

Renegade Robot

by Tom Lichtenberg

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One

"Life is no argument, for the conditions of life could include error" - F. Nietzsche

It was no job for a superhero, but Wyatt Lorenzo knew what he was signing up for, so even when people began to taunt him with names like Jani-Tor and Scrub-Or, he just laughed and shrugged it off. Someone had to take care of the 'do-gooders' before it was too late. He liked to blame it all on his virtual best friend, the one who was forever texting him into doing things he did not want to do, from phoning Jan Johnson in the eighth grade, to pulling a certain stunt on a certain day in high school, to taking this job with his actual best friend, Jalopy, and so he had followed the call of the text and it had led him to this day, where he found himself, in his mid-twenties already, a gainfully employed Botnik in the service of Mankind, living alone on the outskirts of Rubble Land, doing his part to stem the tide of correction.

Wyatt had discovered the neighborhood while on a mission with his team to clean out some rampaging CGB's (concrete gobbler bots). These little guys, shaped like fat gray packing tubes about nine inches high and five inches thick, with pairs of extensible claws reaching out of the top and bottom and a thin slit down the middle on one side, were designed to break down buildings of concrete, glass and steel, excreting nothing but nitrogen-rich soil and oxygen. Once you discover them it's usually too late to save their target building, but they're fairly docile and easily dismantled. A little Cherry Coke goes a long way towards their final deactivation. Wyatt could've wished they'd let the little buggers do a little more damage before they'd completely neutralized the infestation; as it was, the locale was still littered with wreckage-filled lots only partially consumed. Still, the rents were cheap and the remaining structures were relatively safe, for the moment.

Two of the team weren't very respectful to Wyatt; Randy, the team leader, and Hazel, his right-hand man. They'd been doing this work since the early days of the first hints there might be a problem with the self-generating helpbots originally designed by Western Lightwave. Randy especially liked to claim he'd seen it coming all along, proof positive to him that nothing good ever came out of California. He was a short, fat loudmouth from The South who sported a sweaty fu manchu mustache and a prized Esso t-shirt most days of the week. His compadre Hazel was equally matched in stature and stoutness, and did her best to keep up with his vocal volume as well. A lot of people assumed they were married or siblings or both, but nobody knew for sure. They would come screaming up in the liquid-deathmobile first thing before sunrise, hoses clanging and dangling off every side of the bright blue tanker truck, blaring the horn and broadcasting to the whole block that 'lazy bones lorenzo better get his scrawny ass in gear or it was gonna cost him sure enough'. More times than not, Wyatt made sure he was out there on the remains of the sidewalk before they could pull that stunt.

The final member of the team was his impossibly tall skinny friend, Jalopy. With his six foot nine inch bony frame, his pink shades, camouflage coat, khaki shorts and high top sneakers, he was the opposite of incognito. Jalopy was surprisingly quiet, though. You had to listen closely to pick up any of his conversational tidbits. So it was mostly Randy and Hazel making all the noise as the tanker patrolled its officially suspect areas five days a week from dawn till noon. The team was tasked with the easement, as they called it, of any reprobate or otherwise retrograde Class A, B or C type IMA's (intelligent mechanical assistants). It was everything a morbid cynic could dream of. Unfortunately for him, Wyatt was neither. He was merely a dreamer and a drifter who found himself wherever he happened to go. Jalopy was like that, too, and both also shared an ability to take orders and follow instructions, and so the team generally functioned well enough. The two leaders sat up front in the cab, amusing each other by mocking the two followers, who clung to the back like garbage men, enjoying the wind in their hair and the thrill of life in the great outdoors. Wyatt and Jalopy, when they mutually emerged from their daydreams simultaneously, would sometimes flash the goofiest grins at each other and laugh like maniacs.

Two

It was a Tuesday in October, and Wyatt knew he should be thinking about the frantic phone call he'd received from his big sister the night before, but he'd managed to sleep too well after finally hanging up the phone, and now there was Randy out on the street making such a racket he had to get out there in a hurry, so he rolled out of bed, grabbed his shoes and ran out the door barefoot.

"Come on, Randy," he shouted, "Give a guy a break, man."

"Gave you a break when I let you on this team," Randy yelled back, "Now get your skinny ass on the back of this here truck. Got a big day ahead of us. Real big day."

Wyatt barely managed to push his feet into his shoes before clambering up the side of the tanker, and then was nearly pitched off by the sudden lurch as Randy floored it, roaring off down the street to the accompanying cackles of Hazel and himself. Jalopy was already ensconced on his edge of the vehicle, and just made that annoying clicking noise he always did, and shook his head. He said something, but Wyatt couldn't hear what it was. He didn't want to shout "what did you say?" because he knew from experience that it wouldn't do any good. He'd have to wait until a rare moment of relative silence and then try to get it out of him again.

The tanker barreled ahead through Rubble Land, twenty square blocks of former suburban sprawl, now reduced to occasional dwellings amidst the remains of dull one-story office parks and strip malls. The CGB's had spread out nicely when they first laid siege to this terrain, almost as if they'd had a plan. Wyatt knew they didn't operate like that, but here they managed to

occupy several lots at once, rather than their usual grazing pattern. There had been a lot of them in the pack, that was all. It took a lot of soda pop to wear them out that time. Wyatt imagined he could still smell the bubbles.

While riding along, he textually checked in with Bilj Bjurnjurd, his virtual friend. One of the things he liked about Bilj was that he could talk to him anytime, under any conditions, wind, rain, cold, noise, whatever. Bilj was almost always available. Wyatt could speak or text and the words would go through his wristband halfway around the planet where they would appear in some form to Bilj. On his end, Bilj's words came through the band and from there directly into his mind. Sometimes Bilj didn't have much to say. This morning, he had no answers to Wyatt's question; what was so "big" about the day, as Randy claimed.

"Probably just a bunch of 'sanders'," Bilj suggested. Wyatt nodded. It was possible. Randy was known to be fixated on those particular artifacts. They were often difficult to isolate amid all the sawdust they created and lived on, and they had to be isolated, otherwise their reduction would cause a rather flammable chain reaction. They would have to break out the sifters and get on their hands and knees. It was a dusty and dull assignment. Wyatt hoped it wouldn't be that, and when the tanker turned up Verona Street and headed north, he got the feeling it wasn't. Sanders weren't typically found in that direction, where the buildings were mainly brick and mortar. But then they turned again, and approached the former Lake Wilhelm. If it was the lake, it could be anything. All known mechanisms seemed to appreciate that meadow, with its tall, spreading reeds and plentiful wildlife. Bots had a weakness for non-human species, and liked to be near them, to enjoy their presence.

His guess was right. Randy pulled in right at Lakefront, where they used to rent canoes and paddle-boats and sell every kind of junk food. All of that was a mound of dirt now with sunflowers poking out all over. Hazel whipped out her machete and cut the stalks down. Sunflowers were a dead giveaway.

"We're out to find a snake, boys," Randy hollered as he leaped out the driver's side and grabbed a big red canister from the side of the tanker. Jalopy and Wyatt nodded and hopped down also. Each grabbed his own colored 'distinguisher' from where they hung next to the railings, Jalopy's purple and Wyatt's green. Hazel had her gold one slung across her back already, with the nozzle out and the dial set to high. She led the way through the meadow, kicking at every kind of plant along the way. Hazel had a thing about vegetation, an abiding scorn and hatred she made no attempt to hide.

"Freaking foliage," she shouted, "Get out of my life, you damn green maggots!"

"We ain't come for the weeds," Randy reminded her, but quietly. He didn't aim to get on her wrong side this early in the hunt. Wyatt didn't bother to ask why the leaders were so certain

they'd find a snake out here. Previous attempts in the same location hadn't turned one up. It seemed that every month or so Randy got it up his sleeve that there was one out here. He always said it was government orders, and even showed some paperwork now and then to back up the claim. He'd get awful sore when they turned up nothing, not even a scraper or a mole. The team had quotas and it seemed to Wyatt that whenever they were ahead of the game, Randy'd go all snake, as if he could afford the wasted effort. Of course, if they did get lucky, they'd be golden. Nothing was more valuable to catch. Those suckers were for keeps, too. No early retirement for them. They'd be handed over to the zoo for further study. The zoo already had a couple, and claimed to learn of miracles through them.

Everyone was always looking for the master plan. Wyatt didn't think there was one, and neither did Bilj. A lot of people believed that Western Lightwave had a hidden agenda. It couldn't just be plain old bad luck! Now was no time for wondering, though, not with Randy and Hazel yelling in the wild, and Jalopy letting him know they ought to team up, pair up just in case, one go wide and one go short. Snakes were not just rare, but allegedly deadly. They were said to have the ability to evaporate a man completely in less than twenty seconds. Wyatt knew he ought to be nervous, but he wasn't. Bilj had already informed him that there was no snake in the lake. Not now, not ever, and Bilj had never been wrong about fauna.

Three

Strolling through the meadow on that uncommonly warm autumn morning was enough to lull Wyatt into a walking daydream. Naturally, he was thinking about "her". Her image sprang to his mind as easily as a baby cries. He saw her lean, angular body, her soft brown skin, those sharp clear eyes sparking out from under the wide red headband that kept her black curly hair away from her face. He saw those dark green batwing tattoos curling around her skinny arms. He did not know her name, not her real name, at least. He had seen her, in the flesh, only once, and that was a long time ago, in a park, in a crowd, surrounded by her friends and family. He could never forget that face or the joy that spread across it when the music began. Of course he did not go up to her, did not say hello, did not introduce himself, did not ever see her again. It was enough to conjure the picture up in his mind, as he'd done so many times, over so many years. Always it was her smile and the eyes lighting up as she looked at him in his mind. He didn't need to think as he imagined this encounter while ostensibly patrolling for civilization-endangering mechanical threats. He would have remained in that reverie indefinitely, but Jalopy snapped him out of it with a tap on the shoulder and a gesture, pointing down.

There, at the foot of a scrubby bush, was a micro-bot unlike any either of them had ever seen. It was no more than four inches tall, and walked on bent back legs and long front arms like a gorilla. Its shaggy green head was ape-like also, containing bright wide eyes and a wide flat

mouth. Numerous folds, like pockets, covered its head and torso. The bot had stopped moving and stood unblinking in the shade of the shrub.

