

SPLENDID AUTOMATA

Edwin had just sat down with his vanilla latte when his gerbil began to ring. He sighed irritably and picked it up.

"Yes?" he said. Edwin disliked having his coffee break interrupted, especially by unexpected telefur calls.

It was his PA.

"Mister Harland wants you to come back to the office," she said. She sounded nervous, which was good, but determined, which was not.

"I've just sat down with my –" Edwin began

"Right now," she said, like she wasn't scared of him, and put the phone down.

Edwin stared at the telefur for a long time, barely registering the dull red gleam in its eyes. He sighed again, put the gerbil in his pocket and stood up.

A waitress appeared with his tofu burger. He winced. It looked delicious but –

"No time," he said, and pushed past her into the street.

Imagine a rodent, but not a rodent as we know it, with legs or a tail. Just a sort of furry mass about the size of a child's palm. Its ribcage amplifies sound, and its brain chemistry is adapted to receive radio waves. Imagine it - make it - and you have a cell phone.

Edwin strode into RD Industries and took the lift straight up to Harland's office. As usual it was quiet, just the hubbub of conversation and staff stood gossiping around the pelican cooler. He walked right past Harland's PA and straight into his office.

An untouched plate of salad lay on Harland's desk. Edwin thought wistfully of his tofu burger. Harland put down his gerbil.

"I was just about to call you," he said.

Edwin wasn't particularly attuned to other people's emotions but he could tell that Harland was worried, or scared, or maybe even both.

"I came as quickly as I could," he said and sat down without being asked.

Harland looked at him, as if uncertain what to say next. Save for the hum of the generator and the soft swish of the eel's tail in its tank, the room was silent.

"There is," began Harland, "a problem."

Edwin wondered if he could sneak a sip of his latte. He decided against it.

"Some of our products have started to –"

He paused, as if searching for the right word.

"Started to what?" asked Edwin. Impatience was, if not his only vice, his most prominent one.

"Started to..." Harland made an odd gesture with his hand. "*Act up*," he finished.

"Act up?" asked Edwin, "In what way?"

This time he did take a swig of coffee. Harland didn't notice.

"The first thing we heard about was the elebus," he said. "It was in Singapore, thank goodness, which means –"

"Tell me what happened," said Edwin, a little sharply.

Harland told him.

Imagine an elephant, trunkless and long, its back flattened and a system of chairs, grown from the same cells as the ivory in its tusks, seeded into its back.. Manufacture it – learn to replicate its cells and grow it in bulk - and you have public transport.

“The bus was going through the city in the early evening,” said Harland. “It was the middle of the rush hour, so there was a lot of traffic. It had just pulled out from the main shopping area when it got stuck behind another elebus.”

Why are you telling me this? Edwin wanted to scream. In his mind he edited Harland’s story down to the essential phrases. *Bus – traffic – another bus.* It wasn’t hard.

“Anyway, the second bus reversed by accident – inexperienced driver or something,” said Harland. “And the first bus, instead of reversing back too – “

Reversing back? thought Edwin *It could hardly reverse forwards, could it?* Inwardly, he high-fived himself.

“Instead of reversing,” said Harland, “It attacked the other bus.”

There was a moment’s silence while Edwin’s brain stopped being a pedant and took in what it had just been told.

“Attacked?” asked Edwin.

“Attacked,” said Harland. “As in ‘viciously attacked.’”

Edwin stared at him.

“But... but it’s a bus,” he said.

“I know,” Harland replied.

“A bus can’t attack another bus!” said Edwin, “It can’t attack anything. It’s – “

“A bus,” agreed Harland. “I know. Nevertheless, it did.”

“What did the other bus do?” asked Edwin, sounding foolish even to himself. Buses didn’t do things. They were driven. The end.

“Nothing,” said Harland. “It just stood there, while the other bus rammed it. And kicked it.”

Edwin tried to imagine one bus kicking another one, but he couldn’t do it.

“What about the passengers?” he said.

“No deaths, thank God,” said Harland. “A few bruises and one old biddy broke her leg, but she’s in a coma so we’re hoping she won’t come round.”

Edwin thought for a moment. “Singapore, you said.”

“Yes, that’s the good news. Not one of ours, just a franchise build.”

“But from a RD blueprint?”

“Not too worried about that. We can say they got the materials wrong, or the mix, or the vat was unsterile. We’re clear on that one at least.”

“That one?” Edwin said. “You mean there’s more?”

Harland turned to his desktop and stroked the keyboard. It purred back at him and the screen filled with images. The first was of a man with a beard holding up his bandaged hand.

“In Berlin,” Harland said, “He was bitten by his telefur.”

“Telefurs don’t have teeth, do they?” asked Edwin. “I don’t think they even have mouths.”

“This one did. Little sharp ones,” said Harland. “The police had to bash it against the side of a table to make it let go. Voided the warranty, of course, but that’s the least of our worries right now.”

He clicked on another image. CCTV of a cashpouch machine.

“Verona,” he said.

A man was trying to remove his cash from the pouch, but the pouch wasn't letting him. Edwin stared in horrified fascination as the pouch pulled the man's hand in.

"Fortunately we were able to blame that one on the bank," said Harland. "Which is just as well because he won't be playing the piano again."

Edwin was confused by the remark, then decided it was a joke and ignored it.

"Pouches can't pull," he said. "They don't have muscles."

"They do, but they're very weak," said Harland, "And they're engineered to push."

