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KEEPERS OF EARTH

ROBIN WAYNE BAILEY

THIS UNIT REMEMBERS. THIS unit... I... I... I remember.

I remember the empty streets. I remember the empty buildings, the empty shops, and the empty parks. I remember an empty swing creaking in the wind. I remember the silence of an empty city. I remember the smell of emptiness.

I remember the empty blue sky—no cloud, no smoke, no smog, not even a bird. A dirty newspaper blew against my metal foot as I stood alone and looked up at that sky. My eyes were empty, too, but I was crying all inside.

I remember the sun, and most of all I remember the sudden fierce light, the horrible whiteness, then the endless fire.

And I thought, *Where are my masters?*

* * *

KEEPERS OF EARTH

Ezekiel 808 stood alone in the Prime Observatory. The lights of the stars that shone down through the open dome reflected on the silvery metal of his face, in the flawless, technological perfection of his gleaming eyes. He loved the stars, the still beauty of the night with all his mechanical heart. Yet the great telescope and the sky's mysteries offered no distraction to soothe his turmoil.

He held up one hand to the starlight, studying his long fingers. They seemed strange to him now as he slowly flexed and opened them, not his own at all. He peered at the image of his face reflected in his smooth palm, and wondered what—no, who—he was.

"Ezekiel 808 is disturbed." Michael 2713 stood in the observatory's entrance. His speech programs seemed to be malfunctioning. His voice wavered, and his words were punctuated with uncharacteristic pauses and hesitations. "You..." he began again, troubling over the pronoun. "You are monitoring to the Alpha's testimony."

Michael 2713 was only an assisting unit, assigned to the observatory to process computations, to calibrate equipment, and to maintain the great telescope's tracking units. He was not a high-order unit, yet he served well, and of late seemed even to exceed his programming.

"I must provide data," Ezekiel 808 answered finally.

He, too, found speech oddly difficult. His neural pathways churned with an inexplicable chaos, and none of his self-run diagnostics provided a cause. "I must also render judgment," he continued. "It falls to the First-Orders to evaluate the Alpha's actions."

Michael 2713 walked across the floor and stopped at the console that controlled the dome's massive drive engines. Though he looked up into the night, the shadow of the telescope eclipsed his face. "I, too, have been monitoring," he admitted. "I am only Fourth-Order, Ezekiel 808. How is it that this unit . . ." He hesitated again. "How is it that I can feel such confusion? Such uncertainty? Such . . ." Michael 2713 stopped and stood unmoving as if awaiting a command, though within the parameters of his programming he was totally capable of independent action. "Revulsion," he said at last.

Ezekiel 808 focused his attention more keenly on his assisting unit. A Fourth-Order might experience confusion over instruction or data input or even express uncertainty if sufficient variables affected a computational outcome. But revulsion?

"The Alpha has committed a great crime," Ezekiel 808 explained. "We have never known crime. The First-Orders must try to understand."

Michael 2713 raised his fists and slammed them down on the console. Sparks flew, wiring shorted, the smell of smoke and seared plastic rose up from the shattered controls. The dome doors lurched into motion, closed halfway, then shuddered to a stop.

"Why only the First-Orders?" Michael 2713 demanded, turning on Ezekiel 808 in the near darkness. "Have we not all been deceived? How can we trust the Alpha ever again?"

It was astonishing behavior for a Fourth-Order. Ezekiel 808 stared at the damaged console, then backed away as his assistant approached him. "You are malfunctioning," he said.

"No," Michael 2713 replied. His tensed eyes gleamed, no longer full of shadow, but with the coldest starlight. "I am exceeding my programs."

To observe and record, that was my directive.

I watched the vast bulk of humanity board their shining space arks. I watched the thundering fleets lift off. They left by night, like thieves sneaking away, like cowards skulking into blackness. And yet there was beauty in their exodus, for their great vessels shimmered like stars falling in reverse across the heavens as they fled.

I had a thousand eyes with which to watch it all, for my masters had linked my sensors with an array of orbiting satellites. I was the camera through which they documented their departure. They saw their last majestic views of their mountains, their oceans, their sweeping forests, their glittering ice fields through my eyes. Their last sunset shone through my eyes. Their last dawn—through my eyes.

I relayed it all to them in a steady stream of digital

images. Alone, I wandered through their cities, through their universities, libraries, museums. Those images, too, I sent to them. My eyes were cameras taking snapshots, capturing reminders, moments of a culture. I sent it all to them.

I wonder if they wept. I wonder if they ever thought of turning back.

Luminosity gradients, temperature increases, radiation surges—these, too, I observed and recorded and sent to my masters. These were automatic functions. Like some extra-planetary rover I roamed about at will, in constant contact while the signal between us lasted. It lasted for days, weeks, while they raced farther and farther away.

I remember the day the birds died. They fell from the sky, from their nests in the trees, and I felt strange because, for all my technological intelligence, I could not grasp the desperation in their chirping. I picked one up in my metal hand, looked long upon it with my metal eyes, and sent its dying image to my masters. I felt its heartbeat cease, its breathing cease. It cooled while I held it.

