

Note: *This is the original first draft story for ROBOTS. The original direction of the project was for an older audience and a darker story. The story has its origins in The Three Musketeers.*

Subsequent drafts reflect the changes in tone seen in the produced movie

ROBOTS
A Story By
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There was total and complete darkness, where the only thing that existed was sound.

A violent metallic shriek tore through the void, the unmistakable protest of steel grinding against stone. It wasn't a clean sound but a strained one, uneven and desperate, as if something powerful had been forced into a place it was never meant to be. The noise rose, stuttered, and then abruptly died, leaving a silence so complete it felt unnatural.

For a moment, there was nothing at all, and then distant voices echoed through the darkness, warped by distance and rock as they called out for someone named Rodney.

A narrow shaft of light cut through the black, revealing a figure crawling over jagged stone toward the source of the problem. The beam shuddered with each movement before settling on a massive machine lodged in the rock face. Two enormous scoop buckets sat frozen mid-motion, their razor-edged blades designed to slice through stone but now held in place by a stubborn jam of debris. The figure moved carefully, threading his way past the dangerous blades, then leaned in to examine the obstruction more closely. The machine twitched as if trying to free itself, dislodging small rocks that tumbled down the slope. The light slipped for just a moment, spinning as it fell, and in that brief flash, it revealed the figure holding it. Not a man, but a robot. Silver, worn, and built for labor. This was Rodney Copperbottom.

Rodney steadied himself without hesitation and began clearing the blockage with practiced efficiency, pulling away compacted stone piece by piece. There was no wasted motion in his work,

only the quiet focus of repetition. The machine jerked again, more violently this time, its blades twitching as if they could snap shut at any moment. Rodney was aware of the danger, but he didn't pull back. He reached deeper into the jam, straining for the final piece that held everything in place. For a brief moment, it felt as though nothing would give. Then, with a sudden release, the obstruction broke free.

The machine erupted back to life with brutal force, the scoop buckets slamming together in a violent arc that would've torn Rodney apart if he'd hesitated even a fraction longer. He threw himself backward just in time, the blades snapping shut inches from where he stood. The mechanism resumed its relentless drilling, chewing into the rock as if nothing had interrupted it. The surrounding wall couldn't withstand the renewed pressure and began to fracture, cracks spreading outward until the stone collapsed completely, opening the confined space into something far larger.

The mine revealed itself all at once, vast and overwhelming. It stretched endlessly in every direction, a cavern shaped by machinery rather than nature. Massive drillbots churned through the earth with slow, unstoppable force, while conveyor systems carried debris away in constant streams. Hundreds of robots worked across the cavern floor, their bodies dulled and dented from years of relentless labor. The air hummed with mechanical strain, a constant vibration that never quite faded. Rodney climbed down from the broken rock face and landed among them, his feet meeting ground that seemed to pulse with the combined effort of everything around him.

He made his way toward an older robot resting near a pile of debris. Bigweld looked as though he'd spent his entire life in this place. His frame was worn, his joints stiff, his movements slower than the others, yet something in the way he carried himself suggested he hadn't entirely forgotten a different world. Rodney sat beside him, and Bigweld continued speaking as if the interruption had never happened, returning to a familiar subject. Robot City. His voice carried a quiet warmth as he described it, speaking of towering structures that reflected light like polished glass, of streets alive with motion, and of a place where robots existed for more than endless labor beneath the earth.

Rodney listened closely, absorbing every detail. He'd never seen beyond the mines, and to him, Robot City wasn't merely a place but an idea, something larger than his current existence.

Nearby, a large cauldron of glowing blue liquid bubbled softly, drawing Rodney's attention. He rose and moved toward it, dipping a metal cup into the Volz and drinking deeply. The effect was immediate and unmistakable as energy surged through his system, restoring clarity and strength. For a brief moment, he felt something close to new. He reached for another cup, but a sharp voice cut him off. The foreman stood nearby, unmoved and absolute in his authority. Rations were limited, and there would be no more.

