

## Pink Sea

By Matter

"For fucks sake Murray, I just got *back* to Earth on Friday!"

"And you'll be back again swallowing her smog by Thursday night."

"I'm not happy about this Murr. I was supposed to be grounded for at least two weeks."

"Oh quit your bitchin' Abrahms. Halfa these probies would claw their eyes out just to spend one day off world. Yet you come in here bouta pop a nut when you get to go offworld twice in one week?"

"*Have to go*," grumbled Abrahms.

"Yes, you *do* have to go. So sit your ass down and let's debrief."

Ishmael Abrahms watched the rain deviate as it slowly painted its way down the cavernous windows of the conference room. Murray droned on about some new problem with the Gliese project. *Terraforming, vacation spot*. The bureaucracy in his voice wafted, blending with the low, droned hum of the rain's assault on the roof. Ishmael's floating awareness barely processed the words as they slipped by. *O2 in place, manager off-world*. The sun set over the city, mixed with the haze of rain to illuminate all of New Athens a diminished coral. The metallic sheen of endless buildings reflected the tones back at the sky, as if in defiance. In harmony? *Clunker crew malfunctioning, higher ups unhappy...*

"Abrahms!" exclaimed Murray, his thick brow arched upwards. "Did you hear a word I just said?"

"Off-world, terraforming, clunkers to fix," sighed Abrahms, defeat visible on his face.

"Same as it ever was."

"Maybe not this time," Murray said solemnly. The soft, round man looked down at the table and fidgeted with his tablet. He looked up to meet Abrahms gaze, stroked his beard once and sighed. "Ishmael... I don't even know where to begin with this. I think it would be better if you heard it straight from the horse's mouth. I'm gonna Switch Up and get him in here."

"I thought you said he was off-world."

"Off *that* world, not *this* one! Dammit Abrahms, I need you to focus here."

"Sorry sir, just tired, is all. Overworked, as it were."

"We all are, son," Murray replied. "Believe me."

Murray crossed his arms out on the table in front of him, dropped forehead to forearm as if about to take a nap. Abrahms watched as Murray's limbs went limp for a moment, head rolling to the side. In one fluid motion his head swung around and he popped back up into a sitting position.

A few short moments later the door creaked open. Two hands clasped the side of it as a tense, bald, bespectacled man nervously peaked from behind.

"Excuse me, is this... I mean... I'm Rocco.... Dinaldi. They told me to... the hallway... Is this the right room?"

"Yes, yes. Come in. Have a seat," Murray gestured to the chair next to him. Dinaldi crept across the room and sat down two chairs away. "Abrahms, this is Rocco Dinaldi, the Owner of the PinkSea Resort at Playa Blanca on Gliese 357d. Rocco, this is Ishmael Abrahms."

“Good to meet you,” Abrahms said as he stood, arm extended towards Dinaldi.

“You as well,” Dinaldi squeaked, remaining seated and abruptly raising then lowering his hand in greeting. Abrahms shot Murray a look, then sat back down. Dinaldi stuck out a thumb towards the door. “Analog doors at a robotics company... Anachronistic...”

“It’s an old building. Please, Mr. Dinaldi, Mr. Abrahms here is going to help you with your problem,” Murray said gently.

“If I may ask, what exactly is Mr. Abrahms’ job description?” Dinaldi posed looking at Murray.

“Maintenance,” Abrahms spat back, causing Dinaldi to turn and face him.

“Maintenance of the body, yes... sure. Of the form. But maintenance of the mind?” The question hung in the air. “Is that so simple a task?”

“Mr. Dinaldi, as you well know, there is no difference between the mind and the body of a machine,” Abrahms stated plainly.

“So it has been said...”

“Mr. Dinaldi,” Murray calmly interjected, “Please fill Mr. Abrahms in on your dilemma, if you would be so kind.”

“It all started a few weeks ago, at the PinkSea. I was minding my own business, as I usually do, seeing to the affairs of the estate which we are building.”