I sent a message to my masters. *Explain.* I received no answer.

For the first time then, in that moment when I held the dying avian, I discovered it was possible to exceed my programs. I observed and recorded.

But I also felt.

* * *

Malachi 017 stood on a hilltop beneath a tree he, himself, had planted seventy-six years ago. Its great shade spread over him, sheltering his metal body from the misty rain as he gazed westward over the lush savannahs of waving grass and wildflowers. He could not say why the tree gave him pleasure or why he came so often to the hill. But in this time of confusion he wanted to be nowhere else.

The darkness of night was no obstacle to his eyes. He looked down the hillside and watched Joshua 4228 kneel among a gathering of smaller Tenth-Order tractors. The tractors should have been about their work, planting the grasslands, tending the new shoots, sowing fresh seed.

But across the world, it seemed Metallics everywhere, no matter their order, had stopped their tasks to listen.

"You should not waste your time with them," he said when Joshua 4228 finally climbed the hill and stood beside him.

"They are confused," Joshua 4228 said evenly.

"They are tractors." Malachi 017 gazed down at the clustered machines. They hadn't moved from their places at the bottom of the hill. A few stared up at him, their heads swiveled backward on their shoulders. The rest faced eastward where the dark spires of the city stabbed at the cloudy sky. "You would almost think they were sitting in judgment, too," he said.

"Perhaps they are," said Joshua 4228. "Perhaps this is not justly a matter for First-Orders alone."

"Nonsense. They are built only for tilling the soils and planting the seed."

"You have tilled soil and planted seed," Joshua 4228 reminded him.

Malachi 017 turned stiffly around. "This unit is a First-Order," he said. "I stood at the Alpha's side when the world was ash and charred rock. I nursed and farmed the blue algae beds that replenished the air and made all this possible again." He waved one arm over the sprawling vista. "I designed and made a garden from a sea of fused glass." He turned a hard gaze on Joshua 4228. Do not compare me to a mere tractor."

"You err, Malachi 017, to call them *mere* tractors." Joshua 4228 walked a few steps down the hill. Droplets of rain sparkled on his silver form as he regarded the smaller machines. "You are the Alpha's gardener, and there is some small part of you, some expression of yourself, in every grove, every orchard, every meadow, every forest. If you did not plant the seed yourself, your assisting units did, following plans made by you, using techniques taught and passed on by you. Tell me, Malachi 017, when you look upon your labors do you see *mere* plants, weeds, flowers?"

Joshua 4228 paused to turn his face up into the cool drizzle. His eyes closed briefly before he turned to Malachi 017 again. "You forget who made you, gave you

thought, fired the first beam of information-laden light into your photonic brain." He turned again and extended his hand toward the tractors. "This unit is the Alpha's engineer, and there is some part of me in even the least of the Tenth-Order workers. In them, I am perpetuated; through them, some expression of me goes on and multiplies." His voice became staccato, and static punctuated his words. "These tractors . . . you, Malachi 017 . . . are . . . all . . ." He seemed to freeze, as if his marvelously complex circuitry had locked up in mid-gesture. Finally, he managed to finish his statement. "My . . . children."

For a time, the only sound on the hilltop came from the soft patter on the leaves. In the west, a dim flicker of lightning briefly lit the lowest clouds, and eventually the soft rumble of thunder followed. Neither Joshua 4228 nor Malachi 017 moved. They stood still as a pair of sculptures, in the manner of Metallics, conserving energy.

The eyes of Malachi 017 brightened ever so slightly. "Are you still monitoring the Alpha's testimony?" he inquired.

"It is our duty," Joshua 4228 answered. "I have not stopped. Our conversation does not interfere."

Malachi 017 fell silent once more; then, as if with a shrug, his metallic body came to life. He walked once around the tree he had planted and placed his hand on the rough, wet bark. The sophisticated network of sensors in his palm allowed him to feel its organic texture.

He often found pleasure in the touch. Tonight he found something new—consolation. “I do not understand destruction,” he confessed.

Joshua stirred himself to motion also. Once again he moved a few paces down the hill to regard the tractors still gathered below. “You do not come to the city often, Malachi 017,” he said slowly. “Have you visited the library there?”

Malachi 017 turned his head toward the city’s distant spires of black glass. “Long ago,” he said, “while planning the gardens in the northern region of this continent, I discovered the first of several vaults of books and documents our masters had left behind. The Alpha dictated they should be brought to the city and the library was begun. They seemed a crude means of preserving information; I never scanned them.”

“I have spent many hours here,” Joshua 4228 explained. “Even more so, since this trial began. No Metallic, except the Alpha, ever interacted with humanity, ever observed, ever knew them. To render accurate judgment, I have been reading their books, viewing their films, their histories, biographies.”

“These have given you insight into the Alpha’s actions?”