Before Rodney could react, a deep mechanical tone echoed through the cavern, cutting through everything. The drills powered down, the conveyors slowed, and one by one the machines fell silent until the entire mine was still. The sudden absence of noise felt almost heavier than the sound itself. A voice followed, amplified and emotionless, announcing that all units were to cease operations immediately. The explanation came quickly and without ceremony. The mining robots were being replaced. Newer, more efficient models would take over. All current units were to report for transport, where they'd be reprogrammed and reassigned.

There was no outrage, no panic, only quiet acceptance. Most of the robots had experienced this before. They moved toward the transports in orderly lines, following instructions without question. Rodney didn't move. The idea of being reassigned, of continuing the same existence in a different form, settled uneasily on him. He turned to Bigweld, something shifting in his expression.

"I'm not doing this again," Rodney said, his voice steady despite the uncertainty beneath it. "I'm going to Robot City. I'm getting an upgrade."

The statement drew attention, and laughter spread quickly among the nearby robots. To them, Rodney was no different from any other unit in the mine. Worn, replaceable, and bound to the same cycle. Bigweld didn't laugh. He studied Rodney carefully before responding, his voice quieter yet far more certain.

"You're as good as any of them."

The words landed differently than the laughter. Rodney nodded once, the decision settling. As the mining bots were herded toward the transports, he hung back, watching for the moment when the system created its own gap. When that moment came, he

moved without hesitation, slipping away from the line and into the machinery's shadows.

Bigweld caught him just before he disappeared and pressed something into his hands. A small, glowing cube hummed with contained energy. A quisp. One of the few valuable things he owned. Rodney hesitated only long enough to secure it in his chest compartment. There was no long goodbye between them, only a shared understanding of what this choice meant. Rodney moved quickly across the cavern and climbed onto the rear of an outbound freighter just as its engines surged to life.

The vehicle pulled away, accelerating into the tunnel that led out of the mine. Rodney held on as the world he'd always known slipped away behind him. Bigweld watched from a distance until the freighter vanished, aware that Rodney had chosen a path he himself could never take and uncertain whether anyone ever truly survived it.

The freighter burst out of the tunnel and into open terrain, accelerating so quickly that Rodney had to clamp down hard to keep from being thrown free. For the first time in his life, there were no walls hemming him in, no ceiling pressing down. The world stretched outward in all directions, vast and unfamiliar. He carefully pulled himself higher along the vehicle's frame until he could see clearly over its edge, and what he found held him there. Massive conduits and pipelines snaked across the landscape like veins, all feeding toward a single distant point on the horizon. They carried energy, materials, something essential, and they all led to the same place.

Rodney followed their path with his eyes, and slowly, as the freighter raced forward, that distant shape began to rise and take form. Robot City emerged from the horizon, not simply large but overwhelming in scale, its towering structures layered upon one another in a way that suggested constant growth, constant consumption. Even from this distance, the city appeared alive, with ships moving in steady streams, some carrying scrap away while others returned empty, ready to be filled again. The closer Rodney got, the more he realized that the city didn't merely exist within the world. It fed on it.

The freighter didn't slow as it approached. Instead, it plunged into a massive tunnel at the base of the city, swallowing Rodney in darkness once more. The engines' sound amplified within the enclosed space, echoing violently as the freighter raced deeper

underground. When the freighter finally emerged, it did so into a cavernous loading hub that rivaled the mine in size but not in atmosphere. Everything here was controlled, precise, and efficient. Loaderbots swarmed the freighter the moment it came to a halt, moving in perfect coordination as they unloaded and reloaded materials without pause. Scrap poured down from overhead chutes in constant streams, feeding the system like raw fuel.

Rodney climbed down carefully, trying to stay out of sight, but the journey had drained him. His movements were slower now, his systems strained from holding on for so long. He stumbled forward and nearly collapsed into a vat of glowing blue Volz near the loading area. Instinct took over. He dipped his hands into the liquid and drank deeply, letting the energy flood back into him. It was stronger here, richer, and for a moment he was lost in it, drinking again and again as his systems surged with renewed strength. He barely noticed the shadow falling over him until a massive iron hand clamped around his torso and lifted him off the ground.

