

# Mundane Utility

Ron stared up at the metal behemoth looming over him. A nagging itch scraped at some dark corner of his primate brain, a whisper echoing through his genetic memory, from a time when his tiny furtive ancestors cowered in the shadow of giants.

The fact that the mech made no sound as it moved amplified his feeling of unease. There was no whir of motors, no roar of engines, no whine of servos, no shriek of metal against metal. There was only a dull rumor, felt more than heard, as the mech planted each of its four titanic paws on the ground.

One of those paws sailed overhead as the mech strode forward, dusting Ron's upturned face with a fine shower of loose earth. The array of force projector plates on the palm and digits of the massive metal paw mirrored the arrangement of pads on a yinrih's forefeet. Other concessions to zoomorphism had been made as well. Two heat sinks were positioned like erect ears atop the mech's head, and whiskery antenna arrays framed its metal snout. What were the odds that the only two sapient species in the galaxy would independently think to themselves "Let's build a giant robot shaped like a person and stick a guy inside it!"

THUD!

The paw came to rest mere inches from where he stood.

"Watch where you're walking!" Ron yelled, shaking his fist like a disgruntled commuter up at the machine's underbelly, where a round hatch sealed away the pilot within.

"Watch where you're standing!" countered a booming synthetic voice echoing from the mech's head. Ron darted out of the way as the armored left rear leg rose to take another step.

More tremors passed under Ron's feet as the mech trotted over to a tall pine tree. "Watch out," thundered the synthetic voice. The machine positioned its aft end toward the tree and wrapped its serpentine tail around the trunk. The tree cracked in protest as the mech dug its bladed claws into the argillaceous ground and reared up on its hind feet, but the trunk managed to support the mech's weight.

A sharp electric crackle issued from the mech's now freed forepaws as claws of violet plasma erupted from its fingertips. The smell of ozone drifted to Ron's nose on the breeze. The mech swiped upward, effortlessly cleaving a massive limb from the tree, leaving a smoking black stump behind.

There were two thumps in rapid succession as the limb hit the ground and the mech resumed a quadrupedal stance.

Ron jogged across the brown grass up to the front door of a tiny house nearby. He raised his fist to knock, but the door opened preemptively and a tiny septuagenarian emerged. She leaned over to peer around Ron at the mech, which had wrapped the limb in its tail and was dragging it to the curb. "Thank you, youngsters, for getting rid of that pesky limb for me. My lawn will get much more sun now."

"You're welcome, ma'am," boomed the synthetic voice, "but I should point out you're half my age."

"Well, you're only as old as you feel, and I feel too old for that stuff," she responded.

The hatch on the mech's belly opened. Lodestar was lying on his back in the pilot's seat, gripping a keyer in all four paws, eyes hidden behind a HUD visor. He doffed the visor, uncoiled his tail from around a lever at the base of the chair, and hopped out onto the grass. He trotted up to the two humans just as the lady planted a kiss on Ron's cheek in gratitude. She repeated the gesture between Lodestar's ears. He muttered a complaint in Outlander about his personal space that went unnoticed by the elderly human.

"Thanks again," she said as the pair turned to leave.

Ron turned to Lodestar. "Aren't you supposed to be a monk?"

«*Warrior* monk,» he corrected.

"OK, granted, but what do you need a giant robot for?"

«The armies standing against justice and the legions oppressing the weak do not field only infantry.»

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