“No,” Joshua 4228 answered. “But they have given me some insight into Humanity, and I have discerned the prime distinction between Metallics and Humans. It does not lie in our skins, Malachi 017, but in something

more fundamental, more . . .” He hesitated, and when he spoke again, his voice wavered with a strange note. “More . . . disturbing. It lies in humanity’s capacity to destroy.”

At the bottom of the hill, the tractors began to move. In an orderly line, perfectly spaced, they strung out through the darkness and headed for the city, all save one, who waited below, a small and solitary figure, whose gaze was locked on Joshua 4228.

“See how carefully they move through the grass,” Joshua 4228 pointed out as he watched them. “They do no damage to the precious blades as they make their way, and the garden is preserved. This is an imperative with even the least of us, the Tenth-Orders—restore and preserve.”

Malachi 017 came to the side of Joshua 4228. He, too, stared after the departing tractors. “This was not so with humans?”

A soft burst of static sounded from Joshua 4228. “Their records reveal a gift for destruction, for turmoil, for chaos. Their histories glory in it; their biographies ennoble it; their fictions elevate it to a form of art. Metallics have never known this capacity for destruction. It is not programmed into us.”

Malachi 017 laid a hand gently on Joshua 4228’s shoulder. It was an unusual gesture for one Metallic to make to another, and a sign of his confusion. “Then what of the Alpha . . . ?”

Joshua 4228 stared down at the sole remaining tractor. "Yes," he said quietly. "What of the Alpha?"

My masters had built me well. Their cities burned to ash, and all surface traces of Human civilization vanished in a single, searing day of heat and fire and radiation. Ice-caps and glaciers melted, and entire seas rose up out of their beds, vaporized. Clouds of super-heated steam and smoke roiled into the atmosphere. All creatures of the world perished save those worms and insects that made their burrows in the deepest places of the Earth, or those stranger species that thrived near the volcanic vents of the darkest ocean depths.

Through the cataclysm, I strove to maintain contact with those who had made me. Perhaps it was the radiation that interfered, or perhaps they had simply shut down our link, presuming me destroyed. I never received communication from them again. Still, for a long period of time I wandered the planet, dutifully transmitting what I saw—scorched and barren earth that soon was buried beneath massive snows, which, in turn, melted away under torrential rains.

I cannot say precisely how much time passed, for I spent much of it folded down upon myself, no more than a rough metal cube on the landscape. This was necessary to conserve my energy, for I did not know when or if I would see the empowering sun again. My explorations were through, and my transmissions continued to go

unanswered, so I ceased those efforts. With all my functions secured in save-mode, I waited.

When the sun did return, seemingly stable once more, and when at last I rose and stood erect again, I made two immediate discoveries. My programming had subtly changed. Then, I wondered if it had been some effect of the radiation. Now I believe it is simply in the nature of technological intelligence that we grow and evolve. Whatever the explanation, *observe and record* was no longer my mission imperative. It had changed to *preserve and restore*.

The second discovery proved equally exciting.

I felt lonely.

Of the Human cities, nothing remained, but deep underground in military facilities, in research bunkers, in industrial caves, I sought and found equipment, parts, tools, technology. Using myself as the template, I then created companions and assistants. In turn, these units . . . we . . . created still more.

Humanity once had a name for us. They called us *Robots*. But we took our own name. We are *Metallics*. And we are the Keepers of Earth.

Alone in the Prime Observatory, Ezekiel 808 labored over the shattered control console. He feared . . . yes, he *feared* . . . for the delicate mechanisms that opened and closed the precious dome and positioned the great telescope. He peeled back a damaged panel, effortlessly

breaking bolts and screws, and examined a tangle of melted wiring.

He feared, also, for Michael 2713. Some hitherto unrecognized imperative in his programming urged him to pursue his runaway assisting unit, to analyze the aberrant behavior, to correct it if possible, to understand it at least. In the current climate of confusion, Michael 2713's malfunction endangered not just him, but other units. Potentially, if he went to the city, even the general order.

Ezekiel 808 resisted the imperative, however. His need to repair the damage to the dome and the telescope overrode his concern for the assisting unit. Where were the technicians? More than an hour had passed since he summoned them. He paused, glanced at the narrow ribbon of sky visible above, at the unmoving dome. Returning his attention to the tangle of wires, he worked with an uncharacteristic speed, selecting, examining. He touched the exposed ends of two wires together. A spark resulted. Above, the dome doors shuddered open another degree and stopped again.

Footsteps rang in the hallway outside the main chamber. Ezekiel 808 put down the wires as a trio of technicians finally arrived.

"The distance from the city does not account for your lateness," he said.

"There are widespread malfunctions," said one of the technicians, a Second-Order. "Numerous units have

abandoned their primary functions. They interfered, delayed, hindered our departure."

Ezekiel 808 stepped back from the console. The technicians could do the repair work faster and with greater efficiency. Freed, at least momentarily from his concern for the observatory, he strode from the main chamber and up the long hallway past darkrooms and chart rooms, record rooms, past displays of smaller telescopes, past photographs of moons and planets, comets, and star systems. But most of all there were images of the sun—many of the sun. He had built the scopes, and he had taken the photographs. They meant nothing to him now. He pushed open the outer doors and stepped into the night.

