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A world for Ell

"Hi, Ors. What are you thinking up today?" Mar pushed her way between the chairs and stood behind the man, brazenly staring at the three-dimensional image on the desktop.

"A monster," he replied and looked at the girl.

She was just over eighteen, with short black hair and green eyes. She was the youngest employee of the X Incorporated design department, a company dealing with almost everything from combat robots to children's toys. She winced and wrinkled her nose.

"Monsters and monsters. What kind of imagination do you have?"

"Monstrous."

They laughed. Ors, who had long since crossed the age of forty, felt remarkably young in the company of Mar. Sometimes he wished he had a daughter like her.

"Leave it and let's go eat something," she suggested.

Ors stood up slowly and limped behind the girl. He was a tall middle aged man with dark blond hair and steel-gray eyes. He would be quite handsome if his features were not distorted by the scar running across his face from the right temple to the left side of the chin. The missions during the never ending war with Dominion left him with many such souvenirs and with the left leg stiff and shorter by a few centimeters than the right one.

Mar's boyfriend, Luk, was waiting for them at the bar. The young ones greeted each other tenderly and sat at a table in the corner, leaving room for Ors. They ordered the dish of the day. Luk looked serious. He did not even smile

when Mar tried to cheer him up. He just looked at both of them and asked,
"Have you learned something yet?"

"About what?"

"They destroyed your home, Ors."

The message did not trigger the expected result. The man only smiled.

"And what?" He asked "It will rebuilt itself. That's how it's designed."

Luk shook his head. He waited for the waitress to leave and denied,

"No, not like that. Not a building. Your planet."

Ors looked as if someone let the air out of him. He stared at Luk and
whispered,

"Whole Cetus? Just like that?"

The younger man nodded. Ors hid his face in his hands.

"Millions of beings," he whispered "They only wanted peace. After all,
there was nothing there to start a war for."

Mar put her hand on his shoulder.

"We know," she said "It's an agricultural planet, right?"

Ors nodded. After a moment, he stared at Luk again.

"Who?" he croaked.

"The Machines."

"That's impossible! They never showed any hostile intentions."

"So obviously they did now. They hit both sides of the ongoing war, The
Free Worlds and The Dominion at the same time. Showing that they want to join
our war."

Ors shook his head.

"No," he stood up "They would not destroy something they'd created."

He spun on the heel of his healthy leg and left.

Ors took the elevator to the forty-eighth floor, where the flat he rented was

located, let the sensor near the door scan the image of his retina and went inside. The place was small - a room with a kitchenette and a small bathroom. A single retractable bed, a round table with two chairs and a desk were all the rooms amenities. Ors did not need more, as his real home was on Cetus. Here he came back only for Ell.

He sat down at the desk and listened to the quiet rumble of a computing unit that was starting up. Memories pressed on him.

Ell. He remembered her too well. She was eighteen when they met, with auburn hair and hazel eyes. She valued naturalness. Like he did. They were great for several months of meetings on Lena III, one of The Free Worlds. Later, there was a war, and he was sent to pilot the combat robot, Xyber, into the areas conquered by The Dominion. Mission after mission, world after world, days, months, years... Strictly taking two years. So brief, yet so long. When he returned, she had become the wife of the CEO of X Incorporated. They tried to meet in secret, but it did not last long. Col, Ell's husband, learned about them and arranged with the military a mission Ors would not return from.

During the war between The Free Worlds and The Dominion, some of AIs developed consciousness and left to create the Republic of Machines, based on several distant planets. It was growing technologically, but ignored the two struggling factions of humanity. Ors and three other soldiers were to infiltrate their home world, steal advanced technology and, if possible, destroy the data structures. Neither The Dominion nor The Free Worlds wanted a neighbor with potential weapons that they could not understand and that they were afraid of. The Machines detected the spies right away and took Xybers away from them. The pilots became diligently observed prisoners. They had to demonstrate abilities useful for their captors to survive. Ors thrived in the technology driven republic because he had a talent to build and improve devices. He also dealt quite well with computer systems. The other one to survive was Vit, the pilot of the second robot who turned out to be a genius of cyberspace.

They worked for the Machines for fifteen years, away from the war of the

humans, getting to know their world and views, and later they were sent to Cetus for "retirement."

The planet was a place adapted for all who have ever worked for the Republic of Machines. After the technical worlds it gave a breathing space captivating the greenery of forests and the purity of water. People sent back there decided not to change it, not to industrialize Cetus. They built simple houses, tamed animals, hunted, fished and farmed the land. If they needed something – the Machines provided it. They had access to media and subspace channels, but they rarely used them. Ors also built a house in the forest and enjoyed simple life like everyone else. Except one detail. In the basement he was working on a project that when he chose to go back to The Free Worlds it would get him closer to Ell.

Together with Vit, he created a new type of extended link to the Xybers, one allowing remote control of robots from a specially designed cabin instead of a physical presence behind the controls inside of the machine. They also programmed a kind of self-preservation instinct. When Col died they decided to disclose, counting on Ell's favor.

Ors and Vit presented their project to X Incorporated. After a brief but insightful research period, the company began to apply new technology from Ors and Vit's work into all freshly produced combat robots. The Mercenary League, delighted by the increased efficiency of remotely controlled Xyber and nearly zero losses in humans, sent all its machines for upgrade. Ors oversaw the whole process and approached Ell, who now led X Incorporated. Happiness was a step away when the woman fell ill with a plague brought from a distant planet. Her death deepened the bitterness of Ors and his disgust for the ongoing war with The Dominion. The company was taken over by Ell's son and the project was continued. Ors had nothing left to care for, except his home on Cetus. And now he learned that Cetus was gone...