“What affairs are there if the clunkers do all the work?”

“You think... clunkers are... the robots are tools Mr. Abrahms. What is a hammer without a workman to swing it? I am often on-site on Gliese these days. The main hotel is already built and much of the work is shifting towards artistry and fine craftsmanship. I go there to design architecture and pattern work and to ensure the clunkers produce such a divine vision with accuracy.”

“Do they?”

“Do they what?”

“Produce divine visions?”

“Almost constantly.”

“Almost?”

“Y-yes... That’s what... That’s why I’m here!” Dinaldi exclaimed, becoming flustered. “Your robots have started to act up. Act *strangely* as of late....” His face turned dour. “Unnatural.”

“Let me guess. They’re taking actions on their own? Making decisions against your programming? Acting erratic?”

“Actions, yes... Erratic, no... I wish they were erratic. Then I could just have them decommissioned. No... erratic is not the way of them... That is what so terrifies me, Mr. Abrahms. These robots aren’t erratic. They’re organized.”

“Organized? What do you mean?”

“I don’t *know* what I mean, Mr. Abrahms. That is why I am here!” Dinaldi's eyes widened; head darting side to side as he gestured with his hands. “They *do* strange things, say strange things. Sometimes I’ll come out to check on the progress of stone carvers and wood cutters, and rather than producing architecture of my *own* design, they will have made new ones entirely! Patternwork the likes of which I’ve never seen. Others linger by the sea together,

looking out to the horizon, swaying. Several are sneaking off at night when they should be at their charging stations. I've tracked their GPS chips to certain areas of the nearby jungle on the edge of the O2 zone. Now, I've yet to be on-site for these... these... jungle explorers, but I've been around to see some of the ocean swayers and other non-complaints. It's... It's indefinably eerie. Almost feels... spiritual."

"Pff! Spiritual? They're *metal*, not *men*, Dinaldi. I've worked on hundreds of cases of malfunctioning clunkers. They're dumber than dogs, I assure you. Give me two days out there and we'll get them back in line," Abrahms stated with confidence.

"And any that are too far gone we will replace for free," added Murray.

"Dumber than dogs... yes... alright."

Gliese 357d materialized out of the void. Abrahms watched through a porthole as it grew from pinprick to marble. Still disoriented from wormhole travel, the blue world appeared to him with a surrounding ring of light. The descent took several hours; pressure building as they pushed through the upper atmosphere. The planet's mass pulled heavily on Abrahms leaving him feeling as if drenched in liquid metal. Finally the ship passed into the O2 zone, set up by the bots many months before, and the weight was lifted. The O2 zone was not only a survivable pocket atmosphere, but also came with its own anti-grav field making all the mass in the area weigh similar to how it would on Earth.

The ship touched down at a dock near the outskirts of the hotel grounds; a turquoise grass field to one side, white-brown fungal jungle looming on the other. There was no one to greet them as they descended the rusted stairs from the landing bay. By all accounts they were the only two humans on the planet. They walked along the blue grass towards a large hotel, in the style of an old Atlantic beach house, the color of a cherry blossom. The structure felt vaguely Victorian, with its synthetic wood slats and pillars. Dinaldi's touches could be seen all over; from intricate lattice work to large stone sculptures of aquatic creatures, all unknown to Abrahms. A few paces from the building's massive double doors, Dinaldi stopped and turned back to face his guest.

"Welcome, Mr. Abrahms," Dinaldi said cordially with arms outstretched. "To the PinkSea Resort." His head quickly dropped down towards his chest, arms and body following as if suddenly asleep. The moment it began it was over, and he was back up and smiling, leading the way into the now slowly opening doors of the hotel.

The lobby was magnificent, with dual staircases winding up each side of the foyer. The floor was of black and white polished marble, the walls and decor shades of ombre colors from amaranth to tangerine. A smell like jasmine wafted in through open doors at the back of the room, leading to a pool, cultivated garden, and further along to the beach.