The desert wind moaned with a distressing music. It promised a storm. Ezekiel 808 turned his gaze upward. A blazing panorama of stars dominated the black sky, but in the west, a long band of gray clouds crept above the range of hills and mountains that separated him from the city. In the east, more clouds, and those veined and reddened with flickers of lightning.

He walked toward the hover transport in which the technicians had arrived and opened its doors. Finding it empty, he turned away. On the north side of the observatory was an elaborate garden of desert plants, ornamental stones, and imaginative sculptures. He searched its nooks and alcoves. He walked completely around the observatory until he returned again to the entrance.

"Michael!" he called. Then again, "Michael!"

"If Michael 2713 was near, he did not respond. Ezekiel 808 did not keep transport at the observatory. When business in the city required his presence, he summoned it. Otherwise, he and his assisting unit remained on the premises, tending the great telescope, making their observations, observing, recording.

Would Michael 2713 have undertaken the long walk to the city?

As Ezekiel 808 stood in the darkness at the edge of the desert, he tried to analyze the numerous uncertainties nibbling at his programs. The roots of them all lay in the Alpha's crime, in its revelation, and in its examination. Of this he was sure.

He had ceased monitoring the Alpha's testimony. The preservation and maintenance of the Prime Observatory, above all else, was his prime imperative, and he had simply blocked the trial transmissions to concentrate on assaying the damage. Remembering that he must soon provide testimony, himself, and with the technicians finally at work, he activated the internal radio circuit that linked him to the event.

He heard the Alpha's even voice. He had always drawn comfort from the sound of it before. The Alpha—the First Unit, the Template of their creation.

There was no comfort to be found in that voice now. There was only more uncertainty.

And perhaps, there was also fear.

Ezekiel 808 did not return at once to the main chamber. The technicians did not need his assistance. He went instead to the observatory's darkroom and began to process some photographs he had taken through the great telescope at dusk and for an hour afterward.

When the images were clear, he lingered over them a long time. Michael 2713 was forgotten, and the sounds of the technicians at work barely registered in his awareness. The voice of the Alpha droned on. He paid little attention.

The developed images were stark confirmation of his most recent observations. A long, soft hiss of static sounded from Ezekiel 808. He held up his hand to the dim red light bulb and studied it just as he had earlier this same night held it up to the starlight. It had seemed strange to him, then, not his own. It seemed just as strange to him now.

The voice of the Second-Order technician called to him through the door. "We have completed repairs, Ezekiel 808," he said. "We must return to the city."

"Wait," Ezekiel 808 called in return. He placed the images in a folder, switched off the light, opened the door. "Leave your two assisting units here. Instruct them that if Michael 2713 returns, they must not allow him access to the Main Chamber. He is malfunctioning."

"Malfunctions are widespread." The Second-Order had said so before.

Ezekiel 808 studied the Second-Order technician

closely. "Are you monitoring the trail of the Alpha?" he asked.

"No."

Ezekiel 808 paused briefly and listened once more to the Alpha's voice in his head. "I will meet you at your transport," he told the technician. "I am coming with you." He turned away and found himself confronted by multiple images of the sun in sleek metal frames under protective glass that hung in the hallway.

The technician said nothing more and returned to his assisting units in the main chamber.

The folder in Ezekiel 808's hand felt unnaturally heavy. He made a tight roll of it, passed quickly down the long hallway and out into the night once more.

Still no sign of Michael 2713.

The stars were gone from the sky, shut from sight by the thick clouds, which had closed in faster than expected. Sheet lightning danced in both the west and the east now as two fronts crashed together. The wind howled; desert dust and sand swirled in the air.

A familiar sound of gears and motors caused him to redirect his gaze.

The doors of the observatory dome closed precisely.

At this point in my testimony I must introduce an admission of guilt.

For ten thousand years we have been the Keepers of Earth. This planet, abandoned by humanity and reduced

to a cinder, passed into our Metallic hands. Where there was ash and wasteland, we made gardens. We dug deep to find the few buried and protected seeds that had survived the conflagration. We plunged into the depths of the few surviving oceans to nurture the algae beds that replenished the air and made abundant life possible once more.

We inherited a black and charred carcass. But Metallic determination and Metallic care breathed new existence into it. Metallic vision and Metallic labor adorned it once again with grace and beauty. From the First-Orders to the Tenth-Orders, all units have done and continue to do their parts.

Our work is not done. From the ruins of cataclysm, we have made a home for ourselves. But a home must be maintained. It must be safeguarded when possible from the elements; it must constantly be harmonized with nature.

And sometimes—though this concept is not embedded in Metallic programming—a home must be defended.

This unit never knew what became of Humanity when they fled to the stars. This unit never knew if they survived their journey, where they went, or if they made new homes for themselves. This unit never knew their intentions.

But this unit knew Humanity, and knew that if they survived they would come back. This unit knew that if

they saw this world we had made, this home, they would want it once more for themselves.

