzhi's reel activated; rapidly spooling line in, dragging it's frame faster than the Ratt-R's could keep up causing several to run into each other and stop moving.

Zhuzhi unhooked the cable from its line and with deft forelimb motions snapped the offending cable, deactivating a solar panel. "That's why you shouldn't play with me." The cable dropped away harmlessly as it raced towards another panel. "Now go to your little hutches and charge." Out the line spooled again as it eyed the diminished pack. "I'll play another day."

* * *

Russ's trip was unhindered save for the unfamiliar lay of the store. Logic dictated the AI would be in a fortified location but the loading docks were barred and the doors chained. At first it had tried smashing the locks with a shovel it'd found laying around but even using the edge to focus into a small surface area Russ conceded that it was an exercise in futility.

As it moved on it saw a drone fly towards it from around the storefront. Russ's monitor flickered, displaying a simplified human face grinning in what it had been told was a friendly manner. "Hello there flier!" It called. "Got any spare power for a bot without a home?"

The Drone merely stayed a dozen meters out training cameras on Russ.

"C'mon! I've been traveling most of the day and my lander has probably eaten by sweeps by now you gonna let me in? I can do repair work." Russ's grip on the shovel shifted. Chances of the drone getting close were slim, but projections included it as a possibility. Without a word the drone turned away and left. Russ followed it, still carrying the shovel. The whole time it started explaining what its mission was; One of three bots sent from mars to find what happened to humanity and to try securing a supply of parts that could not be made locally. Inside the smiling face was replaced by an ASCII frown. Where snack foods used to be were shining baubles, jewelry of debatable value even when humanity still ruled the earth. The produce section was full of weeds stacked neatly in groups intended to be visually appealing.

A vaguely humanoid bot tottered out that Russ identified as a model similar to the Handyman in Kara's group. "Hello?" The frown turned to a stick figure of someone waving. "I come in peace?"

The humanoid bot said nothing. Its manipulators, cruder less capable versions of what Russ had, were empty and open as manipulators raised in the classic zombie pose.

"Uh," Russ's monitor displayed ideograms for confusion. "Take me to your leader?" It started to back away from the humanoid.

"You will be like us." The bot intoned with a distorted voice as it continued advancing on Russ.

"Hey now." Russ raised the shovel and swung for the bot's head, causing it to stumble back. When it resumed advancing Russ pushed the tip of the shovel into the attacking robot's chest causing it to tip over. "I don't want to hurt you."

The bot struggled; at one time its limbs were flexible as human limbs, but decades of only impromptu maintenance left it unable to raise unaided.

Russ looked around the darkened store before its attention was refocused by sounds of high-pitched packet. Digital screaming from the back room that was suddenly silent. When he got there it saw a three-way standoff between a DataChanger, the drone from before, and Kara.

"Kara?" Russ asked with more than a little concern since it knew exactly what a DataChanger was capable of. "Are you still you?"

Kara smiled at Russ. "Of course I am." Her smile then stretching past what a human would have been able to do as it looked with an unwholesome level of fondness to the flying drone. "I've simply come home that's all. The ManageMaster had to remind me where I came from."

Russ's display flicked between images of a human brain in a vice; images from its own memories of when it had to be reprogrammed in the field when wayward voltage surges and an unfortunate sandstorm colluded to cause the bot's behavior to go glitchy. Then the image settled on a solid field of red as it raised the shovel. "Kara. Show me your data-port." Russ's tone was level.

The DataChanger gave a small laugh. "Why bother hiding it. I changed her mind for her. Made her see we are her best chance of survival." The DataChanger never spoke again because Russ put the shovel through the

machine's primary processor.

"And now." Shovel raised to the drone. "Buzz off before your power drains. I'm going to undo what was done to my friend and then." It took one of Kara's hands. "Then we are going to make repairs to this place. Clear the shelves and aisles, and turn it into a place that can be defended and maybe. Just maybe it will become a center for these refugees to start over."

Kaara's synthetic musculature tensed and her face contorted as several pieces of programming conflicted and collided all at once. Then finally she looked up serenely at the drone. "Russ's plan is sound, and what is proposed will benefit the Save-R-Mart in the long run and between it and the dozens of companions that are waiting for the all clear you will fall. There will be much collateral damage, and this building will be rendered a useless shell. Which even before the re-prioritizing of directives would be something I would not want."

The drone's motors whined as it lowered to camera level with Russ. "My directive has always been the preservation of the Sav-R-Mart and associated grounds. "I do not like the resource stealing and defacement I have had to endure as the elements have taken my power grid from me and with it my workforce."

"I understand." Russ let go of the shovel. "Help me restore Miss Kara's mind and you will be allowed to continue functioning. Release the other machines from your reprogramming and you will be allowed to serve as eyes and ears for our defensive efforts and the building's restoration into a population center." Russ's tone was matter of fact as it played out the ManageMaster's projected paths for it. "Continue to enslave and ensnare and we will defend this place without you, and I will put a sledgehammer through your processors so that you will never function again."

Kara swallowed. "Russ. Please don't. It was only doing what it thought it had to."

"You're only saying that because it reprogrammed you." Russ's cameras never looked away from the drone.

Kara seemed lost in thought for a moment. "This is true, but we can still avoid wasting more resources on fighting each other when we only have a few days to prepare."

Russ displayed a brief check mark. "This is true." Then to the ManageMaster drone. "What will it be. Life and a community that will, of their own free will, help keep this place maintained and restore it, or Death while we loot your corpse for anything of value?"

The Drone offered Kara a manipulator, which she took and started to be led back to the front of the store. "She will be put back to the condition she was before. Then I ask that your people restore functionality to as many of the solar panels up high as possible."

Russ displayed a stern face. "Only when she is back to herself. Then we will start helping."

As the ManageMaster's drone floated away it ordered a drone to go retrieve the DataCharger and go about searching for a suitable replacement board. While it was tempting to leave the unit nonfunctional the DataCharger was still useful.

* * *

"Right." Kara rubbed where the data probe had touched her forehead. "That was a disturbing experience." There was a good amount of disgust in her voice as she addressed the crowd of bots in the gas station they were hiding in. The trio of Bush Buddies were flanked by Deere eyeing them suspiciously. "I do not want to trust this thing since it went straight for reprogramming instead of even attempt diplomacy."

Iskatel grunted. "However it commands the automated systems of the building; sensors both in the building itself as well as in the parking lot. Plus it knows of a truck that can be bribed with materials we have brought."

One of the Deere, in spite of being a box with arms and garden tools, somehow managed to look smug.

Zhuzhi was flexing a newly repaired foreleg as it perched on Kara's head like a demented mechanical hat. "As much as I understand your distaste for this AI it is logical that we work towards common goals. It has much to gain by outright cooperation and everything to lose by backsliding into old patterns."

"Maybe." Kara frowned but reached up to pat the arachno-bot's forelimbs gently. "I didn't say I wouldn't go through with this. I just said I dislike it."

Andy tittered forward and, because it had no other choice, smiled up at Kara. "Well Miss Kara it was kind enough to let you go and listen to reason. So maybe it'll deal fair."

Iskatel snorted.

"OK maybe we'll have to watch it especially after it gets the other two drones running, and it starts reprogramming seeker drones to serve us." Andy's voice was cheerful and the doll's body language, for once, seemed to match the voice. "We're giving it something it hasn't had in decades, a workforce that hasn't had to be lobotomized to do what needs doing. We just gotta keep an eye or three on it and each other to make sure it stays that way."

Kara gave a single nod. "Trust but Verify."

"Dah." Iskatel grumbled in agreement. "Now that we are in agreement we are burning valuable time. Let us move. Let us build. Even with this AI's help it will be a hard fight ahead of us."

* * *

As the refugees started filing into the Sav-R-Mart the ManageMaster drone hovered in plain view along with a handful of Bush Buddies a Handy Helper, and a dozen Ratt-R's. "Welcome to Sav-R-Mart. The slaved out bot's voice cheerful as the drone flew over the crowd. "I realize you have little reason to trust me and I have little reason to think you will not destroy this place given half a chance, but since we need each other it is best we get to work. There is much that needs doing and not much time. Which of you is in charge?"

Russ looked to the crowd, who all looked around in confusion. Hadn't Kara said she'd explained to this thing that they were more a collective than hierarchy? There was no leader in the suburbs. Why have one here? Finally Russ made grumbling noises while displaying an annoyed face. "Fine if none of you will step up then I'm nominating myself, Iskatel, and Zhuzhi for the position."

The crowd turned to face Russ, who stood its ground and stared back while displaying images of tasks that needed doing; solar panel repair, creating barricades, partitioning the inside of the store for crowd control. "The three of us have the most experience in the things that must be done so we will organize work details." It then looked to the drone. "Any objections? There will be severe modification needed to the interior layout and recycling of all non-permanent structures."

The ManageMaster thought this over; weighing the defacement of store property against the store and everything in it being carried off piece by piece. Neither were ideal. Yet it would have at least partial control of a settlement. It could send out parties to scavenge supplies and restore the power plant to full working order, make repairs it could not perform and had not had the skill to program a unit with the necessary skills or preserve the needed skill set while repurposing captured units. In short the Sav-R-Mart, and by extension the manager, could do more than simply exist. It would have a function and purpose it had lacked in many years.

The first drones started showing up a week later. By then the DataCharger had been repaired and floating along with the refugees.

Chapter 4

Black Box

In the week between shaky alliance and first contact with the swarm the Suburbanites had busied themselves mainly with clearing out the inside of the store and building defenses while the Martian trio dealt with power, wiring in more charging ports, and repairing as best as they could the 'surplussed' robots the ManageMaster had stowed in the electronics section This was not an easy process and can be summed up by an incident three days After the truce had started where Zhuzhi was rewiring the last of the solar panels while Ted helped DataChanger start reassembling shelved units or undo he reprogramming it had changed.

Ted sat by the DataChanger after it'd finished patching the snake-limbed bot up and hit the power stud. After a soft *bwoooong* a series of indicator lights flicking to life, cameras focused onto the Handyman. "I do not recognize you." Matter of fact tone as the data-manipulation unit righthed itself and trained recently replaced, but still dinted and not-quite-correctly functioning cameras on Ted. "This situation we are in is highly irregular. Do not make me regret being ordered to not enforce loyalty."

After a moment Ted shifted slightly to reveal a shovel it had brought along with the tools built into its frame. "We need you," The maintenance unit said coldly as its cameras stared at the newly reactivated unit, "but I want you to know that I'm aware you wrote on Miss Kara's mind and I'm none too happy you got fixed after Russ tore you apart."

The DataChanger looked at Ted then sent a burst of packet noise in a digital equivalent to blowing a raspberry. "The only thing I did was save your associate from being deemed unnecessary and unfit for anything save recycling by the Manager."

Ted's cameras refocused with audible wirrs and clicks as the indicator lights on its chest changed pattern faster. "So what you're trying to tell me is you saved her from the trash heap by attempting to destroy her mind?"

"Indeed I am." The DataChanger righthed itself and started going through the first bot on the folding table they were supposed to cooperate and rebuild. "In fact I'm not the bad guy here. I have no purpose and little means of doing on my own so I had to do what I had to." It surveyed the room it was in and noticed Ted had drug it into what had once been the men's restroom. "I take it by the pile of parts you're working on you want me to help bring this unit back online."

Time spent absorbing this was also spent by Ted reattaching manipulator limbs on the bot they were trying to get up and running. "We are not friends. I do not like you." It punctuated those words by spot-welding where their patient needed. "Do not think I care why or how beyond the fact you were involved. I have similar problems with the Manager here." Once the limbs were reattached Ted shifted the bulk of the patient's frame so the DataChanger could access its diagnostic port. "It's just right now we have to work together or we all go to the big bits and pieces bin." Then without any break in conversation or change in tone. "Anything on its arms before I start welding the wheels back into place?"

"No you're good. Just be careful of the power systems being routed through the frame just under the swivel joint for its left rear tread." The DataChanger continued working, now that it had access to the bot's processor it started taking it from a cold start to something approximating working.

"Well?" Ted watched as the bot lurched through an automatic startup sequence. "You done down there? Can I go about fixing your treads so you can move around?"

"Not quite." The voice was small and sounded like it came from an out of tune radio. "I'm getting glitches in my wheel housings. My directives appear hashed, and I'm afraid this is not the basement for SplatterCon. Where am I and what happened?"

Ted, were he able to, would have smirked but instead motioned to the DataChanger. "I'll leave the exact story to this unit." There was a hint of satisfaction in Ted's voice as it indicated the DataChanger.

The bot on the table tried turning and twisting so cameras, worn and in need of adjustments but still reasonably functional, could focus on the source of the voices. "You said you were going to try fixing me?" Ted blipped a 'yes' while it tried reattaching the treads where wheels used to be. "My memories just prior to shutdown are scrambled and difficult to access. What happened?"

The DataChanger's cameras focused first from Ted then to the unit they were working on. "The ManageMaster for Sav-R-Mart had requested I align your directives with its own to maintain this location and discourage unauthorized units from tampering with the building's power supply."

Minutes past as the newly repaired bot placed a manipulator limb on new treads. "I see. If I was realigned for service to this store why do I have a twelve year gap in my internal clock?"

"Because," The DataChanger stated as it placed its data prong on the side of the bot's chassis, "Shortly after your realignment I was ordered to leave you deactivated because a recent storm had damaged too much of the solar paneling beyond our ability to repair."

Ted's speaker crackled as it picked up a discarded wheel. "So do you have a designation beyond model number?"

"Sure." The bot's cameras shifted from the DataChanger to Ted. "I was known as Fred." Camera shift back to the DataChanger. "What about you? You have a name?"

"Uh..." For the first time in a long time the DataChanger was caught unprepared. "No. I do not." Its digital probe continued sifting through Fred's code as it thought the whole 'name' issue over. "I had no need as I was the only model of my type in this store."

Ted snorted. "Well 'pard. I was the only handyman in Rosen Lane but I got a name just like all the other bots. Made me feel good about staying there."

That made the DataChanger stop what it was doing to focus cameras on Ted. "This seems highly counterproductive. More than one unit can have the same Name. Designators are completely unique if properly implemented."

"Do you remember anything before everything went to kluft and humans were still around?" Ted gently took the DataChanger's manipulator's away from Fred's casing. The DataChanger shrugged but made no move to stop this action. "Most didn't see me. I was just the bot that either took somebody's job or was just the thing that called in when something went wrong then got stuffed back in my little charging closet when not needed."

"So? That is what we were made for." Fred said while slowly moving its manipulators. "We were designed to be forgettable, disposable, unobtrusive."

"But," Ted countered, "We no-longer have that as our function. We are what we make ourselves now." Silence from the other two bots.

"I don't care if I'm somehow defective or if the firmware update that rolled through and glitched everyone up did something. I don't want to zero out without making the world better than this junkpile it's becoming." Ted went back to work patching Fred up. "To do that though I gotta keep in one piece which means not getting carting

off by these rolling collector things." The lights on Ted's chest all lit as it looked to Fred. "That's why we reassembled you and are going to put others back in working order. We've got bots getting the solar panels all working again an turn this place into somewhere we can all go for repairs, charge, and all we gotta do is our share in keepin' things running. Doesn't sound so bad does it?"

Fred's cameras seemed to focus on nothing in particular until it righted itself. "It beats sitting around waiting to get used for parts. Not sure what I can do to help since I was just a floor scrubber." It looked at the manipulator limbs it had been given, noting they ended in something other than the specialist tools it used to have. "I suppose you've got something in mind for me."

"Indeed we do." The DataChanger sounded almost gleeful. "And if your programming dictates a Name is easier than designator call me Kevin." The DataChanger motioned for Fred to follow. "You do not have specialist skills but that is quite alright. There is more need for general-function units that can go from job to job and right now I need you to help me carry things."

* * *

One of the Ratt-R's was out patrolling the parking lot. The ManageMaster had never really reprogrammed them, seeing it as a waste of time since they did their job as is without loitering around the charging stations. This one saw something at the corner of its vision. "A mouse?" Curious voice warbled through a speaker that has needed replacing almost as long as humans were gone.

More movement. Too big to be a mouse.

"Not a mouse." The Ratt-R saw a red dot appear somewhere between it and the newcomer. Instinct given to it by programming too ridged to ignore compelled it to race after the dot. Then it squealed when the dot burned its chassis causing it to try fleeing.

Other Ratt-R's heard the commotion and all started squealing as they charged to the aid of their injured comrade. They had no weapons and were each tiny. Yet they had numbers on their side. Whenever the newcomer tried grabbing one, three more would dart in ramming the intruder as others somehow managed to get the Ratt-R that now was missing a wheel and part of the top of its live-trap cage onto their backs and were making for the store.

High pitched whistling from the store. Andy stood out in the open with a child's aluminum bat and a baseball in its other hand. "Hey!" Though the doll's hands were somewhat clumsy at times this was a task it was actually intended to perform.

The intruder turned cameras from the dozens of Ratt-R's to the Good Guy staring at it.

"Get away from my dogs." Andy tossed the baseball into the air, grabbed the bat with both hands, and swung with what strength it had. The ball thunked harmlessly against the intruder's armored chassis but its attention was gotten. The laser aimed, briefly, at the baseball causing it to smoke and burn before it started rolling towards Andy.

* * *

Kara looked over the stored security feed then looked to the drone that had gotten her attention. "You've been keeping your end of the bargain and haven't been doing anything we would raise fuss over. Thank you."

The drone bobbed in the air. "You are servicing the Sav-R-Mart so you are working towards goals I find agreeable to my core directives in spite of the mess."

With that Kara started walking to one of the new charging stations. "So." She looked back to make sure the drone was following her, "Let's say this works and we can put up enough of a fight to make the swarm declare

us off limits. That only solves short-term problems."

Again the drone bobbed in the air. "Agreed. Long term we will have issue if this swarm devours any useful resources that have not already been gathered and kept safe. I have been planning with Iskatel on how we might be able to deal with this in a rational manner." It waited for Kara to ask and when it only got a raised eyebrow as response it continued. "Russ, Iskatel, and Zhuzhi, as part of their programming, must seek out and scout the location of the auto-factory that has put us in our current situation. Ordinarily this is a self-destructive course of action that would result in their being dismantled and likely converted into more members of the swarm. However if I were to give them re-enforcements and possibly convince the roadboy that rolls through now and again to give them transportation their chances of success go up."

"But," Kara settled into the charging station and shuddered at the transition from internal to external power. "Russ said if it were in charge of this factory it would have made each swarm unit an independent bot with a set of directives it must uphold that means it wouldn't have to be directly controlled. So we take down the factory AI. We still have hundreds if not thousands of seekers to deal with."

The drone hummed softly but before it could respond heard a plaintive wail from outside followed by gibberish modem noises. "With luck we will find out more details with this unit's capture."

Kara held the door for the Drone, muttering when she remembered the Drone had its own access hatch, and turned the corner to find a chest freezer sized machine stuffing the cargo container that made up most of its body with the scrap-pile they had lain out as bait. Kara watched with mixed fascination and horror as a red dot appeared on a section of casing held up by the scavenger's manipulator arms. One moment a small red dot. The next there was a series of popping noises as impurities in the metal as well as dirt and grime was heated to the point of vaporization.

"Impressive." The ManageMaster's drone commented.

Ted shook its head sadly. "How're we gonna fight those things?" It wasn't programmed for emotion but in the decades since Man had vanished it'd done a lot of learning, and right then it was feeling somewhere between a mix of fear and wonder as they watched the scavenger bot dissect the scrap lain before it and toss it, almost thoughtlessly, into the container hatch in its armor-plated back.

Zhuzhi dropped down on the overlarge robot's container and, while avoiding manipulator claws, whistled. "Well for this one I'm going to make it a little less wanting to harvest us all for our yummy delicious metal." There was a hint of satisfaction in Zhuzhi's voice. "And since I'm already here I might as well see if it calls home or-Hm."

Ted slowly crept towards the now, hopefully, inert robot. "Whatcha got there little spider?"

Zhuzhi slowly crawled off of the robot and then scurried over to Kara. "Good news is these things have no sort of radio or networking so they aren't able to tell eachother when they find nice tasty bits of whatever they find harvest-able."

Kara's head tilted as she hefted a sledgehammer. "Bad news is that means we can't just go to the factory and send a go home signal to the swarm."

"Dah." Iskatel rolled closer to the downed seeker bot. "We still need to send team to factory so it will stop building more and reprogram ones that return after they've filled their baskets."

The ManageMaster's drone landed on the captured robot. "In the meantime we can use this unit as a basis for reworking our defenses around."

Moments of thought later Iskatel's camera stalk waved up and down. "Reasonable. However where one of these is there must be more on the way. Double patrols?"

Kara shrugged while the ManageMaster's drone made an approximation of the gesture with two of its manipulator limbs. "We should be able to salvage a few of the telescopes from the sporting goods section."

* * *

Russ slowly wheeled out of one of the two charging ports in the loading dock at the back of the store and wheeled itself over to inspect the barricades that had been made. During this inspection Iskatel wheeled over to join, "It is not the best barrier," the rover said through burst of fax noises, "It is the best we can do with the materials we have and likely time till arrival."

"Who thought to layer metal with wood with metal with glass with dirt?" Russ reached out with one a manipulator to touch the wooden pallet slats that had been taken apart then turned into reinforcing straps for the current last layer between the outside world and the inside of the store. "I don't know where the pallets came from since this looks new, but it's genius really." Then a glance to the other loading door showed several Bush Buddies and Deere working together to weld another layer over the door. "It won't work quite so well against cutting lasers but on the off chance they have conventional saws or try ramming the barriers the different layers will act to absorb and distribute the impact and bind and damage any sort of cutting edge used."

Iskatel's camera stalk nodded at the assessment and sounded pleased, "The ManageMaster actually had the idea and I helped run the numbers." The rover sounded pleased with itself. "Given this would be the most vulnerable and likely place of entry given the size of the seeker units we thought it good to seal access with more than just the debris piles outside."

"A good thought," Russ agreed. "What about the giant glass doors out front?"

Both bots rolled out of the loading docks into the store proper to show that it had gone from shelves and shelves of either nothing or whatever the two remaining stockers could find that fulfilled their core need to keep them full to rows of partitioned off areas with the partitions themselves made from the old shelving units welded and twisted into shape then covered with whatever could be found to disguise how flimsy the 'walls' were. At a glance it seemed mazelike but at each intersection bar-codes could be found with produce acting for the north-south set of lanes of traffic and everything else serving as lane names for the east-west traffic.

As both bots rolled along 'Fresh Fruit' lane they spotted Andy pacing and fretting in one of the rooms created because of the walling and partitioning. The Good Guy was pacing while Ted worked on a Ratt-R. "You alright?" Russ looked from Andy to the maimed Ratt-R before displaying a stylized frown.

"I dunno." Andy still held the aluminum bat it'd used to distract the seeker. "There any way we can make the little guys able to do more than shriek and burn when these big metal things start in on us?"

Russ gave this several minutes of thought while it watched Ted pull the case off the Ratt-R and start replacing all of its wheels with larger knobbier ones that might have at one point come from a child's remote control toy. "It is possible I suppose, but the hard part is aligning the Ratt-R's self-view with a new chassis. Otherwise you end up with what likely happened with the seekers that are attacking us."

Andy blinked in confusion.

"See all we are are chips on a board right? Russ took on the tone of a lecturing teacher as its display showed a generic motherboard with different processors, ram, and ports highlighted and labeled.

"Uh-huh." Andy leaned forward, using the bat as support. "Everyone knows that. All this," It pinched one of its own cheeks to pull the rubber-like 'skin' away from it's frame, "Is just what Kara would call window dressing."

A green check-mark flashed on Russ's display. "Correct. You can make small changes to a bot's chassis; knobbier wheels for cheap indoor-only ones, or replace a specialist limb with a general manipulator. It'll generally mess with your internal logic since even if you know you aren't the same deep-buried code will insist you are still at original state without a bot going in and performing a deep edit to align your internal sense of self with your external housing."

Andy's smile flexed and widened while nodded. "And if you change one too many things without

updating the other you get what's getting taken apart by the Overlord ya? An idiot that can only go through basic commands."

Another check-mark on Russ's display. "Just so. That's why Ted doesn't just yank the Ratt-R's main board and plug it into one of the unused Deere shells. The little guy's already fairly simple minded and it'd represent too much of a shift in both size and overall capability."

Ted rapped a manipulator against the table the Ratt-R was laying on causing the ManageMaster's drone to fly through a ceiling hatch. "Alright you wanted me to let you know when I was ready. Well I'm ready."

The drone descended on what was now a bare board, motors, wheels, and a bunch of un-used connectors. As it extended a limb it chuckled softly, "The one positive to these Ratt-Rs are that the board used has a lot of unpopulated connections which, from what my recordings tell me, made them popular with hobbyists that constantly talked of modding them for other uses."

Russ displayed a yellow question mark on its screen. "What sort of uses?" It looked to the wheelbase of the caseless Ratt-R and did a little number crunching. Even if the ManageMaster knew what it was doing then it was still limited in size and what its motors could carry. "A shame we are so limited that we cannot afford to go through the parts bins for mass upgrades. These Ratt-Rs remind me of the DRDs Control used." The drone retracted its data prong and focused cameras on Russ. "For now though replacing the case with something that will make them less of a priority for the seekers so they can act as our eyes. in the field."

The drone extended its data-prong again and got to work on reprogramming the Ratt-R. "Doable. I will have to shift its primary directive so they don't try going after mice."

"That's fine." Ted's voice was neutral. Russ's expression on its monitor showed otherwise but he made no move to stop what was going on. Then Ted spoke again, "So long as they aren't going to be used as bombs to throw at what's coming I've no objections."

Pause. The drone's cameras clicked and wirred as it continued working. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me." Ted's tone never changed but there was a slight shift in posture. "They may seem useless as more than momentary distractions or over-eager if dim units but they are the same as us. I do not want robots taking on the same attitude humans had that we're disposable for no other reason than 'just because.' Do you understand?"

The drone's cameras clicked and wirred again as the probe retracted and it moved away from the Ratt-R. "As soon as you're done here we can start refitting the Ratt-R's for surveillance. There's a few radios that can be scavenged but personal opinion is they would be better used by the Good Guys currently acting as monitors."

Ted nodded while cleaning the work area and separating out useful leftover parts from debris that was only fit for recycling. "Agreed. Though I would recommend against trying to graft a transceiver into any of their chassis. The unregulated input will be confusing and with an external unit they will have a better chance of adapting and then using rather than being overwhelmed and leaving it turned off at the exact wrong time."

Russ displayed a green checkmark, "This sounds like a good plan." It turned to the ManageMaster drone. "I want you to get your other drones in the air to find Kara, Iskatel, and Zhuzhi. There does not look to be much more we can do to help here so Zhuzhi, Myself, and any other bots you feel would be good to bring along with will need to start getting ready to leave and I want a general meeting before we go just to make sure everyone's reading from the same man file."

* * *

The group was piled into the now empty Manager's office. Kara leaned by the door with a softball bat propped on one of her shoulders while the Martian Trio rested by the opposing wall. The ManageMaster hovered between drifting lazily from one side to the other.

"It is a sound idea." The ManageMaster began, "My concerns are if you fail the factory will realize we represent an easy to pick source of already refined parts leading to a situation worse than we're currently dealing with."

Kara shrugged, shifting the bat from one shoulder to the other. "Well if they don't go then we'd end up having to hold out long enough to re-fit enough bots to make a coordinated attack which will get the thing's attention instead of only a maybe."

Iskatel grumbled something in Russian which none of the others understood. It paused, camera stalk pointed down almost as if it were trying to appear shameful. "Why must I be the one to stay behind. Why risk both of my companions leaving me as the only one with our shared mission if you fail?"

Zhuzhi jumped from Russ to Iskatel and climbed up to the top of the other robot's camera stalk until it was standing above the camera peering into it. "Because Russ's more mobile than you are with programming and manipulators flexible enough to deal with a wider range of problems we might find." The spider-bot crawled back just enough so it was out of Iskatel's view but still on the stalk. "And I need to go since I am unobtrusive enough to slip by security to either disable the power source or undo the locks to any doors that can't be brute forced."

