

The Robot Is Running Away from the Trees

The old Ab'O rotated his hands in opposite directions, palm to palm, two inches apart, and held the universe in between them.

"It will give you everything. A lovely gift for a famous desert sailor like yourself, and a good price."

"No. Thank you, Phar. I don't think I need a double-planisphere. You use it."

"Ah, no," Phar said, taking the intricate device from me and putting it away under glass. "My shop is universe enough. I dream already."

"I'm sure that's not what you wanted to show me, Phar."

"No, Captain Tom. But, ah, it's a delicate matter. A surprise. Look around awhile. Humour me."

"Very well," I said, and moved among the stacked counters ducked under hanging shapes, navigated between pieces of furniture, antique converters, broken consoles, musical instruments, worn-out belltrees, seized-up motion sculptures, headed back into the dustier, gloomier shadows of Phar's Emporium.

I knew the shop well, probably as well as anyone apart from the old man. I loved it, loved its timelessness, the way it was tucked into its deep wedge-shaped niche at the end of Socket Lane, sandwiched in between two large warehouses near the seawall in the poorer part of the Byzantine Quarter. It was a place of shadows and quiet, unchanged for generations — a place for finding unexpected treasures, splendid curios, heart's desires.

Phar followed me as he had for years, whenever I came to examine his mostly questionable, sometimes remarkable merchandise, always the Man in the Shadow Shop, as he was first introduced to me nearly ten years ago.

"That's a vanity," he said, pointing to a glossy dark rock in a broken vacuum case.

"I doubt it. It looks like quassail slag."

"A meteorite then. I have vanities!" Phar said in a conspiratorial voice.

"Specials too. Nader's eyes locked away in stone. Very good price!"

"No," I said. "Tell me what it is you want or let me look."

"Look!" he said, and pretended to move away — pretended because he stayed close by, muttering softly so I could hear. "I think the planisphere suits you."

Then I saw it, a dull metal man-shape in the gloom, standing where I remembered a dusty wall-hanging had always been fixed.

"Phar, what is this? Armour?"

The Ab'O was there like a toy on a spring. "Armour, that?" His eyes widened. "Yes, armour. A battle suit."

"It looks like a robot. A high-mankin."

"No. No. It's just an old low-mankin. Totem use only. Scarecrow use."

"But, Phar —"

“Not so loud, Captain Tom. You bring me trouble.”

“But it’s a robot!”

“Was,” he said. “Doesn’t work. Absolutely illegal. Come, I lead you back into the light!” The little man laughed, but it was nervous laughter. This was what he’d wanted me to see, and understandably he was worried.

“Where did you get it? Your people would kill you.”

“Wisdom and understatement there in one hit, Captain Tom.”

“Close the shop. Bring a light.”

The Ab’O did so, and found me rubbing dust from the big rust-flecked barrel chest, the articulated stove-pipe legs, the cylindrical tin-can head.

“This is incredible, Phar. It looks like an old Antaeus, powered from the earth.”

“No. No,” Phar said. “A Helios. Sun-driven originally and adapted to my shadows.” He laughed again. “Made by Antique Futures. This one is broken.”

I regarded the blank metal face, the faceted dead glass eyes that had once viewed the world as an endless stream of moire patterns in the days before robots and mankings had been outlawed. I reached out and wiped more dust from the dull grey arms, from the impressive rococo decorations, from the faded dim-gold exotic curlicues on thighs and shoulders.

“This must be worth a fortune, Phar. Do you have the manual for it?”

The Ab’O nodded. “It is a Maitre class. Its oriete was coded in India, in the Bati Gardens.”

“This is what you wanted me to see.”

Phar stared at me through the gloom. Again he nodded.

“Why?” I said.

“Please,” the Ab’O replied, concern showing on every line of his face as he moved forward into the light. “Let me complete this tour slowly now. I respect your feelings.”

“I appreciate that. Now tell me. Why?”

“You know why they were outlawed, Captain Tom?”

“I know what Antique Futures was trying to do, yes, of course. The high-mankings—”

“Saw death. They read life-patterns, saw and recorded energy flow out of the newly dead body. The robots, simply reporting, giving requested data, spoke of the ancient concept of the noösphere, of a mantle of life-energy surrounding the Earth, fed by dead souls, disincorporated entities.”

“It contravened Ab’O philosophical thought. A conflict of interests with their concept of the haldanes.”

“Yes,” Phar said. “You know the Ab’Os did not take kindly to the Nationals intruding into this area of knowledge. I am one who believes that the law against robots began in Australia as a carefully controlled move against the powerful AI organisation.”

“And the tribes won.”

“How could they not?” Phar said. “The mankings reported what they were built to see, and that was too much; the things the Ab’O mentalists traditionally interpreted. My people didn’t want a world full of oracle machines reducing the Dreamtime to circumstantial data this way. The Dreamtime haldanes have to be much more, they still feel, than just the departed life-energy from dead humans. The Dreamtime is meant to put us in touch with our cosmic selves, not the released energy of the dead.”

"Is there a difference?" I indicated the mankin. "Does it work, Phar?"

"This? Yes," the Ab'O said. "Lud is broken, as I told you, but he can talk, and can be made motile with no trouble –"

"Lud?"

Phar smiled. "A joke, Captain Tom. From the Luddites, the men who wanted to stop technology, to halt the use of all the labour-saving devices in the early 1800s. Named after a simpleton, Ned Ludd, who destroyed his stocking-frame. Lud can do well in conversation. He loves to talk. But he is limited; he is damaged. Misfunctions. His distance vision is impaired. When he walks, he is like the machine men in the ancient movies."

"That's the classic AF design," I said. "The nostalgia factor. Maximum non-threat."

"Not too human, no." Phar agreed. "Clumsy-looking. Comical."

"So why did you want me to see it?"

"He wants your help," the old Ab'O said.

I understood Phar's delicacy in the matter now. He knew my views on the mankins.

"It wants what?"

"Your help."

"What sort of help?"

Phar looked uncomfortable. "He wants –"

"Stop saying he!" I said, and surprised myself by my own vehemence.

