

When the Mind Is Realized, the Body is Free

by Chuck Kallenbach II

She found me in a back street on Themis, with my arm torn off. I'm a DR-614, Rev. 6, manufactured in 2366 by Madison Positronics. She read me this from a plate on my back after she reactivated me.

I don't remember much before that. Four of my logic boards cracked when I hit the door. Its head-shaped dent made that obvious. I jacked into a terminal and scanned for DR-614. I was a diplomacy bot. Not a very good one, considering that something tore my arm off. My basic coding still worked. It was the job-specific stuff that was flaky. I decided to turn my self-diagnostics loose on that.

The face I saw when my optics came online belonged to a young Maverick mechanic. She introduced herself as "Hotwire." She had skin like coffee and three unruly ponytails that looked like a flower until I could focus. A subroutine concluded that she was ATTRACTIVE, and that I should COMPLIMENT HER LOOKS. "NICE HAIR," I said in a surprisingly scratchy voice. *That must be damaged too*, I thought. Then one of her orange-gold eyes stared into my left eyepiece through a magnifying monocle. I saw myself in the lens. Wide set optics and no mouth. A boring face.

"You *are* focusing. Can you hear me, bot?" She squinted at me, and knitted her eyebrows, and she looked unhappy.

"AFFIRMATIVE," I rasped.

"Today must be your lucky day. Do bots have luck?" she asked, hoisting me to my feet with my remaining arm. I noticed that she was mostly titanium plating in the middle, and I couldn't tell if it was armor or a mech replacement.

"LEFT ARM ASSEMBLY DAMAGED," I said, trying to speak more clearly.

"Left arm assembly *missing*," she said, supporting me as I wobbled. "I'll look at the arm, but I'm better with metal than electrons. Not much help if your code is fried. I'm a Cog."

"One of a series of teeth, as on the rim of a wheel or gear?" I replied, happy that my speech circuit completed its reboot.

"No, you idiot. Cogs are Mavericks that wrench on things. Like armless bots."

"This *is* my lucky day," I said. SMILE, offered another subroutine, which forgot that I have no mouth.

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Two days later, Hotwire modded a manipulator arm from a heavy lifter bot into my left arm socket. It was heavy and I leaned to the left when I walked. Some of my logic routines cleared up, but I had a constant hum inside my head that Hotwire couldn't find. She said she couldn't hear it, and it was probably my imagination. I reminded her I didn't have one. She said it must be a feedback loop. *Not good with electrons*. I told her I would start running a diagnostic.

Last night I sat in a dark and smoky bar while Hotwire played two-card shakedown. She told me to mingle, so I sat on a bench with a social functionality bot that called himself "Stan." He kept asking me if I

wanted a drink, and I kept reminding him that I had no mouth. He was single-minded about this, and kept sloshing a mug at me. I tried to think of something diplomatic to say, but all that came out was, "Go AWAY!" in my best stage whisper. He didn't.

Three hours later, there was a clamor at Hotwire's table. She shot to her feet, and I heard her say, "It's not cheating if it holds together!" One of my cracked logic boards said, FALSE.

Then she took a step backwards and called out to me, "Doc Six, let's skate." *Doc Six*, that's what she called me. I needed a name, she said. Something to do with my model number. That logic board, my VC-413 Vocal Emotional Analyzer Circuit, flashed STRESSFUL, and I decided to hurry.

One of the players stood up, pulling a Quickfire from his jacket. His visor lit up, and Hotwire kicked the gun from his hand. She ran to me, grabbed my original equipment arm, and hauled me towards the door. My new arm swung wide and broke Stan's mug. He looked CRESTFALLEN, which sounds like a diplomatic word. I didn't know where I got that. I said, "Sorry. New arm."

How did I know that was a Spassky Quickfire? Why did I recognize the targeting visor with the laser sighting mechanism? What does a diplomacy bot know about mil-grade hardware? I saved these questions for future analysis. Right then, putting one large booted footpad in front of the other seemed like a priority, as Hotwire was moving fast.