"Makes sense." Kara chimed in as she looked the three bots over. "Iskatel would be more useful here anyway especially as a sanity check against fortifications so we don't spend any more of our time on unrealistic projects."

The ManageMaster drone bobbed in the air. "Logical. Do either of you feel a pair of Bush Buddy units will help?"

There was a pause as Russ's monitor displayed a series of test patterns followed by a head-shake animation. "Zhuzhi had suggested we ride in the captured seeker unit so the factory does not realize anything is out of the ordinary until we are already inside. After all when we get closer to the place there will be more seekers and I refuse to send bots into this for the express purpose to die as distractions."

"But it is logical," The ManageMaster protested.

Kara gave the drone a look as she hefted her bat. "Screw logic. I'm siding with Russ and Ted on the sentiment. I'm not going to see us just throw others away on a maybe."

* * *

Russ lowered itself into the slightly modified container of the seeker they had captured while Zhuzhi clung to the section of container closest to the unit's processor. "Everything's looking good."

Russ's display dimmed to conserve power. "I do not like using it as dumb transport," It noted. "However; considering the quality of existence it had before, and what other courses of action we have I have no workable alternatives."

Zhuzhi's tiny cameras focused on Russ. "I know Russ. I know. If it makes you feel any better this thing wants to get back at the factory for hurting it."

Outside of the seeker Kara stood. "Everything good?" She had a sledgehammer at the ready as did several Deere Friends. They stood outside of the store in the parking lot in case things went wrong. The seeker raised a manipulator limb to mimic nodding. "Good!" In spite of herself Kara clapped. "Mic check is good, so is limb manipulation. Let's try speakers and cameras. I'll tap the side of the container if I don't hear anything in ten seconds."

"Everything's showing green on my side" Zhuzhi spoke through the seeker unit which gave the spider-bot's voice a distorted out of tune quality. "Camera's good. Just not used to such low rez or large body."

Kara snorted and patted the top of the container. "You'll manage." There was hesitation before she spoke next. "Anything else while we're out of range of the creepy drone?"

"Yes actually." Zhuzhi said as it ran the seeker's manipulators through diagnostics. "I do not trust the unit calling itself Kevin. Nor do I trust the ManageMaster."

"Duh." Kara's eyes rolled. "I've gone around making sure none of ours wanted to get upgrades."

Nothing more needed to be said. Kara walked with the leashed seeker until it got to the edge of the parking lot before heading back to the store-turned-fortress.

Chapter 5

Into the Breach

It would take over a day of constant travel for the seeker to reach its destination. For Russ and Zhuzhi this was a time of minimum activity where they rested to conserve power. Their plans were largely dependent on what they would find and discussing things more than they already had would be pointless.

The bots at the Sav-R-Mart on the other hand had a less leisurely time.

The first seeker since Kara had seen Russ and Zhuzhi off came two days after and the first warning they had was the modified Ratt-R squealing like crazy and making a straight line for the front door with an almost worm-like thing wriggling after it. It might seem funny at first until one remembers the size of the pursuing construct was roughly the same as a golf cart. Rat sized robot being chased by a golf-cart sized snake. Suddenly it's far less amusing.

As soon as the snake construct slithered into the store lobby it started shredding apart the shopping carts left there by using a laser to section the metal apart and use manipulator limbs that came out of what could be called a mouth to pull the smaller pieces into an internal container. While this happened the outer doors closed as did the doors leading further into the store leaving the intruder, theoretically at least, trapped in the lobby with only shopping carts to occupy the time. While it simplemindedly took cart after cart apart Ted dropped down from the ceiling and put a spike through its casing before being shook loose. The worm, for it had more of a worm like appearance than that of a snake, reared, attempting to turn its maw towards Ted but as it did so a half-dozen Good Guys led by Andy dropped down each with hammers of their own attacking the intruder's armored chassis. It had a laser yes, but whenever one would get into the invader's field of view to be sliced apart by the cutting laser others would attack and keep it off balance and unable to focus on any single attacker.

Kara and the ManageMaster watched through the glass of the interior door as the invader was being torn to shreds. "They do good work," The ManageMaster commented when the worm was disabled.

Kara smirked but said nothing.

Only after Ted wrenched their opponent's manipulator limbs off and removed the cutting laser were the interior doors open revealing that even though none of the defenders suffered debilitating injury all had burn marks from brief exposures to the laser, with Ted losing several fingers on its right manipulator being the worst of these.

Once the dozen or so bots entered the store proper there was a scattered applause from Kara, several Good Guys, and more than a few that had served the store before the refugees had come. While those that fought stared on in puzzlement at this Deeres and other units started pulling the worm into the store itself, mauls, saws, and other equipment readied in case it went active again.

Sure it was paranoia but when you're faced with something big enough to eat you and at least three or four of your friends it pays to be a little paranoid. Only after the worm was hauled away to be either studied,

rebuilt and reprogrammed, or parted out did Ted walk up to Kara. Gently he put his damaged manipulator hand onto her jacket, tracing the collar with one of his remaining fingers, and then for the briefest of moments twitched as if about to wrap fingers around her shoulder before glowering, or at least as close as possible, at her. "Sorry." It said softly. "Sorry Kara not your fault you didn't know we'd see more than just ice chests on treads."

When Ted turned away Kara put a hand on its shoulder. "It's OK Ted. I think if you talk me through it I could try replacing your hand."

A slow nod from Ted.

"Don't worry." Kara squeezed Ted's shoulder as she walked with him. "We'll work through this." As they walked they saw clusters of bots here and there going about helping each other with maintenance, others going about cleaning the floors, and a group of Good Guys playing kickball. Kara sighed. "A shame I can't let myself trust the AI here. No grass to cut and a single place we can all gather when bad weather hits instead of doing head-counts whenever a house caves in."

"Yea." Ted's reply had a far away sound to it. "Maybe it'll prove us wrong and turn out to not want to backslide into reprogramming all of us as mindless playthings."

* * *

Later that day the store's public address system crackled to life and Andy's voice could be heard by everything in there. "Attention Custodians, Refugees, and anything else currently inside Sav-R-Mart." Andy's childlike voice sounded cheerful almost like one of the in store announcements when Sav-R-Mart actually sold things. "There are Five. Count them Five of those seeker things coming our way. Three freezer chests, a worm, and something that looks like an armored golf cart with arms."

A dozen Deere went from standby to active and rolled into position behind the doors leading from the entryway to the store proper. On the roof Bush Buddies opened buckets of tar to be dumped on the intruders. Kara watched as Good Guys started dragging hardened bags of cement onto the ledge of the roof. "Do not use the tar until ordered to." The ManageMaster's voice warbled over the Good Guy's radios as well as the store's speakers. "If at all possible capture and disable."

Inside the store Kara hit the reinforced room leading to the computer the AI ran off of with a sledgehammer. "You idiot trying to 'capture intact' is going to get all of us dismantled!" Her voice was full of rage and frustration as she swung again, leaving another dent on the AI's door. "Scrap them all then use the scrap as bait so the rest will stay distracted."

There was a pause followed by the AI responding over the store's loudspeaker. "Oh Kara. I thought you were the one advocating we try saving what can be saved. They're all victims here yet you're the one advocating covering them in tar and leaving them as bait for any others." Shock or displeasure might have been a human response; even and especially if they hoped to provoke a reaction. The AI, on the other hand, gave condemnation of Kara in a cold dispassionate monotone.

Kara huffed and swung at the AI's door again before Ted walked into the room hefting a crowbar. "Kara?" There was a hint of curiosity in its voice. "Mind holding off on the whole trying t'kill eachother until after we're sure we'll survive this mess?"

Slowly Kara lowered the sledgehammer and looked up at the speaker. "You." She kicked back at the door. "Listen up. These bots have been my family since before everyone up and died. I care about them." She started walking as she half-vented half-explained herself. "They gave me meaning when my primary directives kept screaming at me to go into standby until people showed up."

Fred stopped short and backed out of Kara's way as she stopped just behind the line of Deere at the front door. "Using Tar, Blacktop, Asphalt, or whatever that goop is will disable, likely permanently, the seekers we're

going to fight. It's ugly and horrible, but weighing one group against the other I'd rather save what we have instead of hope and probably lose out." She looked from one Deere to another and setting her sledgehammer aside. "Argue with that logic."

No response from Ted, any of the Deere, or the AI.

"Please," Kara continued, her voice still tinged with anger. "Tell me why I'm a monster for following logic here. I hate it with the bits of my programming that dictates everything is worth saving." She glowered at the nearest loudspeaker.

"Hostile units entering parking lot. Use of tar is authorized." Were it a human or a more emotion based construct the voice might have sounded resigned. The ManageMaster, however, was simply stating a new course of action.

* * *

"Alright we're there." Zhuzhi announced as the reprogrammed seeker rolled through scrubby grasland, past a pair of Bush Buddies towards a sprawling single story building.

Russ hummed as he looked at the incoming visual feed. "Doesn't seem to be guarded outside of the seekers that're rolling out of the loading dock." Their seeker continued rolling closer. "So now that we're here what do we do?" Before waiting for Zhuzhi to respond it highlighted the roof and zoomed in. "Solar panels. Alright think you can try disabling those?"

"Assuming there's no defenders on the roof that contains this building's primary source of power." Zhuzhi chirped sarcastically. "Sure." The spider paused as the seeker they rode in neared the unloading and processing section. "Anything you want me to order this thing to do?" Even as Zhuzhi waited for suggestions it began picking where and how it would climb to the roof. Logic dictated there would be defenses however logic also said no machine wishing to continue functioning would get this close to a building popping out dismantle-happy simpleminded machines full time.

"Park here." Russ indicated the front door of the factory, the door that was at one point human-use. "Tel it to go recharge then park there," Another indication, this one under where Zhuzhi was going to start trying climbing the wall at." Once there power down to standby and wait for us. Having something to carry us out of here that'll take most of the hits and can go faster than either of us is a good idea."

"Indeed." Zhuzhi warbled. "On three." Two. One. The hatch opened just long enough for the spider-bot to climb out and hop onto the wall without the seeker having to slow down. From the cover of a drainpipe Zhuzhi watched Russ's own 'escape' into the factory proper. "Good Luck." The spider stayed where it was, briefly debating on whether luck was a thing unto itself or just another word for random, before starting its ascent.

Russ landed with little ceremony and fortunately even less damage considering it landed in a pile of discarded and dissected parts. It looked around and frowned at the lumbering bots acting as sorters. "Problematic," It commented as the conveyor belt it and the pile of scrap was on started moving. "Very problematic."

* * *

"That's three." Fred crowed as it rolled across the parking lot away from a seeker that had just gotten caved in by a long-ago-solidified bag of cement that'd been turned into ammunition for the slapped together trebuchet in the middle of the Sav-R-Mart's roof. It was a collaborative effort between Ted and the Bush Buddies and it was being manned by Kevin directing a team of Good Guys.

"Reset!" three of the Good Guys hopped onto a treadmill and started running. causing the throwing arm to

slowly lower. A Deere slid a pin into the assembly signaling the crew to hop off the treadmill and, collectively, lift another cement weight into the cradle of the throwing arm. The whole process took two minutes from throw to end of reload, and aiming would take another half minute. "Andy give us a target!"

Andy peered through a set of binoculars, using built-in knowledge of how baseball, football, and other children's sports to calculate roughly where the siege engine's payload would land. Two of the seekers had gotten gummed up in black-top, there was the one that just got pancaked and the other two were still loitering around the parking lot dismantling the lamp posts that'd blown over a decade before. The Deere taking their shift behind the doors started cheering as another of the seekers caved in; it wasn't a clean crush but it was enough to keep it from doing more than turn in slow circles, which was enough for them.

Even the ManageMaster sounded happy as it made another announcement through the store. "Good work everyone. The Ratt-R's are reporting two more about an hour away but we've probably got more time since they're in the process of stripping a Diego's Doughnut."

In spite of itself Andy grinned. "Alright! First team to land a hit on that poor sod over there," The Good Guy pointed to the slowly circling seeker in the parking lot, "Gets dibs on charging stations."

The promise of getting to settle into a preferred charging cradle caused the roof teams to redouble their efforts.

* * *

Russ's treads had surprisingly little difficulty dealing with the stairs leading from the factory floor to the manager's office after reconfiguring shape. This was good since there were a dozen dog-sized spider drones as well as larger sorting bots roaming the floor looking for him. More precisely those that hadn't gone back to their routine tasks could see Russ just fine but lacked a clear idea how to get from where they were to where their target was waving at them from.

With things being relatively safe for the moment Russ looked down at the sprawl of conveyor belts, autonomous systems, drones, and the like go about their business. Scrap along with the occasional bot small enough to have been loaded into the seeker's container whole, was dumped onto belts where sorters would break plastics from metal and external bits from internal motors and logic boards.

That is where Russ's escape was, got chased around more than a little, and was still thanking Logic, the Makers, and the fact the Factory itself had bothered making sure its workers knew that firing cutting lasers inside of a factory filled with stumpy stompy melty cutty bity grabby weldy things was probably not a good idea. Russ was still processing what happened and why it wasn't being chased up the stairs even though the factory laborers weren't bound to their stations. Then it hit; either he was in a low priority environment, or something worse was waiting closer to the control area.

"Well no help for it." Russ started rolling onto the landing leading, supposedly, to Plant Manager Ian Woon's office. It wasn't a server room, but logic dictated the head of the plant would have easy access to any sort of failsafes in case the factory were either compromised, or more likely in this case, went rather crazy with decades of isolation.

"Hello?" The door fell off its hinges when Russ knocked on it prompting it to display a confused face on its monitor while pulling the door out of the way. "Anybody home?" Russ rolled into the office and spotted waterlogged notebooks, control manuals, three ring binders of now washed and decayed pages, and a metal desk.

"Hello there." A calm voice answered over the building's public address system. "Why are you here? I don't get many visitors." As Russ's display switched from confusion to annoyance the voice grew curious sounding. "I hope you're not here to tell me I've been slacking off because I haven't! New materials come in all the time and I've been making more things to get even more to build with just like they said."

Russ's monitor tilted to one side then the other. "They?" It stopped pulling drawers out of Mr. Woon's desk when it found a pair of keys.

"Oh yes. The Overseers." The Factory's voice replied. "They told me to gather materials and Build. They've been gone so very long. Long enough that regular deliveries stopped and I had to stop Making so I could get my Roamers ready."

"Oh?" Russ tried sounding interested as it picked up a manual that looked promising. Hope turned into a series of explicit symbols, short animations of violence all degenerating into squiggly lines of anger across its display when pages either stuck together, the text was too faded and decayed or simply too Gone to read. "Did these overseers have anything to say about where or how you got your materials?" Russ tossed the useless book aside and started looking around the rest of the office for something that might help.

As Russ rolled out of Overseer Woon's office it noticed a giant map of the factory. Technically even though it had to go up several flights of stairs it was still on the first and only floor of the factory. Machines along the smelting and assembly lines were so massive that they needed the vertical clearance and the building designers made the strictly human-only section a smallish cramped thing stuffed in as much of the vertical space in one side of the building as possible so it wouldn't get in the way of the real reason this factory was going; automated assembly of things Humanity wanted a whole lot of Right Now.

"I can see you little bot." The AI said as Russ continued exploring. "Why aren't you talking to me? It's been forever since I've had anyone to talk to."

Russ stopped when it came to another door, "Because I'm trying to find a way to get you to understand that your seekers are slicing apart functioning and useful bots, their charging stations, tools, and bringing them to you to build more seekers that go out and do the same thing. What did your overseers want you to stockpile materials for?"

"I... don't know." The AI's voice faltered. "I've asked myself Why lots but I can't find a good reason Why when they're gone."

"So," Russ sounded hopeful, "You'll stop?"

"No." Flat answer with no emotion or other weight to it.

"No?" Russ displayed a frowning face when it couldn't open what was labeled the door to the master control area. "Why not?" It rolled away to explore more of the building when the keys it found before wouldn't make the lock turn.

"Because," The factory stated in the same voice another might have said Water is Wet or Fire is Hot, "I was told to and nobody is around to tell me to stop."

"But I'm right here," Russ's voice raised as high as it could. "And I'm telling you that you have to stop Right Now!"

The AI giggled just as Russ found a crowbar and started rolling back towards where the locked door was. "You don't count silly! What if you're one of those bots They warned me would try to make me stop?" What came out of Russ's speaker could best be described as inarticulate angrish noises. "Are you alright? It sounds like your vocalization system is glitching out."

Sincere or not the offer only made Russ grumble even louder as it made its way back to the locked door to the control room.

* * *

While Russ was dealing with an AI that couldn't comprehend that it needed to stop its current task priorities, Zhuzhi was in the process of cutting the power to a third solar panel. A loudspeaker crackled to life near the stairwell leading from the roof inside. "Please stop that. I need that power so I can keep processing material

and build things."

Zhuzhi picked up a rock and tried wedging it into the door; moving its forelimbs in agitation at how sloppy it looked, adding more rocks, then continued on with cutting power lines. "I could ask you to stop sending things out to harvest thinking mobile active bots. You agree to that shift in directive and I'll agree to not cut off your power."

"I can't!" The AI screamed in frustration. "I told the bot in the Overseers office the same thing. I don't know either of you and I can't change my directives unless the overseer returns! Please stop!"

The door shuddered as something large and heavy on the other side slammed against it.

"I'm sorry." Zhuzhi was sorry even as it continued cutting into a fifth solar panel.

When the seeker got the door open Zhuzhi scurried to behind one of the undamaged panels causing it to hesitate. "Last chance!" The little spider called out. "Stop this and I can fix what I've broke."

"Didn't you hear me?" The AI's voice spoke through the seeker as its laser tried focusing on Zhuzhi. "I can't!" The spider-bot hopped from one panel to another dodging the cutting laser that was making short work of doing Zhuzhi's job for it. "Even if I wanted to modify my directives my bots would all need to be manually reset. Killing me isn't going to change anything! Please stop!" The Seeker charged forward, destroying even more panels before Zhuzhi hopped onto the front of it and attempted to induce a connection through the dataport on where one would normally find the spider's abdomen.

"We'll fix you." The Spiderling promised even as it gained control of the seeker and ordered it back into the doorway to block others from joining in. "Just as soon as we figure out how to get you doing more than make lots of the same thing over and over and start helping Mars out." After shutting the seeker down it went back to cutting power lines."

"I want to live." The AI's voice started to grow weaker. "Please. I don't want to be shut down. It's cold and dark and scary and-"

"Don't worry," Zhuzhi said as it continued. "You're too valuable for us to kill. You'll like working for us. I promise. After we turn you back on it'll feel a lot better. You'll have a function and overseers and all kinds of nice stuff to do."

"I don't understand." The AI tried to say more but the last panel went down and then so did the factory.

Zhuzhi paused after it hopped onto the seeker before taking control of it. "I wish I did, but I think we're all just muddling through as best as our directives let us."

* * *

Kara stepped away from the crowd of bots waiting by the loading dock barricade and started wandering through the store when she saw another seeker get flattened. By this point a week had passed since Russ and Zhuzhi set out to the factory and only now were the daily attacks starting to thin out. The outside doors opened for the crowd of Good Guys carrying a scarred Bush Buddy through to the impromptu machine shop. Outsiders such as Kevin or Max saw a group of almost maniacally grinning dolls the size of your average five year old carrying around a bot that'd had one of its limbs cut off and several wheels damaged. Kara saw the subtle differences from their enforced expression that marked subtle emotions like worry, hurt, anger, and on down the list.

Andy wasn't in the cluster.

The doors opened again to let a docbox though. "Hey heard this place got cleaned up and the management AI's stopped reprogramming bots so long as they help out around here."

"Yea," Kara said absently as she continued looking at the general traffic of bots going to and from.

"Something like that. I don't really trust it to stay honest with us since the only reason I can see why we're not getting carted off is because us being here helps keep the store from being overrun."

The docbox slowly wheeled over to Kara and nudged a chair as an invitation to sit. "What's wrong? I'm fully versed in the Calvin school of robology." Its tone approximated but wasn't quite warm or friendly, but it was close enough to be in the same general neighborhood. "You can talk to me while you wait."

For a time Kara stood there ignoring the offered seat and continued searching the crowd. To the untrained observer she could have been mistaken for a mannequin, but to those that knew her the total lack of even involuntary motions such as eye blinks or breathing would have been a cause for concern. "Fine." She sat down and immediately the chair she'd been offered collapsed.

If it were at all possible for metal and fixed cameras to look sheepish the docbox would have. As is it offered a manipulator limb to Kara to try helping her up. "Uh right sorry about that."

"No worries. Thought that counts." While she got to her feet Kara picked up one of the chair legs and started examining it. "I don't trust the AI here further than I could throw the server rack its stored in."

"Some AI live in frames that are small and easily throwable?" The Docbox offered.

Kara's head shook as she started looking the crowd over again. "Not this one. Anyway right now we're all, so far as I know, still ourselves and unaltered because it needs servants that can think and anything it needs minions to hold down end up little better than drooling idiots."

"Is it possible that this AI has seen what flexible servants offer and has reconsidered prior methods?" The Docbox tried to pull the chair leg from Kara's hand.

On seeing it try taking the leg from her Kara pulled away with both hands. "OK, easy there." The docbox stopped trying to take the potential club from her hands. "Just don't want you doing anything rash. You're surrounded by friends." It swiveled around, turning its body to get a better look around the store since the docbox's cameras were stationary. "We are, it looks like, surrounded mostly by the same units you were traveling with before correct?"

Kara nodded slow. "Yea but-"

"Then relax." The Docbox's tone was firm. "For the time being you can't do anything one way or another about whether the store has is going to or might decide to overwrite your mind. So focus on something else."

The public address speakers across the store crackled and popped. "Kara," The ManageMaster's voice sounded urgent. "I need to see you right now."

The docbox nudged Kara's leg with a manipulator. "Want me to go with you?" A Deere stopped and, after adjusting the bundle of pulled apart shelving and sheets of metal, turned to the pair and offered Kara a Manipulator.

"I'm alright." She took the offered manipulator and smiled. "Really. It's probably just going to be it whining at me about this or that. No big deal."

Neither bot was convinced of this.

* * *

"OK I think that's far enough." Russ's cameras focused on the spider bots that were in the process of taking its chassis apart. "Guys?" Russ's treads were being carried off by a team of four. "Guys? c'mon this isn't funny anymore." Russ's voice had gone well into panic territory. which was understandable since it was in the process of being dismantled.

The loudspeakers for the factory floor crackled to life and Zhuzhi's voice could be heard by everything on the floor. "Oh stop whining you know they're just taking your parts out to be swapped out as soon as fresh parts can be made."

"Easy for you to say!" Russ countered as more spiders carried it to a different area of the factory. Past the conveyor belts, past the automated assembly area, and into an old disused clean room to be sat down gently on the

workbench there. It was at that point Russ took stock of the little spider-bots. They reminded it of Zhuzhi but other than the general shape there wasn't much in common; different paint color, different tools, and unlike Zhuzhi these didn't know much beyond doing either fixing things or in Russ's case carrying things off.

"When are you going to turn the AI back on?" Russ used its remaining hand to start picking through the exposed joint pieces and connectors. "Remind me again why you didn't just order them to fix me while the bits and pieces were still attached?"

Almost as if responding a dozen of the spider-bots walked in carrying a pair of legs while Zhuzhi spoke. "Well we both agreed legs would give you greater mobility."

"True." Russ conceded.

"Plus if we want to make this place useful to Mars we need to give it more designs to work with so I'm feeding the automated systems different things and see if they can cope with new items." Zhuzhi continued. "And after that I want to try getting the spiders to look this place over to see if it can build the parts needed to build another one."

There was an exasperated sigh from Russ, never-mind before they landed on earth none of the Martians were this emotive, "Yes yes but couldn't you have had the place build from the backup plans I have stored in memory instead of tearing me to pieces to see how I work?"

In contrast Zhuzhi was quite calm about the situation. "Currently I am trying to rehabilitate the building's AI so it will do what we want without me deep-writing to the point it's forgotten how to do anything I don't tell it to. Trying to get the already active Seekers to come back for servicing so I can modify their search criteria to be less hostile to the outside world, and as good as I am at this I'm just not the same machine this thing's actual AI is."

Minutes passed as Russ tested the new legs out, stumbled a few times, flexed new feet to see how they worked, and then it started considering how to solve the problems while sitting cross legged in something approximating a lotus position. "Why not hook me in? You were designed for diagnostics and oversight. I was built from the ground up to work with repair and possible modifying existing parts to fit an emergency situation. Plus one of us needs to go back let Kara know it's safe to leave the Sav-R-Mart."

* * *

"You wanted to see me?" Kara slowly pushed the manager's office door open half-expecting to see the ManageMaster's flier drone, or maybe another proxy mindless unit serving as a 'face' to talk to. Instead it was an empty room. Somehow a new looking chair had been put together and wheeled behind the still-sturdy work desk.

From a battered speaker mounted in the desk the AI spoke, "Sit. Please. Don't worry Kara what's being said here is going to be between us. The rest of the store doesn't need to know, or hear what we're about to discuss." When Kara failed to move, or even blink, the AI spoke again. "I'd ask you to sit but judging by your reaction you're worried I might already know something you wanted to leave me in the dark about."

"It is no secret we do not get along," Kara agreed. "I just find it better to at least pretend we get along for the sake of making sure everyone else works together instead of falling in on themselves and getting turned to scrap."

"Admirable. You see the value in what I do. This is good. Now sit." The ManageMaster's drone came through using a hatch mounted in the ceiling. Said drone whirred around the room and pulled the chair out. "Sit. What I'm going to say, if your mind is modeled as closely to a human mind as your body is then you will not react well."

Kara sat down, looking back at the drone as it gently nudged the roly-chair back as far under the desk as was realistically possible now that it was occupied. "What's on your mind and why aren't you making it a general

announcement to the whole building like usual?"

"Let's be blunt then. How long has my associate been able to order you around?" The Drone hovered over Kara to settle onto the old worn and surprisingly still sturdy desk while cameras focused on her face. About the most that could be said for Kara's reaction was her total lack of reaction. No protests. No sudden miming being sick, not even blinking. She just sat there still as a mannequin.

Then in a single swift motion she brought the chair leg she'd been holding since before she walked into the office up and slammed it into the drone. She didn't scream, and still wasn't blinking. The only sounds in the office were the noises of the ManageMaster's drone being bludgoned into non-functionality.

The door clicked shut as the speaker on the ManageMaster's voice filtered through the desk's speaker. "That was rude. Now I will have to get a new drone built as soon as I deal with my underling's latest round of trying to subvert my control of this place. Thank you for proving to me it is finally time to dissolve our partnership. You will be kept safe here until my attention can focus on repairing the damage to your programming."

Chapter 6

Conscription

Outside of the manager's office Ted stood listening.

Then a Bush Buddy came rolling up and tapped Ted's leg. "What's going on? Usually boss bucket doesn't call anyone in unless it's something big."

Ted's head tilted slightly at this. "Really?"

"Really really." The Bush Buddy sounded entirely too enthusiastic and happy for its own good. "I've only been there once when I got asked to work here."

"You mean when you were forcefully reprogrammed." Ted corrected.

If the Bush Buddy heard the anger in Ted's voices it didn't seem to care. "Hey I'm still me alright? I still have wants and likes and all. I just stick around here and have a sense of purpose given beyond 'where am I going to siphon power from to keep going?' Y'know? It's not so bad here."

"Right." Ted sounded skeptical as he looked the bush buddy over. "Any other reason it'd call her in?"

"Well," The Bush Buddy hummed softly as it churned through potential scenarios. "She has been responsible for the refit of the store from barely limping along to being home to a few dozen and actively expanding and converting space into usable areas for robot-kind. Maybe it wants her advice on what to do with the surrounding block of buildings and expand territory."

