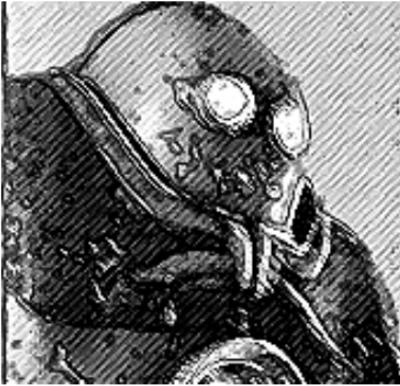


search

by

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The robot had no choice even though everything seemed hopeless.

It was wise to conserve power.

Attaboy had switched most of himself off as he lay buried in the desert. Above, storm winds tore the dunes into violent new shapes, creating landscapes that made his implanted maps useless, but he was safe. Always the most important thing. To be able to carry on and on.

His sensors had screamed their internal warning of the storm. They had sent furious impulses racing through him as subtle changes in the atmosphere touched them, as advance flurries of the distant hurricane played around. Analysis had shown what a monster the storm would be and he had hidden himself quickly. Slight seepage of sand into his joints, worsened by his hasty digging, was nothing compared to the disaster of trying to walk in the hot, tearing winds. A few new scratches would make little difference to his battered body. Later, perhaps, he might regret the grains

which scraped relentlessly inside him, but it was a small price to pay for surviving the storm. One day, that bad day, his sensors would not anticipate a storm and it would all be over.

No, don't think - never think about the end. Everything is all right.

He activated the primary warning circuit, then checked it was in good shape. There was no fault. It watched, as vigilant as ever. With an unintentional human wryness, certainly not put there by Pete so long ago, he admitted that, possibly, even his ability to detect a fault in the fault-finding circuits might be impaired. After all didn't other parts slip at times? But no sooner had that rogue thought crept out than he knocked it aside. There was no fault. There could be none.

How long had he been under the sand now? He regretted any time lost hiding from storms; fighting strange, vicious animals; sometimes, too often, fighting vicious humans; wandering

in uncontrollable circles; disappearing into memory feedback. He had no way of measuring time as his automatic counter had been destroyed years before. Some day he would lie buried and his sensors would fail to tell him when the storm had finished. Without the glaring sun and orange moon to estimate by he would lie there forever,

Bad thoughts. He did not like them, did not know where they were made. These thoughts were a discredit to himself, and especially to Pete. Positive thinking. Search. Search.

At last the sensors let him know the vibrations around where he was hidden had diminished. Things seemed to have settled in the new world above. His nuclear batteries sent power to the remaining rover, tight on his thigh. It demagnetised and burrowed to the surface, a long, thin crab with paddle-shaped legs useful for digging and scuttling across soft terrain. Signals poured back from it and were sorted

by the electro-gel brain protected deep where his stomach would have been, then settled in the two memories hidden small within him.

As all the information from the rover flooded through his circuits he felt his primary store begin to falter under the strain. This had happened before and there was nothing he could do. The primary store held his progressive memory; the other contained mainly data originally programmed by Pete. If he could pluck the faulty one out, like the offending eye in human folklore, it would be sudden and total amnesia. But recently the store had been shunting unwanted memories into his brain in one hundred percent feedback. These obliterated the impulses from the rover, or whatever else he was receiving. Now he could see the images beamed back from the surface, could feel the rover checking radiation levels, could -

The grass underfoot, growing from firm earth, was the best ground.

Radiation was normal. The storm had not left any dangerous residue. All around, the sand --

But grass was all around. He walked towards the forest, birds were singing not far to his right. A light wind rustled the trees. It was good to find a place, so soon after leaving the safety of the ocean, where he could be optimistic about humans having survived. So much had been desert or totally destroyed. Here, sheltered in a valley and apparently not subject to the burning storms, there could well be a settlement. In fact, as he climbed a small rise near the forest, he noticed cultivated fields. Of sorts, he amended as he scoped in. They had been recently cared for but were becoming just a little overgrown.

That was not good.

He entered the forest, glad to be out of the sun which was degrading Pete's paint job: the capital letters of

ATTABOY and the patriotic symbols, done when he still believed that his nation might eventually resolve the crisis.

Attaboy stopped, thought he had heard a noise. Suddenly, he was confronted by about ten humans who had slid from behind trees, or dropped from the branches with surprising stealth and speed. His first contacts. His task would be easier than Pete had suggested. Attaboy said, "Hello, my friends," but then the looks on their faces registered. They were not human looks. He had seen such faces on wild animals. Something had happened. Either they had retrogressed since planting, the fields, or they had taken over the valley recently from more normal people.