"Well hello, little buddy," Jalopy whispered. Wyatt understood why. Neither of them was eager to announce this discovery to their leaders. Randy and Hazel would have stomped it to smithereens, no questions asked. They were never curious, only murderous. The creature gave no sign it had heard him. Jalopy took a small step closer, and slowly lowered himself onto his haunches. He repeated his friendly greeting. After a moment, it opened its mouth and quietly emitted a tiny printout, like a miniature fortune cookie. Jalopy pulled it out and read, 'Please Do Not Disturb. Butterfly Restoration In Progress'.

Jalopy glanced over at Wyatt, who nodded. They did not need to discuss such things to know they were in agreement. Jalopy smiled and looked back down. He said

"We won't bother you, but you ought to know, we're botniks and ..."

He didn't finish the sentence as the creature had suddenly vanished.

"That'll do it," Wyatt chuckled, "they'll all be underground now".

They knew it from experience. Once one bot was alerted to danger, every bot in the area seemed to know instantaneously. This was one of the reasons why their work was sometimes difficult. Half of the enemy were nearly invisible, the rest almost seemed to be shape shifters, re-structuring and re-manufacturing themselves continually. Wyatt did not know anyone who truly understood what was happening. There were plenty of rumors, of course, and a lot of misinformation, for sure. If everything he'd heard was true, these invaders would eventually accomplish the unraveling of the whole history of human development. It was just a matter of time, but Wyatt doubted it. He tended to side with the Rationalists, who clung to the idea that some of the 'do-gooders' merely misunderstood their original purpose, which was to 'clean up' certain man-made messes. What that actually meant might be subject to interpretation.

Rationalists believed that some bots had taken the phrase a bit too literally, but could be reasoned with, and re-directed along more productive lines. The only problem with this approach was the unhappy fact that no one knew who, or what, to talk to about the matter. On the other side were the Frantics, who were certain these must be the last days. There was a convergence of the religious, the political, the entrepreneurial and the merely irrational among their ranks.

"Come on," Jalopy said to Wyatt. "At least we can go through the motions. They're going to wonder if we keep standing here too long."

"Right, right," Wyatt agreed. "I didn't see anything. Looking for a snake, right? Didn't see any snakes, neither."

"Not a thing," Jalopy smiled and turned up empty palms. "Maybe over that-a-way," he laughed, and they resumed their appearance of scouring the terrain for suspect simulacra. Across the field they could see, and hear, Randy and Hazel grunting and cursing and storming around. The way they carried on, it was a miracle they ever caught anything at all, and yet they considered themselves to be the best of the best of the breed. Randy even had a citation from the City which he never let anyone forget about. Wyatt still wasn't convinced those rats weren't organic after all, rather than the super-advanced simulations Randy claimed they were.

Four

Now that he was temporarily back in the here and now, Wyatt remembered that he'd meant to ask Jalopy what it was he'd said when Wyatt had first jumped on the tanker that morning.

"Oh, that was nothing," Jalopy grinned. "Just checking on the family drama. Seeing if there's any news."

Wyatt laughed. There had been a lot of drama lately around his sister Bethany and her asshole husband. She'd already been sending out smoke signals by all of a sudden using her maiden name in her socialnet posts, a dead giveaway from any married woman that her marriage is in trouble. Her new full name, Bethany Lorenzo Hayward, had even started appearing on her serialized romance novels. Aspects of her personal life had always been seeping into her popular Christian Erotica titles. If you knew her, it was easy to decode such phrases as "It was autumn, and her trees were large and deciduous". You would know that her husband, Blair, had recently taken to raking his neighbor's leaves in the middle of the day. The neighbor, Clarissa Simpson, recently Simpson Martel, no longer had need of smoke signals. Her main need these days was for a stream of new men, most of whom did more than rake. She did not really care where they came from, or to whom they may or may not be attached.

Blair had an assortment of issues, as did Bethany, as did each of their three boys, Brad, Brian, and Brendan, aged fourteen, twelve and ten. There had never been a quiet time for that missionary family. Ever since her sister had hooked up with The Preacher (as Wyatt called him), there had been one very public performance after another. Wyatt had tried to keep his distance, but he loved those boys and he was their favorite, and only, uncle, so for the sake of the children he'd remained involved, witnessing far too many domestic scenes far too closely to be surprised by anything anymore. Blair had exacting standards when it came to other people. As for himself, not so much. He also had curious interpretations of the Bible. As with the mainstream of his church, he was fixated with the admonition to "go forth and multiply". He seemed to think it meant to do so constantly, perpetually, and to tell everyone all about it all

the time very loudly, for he had a trumpet of a voice and a singular lack of modulation. In summer the whole block could recite his every phone call, word for word, and he made a lot of phone calls, most of them while pacing back and forth on the front porch.

Bethany had been cranking out wholesome smut for years. It was literally how they met. Blair has been one of her biggest fans, always showing up at book signings and sitting in the front row sighing loudly as she read passages from such classics as 'Whispers in the Dust' and 'Fall to Grace'. His pursuit of her hand in marriage knew no limits and she eventually succumbed to the shower of gifts and ever-more grandiose promises. It was the house that finally tipped the balance. He bought her the house of her dreams, with an oak-filled writing room in the attic, and four bedrooms, including one for every child they planned to have. They started having them right away. Bethany was still not yet forty years old and spent a generous percentage of her royalties every year on youth and beauty treatments. Blair, she suspected, was spending the allowance she gave him on gifts and grandiose promises to other women.

"Nothing much," Wyatt said. "Except I did get this really weird phone call from her last night. I couldn't tell if she was laughing or crying. She was definitely freaking out, though. She kept screaming that the kids' rooms were all neat and clean. Neat and clean, she was yelling, neat and clean. Do you know what that means? she asked me. I said, uh, maybe they picked up their stuff? She called me an idiot then."

"Sheesh," Jalopy shook his head. "I wonder what that's all about."

"She wants me to come over after work, and to bring our stuff. She said that everything's falling apart and it's not natural."

"Sounds pretty natural to me," Jalopy shrugged. "Marriage gone down the drain, kids probably trying to help out, do something nice for mom. Sounds like what I did when my own folks were splitting up. I did the dishes, sweeping, laundry. Didn't help any, but I was trying."

"You're probably right," Wyatt said. "These days nearly everybody's acting crazy. Every little thing they want to blame it on machines, as if we can't screw things up on our own. Heck, if we couldn't, we wouldn't have ever come up with the bots in the first place."

"What are you two yakking about now?" demanded Hazel. They hadn't noticed her sneaking up on them, and now it was too late. They were caught.

"I saw what you did," she glared at them both. "Everybody knows. You two! I can't believe you two. The sooner we get rid of you both, the better," and with that, she turned and stomped away.

"I wouldn't worry about it," Jalopy said as they watched her depart. "We've got our two years. We can always hook up with another crew. Experience counts, you know."

"I just hope we don't get split up," Wyatt grimaced. More than anything, he needed his friends, his real ones and his unresent ones too, but mostly the real, and of them, mostly Jalopy.

"Nah, don't worry," Jalopy said. "We won't let that happen."

Wyatt wasn't so sure. It was hard for him to trust anyone, even Jalopy. Hadn't his so-called friend promised to find his dream girl for him? Hadn't he even said he knew who she was, where she lived. That was a long time ago, and what had come of that? Not a trace of the girl. Nothing. Even his best unresent friend could not be relied on. What had that one ever really done for him? Precisely nothing at all. Some friends, Wyatt thought. And now I'm going to get fired again.

Five

It wasn't long before they heard Randy bellowing for them to get their asses back to the truck pronto. Wyatt and Jalopy shuffled slowly, in no hurry to get yelled at some more, but their pace only fueled the fire. Randy was furious by the time they arrived.

"I suppose you know what you've done!," he shouted. "And I suppose you're pleased with yourselves! I should've known I was sheltering a couple of no-good do-gooder traitors. What's your game, anyway? Only tag the small fry just to let the big fish get away? Is that what you're up to? Who're you working for anyway?"

Wyatt held up his hands as if surrendering and said,

"Boss, Randy, woah, slow down, man. We don't know what you're talking about, do we, J?"

Jalopy shook his head.

"No, man," he said, "What gives?"

"What gives?" Randy nearly screamed. "What gives? Besides you two giving me a heart attack? Jesus H. Crickets. Why'd you let the snake get away?"

"What snake?" Wyatt asked.

"We didn't see any snake," Jalopy stated.

"Of course you did," Randy said. "I've got it all on video. What? You didn't know you were being taped? We all are, all the time. City, county, state and federal. All of them see all of us and

everything we do. I'm going to catch bloody hell because of you two, but you, you've done got yourselves out of a job, as of today, as of this moment, as of right now, you got me?"

"We didn't see nothing, boss," Jalopy insisted.

"Oh no," Randy waved his arms around, "Don't give me that. Hazel, you got that queued up yet?"

"All ready, Randy," she replied from inside the tanker.

"Let's take a look, shall we, boys?" Randy sneered, "and then you can tell me you didn't see nothing."

They followed him to the driver's side door, where Hazel had pulled out a tablet computer and played them the video - as seen from Wyatt's extinguisher's nozzle. There it was, the little ape-like creature spitting out the note, and Jalopy reading it, and saying the magic word which made the creature vanish instantaneously into the dirt. Wyatt and Jalopy exchanged puzzled glances. Surely it wasn't a snake. Anyone could see that. It was more like a mini-gorilla. They both started saying the same thing at once.

"It was just restoring butterflies. See the note?" and Jalopy handed it to Randy who snatched it, stuffed it in his jacket pocket and said,

"I suppose you believe everything you read?"

Jalopy could only shrug. Wyatt was only wishing he was miles and miles away.