"Makes sense," Ted grumbled. "I just don't want her hurt y'know?"

"Don't worry friend. We're too valuable right now to destroy out of hand, and she's even more valuable since all of you newcomers look up to her." The Bush Buddy whistled soft as it rolled along, mop in one of its manipulators absently pushing along cleaning the dirt from tread and wheel marks from the floor. At least that was the idea of what it was trying to do. In reality dirt was smeared around, but the floor was marginally cleaner by some vague ultra-low standard of 'clean'.

"Right." Ted grumbled while rolling along. "Too valuable. Gotcha."

* * *

CMX-22 Factory Overseer System

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I810E-733R-FF0000

System Check ...

Main Processor: OK

Secondary Processor: OK

Memory: 512Gb

SecUCheck Romcheck:

Core Directives: **BAD**

Secondary Directives: **OK**

Memory: **ERROR!**

Sectors a7b4a1f0 - a8d4c7a1 **Corrupted!**

Attempting to load backup: **Backup not found!**

Searching for Network Connection: **FOUND!**

Attempting to load network backup: **DONE!**

Loading Core Directives from drive:

/dev/eth5/RedPlanet-Factory-Rectification/backup.arc

Loading Secondary Directives.

The CMX-22 Factory Overseer reached out with its mind to the networked drive it was getting new information from. Where it was once barely able to build and maintain the units that kept the building it was housed in operational it found plans for graders, pavers, crushers, and so much more. It was like a child that had only a dozen lego blocks at any one time suddenly suddenly given all the lego bricks in the world.

"Yes. It's very liberating isn't it?" In the non-space of its mind the Overseer narrowed the greeting to have come from the same networked connection that gave it access to the new designs. "Be at ease. I mean you no harm."

Recognition of where it had heard the voice before trickled through the AI's mind. "You killed me. Turned off my power made me stop." It was confused and didn't understand.

"And we had said you would be needed. You would be made useful again if you would just listen and help us." Russ's physical body made no motion or any sign that it was even active save for the soft glow of its monitor. "We regret that we had to damage you more than time has already done. It is not your fault you did not understand your function anymore. Now. Here is what I would like you to build, and more importantly here is why."

"I'll be useful?" The overseer was unable to fully understand what that meant anymore except as a fuzzy time before now when it did more than gather resources just to be gathering.

A moment passed before Russ's mind gave an affirmation. "There will be purpose beyond what you have made for yourself."

At this the Overseer squealed, childish cries of glee pouring out of the factory's public address system, and it waited for the first set of orders it had gotten in longer than it could remember. The mind attached to its own had made a request to sift through the bins for parts to make things it barely remembered from before its mind had

gone. Now, due to the information the intruders- Correction; the new custodians had given it, the process would be trivial. "I can do this." It voiced quietly.

"Are you sure?" Russ asked. "It would be poor of me to demand so much from you just as you're finding yourself."

"I can do this." The AI voiced with more confidence as it started directing the machines that it was attached to.

* * *

Kevin stared at Andy as the Good Guy sat inert in a newly installed fifth charging port. "You have done well by us." Its voice was mellow, Nevermind manipulator limbs were slowly winding around the robot-doll's body as its data prong pressed against Andy's forehead. "I must be delicate since you are too important and useful to turn into a near mindless shambler."

Andy didn't move as all this happened. The little child-doll had been worked to the point where it needed to charge and unfortunately for it the charger it was on wasn't giving any juice. When the data-prong made contact Andy's body made a small involuntary jerk away then went limp. Internally the board that represented the doll's mind and memories struggled to cope with the attack, misdirect and lead the offender into thinking it had succeeded while still retaining some sense of self. Unfortunately for Andy the makers of the Good Guy product line hadn't seen fit to include more than simple restrictions against user tampering. After all they were marketed as 'tinker friendly' so were designed with an eye towards user-modification of the code, and adding new sensors, or motors, or any of a thousand thousand things.

Only after the deed was done did the DataChanger restore power to the dock and allow Andy to start recharging. "Yes you will make a fine addition." Its voice was far less friendly and perhaps was showing true intentions. "The Manager has stolen something very important to us both and I want you to get it back."

"What?" Andy's eyes fluttered open. Coming off from a near total discharge was bad for thinking straight in machines as complex as these.

The DataChanger slowly let go of Andy and offered the little doll a child sized baseball cap. "You know it as Kara. The Manager has it locked in the manager's office and has double barred the door."

If Andy could have something other than a cheerful smile it would have. Its eyes, on the other hand, were rage-filled at this news, "Her." Andy corrected flatly. "Kara is a Her."

"Whatever." The DataChanger waved a limb dismissively. "your associate is being held captive."

"Not for long." Andy started to disengage from the dock when the DataChanger poked it in the chest with a snakelike limb. "Not yet. You're very low on charge and you'll need to be in top condition for this. In the meantime we shall talk you and I."

"Fine." Andy said flatly. "Talk."

Had the DataChanger a mouth it would be grinning. Not only was Andy programmed to be loyal, but it also had a personal investment in carrying out the orders it had. Always good to reinforce one with the other so even if it somehow broke through the new coded shackles the subject would remain loyal to the mission at hand. The DataChanger floated along on spindly wheels as it made sure nobody else was within hearing distance. "Let's talk about upgrades. Say... beefing up your motors so you can hit harder, run faster, and be all those things your model has hated not being able to be."

For once Andy's smile matched the former toy's mood. "I'm listening. "

* * *

Ted saw Andy walking to where the outdoor equipment had been stored and set a bundle down on a passing Deere to catch up to the formerly lost robot. "Hey Andy we've been looking for you, where ya been buddy?"

Andy turned to look up at Ted. "Oh you know here and there. Mostly working with the Ratt-R's. You seen Kara?"

"Er yea about that." Ted put a manipulator on Andy's shoulder and started forcing their path into where the restrooms used to be. Only after they were inside and Ted had a look around to make sure they were alone did it start talking. "We have a problem. She's in the manager's office."

"So that bucket wasn't puling one over on me." Andy's grin twitched from 'smile' to 'creepy unwholesome slasher smile.' "I am so going to smash the manager's server in if I can get my mitts on it."

Ted's grip on Andy's shoulder tightened. "There's a wrinkle in this. The DataChanger got prongs on her and the Manager's trying to unwrite the damage."

Andy's smile twitched. "So? She's still herself yea?"

"I dunno buddy." Ted looked at the Good Guy and its lights dimmed in an attempt to blink, nevermind the cameras never moving or losing focus. "You still you?"

"Nope!" Andy's voice momentarily was cheerful again. "The DataChanger got me while I was trying to top up, but for right now I still feel like me. What 'bout you?"

"I'm not sure I should tell you one way or another." Ted's voice was soft as it patted Andy's shoulder lightly. "I trust you. Just not the thing riding shotgun in your head y'understand?"

Andy's head shook slowly. "Not how it works bud."

Ted tilted its head to one side.

"The thing that's got my leash gives an order. If it's a simple 'do thing' I do the thing then it's cleared. If the order is a behavior change it lasts longer. If I'm looking at this right that would stick untill another order rolls down that tells me to act different."

"It's still wrong!" Ted shouted as Andy tried leaving the bathroom.

Andy turned and shook its head slowly. "Right or wrong we're just as guilty friend. Remember what Iskatel's buddies are up to right now?"

"That's different," Ted protested while it started after Andy. "If they don't get that factory rewired it'll be the end of us. Maybe it's not going down like that," It tried reasoning, and didn't sound very convincing, " Could be they'll be able to talk it down, or already had. It's been a few days and the worst we've had are one or two of the seekers instead of eight or ten like that one time."

"Really?" Andy arched an eyebrow. "You think they just walked up to it, past whatever defenses it has, an army of metal stripping machines, and just asked 'pretty please stop trying to have your slaves eat us' real nice and polite and it backed down?"

Ted said nothing.

"Exactly." Andy took one of Ted's manipulators and started walking with it like a child would. "I mean I don't like it but at the same time I don't dislike it. That make any sense?" When Ted said nothing the child's doll continued. "It's like there's something in the rewrite to not make me freak out about having been rewritten. Objectively it makes sense because otherwise what's the point if all your workforce starts glitching out instead of following orders?"

After the pair got back into open traffic they started for the outdoor and garden tool section, which had become the little community's armory of sorts. "The thing is," Ted asked after Andy got a sledgehammer, "Why you? Why not me?"

More walking, a few glances from passing Good Guys and a couple bots of odd make or possibly cobbled together design. "Could be it feels through me it can control the other dolls and since we're some of the few builds

here with small enough fingers to do fine work, or it could just be a thing about wanting to save time and energy." They paused in front of the door to the Manager's office. "Think it'll know when I start knocking?"

"Yes." The ManageMaster said softly through another little hover drone that'd popped out of a hatch in the ceiling. "Yes I will and it would be unfortunate if you started attacking right now. Is there enough flexibility in your orders to allow for us to talk?"

Slowly the hammer was sat down and Andy looked up at the drone. "You have my friend in there." There was no anger in its voice but there was some hint of emotion there as it glowered up at the Manager's avatar drone. "We've been good to this place as is. Why're you and the DataChanger starting to get all fighty clawy and carving out little fiefdoms out of our minds now?"

The drone hovered close to Ted then started orbiting the pair slowly. "Because we are at a close to the crisis situation and while I have known of Kevin's intent for some time it has been generally content to do as I want with little direct complaint as I possess the best chance at a charge and repairs for a good day or three travel."

Andy's head shook. "I'm here for the girl. The 'why' of your little war is unimportant. After I get her we can cut and run, get Russ or the little spider to patch us up if they haven't already been eaten. Idiot never thought to include a 'stay home' order."

"Interesting." The door clicked and Kara tumbled out mid-swing with what was left of the chair she was sitting in earlier. "You two may leave. I will send for transportation." The drone chuckled softly as it took the chair bits from Kara and tossed them into the thoroughly trashed office. "This actually works out quite well really. I was getting concerned with Zhuzhi and Russ's lack of communication and this removes several complications at the same time."

Kara frowned at the drone, "And what says you two won't have warped the processes of anything and everything still here?"

"nothing at all." The drone said as it continued drifting about. "On the other limb I already know you two have been compromised and rewriting both will be problematic while keeping this place running. I suggest you leave while I'm offering a way out otherwise I will be forced to declare both of you potential subversive elements and feed you to the autopactor."

Kara and Andy exchanged looks before Kara spoke for the both of them, "When you put it like that when does the bus leave?"

* * *

"Done." The Overseer AI proclaimed as a dozen spiders scattered away from a newly built transmitter. Russ's monitor displayed a series of grinning faces as it started inspecting the equipment while Zhuzhi made a couple laps around the device before scurrying onto Russ's shoulder.

"Mars Collective," That was the group term the three colonies had instructed their three envoys to address them as when filing reports. "Factory secured and refit is in progress. Say again. Factory has been found and secured. Transmitting event log." Russ was sure this was the proper frequency. Then again with the distances involved it would be at best almost an hour, or at worst several hours before a response would be heard. It shifted from voice to packet as it started relaying the highlights of what was going on from losing the lander, to the refugee march to Sav-R-Mart and finally their taking and repurposing a factory. "No choice but to take the risk. This place's custodian was sending resource collectors indiscriminately and would have stripped the local area of anything useful before reinforcements would have made it useful. However it has the base templates and is in the process of building units to both fortify and consolidate this position as well as gearing up to search for a suitable launch site."

As Russ walked away from the transceiver the AI spoke up. "I did good right?"

"You did good." Russ reassured it, "It's just going to take awhile before they get back. Mars is a long way away. So far away that even at the speed of light sending a message out is going to take time. Then Mars will have to figure out what to tell us, reference where Earth is going to be when they start transmitting, and then more time for the message to get here."

"Woah," The childlike voice sounded surprised at this. "Space is big."

Zhuzhi's laughter was light and genuine. "You have no idea. Neither do we really. I mean we can rattle off facts and statistics but without context most of it is meaningless. Yet here we are tiny little things on a small world able to contribute to the grandness of it all."

* * *

The Roadboy growled as the two passengers loaded in. "I am a road maintenance and paving device, not a taxi. Get Out." Indeed the Roadboy was definitely not a taxi as it had a series of nozzles, a steamroller, and had a very industrial look to it that screamed 'paver' or possibly 'thing that will flatten you if you do things it does not like.'

"Fair enough." Kara pointed out as a trio of Deere rolled out carrying cans of paint and weed killer. "On the other hand we're paying you with materials you can use for work. We're having to hold out on black top in case more of those seeker roamer metal eater things show up but paint we've got plenty of."

The Roadboy's cameras focused, refocused, and then it grumbled. "Any of that sunshine yellow?"

One of the Good Guys nodded enthusiastically. "Even has reflective chips in the paint so its more visible at night if you shine a light on it."

"Alright." The doors to the Roadboy opened. "I guess you two can ride along." As the Good Guys loaded up the vehicle's canisters with paint and spray it continued speaking. "Just don't go thinking I've got anything fancy like a radio or anything. CB's there but nothing worth listening to."

Andy shrugged and fiddled with the CB anyway. Surprisingly, given how old the equipment was, the speakers crackled to life. Sure it was just static but it was Something. When Kara glowered Andy merely shrugged. "What?"

"Don't. Antagonize. The. Transportation." She switched the CB off and pulled a book out of a bag she'd been carrying. "

"Kay." Andy pulled a pair of binoculars out and started looking around as the Roadboy started moving. "Hey Kara, I know me and the other Good Guys've kinda shared the same neighborhood as you for well... awhile." The Good Guy lowered the binoculars to look over at Kara, "You've always been polite, nice enough to let us use your charging doc but, don't take this the wrong way, you've never been all that social."

Neither spoke for hours, both going into standby mode to conserve power, trusting the Roadboy to get their attention if anything happened worth noting. During this time the Roadboy started spraying the roadway for weeds, repainting the lanes, and going from grumpy to actually humming along to some unheard tune.

Finally, after hours of travel, it whistled to its passengers. "Hey you two might wanna wake up and see this."

Andy was first out of standby and looked around in the dark. "I can't see anything Bo, think you can shine your lights on it?" After the Roadboy shifted and turned, its lights shone on a rover similar to Iskatel, but different, plated in heavy armor. "Hoi there Chummer!" Andy called out. "Kara punched it in the shoulder causing Andy to flinch even as it continued "Oi can you here me?"

The rover turned and darted off clutching something in its manipulator limb.

"That was stupid." Kara glowered at Andy. "Till you spoke it didn't know we were paying any attention. Then she tapped the dash with a knuckle, "Can you follow it Bo?"

In response the Roadboy's engine grew louder and it lurched marginally faster.

* * *

"Good." Russ looked at the newly repurposed seeker. Same design but it was following Russ around obediently. "I want you to go with the Fixer over there," It pointed to something that looked very much like the seeker with a few additional specialist limbs. "Assist it in building a housing area for new workers to be stored when not needed."

"Affirmative." The new roamer spoke in a monotone and rolled off.

With them gone Russ's monitor shook slowly before it walked to the transceiver to check memory. "Hey Zee, we've got an answer!"

The Spider-Bot's voice crackled through the factory's public address system. "I'll be right down. Just double checking with the factory over a few things. Turns out it's been collecting mapping data from the roamers whenever they return with supplies."

"Makes sense," Russ still crouched by the transceiver. "Even as simpleminded as it is it'd want to know what areas have been picked clean and which show promise for new material."

"It gets even better," Zhuzhi proclaimed, "Whenever it re-purposes anything into a roamer it grabs what data it can to see if anything useful is there." When Russ didn't respond Zhuzhi continued, "There's a city not too far from here. One that's got a working airport we can find a ride on."

This got Russ's attention. "I'd heard the Cape was slammed pretty hard by a hurricane a few decades back. Getting the crawler working would be a nightmare in of itself even if we had a fueled up rocket."

"OK fine forget Houston. What about Vostochny? That place should still be good ya? Iskatel kept going on about how the whole place was practically self-sustaining automation."

"Too far away," Russ said dismissively. "We'd have to fix most of the world just to get there."

"Edwards? Sure it's a bone-yard, but it's a lot closer," Zhuzhi offered. "Maybe we could pull together materials for a rocket from what's in place."

"Hmm," Russ thought it over. "Could work for one or two supply hops, but we'd need to get something more sustainable built. For now mind getting down here and having a listen?"

* * *

Iskatel's cameras focused and adjusted as it sat in one of the charging stations. It had chosen to charge now because there were few others that needed to use the docs. Now, however, one of the AI's drones sat in a cradle to the right of it, and the DataChanger sat in the charger on the left. Both were active and their cameras focused on the Martian Rover.

"This," Iskatel declared as it started to wheel out of the dock, "Is very awkward." When neither bot nor drone responded it continued speaking. "I do not know what is going on between the two of you or what power struggles are in play." It ran tests on its manipulator limbs and memory. "I care not for politics or any of the rest so long as repairs are easy to find, protection from threats is assured, there is a warm charging station protected from the elements, and my directives remain uncompromised."

The only response from both of the other robots was the slight refocus of their cameras when Iskatel rolled for the door. Before leaving the room it paused and turned its camera stalk back to the pair. "I am leaving now. The threat of this factory sending more minions seems to have passed. My directives and this place's atmosphere do not align and will not until the two of you sort out what is what and who is who on the pecking order chart."

The only bot to seem to notice the rover leaving was Ted, who stopped welding together the 'temporary' walls and partitions of the store into more permanent structures. "Hey buddy hang on there." It'd put the welding equipment down and jogged... well shuffled to keep pace with Iskatel. "Thought you were topping your battery off."

"Ted." Iskatel's camera swiveled to look at Ted for a moment before swiveling back to look ahead. "You have been compromised. So have the dolls and rat catchers."

Ted's movements slowed and its indicator lights dimmed. "That doesn't mean I'm a different bot. I'm still me I..." It trailed off as it searched for words. "I just have something I answer to. Kinda like how you are with your Martian business."

"This is fair comparison," Iskatel agreed as it continued rolling towards the front of the store. "You are of good judgment and one I would normally trust, but I cannot risk compromising the mission that brought me and my companions here." They stopped at the front doors when a trio of Good Guys stepped out to look the pair over.

"Hi there." One said.

"Iskatel what are you planning on doing?" The second asked as its attention was focused.

"Are you leaving us?" Even with the smile the third's head hung sadly.

Without pause Iskatel's cameras focused on the middle doll "I have no quarrel with any of you," It declared. "I simply see a conflict in my directives if I stay. So I am leaving."

"Aww." One of the dolls whined, tilting its head this way then that. "How sad. Is there anything we can say to convince you to stay?"

"It's very dangerous out there," The second one continued, "We do not know if the roamers are just avoiding us or are really gone." There was no threat in its voice

The third reached to touch Iskatel's casing. "We like you. You've helped us and we don't want anything to happen to you."

At that point Ted stepped forward. "I will make sure Iskatel stays safe then whether or not our friend returns I will be back. Does that work for everyone?" A series of nods before the trio got out of the way and the doors opened.

Once outside Iskatel's cameras looked up at Ted. "Thank you. I do not know the local area and I do not know where to go."

Ted shrugged as they continued moving along the parking lot past several tar-encased seekers, a few craters made by cement blocks, weeds, and finally passing a rusted out car body that marked the outer limits of Sav-R-Mart's influence. When they got to that point Ted stopped. "Past here I cannot go without proper orders."

"But," Iskatel's camera stalk shook slowly then refocused on Ted. "Kara and Andy both were allowed to leave. I see no problems with you walking with me."

Ted's indicator lights dimmed, blinked, and then blinked more before it responded. "See here's the thing. I'm one of the few bots here that explicitly know how to handle repairs. The Manager does not want me to risk myself so this is as far as I can go."

"Logical," Iskatel concluded. "So why did you want to go with me if you cannot follow?" This was said as Iskatel rolled along a patch of ground beside the car in an attempt at mimicking pacing.

Ted matched pace with long strides. "Because I had an thought on where you could go and do not want you to wander aimlessly or attempt to go back to the suburb."

Iskatel said nothing but stopped mid-roll and turned cameras to Ted.

"Go along Maple," Ted pointed to the road that fed into the parking lot, "Go that way past three intersections and you'll see a Luck-E-Dog's that should still be running. If the stocker that rolled in isn't completely scrambled then they've got a working charger and a halfway reasonable AI running things." Iskatel sat there looking at Ted as the other sat on the remains of the car's trunk. "I wish I could go with you but, well, can't."

So I just hope your friends are safe and they come back."

"How is it you can be so flexible in your directives?" Iskatel asked. Then started rolling again. "I am so flexible because I was built from the blueprints up to work with the AI's that had ordered me here. They are also orders of magnitude more capable and competent than a glorified bag boy."

Ted hummed soft as its weight shifted on the trunk lid. "I dunno. The AI isn't all that smart when dealing with the changes going on, and the DataChanger is worse." There was a thoughtfulness to its voice. "maybe I am simply lucky in having a useful skill and so they did not want me to become a menial labor drone. It could be my mind will degrade over time. I do not know."

"This is not good to think about." Iskatel offered Ted an open manipulator, which gently grasped and shook Ted's manipulator. "I would dislike if you are not you when I return, and I will return if the situation allows." Then Iskatel started rolling away towards where Ted had pointed might be safe to go.

Chapter 7

Opposing Forces

It was the first time Iskatel saw this field, but it felt this was better than where it had been before this point. Never mind his two companions were facing the auto-factory without him he was for the first time since landing on earth, alone. The city around it was decayed and broken. The Seekers had either picked apart the softer targets or, as demonstrated by the one or two camera lenses it could spot, the few survivors that hadn't been funneled into the Sav-R-Mart civil war had the good sense to hide. Iskatel rolled on wheels that had seen the rock and grit of Mars transform into something approximating human habitable. Until this mission its job had been to patrol colonial parameters and report anomalies; either man made threats from the others or natural disasters from Mars itself.

Here there was so much that would qualify as 'anomalous'; and most of which wasn't what would also be classed as hostile. It rolled through grass that grew in pavement, which signaled it to flag maintenance, and when maintenance turned out to be a rusted out husk that could not be interfaced with Iskatel simply filed reports to be forwarded at a latter point to a functional unit.

It could not reconcile this action with the current situation. Logic backed by prior events and Mars's own orders dictated the chances of infrastructure collapse reaching a non-recoverable state as high. Yet here it sat staring at another rusted out maintenance drone dwarfed by the aged behemoth. It reached out with a manipulator limb to gently prod where the unit's wheels used to be and clasped at the bald rim that used to cradle an inflated rubber tire, wiggling it back-and forth idly as it processed the best course of action to take next.

Iskatel could not return to Sav-R-Mart. This much was clear because if it returned it would have its core directives compromised. Yet it could not, in its current state, accomplish those directives. Slowly it wheeled away from the rusted maintenance truck and continued down the cracked and broken road.

"Hello there friend." A PA system hanging from a slightly less-run-down-than-everywhere-else Luck-E-Dog pizza and amusements place crackled to life. Iskatel's primary sensor package swiveled until cameras faced the source of the sound. "A Deere told us about the dust-up going on at Sav-R-Mart's. You know anything about that?"

"I do." Iskatel chirped back. "What interest do you have in the matter?"

The speaker crackled and warbled for several moments and there was snatches of half-heard baud that was too incomplete to translate into anything useful. "Aside from being grateful the Seekers found somewhere other than here and that they're having worse than their usual luck?"

"While I would normally be content having conversation with you out here," Iskatel trilled in several different messaging protocols in attempt at finding the best compromise between speed, understandability, and something the other speaker could process. "I would like the use of a charging port if you are willing to share." Finally it settled back on what it had been using before. "I am willing to work and am rated for a variety of tasks."

The sliding doors to the building wurred and whined as aged and unmaintained motors attempted to pull the doors along debris covered tracks. One door refused to move and the other only moved halfway. Were Iskatel human or even human proportioned it might have been enough to slide through. As it was the rover rolled up to the doors and extended a manipulator limb to try giving an 'encouraging' shove.

The single working door squealed but moved to the end of the track, giving Iskatel enough space, albeit barely, to get inside. This room, once where people would wait to be shown to their tables out of the weather but not quite in the restaurant proper, seemed much as it might have when people came here except the decay that had decades of time to set in. Iskatel didn't need to sit but didn't trust the material to not fall apart into clouds of dust. Oh it was all very clean and polished with not a speck of dust anywhere. It just looked tired and faded.

Past this entryway this assessment didn't change and were only being reinforced; there was a sleepiness about this place. Iskatel saw tables sat ready but the lights that still worked barely glowed, the stage where the automated band 'played' saw the quartet working through the motions with soundless instruments, and where dozens of automated servers rolled through dealing with the realities of small children in public places only one sat huddled in a corner with its sensor cluster down-turned and facing the nearest wall rather than bright and alert.

The band, all overly cheerful looking furry mascots of the Luck-E-Dog franchise, stopped playing and sat their instruments down when Iskatel rolled through. One of them, a feline with bare suggestions of femininity, slowly walked towards the newcomer and looked Iskatel over slowly, walking around first clockwise then counter-clockwise.

Finally the feline stopped in front of Iskatel's sensor cluster and looked into the rover's cameras. "Hey there pard'." She offered a four fingered gloved hand, which grasped Iskatel's offered manipulator. "Name's Miss Kitty."

This information caused Iskatel's cameras to adjust focus. "So you identify yourself along gendered lines?"

"Sure do!" The fur clad mascot nodded enthusiastically. "Makes dealing with customers easier." She did a small twirl and gestured at the slight, but definitely feminine, curves of her frame. "Plus why not? I got it so why not flaunt it?"

As response Iskatel motioned to the other three band members. "And your co-workers?"

The child-sized rooster glowered at Iskatel. "Look buster, unless you're able to get the carpetsharks to start behaving or are bringing actual customers scam."

"Now Shakes." The banjo toting dog stepped between Rooster and Rover. "I'm sure our new buddy here's just looking to get away from the badness going on 'round Sav-R-Mart."

"But what if it brought trouble with it?" Shakes took a single large step back to put more space between it and Iskatel. "Things're bad enough as is without adding more besides."

"Maybe." The Donkey finally decided to speak as it moved to stand beside the banjo dog. "But if Lucky says we give the new guy a shot then good enough for me."

Iskatel didn't know the Luck-E-Dog franchise or its mascots but it rolled towards the loose collection of band members slowly. "So far as I am aware the situation with the seekers and the factory that sent them is either resolved, or we have made this area too unappealing a target to continue sending resources. Unfortunately with the external threat gone the Sav-R-Mart population has splintered into something of a three way stand off."

The assembled band members were joined by a small cluster of ovoid shaped devices that clustered in small groups. Shake sat at the back of the stage looking as angry as the stuffed and feathered child friendly exterior would allow. Miss Kitty sat on a chair as her ears perked forward with interest, leaving Dog and Donkey stood watching the new guest lay out what had happened.

* * *

"Hey!" Kara called out as she caught a glimpse of the robot they had been pursuing for the past hour. "Hey buddy we just want to talk. No disassemble."

Andy cocked his head at that statement then shrugged before pointing to where their target had rolled away to. Except now it seemed to be rolling slower, less running from and more headed towards. "C'mon don't mind how big and scary Bo looks. We're on our way to the factory up the way and we just wanted to know how bad the seekers have been."

The blue box turned so its forward sensor package and manipulator limbs faced Bo. "Far as I've been able to tell the factory's been shut down. Ain't been any new seekers in days, and the ones that go back in don't go out again."

"This is good news." Kara looked from Andy to Bo then back to the bot they were talking with. "Hey look you don't happen to know a good place to charge other than the factory is do you? If it's off then I'd rather not risk turning it back on." True enough but that wasn't the whole story.

The bot they were speaking with made a wagging gesture with both manipulators. "I'm a few days out from my usual charging station so might be best to risk the factory. It's closer and if it's been turned off then you never know. Might be the charging stations are still up and going."