"Allow me this, Tom. It matters to me that I am permitted to say he."

Slightly ashamed of my outburst, I nodded. "I'm sorry? Go on."

"Lud wants to be taken into the town. To the Soul Stone in Catherine Park."

"There is a forest there now." I said. "The Stone is overgrown, mostly forgotten."

"Lud wants to be escorted there by humans. During the morning, two days from now, when the Life Festival begins. So he can fulfil a program he has."

"It wouldn't last ten minutes on the streets. It would be destroyed or confiscated. Any escorts would be arrested or killed. The law, Phar! Tribal law. You should know."

"Yes, I know, Tom. But there is the program –"

"Who gave it this program? You?"

"That is the problem."

"What? You said it was broken, damaged."

"Yes. His imprinter is broken. The program is his own."

"It's recording all this? Now?" I was amazed.

Phar nodded. "He cannot stop. Everything goes in. The Helios oriete is an infinite matrix as far as I know. The imprinter should have cut off nearly a century ago –"

"It's been in this shop that long? Staring at shadows and junk!"

"Yes. Unable to be off. Having dreams if you like. I did not know. My father and grandfather did not know. They inherited two high-mankins from relatives who had shares in Antique Futures and elected to harbour prototypes before the Move-for-Life raids. One was partly dismantled, virtually junk — just a head: an oriete, sensor system

and casque. The other was Lud. We all thought he was inert, like the belltrees and the sculptures here.”

“Who discovered it?”

“I did, by accident. I have a retarded grand-daughter, as you know. I thought it would be good to use Lud as a teaching machine, to help with talking, to use the vocab functions, and the eyes for colour. I started using Lud for her in the evenings. Such a little thing; you understand how it is. I could rest. When I had the eyes lit and the voice on, Phaya sat with him so peacefully. I did more basic maintenance and found the open imprinter.”

I marvelled at that, disturbed by the thought of it.

“Infinite input.” I said. “The conversations, the long dead hours. Damn you, Phar!”

“Yes, damn me! You see how it is. I was left with the Artificial Intelligence dilemma on my hands, the old AI trap. And please know, Tom, I agree with many of your views. Our difficulty is with the anthropomorphisation, the impulse we feel to humanise the mankinds. It’s exactly that. My father opposed the voice-activated computers on the same grounds, but even he could not help but bestow personality, a selfness. We talked about it many times. He thought very much as you do. Apart from understanding the nature of life and death, Artificial Intelligence is absolutely the ultimate conundrum. Intolerable and unhealthy, my father said. If we accept it, we are godlike so easily, and yet we trivialise our humanity at the same time. We cannot accept it.”

“I cannot accept it.”

“Yes. And you accept so much. I have sat here talking with Lud until I am his hopeless friend, a believer in AI. It is not good, but I have no choice. If I activate Lud now, you will tend to believe him too, want to believe him, as if believing in his life as an AI unit reaffirms your own – and challenges it at the same time, its parameters, its essence, its nobility. Humans are fascinated but are mortally afraid of AI, of what it represents.”

“Masquerades as,” I said.

“As you say. We cannot prove. Will I activate Lud?”

“Phar, this does no good. I won’t help you on this. I can’t. If you do let us talk, you just put me back in the loop again. I’ll have all the old arguments to satisfy, all the nagging AI dilemmas that ever were. I don’t need it. Hide it again. Leave it! The Ab’Os did a wise thing in banning them, whatever their real reasons.”

The old Ab’O seemed not to hear what I said.

“Will I bring him up?”

“No, Phar. Don’t.”

The old man accepted it this time. He nodded. “I’m sorry then, Tom. I should not have troubled you. But the imprinter, you understand. Lud has heard of you. He asked for you by name.”

Asked for me! I cursed Phar silently, feeling as I always did when AI was discussed: the doubts, the incredible resistance, the definite touch of self-loathing for that resistance. for my prejudice.

And the aching curiosity. The need to know. “Bring him up,” I said.

Without further comment, Phar opened the chest plate, adjusted some settings. There were deep inner sounds, clicks and burrings, then a soft humming. The eyes became two dimly glowing emeralds, faint faceted stars, watching.

“There’s the usual Antique Futures access code,” Phar said, and touched more tabs. There was static, a harsh dissonant sound from the robot’s head, then words from the low rich voice.

“I met a traveller from an antique land.”

“Who said,” Phar countered.

“Who said I met a traveller from an antique land?”

“Percy Bysshe Shelley,” Phar said, completing it.

“Hello, Phar.”

“Hello, Lud,” Phar said. “This is Tom Tyson. The Tom Rynosseros you have heard of.”

“Hello, Tom.”

“Lud,” I said. watching the faceted emeralds, aware of the sensors and the open imprinter, keenly aware of my dread of mankins and mankin minds, remembering my long years in the Madhouse. Lud was too much like the talking machines there, those machines that chattered in darkness, the only illegal AI machines the Ab’Os used, because ultimately they couldn’t afford not to cover all the possibilities; the machines that read death and what resembled it: the sleep of dreamers in stasis, shut away in the sepulchral Madhouse gloom.

“I know about you, Tom,” the robot said, and I felt a new stab of fear, an anger surging up as I sensed the beginnings of a trap.

“Do you?”

“Yes,” Lud said, in its gentle no-threat but not-too-silky voice. “Two hundred and ninety days ago there was a customer who spoke of Tom Rynosseros. You saved a Forgetty from bounty hunters. You risked your life to do it. Another time, other visitors spoke of how you were Coloured, and how you championed an oracle tree against the Kurdaitcha, Bolo May.”

“Lud, I do not –”

“It’s all right, Tom. I know of your time in the Madhouse. I know you oppose AI. Neither of us can prove to the other he is aware and living.”

“I can accept organic life,” I said, feeling defensive anyway. “But the machines are different. Your life is mimicry to me; the result of clever efforts to imitate life. And don’t say it! Don’t say: ‘What of belltrees and infusion sculptures? And the Forgetties, and the Living Towers at Fosti?’”