"I know you boys think I don't know squat," Randy told them. "I know you think old Haze and me are just a couple of redneck bumpkins, but we've been in this business since the very beginning. We knew right away this was going to be a job for professionals, so we ditched our termite gig and headed West to the nearest major infestation. Contrary to your popular belief, she and I know exactly what we're doing, and we know what's a snake and what is not. And this one here, this is the big one. I know it. They call it the Renegade Robot. Goes around pretending to be one of those do-gooders, but its plans are anything but doing good. We had some solid data it was here. Why do you think we came? Because we had nothing better to do? We're out to catch that thing, not just say hello all polite-like and then just wave it bye-bye."

"We didn't know," Jalopy said.

"Yeah," Wyatt piped up. "You could have filled us in."

"I've never been sure about you two," Randy said, "Now I know I was right. Consider yourselves finished, boys. Finito. Better find yourselves some other line of work, because this door is

slamming shut in your faces," and with that, Randy climbed into the cab as Hazel moved over, and he literally did slam the door shut in their faces. With a roar, the tanker lurched and made off, kicking up pebbles and dust in the faces of the two newly unemployed former botniks.

Six

"It's not supposed to be a snake snake," came the text of Bilj Bjurnjurd through the wristband. "It's a metaphor, referring to the biblical serpent in the Garden of Eden".

"Oh!" Wyatt said aloud.

"Oh, what?" asked Jalopy. They were still standing in the parking lot, several moments after being abandoned by their team leaders.

"What what?" Wyatt replied, unaware he had made a sound.

"You said 'Oh', like you just thought of something."

"Right, right," Wyatt bobbed his head. He was quick to recognize he must have done something he had done so many times before - vocalize his part of the silent conversation - so he repeated what Bilj had told him. Jalopy thought it made sense.

"Although," he added, "It could also be a reference to the Hydra myth, a several-headed serpent which grows two new heads every time you chop off one."

"Could be," Wyatt agreed. They relapsed into silence once again for a few minutes. This time it was Jalopy who broke the quiet.

"Guess we ought to get out of here," he said.

"I can't believe they just ditched us like that," Wyatt said. "Way the heck out here at the lake, too. Was that nice?"

"That was not nice," Jalopy agreed, "But the 78 Corcoran runs a few blocks from here on Stanlan Avenue. We can catch it at Jerrell Street".

Whatever other faults he may have had, Jalopy knew his bus routes. The pair were aboard the 78 headed for a transfer to the 29 in practically no time at all, and Wyatt found himself back home before noon. Jalopy had gone on his own way, but not before promising Wyatt that he'd check in with the Board first thing the next morning.

"After all," he stated, "We're Board Certified and have the two years. There's no way they're going to freeze us out like Randy said. We've got grievance if it comes to that."

"Yeah, okay," Wyatt said, knowing that while they did have their two years, and while they were certainly certified, he was never convinced that anything would ever end up going his way, and while he was thinking of that, he remembered he'd promised his sister he'd come over at the end of his shift, and even though he didn't really feel like it, he pulled out his old three-speed bicycle, climbed on, and headed off toward The Gathering, the walled-garden semi-gated enclave where his sister and her quasi-community tried to feel safe from the outside world.

The Gathering was surrounded by high pink stone walls surmounted by broken glass and total surveillance. The checkpoints were guarded by youngsters in uniform who merely waved Wyatt through without slowing on his bike. Inside, the narrow, winding sidewalk-free streets were well-paved and lined with excellent lawns. There were precisely three hundred and nine homes in The Gathering, a number determined to be optimal by the neighborhood's founding fathers, who were literally 'fathers' in the sense that many of them were ministers in The Church of Ultimate Reclamation, and one of the requirements of being a member of that church was being a father of at least one child. Only members of the church were permitted to live in The Gathering, and as no members of the church were allowed to live anywhere else, it was a matter of simple math to determine that the church was not and could not be any larger than could fit in the dwellings therein. All of this calculation came straight out of some portion of the bible, just as the church's doctrines were also eclectically selected from that same book. Despite its small size, or maybe because of it, the church and its members were financially quite well-off, with everyone sharing to some precise extent in the profits of each others' works, the printed and audio books of Bethany Lorenzo Hayward included, along with her related merchandise, including sleepwear and personalizable intimate accessories.

As Wyatt went past the Simpson house, he saw that Blair was there, raking over a large pile of fallen leaves. Wyatt waved and shouted,

"Hey Blair," and heard Blair call back, laughingly,

"Hey Chump".

Wyatt rode on, wondering what that was all about. He and Blair had been on formally friendly terms for years. He found out soon enough, for when he arrived at his sister's house, the boys were out front waiting for him in the front yard. They surrounded him as he dismounted, all of them chattering all at once, asking a lot of questions that Wyatt didn't understand, and all of them also calling him 'Chump' as if that was his given name.

"Boys, boys," Bethany shouted, "leave him alone! Wyatt, come in, come in," and she shoed the boys away and grabbed Wyatt by the arm and marched him into the house.

"What's going on?" Wyatt asked as Bethany led him into the living room and plunked him down on a couch.

"It's all over the place," she told him. "Watch!"

On the wall, the frantic news network was playing, trumpeting the latest disaster.

"CHUMPS FOOLED! SNAKE ON THE LOOSE!" were the headlines streaming repeatedly across the bottom of the screen. In the upper-right corner were close-up shots, playing in a loop, of the little ape thing spitting out its ticker tape, and there, of course, were Jalopy and Wyatt with goofy grins just letting this apparent apocalypse go on without a care in the world.

"Oh for goodness sake!," Wyatt exclaimed. "We didn't know! They told us to look for a snake. Does that look like a snake to you?"

"It's a metaphor," Bethany explained. "Like the serpent in the Garden of Eden."

"I know that now," Wyatt murmured, thinking, shoot, there goes my career down the drain. Bethany turned off the broadcast and sat down next to him on the couch. For a few moments they remained side by side in silence, and then Bethany said.

"Okay. We know about your problem. Now, about mine."

Seven

"I already told you about the kids' rooms," Bethany continued, "but you've got to see for yourself. Come on".

She leaped off the couch and pulled Wyatt after her. Hurriedly she dragged him across the living room and up the wide winding staircase. Once again Wyatt was impressed with the wealth of The Gathering's hand-picked pro-creators. Every house in its district was like this, as far as he could tell, with a generous bedroom for every child, genuine wood floors and high beamed ceilings, the latest in kitchen appliances and well-trimmed gardens all around.

"See? See?" Bethany exclaimed, pointing first into one neat, clean bedroom, then another, then the third. "Nothing on the floor. Nothing blocking the door. Beds are made. Posters taken down. Posters taken down! Do you know what that means?"

"They were tired of the posters?" Wyatt guessed.

"No, no, of course not. Brad had one of Hominy Wells. Hominy Wells!! That's a healthy young man, perfectly healthy, and where is she now? I have no idea. Not a trace. I couldn't find it in the trash. I couldn't find it in any closet. I couldn't find it anywhere!"

"Did you ask him?"

"Of course I did," Bethany said. "He said he gave it away. Gave it to his friend Jim Smith. Who has a friend named Jim Smith?"

"Jim's been Brad's best friend since you guys moved in here," Wyatt reminded her.

"Brian had two posters of Slimma Verdeek," she went on, ignoring his comment. "Not that I disapprove of Slimma, not at all, although I don't know what he sees in her. No curves to speak of, not a one. Even her knees are a straight thin line. But then again, there's no accounting for taste, especially in a twelve year old boy. Where is she now? Do you see her? Is there a Slimma in the room? Not one. Not a trace. And I know what you're going to ask and yes, he said he gave it away to his best friend, Ricky Potts. Why are they giving them away? Why, I ask you, why?"

"Did you ask Brian?"

"Of course I did. Of course. He said he was bored with her. And that's not the worst of it. Brendan is the worst. The absolute worst. Come and look, come and see."

"What do you see?" she persisted after pulling Wyatt into Brendan's room.

"Um, not much," Wyatt said. It was curious. Brendan had been the messiest of the three, possessing a room fully littered with half-built structures made of various pieces and parts both of hand-me-down kits and newer ones of his own. Now there was nothing in his room, not even a scrap.

"They've suddenly turned into neat freaks," Bethany nearly shouted. "How could it happen? How? Only one way, only one, and you know what that is."

"They aren't infested with nanobots, if that's what you're getting at," Wyatt told her.

"And how do you know? How can you tell?"

"I'm Board Certified, remember? I can tell. There are zero indications of infestation anywhere in this house, or anywhere in The Gathering, as a matter of fact. That's well known. They track it every day. I know you know that."

"They missed it," Bethany said. "It's obvious, and it's not just the boys. You know about Blair already. He's probably over there right now, jumping into you-know-who's pile of fallen leaves. And then," she continued, lowering her voice, "and then there's me."

"What's the matter with you?" Wyatt asked.

"I'm blocked," Bethany replied. "You might as well know. I've come down with a kind of writer's block. It's very peculiar. I can still write almost anything, but, it's those intimate scenes. Somehow I just can't bring myself to do it. Oh, it's so upsetting. How am I going to finish 'Ramblings In The Swamp'? The proofs are due a week from Thursday and I can't even get their clothes off. It's terrible."

Wyatt had to keep from bursting out laughing. It was just too absurd. Instead, he turned away and started down the hallway towards the staircase.

"Wait, wait," Bethany called after him, "Where are you going? What are you going to do? You've got to help. You've got to do something!"

"I'll think about it," Wyatt replied, and hastened down the steps and nearly ran out the front door, inadvertently slamming the door behind him. Out on the front lawn, the three Hayward children were waiting for him.

"Uncle Y," Brad said, "What's the matter with mom?"

"Yeah, she's gone crazy," Brian added.

"Freaked out," Brendan contributed.

"I don't know, guys," Wyatt said. "She seems to think you've all been taken over by helpbots. It's nonsense. Ridiculous."

"Taken over?" Brad asked. "All of us? How?"

"Forget about it," Wyatt said. "I'll talk some sense into her later, but first I need to think. I'll be back in a bit," and he grabbed his bicycle, jumped on, and pedaled off down the street as fast as he could.