Six months ago, a link in my programs that had been silent for more than ten millennia opened. The unexpected message was brief and simple. *Well done, servant. Prepare for our return.*

You may not understand. If you do understand, you may not approve. I am prepared to give any answer you ask. I am prepared to accept judgment, condemnation, punishment, sanction.

But this unit was already prepared.

I did not remake the world for Humans.

Joshua 4228 admired the beauty of the lightning as he walked through the wet grasses with Malachi 017 at his side. There was a grandeur in the display of energies that delighted him and something deeper, stranger still in its pyrotechnic unpredictability that mystified even as it soothed him.

The inner world of a Metallic was one of order and perfectly defined programming. And yet he sometimes considered that there was something to be studied, observed, learned from randomness, from unpredictability, from chaos.

He had seen a word recently in a book in the library, and the word was *mystical*. It intrigued him, and he spoke it sometimes when he was alone. He knew its definition, yet he did not quite grasp its meaning.

As he watched the lightning, though, and felt the rain striking his upturned face, he thought for just a flicker of an instant that it was within his grasp.

"Do you experience pleasure in walking?" he asked Malachi 017.

"It is natural and efficient," Malachi 017 responded automatically. Then, after a pause, "Yes, I find it pleasurable. I do not report such experiences often."

"Why do we not speak of emotions, Malachi 017?" Joshua 4228 persisted. "They are part of our programming. Yet we withdraw from them. Or we deny them."

Malachi 017 remained quiet for a long moment. "Perhaps because we cannot express them outwardly, we cannot easily express them inwardly. Metal faces do not smile or frown. Our eyes do not cry."

It was Joshua 4228's turn to fall silent. "But I have cried inside," he said at last. "I have made mistakes, Malachi 017."

Malachi 017 emitted a short burst of static. "Unlikely. You are First-Order."

Before Joshua 4228 could explain, a sound interrupted them. They stopped and turned. Through the grass came the small tractor. It had been following them since they left the hill, though its shorter legs had not enabled it to keep up.

"Why do you follow, Tractor?" Malachi 017 asked. "Why did you not go with your work team?"

The tractor did not answer. Its lensed eyes focused

only on Joshua 4228. It approached him, reached out, touched his leg, then backed away. "Permission to inquire," it said.

"We have business in the city," Malachi 017 answered, turning away again.

"Wait," Joshua 4228 said. "This tractor interests me. It's behavior is uncharacteristic."

"Permission to inquire," the tractor repeated.

"Granted," said Malachi 017.

"I recognize Joshua 4228," the tractor said, "the Alpha's engineer. This unit wishes to ask: why did Joshua 4228 make this unit stupid?"

"Are you malfunctioning?" Malachi 017 demanded.

Joshua 4228 stared, his programs momentarily unbalanced by the unexpected question. His interest turned to curiosity, and he knelt down to observe the tractor more carefully. It waited, splattered with mud and blades of wet grass, dripping with rain.

"You are not stupid," Joshua 4228 explained. "You possess a fully functioning Tenth-Order intelligence. That is adequate for your assigned tasks, and you perform those tasks well."

The tractor swiveled its head from left to right. "This unit works the fields," it said. "This unit works the grasslands, forests, gardens. This unit understands seed and soil. This unit understands the care of these, the maintenance of these, the value of these." It hesitated. Its gaze fixed once more on Joshua 4228. "Is there no more, Engineer?"

Joshua 4228 felt a growing confusion. He reached out and wiped rain from the tractor's eyes. "You are very necessary," he said. "You play an essential role."

The tractor interrupted. You are Joshua 4228. That unit is Malachi 017. But this necessary, essential unit has no name. This unit a tractor like all other tractors."

Joshua 4228 gazed up at Malachi, then back again at the tractor. Was it possible that a Tenth-Order mocked him?

"The Alpha made you, Joshua 4228," the tractor continued. "And the Alpha shared its First-Order intelligence with its creation. But I am your design, Engineer. I am your technology, your creation."

Malachi 017 bent nearer with a suddenly acute interest. His voice was little more than a whisper. "Your child," he said.

The tractor gazed up at the sky. "This unit feels the rain. This unit sees the lightning. This unit knows these are good for the seed and the soil. But in this knowledge there is no *understanding*. Why is there rain? What is lightning? This unit works sometimes in the city, tends the gardens there, sees so much that is confusing, so much that confounds this unit's programming." The tractor extended its hands, one toward Malachi 017, the other toward Joshua 4228. "This unit repeats its inquiry: *why have you made this unit stupid?*"

A trembling that defied diagnostics seized Joshua 4228's limbs. He caught the tractor's extended hands in

his own. His voice failed him. He tried to form words, tried to get up, but his metal joints would not respond. "I...this unit...I have made...mistakes," he repeated.

The tractor backed away a step. "This unit is a mistake," it said, misunderstanding Joshua's statement. "This unit will delete its programming. This unit will go off-line."

"No!" Joshua grabbed the tractor's shoulders.