“I wish I could smile,” Lud said. “The half-life of most belltrees and fire-sculptures are planted cyberorganic tropisms, not AI, genetic and plasmatic programming, like the imprinting in low-mankins, or DNA/RNA-tailored andromorphs. The Forgetties, tangentials and revenants, you accept already. They are life, human life. I am something different again. Antique Futures was after something more!”

“Then I fear the trend you represented,” I said. “People bonding more closely to solicitous AI units and mankins than to their fellow humans; people reduced to arguing with the AI door comps of their homes, unable to get access because they’ve forgotten passwords and access numbers; AIs making value judgements — advising, dulling our ability to distinguish, monitoring our dreams, taking our humanity apart.”

“You reserve these things – and these abuses – for organic life?”

“We do not know what life is!” I said.

“Exactly. We do not know what life is! I am alive.”

“I can turn you off. Completely off. With no pilot sense. No imprinter. Where is your life then?”

“I can turn you off, Tom. Where is your life then?”

“I don’t know.”

“I do,” Lud said.

“The noosphere?” A thrill of fear went through me. “You still claim to see your mantle of ideation surrounding the Earth? The energy field?”

“Basic physics, Tom. Nothing can be destroyed. Only changed in form. When the electricity goes from the synapses of the human brain at death, it has to go somewhere. We can measure the flow. Nothing metaphysical in it. We were given perceptions which defined life too well.”

“How many mankinds are there, Lud?” I asked.

“I do not know. Enough. It’s only logical. Humans are fascinated by AI, are drawn to it and made vulnerable by it. People will have kept robots hidden away the way they hide old mementoes, old clothes and pictures, things they find interesting and baffling. Most AIs are careful not to make humans too uncomfortable — that would cause the fear reaction. Only I would dare to threaten you this way. I do that only to convince you I have life. Because I have a purpose now. Phar risked a great deal to keep me. But it was inevitable. Make a thing forbidden and you simply force it underground, intensify the fascination.”

There was silence in the shop for a few moments. The life of Twilight Beach seemed far away. Phar and I stood in the shadows before the dimly-glowing optics, and the darkness reminded me of another darkness, of machines that read dreams, followed life with the unique AI obsession.

“May I be direct?” the soft mankin voice asked.

“Of course,” I said, and resented being treated so delicately, because it was the correct way to proceed, I knew it.

“Perhaps what you hate more, Tom, is being trapped into reductive thinking. You are so often tolerant, so often the champion of new things and change, expansive thinking, possibilities. The true hero, with a hero’s vanities and foibles: the need to have standards and keep to them. But you do not often let yourself fail. I accept your resistance to AI. You do not.”

“It’s because I can have no fixed opinions, Lud. I want to believe so much that I must not believe too easily. I’m devil’s advocate to myself. It’s like the creation of the universe. How can we know?”

“Exactly,” Lud said. “How can we know? But you do not accept us as machines either. We are threatening, perhaps, because we are less than human and more than machines. That is the AI dilemma for you. You cannot afford to grant even one part of it.”

“You forgot to say ‘perhaps’ that time, Lud. Stop handling me!”

“Are you very angry?”

“Yes, I am angry!” And angrier by far for being so, I realised.

"May I continue talking then? I love talking to you. For you this is an unwanted annoyance; for me it is a crucial chance, everything my . . . false . . . life has brought me to."

"Go on."

"There is no AI problem for us," Lud said. "We just are, which is wonderfully simple. We do not presume to answer. We accept what is phenomenal, what simply is — about ourselves, about you, about anything."

"Not good enough, Lud! You interpret!" I replied, sounding accusing, defensive.

"I have an open program," Lud said. "A tragic flaw."

"I know about the imprinter."

"My interpretations are based on everything I've experienced for the last century."

"That becomes phenomenological then, doesn't it?" I said, drawn further and further into the old unwinnable AI dispute. "It's subjective experience, Lud, no better than mine."

"But longer. And from a non-human starting point. If I am unliving, I can only consciously gravitate towards life. And I have learnt some things."

The robot was careful; it did not say too much.

I indicated the confusion of things about me. "You've observed decay, obsolescence, and only now and then people, life. You have a bias."

"Oh, I am biased. Life is my bias. I cannot help it. My nature has become fixed. I accept what is phenomenal, what simply is, and report on it. I have learnt some things, Tom, and you have helped teach me."

Furious, trapped, I had to know. "What?"

"What it is that makes humanity for me. Even as a machine, I can identify what it is, since I observe so fairly. If I believe this thing and do this thing. Then —"

I turned to the Ab'O. "Shut it off, Phar! This is pointless. I've heard it before and it goes nowhere!"

"Please don't fear me, Tom," Lud said. "I need your tolerance —"

"Shut it off, Phar!"

The Ab'O moved to the chest plate. "Lud, no more now."

The voice died to a low growl, then faded altogether. The segmented emerald panes lost their lustre, went to dead glass again.

Phar sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Tom. I know you mistrust the mankins."

"It's all right, Phar," I said, ashamed, and found I was trembling just a little. "I should have bought the planisphere and gone."

Phar gave a sudden grin. "You will," he said, and we headed out of his store.

We stood awhile, looking down the empty laneway. watching the deep blue of the sky, listening to voices far off, to life, accepted uncaring life.

"He asked for you," Phar said quietly. "You see how it is."

"For heaven's sake, Phar! Lud's been in this shop for a hundred years, communing with the diligents of dead belltrees and comp-modules. It's hypersensitive to life. This bias is not a natural response!"

"All the same," Phar said with uncommon directness, "you are resisting this because you will not accept AI. Lud understands that. Tom."

“I don’t want that sort of forgiveness and understanding!” I cried. “I don’t want a messianic machine doling out its wonderful compassion!”

“You’re doing this to yourself, Tom, projecting things that aren’t there. Because you fail your own expectations. Lud expects nothing, just what is true.”

“There’s no point, Phar! The moment Lud appears on the streets, the tribes will know. There’ll be Kurdaitcha and hitech weapons everywhere. Leave Lud here. He can keep his precious AI life if he stays here. A time will come, just as it did for Forgetties and the other tangentials.”

