

THE NIGHT OF THE STORM By Dean R. Koontz HE WAS A ROBOT MORE THAN A HUNDRED YEARS OLD, BUILT BY OTHER robots in an automated factory that had been continuously engaged in the production of robots for many centuries. His name was Curanov, and as was the custom of his kind, he roamed the earth in search of interesting things to do. Curanov had climbed the highest mountains in the world, with the aid of special body attachments (spikes in his metal feet, tiny but strong hooks on the ends of his twelve fingers, an emergency grappling rope coiled inside his chest-area storage compartment and ready for a swift ejection if he should fall); his small, antigravity flight motors were removed to make the climb as dangerous and, therefore, as interesting as possible. Having submitted to heavy-duty component-sealing procedures, Curanov had once spent eighteen months under water, exploring a large portion of the Pacific Ocean, until he was bored even by the mating of whales and by the ever-shifting beauty of the sea bottom. Curanov had crossed deserts, explored the Arctic Circle on foot, gone spelunking in countless different subterranean systems. He had been caught in a blizzard, in a major flood, in a hurricane, and in the middle of an earthquake that would have registered nine on the Richter scale, if the Richter scale had still been in use. Once, specially insulated, he had descended halfway to the center of the earth, there to bask in pockets of glowing gases, between pools of molten stone, scalded by eruptions of magma, feeling nothing. Eventually, he grew weary of even that colorful spectacle, and he surfaced again. Having lived only one of his two assigned centuries, he wondered if he could last through another hundred years of such tedium. Curanov's private counselor, a robot named Bikermien, assured him that this boredom was only temporary and easily alleviated. If one was clever, Bikermien said, one could find limitless excitement as well as innumerable, valuable situations for data collection about both one's environment and one's mechanical aptitude and heritage. Bikermien, in the last half of his second century, had developed such an enormous and complex data vault that he was assigned stationary duty as a counselor, attached to a mother computer, utterly immobile. By now, extremely adept at finding excitement even through secondhand experience, Bikermien did not mourn the loss of his mobility; he was, after all, a spiritual superior to most robots, inwardly directed. Therefore, when Bikermien advised, Curanov listened, however skeptical he might be. Curanov's problem, according to Bikermien, was that he had started out in life, from the moment he'd left the factory, to pit himself against the greatest of forces - the wildest sea, the coldest cold, the highest temperatures, the greatest pressures - and now, having conquered these things, he could see no interesting challenges beyond them. Yet, the counselor said that Curanov had overlooked some of the most fascinating explorations. The quality of any challenge was directly related to one's ability to meet it; the less adequate one felt, the better the experience, the richer the contest, and the more handsome the data reward. Does this suggest anything to you? Bikermien inquired, without speaking, the telebeam open between them. Nothing. So Bikermien explained it: Hand-to-hand combat with a full-grown male ape might seem like an uninteresting, easy challenge at first glance; a robot was the mental and physical superior of any ape. However, one could always modify oneself in order to even the odds of what might appear to be a sure thing. If a robot couldn't fly, couldn't see as well at night as in the daylight, couldn't communicate except vocally, couldn't run faster than an antelope, couldn't hear a whisper at a thousand yards - in short, if all of his standard abilities were dulled, except for his thinking capacity, might not a robot find that a hand-to-hand battle with an ape was a supremely exciting event? I see your point, Curanov admitted. To understand the grandeur of simple things, one must humble himself. Exactly. And so it was that, on the following day, Curanov boarded the express train north to Montana, where he was scheduled to do some hunting in the company of four other robots, all of whom had been stripped to their essentials. Ordinarily they would have

flown under their own power. Now none had that ability. Ordinarily they would have used telebeams for communication. Now they were forced to talk to one another in that curious, clicking language that had been designed especially for machines but that robots had been able to do without for more than six hundred years. Ordinarily, the thought of going north to hunt deer and wolves would have profoundly bored them. Now, however, each of them felt a curious tingle of anticipation, as if this were a more important ordeal than any he had faced before.

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A brisk, efficient robot named Janus met the group at the small station house just outside of Walker's Watch, toward the northernmost border of Montana. To Curanov, it was clear that Janus had spent several months in this uneventful duty assignment, and that he might be near the end of his obligatory two years' service to the Central Agency. He was actually too brisk and efficient. He spoke rapidly, and he behaved altogether as if he must keep moving and doing in order not to have time to contemplate the uneventful and unexciting days that he had spent in Walker's Watch. He was one of those robots too eager for excitement; one day, he would tackle a challenge that he had not been prepared for, and he would end himself. Curanov looked at Tuttle, another robot who, on the train north, had begun an interesting if silly argument about the development of the robot personality. He contended that until quite recently, in terms of centuries, robots hadn't possessed individual personalities. Each, Tuttle claimed, had been like the other, cold and sterile, with no private dreams. A patently ridiculous theory. Tuttle had been unable to explain how this could have been, but he'd refused to back down from his position. Now, watching Janus chatter at them in a nervous staccato, Curanov was incapable of envisioning an era when the Central Agency would have dispatched mindless robots from the factories. The whole purpose of life was to explore, to carefully store data collected from an individual viewpoint, even if it was repetitive data. How could mindless robots ever function in the necessary manner? As Steffan, another of their group, had said, such theories were on a par with belief in Second Awareness. (Some believed, without evidence, that the Central Agency occasionally made a mistake and, when a robot's allotted life span was up, only partially erased his accumulated memory before refitting him and sending him out of the factory again. These robots - or so the superstitious claimed - had an advantage and were among those who matured fast enough to be elevated to duty as counselors and, sometimes, even to service in the Central Agency itself.) Tuttle had been angered to hear his views on robot personality equated with wild tales of Second Awareness. To egg him on, Steffan also suggested that Tuttle believed in that ultimate of hobgoblins, the "human being." Disgusted, Tuttle settled into a grumpy silence while the others enjoyed the jest. "And now," Janus said, calling Curanov back from his reverie, "I'll issue your supplies and see you on your way." Curanov, Tuttle, Steffan, Leeke, and Skowski crowded forward, eager to begin the adventure. Each of the five was given: binoculars of rather antique design, a pair of snowshoes that clipped and bolted to their feet, a survival pack of tools and greases with which to repair themselves in the event of some unforeseen emergency, an electric hand torch, maps, and a drug rifle complete with an extra clip of one thousand darts. "This is all, then?" Leeke asked. He had seen as much danger as Curanov, perhaps even more, but now he sounded frightened. "What else would you need?" Janus asked impatiently. Leeke said, "Well, as you know, certain modifications have been made to us. For one thing, our eyes aren't what they were, and-" "You've a torch for darkness," Janus said. "And then, our ears-" Leeke began. "Listen cautiously, walk quietly," Janus suggested. "We've had a power reduction to our legs," Leeke said. "If we should have to run-" "Be stealthy. Creep up on your game before it knows you're there, and you'll not need to chase it." "But," Leeke persisted, "weakened as we are, if we should have to run from something-" "You're only after deer and wolves," Janus reminded him. "The deer won't give chase - and a wolf hasn't any taste for steel flesh." Skowski, who had thus far been exceptionally