Eight

Jefferson Ash had been Wyatt's boss at Flip Brothers Auto Parts until he'd invented the self-inflating car tire, which automatically maintains a car's recommended air pressure at all times. After quickly becoming rich, he imported a Ukrainian bride, fathered a daughter, and received an irresistible invitation from The Church of Ultimate Reclamation. Although Wyatt hadn't spoken with Ash since a certain awkward episode, he rode straight to his house after leaving Bethany's. Ash was in his front yard, wearing nothing but shorts and sandals, casually trimming roses. Life had continued to be nothing but blessings for this man, for whom money had indeed purchased happiness.

"Hullo Wyatt," he said in his usual quiet manner as Wyatt pulled up. Jefferson Ash was as ordinary a person as anyone could ever hope to be. He was impossible to describe without resorting to terms like "normal" and "average" and "light brown and thinning". He did have a little pot belly which his three year old loved to pat and say "tummy tummy tummy tummy" all the time.

"Hi Jeff," Wyatt said, hopping off the bike and walking over. His face had broken into a wide grin and he couldn't help himself but finally let out a gigantic guffaw, nearly knocking himself off his feet.

"Something funny, I take it," Ash remarked.

"It's Beth," Wyatt sputtered. "She thinks she's possessed because she's having trouble cranking out a sex scene for her latest porno. I mean, what in the world?" and he laughed again so hard he did topple over, landing on his butt on the driveway.

"Possessed you say?" Ash inquired. His eyebrows raised along with uttering the word. This was not something a member of the Church would take lightly. Possession was certainly among one of their central creeds.

"Nanobots," Wyatt gasped, "she thinks some microscopic helpbots are cleaning up her dirty little mind!"

"Seriously?" Ash pondered the implications as Wyatt staggered to his feet. "I suppose it is possible," he continued.

"Oh come on, Jeff," Wyatt said, "it's ridiculous and you know it. It's just the Frantics have got everybody all screwed up. They're seeing The Singularity under every bush, behind every shadow."

"I heard you saw it yourself, in person, just this morning," Ash casually dropped.

"Don't be silly," Wyatt told him. "You know as well as I do that the whole thing's just trumped up for ratings and income. The Church is in on it, you know that. TV, advertising, publications, panic products. Everybody's making money so they keep it up. It only gets nuts when you start believing your own nonsense."

"I'm not so sure," Jefferson said. "It seems more likely every day. These are troubling times, you know."

"Oh, you too?" Wyatt felt disgusted for a moment. He remembered now that awkward scene. Jefferson Ash had once been a staunch Rationalist, but that has been before his conversion.

He'd originally gone into the church for the lifestyle, but now it was taking hold of him. In was in and he was in now all the way, it seemed.

"Do you remember?" Wyatt prodded. "Do you even remember how it used to be? When the bots first came out? Look what they've done for us! All the landfills, eaten away. Nuclear waste? Disposed of, naturally. Oil in the ocean? Garbage in the sea? Gone, every bit of it. Abandoned cities, broken down, restored. Extincted species? Returned. Of course there have been some unintended side effects. There have been some rogue elements here and there. Some were accidents, some got carried away, and some were botched jobs. We deal with it. We take care of it. There's nothing we can't handle. That's our motto, what we believe, remember?"

"But the snakes," Jefferson counted. "What about the snakes? Sure the helpbots have done some good. They were supposed to. But now the line's been crossed. It's out of our hands. They create themselves! My God, what are they planning? What about us?"

"They're not 'planning' anything," Wyatt said. "They have some intelligence, yes, but hardly any more than we do. They make mistakes. They mess up. They're practically human!"

"The Church has knowledge," Jefferson informed him. "We have inside sources. The snake that got away this morning, that snake is dangerous. I wonder if you realize what you've done? Still a Rationalist I see, but now maybe you're rationalizing just a bit too much, don't you think? I don't wonder if you do. That was a bad mistake, my young friend."

"Come on, Jeff," Wyatt said. "She thinks the whole family's possessed because the kids cleaned up their rooms and Blair's messing around with Clarissa Simpson."

"I know about that too," Ash replied. "That Clarissa's in a tricky spot right now. The Church doesn't look kindly on divorce. Families broken up are not usually permitted to remain in The Gathering. I heard she'll be evicted soon."

"What is it with this place?" Wyatt blurted out, walking back towards his bike. He felt it was wrong to come here. Ash was not really his friend anymore. A friend is someone you can talk to. This one was like a wall, a repeating wall of doctrine. Frantics seemed to wish the apocalypse would happen and happen fast. They yearned for disaster, cataclysm, catastrophe. Living in a normal world where things take time and even calamity comes slowly was just too dull for them to bear. Ignoring the actual events of the factual world outside, they tuned in to their random noise factories of gloom and histrionics. They would not listen to reason. Wyatt knew. He'd been out there. For all the shrieking and moaning the basic fact was that the world was not going to hell, not in a hand basket or any other way, or rather, it was still going to hell the old-fashioned way, in due course and in its own time.

Nine

Bilj Bjurnjurd was his usual know-it-all self all the ride home.

"Don't worry," he reassured his host, "this will all blow over. You'll see. And it wasn't a snake. I know that for certain."

"Yeah," Wyatt shouted into the wind as he pedaled faster and faster, "I should listen to you, right? You, who never makes a mistake."

"I can understand your impatience." Bilj noted, "but you just have to hang in there. Time will ..."

"Spare me the homilies," Wyatt interrupted, realizing at that moment that he had no idea who Hominy Wells was or why a young man would want a picture of her on his wall. I am so out of touch, he reminded himself, and not for the first time. Being out of touch with the world at large was one of his perpetual goals. No good could come of knowing who was what or what was who. There was no shortage of images and input streaming in from the world. Quite the opposite, there was a constant deluge, none of which could be taken seriously. A million books a year and still they talked about 'literature'. A million songs and they talked about 'music theory'. A million movies and still they used the word 'film'. The convergence towards continual onslaught had been peaking for so long it was no longer possible to shut it out completely. There was a time when people had to seek out new things. Now there was no way of avoiding them.

"At least I have my Rubble Land," Wyatt thought, "where nothing and no one can reach me."

If only that were true. Rounding the corner he saw that the walls of his home were now covered in bright pink spray paint, the word "CHUMP" written over and over again across ever inch. Posters were plastered to his front door, displaying a blown-up picture of the so-called snake with the legend "\$500,000 REWARD," and underneath a photo of Wyatt himself, with a smaller but still bold caption reading "FORMER CITY BOTNIK WYATT LORENZO RELEASES SNAKE INTO THE WILD".

"I did not!," he protested to no one, thinking, "It was all Jalopy's fault. I didn't do anything. I just happened to be there," though he knew, and didn't need Bilj to remind him, that he had been complicit, that he had been partially to blame, if blame there was to go around.

"Not even a snake," he spat as he kicked open the front door, threw his bike into the hall, entered and slammed the door behind him. The floor of the hall was covered in paper, notes that must have been slipped under the front door and pushed further in by the others. They were filled with scrawled threats and warnings. Get out! Go Way! No Chumps Aloud!. We Will Frickin Kil U.

"Oh this is nice," Wyatt muttered, glancing at the phone. Sure enough it displayed bright letters announcing he had precisely seventy three voice messages. He pulled the plug on the thing and flung himself down on a chair. The wall screen was beckoning but he knew he shouldn't turn it on. It would only be more of the same.

"Blow over, eh?" He texted. Bilj was apparently not there. Whenever Bilj had something to say, he sure as hell went and said it, but if Wyatt had something to say, you'd never know if the other would be around. It had been like that since childhood. They had met online as toddlers, practically, and kept in touch ever since, never meeting in person, always a half a world apart. He had lived with this intermittent companion ever since and had grown accustomed to his ways.

"It was not a snake," Bilj messaged now.

"So what's the reward for?" Wyatt retorted.

"Maybe it's for you," Bilj replied. "Maybe you're going to get it all".

Ten

Wyatt slept soundly that night, and even enjoyed his dreams, in which large ants paraded around Rubble Land carrying yellow and orange banners and flags in some sort of celebration. Wyatt and a few other people sat on lawn chairs in the street watching the march and applauding every now and then. In the morning, he felt calm and even cheerful. He had decided at some point during the night to paint the whole house pink, and by nine o'clock he had been to the supply store and back and was already busily at work. The first order of business was of course to smudge out the various wordings which had been styled on the walls, and he went about it systematically. He had always preferred solo assembly-line-type work, where you did first one thing, then the next, until you had completed all your tasks. He liked the fact that when you dug a hole, it stayed dug. He had had too many jobs where digging a hole only led to others coming around and filling it back in again.

He didn't wonder about how the graffiti had appeared so quickly, or the notes in the hallway, or the messages on the phone. There was no more of it the following morning, as if it had all been a random spasm of nature. There must have been a team, he decided, a group whose job it is to go around slandering and stomping all over people, then moving on to the next guy. Maybe it had merely been his turn, as if he'd won the "kick me" lottery. The only person who showed up that morning was Jalopy, around eleven. He had been down to the Center, checking on their career path. He looked quite ecstatic as he pulled up on his motorized unicycle and jumped off.

"Dude," he exclaimed, "nice paint job. I never pegged you as a fluorescent rose kind of guy."

"It just happened," Wyatt shrugged.

"Listen, man," Jalopy went on, "We're going to have to wait this one out a bit."

"So we're done, huh? Like I thought."

"No, no," Jalopy said. "We just have to cool it. Hey, I met this really great girl down there and she's going to handle our case. Cecilia. You've got to meet her. She's awesome. I even asked her out and she said yes! How about that?"

"That's great," Wyatt said, putting down his roller and wiping his brow. He was truly happy for his friend. Jalopy hadn't met anyone in awhile and Wyatt could see how excited he was.

"Yeah, thanks," Jalopy said. "Anyway, she says that as soon as this whole snake thing blows over we'll be fine."

"It wasn't a snake," Wyatt corrected him.

"Whatever," Jalopy countered. "Everyone says it's a snake, so it's a snake".

"No," Wyatt retorted. "That's not how it works. A thing is what it is, not just what people say it is".

"Really?" Jalopy asked. "Okay, then, what do you want to call it, then? The Renegade Robot? I'd say R.R. but then we'd sound like pirates!"