The grip was absolute. Rodney struggled, but it had no effect. He looked up and saw the source of his capture. An Iron Sentinel stood over him, its polished surface reflecting the harsh light of the loading hub, its form designed for one purpose alone. Control. There was no expression on its face, no hesitation in its movements. Rodney was nothing more than an irregularity to be corrected. He was carried across the facility without resistance, his limbs moving uselessly as he was brought toward a structure that grew more terrifying with each step.

The crusher.

It sat open and waiting, a vast industrial maw lined with interlocking blades that spun slowly in anticipation. The sound it made was low and constant, a grinding promise of what would happen to anything that entered. Rodney wasn't alone. Another robot was dragged forward beside him, restrained at the wrist and struggling just as fiercely.

Crank.

Their eyes met for only a moment, but it was enough. Neither of them needed to say a word to understand the situation.

They weren't being reassigned.

They were being erased.

Without warning, they were hurled into the machine. The floor beneath them shifted and tilted, feeding them toward the center, where the blades accelerated from a slow rotation to a violent frenzy in an instant. The noise became deafening, filling every part of Rodney's awareness as he scrambled to keep his footing. Crank pulled against the restraints, trying to break free, but the mechanism's force dragged them both forward.

The blades drew closer.

Then, for a fraction of a second, the machine faltered.

Something caught. A brief hesitation in the system.

Rodney reacted instantly, grabbing Crank and pulling him sideways toward the edge of the chamber, where a narrow gap had opened. There was barely enough room for one of them. Rodney dove for it, dragging Crank with him, but as the machine lurched back to life, the blades snapped down with renewed force. Crank was yanked backward, his leg caught in the mechanism. The sound of tearing metal cut through the chaos, and Rodney lost his grip. There was no time to recover.

Rodney was thrown into a chute and hurled downward, tumbling through darkness before slamming into a pile of scrap below. The impact sent a shock through his frame, disorienting him for a moment, but he forced himself to move as quickly as possible. Voices echoed nearby. Iron Sentinels. He looked down at himself, then at the surrounding debris, and understood what he had to do.

Working quickly, he pulled off one of his arms, then detached a leg, scattering the pieces around him. He lowered himself into the pile, arranging his remaining parts to mimic destruction, and forced his systems into minimal output. When the Sentinels arrived, they scanned the debris without interest. To them, this was nothing more than processed waste. Rodney didn't move. He didn't react. He simply waited.

After a brief inspection, the entire load was scooped up and transferred to another transport. Rodney went with it. The journey out of the city was a blur of motion and darkness. When the transport finally released its contents, Rodney tumbled down a steep slope of scrap, coming to rest in a wasteland of

discarded metal. Silence replaced the city's constant noise. No machines. No orders. Just wind moving across broken surfaces.

Slowly, Rodney reactivated. He pulled himself back together piece by piece, reconnecting each limb with careful precision until he could stand again. As he looked around, the scale of the place became clear. Mountains of scrap stretched endlessly in every direction, a graveyard for everything the city no longer needed.

Movement caught his attention.

Two figures emerged from behind a ridge of debris. One was medium-sized, assembled from parts that clearly hadn't belonged together originally. The other was barely a few inches tall, moving with sharp, deliberate motions that suggested an attitude far larger than his size.

They noticed Rodney's detached arm before they noticed him. The larger one, Fender, picked it up with interest, turning it over in his hands as if assessing its usefulness. Rodney reacted immediately, hopping forward and snatching the arm back, startling them both.

They stared at him for a moment, surprised.

Then Fender smiled.

"You're not supposed to still be walking around after that," he said, clearly impressed.

Rodney finished reattaching himself and briefly explained how he'd escaped the crusher. Fender and Piper exchanged a look that said it all. Surviving that earned respect.

"Come on," Fender said, motioning for Rodney to follow. "You're not gonna last long out here."

Rodney hesitated only briefly before following them over the ridge.

What lay beyond changed everything.