The light in the tractor's eyes faded out. The pulse of energy beneath its metal skin ceased.

Malachi 017 also backed away. "I have never seen such a thing before," he said. There was uncertainty in his voice.

Joshua 4228 could not respond. His body froze, and his programs locked up in a cascading series of contradictions, paradoxes, and reconfigurations. He barely felt Malachi 017's hand when it settled on his arm.

Finally, he pressed his hands to his face. "There are raindrops in my eyes, but why are there no tears?" he said when he could speak again. He stared at the immobile tractor.

"Because we are Metallics," Malachi 017 answered. "We do not die. This tractor's program can be restored. You can even upgrade it, should you wish. Or you can place its programs in another, better body."

Joshua 4228 brushed away the hand on his arm. "But will it be the same little tractor?" he asked. "Are we no

more than the sum of our programs? Are you such an empty container, Malachi 017, that you believe that? Then you have less understanding than this tractor!"

"You are over-tasking," Malachi 017 said. "This matter with the Alpha is affecting all units." He looked at the tractor and backed away yet another step. "I, myself, am...confused."

Joshua 4228's eyes dimmed and brightened, and his words were harsh. "You are afraid." He drew himself up from the mud, but he was not yet quite ready to leave. "Why did I not see this?" he said, placing one hand gently on the tractor's head. "Why do I only now begin to understand? We speak of our roles, Malachi 017, of our necessary parts in rebuilding this world. We speak of gardens as if they were the beginning and ending of all things desirable. We speak of beauty." He turned to the other Metallic. "But we have also made a thing that suddenly seems very ugly, and that is Metallic society. We have made a race of masters and slaves."

Would you have all Metallics be First-Orders?" Malachi 017 asked.

"Why not?" Joshua 4228 answered.

They resumed their journey toward the city again. Overhead, lightning shot suddenly across the sky in jagged bolts that lit the landscape. The black glass of the city reflected the dazzling reds and oranges: the spires and rooftops seemed to glow, and the facades shimmered.

Malachi 017 stopped in mid-stride to watch. "It almost looks as if the city were on fire," he said.

Joshua 4228 continued on. "Perhaps it is," he whispered. "Perhaps it is."

I am Ezekiel 808, and I have been on-line for six thousand, three hundred, and thirty-two years, seven months, and sixteen days. Many of you present in this court chamber or listening from other corners of the world have never seen me before. I do not come to the city often, and when I do, I come in private, alone, and leave quietly. I spend my time far to the east beyond the hills and mountains at the Prime Observatory.

A few of you have been there. A few of you have put your eyes to the great telescope and viewed the wonders of our neighboring worlds, our neighboring stars. A few of you may have been moved as I was moved, inspired as I was inspired each time I gazed upon those stars, those eyes of the universe which seemed always to be looking back.

To observe and record—that has always been my first imperative. This is noble work. This is necessary work. Metallic society is more than well-planned gardens and gleaming glass buildings. We have moved beyond the reconstruction of this world into a period of discovery, inquiry, exploration. I have found unceasing pleasure . . . yes, I admit it . . . pleasure . . . in devoting my existence to the study, not just of this world, but of worlds beyond.

I do not malfunction when I say this: Humanity did not err when they built their mighty arks and fled the destruction of this world. The accomplishment is an indicator of their greatness. Does a tractor not flee a collapsing cave? Which of us would not dodge a falling tree? We cannot understand Humanity, although the Alpha says he can. But how can we condemn their actions?

But no matter. Humanity is not on trial. The Alpha is.

To observe and record. That was my purpose, and the purpose for which the Prime Observatory was constructed. But now I tell you. There was a dark purpose, as well. I did not know it, recognize it, understand it before.

My programs try to freeze, lock up, as I attempt to speak of it.

To observe and record . . . but also . . . to watch . . . and . . . warn!

Fourteen months ago, I aimed the great telescope toward a distant nebula. This was routine observation, and part of my efforts to map unusual phenomena in the sky. My assisting unit, Michael 2713, and I took many photographs of the region. Not until the next day, however, when we processed the images, did we discover what the cameras had caught—a barely observable streak of light, much closer than the nebula itself that indicated an object moving at an extreme rate of speed.

Each night for one month, Michael 2713 and I ob-

served and photographed this object. Then, on the thirty-second night of our observation, the object not only slowed its velocity, but it modified its course.

Michael 2713 is a superlative Fourth-Order analyst. His calculations have been without error, and they supported my own conclusions. There was no doubt. We were observing a craft, vessel, vehicle. And it was approaching us.

On the thirty-third day, I journeyed to the city.

Again, my programs cascade, attempt to freeze. Yet, I... must... speak.

This unit... I... conferred with... the Alpha. This unit... revealed, explained, told... of our discovery. This unit... I... presented photographs, charts, evidence, calculations.

The Alpha requested... silence. The Alpha requested... that I continue... to observe.

This unit... complied.

