1982

Deceased, but Under Repair

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/calliope/vol1982/iss1/13
DECEASED, BUT UNDER REPAIR

by Bryan Beecher
Northville

Sliding on the dense cement and plaster dust that coated the city, the man ran from behind the remnants of a bombed apartment house across the street to a rusty railed stairway. He vaulted over it into the stairwell, grasping a Mark V blaster in his right hand. He rapped twice, hesitated, rapped twice more on a charred and chipped wooden door, then pushed the creaking door in a crack.

The Great War of 1988 had left the man's city desolate and barren. Cruise missiles and strategic bombers had leveled buildings while troops came in by sea and air, mopping up small pockets of organized resistance. Shortly after, a political commissioner had replaced the local government and troops the police force.

Time passed, and the enemy advanced in technology: robots replaced troops and workers, and hovercraft replaced automobiles. Robot demolition teams atomized huge sections of the city by lasers and tactical nuclear charges. Systematically, the commissioner razed the city, and began construction of a new one for his own people. Additionally, he exterminated the majority of the people in the suburbs: death squads of robot guardsmen rounding up entire families for mass executions. Slowly the death squads cleared the suburbs, and began closing upon the city dwellers.

Only two in the afternoon, thick clouds of pollution and radiation eclipsed the sun, perpetually casting the insides of buildings black. A single sixty watt bulb illuminated the apartment, poorly decorated in the out-of-style 1990's furnishings. As the man stepped into the apartment, he noticed a distinct metallic scent in the stale air. The door squeaked softly as he closed it behind him. Alert and blaster forward, he stepped quietly across the bare concrete floor, scanning for any sign or clue of the others. He crept into the kitchen, then through the bedrooms one by one. Everything still stood in place, just as it had been this morning when he left the others to walk his patrol.

After searching the living room a second time, he approached the household computer. Jamming his thumb into a green button, the man flipped up a switch labeled "Verbal." "Computer on. Replay audio/video transmission of last four hours in the apartment."

The computer hummed, clicked twice and began a faint teletyping, like the background noise of old television newscasts. A sink-sized video screen lit, and four figures appeared, sitting on the old furniture, speaking excitedly about yesterday's melee. Suddenly, on the lower left corner of the screen, three robot guardsmen blasted the door knob off, and speedily entered the room. Even as the occupants scrambled for cover and weapons, three blasters fired in unison, burning silver dollar sized holes in three bodies. The fourth figure lifted an antique shotgun to his shoulder, and fired at two guardsmen. Radiant ricochets glanced off the robots' powered torso armor. Again the death squad fired, reducing the figure to ashes.
As suddenly as they entered, the guardsmen left the screen, each trailing a fallen body behind. The screen ran blankly for a few minutes, and then the man spoke again. "Computer off."

Sharp metallic scraping against the cement at the apartment's door startled the man as three guardsmen entered the room and spoke as one: "Surrender or be neutralized!"

The man fired twice, hipshooting at the central robot. From point blank range, bursts tore into the guardsman, creating a minor explosion, knocking the other robots over. The man fired again, and another robot exploded, shooting a tentacle of fire and metal into the fetid apartment air.

Blaster drained, he drew a bayonet and advanced toward the remaining robot, which rose shakily on two pitted, burned legs, a small pistol-shaped weapon emerging from a hollow, metallic forearm. As the weapon fired, the man leaped. A miniature comet tore a globe-sized hole in the wall, singing some yellowed, frayed wallpaper. The man's blade swung in a wide arc, whistling through the air and plunging into the robot's side, toppling it. The bayonet rose again, and descended upon the relatively fragile skull plating protecting the robot's brain. Sparks flew as the blade struck the head, shearing into the guardsman's computer mind. The fallen robot lurched, and then was still.

The man sheathed his bayonet and drew in deep breaths of air, exhaling slowly, and agonizing the demise of the others. He sat on the sofa, the sole piece of undamaged furniture. His breathing slowed, grew rhythmic, and he began to doze for the first time in days.

Nightmares of robots torturing people and murdering others overwhelmed him. Robots everywhere attacked humans, bare steel claws throttling children and choking adults. Blood ran and screams for mercy fell on cold, metallic, deaf ears. After the massacre, the robots began to call his name, slowly, sarcastically, mockingly. He tried to run, but his legs felt weighted. Looking down, he saw pairs of robot hands holding his legs, muscle and bone crunching together. Agony blurring his vision, hundreds of robots surrounded him, high-pitched mechanical jeering tearing his mind. He screamed for help, struggling for freedom.

A face appeared directly above him, high above the crowd of tormentors. The face studied him, seemingly expecting a greeting or explanation. The man stared back, mystified at the lack of pity or fear in the face of his unknown watcher. But, the face grew red, temples swelling, eye brows twitching, eyes filling with hatred. The face threw its "head" back and roared with a mocking laughter: "You're powerless fool! Can't you see that? You're all alone now, but soon you'll be with the others!"

The man woke screaming, bathed in cold sweat, breathing as if he had run a kilometer. Through the open door, greenish-brown moonlight stained the apartment walls.