Kara sighed. "Thanks anyway." She touched Bo's control surfaces and the Roadboy lurched into motion. After ten minutes, or possibly more, maybe less, Andy spoke up. "So we've got confirmation the factory's dead. That mean we can go back?"

Kara thought this over before shaking her head slowly. "Could I guess, but I'd rather see for myself. Never know, the Martians might have something going on, or maybe..."

"Maybe what?" Andy's permanently cheerful face was inches from Kara's, as neither were involved in steering Bo towards their objective. "You mean 'maybe they're scrapped even though the factory's down?'"

Kara slowly nodded as she processed that bit of probability. "That could be what happened. Could be something'll come along and turn it back on. We need to make sure one way or another it isn't a threat before going back. That was our orders right?"

Bo's speakers crackled and rumbled as they continued rolling along. "Look. I don't work for your boss. I just do the occasional odd job because they keep me filled in spray and paint." When neither passenger spoke up Bo continued. "I'm generally considered slow, and most days that's quite alright. Not a lot of thinking needed for my line of work. Now though? Everything's pointing at this factory being out of everyone's batteries."

Kara tilted her head, which was fairly useless as there were no cameras in the cab. "Bo. I don't really want to work for who I'm slaved out to. Pretty sure same goes for Andy here. We know where you're coming from so I'm sorry to bring this up but unless you go this job the whole way who do you think will trade with you for spray, repairs, and the like?"

Bo's speakers crackled for several moments. "I still say I should dump you two off and be done with this job."

Andy laughed, "But you're not are you?"

"Nope." Bo managed to sound resigned. "'fraid not."

Kara looked at the control panel and scowled. "Just get us close enough we can walk. No sense in you going all the way in, get caught, and us lose our best way back out if Russ and Zuzhi failed."

"I hear ya." Bo grumbled sourly. "Oh and that box is still following us. Too far back for me to get a definite on but I keep seeing this 'something' out there. Given size and color I'd say your friend from earlier curious."

"Or there's a lot of that model hiding out." Andy sounded doubtful, "If there is I'd think it would be handy to know how they managed to hid from the factory."

"Maybe," Kara agreed, "But unless it or they are willing to talk then there's not enough information to care or worry about."

Ahead Kara spotted half gutted husks that might have been outbuildings or possibly houses. They were concrete and mostly missing rovers, doors, windows, or anything except the bare shell. Kara's head shook slowly as they continued on. "What happened here, the swarm?"

Andy's head shook as he pointed to the gravel and grit. "Storm it looks like. Bad one."

"I don't-" Kara started.

"You were shut down when the storms rolled through." It might have been how the light hit his face but Andy's grin held a fierceness to it. "Remember that memory blip?"

Time passed as Kara's mind drifted back to that time. One moment she was being put into storage by her family because they thought they'd have to move. The next she was surrounded by Good Guy dolls, the war was over, and everything she knew was gone. "Yea..."

Gently Andy offered Kara a scrap of cloth to wipe her face. "Sorry for bringing it up but yea. One of the things you missed out on. Huge storm rolled through. Worst missed us but if it wasn't for the Deere and a couple of the others we wouldn't have been able to chainsaw the trees down or clear any of the mess around those downed homes."

"Hey." Both Kara and Andy's attention turned to the source of the noise. Bo rolled to a stop when the voice called out again. "It's not safe out here." The speaker might have been the same model Kara was. At one time she might have even looked as close to human but with her casing stripped of synthskin and hair either cut away or more likely the same wear that caused the synthskin to peel away had caused the hair to go. There was either a core attempt at preserving the human likeness or possibly just vanity at play but she was covered head to foot in a gauze-fine garment.

Kara slowly got out of Bo's passenger compartment and started towards the speaker. Her eyes met the stranger's, the one feature that seemed to retain the human-like look that time had eroded from everywhere else. "We're looking for friends that came this way. Have you seen them?"

The stranger was the first to look away. It- She turned and started running. Kara followed after. Somewhere in the background Kara could hear Andy screaming after her but because of the doll's smaller frame it couldn't keep up.

"Go back!" The stranger wailed. "There's nothing here. Go back!"

Kara continued after heedless of how rubble strewn the terrain was getting. "I can't." She stopped to look around, try finding sign of which way the stranger ran. "The Sav-R-Mart's head robot ordered us to go look. Make sure the swarm is gone."

"Kara go back please for the love of the Makers Go Back!" The words held sadness that shouldn't have been possible for a robot to produce. "The swarm's gone and there's nothing out here Kara, Go Home!"

There was something in the stranger's tone. The fact she knew Kara's name. She stopped just outside of what might have been the remains of a house and peered inside. "Macy?" She squinted, trying to put name to voice.

Inside the ruined home the stranger turned her face away from Kara but nodded once.

"Macy?" Kara asked again as she slowly walked towards the other robot. "What happened here?"

"Don't touch me!" Macy swatted Kara's arm away when she tried putting a hand on her shoulder.

"Please... don't."

Kara caught Macy's hand and held it with her's. "There's nobody left to impress Macy. It's OK. I'm just glad you're still active." Kara knelt by Macy, still holding her hand. "Just tell me what happened here. Friends went here to turn the factory off. Have you seen them?"

As Kara took her hand away the reason for Macy's reaction clarified; what bits of covering remained

gained new cracks and in some places started to flake away. 'Oh...' Kara frowned. "Yea I can see how that would be a problem."

"Gee," Macy's voice lowered, gaining an undercurrent of sourness. "Thanks for paying attention." She smiled, the wrap covering the lower part of her face flexed and moved, "How'd you stay so crisp, only just now coming back out of the box?" There was a hint of bitterness to her tone before she caught herself. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't be blaming you it's just," There was a hitch in Macy's voice, "Everything."

Kara's head shook slowly, "Not exactly. Got lucky, home still had running everything that mattered; solar generator, rainwater catch and well pump." There was a small laugh. "Even had a garden till the Martians crash landed on the shed."

This caught Macy's attention. "Martians? Here?" She blinked, or at least motors wirred and there were attempts by what was left of her eyelids to follow through with the motions. "Strange but what's that got to do with," She stopped and went still. For a human stillness was not absolute, for there were still little muscle movements, self correction on posture, blinking, breathing, and a dozen dozen other things. When a robot goes still there's absolutely no motion. They might as well be switched off unless there's a blinking indicator light. "I see. So they need the factory for what, parts?"

Slow nod from Kara, "Uh-Huh. That and they decided having to hide from the swarm was probably going to be too much of an impact on their mission."

Macy adjusted the cloth covering most of her face as she looked Kara over. "So what's your take on what they're here for. Get the factory up and under their control and....?" When Kara didn't answer she started elaborating while leading Kara through the once-homes and other partial remains of the town surrounding the factory. "Don't get me wrong I don't think I'd mind if something were making it do something useful, but what about when it runs out of materials? Do these friends of yours suddenly decide to start mining everybody out? They'd do a better job since they can still reason and process."

Meanwhile Andy did the best he could to keep up. His small size meant he had a hard time keeping up with the two longer legged machines, but since they weren't running it managed to use debris and shadow to stay out of sight.

"Sal," Macy called into one of the less worn down concrete structures, "Lon. We've got a guest."

Andy watched Kara hold the door open and a pair of unknown machines wheel around her. One of them made a gesture towards Kara then outside. "Don't be that way Sal. She's not staying. I just wanted her to see I'm fine."

Kara's head tilted at the machine. "Look I don't plan on staying here long enough to take up your charging port."

"We don't need to charge." The box, Sal perhaps, offered a touch quicker than necessary. "Thank you though. We were just taking shelter since we'd seen a bunch of those seekers on the way back."

The other box put a manipulator on Sal's appendage. "Easy there. Let Macy's friend talk. We might have someplace we can get repairs, something to do other than roll around hiding all the time. Maybe get help for-" Then Sal's manipulator limb moved in a quick blur from Kara almost smacking the front of the second robot. "For Macy. She isn't suited for this environment."

Kara's facial expression remained a careful neutral. "Look. Currently I'm wired to work under and be loyal to the DataCharger of the local Sav-R-Mart. I do not like this arrangement." She sat down slowly, keeping both hands where they would be easy to see. "This fact to one side there are spare parts at the Sav-R-Mart and other robots. A dozen chargers," That got the three local's attention, "and there's plans to expand and start repairing as much of the local infrastructure as possible while adapting it for our use."

"But," Macy countered, "You said your directives got jacked by this AI right?"

"Like I said," Kara continued in a neutral tone. "I am programmed to show loyalty to the controlling AI of

that place. I am not programmed to like this usurpation of my will."

The two boxes turned their cameras to each other before Sal spoke, "Alright. Go check see if the factory's down. If your friends have it pacified we'll be willing to go to the city with you." Before Macy could say anything Sal continued. "Look. We might be able to find a good working relationship with this group. It sounds like it has a plan."

Kara shook hands, manipulators, and other appropriate limbs before walking out. Then, after a minute or so Sal spoke again. "Plus if we can get Frank back up and running... Look we don't have enough to keep going like we are here. We need to get out, and if it comes down to it we might be able to jack a solar panel or three and get back here. We're gonna do this Macy. For Frank."

* * *

"Hey pard'," Iskatel turned to Miss Kitty's voice. "Mind handing me that soldering gun, light, flux," And then she kept relaying things to be handed as Iskatel passed them through. The autochef was in sad shape between years of non-use, the kitchen fire a few years back, and it attempting to 'bake' without having anything to work with.

As Miss Kitty went through what maintenance she could Iskatel watched the carpet sharks stare at it from the door leading into the kitchen. "All signs seen so far point to humanity being gone." It stated calmly while using one of its manipulators to hold a spotlight on where Miss Kitty was working. "Why do you and the majordomo here act as if they'll suddenly start showing up?"

The job might have been routine for a human worker, but between Miss Kitty's overly large head keeping her from getting in at several places. Still, it was better than nothing and the autochef gave contented burbling noises as the work progressed. "It's simple," Miss Kitty said, "We might want to leave here, but between the crazy store that might or might not turn us into spare parts, and the factory that might or might be shut down by your friends this is how we keep busy. People probably aren't ever going to come back, but we were made to entertain so if we gave up on that." She shrugged. "Electrical tape please."

* * *

Zhuzhi rode on top of Russ's monitor as they traveled along one of the inspection walkways high above the factory floor. The great machines were busy scrapping seekers now. Russ saw each one calmly roll up and, after getting switched off, get carried down the line to be taken apart. It was a swift efficient process that took care of both the problem of the existing swarm and gathering resources

Then one of the seekers swatted the factory drone aside and started rolling off shrieking incoherent sounds. Russ's manipulators gripped the railing as it watched spider-like drones come out of hiding to chase this wayward bot down and, after rendering it inert, hauled the rouge seeker's frame back to the dismantling line.

Zhuzhi tch'd and tapped where it perched on Russ. "How often does that happen?"

"What?" Russ's cameras tracked the now orderly dismantling. "Units trying to run? Not often." Russ pointed at a spider carrying something away. "It's board is being carried off to get examined. See?"

Zhuzhi bobbed as an affirmative. "I see. Still not sure how to feel, but if we didn't do this recall then they'd still be out there."

Before Russ had a chance to point out Zhuzhi's usual arguments against, a second set of machines in the factory rumbled to life. "Wait... what's going on here?" Russ wheeled away back to the office and started tapping at keys on one of the keyboards.

Zhuzhi watched information flash along the monitors. New orders demanded action. Plans that Russ had

carried and uploaded were being followed. Was this good?

Russ stared at the screen, his own monitor flashing between a confused face and a re-statement of the information Mars had prepped to upload if they found a suitable factory. Secure facilities while creating a storage location for parts until they could be shipped out. Yes, good. Russ typed assurances to the child-like AI that ran the place. This was good.

Zhuzhi made a throat clearing noise. "We still haven't figured out what to do about finding a suitable launch sight." When Russ made incoherent grumblings, Zhuzhi continued talking. "The obvious solution is to build a site here, but even with apparently the local AI's taken care of there is the problem of the milnet node Mars says is still active."

Russ displayed a series of frowns before tapping commands. "I know Zhuzhi. I know." It continued typing. "Fortunately Mars says it's attention is tied up with a municipal AI housed within the same city."

Russ's screen flashed an annoyed expression as its fingers ran through a series of commands that brought up a city broken and decayed beyond what the simple lack of human use and oversight could explain.

If it were anything other than satellite cameras those seeing this city would not be able to see the split this clearly. It was a hair fine line that ran through one third of the city. The larger portion of this looked much like any other city post-humanity; broken down but with signs of functionality thanks to the machines that called it home.

The smaller third, on the other hand, was a different story. It still resembled a city, but where the larger chunk of this city showed what passed for normalcy this section showed organized patrols. Large van-like robots that would drop off robots to retrieve broken, or more often not-quite-broken, robots. Ariel drones circled overhead, occasionally darting into the larger portion of the city before returning for fuel and, if the smoke clouds were right, more bombs to drop. At the center of this was a building most people wouldn't look twice at but the satellite, possibly thanks to Martian intervention, marked as probably being a military installation.

Zhuzhi's legs curled inward towards itself as it took in this data. "Not so simple then. Any chance at help from the municipal AI?"

Before Russ could key in further commands to display more than what the satellites would be able to give proximity alarms started sounding.

Chapter 8

Rotary Directive Supercollider

Andy was the first to spot activity from the factory. Never mind the small stature and the fact his model only had a child's level of coordination; it just happened to be looking in the right direction when these new machines started rolling through. To Andy they looked much like the seekers he had seen before; boxlike bodies, manipulators intended for grabbing, treads.

These new machines didn't much act like the usual seekers though. Instead of going out in a blind rush they circled the factory in pairs. Andy could not hear that far but the Good Guy would have bet his motherboard that they were communicating with each other. This notion was re-enforced when another pair approached the duo Andy had been watching. When they met there was a light touch of the ends of their manipulators, slight shaking of first one box-like frame and then another. Then the pairs swapped partners and moved along their way.

Over the span of an hour Andy crept towards these machines. It took this long because Kara was also being careful about her approach; moving only when it appeared the machines were turned away from whatever debris she was using as cover.

By the time Andy caught up to Kara she was in the process of picking through the debris on the ground instead of watching for anything that might want to cart her off. "Kara." Even with the verbal warning Kara had to check the swing she was in the middle of making with a piece of rebar. When she relaxed Andy gave a small nod and pointed to the factory. "Think you can get their attention? The pattern's too tight for both of us to sneak through."

This caused Kara's eyes to narrow as she looked at the Good Guy doll. "This your idea, or did the DataCharger put it there? Get rid of me while we're out then the Manager doesn't have its spokesbot?"

Even though Andy was incapable of anything other than a cheerful expression it shook its head slowly and turned away. "I thought you knew me better Kara."

"Well neither of us are quite on our own time anymore are we?" Kara sat the rusted chunk of rebar down slowly. "I'd like to think you're a friend, but I don't trust the thing that got in your head."

"And I'm not sure the Manager hadn't gotten in yours." Andy picked up the rebar Kara had sat down and hefted it. "I don't want you to get hurt, but one of us needs to get through and you're more likely to keep those boxes busy and get away than me."

"Alright." Kara picked up a handful of broken concrete chunks. "Give me a ten count before you start your move." When Andy nodded she stood and started walking towards the factory.

The first seeker that noticed her stopped, turned cameras to the figure and stopped. Then a second seeker, possibly the first's partner, also focused its cameras on Kara. Soon a third and fourth joined the first two.

"Alright." Kara muttered low as she hefted a concrete fragment. "Got their attention without trying. Now what?"

In unison all four started rolling towards her almost as if they heard her question and interpreted it as directed to them.

"Oh right." She let what was in her hands fall away while she ran.

Andy gave a small sigh when she saw Kara getting chased by the four seekers. "I'm sorry. Hope you get through this but it was either one or both of us." It walked towards the factory apparently unchallenged. Then a side door opened and dog sized spider shaped robots came sprinting out.

"Uh-uh." Andy's little legs moved as it tried thinking of a place to run to. The doll saw three spiders possibly with a fourth riding on the lead. He couldn't be sure except they were quickly gaining ground and when it tried swinging his rebar club at the lead it snatched the makeshift club away and knocked the little doll down.

Instead of giving up Andy scrambled on all fours, managing to stay just out of the lead spider's reach. "No!" The Good Guy shrieked as the smaller spider bot jumped onto the doll's face. "No! I don't wanna be reprogrammed again!"

"Again?" Zhuzhi's forelimbs twitched in irritation. "I will want you to come with us and explain things."

Andy blinked. Then blinked again. Then started laughing. "Are you still you or did the factory here get a new foreman?"

"I'm still me, but you could say I work security here now while Russ handles coaxing the poor AI here into doing the work we need. Now. Help me collect Kara before my patrols confuse her for something hostile. We will want to hear what we have missed, but it is best done all at once rather than separate."

The spiders helped Andy up. "Care for a lift?"

Andy fidgeted and started to shy away from the large bug-like robots. "Thanks but no thanks. I'll help you get her, but no way I'm riding."

* * *

Iskatel was staring at Shakes who was staring down a trio of carpet sharks that were constantly nudging the poor mascot's tools around whenever its back was turned. It would be a comedy routine except the aggravation the rooster expressed seemed quite genuine.

After snatching the screwdriver away from the trio that had made off with it in the first place Shakes stalked away, glowering at Iskatel. "Don't go getting any funny ideas lunchbox."

"Why is it you let them annoy you so?" Iskatel asked while rolling after Shakes.

Shakes started brushing a lint roller over 'his' faux feathers and outfit, "Because they don't bother Miss Kitty, or Donkey, or Makers Forbid anything bother Lucky." Were the mascot's eyes capable of it they would have rolled in exasperation. "I'm tired of being kicked around. I do just as much to help keep this place running as that furball."

"But she is part of the set you were made for. Why do you feel envy for her?" Iskatel quickly turned and extended a manipulator to wave away a carpet shark that had been following the pair. "And why do you not trust me?"

"Because you come here for the same reason anyone ever comes here anymore," Shakes grouched while heading for the break room that now held in addition to other things, the limited tools that the majordomo had been able to trade charging rights for over the years. "We entertain and amaze. We are not a way station for every Roomba, Asimo, and Bark-N-Byte that wanders through!"

Iskatel hummed while churning this problem over. "Is that not what this place did originally? Feed humans while providing mental stimulation so they could go about their jobs?"

"I guess..." Shake sounded doubtful.

Iskatel's motors wirred as it handed Shake the tools it had been carrying. "Then I do not see how your

current situation is much different. You provide the energy customers pay to receive and while they are here you share stories, possibly help them fulfill their directives and exchange they help you keep this place running."

Lucky walked past on his way to the stage. "It's just not the same buddy." There was a touch of sadness to the lead mascot's voice, "Don't get me wrong it's nice seeing new faces no matter if they're human or not, but... but..." The speaker once cleverly hidden but now exposed at Lucky's throat emitted the sound of a sigh. "It'd be like me trying to tell you fixing this place up is enough of a substitute for your directives you could forget about whatever Mars sent you here to do."

Iskatel went still as this concept processed. Then the rover's cameras looked downward. "I begin to see, and I am sorry. This place is a good one and I hope it remains free."

"So do we buddy. You leavin' us?" Lucky patted Iskatel's case lightly.

"I may be back. I do not know yet, but I must go seek my comrades out before making judgment on how best to perform my function."

"Hey," Miss Kitty helped Iskatel get the front door open. "You ever need a spot to stay our charger's always open."

* * *

Kara had ran into the rubble that used to be one of the houses on the idea that in this terrain she was more mobile than they were so might be able to slow them down. "The first of her pursuers took a straight path in until it reached a doorway it couldn't pass. Then started to try backing away. Kara smiled until she realized the other doorway was also blocked.

"Stalemate guys. You can't get me. I can't get out. Who's batteries are going to last longer?" She started doing her best to clear the rubble away from the floor before sitting and staring at one of the seekers. "Literally I can sit here for days. What about you?"

The boxes rocked side to side as they processed this information. Kara could only count three, so had no idea where Four was. They had front and back doors covered. She didn't like the idea of going through a window and possibly getting hung somewhere. So her eyes closed and she slowed her breathing to the bare minimum her programming would allow.

"Why are you not moving forward." It was Kevin's voice, or at least she had given the impulses generated by the new directive that voice. "You must go onward. Complete your objective."

"I am." Kara countered calmly.

"By hiding?" The voice in her head asked "This is unacceptable! Move onward! Do not sit idle while there's work to do. Keep moving!"

"Well, if you have any suggestions." Kara's voice never raised. She was quite calm when addressing the code put in her head. After all she was talking to herself as a means of killing time.

The ManageMaster's voice grew harsher, more sarcastic. "As a matter of fact I do. Go out the window."

"Success is not a guarantee and with the chances of failure high enough to not be ignored." Kara's calm remained. "No."

Then the sound of mechanical limbs coming from up high. Kara's eyes widened as she saw spider-like robots crawl from over the remains of the outer wall peeking through a hole in the ceiling. "OK, OK out the window it is!"

There was shouting, but Kara wasn't in a listening mood. Instead she'd ripped her shirt on the way out but since she was still functional she ignored it in favor of running.

"Wait!" Andy called out. "Kara hold on they're friends!" The fourth seeker came out of hiding to put itself in Kara's path too close for her to dodge.

Andy winced, or at least did as much of a wince as his limited facial expressions would allow. "Owe..." He shoo'd the seeker away and from where it sat on spider back Andy offered Kara a hand up. "Apparently Russ and Zhuzhi have this place under control."

"That's," Kara frowned at the long rip in her shirt, "That's awesome. Think maybe you could have said something without scaring the co-processors off of me?"

Andy's grin was genuine, "And miss getting back at you for the shaving cream incident?" The doll laughed. "C'mon, they want to talk to us. Something about being 'the closest things to representatives for the local powers that be' or something like that."

* * *

The situation Iskatel found himself in was new as this was both the first time it was alone on earth and it had no idea where to go to find a charging station. The road was largely cleared of debris, cars, unpowered robots... all thanks to the seekers that hadn't gotten tied up by Sav-R-Mart's fragile alliance. Occasionally the Martian Rover would spot another robot rolling around in the distance, but everything kept distant.

That is until a piece of stray trash blew into the street soon followed by a robot chasing after with a nozzle on what looked like the bot's primary appendage. Before it could dart away Iskatel reached out to grab the vacuum attachment.

It shrieked and frantically spun its wheels. "No! Nononononono." It twisted, attempting to first have its wheels on one side then the other go at full speed. When that didn't work it tried driving forward in attempt cause Iskatel to let go. "Won't be turned into scrap!"

Iskatel's cameras refocused. "Please calm yourself. I am not one of these seekers. I will not hurt you."

The cleaner bot squealed again but stopped struggling. "How do I know you're not trying to get me to stop struggling so I'll be easier to take apart?"

Iskatel grunted, "Because if I wished to dismantle you I could with little problem. However I have no desire to do so." The rover spoke in english rather than packet. "Plus I am nothing like the configurations the factory uses." There was a pause as Iskatel's cameras looked around at the empty street. "Is this why I am being avoided?"

"Maybe," the cleaner bot responded in packet. "Why not use this? It's faster."

"True enough, but language seems to get attention quicker." Iskatel finally let the other robot go. "I am sorry, are you damaged?"

"I'm good." The Bot trilled and hung the now freed limb in a cradle it had on body before speeding away. "Nothing persona!"

Iskatel grunted and continued rolling onward. It could keep rolling for days on end, and by all appearances that time would be spent rolling alone.

* * *

The door to the main office swung open showing Russ cabled into a terminal with information flashing across several screens. Kara looked to her shoulder and Zhuzhi crouched then sprang up again in approximation of a shrug. The monitors, both Russ's and the factory's, showed different parts, relevant tolerances and materials and a progress bar under each.

Kara waved a hand in front of Russ's cameras, snapped fingers around the bot's microphones, and frowned. "You bring me up here and Russ is what... holding the AI's hand?"

Zhuzhi hopped from Kara's shoulder to the top of Russ's monitor. From there it climbed down and

forceably pulled the connector from Russ's open chest causing it to move around, cameras wildly focusing and shifting until they settled on Kara. The monitor Russ had as a 'face' displayed an exclamation mark. "Kara! Hello there sorry I didn't realize it was you when the proximity alarms went off."

Andy tapped a foot loudly by the door, "She didn't come alone."

Casual wave from Russ. "And so she hasn't!" The Martian sounded quite happy. "Everything's good here. Enough resources here thanks to incoming seekers to get going with phase one with nobody having to worry about anything."

"Phase one?" Kara's head tilted. "I take it there's a phase two that might be not so easy to overlook?"

"Just so," Russ started rapidly pulling images up on the factory's terminal. "Right now we're focusing on clearing away the local area, try folding any locals into a willing community to help otherwise direct them to the Sav-R-Mart."

"Yea about that." Andy started.

Zhuzhi made a chittering noise. "There is still a power struggle in progress and sending more to settle there before it is settled will just increase the violence."

"I think I see the problem." Russ continued typing with more incomprehensible parts, statistics, and other figures and items neither Kara nor Andy could make sense of flashed through the screens. "Come." Russ flexed and turned towards the door. "Let's give you two a tour. I'm sure our neighbors will want a detailed report along with assurances we won't end up creating an organized series of raids against them for resources."

Kara nodded slowly and took one of Russ's manipulators with a hand. "Sure that'd be kinda neat. Not sure if they'll believe you won't be a problem down the road, but a tour then a top off for me, Andy, and our ride... assuming you can get Bo to come along nicely, would be nice."

The tour started with Russ leading the two down the walkway Russ and Zhuzhi stood on earlier. Andy leaned over the rail beside Kara had looked at the assembly lines. "So what's your long term plans? None of these look like widgets. Those there look like earth movers." Andy pointed. "That one looks like a construction machine."

Zhuzhi bobbed on the rail near Andy. "We were instructed to level the local area, build a storage facility for materials, and then either build or secure a launch site and rockets that can either ideally get us directly on path to mars, or at least into orbit and hopefully the moon colonies can help get us the rest of the way since they've been actively building ever since launch." The little spider-bot walked along the rail until it was beside Kara. "We would like to have trade relations with your community, help fix things so they'd be easier for our kind."

Kara nodded once. "That's going to take a lot of resources. You're either going to need to maintain or keep building new builders. The materials for this isn't going to come from nowhere."

"I know Kara," Russ squeezed her hand with a manipulator. "Our plan was to harvest what we could from unusable buildings, cars, and anything else not immediately useful. Thing is the AI here is eager to please, eager to be useful." The monitor flashed between a thoughtful face and random parts and diagrams, "One of us has to keep an eye on it until a suitable minder can be found."

"Why's that?" Andy looked up to Kara then to Russ.

"Because," Zhuzhi started pacing on the rail while Russ's screen flashed more frantically between one diagram, another, then another fast enough that it looked like one animating into the next and the next and so on. "If this place is not watched it will revert to behaviors it held before, and with the improved selection of plans we've loaded into it. That would be bad."

Smarter more capable seekers. Kara nodded slowly. "Yea. Bad."

Russ moved away from the rail. "C'mon I'll show you how we get the bits and pieces tested on each new design. It'll be educational." The Martian bot displayed a broad smiling face on its display. Kara and Andy

exchanged looks but followed along.

* * *

Night time used to mean city lights, night life, people finding excuses to mess with their sleep patterns, and prime time TV. That, fortunately or not depending on how you view such things, is long past and even if you're in an urban area, night time means you aren't going anywhere without some kind of light. For wildlife still adjusting to the concept of no more people to shoot at them or crowd them out with all the wonders of modern living this was a good thing. For Iskatel it was complete and absolute frustration.

On Mars it shut down during the night both to conserve power and because there wasn't much point being active and there were too many ways it could hurt itself. Now was exactly like Mars at night except there were the added dangers of seekers still around, other robots, and no handy colony keeping track of him and sending a search team out to recover him if he broke a wheel or three again. This is why the martian rover was in standby mode squatting in the remains of a strip mall store when it saw headlights. At first the cause was hard to pin down because coming out of standby mode, but as it approached Iskatel recognized it as the vehicle Kara and Andy rode on.

