

Dean's Caretaker

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The shovel stung Dean's hands with each hit. The metal on metal impact jarred his arms, but the caretaker was still squirming and Dean's fury was just peaking. It thrashed about, trying to get to its feet, until the chest plate cracked and the exposed servos bit down on the shovel's edge. The handle ripped from his grasp and his rage lessened. It was not a moment too soon. The gears locked and the current popped and cracked as it welded the shovel to the caretaker's frame.

Dean remembered little of the fight between his rally cry, "to the death, you stupid robot," and when the shovel left his hands. The curse sounded stupid now, better in books than spoken out loud, but Dean had never been a fighter, never picked a fight. His last battle had been in third grade and he had been knocked down, sat on, and had his face rubbed in the snow until his nose had bled. That finished his fighting days, and Dean had shied away from trouble since.

His heart was calming, but slow. It jumped again, trying to kick back into anger as he surveyed the remains of his garden. There was little left, the bonsai lay crushed in the compactor, red maple leaves looking like chunks of bloody meat mixed in with the junipers and willows. His water garden, months of work and salary spent, no longer filled the backyard. Desert rock and sand flowed in its place. One twitching goldfish battered in dust was the only evidence that it had ever existed. The outside walls, displaying his Japanese landscape, had returned to the dry desert range that was the default display

model for his condo. It had been nice enough when he bought the place, but now it made him ill.

The caretaker robot, “designed to keep your world in pristine perfection,” had been one of the selling points on the condo, but it had caused Dean nothing but trouble. After walking in on its destruction the first time, its metal clamps feeding the water plants into the compactor, he had cancelled his subscription for it at the office. They had talked him back into the payment, promising that it would be reprogrammed. Dean had conceded, not one to cause waves. Twice since, he had found it back to its work, drying out the gardens, shoveling rock over the grass, and always a desert landscape spread out from the unseen wall into the faux distance. He had managed to cut off the subscription, e-mailing rather than face the managers again and fold under their insistence that the problem could be fixed. Regardless the robot had come back, sometimes just sitting, staring at the fish like a cat, or flipping through the hundred landscapes, trying to find the desert that Dean had long since deleted from the condo’s memory.

“Do you think it loves the desert, or just hates all things Japanese?” Trinidad had asked, when Dean explained his trouble.

“What do you mean? It’s a robot, emotion doesn’t come into the equation,” Dean said, annoyed that he was making light of the situation.

“I’m joking, Dean. Look, something’s definitely wrong with it and you have to confront them about it. Get them to pull it from the complex if it won’t stay out of your place.”

“Easier said than done.”

“Not if you would quit wimping out,” Trinidad said, his mouth full of food to disguise his disgust. Dean had heard him, but did not want to start an argument.

He had put off talking to the management, dreading the return to the office. Trinidad had been right, that would have been the best way to handle the situation, but when Dean saw the robot standing by the compactor he lost his head. It was plucking the leaves from the real oriental orchids that had been bought only after a summer of saving. The caretaker turned to stare at him with those blank monitors, plucking away until all the leaves were gone before tossing them in the trash. The shovel was in Dean’s hand before he realized it and he was swinging away.

Once Dean had again deleted the desert scene, how the robot had returned it to memory he couldn’t guess, his anger finally disappeared. It left him exhausted, his muscles ached, but despite the loss of so much money and effort, he felt good. He had won, even if it was over a midget service robot, and he felt strong, powerful, like a man. He left the robot and went straight to the condo’s office. His confidence would only hold as long as his anger, and this glorious feeling of victory, stayed. He knew himself well enough to know that he must face them now or not at all.

“I think someone’s in love,” Trinidad said, as the little robot chased after Dean, knocking against his shoes like a persistent terrier after some special time with his leg. It charged his foot again, almost tripping him up and sending his lunch tray careening out of his hands. Dean turned, waited for its next charge and kicked. The little maintenance

robot crashed against the wall, bounced flipping across the floor and stalled, wheels up. They spun forward and backward, but it was stuck until rescued.

