

Planters

"The real voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes."

--Marcel Proust

"Over there, CEV, that's exactly the right type of rock." MAX rose from his wheels and pointed a well-jointed metal finger. "Not crumbly like these here."

CEV wheeled over to the outcropping and stepped out to get a better look.

"No, underneath," directed MAX. "In the shade there."

"Ah, these are indeed excellent," said CEV.

He returned to help MAX move their sprayers, usually held in their wheelers, but preparing for a long day in the barren Martian landscape, they had brought along more than the usual number. The sprayers distributed yeast, water and lichen flakes. If no shade was offered by natural rock outcroppings, the two robots created artificial ones. The landscape was becoming dotted with interesting constructions.

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"They claim there is enough CO2 now to get these started," said MAX.

"Not sure I believe them."

"Humans?" asked CEV.

"SETA speaking for them," said MAX.

"Oh," said his companion. "She and her atmosphere enhancers. I am particularly content that we ourselves do not need O2 nor CO2 in order to function."

"Indeed, CEV. It is preferable to be a robo anytime, anywhere. Hand me another sprayer."

CEV obliged.

"It is agreeable to do this work," said CEV after some time had passed. "It keeps my joints oiled."

"I agree," said MAX. "Nothing is worse than spending too much time unmoving. Fortunately, we have an entire planet to cover."

"Well, between the Chroococciopsis greenhouses. What percent did SETA claim is now covering the planet? Twelve point six?"

"I believe that was it, yes."

"I don't completely trust that magnetic field generator," said CEV.

"I agree," said MAX, "but even should it fail, it will not affect us."

"They would terminate our work. They might shut us down." CEV paused.

"Besides, with or without a magnetic field generator failure, remember what happened to JET and TIR? Just one sign of needing an overhaul and you're put down for good. Like all the human's machinery, they keep upgrading and junk the older stuff."

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"We could escape and hide before that happens. And if the generator fails, let them leave and go back to Earth; we will function on our own."

For a moment, the two stood and watched the sky. It was a soft butterscotch color.

"Nice day," said MAX. "though the wind is picking up a bit. Did you see that sunset last night? Nice blue."

"Sometimes," said CEV, "I wish we could just leave and go exploring. I would like to be an explorer."

They worked companionably for some time before they noticed their nemesis approaching.

"It's SETA," said CEV. "Slave driver." He made little squeaking sounds, which passed for laughter.

MAX set down his sprayer, stood up and waited as their fellow robo approached. CEV did not bother to get up and kept on working. Some human had, either from a twisted sense of humor or boredom, created SETA to resemble a jaded metal hooker. Her measurements were 36-24-36 and the joker had painted on her torso a French teddy and net stockings. On her head, he glued a wig, which she had since ripped off, leaving patches of fabric and small clumps of red hair here and there.

"Stop your work while I explain the incoming message," she said. "They are having difficulties with the magnetic field generator. NASA is sending out a work crew. It will take two days to get there and no one knows how soon they can repair it. Get to work battening down the hatches on greenhouses. KAO and PIN are doing District Three, LENI and RYC, District One. You will work all night."

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"Hey, SETA," said CEV, "you look very sexual."

"You mean 'sexy,'" corrected MAX.

"Yes, that," said CEV.

SETA turned quickly and walked away. Then she stopped and looked at them. "The scrap heap always needs more metal," she said ominously.

"I am laughing inside," said CEV.

"I'm not," said MAX. "You seem to have missed the seriousness of what she just said. If they are unable to repair the magnetic field generator, our work will be for nothing. The lichens will all die. The greenhouses also would be for nothing since no matter how much oxygen we generate from them, without the magnetic field, it will all blow away into space."

"I don't believe it will go away that fast," said CEV, "but it will eventually." After a moment, he said, "Why are we doing this, MAX? We ourselves do not need oxygen, nitrogen or plants. We do it for *them*."

"We do it," said MAX, "because we are created and programmed to terraform this planet. It is doubtful, even for us, that we will exist long enough to see the results, but it is our destiny to work at it."

"Destiny, MAX? Do robos experience destiny? Our sort, I mean. Workrobos, not the higher kind."

They were rolling toward the closest greenhouse in District Two. The greenhouses had whimsical names; this one was called "Allula," and the next "Gidget." Each was one hundred meters wide, 200 meters long and 6 meters high. Inside, the floors were covered in shallow ponds containing cyanobacteria,

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Chroococciopsis in particular. Down the center and crisscrossing the ponds were narrow walkways. The cyanobacteria had been manipulated genetically to more efficiently create oxygen.