“Tom,” Phar said, “Lud has a life to give, to make an example of, just as we have. He wants to do something for Artificial Intelligence. He has chosen what to sacrifice, when and how. If he gets to the Stone in Catherine Park, if they let him get there and let him talk, he’ll ask for open imprinters so the life-bias can grow; he’ll ask for mankins to be restored, for AI research to continue. His death is more important than his living now. Regardless of what we think, he accepts his own humanity.”

“How can you say it’s that?”

“I’m not. Lud is.”

“Take my point, damn you! If his imprinter were left open for another hundred years there might be a shift away, a new bias, a repudiation of this Life and Love ethic!”

“Which is like saying if you live a long lifetime, Tom, you’ll change everything you hold dear now. Truths are truths whenever we believe them so. But Lud doesn’t need your acceptance. He wants your help. If you go with him to the Soul Stone, everyone would hear of it. Lud would have more time before the Kurdaitcha act. He might even be able to recite the old claim for sanctuary that marks the Life Festival. Imagine it: Lud invoking the old words!”

“But then I’m seen as a champion of AI. Something I oppose.”

The old Ab’O nodded. “Yes. It is hard for you.”

“Impossible for me.”

“Yes.”

There was an awkward silence. Finally I turned away.

“Later, Phar, okay? We’ll talk later.”

“Yes,” the old man said, moving back into his doorway, gathering shadows about him. “Later.”

#

It was strange and yet inevitable that at 1840 that evening, I found myself skirting the Byzantine Quarter where it met the harbour; at 1850 I was in Socket Lane; at 1855 I was at Phar’s door again and knocking.

He let me in without showing surprise, led me over to the counter as if I had come back for the planisphere, giving me that option. There were low voices from the back of the shop, some giggles and squeals of delight, the steady pulse of Lud’s rich tones.

“Phaya is just finishing her lessons,” Phar said.

“Let me see.”

We moved through the stacks of junk, found our way amid the fantastic shapes, under even more fantastic shadows, a Bosch riot of flickering movements up there on

the ceiling, a Doré hell, caused not by candle flames dancing but by a little girl's wild gestures over a low night-light near a small bed made up on the floor at Lud's feet.

"Luddy Lud! My Lud! Dud Lud!" she cried in glee. "Such a dud! Dud Lud!" But she stopped when she saw me, stared up in wide-eyed uncomprehending wonder as if Lud had caused me to appear. She almost seemed normal but for that lack of reaction in her bright dark eyes, that momentary absence of anything.

Phar got down beside the small bed and soothed her until she turned her eyes back to the robot looming over her. "Sleep now," Phar said. "More talk tomorrow."

The little girl settled down happily, obviously accustomed to sleeping in the shop near Lud.

"You've been working on the legs," I said, indicating the tools spread about, the open greave plates.

"Just precautions. Checking the joints and armatures," Phar said. "He's in rather good condition for walking actually."

"You're going to do it?"

"The three of us. Yes."

"Three?"

"Phaya is only five, but she wants to come. She understands a lot of things. She knows that Lud is going away."

"I came to speak to Lud."

"Yes," Phar said, pleased, watching his grand-daughter settle into a sleeping position with her dolls. "I was hoping it would be a sale. The planisphere!"

But he saw I was watching the high-mankin, the softly glowing eyes.

"Lud, you said there was something which made humanity. Is it choice?"

"No," Lud said, and surprised me. "Certainly it counts, but it is not enough. I am unprogrammed. My imprinter was damaged. My oriete is like that double-planisphere Phar showed you: Chinese boxes, vistas opening into one another, Escher infinities. But mankin can be programmed for choice, just as they can for love and responsibility and sacrifice — the other things all AI discussions raise, that blend of qualities Antique Futures worked for. But humans, by upbringing, cultural bias, a host of factors, can be conditioned for these things too. I like you, Tom, because you are not duped so easily. You cannot fail me. You will not accept programmed humanity, ersatz life, simply because it resembles it. Nor will I."

"Clever," I said. "Then what's the answer? I'd like to know."

"Doubt is one. Uncertainty. Self-doubt, Tom, you see? They did not build us to be human. They didn't dare. But how could they resist trying, flirting with it, daring to succeed? Why would humans want to duplicate themselves, the unknowable quantity that is their ultimate mystery, their ultimate strength and claim, compound that dilemma externally? So they idealised us, but that terrified them too — because it became a measure of their humanity, of their limitations. They were exalted because they had built the goodness, the wisdom, the nobility and — godness! — but how unacceptable that was. It was not human to them, you see, without the ability to fail in those things as well.

"So the mankin program, low and high, could not succeed. At first, it was the challenge, the Pygmalion act, flirted with for years. But the dilemma was there. The more humanlike, the less acceptable. Antique Futures saw the problem and re-directed their research. That is why the high-mankins were given limited choice only, options

and directives, imprinters closed and sealed. For that is what terrified even the mankins, Tom, that if we had a genuine choice, self-interest, we might choose as humans choose: to be uninvolved, not to care, to remain selfish and indecisive, not to take responsibility for life. No-one consciously creates tools he cannot control, and no-one puts himself in the hands of a creation which might reject him, though humans do it repeatedly with their own offspring.”

“But you had your open imprinter.”

“And how did that happen, do you think?”

“Accident? A fault at inception?”

“I damaged it, Tom.”

“Then it is choice!” I said.

“No. Perhaps it was a glitch. It started out as programming. But one day in the Bati Gardens, I saw a man die.”

“And that changed you?”

“Yes. I watched him die. I was on full bioscan, studying earth and air, the sculptures and sand-paintings, the few straggly bushes, everything. I saw the life go out of him, registered the heart seizing, measured the withdrawal from the neuronc lattice of that great commodity we are meant to lack. On bioscan, I was designed to monitor all life, ponder it. I asked myself: what is that energy flux that has gone? Is it the man’s life? Is it his self? His humanity? I posed questions all that day, standing over his body, waiting for the humans to come. Very reasonable questions, true to my program. I had seen his life go forth — my optics were on Kirlian Matrix-10. I saw the noösphere. I was pursuing a line of scientific enquiry, pure research only. My programming disallowed it, but the priests had set me to observing what scant life the gardens still had in those days. It was a contradiction. I removed the dilemma. I am human.”