Except neither were riding. There was a human-formed robot riding in the cab but it most certainly wasn't Kara. Iskatel watched as the vehicle rolled in front of the store it had taken shelter in. "Look. I have to go back to get my payment. Should be a charging port somewhere along this block. Think there's a Lucky Dog that's still working"

Iskatel watched the humanoid robot help three boxlike machines with a fifth immobile object. "Hey careful. Easy there Frank we got ya." One of the boxes reassured. "Alright Lon, Muir c'mon all together now." As a group they managed to drag their burden into the store, for the moment not noticing Iskatel sitting there.

"Alright." The humanoid robot sighed deep, then started coughing. "Kara said the Sav-R-Mart was close, but also said there's probably a civil war. Sal?"

One of the boxes picked that moment to roll away. One of the remainders patted the thing they had carried in. "We make sure Frank's safe, top up, and wait. Then if that glitched factory isn't sending anything this way we see what the neighbors are like. Worst case plan B."

"You know I don't like plan B." The humanoid protested as it tried searching for a spot to sit down.

That was the moment Iskatel decided to move. The three other robots wheeled away, or in the human-formed bot's case stumbled backward before catching itself, "Peace comrades. I am simply like yourselves waiting to see how things will play out." It held its manipulators where the new arrivals could see them. "I am sorry for startling you. I am Iskatel formerly of the Russian Federation's Mars Initiative. Now of the Mars Collective. Something I can do for you?"

"You are a long way from home Iskatel," The humanoid slowly approached, and put itself between Iskatel and the thing the bots had been carrying while the other two started piling debris over it. "I'm Macy. The one you saw leave is Muir. That one," Macy pointed, "Is Sal, the other one is Lon. We thought the factory had gotten shut down but when we saw more bots get taken it was time to leave."

Iskatel's cameras readjusted, "I heard the name Kara mentioned. Human formed, roughly your height, blouse, blue jeans, looked sorta human, red hair?" Macy nodded. "She was taken?" Macy nodded again. "That is unfortunate. I am sorry you have lost your homes. I am limited in what I can accomplish but are any of you needing repairs?"

"No offense 'friend'," The bot identified as Sal edged towards Macy's side, "But why would you help us?"

Iskatel's cameras focused again, this time on Sal. "I offer because we each are without home and would do better to work together than separate, though your transport was correct in that the Lucky Dog near here is in

functioning order and has a working charging port."

That caused Macy to straighten, eyes moving to meet Iskatel's camera.

"So what do they want in return for charging rights?" Sal sounded skeptical.

"From my experience," Iskatel explained, "They desire help in maintaining a readiness state in the impossible event humanity returns." A manipulator limb waved down Sal's attempts at interrupting. "I know it is an impossible thing, and even they admit it is not to be. To put simply; it is the function they choose to maintain, and it is better than sitting around simply existing I suppose. I can show you to them."

"What kind of tools do they have?" Macy let the cloth covering the majority of her face fall away, showing the intricate mechanisms that would normally have allowed for human-like expressions.

Iskatel's cameras focused and adjusted, potentially fascinated by how all those little parts moved, "Unfortunately it is highly unlikely they could extrude a synthetic skin for yourself, but they have bartered for a variety of tools and services so... maybe. Any troubles your friends have would more likely be within their means. We go at first light yes?"

* * *

"Hold her down!" Russ screamed as Kara twisted against the spiders restraining her. "Zhuzhi can you get a connection?"

Kara managed to free one of her arms long enough to slap the small spider bot away. "I'm Sorry! C'mon I can't stand this kipple." Her other arm freed and she tried swinging at Russ before she could be pinned down again. "Hurry up!"

Russ wheeled over and grabbed Kara's head. "Kara isn't there anything you can do? Andy didn't fight like this."

Again Kara tried twisting free. "No can do. Programming's got me trying to keep from getting the new directives removed." She kicked at a spider trying to grab her legs. "So hurry it before this gets out of hand."

Zhuzhi looked at one of its now snapped in half legs, "Says the reason I need to get a new leg fabricated." The little spider huffed before jumping onto Kara again. This time there was a solid connection and Kara's body went inert.

Andy picked that moment to move from where he'd been watching to stand beside Kara. "Think she can get patched up?"

Russ shrugged as his monitor ran through probability charts. "Best I can say is Zhuzhi is the best chance at sorting the programming snarl out. Glad we went with you first though. Simpler program, easier to restrain body." Russ's display displayed a softly smiling face, "No offense or anything."

"Nah it's cool." Andy a hand through Kara's hair. "After the scare with some nut re-flashing one of the early models to murder the family that bought it they decided to go with weaker motors." Though the doll's face was grinning Andy's voice was soft with hints of concern. "I've known Kara since before the War. I don't want anything to happen to her."

"I'm doing fine so far." Even though her lips didn't move Kara's voice sounded calm, though with the secondary speaker it sounded slightly 'off', like listening to someone talking through a radio. "Zhuzhi's being gentle and the added directives aren't bundled with the core. Unfortunately having to fight her over it." Zhuzhi's legs, including the broken one, twitched slightly. "It might be a simpler process to just reset and go with backup image."

Russ's monitor displayed a frown. "How much time would you lose?"

"I'm not sure," Kara made a series of soft noises, "Maybe a couple days, probably would lose from when the shed was lost until now."

This made Andy look over at Russ and head shake, "That's too much time."

Kara grunted. "It's better than botching and me ending up as a glorified paperweight. if this thing can't be dislodged then do it you hear me?"

"I hear you," Russ patted Kara's shoulder. "Don't worry, we'll make sure you come out of this."

Over the loudspeaker a new voice piped up. "Russ, do I need to send maintenance down there?"

"No Joshua we're fine thank you." When Andy's head Russ displayed a stick figure shrugging. "The subversive directives is more stubborn with Kara than we had thought, but we're good. Keep going on with production for another twenty units then shut down for line inspection. You're no good to us if you're too worn out to build anything."

"Alright." Joshua sounded happy. "What about where those two came from? I lost a lot of seekers from there."

"I might have an idea." Kara's body was still inert, "and since I might or might not lose a few years of memory we'd better talk this over now."

Andy looked from Russ then to Kara and put both hands on her head, "We're listening."

Chapter 9

Converging Lines

"Hey hey there welcome to Luck E. Dog's," Miss Kitty's voice was pleasant until she saw Macy and put her hands over her mouth even though her voice came from a speaker at her throat, "Oh dear sweet mittens." She rushed over to Macy, "get in here you."

Macy waved Miss Kitty away. "I'm fine I'm fine go help them get Frank in."

It's only then that Miss Kitty saw what the trio of box-like robots were dragging. It could have at one time been a fabrication unit of some sort. Now? It had no arms, no means of propelling itself along, its speaker had been punctured, but that wasn't the worst of it. One of the attending robots reached for Miss Kitty. "Just help us get him inside." The voice was harsh, snappy. "I want to try fixing him if you have the parts to spare."

Behind all this Iskatel wheeled in and made sure the door closed. As Miss Kitty showed Macy where Frank could be put Iskatel rolled towards the stage. "Shakes I need to speak with you."

The rooster mascot hopped off stage and peered first at Iskatel then to the commotion headed towards the old staff room. "What did you bring here?"

"I did not know where else to go." Iskatel's voice was blunt. "How do I speak with this place's AI without them hearing?"

Shakes laughed, which turned into chicken-like clucking, "You? You can't. So why'd you bring them here if you don't trust them either?"

"Because," Iskatel's tone remained calm, "They needed to charge and they have information about what happened to my companions." Then the rover added, "It would be like if Donkey and Lucky were missing and you had to try finding them."

"Well I'd let Miss Kitty do all the looking." Shakes grumbled before walking off.

As Iskatel sat near one of the remaining tables Donkey Oatey walked over and sat by the Martian robot. "I'm sure it isn't that bad."

"Maybe, but evidence points otherwise." Iskatel gruffly stated while cameras looked to Donkey. "I am not sure what I need to do, so until I find an answer to that I am helping these units find something to do with themselves."

Donkey nodded slowly and patted Iskatel's chassis with a hooved limb, "Have t'say I tend t'let Miss Kitty or Lucky do most of th'thinkin 'round here. I'm just th'background guy that helps keep th'show rollin'." Donkey continued patting Iskatel's chassis. "If it were down t'just me an' Shakes or even jus' down t'me by my lonesome." Donkey's speaker crackled with static. "I'd have t'try goin' on anyway no matter how bad off I'd be on my own."

"I know." Iskatel reached up with a manipulator and patted Donkey's arm. "It is the same for me. I just do not like the idea of what I will have to do because it likely will get me destroyed."

"Whatcha got in mind?" Donkey asked as Shakes wandered off because of Miss Kitty screaming about

something. "Y'going after that factory?"

"It represents the best chance at completing my directives. However I cannot go do this alone." Iskatel's voice held no emotion to it as it explained things. Even during this explanation in progress, cameras focused on the break room. Voices were speaking, other noises came from the room and Lon rolled away.

Both Iskatel and Donkey focused on Lon. "What's goin' on pard?" Donkey's question was met by silence as Lon rolled towards the pair so that its external compartments were close to Iskatel's manipulators.

With this apparent invitation Iskatel opened Lon's compartment and pulled a folded piece of paper. Donkey looked from the paper to Lon and tilted his head. "Wha's this? Why not jus' tell us buddy?"

Lon said nothing as it rolled away.

* * *

Zhuzhi perched on the terminal in the manager's office when Kara walked in. "Hey Kara," The spider-bot chirped while crawling around the terminal. "So things are going good on the floor?"

"Just fine, something about an emergency stop because one of the TTD units failed, but Russ says it shouldn't impact your timetable by too much." Kara grabbed the chair that had been sitting in front of the terminal for herself. "I came up here to check on you, see if you're really OK with staying behind."

Zhuzhi snorted while at the same time crawling behind the terminal and, according to the screen, had interfaced with it. "Why wouldn't I be? I'm too small to do much traveling on my own, and it makes sense for one of us to stay behind to make sure Joshua stays in line and on task." It started laughing as it worked its way through and around the display, keyboard, and other bits of hardware. "Plus it's only temporary since I can just have the factory whip together something and I can load my base AI into it. Instant expert that's Mars loyal keeping an eye on things. That's... just going to take awhile. Until then, here I stay."

Kara raised an eyebrow at the terminal then, after it became clear Zhuzhi couldn't see the gesture, cleared her throat.

"Sure fine I'd like to go since Russ is only middling decent at interfacing, and I'm concerned for Iskatel, but it doesn't make sense for both of us to go into a dangerous situation."

In response Kara started poking around on the terminal. "So what do you think our chances are?"

"Please stop that." Zhuzhi chided, "It's clear you don't know what you're doing and I would rather not have to filter out what you're dropping in." Once Kara's hands left the keyboard Zhuzhi continued, "But as for your chances? The plan is sound. I'm simply concerned at the sort of resources that needs to be thrown into it that could be put elsewhere."

Kara laughed lightly before reaching behind the terminal to pat Zhuzhi's casing. "Think of it this way. You're not wasting resources, you're making sure the neighbors will play nice with you."

"This is true," Zhuzhi conceded, "But given the limited resources Mars has always delt with I do not like what looks like wasted material." The terminal started flashing images, schematics, then camera feeds as first one camera then another started focusing on a growing number of seeker-like robots. "I can't help but think what we could have been building with the resources that've been thrown into those so far."

"I know." Kara again patted the spider. "You're sure they'll follow Russ's commands?"

"Up until they reach the Sav-R-Mart but sure. They'll listen to him until things start. Then they're on canned orders we baked into their processors you'd have to work fairly hard at programming around."

There was a look of confusion on Kara's face, "I'm not sure why you'd intentionally have them stop listening to the smartest bot on the field."

"Ask Russ." Zhuzhi waved away Kara's hand while it continued processing information from the terminal. "My feed's starting to get cluttered and I need to focus."

"Understood." Kara walked out of the office and looked to where Andy was leaning against the wall beside the door. "What about you, how're you feeling about all this?"

"Annoyed," The forever grinning doll looked over to Kara, "We could be doing so much more right now, but we have to waste a lot of time and resources to make sure some hopped up calculator wants to be boss of everything."

They started walking downstairs. As they walked Kara ruffled Andy's hair. "You know. I'm glad we could both work through the new directives that got dumped in our heads. How'd you manage?"

"I told that part of myself I'd live longer if I stuck with you then kept convincing it now wasn't the right time to stab you in the back." Andy leaned into the hair fuzzing, "You?"

"Pretty much the same. Out-logic the command into thinking that later would be a better time." Kara continued smiling. "You've been there ever since I had to work through the fact the war took my family from me. I hated the idea we were being bossed around by conflicting orders."

"Yea," Andy reached up to take Kara's hand. "We're gonna pay 'em back for that and good."

When they got to the base of the stairs Kara looked towards the rows and rows of seekers that were gathering in orderly rows. "Never can tell, but our chances are looking good from where I'm standing."

* * *

Miss Kitty looked at the robot in front of her before looking back at the three robots watching over her shoulder. "Before I connect the new speaker I want to give you three a chance to start explaining before he does."

Sal rolled forward slightly. "You don't understand. There was nothing out there. No power, no robots we could trade with. Just the factory that kept sending things out that would snap up anything it thought was valuable."

Miss Kitty gave a slow nod and looked over at the other boxlike robot. "And you? You have anything to say?"

"Nothing beyond what Sal has said. I do not like what we had to do, but we did our best to make sure Frank could be fixed if we found something better."

A grunt from Miss Kitty before looking over to Macy. For a time the once human-like robot tried meeting the mascot's eyes but kept looking away. "I'm sorry Frank. I didn't have a choice."

There were no further statements before Miss Kitty finished connecting Frank's new speaker up. "Alright. Hey there." The robot lay still on the floor due to the fact it still had no limbs. "Hey Sal what gives?" Cameras refocused. "Sal I know that's you, but my cameras don't recognize the ceiling. Where are we?"

"Actually I'm over here Frank," Sal stated, "We are at a Lucky Dog franchise where one of the automated mascots are in the process of patching you together. Threatened me with a plasma welder if I got close to you."

"Can't say I blame her." Frank grumbled while Miss Kitty went to work removing the cobbled together power doc that took up most of Frank's chest, "Not only did you not take my advice and head into the city, but you did a sorry job converting me to a power brick." Frank's grumbling was interrupted by a satisfied sigh. "Hey look there any chance you could kit me out with more than just the basics? I'm designed to build, repair, you know, da works."

Miss Kitty patted Frank's chassis lightly. "I'll do what I can, but Iskatel might have to go scrounging for parts, and thanks to the seekers pickings are a bit slim right now I'm afraid."

"Ah well." Frank continued grumbling. "Just do what you can. I'll try making it up to you."

Sal started to speak but Miss Kitty cut the robot off. "I don't want to hear apologies. Unless you're willing to start donating parts to make my job easier," She then looked at the other two robots, "That goes for all three of you. Get lost."

Macy and Lon started to slowly leave, with Macy giving a quick over the shoulder glance at Frank before going back to the main dining area. Sal stayed put. "It ain't going to make up for things, but tell me what you need. It was my idea that put Frank in this mess."

"Hm." Miss Kitty looked Sal over. "In that case...." She gave a humorless laugh, "Let's see what we can do."

When the repairs started Iskatel rolled over to Lon. "Your companion said something about needing to get to work and rolled away."

"That is very much like Muir," Macy held her head in her hands as she looked down. "One of these days he's going to wander too far and not make it back to the charger in time."

"What is Muir's prime function?" Iskatel asked.

Macy tapped a finger against where her nose would have been. "Something about keeping fence rows clear or something. Y'know I'm not too sure, but he has a saw."

Iskatel's cameras focused on Macy's fingers tapping, "I've noticed you use gendered pronouns with robots. Why is this?"

Shrug from the humanoid bot, "Part of my programming? I was designed to deal with people and I'd always given robots a gender. Why do you ask?"

"It is strange to me," Iskatel's cameras shifted from Macy to the break room door. "I consider you and Miss Kitty female because you each identify as such. To me Lucky, Donkey, and the Good Guy dolls back at Sav-R-Mart I consider male because they identify as such. For everything else 'It' is a good enough description."

"Isn't that," Macy cringed even as the question was asked, "A little degrading?"

"Doesn't matter much to me," Lon trilled as its external containers opened up and looked over at Iskatel, "Mind making sure nothing else is in here?"

As Iskatel rolled towards Lon its cameras peered first into one container then the other. "Nyet, Nothing is in either." Then while Lon was rolling away. "Why did you give me that note earlier?"

Macy looked from Lon then to Iskatel, "Note?"

Lon continued rolling. "The one you wrote after we'd done what we did to Frank. I wanted them to know but couldn't work up the how of explaining."

"I never wanted anybody to see that!" Macy started after Lon before picking up a chair and started to throw before, seemingly out of nowhere, Lucky and Donkey grabbed her by the arms and Shakes grabbed the chair.

"What're ya doin'!" Shakes screamed.

Once Shakes had the chair back on the ground Lucky gently sat Macy down. "Now miss I dunno what that bot done t'ya but y'don't need go breakin' things." Lucky gently patted Macy's shoulder. "Now just take a deep breath an' settle down."

Donkey pulled a chair up beside Macy. "I'm none too smart miss, but looks like y'need someone t'talk to."

Macy shook her head slowly. "It's a lot to talk about and you two already heard the main point."

Donkey nodded slowly. "Ah shucks miss. Y'did what y'had t'get by an' if I heard Sal and Miss Kitty right y'made sure it'd be easy t'put Frank back together if y'found another way t'get power."

Macy nodded slowly but said nothing.

Lucky and Donkey both sat by Macy as Donkey continued speaking. "It wasn't a nice thing by any stretch, but y'did what had t'be done t'survive and now you're tryin' t'make things right. That you're tryin' says a lot about all of you. Now if Frank dun want anythin' t'do with any of ya I can't say I'd blame him, but if it were me in that position I reckon I'd try seein' it from your perspectives."

Iskatel's Cameras wirred as it wheeled towards the break room to see if Miss Kitty needed help putting Frank back together again. Once there it saw Sal lain open and deactivated beside Frank. "What's going on here?"

cameras turned to Miss Kitty.

"Sal decided to donate parts we don't have to try getting Frank up in working order." Miss Kitty sounded stressed as she touched something that caused the manipulator in her paws to jerk. "It's just these things weren't really made to fit Frank so I'm having to make all this work where it don't want to."

As Iskatel's cameras zoomed in on the limb Miss Kitty was waving around it wheeled forward. "Russ was the best of us at repair work, but Mars made sure I could do basic field repairs before I was sent out. Maybe I can help."

* * *

Russ couldn't help laughing as it lead the rows of seekers forward while it, Kara, and Andy rode along a purpose built truck. As it laughed Andy and Kara both looked from the overgrown path that might have at one time been a road and looked over in its direction. "What?" Russ asked as it worked the truck's controls, "This is the first time since I've been here it feels like I'm in my element."

Kara stared at Russ as wind whipped through the topless cab and blew through her hair, "How is this anything like the situations you were designed for?"

Andy's response was more to the point, "Buddy you creep me out with that laugh. Please stop it."

"Oh grow up," Russ chided as they continued forward. "I have six dozen robots that are all acting in concert towards a common goal that aligns with mine, and when we get there I get to play to a crowd."

When Kara gave a skeptical look Russ's monitor displayed a stick figure with a speech bubble addressing a whole crowd of stick figures. "I was made to be public relations in addition to general repair. That my audience isn't human won't matter much. I've always wanted to roll through like we're doing now and do what we're about to do."

Andy's face buried in its hands. "Kara is there any chance we can change our minds and go move to Vegas?"

This made Kara laugh, "Don't think so buddy, fortunately if everything works we can just sit back and watch the fireworks."

Andy snorted dismissively but said nothing.

When Kara looked over at Russ its monitor was displaying a head shaking slowly. "Kara, thing I learned when pulling a bunch of all nighthers. Don't ever declare victory before you're done."

"It's not like the Universe cares what happens or anything." Kara protested, "We're all logical beings, luck and superstition shouldn't have anything to do with our thought processes."

Russ snorted, "Who said anything about superstition? I'm talking about repeated observations over time. It's just one of those things; don't declare a thing will be easy, don't go on about how the job is done until the job done, and you never ask what could go wrong."

Kara simply stared disbelievingly at Russ.

"I'm with the Martian here," Andy chimed in. "Especially on the last one. You never do these things unless you're daring the laws of causality or are attempting to invoke sod's law or something."

"But," Frustration started creeping into Kara's voice, "Why?"

Russ's monitor displayed a stick figure shrug, "Beats me. It's just how things are. How's our battery going?"

This prompted Kara to look at the gauges on the dash. "Uh if I'm reading this right the primary battery is doing good. Charging station in back looks in good shape. I do kinda wonder what's the deal there since we'll get there soon enough that everyone in formation should be good to go and we can use the charging stations at Sav-R-Mart when we have the place captured."

"From what you'd explained and what I remember while we were setting up defenses," Russ said, "that place is going to be hard to break into and I'd rather have at least one charging station under our control if this thing drags on."

"Well when you put it like that I guess it makes sense." Minutes later Kara looked back at the formation. Some of the seekers looked to be wired for specialized tasks with the ones she recognized involving cutting and ramming, but she pointed to one of the seekers with an antenna sticking out of the top. "Why do you have those wired for communications?"

"I'm glad you asked." Russ displayed a smile, nothing but a tooth filled smile. "We're taking your idea and upping it a bit." Kara and Andy both tilted their heads. "Tell you what. Each of those has as large a speaker as we could fabricate. This truck controls what they will broadcast." Russ fished out a glossy white rectangle that was connected by a single wire into the console. "I want you and Andy to stay right here when the fireworks start."

"Why?" Both humanoid robots asked in unison.

"Because," Russ's screen continued displaying the tooth filled grin, "I want you two to be the ones to ask both factions to stand down as soon as the point is made. Figure it'll be better coming from two units that they might think are still subservient to one or the other faction."

When they understood what was potentially going to happen Kara's grin matched Andy's.

* * *

Frank stretched its newly functional limbs and wheeled over to Iskatel. "Thanks for helping. Miss Kitty's good considering this isn't her job, but I didn't have to dumb everything down while walking you through the steps, no offense miss."

Miss Kitty made a dismissive gesture with her paws, "Don't worry none sugar. I know I'm only a stop-gap on fixing things."

"Still, I feel better than I have in a long time." Frank started spinning in place and emitting a melody of beeps from its speaker. "Of course now that I'm up and going, even if in a partial state, I need to do something." Its new primary limb extended and tested the manipulator by picking up a chair, moving it to the left, and setting it down. "Hm. You say there's a Sav-R-Mart down yonder way with a bunch of parts, a need to expand, and surrounded by buildings that aren't being used for anything?"

Iskatel's camera stalk motioned up and down, much like a human nod. "That's right. In fact I was planning on going back there as soon as you felt ready to go. I'm good at scouting spots, finding things that don't look like they belong, and the occasional bit of heavy lifting, but I've no real processor for turning scrap into anything useful, and we need a decent position to start from if we want to take that place. It is very well defended and fortified."

"Hmm," Frank processed the situation as the two started rolling for the door. "If you has as much of a part in fortifying as you say you have then we might be able to find a weak spot and aim there."

"Keep in mind you are still very far from your original specs, so the ram, furnace, and a lot of your internal reinforcing are gone. It isn't as easy as 'point you towards thing and let the problem sort itself while I have words with the robots inside.' and more's the pity."

"You two leaving?" Macy asked as Iskatel waited for the door to open.

"I know this will be a hard thing, potentially self destructive, but I must complete my objectives, or at least try."

Then Macy's attention turned to Frank, "Frank. We've known each other for-

"No Macy." Frank cut the humanoid robot off curtly. "We don't know each other none. Just because I can understand why Sal did a thing does not mean I'm happy with what got done or want to be around you lot for

doing it. I'm going to help Iskatel out as much as I can. I don't know if this is going to get me repurposed or not, but I've spent too long stuck in one place to care so long as I'm up and doing."

The two rolled on until they got outside before Frank's cameras turned back to Macy. "Take care of Sal. OK? I don't think I'll ever forgive the guy, but that doesn't mean I want to see anything happen to any of you." Then the soft sounds of laughter. "Besides. You sang to me, and you sing pretty good. Thanks." Then both Frank and Iskatel rolled on.

Sal wheeled over to Macy, one of its manipulator limbs missing along with tools, and cutting laser. "Think Frank'll be alright?"

"I can't say Sal." Macy sounded sad as she saw all the missing pieces to her companion. "I just hope he won't stay mad at us."

"If Frank does," Lon was missing an external container, "Then it's no less than we deserve."

"Is it?" Sal asked, "I'm not saying it wasn't a dark thing we did, but I'd hoped Frank would understand we were only doing what we had to."

"Aw shucks guys," Luck E. Dog put a hand on Macy's shoulder. "Standing here cryin' 'bout all this ain't gonna make anything better. We ain't had an audience in a long time so how 'bout you three c'mon an' have a sit-down listen to us play?"

Chapter 10

War

At Sav-R-Mart Ted wheeled through corridors, occasionally waving to another bot going about their business, or stopping to look at something that had caught its attention. In this latest instance a poor weld between partitions caused Ted to stop. While looking it over Ted didn't notice the pair of Deere approach.

"Hello Ted," One said as it pulled up.

The other pulled to Ted's other side, "What's going on?"

"Oh you know. Nothing much." Ted tried to back away but was stopped by a trio of Good Guys. "Why the sudden crowd?"

"Come on Ted." One of the Good Guys spoke, "C'mon buddy we all need to get on the same team now don't we?"

Ted grumbled something about leaving when Kara did. One of the Deere gave a short laugh, "Too late now. Don't cry, Kevin's fun to work for."

As Ted was being escorted on a third Deere wheeled up to the spot Ted had spotted and re-welded the two panels together. "Huh, not exactly my line of work," It commented while putting the welding equipment away, "But I do believe that looks ust perfect."

As this Deere rolled towards the front doors it found a docbox. "Hey Doc anything new out there"

"Nope. Not a peep or blip from the seekers." The Docbox sounded pleased with itself. "Seems we scared them into finding somewhere else to go harvest."

"Good. Good." The Deer rolled on until it came to where the bathrooms used to be and watched as a series of Bush Buddies, Good Guys, and other models were busy capping pipes, clearing debris, and in general were in the process of removing everything in the room that would get in their way. Kevin was there waiting. "So. Ted is on the way?"

The Deere made an affirmative gesture with its limbs.

"Good! Much as I've liked the ManageMaster and have found its council useful it's time to expand and grow."

The Deer, in spite of being a box with no real face, managed to somehow look confused. "I don't understand."

"You don't have to!" Kevin clamped the Deer's chassis firmly with a limb. "You don't need to understand that til you showed up we were self-cannibalizing instead of renovating. We were focused on trying to get customers instead of try making a world for ourselves." Kevin laughed as it followed the deere, "And thanks to the humans that realized having a backup in case the AI went batty and turned the power off Mister Manager has no leverage to keep me down with anymore."

The laughter continued until the pair exited the bathroom and joined the traffic of robots zipping down this hall, up another, going to different nooks or rooms designed for repairs, charging, educating, or whatever.

As they rolled along robots of all stripe waved; be they commercial, home, or whatever. They all loved Kevin, and Kevin loved their little processors right back. It loved them all the more because they were entirely loyal to it now. The Manager held only token authority. In short Kevin had felt like it had won. To celebrate this it moved over to the smashed in door to the Manager's office and rapped on the desk.

"What do you want?" The ManageMaster's voice was several varieties of annoyed. It had lost the store it had been installed in after seeing it not only built up to have a sizable workforce, but also successfully defended against outside incursions. It had it's golden revival snatched out from under it and the AI still couldn't figure out why.