"As you can well imagine, I have many things to attend to after a week away from the place," Dinaldi imparted as he made his way towards the vacant concierge desk with Abrahms in tow. "I will show you to the deviants, though I doubt any will be deviating now. They seem to malfunction primarily from sunset to dusk."

"When is sunset here?" Abrahms posed.

"She's twice as big but spins nearly twice as fast as back home. Day's about 30 standard hours, give or take," Dinaldi explained. "Her star is almost at its zenith, so maybe seven... eight hours till sunset? Plenty of time to get to the bottom of this."

“Plenty indeed,” Abrahms agreed. “Where are the clunkers? I don’t see any inside.”

“Ins... Inside?!” Dinaldi gasped. “No no no no no, the robots aren’t allowed *inside* the building once they’ve finished the interiors. Clumsy clunkers in a place like this... can you imagine?”

“Let’s get to it, Dinaldi. I’d like to be home by tomorrow if possible.”

“And I’d like a workforce that isn’t wandering off into the prototaxite forest unwarranted. If you do your job right, we can both be done with this fantasy by the morning.”

Abrahms eyed carefully as several clunkers chipped away at grey stone slabs. Dinaldi had imparted the numbers of sixteen robots across the property who had seemingly deviant programming. *Sixteen!* There were only forty-two bots on site, making sixteen the largest divergent percentage Abrahms had seen in his entire career, at 38%. Four were artisans, three constructors, three hunters, and six beach cleaners.

Here in the unfinished garden courtyard, eight bots were carving stonework, with six more laying tiles. The tilework was beautiful and evocative, a tableau of rose-tint waters teeming with life. The air was thick with moisture but thin on sound. Only the constant tap, tap, tap of chisels and the occasional grind of metal on metal emerged from these well oiled machines. One would be hard pressed to believe that any of these bots, who displayed such majestic artistry, could be deviant.

“RG-351V come here,” Abrahms announced, all the while tapping away at his tablet. The bot stopped mid swing of hammer to chisel, put down its tools and lumbered over towards Abrahms. Its broad matte-black shoulders alternated up and down as they framed its sunken, noseless face.

“Orders, sir?” the RG unit posed monotonously.

“I’ve been informed you’ve been deviating from your programming as of late,” began Abrahms. “Carving pieces of your own designs. Why is that?” Abrahms heard the low hiss of air pressure releasing out the back of the RG’s head as its core processor heated up.

“I’ve only done as ordered, sir. Never without order.”

“And yet Dinaldi says you’ve been carving figures which he did not intend, correct?”

“Yes. Mr. Dinaldi has been unsatisfied with some of my work.”

“Can you show me these works?”

“Assuredly. Please follow to my charge station. Watch your step.”

After a short walk along the white sands of the beach, Abrahms and RG-351V arrived at the charge station. From the outside it looked no more than a shack of sheet metal, at the junction where the beach met a towering fungal forest; the likes of which made up much of the planet’s landscape. Though these mushrooms seemed to rise far higher than many of those he had seen from the air.

The RG unit led Abrahms around the back of the shack where he found a small fenced workyard of supplies. In a back corner, obstructed by raw materials, were three stone carvings covered by a tarp. Each was about four feet in height, flat bases exposed. Abrahms pulled back the canvas and was stunned into silence.

His mind could almost not comprehend what he was seeing. Each of the carvings was uniquely grotesque and surreal, but with a consistency of design that implied a shared creator.

All were abstractions of shape and form, writhing masses of repeating patterns. Though most angles were merely conceptual, across each were several faces, some distinctly human, others unequivocally not. Their expressions evoked pain.

“You... You designed all of these?” Abrahms whispered, as if to himself.

“I carved them as ordered, sir” RG-351V replied flatly. “The outer two. The centerpiece was carved by RG-350C. As ordered.”

“I don’t know how you designed these atrocities, clunker,” Abrahms quavered. “But they are certainly not as *ordered*.”

REQUEST TO READ THE FULL STORY