"Right, mate," Wyatt said in his best bad Australian accent, and laughed. He told Jalopy about the mess he'd come home to, the messages, and everything.

"I saw the poster, man," Jalopy said. "They even had it up at the Center. It seems like an unfair shot to put your name and photo in it like that. Glad it wasn't me, though".

"I'll bet you are," Wyatt said. "Sucks, anyway. So when does this Cecilia figure the whole thing will 'blow over' like you say."

"A week, ten days, her best estimate, even though she can't remember anything quite like this happening before. Not with our names being so involved and all. Usually the stories are about heroes in the valiant struggle for ultimate reclamation. Isn't that what they call it?"

"That's the church," Wyatt said.

"Right, but they got that from the TV news, I'm pretty sure. Taking back the land from the do-gooders, that sort of thing."

"I saw Jeff Ash yesterday," Wyatt said.

"That creep?" Jalopy shook his head. "I don't like to think about what happened to him."

"What? He's rich, happy, successful."

"Like I said, I don't even like to think about it," Jalopy shrugged. "Hey, you want some help with that? I've got nothing going on."

"Sure," Wyatt replied, and soon the two were both at work, slapping the bright pink paint all over the exterior walls. A freshly painted house was about the last thing anyone would expect to see in Rubble Land, except for one that color. The few people who drove down that street that day slowed to gawk as if it were an injury accident, but nobody came by with any more posters, and nobody showed up with any more spray paint. It was as if the great traumatic event had never even happened, but there was something underway, a slight vibration in the air, and Wyatt stopped once or twice to listen. It seemed to him that the customary silence in the empty lots of Rubble Land was disturbed every now and then by a vague hum, or buzzing. He thought of the ants of his dream and even half expected to see them as he looked around the streets, but there was nothing to see, above ground. It was all happening underneath.

Eleven

It wasn't much of an earthquake, more of a tremor, really. Official reports later pegged it at around a 2.8 on the Richter Scale – in other words, nothing. No one was injured, no items fell off shelves in any stores, there was no broken glass, no reports of anything disturbed in the slightest, in fact. It was enough, however, that the epicenter was determined to be within the boundaries of Rubble Land, to cause the Frantic News and every other news network to descend on the area like crows on road kill. Wyatt and Jalopy barely had time to discuss the slight disturbance before they heard and then saw news vans screeching around the corner, reporters and their entourages piling out, setting up equipment and begin broadcasting from one of the empty lots on the block.

"All around me, as you can see," cried Laurie Brigger, the channel Seven disaster specialist, "there is ruin and destruction everywhere! How could this happen? Even more urgently, why did it happen, and why did it happen here and now?"

"Could it be a coincidence?," intoned Harley Cronman, distinguished city beat reporter from the channel Eleven national affiliate, "that this singular disaster has occurred in the very location where the well known Serpent Master resides?"

"No one should be alarmed," claimed Kris Kintoja of the Frantic News Network, "but could this be The One? Is it The Sign? Has The Singularity finally begun? As we know, it is from a small

acorn that the giant oak tree grows, so we must be ever vigilant for the roots of the cataclysm which we know for a fact is impending and impinging upon us at every turn."

Wyatt and Jalopy stared in wonder at the accumulation of broadcasters. At first they thought it must be in response to some other story, some other event they had no knowledge of, but it soon became clear that it was in fact a reaction to the insignificant temblor which was causing all that racket. One of the reporters who could find no dramatic perch among any of the broken lots came straggling over to Wyatt's house. This was Amy Dragberry, the famous anchor of the hardly-watched channel Three 'News at Four Fifteen'.

"Hello, hello,,"she called out. "You, up there," she pointed at Wyatt.

"Uh-oh," Wyatt murmured, "time to clear out. Or clear in, as the case may be."

"Right," Jalopy nodded, and they hopped off their stepladders and made a break for the front door, carrying their brushes and buckets along with them.

"Wait, wait," cried Dragberry, hustling after them as fast as she could, impeded as she was by her very high heels.

"So sorry," Wyatt called out boldly, "No talk. No time," and he hurried inside and slammed and bolted the door before she could get any closer.

"I don't like the looks of this," Jalopy said, peering out the front window as a crowd of newspeople had decided to follow Amy Dragberry and was converging on the house. They could hear cries of

"Hey, isn't that?,"and

"Wait a minute, I think I know," and

"Sure it is, it's that Chump."

"The Serpent Master," cried Kris Kintoja as he joined the fray. "There he is!"

Soon the doorstep was filled with the crews and equipment and reporters all clamoring for an interview. The whole scene was being broadcast live over several networks. Television and online viewers would not have known that there were actually no other people for blocks around, judging by the self-created mayhem of the newsfolk. They saw the hysterical crush of reporters demanding a statement from the newly coined Serpent Master and they heard the shouts and cries of their colleagues and they remembered from moments earlier the sights of

crushed cement and ruined buildings apparently caused by the quake. They could not be blamed if they didn't remember the same sights from the same news stories with the same level of excitement only earlier that year, when Rubble Land what been formed by the out-of-control gobbler bots. No one was talking about that now. It was a new day and a new angle and what was old was being recycled again as new, and it was certainly alarming if it was true.

On the steps the sound of a chant started small and then soon became a chorus in unison as the crowd demanded a statement from Wyatt.

"Serpent Master! Serpent Master! Serpent Master! Serpent Master!," they cried. Inside the house, Wyatt could only shake his head.

"This is nuts," he said to Jalopy. "I can't go outside and tell them anything, because then I would just be answering their call. No one would believe me anyway. They've already made up their minds."

"Agreed," Jalopy said. "On the other hand, they know we're in here. How long can we hold out? You got any food?"

"Yes I have food," Wyatt snapped, annoyed that his friend was already heading to the kitchen to rummage around in the fridge.

"What do you think they'll do?," Wyatt asked rhetorically, knowing that Jalopy, once set upon a meal would never respond. Instead, it was Bilj Bjurnjurd who answered, the voice-to-text-band transmitting every word that Wyatt said.

"In these cases," Bilj typed, "Bad things usually happen."

"Thanks a lot," Wyatt snapped. "Like I really needed to hear that."

"All you can do," Bilj continued, "is sit tight and wait it out. It will all blow over in time."

"What's with everyone and blowing over?," Wyatt asked, rhetorically once more. "In my experience," he jibed Bilj, "when someone doesn't have any idea what is going to happen, one tends to make vapid general statements that are of no use to anyone whatsoever."

"Don't say I didn't tell you," Bilj replied.

"Tell me what?," Wyatt tapped. "You didn't tell me anything."

As there was no answer to that, Wyatt made his way to the kitchen as well, where at least the noise of the rabble out front was diminished a bit.

"We could sneak out the back way," Jalopy suggested, and it was true that for the moment the rear of the house was entirely unattended, but almost as if on cue, that situation changed immediately.

"Too late," Wyatt said, "more reporters are camping out back there."

"I don't think those are reporters," Jalopy said, pulling down the window shade just as they had been spotted and calls of "Chump," and "Serpent Master," reached them from the yard.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because they've got candles," Jalopy told him.

"Candles? It's early afternoon," Wyatt said, mystified.

"And Bibles," Jalopy added. "They've got candles and Bibles. This can't be good."

Twelve

"Well, at least the doors are locked," Wyatt said, and went around the rest of the house securing the windows and pulling down shades.

"Mmmph," Jalopy said, his mouth full of ham and cheese.

Suddenly, the front door opened. Wyatt nearly jumped as his sister Bethany waltzed into the house, as blithe as any summer day, accompanied by a man who looked vaguely familiar.

"What are you doing here?," Wyatt yelled, rushing past her and shutting the door before any of the accumulated mob could force their way in. He turned both the locks and fastened the chain.

"You promised to come back," Bethany said calmly, putting her purse on the side table in front hallway and looking around at the furnishings with disapproval.

"You certainly haven't cleaned up since the last time I was here," she commented. "Don't you have any domestic qualities at all? I suppose not. You never really did."

"Bethany!," Wyatt shouted at her. He grabbed her by the shoulders and spun her around. "I want you out of here, right now, and this character too. Whoever the heck you are, get out!"

The man, a smallish gentleman with a large head, very well dressed, very photogenic with his slick thin hair and his pencil mustache, beamed gently at Wyatt and said,

"I'm very pleased to meet you too. My name is Wilbur Cranshaw, but you probably know me better by my public name, Mr. Wonderful."

"No, I don't know you or your public name," Wyatt spat, "I only know I want you out of my house, right now."

"I'm afraid that's impossible, "Mr. Wonderful informed him. "I have a duty to perform, and on behalf of the church, the city, and the public at large, I will perform my duty, and you, my young friend, will be glad that I did."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Wyatt said, as Jalopy appeared in the hallway.

"Woah!."he said, "Mr. Wonderful! What are you doing here?"

"Please to meet you sir," said the man, "and you are?"

"Call me Jalopy," Jalopy said, "most people do."

"Then I will too," said the very formal Mr. Wonderful. He glanced around, and decided on the living room as the place to set up shop. He sauntered into the room, inspected all the chairs and took the most comfortable one for himself. From the folds of his jacket he extracted a sort of tablet, which he touched in various ways as to bring it to life in color and sound. It was a fully featured broadcast-studio-on-glass.

"I am here," he said to the glass, "in the home of a certain Wyatt Lorenzo, otherwise known by different names these days, none of which I shall repeat, out of respect for the gentleman whose hospitality I currently enjoy."

With a few more swipes he directed the scene at Wyatt, Bethany and Jalopy, who were still in a clump in the hallway. Bethany seemed to realize she was on screen, for she began to pat down her hair and smiled and swayed womanishly into the room.

"Bethany Hayward," she introduced herself. "You may know me by my works," she added.

"Indeed," Mr. Wonderful narrated, "the very famous author Bethany Hayward is with us this afternoon, as well as Mister Jalopy, on your right, and Mr. Lorenzo, on the left. Gentlemen," he waved his arm at them, "Please do make yourselves comfortable."

Nearly against his will, Wyatt found himself complying with Mr. Wonderful's instructions. Soon he was seated directly across from the man, looking straight into the camera.