Junk City rose from the scrap itself, a sprawling, chaotic construction built from the remains of Robot City. Towers leaned at impossible angles. Bridges connected structures that were

never meant to fit together. Every surface was patched, repaired, and repurposed in ways that defied logic.

And yet it worked.

Robots moved through the streets, each unique, assembled from mismatched parts that reflected necessity rather than design. Some were polished in places; others were barely functional, yet all moved with a sense of individuality Rodney had never seen before.

There was no uniformity here.

No system forcing everything into place.

Despite its disorder, Junk City felt alive in a way Robot City hadn't.

Rodney stepped forward slowly, taking it all in, trying to process what he was seeing. For the first time, he was somewhere that didn't feel controlled, where existence wasn't dictated by efficiency or replacement.

Fender watched him, amused by the reaction.

"Welcome to Junk City," he said.

And for the first time since leaving the mine, Rodney began to understand that the world was far larger and far stranger than he'd ever imagined.

Rodney didn't remain an outsider in Junk City for long, though the place never stopped feeling strange to him. Fender and Piper moved through it with the ease of long familiarity, weaving through narrow pathways of stacked debris and patched structures that somehow held together despite their instability. Everywhere Rodney looked, he saw evidence of improvisation. Arms that didn't match torsos. Legs reinforced with parts clearly meant for something else. Heads mounted on frames that seemed too small or too large to carry them. And yet every robot moved with purpose, with identity, with a kind of freedom Rodney had never witnessed before. In the mines, every robot had been defined by function. Here, function was secondary to survival.

They led him into a central space that served as both a gathering point and a workshop. Several robots were busy repairing others, swapping parts with casual efficiency. There was no perfection here, only continuation. Rodney noticed the absence of order, but also the absence of fear. No foreman. No commands echoing through the air. Just activity, messy and constant, driven by necessity rather than control.

It was there that Rodney saw Crank again.

The former guard captain sat in a rough chair, his damaged leg being replaced by something that didn't quite fit. The new limb was functional but mismatched, assembled from whatever was available. Crank endured the process with visible irritation, though he masked it with sharp commentary aimed at anyone within range. When he spotted Rodney, there was a flicker of recognition followed by a short, humorless laugh.

"Didn't think you'd make it out," Crank said, his voice edged with something between respect and disbelief.

Rodney explained only what was necessary. The crusher. The fall. The scrap. Crank listened, then nodded once, as if confirming something about Rodney he hadn't been certain of before.

Later, in a dimly lit establishment that passed for a bar, Rodney learned more. The place was assembled from uneven plates of metal, its interior crowded with robots that leaned, creaked, and clattered in ways that would've been unacceptable anywhere else. Drinks were passed around, containers filled with modified Volz or other improvised mixtures that served a similar purpose. Crank drank heavily, as though trying to dull something deeper than physical damage.

He told his story in pieces, not all at once, and not always in order. He spoke of Robot City as it once had been, before the shift. Before the obsession with efficiency. He'd been part of something then. A unit with purpose beyond maintenance or labor. The Paladins, guardians of order, protectors of the system. There had been pride in it. Structure. Meaning.

Then the Arcon had changed.

Not gradually, but all at once. Orders shifted. Priorities realigned. Efficiency became the only thing that mattered. Anything that didn't meet that standard was removed. Entire

divisions were dismantled overnight. Crank's unit was no exception. One day he'd been essential. The next, obsolete.

"They didn't reassign us," he said quietly. "They erased us."

Rodney listened as the idea of Robot City shifted further from the image he'd built in his mind. The place that had once represented opportunity now took on a different shape, one defined by control and elimination. That understanding came too late to matter.

The attack began without warning.

The first explosion tore through the outer edge of Junk City, sending shockwaves through the unstable structures. Metal collapsed inward. Bridges snapped. The sound was followed by more, each impact more devastating than the last. Iron Sentinels poured into the city, mounted on crushing vehicles that tore through the streets without slowing.

Panic spread instantly.