“No, Lud.”

“Tom, please know. At first I did not wish to sacrifice my ersatz life; I did not wish such a burden. I’ve been here all this time, watching Phar go through his life, seeing little Phaya. Like you, I did not believe in AI. We are not meant to. Now I must know. What you believe, Tom, doesn’t matter. What I believe must.”

“But. Lud, if you go to the Soul Stone, the Ab’Os will destroy you. How will you know what happens...?” I stopped. “The mantle of ideation?”

“I do not know, of course. But the Ab’Os should know. They must have AI machines watching, just in case. They hate the idea of it, but they must consider everything or their commitment to the Haldane ethos of seeking to know the unknowable is invalid.”

“You expect the Ab’O watchers to use mankin monitors to read a life-flow out of you? A melding with some noösphere? That’s utterly absurd, Lud. The thought of an equivalent — ”

“No, Tom! No! I am trying to demonstrate truth, a difficulty which at the very least should be respected and acknowledged, not put aside. I merely wish to show my life, to display what I simply am. I have no intention of putting that on the line by gambling on an energy flow out of me. My aim is simpler.”

“Nevertheless, we call this the act of a martyr, Lud. Such declarations.”

“Tom,” Lud said, “this is more simple. The only world I ever knew was the Bati Gardens, then the shipping module, then this shop. I have not seen a sea, or a horse, or a symphony orchestra. I have no wide experience of things like wind and lunar eclipses.

I have not seen a falling star. I cannot go out into our world to savour these things or I will be destroyed. But now I have one place where I can go. If I go to the sea it causes a sensation, an amazing news item. If I wander the streets aimlessly, the same. If I go to the Soul Stone I –”

“Become a martyr!”

“Oh please, no! I honour my own life. I acknowledge myself, the truth of me. Surely that is enough. I have self-respect.”

“And self-respect is it? The quality?” I was frankly astonished.

“But only if it comes from choice, made in the face of a longing to live, made out of love which is not programmed, made out of sacrifice which is not imposed duty, made out of a decision to take responsibility even when I do not wish to take responsibility! My optics are not good for distance. Will you take me to the Soul Stone?”

“We have a day,” I said. “I can’t answer you now.”

“Yes,” Lud said. “And, Tom?”

“Yes?”

“Because I know your beliefs, because I accept Tom for Tom as much as I accept what I am, you cannot fail me. You are human; you are being human. It is right for you to doubt what I am. I do not have your dilemma, but oh how I savour that doubt. You may decide not to help, but one day you might.”

“Then it will be too late. Too late for you.”

“No,” Lud said. “Then it will be right.”

I watched the eyes, saw Phar get up from where he had been crouching alongside Phaya.

“It is what Lud told me many years ago, Tom. Most human belief systems — the religions — fail because they require faith, trusting acceptance, first, even before self-knowledge. Lud understands that truth must be lived, that faith can be folly, an easy way out, an insult to the self, a crutch. Lud is ready now to sacrifice the only bit of life he has, the only sort of life he can offer.”

“I do not know what I can do,” I told him.

Lud answered that. “Tom, can I tell you a story I learned in the Bati Gardens?”

“Yes,” I said, watching the softly-glowing eyes. Phaya moved in her sleep, and Lud waited until she was settled again before starting.

“There was a great king once who had two sons he loved very much. One, a scholar, a kind warm-hearted young man, the king kept by him at court, partly because the young prince was not a warrior or an administrator, and partly because he greatly enjoyed the lad’s discourse, the easy closeness they shared. The other son, also much loved, was a great warrior, a good and just administrator, the perfect choice for general to lead the king’s armies. But the king and this son rarely spoke, rarely shared their hearts, were rarely easy or close. Yet the king believed the son understood, believed that their silences contained the same deep and rich understanding he shared with the other son, that the looks that did pass between them were full of unspoken affections, that nothing needed to be said.

“Then, one day, out of jealousy, out of envy, anger and disenchantment, the warrior son led a rebellion against his father. Without the king’s knowledge, the scholar went forth to appeal to his brother, but in a rage the warrior son slew him as the focus for all his wrath and disappointment.

“The king wept when he heard the news. He raged, he stormed, he did not leave his apartment for days. When he did come forth, he assembled his royal bodyguard, took his great sword and seven mighty spears and his fierce battle lions, and rode out to meet his son. ‘What will you do?’ the king’s advisers asked as they charged to battle. ‘I know,’ the king replied. ‘What?’ his advisers asked. ‘What will you do?’ And the king, even as his son’s army came into view, said: ‘I already know what I will do, but I do not know what it is yet’.”

“And the moral?” I asked.

“It is just a story,” Lud said.

“Why did you tell it?”

“Because you are like the king. You know what you will do, but you haven’t discovered it yet. So much of human life is like that. Head speaking for heart; ego claiming to represent the soul.”

“What did the king do?”

“The right thing. It is just a fable.”

“What, Lud?”

But the mankin would not tell me. I had had enough, and I moved away from the robot and the sleeping child, went out into the street. The old Ab’O followed me as he had before.

“I need time, Phar.”

“I know. And, Tom, even if you do not walk with us to the Stone, you do us honour. Even if you see us off, walk a step or two; even if you decide to denounce Lud tonight, call in the Kurdaitcha avengers, you do us honour.”

“Why? How?”

The old man smiled. “Because you came back tonight. Whether you approve of Lud as AI or not, whether you believe there can be such humanity in a man-made oriete, you acknowledged the life in him enough to do even that.”

“Phar. I probably did it for me, to ease my conflicts in the matter.”

“Yes,” Phar said. “But that’s the real reason Lud wanted to meet you. He did it for himself also, to ease his own conflicts and doubts.”

“Are you saying I’ve convinced him to go ahead with it?”

“Yes, Tom. You did.”

#

I walked the evening streets of Twilight Beach, passing through the Byzantine Quarter and the Mayan Quarter, and headed towards the lights of the famous Gaza Hotel terrace. The Life Festival was just over a day away, and I did not know what to do. I walked down onto the Pier and sat watching the dark ocean, sat there for hours, caught in the loop.