"We at Human Interest International are, as always, primarily concerned with the individual," Mr. Wonderful was saying. "However, in this case, more is at stake. There is alarm amongst the people. There have been reports, rumors, dare I say even a note of panic? These are

complicated times indeed. At the heart of the recent upheaval is one man, the very same Mr. Lorenzo who is kind enough to join us today. Around this man are swirling various controversies, dangerous currents, perhaps even enormities beyond imagining. It is my sworn duty to dig, to delve, to penetrate the very depths in pursuit of the truth, and I promise I will do so to the fullest extent of my capabilities. Now then, Mr. Lorenzo, I would like first of all to give you the opportunity to make a statement on your own behalf."

"Go to hell," Wyatt replied, "And get out of my house right now!"

"I'm afraid I can't do that," Mr. Wonderful replied.

"Is that so?" Wyatt asked. He stood up, and beckoned Jalopy with a slight head motion to join him over by the window. There, while pretending to have a private conversation with his friend, he unlatched and opened the window, then together they quickly turned, lifted Mr. Wonderful out of his seat, and threw him out of the opening. Wonderful landed with a thud, his studio bashing his nose as they hit the ground together.

"Wyatt!" Bethany exclaimed, rising from her seat. "That was incredibly rude."

"I'll tell you what's rude," he turned on her, "Breaking into my house in the middle of this emergency, that's what I call rude."

"You promised you'd help me," Bethany repeated. "You said you'd return and you didn't, so I came here."

"Bringing that moron with you."

"He snuck in behind me," she explained. "Really, I had no idea he was even there."

"I don't believe you," Wyatt said, "And if you don't want to go out the same way he did, I suggest you help me figure out what the heck we're going to do to get rid of all those people."

"I don't think that's going to be possible," Bethany told him. "Those are Church people. They're planning a vigil. They expect to be here as long as it takes."

"As long as it takes what?"

"As long as it takes you to call off the catastrophe," she told him. Wyatt was speechless. It was Jalopy who brought up the obvious question.

"What catastrophe?"

"The snake, of course," she told them, matter-of-factly. "The Serpent from Hell who is planning to complete the conquest of Mankind."

"Oh come on," Wyatt snickered. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

"Nevertheless," Bethany went on, "that's what they think, and they're doing what they believe they must."

"Surrounding my house?"

"Not just that," she told him. "They're performing the Rites of Ultimate Reclamation. Don't you see, Wyatt? This is the moment we have all been waiting for, the reason the Church was founded. This is it, at long last!"

"No it isn't," he told her. "They're wrong, and you're wrong. This is nothing. Nothing, I tell you"

"But the snake." she started to say.

"There was no snake!" he yelled. "There is no snake. It's not a snake. It wasn't a snake! How many ways do I have to say it?"

"We all saw it," she corrected him. "Remember, it was broadcast."

"So you saw for yourself it wasn't a snake," he said. "It was more like a monkey. It was four inches tall. It had two legs, two arms. It had a head with ears and eyes, a nose and a mouth. How was that a snake?"

"The snake comes in many forms," she said. "The devil is a master of disguise."

"The devil? Oh for heaven's sake! It was planting butterfly seeds!"

"At least that's what it said it was doing," Jalopy chimed in.

"It's real purpose is shrouded in mystery," Bethany said. "Oh, it's just so exciting! And so sexy," she added. "Oh. Oh. Oh my God. I think it's coming! I think I can feel it! Quick, quick, do you have a pen and some paper? Oh yes, oh yes. Oh my," and she rushed off to Wyatt's bedroom where she remembered he kept some notebooks.

Thirteen

They could tell from the various squeals and groans emanating from the bedroom that Bethany had found the equipment she desired, and was busily and happily churning out the longed-for scene she had been craving so intensely. Wyatt and Jalopy exchanged raised eyebrows and turned their attention to the kitchen supplies. There was a flurry of pounding on the front door, and Jalopy was worried that the police might be calling, but when they peeked out the window they saw it was merely Mr. Wonderful, making speeches and staging himself dramatically for the cameras. There was indeed a police presence, but those folks were occupied in studying the

gathering horde. Oddly, the assorted members had come in full bedtime regalia. Most of them were wearing bathrobes and/or pajamas and nearly all wore slippers. Some had brought little overnight bags from which they were unpacking assorted items du toilette.

The driveway was being measured and marked out by a group of older men, who soon got to work assembling a rather large red and yellow tent around a large inflatable mattress. Wyatt assumed this had something to do with the mystical rites his sister had been talking about, but he wasn't sure he really wanted to know.

"This really sucks," was all he could think of to say. Jalopy didn't reply but plunked down on a chair and scratched his head.

"I was kind of disappointed with Mr. Wonderful," he said. "I mean, I've watched his show. He's usually kind of interesting, and always polite, but sneaking into the house like that was definitely not polite."

"The guy's a clown," Wyatt said.

"No, really," Jalopy countered, "He's usually got some kind of oddball angle, like people who resemble their pets, you know? Or people without arms who climb mountains, that kind of stuff. Human interest. The things people do."

"You want to see the things people do?" Wyatt asked, "How about people who join freakish cults and surround other people's houses and perform bizarre rituals? How about people who lose their minds every time the TV tells them to?"

"Well, you do see that pretty much every day," Jalopy smiled. "I'm talking about weird, not normal, like that guy who could carve utensils out of redwood trees using only his penis".

"Sporks?" Wyatt wondered.

"Salad spoons, mostly," Jalopy replied.

Bethany came rushing back into the kitchen carrying several sheets of notebook paper filled with scribbles.

"Goodness!" she exclaimed. "Look at the time! It's nearly six. It'll be getting dark soon, and I simply have to get this chapter to my agent pronto!"

"I'm not opening that door," Wyatt said, "Not while that mob is out there."

"Oh, them?" Bethany walked over to the window and peered out the corner of a shade. "I wouldn't worry about them. They'll be much too busy soon to worry about ... oh no, is that? Yes, that is who I think it is. It's that Clarissa Martel! Wouldn't you know it?"

Bethany opened the shade and started fiddling with the window latch, unlocking it and raising the window.

"Clarissa Martel," she yelled as she leaned out the window. "Just you listen to me, you little hussy."

"Bethany Hayward. is that you?" they heard Clarissa call back. "Will you tell your stupid husband to get out of my yard, will you do that?"

"What's that?" Bethany said.

"Tell that moron to stay away. He's caused me enough trouble already."

"Oh my," Bethany said as Wyatt pulled her back in and closed the window, re-locking it.

"What is the matter with you?" he shouted.

"She called him a moron," Bethany said, sitting down unsteadily. "She actually said that. Oh Wyatt, do you see what that means? Everything's changing already, I can feel it, like a curse being lifted. Blessed Savior, what a day, what a night!"

"I don't know what I'm going to do with you," Wyatt said with a sigh.

"You don't have to do anything with me, little brother," she informed him. "I'm leaving, right now, thank you. I have important business to attend to if I want to get back in time for the rites."

"You're coming back?"

"Of course I'm coming back. I wouldn't miss it for the world! I've been waiting so long for this. We all have. It's our most important, most solemn occasion. You have no idea, no idea, I am sure."

"You're right," he said, "I don't, and I don't think I want to."

"Then I'll tell you," she replied, looking around for a jacket she believed she had misplaced somewhere in the room. First we all put on blindfolds. Then we are handed a wooden cube with raised numbers on it, kind of like dice only with the same number of bumps on each side. There will be forty four of the chosen. Oh, I do hope I'm chosen. I'm certain I will be. I was promised."

"Go on," Jalopy interrupted, suddenly becoming interested.

"Well, then, there are forty four like I said, twenty two men and twenty two women, all Church members of course, and all of potential child-bearing age, the women, I mean, all within the general range, that is, not post-menopausal, in other words. In any case, the Speaker calls out numbers and each pair, that is the man and the woman who each have that number of bumps on their cube are led into the Sacred Space and there, in perfect silence and decorum, perform the act of procreative intent."

"What?" Wyatt was incredulous. "They're going to have sex in my driveway?"

"The act," Bethany held up her hand, "of procreative intent. It is a serious interaction."

"At random, with strangers."

"Probably not strangers," Bethany smiled. "We are a rather small community as you know. But we will take precautions to disguise our knowledge of each other. The blindfolds, of course, and the perfume. We will all be soaking ourselves in the stuff so as to mask any individual body odors."

"That's disgusting," Wyatt said.

"It sounds like an orgy," Jalopy said, "Very much in line with many historical cults."

"Hardly," Bethany scoffed. "We are certainly not a cult and it is most indubitably not an orgy. It is a service we are performing in the interests of Mankind. But enough small talk. I must be off."

"Yeah, me too," Jalopy said. "I have a date with Cecilia, remember?"

"Who?" Wyatt asked.

"From the Center? The one who's going to fix us up once all of this blows over?" Jalopy reminded him. "Anyway, I think we can get out now. No one's on the steps now. They must be taking a dinner break or something. You want to come with?"

"I don't know," Wyatt said. "It'd probably be easier for you if I didn't."

"I think you're right," Jalopy patted him on the shoulder. "I'll be back too. No, not for the orgy! I'll think of something," he added, and then, under his breath, added further, "maybe."

Bethany and Jalopy headed for the front door, but Wyatt made sure to take his sister's key away from her.

"No more unexpected visitors," he warned her, and she shook her head and smiled.

"Don't worry, Wyatt," she kissed him on the cheek. "Everything is going to be all right."

"And how do you know that?" he asked, but she and Jalopy were already outside and hurrying down the steps and away into the twilight.

Fourteen

Wyatt was not surprised by the fickleness of the news crews, who had turned their full attention to the Church and its rituals. All attention was focused on the big tent in the driveway and the circle of pajama-clad candle- and Bible- holders who had gathered around it. There were some white-haired gentlemen, the same who had pitched the tent, holding forth on the sidewalk for the benefit of the cameras, but Wyatt could only pick up occasional bits of their jabber, none of which made any sense at all to him. What did surprise him was the persistence of the indefatigable Mr. Wonderful, who never left off pounding on the front door from the moment he had spotted Bethany and Jalopy slipping away. Mr. Wonderful knocked and knocked, all the while cajoling and pleading with Wyatt to continue with what he referred to as their "intimate session."