"This is horrific."

"That's not the worst of it." Harland clicked on another image. Fire in the sky, snow on the ground, bodies falling.

"Dear God, what is it?" Edwin said. Even he felt something like distress at this image.

"Siberia," said Harland. "A Russian experimental project. Airborne puffership. Loosely derived from a puffer fish, but much much larger, obviously, and involving some kind of gas mixture instead of whatever the fish puffs itself up with."

He looked at the images. A Russian voiceover shouted helplessly – and, to Edwin's mind pointlessly – over the footage.

"Russkies hushed it up, obviously," said Harland. "But the funny thing is, they're not even blaming us."

"Why not?" said Edwin. "They blame us for everything else."

"I know, and they're not crying sabotage or Western imperialism," said Harland. "They even sent us the footage. That's how worried they are."

"Do they think it's us?"

"No." Harland shook his head. "They've got their own theory."

He clicked on another window. This time it was a meeting, obviously filmed from a camera up in the ceiling. A group of men in uniforms sat round a long table while a man in a lab coat opened a box. Edwin couldn't help leaning forward as the camera zoomed in on the man's hands. The man carefully removed a small container from the box, said something sharp in Russian that made the uniforms shrink back in their seats, and then removed the lid.

Inside was a ball-shaped object. It had scales, and bumps where its fins had once been, and it was the size of a basketball. The man clicked on a mouse – a small grey one – and the ball began to rise.

"Good trick," said Edwin.

"Be *quiet*," said Harland.

The ball rose a few centimeters into the air, and then began to expand, like a balloon. Soon it was twice its former size, then three times, and a few seconds later the size of a large beachball. All the time, the man in the lab coat was talking to the men in uniform.

Then it happened.

Even on the small computer screen, Edwin could see that something in the room had changed. The ball was no longer just a ball, an inanimate object floating in the air. It stopped expanding. It turned in the air towards the men in uniform.

And it looked at them.

And exploded.

The image cut out in the white flare of the explosion and the clip ended.

"I – " Edwin began.

"Don't say anything," said Harland. "Anything you say might be recorded."

“By who?”

“Look around you,” Harland said. He seemed, now that Edwin thought about it, quite distressed. Wild-eyed, even. “They’re everywhere.”

Edwin saw what he meant. The electric eel running the battery in the tank, the catboard, the telefur... Someone had once said that 99% of all the technology in the world was manufactured by RD, and here they were in the very home of RD itself.

“Got you,” he said.

“I know what you saw,” Harland said. “I saw it too. When its eyes opened...”

He stood up and looked out the window. A dronehawk flew past, delivering a package. Down below elebuses and horsecars thronged the streets. In the next office they could hear the pelican cooler gurgling.

“Let’s go on the roof,” said Harland suddenly. “We can talk there.”

A few long, heart-thumping minutes later – Harland had refused to take the lift – Edwin stood with Harland on the large, deserted roof of RD Industries. Around them was nothing but the buffeting of the wind.

“It’s happened, you see,” said Harland. “Sentience.”

“That’s impossible,” Edwin said. His stomach hurt and he was starting to wish he’d had that tofuburger at the coffee shop. “They’re animals. Animals don’t *think*. They can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because – “ Edwin struggled to find the words. “Because they’re animals!” he finished. “You might as well expect a pen to think. Or a rock.”

“Pens don’t have nervous systems,” said Harland. “Rocks don’t have brains.”

“Brains,” said Edwin, contemptuously. *You’re the one with no brains*, he thought.

He was suddenly aware that Harland was looking at him appraisingly.

“You’re a repellent man, Edwin,” Harland said. “No feelings, no compassion, nothing pleasant at all. But you’re clever. Good job too, because you’d have been out on your ear a long time ago otherwise.”

Edwin just stared. Harland was being plain rude now.

“Clever,” repeated Harland. “I need you to be clever right now. We can phase out organic technology eventually, I know that. We’re still ahead of the curve. We can change direction – go mineral based. Metals, plastics, that sort of the thing. Entirely replace the tech. What do you think?”

Edwin stared.

“This is radical. Very radical,” he said, almost impressed. “It’s – it’s a challenge.”

“Yes,” said Harland, enthused now. “A challenge. I like that. See, this is why we need you, Edwin. You identify a challenge and you rise to it.”

Edwin felt good now. He had a purpose. He was *needed*.

“So what do you want me to do?” he asked.

“The issue isn’t the new tech,” said Harland. “It’s the old tech.”

Edwin frowned. “I’m not sure what you mean,” he said.

“We’ve done it before,” said Harland. “An extinction here, a cull there. But nothing on this scale. We need to get rid of it. Get rid of it *all*.”

He looked at Edwin. “The question is – how?”

Edwin gazed at the blue skies above him. A single narrow cloud in the sky. He thought for a moment. The cloud passed over the sun. He turned to Harland.

“I suppose we could eat them,” he said.

“Eat them?” said Harland, shocked. “That’s the most revolting thing I’ve ever – “

He got no further. The cloud swept down. It had wings and claws and long razor teeth. It raked out Harland's throat with a single scoop, sheared off Edwin's head with its teeth and flew on, shrieking with pleasure.

Their bodies were found by the people who sought refuge on the roof of the burning building, but by then it was all too late.

"It seems reasonable that nature should produce its own automata much more splendid than the artificial ones. These natural automata are the animals" – Rene Descartes

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