They moved closer, all dressed in rough skins or ragged pre-war clothes. Their hair was long and dirty. They carried poorly-shaped clubs, splintery-sharp pieces of metal and glass, and stones. His brain had been momentarily too occupied

with success to take in their barbaric state immediately. He began to speak again, but, shouting with one violent voice, they attacked him. He turned and ran, not knowing what else to do. He ran with two humans clinging to him until they fell off. He ran from the --

The past receded from his brain and the rover's data began to make sense again. There were no new problems involved in returning to the surface. He went through the information again, checking all he had missed in the memory lapse. Assuming the rover's reliability - what else could he do?

He began digging his way out. Slowly, more than previously, he reached the open desert. As he heaved free of the sand, he thought that perhaps he had not been so slow after all. He stood up noisily. Almost ten feet tall, once stylishly humanoid in a powerful way, he was now corroded and dented like an old, diseased superman whose youthful physique was

barely evident in what was left.

He looked around carefully. There had been trees visible before, to the north, but now nothing. Smooth mounds of dull, orange sand swept to the horizon in all directions. The high sun still burned too bright for his photors to receive. His visor had been ripped from his head in a distant fight, so he now never looked up during the day. Not that there was anything to see anywhere, it seemed, except sand and vivid blue sky.

He signalled the rover and it scurried back, shutting off the perpetual flow of data which Attaboy had ignored since realising everything was calm. It climbed quickly to its place on his thigh and he turned on the electromagnet which held it there. He decided to continue north and pulled his right foot out of the sand, the plates having shattered long ago. With creaking movements, he limped on.

Perhaps there had been humans just ahead. They, even in their fragile bodies, seemed more capable than him of overcoming storms. But, if there had been any, despite their amazing capacity for self-preservation, there were none now. They might even have taken their camp to a place he had already been. All he could do was go on, and on, to what he hoped were new places, searching for the right humans.

The day was hot. Every day was. There seemed to be nothing so changeless as that. The metal from which he was made had a virtually non-existent coefficient of expansion. The little it did expand, though, was more than enough and he was warping all the time. With this, and the lack of lubrication, and the insidious sand creeping past his seals, if he had been human he might have given up. His joints seemed noisier and his left leg shakier whenever he checked them. But there was no despair. None had been programmed. There were

only these thoughts and they must stop. He pushed them away.

Around him was a little group of dead, twisted trees, stumpy and black, previously hidden between two dunes. There were bones, which he looked at with what was almost excitement, but they were old, and, sadly, human. He dragged his huge mass up another sliding, shifting slope, feeling power surge from the nuclear batteries in his upper arms and leg, feeding the tiny motors which forced him on. He was nearly at the top when something landed heavily on his back, almost knocking him over. He fought to stay upright and climbed at full power to the level crest of the dune to give himself more advantage and all the time the scratching, biting creature clung to him.

He reached behind and knocked it off with a sudden, firm blow, then turned. It was a large mutated cat of some sort. It seemed to be all mouth and claws as it moved towards him. It was heavy

and probably fast, like a burned-brown tiger but with hard, sharp bone or cuticle sticking out of its fur in strange places.

Attaboy knelt down, lowering his centre of gravity. He would not be unbalanced. The cat stopped, and stood, spitting and snarling at him, then began crawling slowly forward, keeping low, bunched up in a tension of iron muscles. It leapt for his photors, which was dangerous for him without his visor. Obviously it had attacked humans. Attaboy tore the creature from his head with one hand which almost overstrained the motors. He had to let it, go and allow the coolants time to ease matters before he acted again. With one arm covering his photors he knelt there, letting the cat claw futilely at him, hoping it was doing no damage as it retreated and leapt, or when its vicious scratchings caught on small cracks in his body. Finally, he felt he could entrust another surge of action to the motors so he pushed forward with the arm

which covered his face. The creature clung on but with more power it was ripped away, screaming. His other arm smashed down on its head, spattering blood and bone around with the violence. He let his hand --

Pete shook his head. Tall, brown-haired, wearing the smock he hadn't removed for days, he stood limply at the other side of the laboratory. Attaboy was lying --

The cat appeared again in his awareness, then --

Pete walked towards Attaboy. The door in the robot's chest was open. On the bench, next to the hydraulic lift, was all the undersea equipment, barely used, which had just been removed from him in order to be replaced. Attaboy heard a noise and turned his head. Julie had entered and she was crying again. Pete moved past Attaboy hurriedly and put his hands on his wife's shoulders. He stroked her short, blond hair when she had stopped shaking and muttered things to her which the robot could

not hear. He pushed her gently onto a chair and said, "Damn bastards."