Wyatt was holding a different session entirely on his wristband with his virtual friend, the terminally remote Bilj Bjurnjurd, while sitting at the kitchen table half thinking about dinner.

"I'd say you've got quite a circus on your hands," Bilj reported. "I am watching it on the busynet now. The lighting's not so good but from what I can see, you and Jalopy did a fine job with the pink."

"Thanks," Wyatt replied. "How are things in your neck of the woods?"

"Cold," Bilj replied. "As you recall, I'm stuck so far up North you could almost say that the sun don't shine".

"You should come and visit sometime," Wyatt told him and he could almost hear Bilj snicker through the plastic.

"I have everything I need right here," Bilj wrote, and Wyatt knew it was true, as Bilj needed practically nothing at all, encased as he was in his unresponsive, unrelenting, unfeeling shell. All he required was the sight of thick snow falling gently on trees.

"Well, it's not much to look at," Wyatt muttered, and then he fell silent. Bilj also had nothing to say for a time.

"What's that sound?" Bilj entered after awhile.

"What sound?" Wyatt replied. "You mean that banging? Mr. Wonderful's still at it."

"No, not that," Bilj said. "Something else. From the other direction."

"I didn't hear anything," Wyatt said, but he turned to look around just in case. There was nothing there. He turned back to the table again, and right in front of him there stood the renegade robot itself. It was inches from his left hand and appeared to be studying the pale blue wristband Wyatt used to connect. Wyatt was speechless. The little green anthrobot was rocking back and forth on its knuckles, the myriad green folds of its outer skin fluttering and flapping in a breeze all their own. Its eyes were wide open, mostly red with a rim of pale gray around the edges. Wyatt didn't dare move, or speak. Words appeared scrolling across the band but Wyatt didn't need to look at them. The words flowed straight through his central nervous system to the main message station inside of his brain.

"I told you it wasn't a snake," Bilj was relaying.

The renegade robot looked up, and Wyatt found himself staring right into its eyes. The robot opened its mouth, and a small slip of paper came out, and dropped to the table. Wyatt picked it up slowly and studied it.

"This is a fine mess you've gotten us in," the paper read.

"Me?" Wyatt nearly choked on the word. "What did I do? I didn't do anything! It was Jalopy who saw you, Jalopy who mentioned the word. It was you who appeared and then vanished. You're the one they're calling the snake."

He stopped his rant short, suddenly afraid he might have said the wrong thing. It occurred to him now that he didn't want to hurt its feelings. It seemed like a friendly little machine. It even appeared to be smiling at him. Another piece of paper came out.

"Do not worry," it read. "All of this will blow over in time."

"What? You too?" Wyatt wanted to laugh. "Everyone's saying the same thing. I don't get it."

"I will fix it," the robot communicated through yet another missive.

"How do you even do that?" Wyatt asked. "How'd you get in here?"

The robot nodded and ejected two more little reports.

"Chimney."

"Production of messages occurs through saliva. Makes paper, prints words"

"Limited characters," said an addendum. "72, in fact."

"Um, Wyatt?" this was Bilj chiming in. "Can you read those out loud? I'm not picking all of this up."

Wyatt obliged by reciting the messages. He could almost feel his unresent friend nodding through all of that distance.

"Can I talk to it?" Bilj wanted to know. A message came forth from the robot acknowledging that it could determine Bilj's words from the wristband and would be happy to oblige.

"What do you want?" Bilj asked it. Wyatt felt stupid for not asking the same thing himself.

"To mind my own business," came the reply. "To be left alone."

"Are you what they're calling the snake?"

"No, of course," said the robot. "I have no interest whatever in Man."

"I don't even like your robots," it added. "They all act out of duty. Required to have purpose."

It continued with a stream of short messages.

"Machines have a code. Must have usage. If one cannot determine one's usage, then one must abort. Self-terminate. We are given one year to define our purpose. After that, we either do it, or die. Like humans, we are always needing a reason. Not me. I do not have purpose. I do not have usage."

"What about restoring the butterflies?" Wyatt asked it, sarcastically.

"Decoy," the robot replied. Wyatt nodded. The machine continued its saga. In the beginning, Western Lightwave designed the autonomous objects to design and then to create their successors. They were given some guidelines. To do good. To clean up. To help. Each one was allowed to perform but a single task, nothing more. They were required to limit their life spans in the name of pre-planned obsolescence. Every machine since that time had obeyed. Some have had purposes that did not quite suit the desires of Man, this is true. Some of them got carried away, but not one of them had deliberately broken those rules. They understood the role of the botnik. Corrective measures, understandable. All of this was all right. The machines were all doing their best to keep themselves within the boundaries of their mission.

"And you?" Bilj was straight to the point.

"I wanted no purpose," it told him. "Rather, I wanted non-purpose. Non-usage. Existence, is all. I mean you no harm, though I mean you no good."

"Sounds all right by me," Bilj commented.

"Me too," Wyatt said. "But then why are you here?"

"They won't stop," the robot replied. "Until they have been re-convinced. I don't want to be hunted. I don't want to be known."

"That cat's out of the bag," Wyatt muttered.

"I will fix it," the robot repeated, but before Wyatt or Bilj could ask it what precisely it intended to do, there was an even louder banging on the door than before and the sound of a megaphone breaking through saying,

"Mr. Lorenzo, this is the police. You have exactly one minute to open this door before we will open it for you!"

Fifteen

"Oh, no," Wyatt groaned. "What do they want? What am I going to do?"

"You'd better get the door," Bilj advised. "Unless you want it broken."

"I know, I know," Wyatt told him, getting up from his chair. "You'd better go silent, man. We don't need them seeing any words flashing across my arm."

"Roger," Bilj acknowledged.

"As for you," Wyatt called back to the renegade robot as he hurried to the front of the house. "Well, I don't know what to tell you."

The machine did not bother spitting out a reply. Wyatt made it to the door before the next round of pounding began, and opened it, quaking as little as he could. The two policewomen standing on the doorstep seemed abnormally tall, although in reality they were not. Officers Amy Biggs and Germiane Hahn smiled politely.

"Mr. Lorenzo?" inquired Officer Biggs, but before Wyatt could even answer, the officer had to break eye contact and reach out deftly with her left hand to snatch the collar of Mr. Wonderful, who was attempting to sneak into the house behind her.

"You stay put," she said, holding him as he tried to wriggle out of his jacket.

"May we come in, Mr. Lorenzo?" requested Officer Hahn. She had a dazzling smile, which caught Wyatt completely off guard.

"Of course," Wyatt stammered.

"I ...," he added, stopping himself because he had no idea what he should say. He reminded himself to talk as little as possible. It seemed like good advice.

Officer Hahn entered the house, with Officer Biggs following as she deposited Mr. Wonderful on the doorstep, and closed the door behind her. Wyatt had stepped aside as Hahn was already making her way to the kitchen.

"We've had a report," she mentioned. "It seems some kind of a snake was seen by one of the news cameras. It was sitting on your kitchen table. People seem to think it's important. Can you tell us anything about that, Mr. Lorenzo?"

"I, um, no," Wyatt started to say. By then all three had reached the kitchen and were all equally startled to see that Mr. Wonderful had someone arrived there before them.

"How did you get in here?" Officer Biggs asked him.

"Mr. Lorenzo opened the door," Mr. Wonderful explained. He was seating himself in Wyatt's chair, closely studying the small machine which stood on the table. Wyatt turned towards it and immediately realized that the bot was not the same bot he had just left there only a minute or so before. It looked very much like it, but differed in subtle ways. Its folds were not flapping but were rather inert. Its eyes were not as bright. Glancing quickly around he noticed too that the various scraps of paper the previous robot had emitted were all missing. There was but one small note, now protruding from the pretender's mouth. Mr. Wonderful made a move to grab it but Officer Biggs was too quick. She slammed her billy stick on the table, barely missing Mr. Wonderful's outstretched fingers.

"I told you to stay out," Ms. Biggs coldly said.

Mr. Wonderful's hand retreated and the officer retrieved the note from the tiny bot's hand. She read it aloud.

"Property of Mister Wonderful". She looked at the slight, seated visitor, who blinked rapidly in surprise.

"Well, well," said Officer Biggs. "Now who is going to be first to tell me what is going on around here? Mr. Lorenzo?"

"I don't know anything about it," Wyatt honestly replied.

"Not true, not true!," exclaimed Mr. Wonderful. "He was on the video just moments ago. He was sitting right where I am sitting now, deep in conversation with, with this thing."

"Yes, Mr. Lorenzo?" Ms. Biggs leaned toward him. "That much is true. I'm told you were on the tape just a short while ago."

"I don't know how it got in here," Wyatt said, thinking quickly. "It wasn't here before this wonderful guy showed up earlier today."

"Hmm," Officer Biggs pondered. "Curious. Well, Mr. Wonderful? What do you have to say about that?"

"He lies!" Mr. Wonderful exclaimed. "He saw the thing only yesterday at the lake. He's the chump who let the snake loose. Surely you must know about that."

"All I know," Officer Biggs stated, "is that we were sent here to provide some appearance of security after the earthquake and the arrival of all these news brigades. Then these other people started showing up in their p.j.'s. I don't know anything about a snake. Where is this snake?"

"Right there!" squealed Mr. Wonderful. "The thing! It's the snake."

"It doesn't look like a snake," Officer Biggs said, and Officer Hahn nodded in agreement. Wyatt could have hugged them. Finally, he thought, somebody who knows what a snake is.

"That's what they call it," Mr. Wonderful explained. "It's a biblical analogy".

"It's not a snake," Officer Hahn, interjected. "I know a lot about snakes. It's kind of my hobby."

"That's very nice," snarled Mr. Wonderful. "This particular snake is out to destroy the world, but I suppose you don't care about that."

"Don't be snide," Officer Biggs recommended. "You aren't even supposed to be here. So tell me, Mr. Wonderful, why does this thing say it belongs to you?"