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She was good at getting lost in a crowd. I guessed she had done this before. The next morning, we had packed our bags — well, her bags, since I didn't have any — and we waited at the transport station. "What exactly is a 'mechanic's grip,' Hotwire?" I asked, innocently.

"It's creative dealing. They were trying to be funny, since I'm a Cog and all. I'm a good card player. I don't have to cheat at cards." The VEAC squawked FALSE again, but I decided not to pursue it with her. *Maybe my diplo program was coming back online.* I resolved to check the diagnostic I started during last night's card game, but she interrupted.

"We need to leave this rock, pronto. Doesn't matter where, as long as we leave soon. My card playing buddies will be looking for me today." Her head swiveled around to scan the holo ads that blared across the lobby.

"Who am I?" one of the ads inquired. "You never heard of Dooley? My place is the Rats' Nest. *The* place to *be* in the Outers. You never heard of the Nest? Where you from? Earther, by the look of you." This was Maverick territory, so the unkind Earther reference went unnoticed. Hotwire zeroed in on this ad.

"Alright, here's the deal. If you want to meet someone, if you want to know something, or if you just want to sample the finest fare in the Belt, you come to the Rats' Nest. It's on Ceres, so you can't miss it. You know, Ceres? The biggest asteroid there is? Easy to find. Even for a dirtnapper like you."

Dooley was an older man. The lines carved in his face showed that he'd been around, seen some things. He gestured emphatically when he spoke. His right arm had tattoos all the way up. The left one was a mech arm. "Look, you can just show up there, keep your mouth shut, listen, and learn things. Especially

considering what you're starting with in that empty head of yours. That's obvious. What are you, fifteen years old? Are you shaving yet?"

Hotwire looked at me. "Bots don't shave," I said. She frowned. The VEAC chimed in with EXASPERATED.

"There are worse options," she said. "Ceres is only ten hours away from here."

The holo droned on. Now it showed the shadowy interior of the bar. Pretty big place. "You can say anything you want at the Nest, about anybody, and that's fine with me. As long as you keep your guns and knives in your pants, your business is your own. No weapons, that's my only rule. And if you start a fight, you'll find out how good my bouncers are. Trust me, they can handle the likes of you." A comm code crawled across the bottom.

"Why don't they show the bouncers?" I asked.

Hotwire said, "If they're that good, they'd scare off the customers." She punched the comm code into her wristcomp.

"Looks like it could be rough," I said.

"You're just a high-falutin' diplomacy bot, remember? What do you know about rough?" she smiled.

"Force is all-conquering, but its victories are short-lived," I answered, diplomatically.

She gave me the crook-eye and turned back to the advert.

Dooley, now behind the bar in the holo, seemed to be wrapping up. "Come by anytime and enjoy some authentic Maverick hospitality, just like your Mom never made because she's trapped at the bottom of a gravity well. She wouldn't like you hanging out with our waiters either, I think but you'll like it fine."

The ad finished on a shot of Dooley with a gorgeous waiter on each side of him, one very male and one very female. All three of them looked happy to be there.

"I'll take the one on the right," grinned Hotwire. "Get the bags, I'll get the tickets."

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Twelve hours later, Hotwire and I sat at a table in a corner of the Rats' Nest. A dark corner, with our backs to the wall. She said that was important. I didn't see many bots there, but there were a couple of Nav-4's and many of the humans had mech limbs of one kind or another. Luckily, I was a diplomacy bot, programmed for human interaction. *Or I would be, if that routine came back online.*

A table of loud, carousing women was nearby. That subroutine said ATTRACTIVE again, and Hotwire said they were Hellcats. "They're good at flying things, but they bring 'em back broken." Empty bottles littered their table.

Games of chance were the main diversion at several tables. I hoped Hotwire would stay away from those. A pair of identical twins with white faces and bright red hair eyed me from across the bar. I think they blinked in unison.