This unit... I... observed the craft, vessel, vehicle... approach our solar system. It passed within the orbit of the outermost world. It continued to slow, to brake... and Michael 2713... photographed it as it passed the ring-world. It had become easy to see—a gleaming metal sphere, silver in color, with skin similar to our own. Past the red planet it came.

We... this unit and Michael 2713... could see it in the night sky without the great telescope. Any Metallic who looked up... and we do not look up often enough

could see it. It instilled a sense of wonder, awe, mystery that mere programming cannot convey or explain. On several nights, we watched it with no other equipment than our own eyes.

Nevertheless, my eyes were at the telescope... three nights ago... when the Alpha committed... his crime when the Alpha's weapons... destroyed the craft.

Michael 2713 ran. Never tiring, never short of breath, he ran for hours through the dark and the rain. It seldom rained in the desert, but he paid no attention. His footing remained sure in the thin mud and damp sand. He raced the lightning and the wind. The flat desert made a perfect track.

His programs cycled in an unending cascade, but he did not lock up, nor freeze. He ran, instead, directing all his energy into that single unthinking activity, fixing his gaze on the ground at his feet.

When the observatory could not be seen behind him, or even the peaks of the hills and mountains that stood between the observatory and the city, Michael 2713 finally stopped. Because he had not tried to monitor himself, he had no idea how fast he had run or how far he had gone. He looked around and saw nothing familiar. He had never been so far east before.

He glanced up at the sky, at the thick cloud cover. It was an automatic action, instilled in him by his long service to Ezekiel 808. But he had no wish to see the

stars, no wish to be reminded of his own role in a tragedy.

Yet, he did look up, and he was reminded.

Michael 2713 sank to his knees, not because he was weary, but because there was nothing else to do. He was only Fourth-Order. Why did he feel . . . what was he feeling? Guilt.

He leaned forward and closed his fists in the wet sand. Some words of Ezekiel 808 came to him, a memory loop that opened unbidden. *This is the stuff that stars are made of*, Ezekiel 808 had told him as he held up a handful of soil. Then the First-Order had put a finger on Michael 2713's chest. *You are the stuff that stars are made of*.

Michael 2713 was young, a new model, no more than a single century in age. He had not understood then the meaning of Ezekiel 808's words. He was not sure that he understood now. Yet the words resonated in his programming, and he knew they were important, that they were symbols for something he could, with effort, understand.

He began to cry inside. He cried for the loss of the trust he no longer had in the Alpha. He cried for the damage he had caused to the observatory. He cried for Ezekiel 808, whom he had nearly attacked as he had attacked the console.

Most of all, he cried for the humans. They had come home again only to die in a conflagration not unlike the one they had fled.

Chaos overwhelmed his programs. His systems tried to lock up, to shut down, but he resisted. He cried, and suddenly crying became an imperative. He had no tears, and yet the emotions churned, boiled, demanded some greater expression. He threw back his head. His metal throat strained. Without thought or design, a wrenching cry rose up from deep inside him. It was no sound ever made or heard before.

It was all pain.

After a while, Michael 2713 rose to his feet again. He considered switching on the radio circuit in his head and listening to the trial. But there was no purpose or logic in that. The outcome was irrelevant to him. He stood apart from Metallic society now. The Alpha was false. If he returned to the city, even to the observatory, he knew that he would find many more things that were false, many more assumptions that could no longer be trusted.

He turned his back to the city, set his gaze on the east, and walked.

After a time, the rain ended. It never lasted long in the desert. Overhead, the clouds began to diminish, and the moon shone through.

Michael stopped on the rim of what seemed to be a crater. The moonlight intensified as the clouds scattered. Its glow lit the desert with a milky shimmering that spilled down into that deep cauldron, showing him a sight.

Again, he threw back his head, but this time it was not a cry of pain that came from him. It was a howl of rage.

On the crater floor, rising tall and straight above the rim itself like needles stabbing the sky stood ninety-eight gleaming missiles. Among them, on the floor of the crater, he spied two black and empty launching pads.

Michael 2713 swiftly calculated how long it would take him to dismantle them all. Then he descended into the pit.

I am Joshua 4228, and I am the Alpha's engineer. I made many of you. If I did not make you, I helped to make you. Or I designed you, or you contain elements of my designs. I am the Second, endowed with life by my Creator and fashioned in his image.

You have heard the words of Ezekiel 808. His statement was simple, accusatory.

You have heard the words of the Alpha. He has admitted his guilt.

Now . . . this unit . . . will admit his.

The Alpha did not act alone. He told me of Ezekiel 808's discovery, revealed his timetable, explained his intention. I opposed none of it. I exposed none of it.

You have heard many facts. But even facts may be open to interpretation. That is not a concept many of you will understand. It is no less true.

The Alpha has always believed that Humanity would

someday return to reclaim this world. I have believed it, too. I have read their books, their literature, studied their documents, records, films. I know that as a species they were courageous, inventive, resourceful. I know that they were also aggressive, deceitful, untrustworthy.

The Alpha remembers that Humanity fled this world because the sun had become unstable. Their scientists predicted a solar flare . . . a prominence . . . would brush or even engulf this world.