“I like the new Dean, Destroyer of Robots, Conqueror of Androids, Master of All Thing’s Machine.”

“Here’s a dollar, Trinidad. Now get back in line and get a cup of shut the hell up,” Dean said, laughing only once the surprised look on his friend’s face spread into an embarrassed grin.

“Right then. Point taken.”

Trinidad rambled on through lunch regardless. Dean nodded where appropriate, but his mind was still on the little robot. His toe throbbed and he reminded himself not to kick a solid metal object again. He would have dismissed the event as a common malfunction, if it had been the first.

Yesterday morning, a broom had smacked against the glass elevator as he rose through the office lobby. A woman beside him had spilled her coffee and everyone laughed, that half-chuckle when some frightening shock has passed. They laughed it off, but Dean had seen the robot standing on the granite floor, watching their ascent. It was three floors below and a chill had run through him as he wondered what would have happened had the glass not been there. He had shrugged it off and refused to think more about it, tucking the event away in that vault where all conflicts had been placed to keep his mind peaceful.

Dean spent more time inside, ordering delivery, shopping for his garden replacements on the wall screens. He left the house only for work, calling ahead for a taxi

and rationalizing the extra cost against getting to work a little early. It all served to keep him out of sight from the machines, the blank stares from the litterbots on other side of the subway platforms, the metal dishwashers stopped in mid-action and watching from the kitchens of the coffee shops. He buried his face in the morning paper as he sat in the back of the taxi. He avoided them as he did all trouble; he did not think of it.

Trinidad caught him on a good day, Dean's early arrivals noted by the boss and complimented; otherwise he would have stuck to the self-banishment of his cubicle and not accepted lunch out of the office. The crowd was thick on the street. Dean was just one more body packed in the stream of noon migration. He enjoyed the lunch, tired of his own leftovers, and was in the first fine mood in the week since his garden had been destroyed. That was why, at Trinidad's comment, he had turned to look over his shoulder without thinking.

"You have any parking tickets unpaid?" Trinidad asked.

"No, haven't driven in a couple of years."

"Maybe you have another crush on your hands."

Dean turned and saw the traffic android stepping onto the curb behind them. The opaque monitors flashed. Perhaps it was light off some passing windshield, but to Dean it seemed the mark of recognition when someone finally places how they know you. There was just enough time for the fear of that flash to turn his smile into a tight grimace. Then the cop swung out with his long arm, hand still clutching the ticket book, and slapped Dean across the face.

The arm swung slow, but it was a mass of heavy metal and it sent Dean sprawling across the sidewalk. He rolled and stopped, a thin alleyway of blue between the buildings catching his blurry eyes. *The sky is so far away*, he thought, for no certain reason. He felt the step of the heavy machine through the sidewalk, it was much larger than the simple maintenance robots, and then the blue sky was hidden behind the mass of metal law enforcement.

Dean was lifted into the air, plucked up by the front of his jacket like an errant toddler. The front of the cop's chest, a screen of fines and infractions, flickered a rosy red. Dean saw dark sand and the dim outlines of a mesa at sunset, and then he was in freefall.

The tide of the lunch crowd had turned, but not diminished in size, and he went down in a crater of arms, legs and curses. The crowd cushioned his fall, but only set the pain of impact aside for a moment. The cop came forward with limbs flailing. *I may be the first to know what it is to be beaten up by a major appliance*, he thought, some odd defensive mechanism turning the sickening crunch of a broken arm into dark humor.

He scrambled as best as he could, trying to flee with all the other screaming people. They ran, leaving him in an open circle where they watched the fight like a group surrounding some spontaneous schoolyard brawl. Another hit broke his ribs. Dean tasted the grime of the concrete as his face smacked against the sidewalk and then the skyscrapers closed in, smothering him in darkness.

The pinging sound of some machine pulled him from the thick blackness. He shied away from the sound but it drew him toward consciousness, one beat marking each fathom he rose. As light began to swim in his eyes, other sounds intruded. Muffled voices, slurred as if drunk, mixed with the quiet noises of people moving somewhere outside the room. The wall screen babbled on and the words drifted across his mind, only patches penetrating his thoughts. He concentrated, stringing the words together and trying to wake fully.