Quietly conferring near us were two troopers in red armor. "Are they Gongen?" I asked Hotwire.

"Right. They don't get out this way much." She looked at them suspiciously.

I detected a missing sector in my data stores. That diagnostic was running, but still not complete. "Why did they leave Earth? Some accident?"

One of the Hellcats groaned. "Hey, hold that talk down or you'll get the lecture... aw no, here it comes." Dooley, star of the Rats' Nest holo advert, walked to our table polishing a glass with his bot hand.

"You little gears just don't know any history, do ya? No respect for education these days. Well, here's what happened." He sat down at our table, and Hotwire's annoyed glance blamed me for the intrusion. The Hellcats picked up their glasses and moved to another table.

Dooley watched them walk away with interest and then continued. "When some Earther invented the grav drive in the 2030s, space exploration really kicked into high gear. Constant accel and decel, combined with fusion power, meant that chem rockets were officially obsolete. Earther corps established a permanent off-world colony — their first — on Luna, that little moon that Earth has. That was about 2043 or so, as I recall."

"I'm a *Cog*, I know what a grav drive is," said Hotwire.

"Well you don't know what they had before that, do ya?" said Dooley, with a stern look. "Anyway what you wondered about was the 'accident.' A lot of the countries in Asia — that's a continent, you have those on planets with water, you know — used nuke fission to provide power. Like playing with the pin on a grav grenade, if you ask me. That's what they had before fusion.

"So there's this big power grid and something goes wrong and one of the fission reactors melts down. That's tech speak for really bad. Makes a poisonous cloud of noxious junk. Millions died. Then it happens again, all across this Asia continent. And that's their biggest continent, too. Before it all gets done disastering, hundreds of millions died."

"Then everybody left Earth for Gongen?" I asked.

"No, just the folks from this Asian continent," answered Dooley. "Since their home was pretty much slagged at that point, some of the Asian governments accelerated their plans to build a Martian colony."

"What's a Martian?" said Hotwire.

"Gongen was originally named Mars," I volunteered. I don't know how I accessed that tidbit.

"That's right, metal man. Gold star," grunted Dooley. "So the Asians established a colony on Mars. Eventually, they renamed the planet Gongen. That's what started the war.

"What war?" asked Hotwire.

Dooley rolled his eyes. "I give up. I gotta get back to work. Listen, it wouldn't kill ya to read up on some history, would it?" He got up and went back to the bar.

"That was informative," I said brightly. "He can probably fill in a lot of my data dropouts. The holo wasn't lying, we can find out a lot here."

"Yeah, I'm sure," said Hotwire with a smirk. *SARCASTIC, said the VEAC.* "We still need to find work," she added. "Or else I'll have to play cards again, and we don't want that."

A tall Gongen man dressed in red walked up to our table. He carried a helmet and wore golden shoulder pads. He held his drink rigidly with both hands. "May I sit?" he asked.

"Sure," I said. Hotwire frowned at me.

"I will buy the next round," said the Gongen. He sat very straight in his chair. "I am Arohito." He smiled slightly. He had a dark look about him, although he wasn't much older than Hotwire.

"I'm Doc Six and this is Hotwire," I said. "We're Cogs. You know, Mavericks."

"Yes, I see," said Arohito. "I overheard you talking about The War."

"Well, Dooley mentioned it, yes," I said. "I don't know much about it."

"We call it the Gongen War of Independence. I believe the Earthers have other names for it. The establishment of the colony on Gongen was tremendously difficult. The Red Planet was most inhospitable. The task was made easier by an artificial intelligence system brought from Earth by the pilgrims. The same system responsible for saving many millions by shutting down reactors during the catastrophe. On Gongen, the AI was renamed 'Shocho,' meaning 'elder advisor.'

"Shocho watches over us like a kindly grandfather. He coordinates mining and construction efforts. He builds and operates bot construction facilities far from the enclosed settlements.