Julie looked up, eyes red and shining.

"They might not fight," she said, her voice strange from crying. Pete was not really any stronger than her, realized Attaboy, just under less strain. He said, "Julie's right, Pete. There may not be a war. Perhaps you should carry on as normal."

His voice came from a small grill in his throat and he could not change it to the reassuring tone he felt the situation needed. It may have been wiser to have said nothing.

Pete ignored him, which was a rare occurrence, and spoke to Julie.

"But what if there is? What's going to happen afterwards? My God, don't you realize..."

Julie began sobbing again. Her words were barely distinguishable as she said, "Oh, God, Pete. Don't you think I realize better than anyone? But is it right? How can you be so sure of

yourself, so certain that the ends always justify whatever bloody means you use?"

There was nothing Attaboy could do. He just lay there deciding not to interrupt any more, as he had discovered that human emotions were not things he understood well enough to intrude upon.

"You know I can't ask anyone else's opinion," said Pete. "Public outcry would stop me dead. And you know how wrong the public can be."

Julie calmed down and quietly asked Pete for some coffee. He was annoyed, Attaboy could see, as he wanted to get down to work as soon as possible. He was very pessimistic about the possibility of total war. But he walked towards the bubbling percolator which was always --

The cat gave one last jerk under Attaboy's hand and he was back in the present. There were so many things that could trigger the faulty feedback mechanism, and no

apparent order to the memories. No system he could discover and overcome.

He stood up, leaving the creature bloodsoaked on the sand. Probably something would eat it, unless it was buried by a storm first. He moved on.

The sun was low now and dull enough for Attaboy to look at it. Soon would be time to switch on his night-vision but for the moment he walked north, left knee creaking abominably. There was no stopping for rest, no need for sleep. His only purpose was to search.

As the miles moved slowly past - logically he was aware of time as a function of his progress - he eventually saw in the distance a blur which was different from the rest of the infra-red picture his night vision produced. As he neared it, he made out a cluster of healthy-looking trees. That was very promising. The spot in the middle of the trees could well be a fire.

Assuming he could not be seen in the darkness, which

was all he could do, he approached as near to the trees as possible. The noise of his body was something over which he had no control so he stopped moving at such a distance from the trees that he himself could not have picked up normal human sounds.

The rover detached and sped away as Attaboy, playing safe, dug in just below the surface in case anything came towards him and started a commotion. He was settled in as the rover reached the trees and beamed back the sound of talking. Attaboy felt something like fire surge through his circuits. Talking. They had not regressed as much as others he had met. And the rover was recording a very low radiation level. Could this be it?

As the rover crept in nearer, Attaboy saw and heard the camp as though he was there. Three large shapes sat around a fire of wood pieces with a small pot hanging over it from what looked like the frame of a

bicycle. Several other forms lay around the fire. They seemed to be sleeping. Their sex was not immediately apparent as they were all made shapeless by the bulky clothing they wore for the desert night. None of them seemed small enough to be children, which gave more credence to Pete's fear that there would be universal sterility after the war with the new weapons that had been developed.

The three humans around the fire were talking about ruins to the east. They were discussing the possibility of living there, which would apparently mean fighting the inhabitants.

Always violence, thought Attaboy. Could these possibly be good people? Could they be trusted? He would need to talk to one of them. If that did not work then there were the ruins to the east to try. He was about to recall the rover when --

a tentacle reached out. Long sinuous, underside lined with ugly suckers, it stretched towards him as --

If he could just deactivate the rover and stop the data flow which was creating the feedback--

The octopus had two powerful tentacles as if in a loving grasp around him. Attaboy was too heavy to be moved. He could just have waited and let his opponent tire of the rock-like creature its prey had become. However, the shark which swam menacingly back and forth above had enough mass to shake him, and possibly damage the robot womb in his chest, if it attacked.

Despite built-in protective feelings for any living thing, his mission came first so he reached out and, with cumbersome ease, crushed the tentacles. The twisted remains, red clouds swirling around them, were quickly withdrawn. Attaboy moved away as the shark sensed blood.

He trudged upwards on huge foot-plates which he could flex depending on the state of the sea-bed. A large, slow school of colourful fish swam near as he bypassed a

tangle of kelp. Small, inquisitive creatures darted at him. Once he had known what they were called before his programming had been changed. They had been his companions for a long time. A name would have helped. But now his rovers swam back to inform him that conditions were acceptable on land, and he had to leave.