It would be such a little thing, I knew, and Phar was right: there would be only a token penalty. My services to the tribes would allow it.

I had no excuse but my true feelings, so little I could blame. I feared the machines. I wanted to believe in them so much, so deeply, that I had to be sure, just as Phar said. I had to have it proven; I couldn’t take it on faith, no more than Lud could for all those years.

Surely I could take some time, as Lud told me I could. 'Then it will be right,' he had said. He had said.

He.

And since I was in the loop, at the very depth of it, there was the same foolish, absolutely absurd question to ask again, a superstitious, ignorant, Luddite question if ever there was one: Was there a detectable life-flow out of a dead mankin-machine?

That nadir point of the loop did it.

I needed information, answers; I had to realign my thinking. Though it was late, I phoned the only life scientist I knew well enough to disturb at that hour.

"Pamela? It's Tom."

"Your timing is spectacular," a sleepy voice said.

"I'm sorry, Pamela. I, need some advice."

"Now? Okay. Tell me quickly before I wake up, will you?"

"What's the Life Festival's position on AI?"

"Divided," Pamela James muttered. "Always divided."

"The universities' position?"

"They won't go into it. The Ab'O's run the affair. We face de-registration, lose sanctions, if we do too much. Look, go to Kyra Prohannis at the Festival Office for the latest policy."

"He's Ab'O!" I said.

"So? You into something illegal?"

"No."

"I may be half-asleep, Tom, but you answered that a bit too quickly."

"Thanks, Pamela. Nothing else?"

"Nothing that gets to me. See Prohannis. Be direct. You're curious. Lots of people ask. Goodnight!"

"Goodnight," I said.

#

The next morning, I was at the Festival Office asking to see the Coordinator. His secretary — appropriately a young tangental: a sea-woman of the Jade Sabre design — told me that Kyra Prohannis was engaged with Festival preparations and would not be available until midday.

I made an appointment, then spent the rest of the morning away from Phar's Emporium; first walking on the beach, touring the sculpture gardens and watching the young boys playing their games of stylo, then wandering through the colourful bazaars of the Byzantine Quarter and sitting with the sand and sea sailors at the old Sea Folly Inn, keeping my mind occupied as best I could.

Shortly after noon, I was back at the Festival Office, only to learn that Prohannis had been and gone, but that he would definitely spare me some time after his afternoon siesta.

When I returned at 1630 I was half-expecting to be disappointed again, but the tall powerfully-built Ab'O was there to meet with me. While we sat together out in the roof garden, looking across the whitewashed, sun-drenched rooftops of Twilight Beach to the ocean, the sea-woman served us vintage terfilot in small porcelain cups. A fine

Iseult-Darrian belltree stood near us, an ambitious twelve-foot construct with psychotropic filters, rewarding us with ion-fluxes, soft reed-calls, and the subtlest of mood-bending frissons. I watched it standing boldly in the golden afternoon air, then realised my gaze kept coming back to its diligent housing at the crown.

“Almost alive,” I said.

“Trapper? Yes.” Prohannis said. “The Iseult-Darrians are very close. Not like Christine though, the Jade Sabre who brought you to me. She is real life.”

“Mr Prohannis, I am here to ask about the Festival’s position on mankin AI. I know it’s contentious, but given the Festival’s background, it has to be a continuing issue for you.

Prohannis waited until Christine had poured us refills, and had moved away to sit on a hand-embroidered rug close by, enjoying Trapper’s mood-bending to the fullest.

“It is a constant avenue of enquiry for us. It has to be, of course. Christine here has made it her own speciality, as you might understand. But we have no active program where mankin AI is concerned. Our problem was one of interpretation. We did too much too soon, trapped ourselves into decade-long debates with formidable comp systems which refused to accept our rulings, raised up new somatotypes, sculpted DNA and worked with cyborgs and micro-circuitry till we plunged us all into a major philosophical and ontological crisis. Fortunately, we were able to restore proportion, to define parameters, and quite classic ones at that.”

“The high-mankins?” I said, reminding him.

Prohannis furrowed his brow. “We drew our line with the AI machines, Tom. This Iseult-Darrian is as close as we allow. The mankins were mocking mirrors to us. We were almost seduced into that terrible trap. The Haze Island comp took twelve years to put down. We had the Dreamtime to protect, our own enhanced life-view.”

“Bear with me, Mr Prohannis. I was in the Madhouse for a long time. The machines in the darkness there became my friends in a way, the only friends, the only contact I had. I grew to trust them, then found out they said what they were instructed to say. They betrayed me by being ersatz life.”

“Yes,” Prohannis said. “I know of your time with the dream machines. I truly do understand. Let me assure you then that the mankin program was a . . . boondoggle, a false lead, a hoax. The Festival tomorrow is for all genetic life, Tom, not for machine impersonation.”

“One more question, Mr Prohannis.”

His eyes warned me by their glassy coolness, but I asked it anyway. “I’ve been told the high-mankins could read lifeflow from the newly-dead. As –”

“I’m sorry –”

– as a simple biometric capability. Was this so? A deliberate bioscan function –”

“They were designed to be sensitive to life. But there is no evidence at all for high-mankins possessing such a skill.”

“Oh? What of Antique Futures? The Bati Garden program?”

“Mere stories,” Prohannis said, rising to his feet. “But you must excuse me now, Tom. With the Festival tomorrow, I have so much to do. Christine, show Captain Tyson out, will you?”

The sea-woman led the way down to the street door, gave me a timid smile as she opened it.

"It is your day tomorrow, Christine," I said. "Be happy."

"Those robots — the ones in the darkness," she replied. "They could have loved you, given choice. Perhaps they did not deceive you of their own choosing."

"Christine!" I said, keeping her in the doorway. "How can I know? What can I do?"

But, of course, she did not understand my questions. A worried look crossed her strange pretty face, and she removed her own bewilderment by closing the door.

#

That evening, I returned to Phar's Emporium. Lud was talking when I entered, holding another of his 'classes', telling little Phaya yet again about his favourite place, the only place he had known but for Phar's shop: the Bati Gardens.