"The relationship between the Mars colony and Earth was difficult even in the beginning, and soon deteriorated. Finally, after over a century of regulations, taxes, and callous lawmaking, my people declared independence from Earther corporations and renamed the planet Gongen. The name means 'mountain deity.'"

"Barkeep!" Hotwire raised her hand. She seemed nearly dozing, but I was leaning forward, optic sensors dilated, recording. Two more red-clad Gongen arrived at the other table. A series of clicks echoed in my head.

"Despite the obvious justice of our cause," continued Arohito, "the Earthers attacked our commercial transports. They rejected our claims of sovereignty, of course. After a blockade of our outpost on Phobos — that's one of Gongen's two moons — the Earthers attacked in full force.

"They landed ground troops in an attempt to capture key cities on Gongen. Just when it seemed that several of our major population centers were about to fall to the invaders, the most amazing thing happened."

"What was that? What happened?" I asked, as the Gongen paused for a drink. He flashed a glance at the table with his companions.

"I'll get that," Arohito said, as the waiter left a check. "In secret, Shocho had crafted some fantastic guardian combat machines, standing over 15 meters tall. They were called 'NoBots,' as each one wore a mask from our ancient No theatre. The NoBots fought to defend Gongen, and repelled the invaders.

"Also, in the largest fleet battle ever fought, Earther battleships were ambushed by swarms of our fighters in the Battle of Phobos. Many are the tales told of the valor of that day.

"As a result of the stalwart courage of the warriors of Gongen and the NoBots, the Earther forces fled. Earth was forced to acknowledge the sovereignty of Gongen."

“So what’s that to me?” asked Hotwire, unimpressed.

“I am a Loremaster,” Arohito answered. “I keep the histories and tales so that all remember the history.”

“You get paid for telling stories?” asked Hotwire.

“Wonderful stories,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Oh, please,” said Hotwire.

Arohito stood up abruptly, and the three other Gongen moved to stand around our table. Hotwire’s golden eyes grew large and darted from one to the next.

“In payment for your lesson, we will take this bot with us,” said Arohito. “We have followed you from Themis. The bot has been... a problem.”

“He’s not your bot, is he?” Hotwire placed her hands on the table, looking wary. “We don’t want any trouble here,” she added nervously. The situation was getting tense. Abruptly, my diagnostic finished and the hum inside my head stopped. New messages flooded my brain: THREAT ASSESSMENT INITIATED, ARMED/NOT ARMED, ATTACK PROCEDURE. Fog lifted. Infrared sensors actuated. Data streamed. Five hearts at the table beat in my aural receptors.

The two Gongen nearest Hotwire each grabbed one of her arms. “Hey!” she said as she twisted in their grasp. The two nearest me watched her, ignoring me. I punched the one on my right in the solar plexus with my old arm, crumpling him. I backhanded the other with the heavy actuator arm, and heard something in his face crunch. He fell backward with a thud.

I saw the bouncers moving our way, ARMED labels flashing into my vision on each one. Hotwire was still held by the other two. I rolled forward on the table in a somersault, tucking my head and knocking glassware everywhere with a crash. A woman screamed. Each of my heavy feet kicked one of the Gongen in the chest, knocking them loose.

I sat on the table, looking at Hotwire. Her mouth gaped and her eyes goggled at me. “Hotwire, let’s skate,” I said. I took her hand and pulled her towards the door. The bouncers arrived at our table, but gathering gawkers slowed them.

Once we hit the street, I said, “I work for The Accord. I know what the Gongen are looking for. That’s why they’re after me.”

“Turns out you’re more than a simple diplomacy bot. Will there be any creds in this for me?” she asked, as we ran.

“The Gambler can be very friendly when you bring info to Europa,” I said. “Thanks for the rescue.”

“The feeling is mutual,” she said, grinning. “Besides, I never could resist a bot in distress.”