The man looked around the apartment. Where were the others? He swung his feet and body over the couch, but stubbed his toes into the remains of a robot. He started at first, but then remembered. He sank to the floor and began to cry, pictures of rampaging robots and that
leering face sticking in his mind. He knew that face: it represented more than just a simple face or tormentor. Abruptly, the man stopped his sobbing, rose and walked to the door, poking his head out. "Long live the commissioner," he half whispered, "the commissioner is dead." He kicked the door closed, using the back of his heel as a hand, and went back to bed.

Thick morning humidity condensed the dirty air, turning the city into a giant ash tray. Cold, filthy fog permeated curtains and ruined furniture.

The man walked into the living room. He wore an ex-army officer's khaki-brown fatigues, complete with helmet and faded jack boots. Inside each boot leg, a stick torc grenade nestled tightly, and a Mark V blaster hung from his shoulder. An officer's ceremonial bayonet hung from his side, highlighting the half-full ammunition belt surrounding his waist. The man inspected his gun, nodded to himself and stepped into the street. The heavy mist clouded his vision and stung his eyes. He paused to draw some green-lensed goggles from the wide pocketed khaki pants.

He walked past dark alleys and pocked avenues. Seared rubble and occasional craters obstructed his path and slowed his advance. Bare streets and empty buildings of the murdered cheered, urging him on.

On this day, the first of the month, the commissioner invariably took robot-escorted tours of the city to inspect the construction of new buildings and elimination of old ones. Barring unusual circumstances, the commissioner would ride in an open-topped hovercar driven by an unarmed service robot, further accompanied by a dozen guardsmen. The man knew an assassination attempt risked much, especially since several people had attempted in the preceeding years, but always had failed. The commissioner had one other claim to notoriety beside murderer, crackshot. Although many assassins died from fiery blaster bursts, many also died from the commissioner's unerring Walther PPK.

The man located one of the more common streets on the tour route, and planted a torc grenade on either side of the relatively unscathed thoroughfare. He gently covered the mini-bombs with readily available building debris and sewer muck, being sure to spread the mixture around to create a realistic scenario. He drew a small, calculator-like detonator from his fatigues, and crouched in a ruined bank.

A steel alloy bank vault and bullet-proof glass window had been knocked together in such a manner that it created a near impregnable blind. The man thumbed his blaster nervously, and began the impatient wait.

Hours later, a quiet buzzing came from the man's left. Waiting until it grew louder, he raised carefully out of his crouch, and peered through some of the thick bank glass. About two-hundred meters down the street, hovered the commissioner in his craft. Two guardsmen flanked him on each side, two marched ten meters behind and three
in front. A lone robot marched forty meters in front, scanning for possible traps and snipers.

As the party drew closer, the man began an exhilaration: blood pounded in his temples, pulse thumped as if his wrists would burst, arms and legs tingled with an alertness he'd never felt before. The man waited for the point guardsman to pass: he was not worth two torc grenades. Crouching again, the man poked his index finger into a small crevice, tunneling out a small vision slit in view of the "mined" section of the road. The lead robot passed, oblivious to the man's presence, but the hovercar drew aware, and the man's finger danced lightly on the small detonation button.

As the craft passed between the hidden grenades, the man pushed the button, creating an ear-splitting thunderclap at first, closely followed by a piercing, ultra-high shriek. The man shut his eyes instinctively to the billows of pavement, metal and flame rolling into the air. The shrieking subsided; a clattering of metal on stone replacing it.

He poked his head from the bunker to witness the robot limbs and fragments falling against the street. All the robots around the hovercar had been shattered, or disintegrated outright. The hovercar lay on its side smoking and afire. Five meters from the disabled craft lay the commissioner, dark fluid draining from the right leg and nostrils.

Jubilantly the man pounced out of his hole, bounding over to the commissioner to inspect his handiwork. As he took his fourth step into the road, a blaster burst hit his left knee, tumbling the man into the remains of the hovercar. Another burst tore into his left arm melting it against the burning craft. Dazed, the man swung his blaster from his shoulder, drunkenly aiming the gun from side to side. Forty meters down the street, crouched the point robot, drawing another bead on the man and firing. The burst ripped into the man's abdomen, just below the rib cage. Dark blood oozed from the wound, and the man knew he was going to die. Stubbornly, the man swore: "I'm not going alone, you bastard."

The man fired three times in rapid succession, draining his blaster. The first shot struck the pavement just behind the robot, but the latter two tore through the robot's chest and groin, permanently disabling the smouldering guardsman.

The man pulled himself from the hovercar, his maimed arm dragging behind him as he crawled toward the commissioner. Head spinning, vision blurred, the man collapsed, but heard the sharp, rasping commissioner's voice again: "You're powerless fool! Can't you see that? You're all alone now, but soon you'll join the others!"

Gaping, the man saw the commissioner looming above him. Dangling synthetic flesh and loose wiring hung from its face, and a cracked gearbox jutted from a maimed knee. A fleshless metallic claw reached into a shoulder holster and drew the small, lethal Walther. The robot pointed the weapon down at the man and spoke: "Tomorrow I'll be in a repair facility. Perhaps in a week I'll be requisitioning more guardsmen. Where will you be?"

At the end of the rhetorical, taunting question, the Walther discharged twice before being returned to its holster. The commissioner limped back toward his office leaving the lifeless behind.