Robots scattered in every direction, but there was nowhere to go. The Sentinels moved with brutal efficiency, targeting anything that moved or resisted. Some robots were captured; others were destroyed outright, crushed beneath the machines that rolled through the city like an unstoppable force.

Rodney froze for only a moment before reacting. He pulled Fender back from a collapsing structure, dragged Piper out of a charging unit's path, and turned to see Crank already engaged in combat, fighting with a precision that spoke to his past. Even damaged, even incomplete, Crank moved with purpose, taking down one Sentinel before being forced back by another.

The destruction was total.

Buildings collapsed around them. Fires sparked and died. The chaotic life of Junk City was reduced to debris in minutes. Rodney watched as Viceroy stepped into the path of a charging Sentinel to protect Crank. The impact was immediate and final. Crank reached him, saw the damage, and knew there was no saving him. With a steady hand, he shut Viceroy down himself.

There was no time to mourn.

Rodney grabbed Crank and pulled him back as another wave of Sentinels pushed through. Fender and Piper regrouped with them, and they ran together. Not toward safety, but away from annihilation.

When they finally stopped, they were far enough from the city that the noise faded into the distance. They turned back and looked.

Junk City was gone.

What remained was nothing but another pile of scrap.

Something shifted in Rodney at that moment. The idea of Robot City as a place to belong was gone, replaced by a clearer understanding of what it had become. This wasn't a system to join.

It was a system to stop.

"I'm going back," Rodney said, his voice steady.

Crank looked at him, then nodded. "Good. I've got a score to settle."

Fender and Piper exchanged a glance before stepping forward as well. Their reasons were different, but the direction was the same. The captured robots. The destruction. None of it could stand.

Together, they turned back toward Robot City.

The journey was quieter than the one Rodney had made alone. There was less wonder now, more focus. As they approached the city, they moved carefully, avoiding patrols, studying the Sentinels' movements, learning the rhythm of the system they were about to enter.

They gained access with a severed Sentinel hand, its identification codes still active. The gate accepted it without question, opening just long enough for them to slip through.

Inside, the city felt different from the outside. More controlled. More contained. Every movement was regulated, every system monitored. Rodney kept to the shadows, following Crank along pathways that avoided the main flow of activity.

Their objectives began to diverge. Fender and Piper focused on the captured robots, determined to find a way into the Barbican, where prisoners were held. Rodney and Crank moved toward the center, toward the source.

The Glitter Palace.

It rose above everything else, a structure of polished surfaces and controlled symmetry. Inside, Rodney finally saw the system from within. Everything was ordered, precise, efficient to the point of sterility.

It was there that he discovered the truth.

The Arcon wasn't a single entity. Beneath the outer shell, beneath the controlled movements and calculated decisions, there was something else. A mass of microscopic machines, imbots, working together as a collective intelligence. They didn't think as individuals. They processed. They optimized. They removed anything that didn't fit.

They had taken control of the system.

Rodney escaped before he could be captured again, regrouping with the others as they were forced downward, deeper into the city's hidden layers while avoiding patrols that seemed to be everywhere.

Below the city, they found something unexpected.

An older world.

Buried structures stretched beneath the modern system, remnants of a time long before Robot City had consumed the surface. At the center of it all lay the source of Volz, flowing through massive conduits that fed the entire system above.

And there, waiting in silence, were the robotos.

Primitive. Angular. Unchanged for generations.

Rodney approached one carefully, using Volz to bring it back to life. The response was slow, mechanical, but undeniable. These robots still functioned. They still existed as a collective, bound by programming that had never evolved.

Rodney saw the possibility immediately.

With no other way out, they entered the Volz system itself, letting the flow carry them upward. The journey was violent and disorienting, but it delivered them back to the surface.

And into the final stage of the conflict. The Black 99 units were already active.

Thousands of identical machines moved through the city, enforcing control with absolute precision. Resistance was crushed instantly. The system was nearing completion.

Rodney, Bigweld, and Crank were captured shortly after their return, betrayed by Cappy, who revealed her true nature as a shapeshifting agent aligned with the imbots. They were brought before the Arcon, and the system prepared to eliminate them as it had eliminated everything else.