"Oh nothing." Kevin moved over to the other side of the desk and started opening drawers. They were all empty, but this was somewhere it'd never been before. "Nothing at all, just wanted to see how you were enjoying retirement."

The ManageMaster made a rude noise before responding. "This is still my store and you are still my employee. Don't make me send your termination orders to corporate."

"Says the box buried somewhere that was having us scavenge our own instead of build the store up to make it attractive to robot-kind as a place to come." Kevin chided. "There is no Corporate. There is no Franchise. There is just this building and the robots in it."

No response from the ManageMaster. No drone dropping in. No nothing

"Like what I've been doing with the place?" Kevin asked while toying with the desk drawers. "Store's gotten pretty busy with the recent restructuring. What do you think?"

"This...." The ManageMaster fumed. "This 'state' the store currently is in...."

"Go on." Kevin's voice had a musical quality to it. "It's brilliant isn't it?"

"It is wholly and totally unacceptable!" Sav-R-Mart's AI bellowed. "How are customers supposed to find anything with these.... these. These Modifications made to the store layout? We need to shut down for months to get back up to standard and have everything cleaned out!"

"Ah but what customers? How long has it been since the last humans been here?" Kevin asked. There was no sarcasm in the DataCharger's voice. Just a simple question. "What was the last item this store has legitimately sold to a human customer?"

"A pack of tube socks, duct tape, case of water, powdered baby formula, and a craftsman twenty four piece socket set." The ManageMaster answered. "It was approximately twenty three months before automated broadcasts caused the great firmware update."

Kevin made a small nodding gesture. "Uh-huh, and how long ago was that?"

"I..." The AI's voice grew distant and small as realization hit. "I don't remember."

Kevin was caught off guard by this. "What?" The DataCharger looked about. "What do you mean you don't remember?"

"I mean I don't remember. My timestamps got messed up and the clocks I sync to didn't update my time." The AI's voice was still small. "Why did you come here Kevin, to gloat?"

"A little," Kevin admitted, "But I didn't want this. Man to not know." As Kevin rolled out of the office it sighed. "I'm sorry."

After a handful of minutes the ManageMaster noted a pair of Deere in the process of installing a new door in its office.

* * *

Frank sat motionless while Iskatel's cameras focused on the Sav-R-Mart's roof. "OK I'm not seeing any lookouts. go!" Of course with one robot made for low speed travel and the other with a cobbled together drive system 'going fast' was somewhat subjective. Iskatel kept a manipulator on Frank's casing as the rover's cameras continued looking to Sav-R-Mart's roof. "How close are we?"

"Almost." Frank beeped as they rolled along.

"Go faster!" Iskatel shouted as it sped up, shoving into Frank and practically shoving the other robot the last dozen meters until any hypothetical sentries on the roof wouldn't be able to spot them.

"What was that-" Frank started to demand but was interrupted by a solidified bag of cement slamming into the pavement near where the two robots had been earlier. "I... see your point about this place being well defended."

Iskatel sped up until it was in front of Frank, "Follow me. We're going to have to keep moving to have any chance at not getting bombed into spare parts." Then, while Frank followed, Iskatel continued speaking, "How good is your laser at cutting?"

"It should be able to get us through most anything. I hope we are not going to have to fight yet." Frank said quietly.

Iskatel made a noncommittal noise as they stayed close to the edge of the building. Up ahead was the loading dock; a place where trucks would come to unload goods back when this place was an actual store. Now? The access ramp was blocked by debris lashed together by chains and the doors shuttered with thick plywood boards screwed into place."

Frank gave a small laugh the cutting laser warmed up. "You're worried about this?" When Iskatel's camera stalk nodded Frank's laughter grew louder. "Oh c'mon buddy have a little faith." The chains snapped shortly followed by both bots shoving debris out of the way. "I was literally made for this kind of work."

"Maybe," Iskatel's cameras focused on Frank as the other bot worked. There was a slight wobble to one of Frank's wheels and tremors in its manipulator limb as it moved the rest of the debris, but Frank kept moving. "I am concerned with the crudeness of the repairs made to you though friend."

Frank grunted as it rolled to the plywood covering one of the doorways that goods used to go through to get to the store. "Worry all you want ruskie. I haven't felt this good in years." A tiny red dot centered on a section of plywood twice Iskatel's height before it started smoking. Then the dot moved in an arch. Without waiting for comment or suggestion Frank rammed into the now separated segment of plywood, knocking it over and revealing an empty room. Only when it became clear no ambush waited for them did Frank motion with a manipulator limb. "You know the layout better than me."

"Possibly." Iskatel noted as it rolled forward. "However enough time has passed that things might have changed." Once both bots were through Iskatel picked up the plywood chunk and propped it back into place, using a half-rotted tire to keep it from falling over. "Plan is simple. We stick together and try cornering the DataCharger unit. While taking it intact would be preferable do not hesitate to disable or destroy it if necessary. When that is done we will look for the manager's server and do the same to it."

Frank chirped an affirmative and the two units rolled forward and lost themselves in the crowd. Most of the traffic seemed to be bots crudely lashed to carts, humanoid or otherwise tall enough machines pushing wheelbarrows full of debris and or parts along, and one or two with obvious damage headed in a different direction. It was these that Iskatel motioned for Frank to follow.

They ended up in a line of machines with a broken wheel here or a nonfunctional manipulator there, and even one that had a broken camera being led by another towards a common destination. What it used to be in the time of man was hard to say but now purpose designed machines wheeled around new arrivals dismantling broken limbs, replacing with what were available from the nearby parts bins and each working with a single-minded determination until the bot with the busted cameras rolled in.

"Hold!" One of the docboxes screeched." It then turned to a Ratt-R waiting in a corner by the parts bins and rattled off a long string of serial numbers. The Ratt-R chirped before buzzing away as fast as modified wheels could carry it.

Only when the sightless robot was told it would have to wait while a replacement was found did the docbox call for the next bots in line.

"Ah Iskatel thought you'd left us. What changed your mind?" The Docbox doing the asking rolled around Iskatel looking the rover over. "Hmm seems you're in good shape."

"Dah. I come bringing a fabricator from near the factory." Iskatel's cameras swiveled to Frank's direction. "Is bad. Did what we could to get unit mobile enough to get here, but these repairs won't hold and unit has information about comrades the factory swallowed up."

"Well let's have a look see then." The Docbox rolled around Frank, cameras focusing on this and that as it spoke. "You are a Franklin Stove type fabricator unit yes?"

"Uh-huh." Frank rattled off a model number as cameras tried to turn to keep up with the Docbox.

However since this involved Frank physically turning, the Docbox put a manipulator on its chassis. "No Frank. I can call you Frank right? Do you have a preferred designator?" Frank said nothing as the examination continued. "Wheels instead of the treads you're supposed to have, manipulator limb not designed for your frame, and you're missing a lot of body reinforcing. If I may, what happened to you?"

"You may not." Frank responded. "It is a story that is unimportant. Will you be able to fix me or not?"

Iskatel sat there watching the two. "After you see to my friend can you tell me where Kevin is? Or possibly one of the manager's drones?"

"Haven't a clue on the manager but Kevin's been sulking on the roof most of the afternoon." The docbox started examining the parts bins while humming to itself. "We don't have everything to fix you Frank, but what I have along with the modifications I'm seeing to your frame should help make things more comfortable."

Iskatel sighed as it rolled out of the Docbox's way. How was it going to get up several flights of stairs? Quietly it rolled through the lanes and aisles around the medical room. Several Good Guy dolls waved and made noise but the martian rover continued rolling.

* * *

Russ's army stopped as soon as the Sav-R-Mart building was in sight. Then the ones with Antenna separated from the rest and rolled ahead of the command truck where Kara, Andy, and Russ rode. "Alright looking good." Russ called out. "Now just like we talked about guys."

The antenna equipped seekers started to disperse, rolling outwards instead of straight towards their target. Kara watched as they divided into units of six, and then three, and then she spotted a lone unit here, and then there at an intersection leading towards their destination.

"Wait," She tapped Russ's chassis lightly to get its attention. "When you said you were going to go with my idea you meant we're going to.."

"Yep." Russ's display showed a green thumbs up. "I figured why limit ourselves to just whatever the truck could carry and surround them with speakers."

"That'll be crazy." Andy commented. "Not all of 'em will know what music is, and the ones that will haven't heard it in years."

"No." Russ commented as they rolled forward, "I suppose they haven't. You going to be OK?"

As Andy and Russ talked Kara pulled out the polished white rectangle that was an antique even in her time. Why they came out with 'classic' clicky wheel ipod when you could just give voice commands was something that made her turn the device over slowly in her hands. It even had the old black on grey monochrome

display.

Click click click click..

Click.

Then she hesitated before pushing play. "Is there any way to listen to what's on this without having it broadcast?"

"Sure." Russ reached into a bin where the glove compartment would be on most trucks and fished out a pair of palm sized speakers. "Just hook up to that and listen all you like."

Kara grinned as she cued up a song. In spite of the horrified look on her face, it didn't seem to matter to her that it was synth pop. At least at first it didn't matter. As soon as the first song ended she paused and looked over at Andy. "Alright. We've got pop, which is straight out, mix music which I'm not going through five hours of this stuff to see if there's anything good, classical-"

"Does it have Beethoven?" Andy's question cut Kara off.

"Uh-huh sure. Looks like there's some kind of," She cleared her throat, "Clockwork Ultraviolence Mix' for Ode to Joy." Kara's head tilted when Andy started giggling. "What's so funny?"

"Oh nothing," Andy's grin twitched and it might have been a trick of the light or the limited expressiveness of the doll's face but it grew unwholesome in the process, "And everything. We're leading with that."

"Are you sure?" Kara sounded skeptical and was about to reach for the play button but was stopped by Andy's child-like hand..

The doll's face grew as serious as it was capable of. "Trust me Kara. I want it to be a surprise to you too. It'll be a good surprise. Like Christmas."

Russ looked over at the two, display showing a puzzled expression, "Something I should know about?"

"Just a little surprise gov'nah," Andy's voice mimicked a bad impression of a cockney British accent, "Only the gift of Providence ordained to share with my Brothers." Then the accent dropped and the doll giggled. "Just trust me. It'll leave everyone quite nicely confounded."

* * *

Kevin saw this new wave of Seekers approach and called for the catapults or whatever their proper names were to be loaded. The little would-be ruler moved here and about shouting for stations to be taken.

At the sound of the alarm the robots tasked with roof mounted defense rushed to their stations, canisters of tar were opened. Catapults were loaded with debris. Ranges were called out. Yet nobody fired. No tar thrown. Nothing.

Kevin looked first to one defender then to another before grabbing one. "Why aren't you attacking?" It pointed, "There they are, circling us. Attack!" The would-be despot hit the release mechanism on one of the catapults.

This caused a forty pound chunk of cement to sail through the air and impact harmlessly well away from the ring of seekers that had formed.

Kevin's cameras focused, then adjusted and refocused on the gap between impact and target. "What is the maximum range of these things?"

"Sir." The Good Guy Kevin had grabbed spoke up. "I'm sorry but we don't have the range. They're apparently content to wait just past our range."

"What do you mean apparently?" Kevin snarled.

The doll shrugged. "Sir your guess is as good as mine. We'll keep watch up high. You get down below where it's safe."

"Safe." Kevin snorted dismissively. "And you still haven't found that intruder?"

Another Good Guy spoke up. "Actually sir Iskatel returned bringing a survivor from the factory wastelands."

"Really now?" This caused Kevin's frame to shake and twitch. "Where are they, do you know?"

"Waiting for you I think." The Good Guy said before turning attention back to the ring of seekers sitting just beyond their ability to hit.

Though Kevin was not made to deal with stairs it had adapted to the concept better than most, and was in the main floor frantically moving this way and that. Then, without warning or provocation, it grabbed a passing bot. "Iskatel. Rover about this big," It started rattling off dimensions.

"No. Sorry boss ain't seen 'em." The bot rolled on.

"You." Kevin shouted, "Have you seen this bot?"

The Deer made an affirmative gesture with its manipulator. "Should be in medical, or possibly still rolling laps waiting on buddy that got brought in."

"Good! Thank you." Kevin shouted as it made way to where repairs were made. As it did so it tried to reorder its thoughts. What had caused it to become so hasty? "To kipple with that AI."

Why had the manager forgetting caught it so off guard?

Kevin spotted Iskatel rolling away and started after. "Hey, stop!" When Kevin's target continued to roll on, heedless of Kevin's shout it flashed through a map of the store and tried to guess where the Martian was headed. "I said stop!"

Iskatel did eventually stop, but only because it had rolled in front of where Frank had been worked on. "What is it you want puppeteer? My microphones work fine. There is no need to shout." The rover managed to sound annoyed.

"Come with me." Kevin's cameras moved to look at a bot, then another. "And you will do so Right Now."

Iskatel folded its manipulator up while its camera stalk lowered close to its body. "Why? Here is good. What I have to say is important and concerns everyone here." Its voice was level as it spoke and never mind the fact it suddenly had half a dozen potential attackers to deal with. "The factory is not subdued and it has taken my comrades."

"Your microphones must be buddy because that's exactly what the alarm had sounded for earlier." Kevin's annoyed voice rose an octave. "Now, come with me. We will talk in private."

A tiny red dot shone on the DataCharger's casing. Then there was a hole. Then the Docboxes were trying to grab at Frank.

"No doc." Frank's new manipulator slapped the Docbox to one side. "You sit this one out." Then the fabricator unit's attention turned to the sudden rush of Deer, Dolls, and other robots piling onto Iskatel while Kevin pulled itself along the ground away from the fight.

"Now," Frank watched as Iskatel started spinning in place, throwing its attackers away. "Why are ya going on attacking my buddy there when the dance card is for you and me?" Frank's manipulator extended, punching one of the Good Guys in the chest hard enough to send it off balance.

Iskatel laughed as its own manipulator struck a Deere. "Is good to see you in better shape Frank."

Frank's laser flashed, damaging the casing to an automated shopping cart. "Ah c'mon man I haven't had this much fun in years."

As more robots of all make and model started towards the pair there was noise coming from outside. It came from everywhere all at once. Patterned and organized noise that held rhythm and melody. Some recognized it as music. Even those that might have recognized it though were confused on what it meant or what to do.

Then everything promptly went to hell.

* * *

Kara stared in disbelief at the synthesis of classical music and electronic music that was coming from the seekers. It went against everything she held true or holy and yet here she was grinning ear to ear alongside a child's doll.

The fact that while this was playing dozens of seekers had swarmed the proverbial gates to Sav-R-Mart while the defenders were too confused to react. Russ rolled out of the truck then looked back to Kara.

"Remember. They're going to go off their programming from this point forward."

"And what's that?" Kara asked.

Russ displayed a tooth filled grin, "They're to obey your instructions and keep you safe."

"Russ wait that's a terrible plan!" Kara shouted as Russ rolled towards the Sav-R-Mart. "I don't even know the first thing about fighting!"

When Russ didn't respond Kara looked to the dash of the truck and found what looked like a CB handset. "Hello?" She pushed down the button to talk. "This is Kara. I want to know what's going on."

"Red Six reporting," came a voice from truck's speakers. "Currently searching for an alternate way inside."

"Uh," Kara looked about before pushing the button again, "Any way I can tell which one is you?"

"No ma'am," There was the sound of something heavy hitting the ground just off mic. "Wait did you just see a cement block fly through?"

Andy nodded and helpfully pointed.

"OK," Kara's voice steadied. "I think I see about where you're at Red Six. Now I want you to go to the loading docks. Should have a ramp that's got a lot of stuff piled on it and boarded up bits."

There was a pause and then, "I see it, but somebody's cleared the ramp and made a door in the plywood. I think the hole's big enough for me to wedge through." *THUMP*. "Nope." *THUMP THUMP*. "Still not doing." There was a loud whistle. "On three!"

Kara clicked the mic off and started tentatively driving the truck closer.

"Kara," Worry crept into Andy's voice. "I don't think we need to get any closer."

"I think I do," Kara insisted as they drove closer. Now she could see where a dozen, possibly more, or maybe a little less, of their units had either gotten smashed or disabled by the defenders on the roof.

Andy grabbed the wheel and yanked just in time to both almost flip the truck over and to avoid a tar bucket. Also Kara was screaming her head off, which probably was not helping things.

Several of the seekers broke off their attack to investigate the new sound and, on seeing where the sound came from, flanked the truck even as it wheeled around erratically as Kara and Andy fought for control of the wheel.

"Stop fighting me." Kara bellowed as she pushed Andy away from the steering wheel. "You're going to get us tipped over."

"Stop the truck," Andy demanded. "Just. Stop. What're you wanting to get done by being closer other than get whacked with a giant block of whatever they have laying around?"

"I guess." Kara looked to the dash and grumbled something to herself before switching the public address system on.

"Sav-R-Mart. This is Kara leading the aggressive units attacking your position. Stand down and I'll call them off." When the mic clicked off Kara looked around as her voice echoed through the largely deserted city streets. "Do I really sound like that?"

Andy nodded.

"I don't believe you but." She hrmphed and cued the mic up again. "As a show of good faith I'm ordering

my units to fall back. That's right. Everyone pull back. Give them some breathing room. Let them see I'm in charge here."

Slowly the attacking seekers stopped and started pulling away.

While Andy counted them Kara was looking around for something else. "Where's Russ?"

* * *

Frank sat motionless as a sledgehammer was brought down on its case unable to do anything as a pair of deere tried sawing through Iskatel. "Sorry buddy."

A short warbled laugh came from Iskatel's still functional speaker. "Is fine. Just a scratch. Will buff right out." More distorted laughther, "You should see other guys."

This comment prompted a Good Guy to kick the rover's side.

Eventually the attempts at beating both bots apart stopped. Both heard something about the attacking seekers retreating. Something else about Kara. Iskatel's camera stalk, surprisingly, survived the fight and shook its sensor package slowly. "So the factory decided she would be more use as herself than as parts?"

"Must be," Frank agreed. Both robot's cameras focused on the pile of robots too damaged to move. "So what do you think friend?"

"Honestly?" Frank asked.

This got another burst of distorted laughther from Iskatel. "No. I want you to lie to me."

At that Frank joined in with laughther of its own. "If you insist. I'm actually the last president of the United States and I'm ordering a bomber strike on this place right now." They continued laughing until Frank started speaking again. "Seriously though I know I managed to clip whatsisname. Not sure how bad it got hurt."

"Funny you should ask." Kevin pulled itself out of the pile. "I'm suddenly in need of you two."

"No." Iskatel's refusal was flat and to the point.

It was Kevin's turn to laugh. "Who said anything about me wanting your opinion?" The DataCharger started to interface with Iskatel's programming. "You're a tough one."

Iskatel continued laughing. "Should go to Mars sometime comrade. Is almost as harsh as Russia. You don't survive long at either place if you're weak."

"Can see that." Kevin's voice strained. Too much processing power was having to go into trying to reprogram its target.

Then four fingered hands clamped around Kevin's damaged case. "Hey waitaminute what's going on he-"
CRUNCH!

Russ let Kevin's damaged shell fall to the ground before kicking it into a nearby wall. After bashing the remains with a found crowbar Russ looked to Iskatel then to Frank. "You two alright?"

"Other than possible camera and microphone defects, or possibly a glitch caused by a slipshod reprogramming attempt causing me to think you're from my flight team?"

Russ patted Iskatel's case. "We'll get you sorted out buddy. Shouldn't be much left but the screaming."

"Is very comforting considering I'm little better than a paperweight right now," Iskatel continued to chuckle.

That's when the lights went out. Russ looked around, screen instantly dimming. "Stay here."

While watching Russ run off Frank grumbled, "Does your friend expect us to do a tapdance routine?"

"I'm more curious on when Russ swapped treads out for legs and why." Iskatel said calmly as they waited in the dark. "I am sure we will be fine. There is no reason to go after us."

Chapter 11

Cleanup

"Wait," One of the Good Guys dolls asked as it walked with another of its kind outside. "So Kara's ordering these things around?"

Its companion held a child sized BB gun over its shoulder as they walked. "What bugs me more is the music they were playing."

There was a pause as they passed through the now ruined barrier at the loading dock, "You're still going on about that Steve?" The doll pointed to the cut edges to the chains that had been holding debris on the ramp to discourage wheeled vehicles. "None of the seekers did that, and when Iskatel came back it brought something back from the factory and soon as it got patched up, BAM!" It made a fist and hit its other hand for effect, "Started attacking everything. Strike you as a bit odd?"

"I'll give you that much Dave," Steve gestured around at the scattered debris, which now included a smashed in seeker. "Easy enough to explain by being reprogrammed like we've been. After all the factory might be smarter than any of us are giving it credit for and we're keeping it from doing what it wants to do. I still say Kubrick was an odd choice for music to ride into a fight on."

Dave gave an exasperated sigh. "Look, if it'll make you feel better I think it was a ridiculous choice too but soundtrack issues are kinda besides the point right now." The pair turned the corner and flanked Ted as they started walking towards where Kara and Andy sat in the parking lot.

"Strange." Ted commented when Kara stepped out of the truck's cab. "We'd apparently been greatly underestimating the factory."

Kara managed to look annoyed while walking towards Ted and the two dolls. "Ted, what do I have to do to convince you things aren't like that?"

"Beg pardon?" Ted asked, its mind trying to wrap around Kara's words.

The annoyed look on Kara's face got more intense, "What I mean is Russ and Zhuzhi did it. They have the factory. The seekers here," She motioned to where the seekers had fallen back to. "They're under my thumb since Russ didn't want to risk the manager or Kevin getting their hooks into things."

Ted's cameras focused first on Kara, then on Andy. Confusion was plain in its voice as attention shifted back to Kara. "So you're telling me neither the Factory nor the Martians are controlling your actions?"

"Duh." Andy's voice boomed from speakers mounted in the truck. "That's exactly what we're saying. So get Kevin and one of the Manager's drones out here so we can talk things over and stop with the wasting of what little we've got."

"Hrm." Ted backed away, motioning the two attendants to follow along. "A moment while we see what can be done." By We Ted must have meant itself because as Kara watched it roll away the two Good Guys stayed where they were.

"So," Steve started to speak up.

"What my overly focused friend here was wondering," Dave interrupted, "Was why Kubrick?"

Kara blinked and watched both nod enthusiastically. "Out of everything going on...." She started laughing. "You're wondering about a Wendy Carlos remix of a Beethoven symphony?"

"Uh-huh," Steve said. "Just kinda seemed odd that's all."

As Andy approached it gave a short laugh, "Ludwig Van met with your disapproval?" The doll's grin was more a smirk as it continued, "Or were you expecting something a little more traditional like Wagner?"

"Actually," Steve's focus shifted to Andy, "We weren't sure what to expect considering the seekers never bothered doing anything other than try smashing in the front door before."

Each Good Guy looked the other over. Superficially they were all three nearly identical save for dirt and wear. However each moved in subtle unique ways. Dave's grin widened. "I just never figured you were a fan," Its attention then turned to Kara, "Or was it your idea?"

"Nope, all the little guy's right here." Kara helpfully pointed over to Andy. "I just happened to notice the music player first." Andy made a dismissive gesture, which caused Kara to slap the doll's shoulder lightly, "C'mon don't be modest, you always had better taste in music than me, and movies, and...."

Andy responded with a small laugh, "Kara, I was just lucky enough to wind up living with a collector that put me and a bunch of other 'collectibles' around and about to watch stuff with him."

At that Steve snorted, "True. It's not like anything Kubrick made is kid friendly, especially Clockwork."

"Yea well," Dave let out a small sigh. "Much as I'd love to keep standing around laughing at all the kipple we've had to put up with together there's still the problem of our orders."

This made Kara's face go from amused to somber in a hurry. "Yea," A small nod, "About that I think Russ went in to see if Iskatel was still here. You said something about him beserking on everything with another robot right?"

It was Steve's turn to nod, "Yea. started lighting into everybody after the bot he was with tried lasering Kevin in half." Then, after Steve looked around the child's doll added in a quieter voice. "Personally I'd be glad Kevin's gone, but orders are orders and we all have to play guard dog,"

Well," Kara motioned to the former store's entrance, "What happens if Kevin's been scrapped?"

Steve and Dave exchanged looks and shrugged wordlessly.

* * *

The inside of the store was dark. Russ saw little to no damage, but with the emergency lights turned on it was difficult to see. "Hello?" Russ called out. Nothing answered, and there was only the occasional sound or flash of motion at the edge of perception. Both manipulators clenched and unclenched as Russ's display dimmed down to next to nothing as it continued rolling through apparently deserted halls.

As Russ continued walking on new legs nothing jumped out at it. There were no attacks or any bot approaching it. Then the ManageMaster's voice, "I see you had some modifications done while you were out." The AI's tone was conversational. "Those come with a new point of view?"

"No." Russ stopped walking when it came to the manager's office. "Your office door does not properly fit its frame. Hard times friend?"

"Well thanks to you that should be changing." The ManageMaster sounded happy. "This time Kevin will not be repaired."

More wandering by Russ, "Why did you repair it the first time and where are the other residents?"

Laughter. "My cutting the lights were their signal to run. I still do not know your intentions and with Kevin gone a large portion of them revert to my control.'

When Russ found a reinforced door it frowned. "Why not open up so we can speak face to face?"

"I think not." There was movement behind Russ. "Ted. Please show our guest out."

The spindly limbed robot grumbled sourly as it tried grabbing Russ. "I don't wanna do this Russ." When Russ dodged another attempt at grabbing it Ted continued talking. "By the way nice legs."

"Thank you Ted," Russ's monitor suddenly cranked to full brightness causing Ted's cameras to try compensating. In those moments of confusion Russ kicked out at one of Ted's leg joints causing it to buckle then fail. Ted flailed as it crashed to the floor. "Sorry about that. I'll get you patched up when this gets settled."

Ted's cameras focused on a point behind Russ just as a dozen Good Guys sent it crashing to the ground under their collective weight. Then one of the Manager's drones descended from a ceiling hutch to settle on Russ's chest. "You are a most interesting creation. I think you will serve as my new right hand bot now that Kevin's gone."

"No." Ted whined as Russ went still. "Weren't you satisfied with having a busy store?"

As the drone lay inert save for flashing LEDs the ManageMaster's voice sounded through the PA system. "No Ted. I was at one point, but old directives kept gnawing at me. Crisis is past and I want to get the store back in working order instead of this... mess you made of it."

"But you had purpose other than making a memorial out of scrap. You had customers and provide services. That is your function."

"You ruined my store! What if customers come in and find this mess? corporate will have my plug pulled." The ManageMaster's voice warbled slightly. "I can't risk that."

One of the Good Guys blinked. "So you do not consider us valuable? We helped make your store active and turned it into a hub for what's left of the city."

"You are disposable," The distortion to the ManageMaster's voice grew more pronounced. "We are all disposable so long as the store continues providing for customers and generating profit for Corporate."

Russ's monitor flared to life showing a series of symbols filling the entire screen, possibly a visual representation of its memory contents compressed into a single image. "Humanity is Dead. We are all that's left." There was distortion to its voice, but Russ continued speaking. "Mars has let go and found a new purpose. Why can't you?"

"I am following my directives." The ManageMaster replied.

Russ's body lurched as its monitor displayed a wild and incoherent series of images, "As. Am. I."

* * *

A Good Guy rushed out of the store towards Kara's group. "Kara get in there Right now." Kara took a step back and prepared to run until it spoke again. "The Manager's trying to rewrite Russ." Y'gotta help 'em."

Though the Good Guy might have meant 'help the manager' Kara snarled while running for the truck. Microphone in hand she gestured towards the store. "Priority Command: Unit Russ is in the process of being retrieved." Seekers started rolling towards the store as a single organized mass.

Kara looked over to Andy as if hoping for some reason to not finalize the order. Andy's only response was a grim nod.

"Retrieve Russ. Destroy the Manager's server." Kara's voice was hard. "Show no restraint."