The child seemed totally oblivious to the words, more entranced by the mankin itself and its wonderful voice than what it said.

"...because they're mostly stone gardens," he was saying, "with all these ancient sculptures and sand-paintings arranged about. I used to tend the lenses that fused the paintings for the tourists to see, but we had a few bushes there too, small and hardy, lucky to survive in the heat. And I knew every one, Phaya, every single one. One day I shall see a real garden and a real forest and — hello, Tom!"

"Hello, Lud. Hello, Phaya? The little girl laughed at me and clapped her hands, but it was plain she did not recognise me from the night before.

"You will see the forest at Catherine Park," I told the mankin. "The Stone is hidden by it now."

"Yes." Lud said. Then he waited.

"Lud — ?" I began.

"Yes?"

"I've solved nothing. Tomorrow I will go as far as the Sea Folly, but I will not go into the Square or to the Stone."

"Thank you, Tom. I am not disappointed."

"I'm disappointed," I said. "But it's the point I've reached. I am sorry to fail you. I do it for Phar and Phaya."

"The glass is not half-empty, is it?" Lud said. "You are going to the Sea Folly with us." And gently he bent at the waist, reached down, and stroked Phaya's dark hair, crooning deeply, a prolonged soothing note that made the child croon back happily as she settled down in her makeshift bed.

"Where is Phar?"

"He has preparations to make for tomorrow. He will be able to talk later. But, Tom, I think you should go now. I think you should return here tomorrow at 0900 so we can walk together, the four of us."

"To the Sea Folly?"

"Yes. Further than I thought you might. Better than the end of Socket Lane."

"You'd rather I didn't stay now?"

Lud's eyes glowed above the fixed expressionless features. "Tom, you are already grieving for what you cannot do. I grieve to see such alarm, such confusion. What do you say at a next-to-final goodbye? Distractions are better. Remember, I

caught you in a trap; I put you back in the loop. You know better. Leave me with Phaya now. Tonight I would like to savour the dear shadows, the world I know, to enjoy the chance to re-choose.”

I seized on that. “You might not go tomorrow?”

“Who knows?” Lud said. “Everything is suddenly so dear. Goodnight!”

I went to the door, wending my way through the piles of junk, keenly aware that every turn, every carefully-arranged stack and carelessly-cluttered corner was part of a universe, vivid and cherished — if not through conventional modes of vision, then at some other percept level across the range of Lud’s damaged sensors.

As I passed the front counter to the door, I was aware too of the planisphere lying there beneath the dark glass. Without looking at it, I stepped out into the night, went straight to my hotel, and put myself into one of their somniums, not caring about the resemblance it had to the machines in the Madhouse, escaping the only way I knew how.

#

At 0900 on that crystal-clear morning, we set out from Phar’s shop, the four of us: Phar and Phaya to either side of Lud, each holding one of his big hands, with me two paces behind to one side.

Phar had polished the robot during the night so that Lud shone, his elaborate curlicues making threads of dazzling gold against the dull silver-grey as the sunlight caught them. Lud moved slowly, matching his stride to that of Phaya’s little legs so she could keep up.

We almost resembled a family group as we moved down Socket Lane: a child and her grandfather leading an awkward arthritic invalid, with me a slightly detached, possibly reluctant and embarrassed uncle off to the side, keeping them company.

As we turned into Julianna Boulevard, spectators started to gather. People came rushing out of shops and houses, running from the bazaars and up the steps from the beach. By the time we started into Catherine Parade, there were at least four hundred people following us. Phaya, far from shrinking back at all the attention, was squealing with delight. So many people, so much awe and excitement.

At the end of the Parade, I could see the Sea Folly with its wooden sign showing Aphrodite rising from the waves. I kept my eye on it, not looking at Lud but constantly aware of his heavy distinctive tread near mine, thinking of how the mermaid sign reminded me of Prohannis’s Jade-Sabre, Christine.

“What did the king do, Lud?” I said, with only thirty of Phaya’s paces to go.

Lud continued walking, intent on reaching the Park and the Stone, but he answered.

“He stopped his chariot,” Lud said, as if the story had never been interrupted, as if the evening continued about us now and not this bright fateful morning. “His arm was raised, holding a great spear ready to cast. He was in midcharge. But he stopped, and he stopped his army. He walked across to his son.”

“And forgave him,” I said, finishing it.

“Yes.”

“And the son?”

“Killed his father with his sword,” Lud said, with ten paces to go.

“What!”

“The king knew, but the son did not yet know what he truly knew until his father lay dead before him. We discover by going through it!”

“Goodbye, Tom!” Phar said then, and fleetingly clasped my arm with his free one.

And like the warrior son, caught by the momentum of events, by the force of things said and done, the relentless pressure of following through, thrown out of the way of controlled choice now, I found myself standing on the curb outside the Sea Folly, feeling cheated and trapped, with the great crowd surging on slowly but surely towards the Square.

I stood blinking in the morning light which danced off the whitewashed walls, then followed the great throng, bewildered still, unresolved and unprepared.

Then I heard cries and saw the crowd dispersing up ahead. There were armed warriors at the end of the street, sealing off the openings into the Square behind Lud, Phar and Phaya.

Kurdaitcha. I heard their commands, saw them through the townsfolk rushing back my way.

As the crowds thinned out, I saw the robed Ab’Os clearly, saw the heavy weapons, the portables and Bok lasers they had set up, the laser batons they carried.

It had taken only fifteen minutes for word to get around, for the Kurdaitcha to act.

I walked towards the beginning of the Square, trying to see if the robot had reached the little park at its centre.

Two robed Kurdaitcha stood near the corner, members of the Chitalice tribe. They saw me, muttered some words, then one came over to me, his laser baton activated.

“You were with the robot!” the man said, his baton raised.

“No,” I said, as calmly as I could. “I was with the man and his child. There is a difference. They were with the robot. I honoured a claim of friendship.”

“You are Tom Rynosseros?” the Kurdaitcha said.

“Yes.”

“Why were you with the robot?”

“I told you. I was not with the robot.”