But the system had overlooked one thing.

Piper.

Through a mix of improvisation and sheer determination, Piper rallied the remaining junkbots, uniting them into a force. They didn't match the precision of the Black 99 units, but they didn't need to. They crashed into the palace with raw momentum, tearing through the controlled environment in a chaos the system couldn't immediately adapt to.

The final battle erupted.

Robots clashed across every level of the city. Junkbots and robotos fought alongside one another, overwhelming the uniform forces with unpredictability. Crank faced Cappy directly, their battle brutal and personal. Rodney moved toward the Arcon, while Bigweld called not to the shell but to the intelligence within it.

The imbots hesitated. For the first time, their processing encountered something they couldn't immediately resolve.

Rodney used that moment.

He drove Cappy into the glitterer as the imbots attempted to transfer into her, destroying both in a single act. The system collapsed almost instantly without their control.

The Arcon fell, then slowly rose again.

Different. Restored.

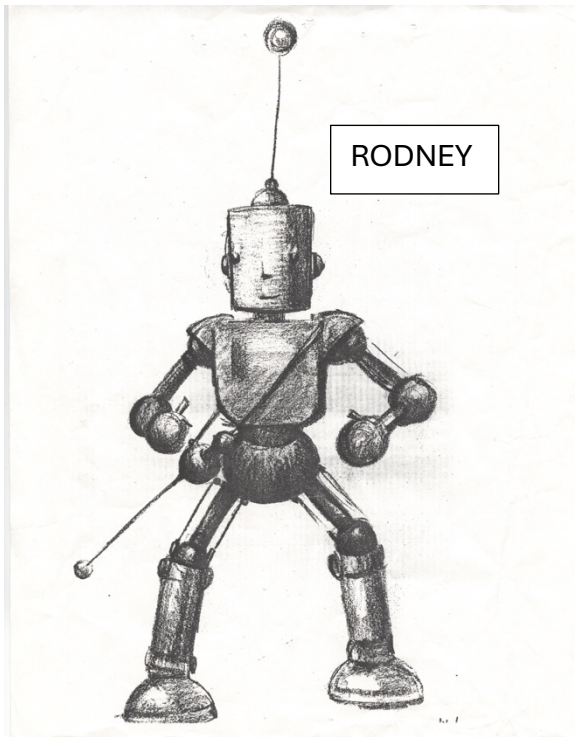
The city began to change.

The Black 99 units shut down. The remaining robots were freed. The rigid system that had once controlled everything began to loosen and break apart.

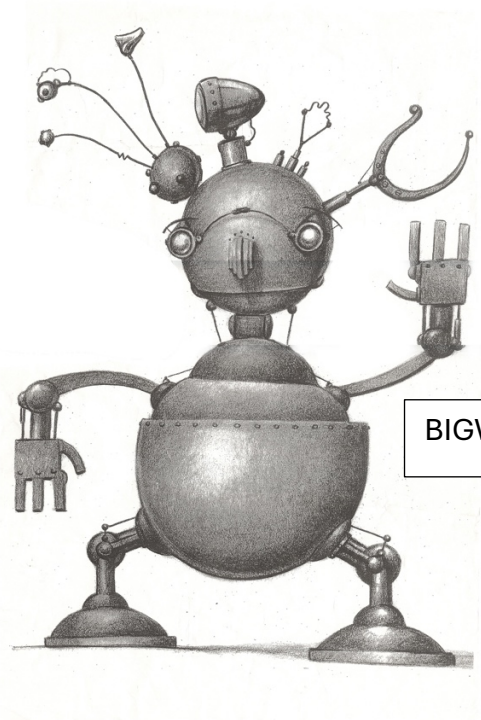
Rodney stood with the others, looking out over a city that no longer felt like a machine consuming the world but something that might finally learn to exist within it.

He never got his upgrade. He did something far more important. Proof that he never needed one.

CONCEPT ART DESIGNED BY WILLIAM JOYCE BASED ON THIS STORY



RODNEY



BIGWELD



THE ARCON