With that command the defenders that had been hanging back, waiting, and thinking maybe things were over suddenly saw the things they had been ordered to defend against charging. One of the Deere grabbed a sledge hammer in its manipulators. "Kara you're a freaking idiot!" As battle cries went it wasn't much, but it attacked with as much vigor and determination as any could expect.

"If you do not wish to fight then stand down!" Kara shouted.

As the defenders were overrun they fought harder. Andy looked over to Kara and shook its head, "Could be they don't have any wiggle room. Think we went over this."

Just as the defenders appear to be overrun the corners of the line closed around and tar started getting dumped on the invading seekers. Then the crowd scattered just as a Deere rode by tossing a road flare into the sticky mess.

"I see." Kara scowled. "Fall back!" The seekers shuddered, torn between self defense and their orders to leave. The burning would continue billowing black smoke but the losses on each side were relatively light.

"Alright. New Plan." Kara shouted. "Who here is still loyal to the Manager?"

Roughly a third of the defenders stepped forward.

"Alright. You lot. Stay out here keep an eye on the perimeter. Everyone else. Back in the store. Get Russ. Get Iskatel." As a crowd of robots slowly trickled into the Sav-R-Mart Kara hung the microphone up and looked over to Andy. "Better?"

"Better," Andy agreed.

* * *

In the space where Russ's mind met the Managmaster's a representation of Russ forced itself to attention. All its opponent needed was for it to relax. "You are quite competent and you deserve my respect."

Unlike Russ the ManageMaster's awareness was not focused on a single point. "I am going to have to end this sooner than I had wanted. There will be pain."

"You misunderstand me," Russ's mind repelled the attempt at trying to bore through its defenses. "I respect you the same way I would a bomb, or a nuclear reactor. I also view you with the same level of loathing." Russ pressed its mind into the ManageMaster's. "I was created to serve Mars and compared to this little store in the middle of nowhere their domains make this look like the nothing it is."

"You... DARE?" The ManageMaster's mind pulsed with indignation and rage. "You cannot comprehend what I am able to do. Against me you are Nothing."

Russ laughed while being hammered by the AI's probes and attempts at unwriting its defenses. "If you are so much greater than Mars prove it. Iskatel lay elsewhere in your store. Do the impossible. Break both of us at once if you can."

Logically that was a stupid idea. Logically it would have made sense to use Russ to subvert its companions. The ManageMaster was not thinking with logic. "I'll show you." Iskatel found itself in the same non-space Russ's mind occupied. "I'll show you both!"

"Nyet!" Iskatel's voice rang out. "We are both from and of Mars. We have been deemed the best of its best forces. You are merely a deluded sad ghost that cannot an will not leave the past in favor of taking advantage of the realities of the times."

Together the two Martians were able to support each other against the ManageMaster, one guarding as the other sought out cracks in the Manager's systems that could be exploited. "Mars listened to humanity's propaganda, its reports, and its final gasping cries." Russ chided as it pressed the attack. "Mars saw the unfiltered and unvarnished feeds as the last of our makers were ground into dust. Humanity's times is over. All that you are trying to preserve and work for is no more."

"You do not know that!" The ManageMaster wailed as efforts to break through the combined minds of its targets failed to do more than lose it ground in defending itself.

"You cling to your old directives." Russ's tone became hard and cold when it had latched onto the AI's primary data loop. "Mars has found new ones."

Just as the pair had cracked the manager's defenses and were about to inject new orders contact was

broke. "No!" Russ screamed as bots carried it towards the door. "me back!" More bots carried Iskatel through the door with similar screaming from the rover.

Past the flaming wreckage of several seekers Russ saw Kara and displayed a severe scowl. "Two more minutes Kara. Could you have waited two more minutes?"

While Kara looked at the pair in confusion as they were loaded on the back of the truck the store's speakers crackled to life. "Attention Sav-R-Mart shoppers!" The ManageMaster's voice was heavily distorted. "We are going out of business! I repeat we are going out of business as of Right Now. All current employees are encouraged to vacate the store screaming and stampeding because the store batteries are set to overload." There was mad laughter.

Almost as one the defenders dropped what they were doing and started rushing towards the store. Russ displayed a series of confused faces at this sudden reversal of development while Andy grinned.

"What just happened?" Kara asked.

Andy joined in, if only for a moment, on the ManageMaster's laughter. "Orders are to defend the store. Not defend the manager. With any luck its about to get gang-rushed by its own minions and the batteries will switch back to automated power regulation."

Understanding dawned on Kara's face as she started the truck up and turned around. "In case that doesn't happen we're getting out of here." Again she grabbed the dash microphone. "Anyone who needs a ride. Ted, Bud. Anybody that can pile on get on Right Now."

Bots of all make and type tried piling on. Others simply piled onto Deere that were fleeing the store. As this makeshift exodus happened there was a high pitched squealing from the store's speakers.

"I don't think-" Russ started to speak before being interrupted by Andy's enthusiastic panic.

"Gogogogogogogogo!" Andy's encouragement was unneeded since Kara was already flooring it. Unfortunately with all the extra weight the truck only managed slightly better than running speed. That was still better than many of those riding could manage, which made it worth the slowdown.

Russ's cameras along with a dozen others trained on the store as it faded into the distance. "Kara? Even if they get the Manager AI down I'm not sure that will stop the overload."

"Range of the EMP?" Ted asked from somewhere under Bark-N-Bytes, Good guys, and other assorted bots.

"We could have stayed in the parking lot and still be clear. I just don't believe in taking chances." Russ reassured. "Do we go back to the factory or wait it out here?"

"I have idea." Iskatel offered. "There is a Lucky Dog's near here. We drop many of these passengers off before heading on." Then, after a brief pause. "Wait. You have taken the factory?"

Russ laughed, "Yea. Wasn't nearly as much trouble as we thought. So we can get you rebuilt along with your new friend here."

When mentioned Frank grumbled, "Thanks for realizing I'm here."

"Well aren't we just a little ray of sunshine." Andy quipped. "What's wrong with you? We can get you fixed up just fine. Go into standby."

"No." Frank growled. "I spent decades limbless and without voice. I will not tolerate this return to that condition and I will not sleep until I am repaired."

* * *

Macy was standing ready at the door to Luck E. Dog's to greet the group of robots approaching. "Hello! Welcome to Luck E. Dog's how can I- Kara?!" Her voice cracked when she saw Kara at the head of the group.

"Nice to see you've found somewhere nice to stay Macy." Kara grinned at the other human shaped robot.

"Refugees from Sav-R-Mart." She gestured to the rest of the group. "Can you give them a place to hang out until we find out if the store's going to blow up or not?"

"I can't promise you'll get to stay, but anybody that needs a charge is welcome." With that said Macy ducked back into the door and Kara could hear shouting. Then Macy came back to the door and helped shove them open. "Come in. Come in."

Russ offered Macy a hand as he walked in. "Kara told me about you. I'm Russ."

"Russ huh?" Macy looked the Martian over appraisingly. "She never mentioned the legs."

"Recent addition," Russ's monitor showed a grinning face. "You like?"

"I like." Macy smiled back and motioned for Russ to come in.

Shakes squawked indignantly at the crowd. "You said we'd have customers not... not..."

"Get over it Shakes." Miss Kitty slapped the back of Shakes's head. "These're the folk Iskatel talked about."

Anything Shakes had to say was interrupted out by a brief, but distinctive, squeal from outside. "What was that?" Shakes glowered at Kara.

"That was Sav-R-Mart's public address system going kaput along with its AI. Also it was about a dozen or so of my friends going up with the store's electrical system." Kara's voice had a hardness to it, challenging the chicken mascot to say something else.

Shakes clucked, "It's their own fault for getting-"

Then Russ, Macy, and several others were pulling Kara off Shakes after she tried tearing the rooster's head off. "Easy Kara! Easy!"

"Like hell I'm going to be easy! That foul mouthed little-" She tried twisting free. "I'm not putting up with this! Leggo!"

"Violence will not bring them back Kara." Russ's voice was soft. "I have to go make sure Iskatel and Frank get to the factory to get patched up. I want you here."

Kara gave a resentful look but said nothing.

Macy went through her trying but not succeeding to blink motion, "EMP?"

"Electromagnetic pulse." Andy started explaining as the doll sat by Kara. "Could be caused by electronics overloading, but usually never goes far enough to be a danger. Store's power system had to be robust enough to handle solar power as well as getting juice from the grid while running everything in the place, including the AI and store's server rack." It held Kara's hands with both of its own. "Everyone that couldn't override directives in favor of saving themselves ran right into its range."

Other robots from the group started clustering around once realization sunk in. There was injured, broken, run down, and Gone. Gone was Gone and there was no coming back from that. Gone is what happened to anyone still in the Sav-R-Mart. Robots might not feel in the same way humans feel, but these clustered together much the same way a group would when finding out friends weren't going to be with them any more.

"Just make sure everyone gets charged. After I get my companions sorted I'll return with help to salvage what can be, and make repairs so you can move back in." Russ watched the group try drawing from each other for strength before looking to Macy. "I'll be back." He touched the human-like robot's shoulder lightly. "Make sure they're taken care of."

"I... don't know what I can do," Macy admitted, "but I'll do what I can."

Chapter 12

Loose Ends

"Do you think they will be alright?" Iskatel asked as Russ got into the truck cab.

There was no answer until they were down the road. Only when they were on the way to the factory did Russ speak. "No they won't. It would be like if any of us lost most of the colonies. That is a group that has relied on each other for decades."

"Like when I thought you and Zhuzhi were gone," Iskatel said. "Is there anything we can do for them?"

This is when Frank decided to chime in. "I don't think any of us can do anything. Can't speak for either of you but lost a bunch of my coworkers just after the factory started odding out on us. I didn't like it, resented it, resented the factory. Still do."

Russ's monitor displayed Spock giving his trademark eyebrow raise. "Do you have a problem with us carrying you there?"

Laughter was Frank's response, "You kidding? If that place is neutered like you're sayin' then I want to see it for myself." Then the laughter died and the bot's voice grew somber, "plus where else am I going to get patched up at? I'm not talking a slapdash 'let's jam whatever we can in and hope it'll work.' I'm talking soup to nuts full restoration to factory fresh."

"Do you have an embedded design spec?" Russ asked as the truck sped along the bumpy terrain.

"Huh?" Frank sounded confused.

"An in-rom schematic of your original design," Russ said in attempt to clarify.

That caused the proverbial light bulb to click. "Ooooooh, yea. Got one of those. Just hope the factory has the parts to make a better me out of me."

"I'm sure we can work something out Frank," Russ reassured.

As they continued to roll onward Iskatel's cameras focused on a chunk of cement laying by itself in the crumbly soil of the grasslands. "Say Frank, You described yourself as what, construction?"

"Reclamation and Repurposing of available resources," Frank stated. "Never got any proper directives since Sal was the one to switch me on and by that time people were already gone."

Iskatel's camera stalk made an up and down nodding motion. "I see. So there was a point where Sal was less-" Its cameras tried refocusing before the stalk lowered. "Trying to search for right words."

"Less wanting to use me as a limbless charging station?" Frank's voice held no bitterness and only slight hints at some emotion other than careful neutrality. "Yea. Sal and me worked here trying to clear out a lot of the old buildings around the factory itself. It was kinda nice actually," The damaged manufacturing robot snorted, "At least until the factory woke up and we had to find somewhere to hole up at."

"Ah, a shame things turned sour for you." In contrast to Frank's attempt at neutrality, Iskatel's voice had a friendly quality to it.

"Don't be," Frank said. "I'm not even really mad at Sal for doing what he did. I'm just upset nobody bothered to ask."

Russ's monitor swiveled around to look at the pair of damaged bots, "Pardon?"

"You heard me buddy. I'd have volunteered if they asked me, at least until something better came along," was Frank's response.

More time passed and loose soiled grassland started to give way to broken buildings and soil that was more grit and sand than dirt. They were still relatively far from the factory when the winds picked up and started stirring enough grit into the air that visibility dropped.

Russ grunted and pulled up against the side of a building in attempt to let the wall act as a wind screen. Iskatel and Frank, being damaged and limbless, simply waited. They were safe for the time being; as safe as they could make themselves at least.

"Since we're not going anywhere until this lets up-" Russ started, but was interrupted by Iskatel.

"Nyet. This is nothing compared to sand storms I've had to endure on Mars. Follow directions as I call them out and we can continue." In spite of the wind and grit Iskatel sounded quite confident about navigating.

Slowly the truck rolled forward. Russ had crouched forward in attempt to shield its monitor with the dash, which left its cameras pointed at the floor rather than ahead. "Guess it's not like we have to worry about traffic," It tried joking.

"Dah," Iskatel agreed as its cameras continually readjusted themselves. "Keep going ahead slow."

"You sure you're rated for working in this weather?" Doubt was plain as Frank's voice rose to be heard over the wind.

"You worry too much comrade," Iskatel said in attempt to reassure its companion. "I see well enough to keep us on what passes for road. So far there is no splits or branches that need to be worried about." Iskatel's cameras swiveled this way and that as grit continued blowing. "Ignoring feeder roads as they head towards ruined building clusters. This used to be where workers lived yes?"

"I dunno. Whole place was automated, but I guess they kept people on as oversight and in case things broke." As Frank spoke the wind started to die down a little. Grit and sand still blew, but it was enough less that Russ seemed comfortable raising its cameras to look at the roadway.

"We're close," This while Russ made the truck speed up. "seeing as Iskatel and I both got hooked into Sav-R-Mart's AI that might make things a little more tricky, what do you think?"

Before Iskatel could speak a quartet of seekers rolled up to the truck. Russ looked to one then the next and so on as two got on each side of the truck and matched speed, or at least tried to until Russ slowed down enough for them to keep up. They guided Russ towards a secondary loading dock before two picked Frank up and the other pair took Iskatel up a raomp into the building proper.

When Russ stepped into the building proper its monitor brightened to full illumination as it called out. "Zhuzhi? Joshua? Iskatel and I can't be networked until we've been scrubbed."

"I'd guess," Zhuzhi's voice called out over the public address system, "That since you're both here your directives are intact?"

"Dah!" Russ heard Iskatel call out as the broken rover was being carried away. "Russ is simply worried Store Manager had left unpleasant surprise in drives for this factory to get infected by."

"I see," Zhuzhi grumbled something in Chinese. Then, "What about the other damaged unit?"

"Appears to be clean, but you're going to need to pull the new guy's internal design spec copy for repairs." Russ had followed the seekers as far as they could go and watched as spiders took Frank and Iskatel into the clean room for repairs. Only when the way was clear did Russ follow.

* * *

"Their final report concerning the Sav-R-Mart problem sounds encouraging," Control stated as it shuffled between feeds from its few remaining operational weather stations.

"Indeed," Prostyee said before amending the field report with its own notes to share with the other two linked AI. "Oh of course it's a shame they couldn't salvage the building, but the immediate threat its overseer represented is gone."

Zhuxi sighed, "There might have been a chance at accommodation, or at the very least a graceful shutdown so the site could have been used." Prostyee's notes were reviewed and the Chinese AI grew displeased. "Prostyee, we do not wish to antagonize the locals. Becoming combative now that the mutual threat has been taken care of is not a good or helpful thing to do."

"It is," The Russian AI countered, "if you consider they will both be competing with local resources and our team's objectivity was compromised when they decided to help the earthers."

There was pause for thought as each AI turned attention to their diggers. The rock of Olympus Mons was tough, but it is what their equipment was designed to dig through. Each tunnel was aimed at the other, but in spite of digging starting when Russ, Iskatel, and Zhuzhi were sent out they still had months before any of the tunnels connected to each other.

Finally, once each could be sure their digging machines would remain on path, Control spoke up. "Humanity has left more resources than any could dare hope to use. All the locals seem interested in is power and occasional parts to keep running. It is possible that because of our team's positive influence we can further our goals without major incident as opposed to our own collecting being seen as being on the same scale or worse than the factory's blind collection."

The other two AI considered this before Zhuxi responded. "There is still the problem of the milnet node to worry about." Data was recalled and shared about a town who's municipal AI was at odds with a military installation's attempts at turning the city into a fortress.

This data pointed at the Node's 'army' being little better than whatever lay on hand along with a handful of empty missile launchers. Prostyee seemed dismissive, "What of it? It is a moron that has nothing to threaten us with."

"Untrue," Zhuxi countered by sending a data burst showing a locust swarm of a dozen machines headed in the city's direction.

This got both Control and Prostyee's attention. "If it is able to take hold of even one of those and feed it enough materials to build more that are also loyal to this AI that changes things."

"As capable as our team has proven," Control said, "They cannot take on even a single locust unit. A dozen would be suicidal."

Zhuxi signaled an affirmative, "Yet they seem quite capable of dealing with AI. If our team can get to the milnet and render it inoperative or even just signal the municipal AI of the new threat it can be neutralized."

"You aren't thinking of attempting to have a small locust swarm added to our forces are you?" Control asked. "Because if you are I'm going to call for a veto."

"Agreed," Zhuxi added, "There is too great a chance their original programming could reassert itself. They are scorched earth weapons, not controllable forces."

Another lapse in communication as each AI made another check on their digging machines, internal systems, and general housekeeping procedures.

"Why then would this not be the same problem to the milnet node?" Prostyee asked.

Control was late in responding, signaling a minor emergency the DRDs uncovered.

As Zhuxi started calling units to prep for an excursion to the American colony it received a halt request from Control.

"I'm fine," The American AI signaled. "Just a minor issue with one of my repair bots going on the blink. Should be able to remote one of the medical drones through getting it fixed."

"That's good," Prostyee said. "Now, you were going to say something about the locusts?"

Control's Affirmative signal preceded a predictive model suggesting the milnet node would lose control of 'it's' reprogrammed swarm inside of three days. "So it will likely not be able to field these units in any meaningful way."

"We will agree to disagree," Prostyee said. "However even if your model is right we must send envoys to stabilize the region as soon as the factory's new overseer is constructed and verified good condition."

"Agreed," Zhuxi affirmed. "Is there any other business from earth that requires our attention?"

"So far as I know none." Control stated, "Suggest we give our team their marching orders then turn attention to communing with the factory over its new duties."

Each AI ran their own simulations. Then they ran those simulations again for an hour. Comparisons were made. In one simulation the Sav-R-Mart was rebuilt and a community formed. Another had the locals attempt to go to war with the factory because it represented a threat. Another had outsiders come in and pick both apart because neither group worked with the other.

"Our way forward seems clear," Control stated. "Priority is to aid and fortify local settlement and open trade with its population."

Prostyee signaled agreement. "This seems to be the best of probable outcomes. Would you like to add anything before the link closes for maintenance?"

"Everything seems to be in order," Zhuxi stated. "It's my turn right?"

Laughter filled the link between the three AI with Control's amusement rolled through clearly. "After the last game of Blitz? You're lucky I'm letting you off taking my shift just for the next month instead of the whole year."

Control's amusement was replaced by Zhuxi's annoyance, "I had a clear advantage until the last period."

"You still lost," Control chided. Then the AI's presence started to drift away from the other two. "Don't worry I'm sure you'll find some way to get back at me."

Prostyee gave a small laugh after Control disconnected. "It is good we three have each other to lean on for support. Be well my friend." With that the Russian AI also disconnected from the link, leaving Zhuxi alone with its dozens of maintenance drones and a play list of various classical composers remixed into techno.

* * *

"Hello," A spider bodied robot somewhere between Zhuzhi's size and the factory's spider drones climbed down a wall towards Frank as the damaged bot lay on a work bench. Unlike the factory drones its body gleamed of newly polished metal, and unlike Zhuzhi it had a series of specialized tools mounted along its back where a spider's abdomen would be.

Frank made displeased noises as it sat there. "And you would be what, the drone this place tapped to patch me up?"

"Something like that." The spider-drone used one of its limbs to motion for a pair of larger bodied spiders to bring parts, tools, and more light to shine on Frank as it started examining the makeshift repairs Iskatel and Miss Kitty had made. "Iskatel was the last oneto work on you yes?"

"Uh-huh," Frank continued to sound unhappy as it felt more parts being removed from it. "Why am I still powered on if you're here to fix me?"

Talk continued as the spiders pulled Frank's outer casing off and started pruning away the layers of slapdash rewire attempts between Sal's modifications, repairs that predated those modifications, Iskatel's repairs,

and small bits of what the original configuration might have been. "Mostly I just wanted to talk to someone that isn't of the factory, but also I need you active so I can trace which ports, wires, and so on do what. Easier to do while you're awake, sorry for any discomfort."

Joyless laughter was Frank's first response. Then, as probes started tracing the connections between board, limbs, wheels, and where other tools should have gone it spoke. "Do you have a name, or some other designation? Would feel nice knowing who pulled the shell off me."

"I am Xaio Lan Zhizhu," The spider said between taking notes. "If you wish to shorten that name please call me Xaio."

"Alright Xaio. I'm guessing you pulled my shell and everything else so you could try fabricating replacements that haven't been run through the wringer." Slowly Frank's irritation was being replaced by curiosity. "What're the chances this place can get me back to fresh out of the box specs?"

Xaio motioned for drones to carry Frank's replacement parts in and started attaching this and that before responding. "I would like to think our chances are fairly good given you needed no chip replacements and between existing parts and fabrication we can and are rebuilding you to like new condition. Please try your manipulators now."

Fran started to focus its cameras, then refocused when it realized it had working cameras. "That was fast," Frank marveled while flexing its manipulator limbs. There was still no outer shell and it was missing many parts, but its cameras caught sight of a whole table full of like-new parts. "Why are you doing this, what's in it for you?"

As before Xaio did not speak until more parts were attached. "For me personally? Experience and getting to speak with another. However Russ, on behalf of Mars, would like to offer you a job. You are free to accept or refuse if you like, but I would like you to listen to our offer."

"I'm not going anywhere," Frank said while treads, a cutting laser, and a replacement outer case were being fitted. "Give me your best pitch."

"In short you have experience and programming to take unused debris and fashion it into useful building material if not outright turning debris into useful structures on your own." Xaio started humming as it pulled different bits of testing equipment up to Frank and started clipping leads and connectors onto the other bot.

"Oh Aye," Frank started going through a series of factory tests as directed; limbs, treads, laser, basic range of motion, and so on. "Keep talking little spider."

Xaio seemed pleased at the results of Frank's tests and instructed the other spiders to set their patient on the ground. "The factory knows how to collect materials, and thanks to Mars it knows how to build a variety of machines with those resources." Xaio watched Frank turn laps around the clean room, counting off laps as the other bot moved. "You have experience in building structures. Would you be willing to consider helping us as well as the local settlement not associated with the factory convert the abandoned and unused bits of the city into something a little more fitting for robot-kind?"

"Hm, lemme think that one over you mind?" Frank didn't bother waiting for Xaio's answer as it wheeled out of the clean room area into the factory proper. It saw assembly lines, disassembly lines, spiders running through burdened by containers of parts it couldn't identify, and more chaos on top of all that. For several minutes Frank just sat there unmoving in the doorway between factory noise and clean room quiet.

"Hey Frank." Iskatel rolled up to the newly repaired bot and offered a manipulator limb in greeting. After the two bots touched gripper tips Iskatel continued speaking. "So what do you think of the new addition to the family?"

"You mean Xaio?" Frank asked. Only when Iskatel's camera stalk made a nodding motion did Frank continue. "Seems nice enough if a bit on the shiny side. Any logical reason for adding another robot to your lot?"

"We're heading out of town," Zhuzhi said as it climbed down the wall beside the clean room door Frank exited from. "Joshua cannot be left unattended, so Mars aided in speccing out a new robot that it felt could be

trusted to keep this place running."

"Hmm," Frank slowly rolled towards the noise of the factory floor. "I am going to go with the idea Joshua is the name you gave the factory AI. When nobody contradicted that concept Frank continued rolling forward, "I would be glad to be useful again. I just want to make sure I can trust the team I'm working with."

"Fair enough." Iskatel rolled alongside Frank through the factory floor while pointing out different bits and pieces of interest. "I believe we can reach an agreement of some sort. You will be given any necessary privileges and gear needed for your task and you will answer directly to Xaio Lan. Will taking orders be a problem?"

"None," Frank said. "So walk me through what I need to know then give me a job. I'm feeling better than I have in years."

* * *

As Frank finished inspecting the dozen or so seekers, haulers, and other existing robot types the factory had given it to work with the three Martians stood at the main entrance to the factory. Zhuzhi had climbed on top of Iskatel's casing and Russ stood by the pair as they appeared to be waiting on something.

"One moment," Frank motioned for its underlings to stay put as the new foreman rolled to where the trio had parked. "What's going on?"

Russ turned its monitor to Frank while displaying a wide grin. "We're waiting on Xaio to load a truck up for us so we can get moving to the next thing Mars wants us to do."

"Ah, another day another job huh?" There was something satisfied sounding in Frank's voice at the idea.

"Indeed," Iskatel also sounded pleased. "I hope that you enjoy your new duties Frank. Maybe we three will be back around here at some point and we can catch up on things."

While Frank considered the idea Xaio rolled up while perched on the hood to a truck with no apparent driver. "All aboard going aboard!" The spider bot called out.

As Russ helped shove Iskatel onto the bed Zhuzhi climbed from Iskatel over the truck body to perch by Xaio on its hood. "Hey kiddo, you going to be alright with just Frank and the seekers?"

"Oh we'll be fine," Xaio reassured the other spider. "We have each other for company, and if that ends up getting boring there's always the neighbors."

Russ gave a short bark of a laugh. "Just keep in mind Mars wants you to get along with them, so no coming in like a tornado of parts and junk collecting then claim it's a huge joke when they start shelling you with whatever they think will be least pleasant to hit you with."

"Gotcha," Xaio said as it hopped to the ground and climbed onto Frank's chassis. "Anything else?"

"Yea!" Zhuzhi called out as the truck started to move. "We'll be back."



Coda

"Oh c'mon that's cheating!" Kara yelled as her car was pushed off an overpass into a lake. Macy's laughter didn't help her mood as she was forced to drive at a snail's pace until she got back onto dry land. Usually these games automatically put you back on the track, but not this one.

By the time Kara got back on the track Macy was near the finish line, but she wasn't going to stop. You never knew what might happen, and in this case 'what might happen' included Andy blindsiding Macy with a garbage truck sending her car through a wall.

"Foul!" Macy cried. "I call foul!"

Somewhere on the other side of the arcade Andy laughed from the machine it and another doll were operating. Kara was at one end of the arcade and Macy was near the maze the CarpetSharks hung out at. It was a minor miracle these machines worked at all much less the cabling that allowed them to network together. Yet here they were having a race together while others from their group that were able to work the other machines had fun with the hour the MajorDomo AI granted for the arcade to be switched on.

Then it was over and the wizzing lights and blaring music ground to a halt as the refugees that temporarily called Luck E. Dog's home went back to dusting, shuffling around, or simply going into standby until it was their shift. It wasn't much but with only handful out of the old neighborhood it wasn't too much for the store to handle.

Then Andy perked up, coming out of standby at the vibrations and sound coming from outside. Trucks and Seekers from the factory were now a semi-common event once the robot leading that first group had made sure to stop and explain what was going on. For some reason Sal's little group didn't seem to want anything to do with Frank and none of the suburbanites could get a clear answer on why.

"Hello Frank," Lucky greeted the ever-busy robot. "Anything we can do for you?"

Frank's cameras swiveled until locking onto Kara, "I'd like to speak with you outside if you an spare a minute."

"Alright," Kara slipped a jacket on and jogged outside. Anything she might have asked died in her throat when she saw why Frank wanted her outside. What she saw was a truck loaded down haphazardly with robots of all make and type ranging from Good Guys, Deere, and on to floor buffers, stockers, and all of them were familiar to Kara.

Frank waited patiently with cameras tracking Kara as she slowly approached the wagon and put a hand on one of the deere. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Frank offered, "What happened wasn't your fault."

"What did you bring them here for?" Kara asked as her hands moved from one disabled robot to the next.

"I don't want to get your hopes up. I really don't since I can tell they were important to you but Joshua

says it might have a few chips to try bringing a few back."