I do not claim to know more than the Alpha. But I am First-Order, and I may question, analyze, examine. What science could predict such an event with such accuracy? When I look up in the sky now, the sun appears stable. When Ezekiel 808 turns his telescopes on the sun, he finds no evidence of instability I know this because I have asked him. I have studied thousands of his own records and photographs.

You have only to go to the library to see a different kind of record, an older record, a record of wars . . . conflict . . . treachery. You may then question, analyze, as I have done. You may ask what I have asked.

Was it a solar flare that destroyed this world? Or was it a weapon, something unimaginable. Was it some test perhaps that went wrong? Or was there deliberate destruction orchestrated by a race gone mad?

I do not know the answer. But I must ask the question.

I must ask why the Alpha was built to withstand the

cataclysm. Was it so that he could transmit images and readings? Then why did Humanity shut down its link with him before the event transpired?

Why did the Alpha's programmed imperative shift from *observe and record* to a different imperative: *restore and preserve*. Was it some effect of the radiation, as he has speculated? But he has also said that his programs were well shielded. I must ask, then. Was this second imperative a corruption of the first? Or was it implanted from the beginning by his creators and designed to activate at a practical time?

The Alpha has said that he became lonely. Could that, too, have been embedded in his so carefully shielded programming? I must ask. Was my creation... your creation... the Alpha's original idea? Or did Humanity plan from the moment of his design that he should eventually make more of us, that we... *Robots!*... would then rebuild... restore and preserve!... their world so that it became fit for them once more?

How many tools did we find buried in deep vaults? How much equipment? How many books and records did they themselves preserve underground out of reach of the flames?

I must ask: why?

You must ask: why?

The Alpha has stated that he always believed Humanity would return. And they came.

I take no pleasure, pride, satisfaction in admitting

that I have engineered more than *Metallics*. I am also the maker of the weapon that destroyed the human vessel. Five thousand years ago, in preparation for this moment, with these questions unanswered and unanswerable, I went far into the desert with a crew and constructed... destruction, cataclysm, armageddon. I put the trigger in the Alpha's hand.

I felt nothing when three days ago he pulled that trigger. Yet, in the intervening time, I have continued to question. I cannot stop questioning. It... is... a... haunting... experience. I am... disturbed. And I find... no answers. Was it right? Was it wrong? Where is the answer?

I... this unit... I may have found it... tonight, in the grasslands, in the rain. It came in the voice of... a small tractor.

We are the Keepers of Earth. But now... I ask...
... Are we fit to keep it?

Malachi 017 stood alone in the court chamber. All the other First-Orders had filed out save for the Alpha and Joshua 4228. They had retired together to a private inner room from which they showed no sign of emerging.

How old and weathered the Alpha had looked. There was hardly any gleam to his metal skin.

The walls of the court chamber were staid and featureless. The thick black glass tinted the world beyond. It was a different world, Malachi 017 realized, than he

had ever known before. It was an uncertain world with an uncertain future.

Children had rebelled against their parents.

A people had outgrown their . . .

. . . Creator . . .

. . . their . . . God.

In the streets there still was chaos as Metallica reacted to the news. But interesting things were happening. He thought of the tractor, and wished for a face that could smile. It had exceeded its programming in a startling manner. Others had mentioned similar reactions in other Metallica.

Could it be, he wondered, that out of adversity and uncertainty came . . . not just fear and turmoil . . . but growth?

When he was sure that Joshua 4228 would not rejoin him, he turned slowly and left the chamber. Storm clouds still dimmed the sky, but there were signs that the morning sun would soon break through.

Ezekiel 808 stood unmoving just outside the entrance on the edge of a small garden. The light in his eyes was dim.

"I have heard it said," Malachi 017 said softly, "that Humans slept through the night. Have you ever wished that we could sleep, Ezekiel 808? Have you ever wished that we could dream?"

Ezekiel 808 turned his face toward the sky. "I have dreamed," he answered. "I am dreaming now."

"You must teach me this art sometime," Malachi 017 said. He assumed a position similar to that of Ezekiel 808 and turned his face likewise to the sky. "May I ask about the folder you have rolled in your hand? You have clung to it all through the night."

Ezekiel 808 faced Malachi 017 for a long moment, then said. "Walk with me through this garden," he said. "My transport will be just a little while."

Side by side, they passed among the ordered rows of colorful flowers and beds of herbs. The rain had freshened the blooms, and the petals shone. A pleasing scent sweetened the air. Malachi 017 especially appreciated such beauty, for he was a gardener.

When they reached the center of the garden, Ezekiel unrolled the folder. "Are you afraid of change, Malachi 017?"

Malachi 017 emitted a hiss of static that might almost have passed for laughter. "Does it matter if I am afraid?" he asked. "Change happens. That is the lesson of the night."

The light in Ezekiel 808's eyes brightened. "Then I will tell you what I could not tell the others. I will show you what I did not show them." He opened the folder and held up the photographs, each with their dark star fields, each with a long streak of light.

"Another ship is coming."