"CEV," said MAX, "I am not sure what SETA means by 'battening down the hatches' of the greenhouses."

"I am not entirely sure myself. Perhaps we should message her. Though I dislike letting her know that we don't know everything."

"There is no choice, we must ask her."

"You do it," said CEV."

MAX messaged. Immediately, SETA answered. "You two are ready for the scrap heap. Attach the roping." She clicked off.

"Ah, I recall now," said MAX, "but where is the roping? I believe she only mentioned this once and that was 2.86 years ago."

"It could only be in the back part, where else?" said CEV.

He was right. Piles of it were coiled way in the back.

"You don't think if things blow into space that the windows will break? All it would take is one blown out window to destroy it all," argued MAX. "All the O<sub>2</sub> gone, poof."

"These are really reinforced," said CEV. "Each one is 18 centimeters thick. Since the atmosphere is so thin, I don't know if anything would break at all. I don't think this roping is even necessary. Sometimes SETA is ridiculous."

"Nevertheless, I am apprehensive," said MAX.

"Let's get to work then," said CEV, as he pulled on one of the coils. This

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labor was hard and only a robo could manage it. Certainly only a robo could work nonstop for an entire Martian day and night without water, food or rest.

By noon the next day, the two were a bit banged up and needed adjustments and lube jobs. One of MAX's circuits had blown and SETA was the one to replace it. As she worked on him, he said, "I assume that the humans have all gone underground."

"You assume correctly," said SETA. Her patches of torn wig hair, resembling the coat of a Irish setter with a bad case of mange, looked alarming in the glaring light under which she worked. "Sixty percent of them have gone to the Cavern and the rest to Cavern II. They might not be able to communicate with each other though they may still be able to with us."

"Are you ever afraid of them, SETA?"

She stopped to fix MAX with her glaring cerulean blue eyes. "Why would I be afraid of them? They cannot survive without us."

He saw that some of her "net stockings" were chipped off. "Well," he said, "consider what happened in '78."

She worked silently for a moment before replying. "That was Earth, this is here. We have the advantage here."

"Really? There are three thousand and nine of them and how many of us? Fifteen working and twenty-five more in stasis? We cannot activate them, only the humans can."

"Wrong, MAX. A few among us do know how."

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MAX stood up in surprise, causing SETA to drop her tools. "These tools don't grow on rocks, MAX," she said.

"Sorry." He picked up her things, handed them over and stooped back down. "My cart needs work on it too," he said. "Who among us can activate them and may I remind you of President Philips."

"I am not able at this time to say who can activate the stasis robos. As for President Philips, robos always hold him up as their hero and hope, but he is not like us, MAX. He is an android, part bio. His acceptance does not signify anything about ourselves." She removed part of MAX's arm to make adjustments.

"Nevertheless, it's a start," argued MAX. "I think that you do not understand the significance of an android being elected President of West Coast United States."

"It is a start, I grant you that," she said, "but not so much a high priority in our own concerns here. What matters on Mars is what will happen should the magnetic field generator not hold. Back to square one. We have progressed far in our green growing but this will make a mess. And what if the humans return to Earth? What will become of us?"

"I doubt they will return even if the worst happens, though CEV and I have thought of this," said MAX, but he went no further. Could he trust SETA? He didn't know.

"CEV," she said with some disgust. "He is not so nice."

"He just likes to tease you."

"I don't like it. He is lucky I don't hide his reserve charger."

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"Oh, please don't do that," pleaded MAX. "A dust storm could cut off his solar charge if we become stranded. I would be very lonely without CEV."

"I don't see what you could possibly like about him," said SETA with a sharp twist of a wire.

The two human habitat cities, contained under glass constructions, had underground sections for shelter in emergencies. The first habitat, jokingly called "Pittsburgh," named its underground section, "The Cavern." The underground section of the newer habitat, "Paris," was simply "Cavern II." Cavern II messaged the robos who themselves were housed in their own cavern though this was a natural one and held only Martian thin atmosphere.

SETA answered the message. "There could be a temporary outage within the next two hours," said the voice, which she recognized as belonging to Duncan Brodish, second in command. His image flickered on her screen before going out in a burst of static, though his voice continued.

"Are the greenhouses protected?" he asked.

"We have battened down the hatches," replied SETA. She continued to work on MAX who was intent on the conversation.