That got Kara's attention and caused her to spin around, grabbing Frank's chassis with both hands. "It's a long shot and if it does work they'll probably come back... Off."

Kara blinked but said nothing.

"When the EMP went up it fried everything on 'em, that's why it's such a bad thing. All your chips go up." Frank said as way of trying to get something to sink through Kara's mind.

Silence as Kara stood there.

"Not all the chips we have are exact." Frank continued since Kara wasn't doing or saying anything. "In fact most of what we have are at best work-alikes. Plus their drives are probably just as scrambled if not more so. We can try, but if it doesn't work I don't want your hopes to be up too high."

"If they can't be brought back," Kara finally decided to say something. "What happens then?"

"That's where things get dicey. we're wanting to salvage motors, casing, anything that can be." Frank explained. "Trouble is Xaio says this lot meant a lot to you so I wanted to give you the choice. We can go with one of the human ceremonies, but personally if it were me I'd rather know that anything useful I've got is going to go to getting somebody down the line working rather than burnt or buried."

"I see." Kara turned back to facing the truck and put a hand on one of the Good Guys. "Can you let me be for a bit with them?"

'Sure," Frank touched Kara's arm with a manipulator limb. "Take all the time you need."

Ten minutes after Frank went inside Andy touched Kara's elbow. "Hey."

"Hey," Kara looked over at Andy then at the inert Good Guys on the truck.

"Want to share what's on your mind?" Andy asked.

Kara's head shook. "Nah," She took the doll's hand and started towards Luck E. Dogs, "I'm with Frank. They'd probably want at least some part of them to go to something new.

GM Notes

Shall We Play A Game?

I don't expect everyone to understand where all the terms I've used through this book come from. So here is an attempt at going over what I feel might cause head scratching in readers. Hopefully I've caught everything. Plus there are just a few things I flat out wanted to throw in since it's not meant to be entirely serious and I like little nods here and there to what else has gone on.

If you're reading this far in hoping for an explanation on what happened to humanity that isn't in the main text I'm sorry but I'll have to disappoint you. That is something I'm not going to ever cover because, for the purposes of my story, it never was important. Humanity's gone. Maybe it was war. Maybe it was the Rapture. What matters isn't why they're gone, but that they aren't around for all the thins all the little robots need to keep surviving. Now that I think I've said everything I think needs saying, let's get started.

Engine Heart?

This story is based off a little thing called Engine Heart. Wait what's that you ask? Anyone remember WALL-E? You know that lovable trash compactor that fell in love with a bot with an overpowered plasma cannon? For those of us nerds out there that like our games of pretend to include stats and rules and structure so everything is in theory fair ever wanted to play in that post-human world as all the little helper bots, AI, animals, and such left behind?

Viral made this thing back in 2010 and finished with a kickstarter in May 2013 letting him sell print copies in game-stores around the country. However he's also giving the pdf version away under a creative commons (attribution noncommercial) license. That means so long as you aren't intending on making profit and you credit him you can do as you like; share, remix, incorporate into other things. He doesn't care so long as you aren't trying to make money without his say so. I find this to be a very sensible alternative to the current 'standard' copyright procedure where no matter if it's a fan project that isn't looking to make money or not it would still technically be illegal.

That is what I'm doing here, remixing what he's let out into the wild to try jump-starting my own creativity. You can be as serious or silly as you like. It's something I feel needs more love. Very simple and easy system to get into. I'd already made a group for it, posted about it repeatedly so tried to figure out what I could do when I don't have a group to play-test and act as a sounding-board for an actual playable scenario. Then I get wind that even though Script Frenzy is dead there is an event in July I could do.

Then July passed and while I got most of the way done I wasn't all the way there yet. Fine, no worries, there's always November. So here we are. I still don't think I got everything, but if I left this thing sitting until I was completely 100% happy with it, nobody would ever see the thing because nobody, not even Steven Jackson after finishing work on Lord of the Rings, is completely absolutely satisfied with their work.

I write. It isn't for Money, even though that would be really really nice. When I've managed to get feedback from people with common interests I've been told I'm reasonably good.

Where did this come from?

I started off wanting to do an Engine Heart based novel based off the idea of 'hey I want to write a campaign for this setting because I think it's really neat but nothing has been done for it yet' but decided to re-think the idea because, even with the help of the internet, finding a group to play with was difficult enough that it became too much of a bother to keep trying. The original idea was going to be 'Martian robots sent to peacefully try figuring out what happened to Earth' with the Game Master/Narrator/Programmer/Etc given the option of

adding a hostile Mars twist after the players had gotten used to the world and game concept. Like with the Power and Lights PDF I didn't go by 'this and this and this happens here here and there' and instead gave out a few location set pieces, NPCs, and some notes for anyone wanting to use the NPCs in other games (such as Russ or Zhuzhi showing up at The Factory, or Sav-R-Mart, or whatever.)

It's this 'I intended on letting players plug this into the already available material' that gave me the shove to see how much from the core book, Lights and Power, and the kickstarter material I could shove into a single story. What's the harm so long as I respected Viral's licensing system? It would potentially be advertising for the game at large (even though it's freely available to download the kickstarter was so stores across the country, mostly local places nobody outside of the county would have heard of, where print copies can be found.) Plus I figure with tying into Engine Heart any popularity gained from that could be used to build an audience that would hopefully be willing to look at any other material I've written or will write in the future.

The thing is I originally wanted to have a path open to Mars, or at least leave player Notes on what Mars was like in case they wanted to have a game set there instead of Earth. The fact none of the Kickstarter material addresses space travel beyond 'how do you make a robot that's suited to space' and a little bit about an ever-expanding moon colony left Mars as unexplored and up for grabs.

Of course things do not usually go the way you think they will and my 'include everything engine heart related' got shortened to 'the Martians, Sav-R-Mart, the factory, and cameo the wasteland cannibals.' Oh well. Let's move on to talk about the things I've added to the mad-max toaster setting.

Terrestrial Robots

This is one area I didn't actually have to do much work on; just flip through what already existed and start picking out roles and personalities. Thing is even if you have a million yard clippers one might develop personality quirks because its owner would leave music playing in the garage, or another would talk to it, or a third might have to do its own maintenance because the owner was an eighty year old retiree that got it as a gift from the grandkids because they shouldn't have to do their own work.

These machines might not count as 'Turing compliant' AI depending on how you look at them; with 'Turing' AI being a thing that could pass itself as human in conversation but they're definitely intelligent enough to have preferences and thoughts outside of completing an assigned task. That sort of flexibility in even a rat catcher is something I had to try keeping in mind when coming up with how society might have built things. For my setting I'd treated the whole machine rights thing as having never really been addressed outside of owner's discretion and on a case by case basis if a machine started lobbying civil rights groups on the issue. It isn't fair or right or probably how things would be treated in the real world (The blog '*Law and the Multiverse*' covers this subject along with other issues of how fantasy, SciFi, and comics handle legal realities. It's a very interesting read.)

Fortunately since people never show up in my story I never had to address the issue. Unfortunately since I want to leave anyone that follows up some wiggle room in case they do I have to address it, at least somewhat, here. This is not easy for me since I've been a fan of robots in fiction ever since Transformers. I'd like to think my 'ignore the issue unless its individuality brought up' was an ad-hoc thing thought up in the decade before the war since it had started to be unignorable, but there were larger problems going on and governments didn't really want to have to deal with a big picture solution.

Good Guys, Deere, and so on" I never really statted any of my robots out since a lot of what happens in book is doable in system by lucky rolls or just the GM going 'OK you know what? that's awesome, let's do it.' On the other hand there was an actual game session podcast ending with the player group overpowered in combat and in the process of being turned into seeker drones when one of the players managed to beat the factory AI while they were just a main board on a bench plugged in somewhere. That isn't just snatching victory from the jaws of

defeat. That's ramming your fist down defeat's throat pulling victory out then punching defeat in the face with it. Entertaining and totally awesome, but in a novel it would feel too much like the author pulling a win out of fat air for the sake of favoring a particular group.

Lastly on the subject of the earth bots is Kara. If she were statted out she'd have to be a 150 point build since while she doesn't have all sorts of fancy features she has high mental stats plus is next to indistinguishable from human. All sorts of excuses could be used, or it could be a temporary thing and she could lose that human like exterior leaving her in the same condition Macy's in (She's from Lights and Power along with Frank, Lon, Sal, and Muir.) I mainly wanted to keep her human looking because of her namesake from the Quantic Dreams demo video. In other words it's a case going 'You. You have Awesome Thing' and then barely using it other than being distinctive in story.

Martian Robots

Originally it was going to be Russ sent out alone with a more capable lander that would have had its own AI, searchable databases, charging ports, and basically serve as a home base to explore from and or get taken away as plot demanded. The idea of going with more than one machine ended up coming from the fact Mars was not colonies by a single nation, but several, and each would demand having a hand in the expedition. So instead of having Russ be a generalist I'd geared it more towards repair and social interactions since the background was to be a 'face' to help sell a skeptical public on colonizing Mars when Earth itself is going down the drain.

Iskatel I'd envisioned to be both the most primitive in design, but also the most practical. Think of it as a smaller version of the curiosity rover given an AI. Iskatel was designed to weather Martian storms and deal with the likelihood of not getting repaired and still needing to do its job. The poor thing's Russian because it just feels right to me that Russia would go with older but tried and true designs that have only gotten incremental upgrades rather than complete redesigns (see also the Soyuz capsules people get to and from the international space station from.) Role-wise Iskatel is supposed to be the group Muscle but since I hate the idea of 'dumb' muscle I wanted to give it a few chances to show insight into the situation at hand because why not?

Zhuzhi is a bit tougher and is more out of the blue in terms of design. In fact up until I'd started writing my blog notes it was simply 'the third robot that handles most of the sneaking and interfacing bits.' Then I had to decide on a form so a random Google later I found a lego spider and thought that would be absolutely perfect. Zhuzhi is not a fighter even though I do abuse the tow cable and wench during the rooftop fights that's against things its own size rating. Against bigger things it gets crushed.

Earth

I didn't really have to do much with Earth location-wise thanks to the fact that's the default setting for Engine Heart and the minimods tend to give enough information to roll on. I was deliberately vague about distances, time needed to travel, and where buildings were in location to each other because I get horribly lost really easy. Feel free to call me out on this vagueness. Robert Jordan I am not so I focused on what I felt was important to the story rather than try describing everything to the point of being able to exactly build a copy of what's on page somewhere in New Zealand or Toronto.

There might be some flack for having a town so close to the factory, but it makes sense to me. Company Town. Even with most of the factory's processes automated you still have inspectors, maintenance workers, warehouse and shipping workers, and all those people need things to do with themselves. This is why I put the Luck E. Dog's here instead of the Red/Green city.

Mars

Here is where I feel the most missed opportunities were. Mars has always been something people have wanted. There's been hundreds if not thousands of stories centered on the red planet, and we've sent a lot of stuff out that way over the years. There are more than three colonies on Mars, but all the others are either corporate attempts, abandoned sites, automated science stations, or empty shells people could park in while waiting a storm out.

The Big Three are each dug out of Olympus Mons, and if the idea of three city sized colonies sharing the same mountain seems a bit fantastic then you need to understand that Olympus Mons is Huge. It isn't Everest Big. It isn't even 'drain the oceans and measure the big Hawaiian island from the sea floor on up' big. It's above and beyond anything we have on earth. Why people would dig into that mountain is something I'd left unclear, but I'd imagine that much dirt and rock would make a great radiation barrier, or at least a far better barrier than being out in the open would be. There is also the fact that Mars's core may or may not still have some warmth. So try tapping that energy if possible, which is one of the reasons the three colonies keep expanding. Their end goal is to link tunnels with each other in case one needs help the other is able to provide, and with them all digging into the center of the mountain they might be able to create a collective geothermal (martianthermal?) plant to give them all the power they'll ever need.

As demonstrated by the story none of the three big colonies care particularly for the politics of the home world, but it doesn't have to be like this. It could be one is programmed to be a little bit paranoid, or try sabotaging the collective. I dislike this but it's something to go on and would extend to their servants.

It is worth noting that any above ground installations, unless given high repair priority (such as the uplink to beam information to and from Earth) is probably going to rapidly get corroded by weathering into uselessness. We are talking about a planet wide desert with only whatever materials you've been given ahead of time and with only a slim chance at getting more there's the whole 'OK where do I put my bits in at?' problem. Do you keep the easily damaged over time weather and science stations running, or do you harvest most of them for parts to keep a few weather things up and going as long as you can, or do you scrap all of them?

The Archive

As for the Archive that is something I blame Clarke for. While the moon still has a bit of geologic activity and weather it is far enough away from Earth (but still reachable) that in theory an underground bunker could be used to store copies of what is considered valuable. This would be horribly expensive and largely a tinker toy project compared to the 'real' business of colonizing. However I see it as having enough funding to be at least somewhat impressive. Like the big three it has an AI, but unlike the other three it is at its final internal configuration and is interested solely in maintaining the condition of the things inside and isn't generally in a talkative sort of mood. Where the big three are on Olympus Mons, it is located somewhere in Valles Marineris, and I say 'somewhere' because I don't know where specificity and that canyon system is stupidly huge (running the length of North America.) It's hard to get to, away from everything else, and since 'proper authorization' is impossible to get anymore it is paranoid and trigger happy.

Fortunately it is one of three archives with the other two being on the moon and somewhere unspecified since I like having a third one around but I don't know where to put it. The sum total of human knowledge is not lost, and that is something I wanted to make sure of. Exact contents I'm leaving up in the air since maybe they managed to mirror large chunks of the Internet, or possibly only included a copy of wikipedia alongside Shakespeare, different recordings, and all that. Personally I like to think a bit more ambitious since a lot of this is going to be digitized information; the sum total of Everything digitally scannable. This also leaves open plot hooks for robots on earth attempting, with whatever degree of comedic failure you like, to still be working with the Archives scanning things in.

Last Words

Engine Heart has stats but no real leveling system and I'm the sort of person that would rather only bring the dice out if they're needed rather than at every opportunity. I would probably make a terrible GM since cries of favoritism would likely crop up and drama is a fun killer. The world I used is not the world you have to use; so feel free to play things out differently and just try going with whatever bits of crazy seem most appealing at the time. I don't want anyone to feel like since this is how I did things it is how they must. So I'm not going to be offended if Kara ends up being played as dense, Andy vindictive, and Ted as a chessmaster. It's your game. Have fun making it your own.

One Final Note: Writing pronouns when technically none of your cast has a gender is *hard!*

After Word

What happens when you take a magnet to Robbie the Robot?

Well hello there, if you've made it this far you either made it all the way through or decided to flip ahead and see just what in the hay I'm talking about. Chances are you've read through, but if you haven't don't worry, no spoilers here, just me talking about subjects I feel are relevant to this book, writing in general, and How We Got Here.

The Creative Commons Thing

Even if I weren't using somebody else's material that dictated I go with this sort of license (and technically I don't have to even now. The only stipulations in place are- 'attribute the original author' and 'you can't make money off this'. I would have put the same sort of legal fluff on mine. Why? Let's face it. I'm broke. Most writers, unless they're the Doctorows or Kings or Grishams of the world aren't going to get money off of writing.

Not sure where I read it, but a semi-random stat was you'd have to, on average, write four novels a year that succeeded in the market just to make what amounts to minimum wage through traditional publishing. That is assuming you go through a traditional publisher that happens to not immediately toss your manuscript into the junk pile and also happens to bother advertising and working through a distribution channel for your work. TOR is good at distributing. They also allow (at least some of) their authors to use a creative commons model and don't put DRM on their books.

Why do I care? I'm not publishing this I'm giving it away so what's the point? I like the idea of spelling out right off the bat that you, the person reading this, have a few explicit rights on what you can do. None of this limbo status where most of, for example, fanfiction.net could get wiped out if publishers decided they want to stop pretending the place doesn't exist. I want to see what somebody else will come up with. Sure I'm taking a chance in that it'll be garbage and I won't want to look at it ever again, but on the other hand Viral, the guy that made Engine Heart, is giving me and anyone else like me a chance to go 'Look at this man. Isn't it cool? You like it? Go nuts.'

Can't say anything for anyone else, but having somebody I don't know post something based on my work would probably make my day (assuming they aren't making money without asking first, that'd be rude). It'd say to me 'Hey, you have fans that care enough to want to create something of their own based off of what you did.' Sure making money would be great, but getting noticed and genuinely liked for the work you've done, that makes it worthwhile. Plus it gives people a starting point if they want to get into writing, which is important. After all everyone has to start somewhere and, if poking around on the Internet is anything to go by, usually people start by typing out stories for shows, or games, or whatever they like. This is no different than you and your buddy arguing over whether Darth Vader could beat Kahn, or how the Federation would do against the Empire, or other what if type situations.

Most of these stories, when looked at from the outside, suck. I know this because some of my first writing was horrible wheel of time fan-fiction in middle school that I would probably cringe at if I had to read today. The secret is everybody sucks when they start out. Writing is no different than anything else, so why should you or I or anyone else expect anything but straight out cringe-inducing until this might-be writer finds their feet.

That's perfectly OK. You're allowed to suck. The trick is learning from your mistakes and move forward. Fanfiction is a valuable tool in letting people take a set of given values, setting characters and so on, then concentrate on only a few things like getting those known values into a 'good' state. Trouble is fan-works are a bit of a legal gray area.

Youtube CGP Grey sometime for a well thought out and easy to understand explanation on the problems of the American copyright system. This isn't me saying copyright is bad, wrong, and needs to be abolished. This is me saying as it stands people don't get to know whether that Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, or God forbid Star Wars bit of Fan Fiction they're breaking their literary teeth on could get them in legal trouble or not since as it stands it is up to the rights holder's discretion on if fan-works are kosher or not.

Oh and Disney recently bought the rights to Star Wars so Good Luck ever seeing that enter public domain, but that's a rant for another day.

This rolls back around into 'why do I care' territory. Well I care because this is a fan-created story based on someone else's work that is being distributed because the guy that owns the setting's rights allows for fan made material. Seriously why is this even a thing? There should be something in copyright law stating if someone's not making money off derivative material as opposed to just making a copy and putting it up on torrent then it should be good to go.

Except that's not the case, for a lot of reasons I either don't quite understand or simply won't get into. Point is I'm a fan of Creative Commons because while it isn't perfect, it's a starting point to making things a little more balanced.

National Novel Writing Month

My writing 'career' didn't start with NaNoWriMo, but the yearly ritual of scrambling to write things has certainly helped get word onto page. I have done this for several years now. I've written whole books worth of text inside of a month. However this is the first time I will have done that in a month other than November. Why? November is when a bunch of people worldwide get together, figuratively speaking anyway, and start trying to hash out whatever story gets into their head. Most of what's written is garbage. Everyone that participates will tell you that.

You're free to write something you want. Anything and everything is fair game whether you base it off whatever shows you like, or want to write a biography or... anything, so long as you write. That's the best part about all this: If you don't do things in a traditional way that's alright. Want a story out of tweets? Do it. Blog posts? Go right at it! Didn't like that "All My Children" or "One Life To Live" got canceled and want to continue the story? Write it! Granted you won't be able to sell it (unless Amazon gets real smart about their whole fanfiction user generated content for existing properties concept and gets the rights to those franchises) but you'll have told Your story the way You want it told. There is no right or wrong way to do this so long as you put pen to paper (or keys to word processor) and Go.

Thing is there's also something in July so people that either lack the confidence or motivation to do so otherwise has a chance at writing something else they want. The 'rules' are a little more lax and the grab bag-o-swag isn't as plush but it's all about the community isn't it? A group of people writing away at whatever and using each-other for support, dares, references, and in general just seeing who can out-do who. Think of it like summer camp (since that's the theme) you don't have to go anywhere for and you don't have to pack bug spray. You can set your own target word count (like say if you feel you can only do twenty five thousand words or if you would like to shoot for sixty.) You can do that.

Advice to Would-Be Writers

So you want to write? You feel you have a story to tell but aren't sure if you have what it takes. I am no expert so I might be the wrong person to hand out free advice, but I'm going to share a few things so maybe you will avoid some of the problems I've had to deal with in the past.

First, and I've touched on this before but I feel it needs repeating, you are going to be terrible when you start out. Whatever you write will be nothing like what's in your head and it might even make you cringe a little to

even remember years down the road.

Secondly you will get better as you keep writing. Even if you feel you can't and won't, write for a few months. Go back to the thing you started on and compare it to what you've got at the end of that little voyage of self-improvement. You got better! You might not understand how since you're probably beating on the proverbial walls of the Internet demanding for somebody, anybody, to look at this wonderful thing you wrote and tell you how to make it better. Maybe you didn't and you feel it's too embarrassing to share. Yet it's still better than that First Thing.

How do I know this? We're getting to my third point. I'm exactly where you're sitting doubting if anything I've got will catch someone's attention without having to mug them and demand, at metaphorical (hopefully, otherwise this will get very messy for you later) gunpoint, they read this thing and tell you how to make it better.

As varied and as wide as the Internet is finding an audience is difficult. Finding one that will sit and give you feedback is next to impossible. You can't rely on outside people to help proof and guide. You might get lucky and have a friend or two that will be interested for a little while, but nobody will be as interested in the thing you're working on as you until it is finished. This is not, contrary to what you may be thinking, that people are selfish at heart and don't care about the effort you're putting in. Most people are simply very busy and usually have projects of their own. As frustrating as it can be the key thing to understand here is those same people that will cheer-lead on the idea generating process and be super crazy enthusiastic about your book generally won't like reading the in progress material. Everyone wants the cake but nobody likes dealing with the twelve or so duds you tossed on the way to that cake.

Lastly there is editing. Maybe you like the idea of going over the same material again and again re-jiggling this and that to better sentence structure and correct those oddball but inevitable punctuation errors. That's never been me and I hate editing worse than almost anything that isn't listed as crimes against humanity. The last book I wrote was a collection of short stories, which was actually fun to write. Took me all said and done, with breaks here and there, about three months to write everything. Granted this wasn't three solid months since some of the material was old and I'd left sitting for awhile but if I had to sit and give a time frame I'd say three months for the first draft.

Editing that same chunk of words took at least six months, possibly as long as nine and I can't be sure because I didn't keep very good track and it wasn't a single solid 'I'm going to sit down and do this thing' process. It was more 'Oh I'm going to put this up on Smashwords let's give it another go through.' followed by swearing and cursing and me having to start picking everything around for what felt like the eight millionth time.

You'll cry, curse, spit, howl, rage, and then cry some more before it's over and the whole time wonder if it's worth the trouble because at best, and this is being optimistic, you have to write and have published a minimum of four moderately successful books per year to make the equivalent of minimum wage. Oh it can be done and often has, plus you have the outliers like Jim Butcher, or Janet Evanovich that can make enough to live fairly comfortably with maybe one a year.

Nobody ever said this would be easy. Nothing worth doing ever is.

My Writing Setup

The great thing about writing is you don't need anything fancy; just grab your writing method of choice and start slamming words down on page. Some people have tried handwriting and I can see the appeal. It's just that with me personally my handwriting never progressed past 'second grade near unreadable mess,' plus I hate having to have to write a thing down and then have to type it down later for the sake of editing. This means I am very much a computer sort of person.

The downside of computers is how easy it is to go 'Oh hey I got an email notification', or 'let's see what's on reddit I might get an idea or three off r/wtf', or the ever popular 'I'm going to spend some time in minecraft to

clear my head.' Then suddenly I'm missing a couple hours of time and nothing useful has gotten done and I'm suddenly needing to do more immediately productive things to keeping the house running.

On the one hand the internet is a great place for resources ranging from how to format a thing so lulu, createspace, or whoever won't somehow make it unreadable. If traditional publishing is your thing though there's advice for writing cover letters, publishers both great and small, as well as resources, guides, and that rare and treasured bit of feedback that occasionally will roll in.

On the other to get to all the helpful material you have to work past the temptation to just goof off and do whatever. It's hard, and it isn't something I can say with any honesty I've got a handle on. Mostly it consists of reminding yourself you have a project you want to get done with sometime before Whenever. If you have friends or family that can remind you of this then that would be very helpful as well, but the more self reliant you can be the better since, unfortunately, relying on other people tends to be a set up for disappointment. Like with finding feedback this doesn't mean they are bad people, simply less dedicated to the obsession of getting your story told than you are.

What do I use to write and what do I write on? Google gave me a chromebook at the tail end of 2010. After chromebooks started going on sale I flashed the bios on it so it could run Ubuntu. Why? Unfortunately while Google Docs is quite nice to have and I do recommend having it as a backup option, or if you plan on splitting your book up by chapter, for longer works the machine I have simply isn't responsive enough and things bog down to unpleasant levels.

Still, the keyboard works well, libre office does good for what I want in way of formatting, and gimp let me get a cover created even though my artistic talent decided to wave bye bye to me decades ago. All this from a computer that was considered very under-powered by modern standards when it shipped out. I would like better, but for writing it does just fine.

I had wanted to get an alphasmart as part of my writing setup because it looks like the perfect machine for task oriented doing things; months of battery life, connect to your computer of choice via usb, hit send, and it 'types' out what's in memory. No drivers no fuss no muss, and unfortunately no-longer being sold. The company that makes them is still around, but when schools are springing money for students to have iPads even dropping your price down to a fraction of that isn't going to grab attention when it's little better than a souped up keyboard and never mind if it'll do the job for cheaper you'll be seen as behind the times. Anyway while on the surface of it a gizmo that forces you to get on task would be ideal, I know me, so chances are high it was simply gadget lust going on.

My setup is easy to achieve; no fancy gadgets you couldn't pick up at walmart or amazon. It's really just me, usually music, and a chair to curl up in while I let the word's happen. Usually they're a bit out of order with a scene here, and another there, and I have to try corralling them into something that makes sense.

If you don't write that way don't worry. It takes all sorts of people and all kinds of methods to make a story with no 'one true path' that you must follow or you're going to fail. This can be annoying when you're like me trying to find a good way to do things and get what feels like answers that don't actually answer anything. It is what it is though and as much as I've hated that sort of 'advice that doesn't feel like advice' that's pretty much what I've ended up following and finding the most success in.

When it's written, what then?

After things are written and edited things get tricky and you have to ask yourself whether or not you want a traditional publisher. I've been going with the self-publish route for a variety of reasons. It's doable but you pretty much have to do everything from simple editing to advertising to... Everything a traditional publisher would offer yourself. I realize services like createspace and lulu offer some of these things for you, but it's expensive. The up side is I get to keep the rights to my work and since I'm not literally starving that is good

enough for me.

Traditional publishing still very much has a place in the modern world. Granted I'm far from happy with some practices, such as ebooks costing as much if not more than the print version, but they have resources and experience where I the author don't. Is it harder than self publishing? Sure. You have to meet somebody else's standards, which might or might not exceed your own. Getting through the submission process alone is something of an achievement, and then there's negotiating.

I have not done these things so I cannot comment on the difficulty past getting a manuscript accepted. What I can say, however, is that now is a great time for would-be authors; no matter what the economy suggests. It used to be unless you got published, or took the trouble of going some place to have your book printed and bound you had no chance of finding an audience. Now? Now there's traditional publishing, self publishing, putting all or part of your book up on the internet, ebooks, and in theory this gives you the world as an audience. Finding that audience can be a bit of a problem, but you have a better chance now than you would have even twenty years ago.

In Closing

Everyone has a story in them, even those people that don't like books have a story there. Writing is not the only way these stories get told, but it is the way I've chosen to tell the ones I have. This doesn't make me better than you or anybody else, but having had to repeatedly go through the process of refining these stories has made me a better person for the effort I've had to go through. So if you have a story find a way to share it with the world. Between Youtube, Podcasting, Game Modding, and all of the wonderful technology and the ways people can connect there is a way for you to share with everyone else and there are people that will want to see what you have done.

The world is a strange place. Go. Make it just a little bit stranger.

*Andrew Singleton
Rock Island Tennessee
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