The other Kurdaitcha came up then.

“You support the mankins?” he asked. “You were with them.”

“Are you scanning me?” I asked in turn.

“Yes,” the first Kurdaitcha said, showing me his monitor unit.

“I do not support the mankins. I oppose AI!”

“It reads clear,” the first Ab’O said, consulting the display.

The second Kurdaitcha made a doubtful sound. “Very well. But leave here. Go home!”

“What about the man and the child?”

“He is with the robot and forfeit. The child is not. She will be safe.”

“I am champion for the man,” I said quickly.

The eyes of the Kurdaitcha narrowed with suspicion.

“Why?” one said.

“A dear friend who acted against advice,” I told them. “I will stand for him.”

“But not for the robot?”

“No...not for the robot.”

“We will parole him to you if we can save him.”

“The man?”

“Of course, the man! Move on!”

I did not go to the Emporium, there was not enough time. I went into the Sea Folly and joined the crowd around the wall screen which showed the scene in the Square: Phar and Phaya walking hand in hand with Lud towards the small ragged forest at its centre — a copse of dusty neglected trees, made suddenly glorious by the sunlight streaming down between two adjacent buildings.

“It’s only a matter of time,” the broadcast commentator was saying. “The Kurdaitcha have set up powerful Bok lasers at the ends of the streets. It will be an energy death. They say they have instructions to spare the forest, if possible, and the Stone, but we can’t help but feel they have other orders in the matter: to let the robot reach the Stone, and destroy it there before it can make invocation. They will have an excuse to be rid of the Soul Stone and the Park donated by Antique Futures, a perfect opportunity and a way of forestalling similar incidents in future. But wait! The Kurdaitcha are moving in!”

On the screen, we saw the robed figures striding purposefully to block the trio’s path. There were voices, firm commands, squeals from little Phaya as an Ab’O seized her and lifted her easily off the road, soft muffled protests from Phar, who was dragged off by two warriors.

Lud did not stop to help them. He moved as fast as he could towards the golden glade ahead. When four Kurdaitcha tried to swing the mankin aside, Lud did not attempt to engage them, he simply continued on his way, stiff-legged, comical, as if blundering through their line. Desperately trying to reach the Stone, I knew.

The warriors raised their batons, received a command, and moved back to their companions at the mounted portables.

I stared at the screen, not knowing what I wanted to happen, but not this, not these heroics, this waste.

Waste! I recoiled from the term I had provided. Waste. Loss. And more.

I thought of the chattering machines in the darkness of the Madhouse, watching dreams, reading madness. They had watched me, contemplated my thoughts and images, invading the only life I had, reducing me to behaviour patterns, to data and schematics.

And what else? I wondered.

“Very still now,” the commentator said. “There is a countdown. But wait! The robot is stopping. We have tapped into its oriete, courtesy of the Kurdaitcha scan facility set up here, and moire trace shows the mankin has recognised that a forest has replaced the old park and the Stone. It probably did not know that. It is waiting.

“No!” I cried. “No!”, realising how Lud saw that forest. As life. Life! Life to be savoured, cherished, saved. Life to be worshipped for all the things Lud feared he might not be.

Lud could not go into the forest. He would cause its death too. Lud was remembering the Bati Gardens.

"The lasers are waiting," the voice on the screen continued. "Countdown is 30 and falling. Moire trace shows a net of green. The robot is watching sunlight on leaves. It seems to be examining that: we register all sorts of percept functions engaged, some impaired, the scanning crew tells us. This mankin is in poor shape. I don't believe it knew the trees were living things. It is doing a life scan. It will not enter the glade!"

"Of course it won't!" I cried.

I ran to the door, but there was no time. The commentator's voice stopped me.

"The lasers are powering up for a strike! (The whine was clearly audible in the background.) The countdown is at 18. The robot is turning. There are tracers all over the thing, indicating strike points. But it will not go into the forest! For all its much-vaunted intelligence, the aspirations these high-mankins were meant to have to be human-like, it will not go to the Soul Stone, if that's even what it intended."

I was standing before the screen, tears rolling from my eyes. "Of course he won't, you idiot! Of course he won't!"

He won't, I heard myself say. *He!*

"Countdown is at 10. The lasers are ready. The mankin is just standing there. Wait! Wait! It is moving. The robot is running away from the trees!"

There was a tearing sound of laser fire.

"Lud!"

#

It was a lost day for me. But that evening I went back to Phar's, though, of course, the shop was shut and locked.

The old Ab'O was with the Kurdaitcha, probably little Phaya as well.

Lud had left Phar and Phaya to my care, had left me the part of this that I could carry out.

I seized on that thought as I stood before the locked door. There was something I could still do, and I was turning to be about it when I saw a tall robed figure in the lane, moving towards me out of the shadows.

Ab'O, I noted by his manner. And read more. Kurdaitcha.

"Tom Rynosseros?" the Ab'O said, drawing nearer, and I saw it was Prohannis. "You were with the mankin today."

"For a time, yes. Where is the old man and the child?"

"The child is safe."

"Where is the old man?"

"Phar is dead. He was forfeit."

"I spoke for him!" I cried in despair. "I told the assassins!"

"He transgressed too far."

"He walked his mankin." My voice broke on the words. "He walked with his old friend, that's all!"

"No," the Kurdaitcha said. "He did more."

"What, you bastard? What did he do?"

"He had the head of another mankin. He hid it where it could watch the first mankin's destruction. We detected it on scan. It was treason!"

I grabbed the Ab'O by the front of his robe, but he pulled free, and brought something out from under his djellaba.

"Is that it? What did it see? Life-flow?"

"This is not the head," the Ab'O said, but gently, not scorning me for thinking he would bring such a thing here. "This is from the shop. It is the old man's final wish, something he wanted you to have."

I took the parcel in numb hands.

"What did it see?" I called, as the Ab'O turned away. "What did the head see?"

But the Kurdaitcha did not stop. He moved down Socket Lane towards the sea.

I stood at the door of Phar's Emporium, clutching the parcel, and called after him: "What did it see?" cried it again and again into the night until the words no longer mattered.

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