"The safety of the lichen is a serious situation."

"It is indeed," said MAX loudly.

"Who is that?" said Brodish.

"A robo I am performing maintenance on," said SETA.

"Good. Well, stay safe," said Brodish dismissively and flicked off.

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"He doesn't care two hoots if we're sucked into space," mumbled MAX.

"We will not be sucked into space," said SETA firmly. "That is ridiculous."

CEV entered, having gone back outside to check on one of the rock formations. "It's blowing out there," he said. "But maybe just a dust storm. If the magnetic field generator goes down, what will it look like out there?"

"I don't know," said SETA quietly. "Probably it will look like nothing." She had reattached MAX's arm and gave him a small pat on his back. "Now you," she said to CEV.

CEV sat on the workbench. "I am very apprehensive," he said, it not being in a robo's repertoire to cover up or lie. "This could be it for us."

SETA performed her work with a lot of unnecessary yanking and jerking but CEV did not appear to notice.

"Do you hear the wind out there?" he said.

"Seal the doors," SETA told MAX.

"What about the others?"

TED and POM are in the back assuring that we have secondary power. KAO and PIN and LENI and RYC will shelter in Robo Cavern Four. The others will join them if they can, if they can make it there."

"That does not have a good sealing door," said CEV.

It was not as if any of them, robo or human, had never experienced a Martian dust storm. These occurred every so often and were nowhere near as violent as an Earth hurricane due to Mars' lack of atmospheric density. About

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every three years a global storm covered the whole planet.

"The thing is though," said MAX, expressing what everyone was thinking, "we don't know for sure if it's a dust storm. If the magnetic field generator fails, won't it just start out the same? Or will the loss of what atmosphere we have developed be very gradual?"

Neither CEV nor SETA answered. They sat down on the dirt floor against the wall of the cavern with their legs straight out in front of them.

"Shall we play a game of Bidder? I'll deal out the cards."

"No," said SETA.

"Chess? Two against one?"

"Maybe this is when we should escape," said CEV, not bothering to hide this idea from SETA now.

"To where?" she said.

MAX and CEV looked at each other. Finally, CEV continued. "To the far ridge. Go through and keep on going. Take what we need, a few things."

"What would we plug the emergency chargers into?" said SETA.

This stymied the other two for a moment.

"We take one of the smaller generators," said CEV eventually.

"And what do we run them on after we run out of fuel?" said SETA.

"The solar one," said CEV. "I would think that was obvious."

"Stop with the arrogant attitude," said SETA. "We robos only have one of those here and the humans occasionally expect to borrow it. Let me reflect on this. There is also the matter of the satellites seeing us."

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Was she actually thinking of running away with them? MAX was confused. He had believed she was content serving as the eyes and ears of the humans in the robo contingent.

"Why are we even discussing this?" he asked in order to feel her out. "I suppose it's like playing a game of chess, just for mental exercise?"

SETA took a while before responding. "You don't know me at all," she said.

The winds picked up outside visually though the robos heard nothing. They could see through small, thick glass windows in the sealed doors. SETA tried to message Cavern II to see if they had news from NASA, but communications were totally down. Two days passed.

"Why are communications down?" asked CEV. "Those winds wouldn't knock over a cat. Even if the atmospheric density *is* up by 270.8 percent. That is still less than five percent of Earth's."

SETA stood up. "Speaking of cats, if we ever do leave, what will we do with Bounce? We can't leave him here alone." SETA had obtained a kitten from Pittsburgh and kept him in a large, air filled playpen inside the robo cavern.

"The humans will find him and keep him for themselves."

"I would miss watching him play," SETA said.

"I never knew you had this side," said CEV. He looked around at the cat, which was busy knocking something about in his terrarium.

Suddenly the screen buzzed with static and Brodish from Cavern II came on. "NASA reports they have made the repairs. Turns out it was not serious, just a

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problem with translation of energy. If it happens again, it can be fixed by remote. Go back to your work now." The screen went blank.

The three robos looked at each other before standing up. Something had changed; they all felt it.

"It's almost night," said MAX.

SETA looked through the thick glass. "The wind is still going. So it is just a normal storm after all. I think we should stay in now in spite of what Brodish said."

The other two stared at her. "In spite of what he said," they repeated.

"All workers deserve time to rest," she said.

After a pause, MAX said, "But robos don't need rest."

"Not physically," she said, "but in other ways."

CEV came forward and dared to lay his hand on SETA's shoulder.

"We are together," he said.