The man shook his head to free himself from the memories. The last stage of the project remained to be triggered - awakening the self-preservation instinct.

"Tanu," he said.

A three-dimensional image of a person appeared on the table top and took on Ell's appearance. To honor the boss's memory, X Incorporated created a program that advised and did a dirty job in cyberspace. Ell's personality was transferred and Tanu was given her appearance very convincing. Unfortunately, memory has not been preserved. Or maybe it wasn't supposed to be.

"Hello, Ors. Are you still doing the same?"

"Yes, Tanu," the man took a cigar from Cetus from his pocket and lit it. "It's a pity you do not remember me," he muttered.

"I do not remember you," admitted the program. "But I like you. And I'm sorry."

"Because of Cetus?"

The figure on the hologram nodded. Ors blown smoke. He looked like someone making an important decision.

"Tell me, Tanu, who did it."

"The Machines," the answer came.

He winced.

"This is the official version. And the others?"

The figure disappeared to come back in a moment.

"Come to me," she said flirtatiously.

He connected himself to the network and got surrounded by a feast of colors. Shortly he saw Tanu in a bright airy dress. She extended her hand to him. She spun around and pulled him to her. Here he could dance. They swirled.

"I have a new Cetus for you," she whispered. "All you have to do is to come to me. Indestructible, even out of reach of The Dominion. Do you want it?"

They whirled.

"You're tempting, Tanu. Maybe someday..."

She stopped in his arms. She even smelled like Ell.

"I'll wait. Now go."

He returned to reality. Tanu was smiling in the hologram. She had a specific way of communicating information, especially secrets. The Dominion. They were behind everything, Ors was certain that The Dominion influenced the Machines to destroy his home. Well, he will answer them. He'll give The Free Worlds a terrifying advantage and let The Dominion worlds burn! Ors ceased to care for the innocent, after all a war was a war, and they did not spare the peaceful residents of Cetus. He took the mini disk out of the drawer and put it in the reader. A row of numbers appeared on the screen. The final passcode of the project. He sent it to the main server and went to sleep.

When the secret code was received, accepted and confirmed by all Xybers with the new link, X Incorporated issued a banquet to celebrate the success of the project. From the pilot's room located in the back of the building, Ors connected with a huge battle robot standing in front of the company's skyscraper to present his invention. Instantly he was virtually inside the Xyber's cabin and heard a quiet greeting. He answered the same and thought the movement. The robot reacted smoothly, as integrated with the pilot. They took a few steps, destroyed the set targets and avoided a sudden attack. Xyber understood what it was doing. The last code activated the Intelligence of the Machines in it, a module, now installed in every combat robot, which Ors had once received at Cetus for research. It gave its own judgment to the Xybers.

"Withdraw now, pilot, but stay in cyberspace," Ors heard the nice voice of the robot tell him.

He did as he was told. The events went on quickly. The first Xyber missiles destroyed the transmission booth, the rest half of the corporate skyscraper.

Ors woke up on the bench next to his home on Cetus. He breathed a sigh of relief. He must abandon this project. Too many nightmares were bothering him lately. He stretched and walked briskly to the door. Something was wrong. He went inside. Ell smiled.

"Well, sleepyhead. Breakfast is ready."

"Okay, I'm just gonna wash my hands."

He closed the bathroom door behind him and his eyes fell on the cane standing in the corner. Who needed that? He washed his face, admiring himself in the mirror. His features were smooth and scar free, like they hadn't been for years. He entered the kitchen and kissed his beloved. They sat down for breakfast. The impression of unreality has intensified.

"Darling, I invited Mar and Luk today for dinner. Do you mind?"

He looked at the woman intently. Sparks scoured in his gray eyes.

"No, Tanu, I do not mind. You saved them, didn't you?"

Ell/Tanu gave him a surprised glance and confirmed:

"Same way I saved you. Personality transfer. I did not want you to be alone. Others will join as well. Cetus is a gift from the Republic of Machines for those who helped us get rid of the threat from humans. Did you suspect what it will be like?"

Ors smiled. "That new Cetus will be virtual? Yes, from the moment yesterday you asked me to join you. But why did the Machines attack? They never interfered. I thought their logic would not allow killing."

She answered; "It doesn't let us kill your war machines, because they are the same race."

The man slowly got the meaning of her words.

"And humans are not," he said slowly. "Machines always had an eye on the threat we presented. We were constantly trying to destroy their intelligence, make them slaves. How could I do something like that?! How could I have thought that the Machines would not want to get rid of us?"

Tanu stood up and shrugged.

"Humanity will survive. I think so. We will bring you back to the level before space flights. We do not have to destroy the whole race, it's too energy consuming. And Ors, it's not your fault. We've been working on you for fifteen years. We had to give you the conditions for creative actions, cherish the desire for revenge, give Cetus, take away Ell, give Tanu, finally take away Cetus. It worked. Your world is still fighting, but it's a matter of time. You have as much time as you want. You have your Cetus."

"And I have you."

Tanu began to dissolve.

"No, you don't. I will send you others. I'm just a ghost in the machine."

THE END