He churned up mud in a dark trail behind him. His legs were moving smoothly and easily, joints lubricated by the water as had been intended.

Pete, and the others in the original project, had made him well. But not for exactly what he was doing. The sea was his home all right, despite his apparent incongruousness there. However, he should have been taking photographs, collecting specimens, accumulating information. He sometimes saw mutated fish which he knew would have interested the researchers but there was nothing he could do. Slowly he made his way up --

The immediate situation returned. That memory had been of happier times. Nearer the days when he had performed his original function of Underwater Survey Device II. The present was so very much different.

He left the rover where it was, only switching into it for carefully short periods, until everyone was asleep except for one guard who sat mostly on the side of a high dune facing east, but occasionally walked around. Attaboy realised he would have to act soon if they were leaving tomorrow.

The rover followed the guard slowly and quietly. When the shuffling mass of rags was quite close to Attaboy he sent the rover almost over the guard's bare feet and then towards his own hiding place. The guard, probably always eager for food, followed quickly, aware that anything which moved away from him was fairly safe. Attaboy used his accumulated knowledge of new mankind to figure that

the guard would not want to share anything with the others if he didn't need to. But, as generalisations didn't always apply, he would have to be quietened as soon as possible.

Attaboy dragged himself in slow silence from beneath the shallow layer of sand and crouched still as the guard chased the slight noise of the rover. When the human passed him he reached out and clutched one leg, pulling him down quickly and putting the other hand over his mouth. It was not until he held the struggling, grunting form that he saw it was a woman. That was better. She, surely, would be amenable towards him. As the fold of her hood fell from her face, he saw that, under the scars and occasional radiation sores, it lacked some of the savagery he had seen in other humans. There was still much violence and anger in its pitiful thinness but, although he was not an expert, he felt she could be the one.

Continuing to restrain her from talking or moving, Attaboy spoke. His voice, seldom used, was in good condition. He had it as low as possible while he explained the situation in simple words. He had to win her trust so that she would introduce him to the group and they would accept the children. As she did not answer his first exploratory questions when he felt he had calmed her enough to release her mouth, he told her about the babies, grown, and carried from embryos conceived in Julie, within the lead-lined robot womb in his chest. They had lived inside him, fed on the supplies he had then had, all the while beneath the ocean awaiting the aftermath of the war. At foetal-maturity their growth was suspended until he could release them at the right time. He hoped this would be that time.

She said nothing when he removed his hand again. It was possible that the ability to communicate represented a valuable, and thus secret, weapon. She was no longer afraid but Attaboy received

the impression that she disbelieved him. He knew the only way was to show her. His night-light, affixed solely for this purpose, and miraculously undamaged, shone out. He pushed her away from him carefully so he could open his chest, but he still held her shoulder and covered her mouth. The panel swung open, for the first time since he had left Pete and Julie. Almost proudly he knelt there with the inside of his chest revealed to her.

She jerked back as he tried to move her nearer for a better view. He had to remove his hand from her face as she was obviously in great distress, coughing and retching. Quickly he shut the panel, not wanting to risk any bacteria or viruses from her penetrating the protective layers. She was trying to pull away from him.

What was wrong with her?

He realised he had little experience with humans of this new age but such behaviour when faced with

innocent babies could only be madness. His memory informed him that insanity was definitely not acceptable.

He looked at the struggling savage with her tattered cloak, and shreds of fur bound to her feet. This is no mother, he thought. Something intangible shifted inside him with the disappointment. However, he overcame the too-human desire to leave and, once more, opened his chest. Gently, he turned the woman to him. She screamed and hit out at him wildly. He flung her away and shut the panel finally.

Now he had to depart before help came for her. Looking down, he saw she lay unmoving on the sand. Nearer, at his feet, was a small object. He focused on it. It looked almost like a tiny human hand but it was horribly discoloured and parts were swollen or flaking. He now knew she was mad if she carried something like that with her.

Voices from the camp, and sudden dancing lights behind the mounds of sand, reminded him he had to move on. He attached the rover and limped away. The eastern ruins had to be worth investigation, as long as the inhabitants did not attack him.

As the noise of the savages disappeared with distance and his own creaking and scraping was all that accompanied him, he wondered how long his search would last. He had to find someone for the children before he broke down completely.

He limped slowly through the night. The moon, huge and orange when not covered with churning black cloud, was full. Another month.

His sensors warned him of a storm approaching. He knelt carefully and without undue haste began to dig. As he did, he checked the primary warning circuit. There was no fault.

Or there appeared to be none, he admitted. Then, with

determination, "There is no fault".

There could be none. Otherwise -

He dug deeper.

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