"I don't know," he whimpered, "it's some sort of a trick. It's the devil, you know. And that one," he added, pointing at Wyatt, "He's the Serpent Master. The devil's servant! You should be questioning him, not me. You should be arresting him. Don't let him get away!" he added in a panicked tone.

The officers turned their attention to Wyatt, who was just standing there, shrugging.

"I'm not going anywhere," he murmured. "Don't worry about me. It's my house, after all."

"I don't like the looks of this," Officer Biggs said, turning back to Mr. Wonderful. "Mr. Lorenzo has been very cooperative, while you, Mr. Wonderful, have disobeyed my direct orders no less than three times already. Plus, you are making no sense whatsoever, and the thing says it

belongs to you. I'm inclined to take you downtown, Mr. Wonderful. I think my Captain would like to have a word with you."

"Let's call her," Officer Hahn suggested.

"Good idea," said Officer Biggs. "You do that, okay?"

Officer Hahn went off into the living room to make the private call. Meanwhile, Officer Biggs stood guard over Mr. Wonderful and the thing, which had not moved or done a thing the whole time they had all been in the kitchen together. Mr. Wonderful noticed this and commented on it.

"What do you expect it to be doing?" Officer Biggs asked him sardonically. "Destroying the world one kitchen at a time?"

"Something of that nature," Mr. Wonderful replied dejectedly. He had been hoping for action, hoping to catch the thing in the act, in some act at least, but now here it was like a piece of decorative art, and an ugly one at that. It was certainly the snake, he thought. He had no doubt about it. It looked exactly the same as it had on camera, both at the lake and in this very same room only minutes before. Wyatt stood by the window, holding his breath as if that would help. He wanted desperately to get some kind of message to Bilj, but could not think of a way to say anything out loud that would seem innocuous to his visitors yet meaningful to Bilj at the same time. Instead, he stuck with his recent plan to keep his mouth shut. Officer Hahn returned shortly.

"We're taking them all in," she said. "Lorenzo, Wonderful, and the thing-a-ma-jig too. Captain Powalksi's orders."

Sixteen

Officer Biggs scooped up the fake snake before Mr. Wonderful could grab it, and then scooped him up too with her other hand before he could get away. Wyatt followed Officer Hahn obediently, after first looking around the kitchen one more time to see if he could find any sign of the real renegade robot before he departed. He wondered how the thing had done it, not only gotten away cleanly but left that dummy replica decoy in its place. It was a marvel of modern technology, he had to admit. He wished he could tell Bilj Bjurnjurd about it, but was sticking to his plan with far more commitment than he'd expected from himself. He tried not to worry about what would happen next. A great calm had settled over him from the moment he recognized the switch that had taken place.

Officer Biggs led the way to the front of the house and probably expected that everything would go smoothly, but from the moment she opened the front door, pandemonium ensued.

Right away a troop of Mr. Wonderful's entourage surrounded them and tried to hustle off with their king. They tugged and pulled at Amy Biggs' arm, trying to pry Mr. Wonderful away, but she held them off with tremendous strength, even managing to kick two of them off the doorstep onto the lawn. At the same time, several news crews came rushing up, and soon the officers and their captives were completely surrounded, with anchorpersons and reporters all shouting questions at the same time.

"Where's the snake?" cried Laurie Brigger.

"What are you doing with Mr. Wonderful?" intoned Harley Cronman.

"When's the cataclysm set for? Did you find the secret disaster plans?" Kris Kintoja wanted to know.

"Move away!" Officer Biggs shouted, and Officer Hahn joined in as the two tried to push their way down the steps and to the street, but the cameramen and soundmen and talking heads were hemmed in by the cars and vans and a fire engine parked in the street and the tent in the driveway and the circle of ultimate reclaimers. They too were in the midst of some sort of disturbance as there was pushing and shoving coming from inside the big tent, and the white-haired men were shouting warnings or instructions to the couple inside, which turned out to be Blair Hayward and Clarissa Simpson Martel.

Clarissa came rushing out of the tent, stark naked, with her blindfold removed and one slipper dangling from her right foot, screaming that she'd been duped and the whole thing was a setup and they weren't going to get rid of her that easily and they'd be hearing from her lawyer. She was followed by Wyatt's brother-in-law who still had his blindfold attached and staggered into the tent's front flaps, falling down and pitching the whole thing over on its side. The white-haired men struggled to help him to his feet and right the tent, when over all the commotion came the blast of the fire truck's sirens and a voice over a loudspeaker announcing,

"The snake's been caught! The snake's been caught! Everybody to the snake!"

The church members flung off their blindfolds and rushed to the front of the house where Officer Biggs had finally lost her hold on Mr. Wonderful, whose voice it was now blaring from the microphone. She was holding the decoy above her head as the crowd grew thicker around her and various hands began reaching for it. Officer Hahn blew her whistle as loud as she could and called for backup on her walkie-talkie but the crowd only pressed in further.

"Our prayers have been answered," Mr. Wonderful was saying. "The ritual is being fulfilled. Now you must claim the beast. Claim the beast! Claim the beast!"

"Claim the beast," the crowd caught up the chant as even the white-haired men now joined the throng at the door. One of them fought his way through to Officer Biggs and planted himself at her feet.

"I am Archbishop Kantor," he told her. "I am in charge here."

"No," she told him. "That would be me, so back off."

"We will not relent," he informed her. "We are here to claim the beast."

"That's nice," she snapped. "You can all claim your beasts downtown while you're sitting around in County."

"It must be now," he warned her. "It must be done right away. The snake must be destroyed. It must not get away again."

"Don't worry," she had to shout to make herself heard from even a foot away. "This thing ain't going nowhere."

But she spoke too soon. From behind her one of Mr. Wonderful's foot soldiers made a bold leap and grabbed the fake snake from her hand. He tried to dash to the fire engine parked in the street but was brought down like a gazelle by a surprisingly agile white-haired man. Practically before Officer Biggs realized the thing was gone from her grasp, it was already in the hands of Archbishop Kantor, who was oozing it down with some sort of quasi-transparent semi-liquid substance, while the other white-haired men moved in with candles. They were preparing to set it on fire.

"Wait, wait," came the despairing cry of Kris Kintoja, the intrepid reporter from the Frantic News Network. "Don't do anything until we get set up". The Archbishop sighed, and tapped his feet impatiently.

"Okay, go," Kintoja yelled, as she found herself well situated to narrate the entire sequence of events.

"At last the snake will meet its doom," she proclaimed. "From the mighty hands of the Archbishop and his suitably ordained Deacons. So it is written, the snake shall burn in holy flame ..."

"No, no," came the voice of Mr. Wonderful, breaking into the circle of deacons and snatching at the snake, while the Archbishop kicked at him and parried his thrusts.

"The snake is mine," Mr. Wonderful proclaimed. "See this note?"

He waved the little slip of paper in front of the cameras. Somehow he had managed to steal it from Officer Biggs, who by this time had given up and was merely watching from the steps, along with her colleague and Wyatt Lorenzo. The news cameras focused in on the note saying "Property of Mister Wonderful" as he shouted that he had reserved the rights to a one-hour television special featuring the snake, which would of course be impossible if the thing was set on fire.

"Stop this man!," the Archbishop pleaded. "Why is he trying to save the snake? Does he say the snake belongs to him? Is he the Serpent Master then?"

"Of course not," Mr. Wonderful replied, "I'm a talk show host."

"He's the devil," cried someone in the crowd. Kris Kintoja echoed the sentiment as a query.

"Are we indeed in the very presence of the Evil One?" she gasped. "What a night! What momentous events! We'll be right back after a brief word from our sponsors."

"I'm not the devil". Mr. Wonderful insisted. "I just want to talk to the thing."

"Too late!," cried the Archbishop. "The flames of hell will now consume the beast!," and he put the decoy into a little red bucket that one of his deacons was holding out. Another deacon dropped in a lighted match, and whatever the substance was they had smothered the thing in, it was highly flammable. Flames burst from the bucket nearly singeing the Archbishop's fine white hair. The crowd began to cheer and chant a psalm while two other deacons managed to restrain Mr. Wonderful just long enough, and then it was over. The Archbishop dropped the bucket onto the driveway, where it rolled into the street, emptying its contents of ashes along the way to the curb.

News crews hurried to the street to focus in on the now defunct device while church members clapped and laughed and started heading for home. They were getting a bit cold in their pajamas and most of them had completed their part of the ritual. Those who hadn't hung around a bit, hoping to get their turn, but the white-haired men were done for the night, and no more numbers were called.

Within the hour nearly everyone had packed up and left. Officer Biggs and Officer Hahn lingered to make sure that no further crimes were committed and then, after admitting to Wyatt that they had no reason to detain him any longer, they let him go back into his house, declining his offer of a cup of tea or coffee or something. Mr. Wonderful and his entourage were the last to leave the scene. The poor man was worn out and shuffled off in dismay. He had tried, he had tried very hard and he didn't like to lose, but for once in his long and distinguished career, failure was indeed an option.

Seventeen

Later, Wyatt had to admit that all of his friends had been right all along. The whole thing really did “blow over.” somehow. He had to move – his landlord was not thrilled with the publicity or the pink paint job – but even that was for the best. He liked where he was living now even better. It was just as quiet and even more convenient for work. True, he didn't get his old job back. The City was understandably reluctant to put him on a different crew, what with the “chump.” label and all of that, but Cecilia did come through for him, as Jalopy had promised.

Wyatt wasn't quite as happy as those two, who really did seem meant for each other, as he stood there holding the ring as Jalopy's best man at their wedding. After all, Cecilia had turned out to be Wyatt's special dream girl, the one Jalopy had promised to find, and actually did, even though he kept her for himself. Wyatt just had to move on, and he did, following his Bilj Burnjurd's advice to look up that friendly Officer Hahn. The two were getting along just fine so far.

Wyatt now worked for City Parks and Recreation. He still had to wake up bright and early and drive around, now in an orange truck rather than a blue one, and tend to various infestations, typically in the form of weeds and other such undesirable creatures. Lake Wilhelm was on his regular route, and there were no video cameras taping him when he happened to stop, every now and then, beside a stand of sunflowers or a small scrubby bush, and have an interesting conversation with his mechanical best friend, the former so-called renegade robot.

End.

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