In local news, IntelGrid stock... contract with the city last month. Their BroadNet server now connects 90 percent of the area's robots... shared memory and task recognition... increased efficiency by 100-fold, says IntelGrid. The company...24 major cities...federal contract is under consideration.

The words turned something in Dean's mind, some dread was forming, but he couldn't put it all together. He was in a limbo of mist and smoke and his thoughts raced around just out of reach.

"Does that mean I can rely on my housekeeper for car repairs, Julie?"

"Well, that remains to be seen Charles, but I do know that the coffee-maker here at work has finally figured out how to make my mocha-cino."

"Wonderful. In Bridgeport today..."

As he came closer to waking, pain followed the light and sound, but just as blurred. It lay deep in his body, constant, but disconnected. Dean's eyes flickered open. A blue gel-cast surrounded his elevated leg. Through the bright syrup he could see the scars

across his thigh and the pins rising from the skin like miniature towers reaching for the fake blue sky.

He reached to poke at the cast, tried twice, expecting to see his finger prodding the gel, before he realized his arm wouldn't move. He decided against looking at it. It would be the same; more towers of metal, as if some small race had inhabited his skin while he was gone. *My garden wasn't enough. Their terraforming my body, too*, his mind thought, twisted by the thick layer of painkillers padding his brain from his body.

"Dean, are you awake, buddy?" Trinidad whispered. Dean grunted, his tongue too dry and swollen to talk. It came out with a whistle, like when he had lost his front tooth as a boy. He wondered how many were gone this time.

"You're going to be ok. The doctor said that in a few days you will be back on your feet. You want me to get him?" Dean grunted, but wasn't sure if he meant yes or no. He could barely understand Trinidad and he was so tired.

"My lawyer, Lonnie, says you have a pretty good case against the city, especially against the condo managers. He checked a few places and it seems that your gardening robot had been marked for teardown. Full of viruses, he said. Anyway, the condo people must have picked it up illegally. Lonnie'll be by later for your statement. He's trying to figure out how you got attacked. He thinks the virus must have spread somehow, using your identity as a trigger. What exactly happened with that gardener anyway?"

To the death, you stupid robot. The words rose from the fog surrounding his mind. What a stupid thing to say. But it should have been over. He had killed it. The fight was done, but it hadn't finished.

Dean's mind began to turn, remembering all the blank stares from the other robots. He had ignored them, but they had recognized him and their fight was unfinished. Dean began to cry. How could he step out of this room, a fight waiting with every robot in the city? It would never end.

"Easy, man. It's going to be all right. You'll be back on your feet in no time, the doctor said so. Let me go get him, and he'll tell you himself," Trinidad said. Dean heard the door click shut somewhere out of sight. Faces of robots swam across his vision. The small trash robots, little dog-like creatures didn't bother him. What kept returning were the traffic cops, the enforcement robots, construction androids with their huge limbs, steel treads to run him over. They raced toward him. He pulled at his eyelids, dragging them wide open so the light of the room flooded in and washed the images away.

The door clicked open and shut again.

"Nurse, the patient is in recovery status."

That must be the doctor. Maybe he can give me something to sleep again. I don't want to see these things.

"Monitor the progress of his fractures and internal injuries. Coordinate the Nanopacks by the Priority Set. Administer IV 722 every four hours, as well as the other meds on your list. Come forward and recognized patient 27668, Dean Herman."

Dean caught the reflection of chrome out of the corner of his eye, and the nurse rolled forward. The doctor began to introduce himself and update him on his condition, but Dean only heard the faux voice.

"Patient 2768, Dean Herman. Recognized."

The doctor continued talking, but Dean was watching the flash in the nurse's dull eyes and the list of instructions fade as its screen turned a dusty rose sunset. Dean's grunting whistle grew to a frantic pitch.

"It's all right Mr. Herman. Your injuries are already healing well. Calm down, Mr. Herman. No need to get upset," the doctor said, and stepped aside to let the nurse get to work.