quiet, not even joining the good-natured roasting the others had given Tuttle on the train, now stepped forward. "I've read that this part of Montana has an unusual number of ... unexplained reports." "Reports of what?" Janus asked. Skowski swept the others with his yellow visual receptors, then looked back at Janus. "Well ... reports of footprints similar to our own but not those of any robot, and reports of robotlike forms seen in the woods." "Oh," Janus said, waving a glittering hand as if to brush away Skowski's suggestion like a fluff of dust, "we get a dozen reports each month about 'human beings' sighted in wilder regions northwest of here." "Where we're going?" Curanov asked. "Yes," Janus said. "But I wouldn't worry. In every case, those who make the reports are robots like yourselves: They've had their perceptions decreased in order to make the hunt a greater challenge for them. Undoubtedly, what they've seen has a rational explanation. If they had seen these things with their full range of perceptions, they would not have come back with these crazy tales." "Does anyone besides stripped-down robots go there?" Skowski asked. "No," Janus said. Skowski shook his head. "This isn't anything at all like I thought it would be. I feel so weak, so ..." He dropped his supplies at his feet. "I don't believe I want to continue with this." The others were surprised. "Afraid of goblins?" Steffan asked. He was the teaser in the group. "No," Skowski said. "But I don't like being a cripple, no matter how much excitement it adds to the adventure." "Very well," Janus said. "There will be only four of you." Leeke said, "Don't we get any weapons besides the drug rifle?" "You'll need nothing else," Janus said. Leeke's query had been a strange one, Curanov thought. The prime directive in every robot's personality - installed in the factory - forbade the taking of any life that could not be restored. Yet, Curanov sympathized with Leeke, shared Leeke's foreboding. He supposed that, with a crippling of their perceptions, there was an inevitable clouding of the thought processes as well, for nothing else explained their intense and irrational fear. "Now," Janus said, "the only thing you need to know is that a storm is predicted for northern Montana early tomorrow night. By then you should be to the lodge that will serve as your base of operations, and the snow will pose no trouble. Questions?" They had none they cared to ask. "Good luck to you," Janus said. "And may many weeks pass before you lose interest in the challenge." That was a traditional send-off, yet Janus appeared to mean it. He would, Curanov guessed, prefer to be hunting deer and wolves under severely restricted perceptions rather than to continue clerking at the station house in Walker's Watch. They thanked him, consulted their maps, left the station house, and were finally on their way. Skowski watched them go and, when they looked back at him, waved one shiny arm in a stiff-fingered salute.

* * * They walked all that day, through the evening, and on into the long night, requiring no rest. Though the power supply to their legs had been reduced and a governor put on their walking speed, they did not become weary. They could appreciate the limitations put on their senses, but they could not actually grow tired. Even when the drifts were deep enough for them to break out their wire-webbed snowshoes and bolt those in place, they maintained a steady pace. Passing across broad plains where the snow was swept into eerie peaks and twisting configurations, walking beneath the dense roof of crossed pine boughs in the virgin forests, Curanov felt a tingle of anticipation that had been missing from his exploits for some years now. Because his perceptions were so much less acute than usual, he sensed danger in every shadow, imagined obstacles and complications around every turn. It was positively exhilarating to be here. Before dawn, a light snow began to fall, clinging to their cold steel skin. Two hours later, by the day's first light, they crested a small ridge and looked out across an expanse of pine woods to the lodge on the other side of a shallow valley. The place was made of a burnished, bluish metal: oval windows, Quonset walls, functional. "We'll be able to get some hunting in today," Steffan said. "Let's go," Tuttle said. Single file, they went down into the valley, crossed it, and came out almost at the doorstep of the lodge.

* * * Curanov pulled the trigger. The magnificent buck, decorated with a twelve-point rack of antlers, reared up onto its hind legs, pawing at the air, breathing steam. "A hit!" Leeke cried. Curanov fired again. The buck went down onto all four legs. The other deer, behind it in the woods, turned and galloped back along the well-trampled trail. The buck shook its huge head, staggered forward as if to follow its companions, stopped abruptly, and then settled onto its haunches. After one last valiant effort to regain its footing, it fell sideways into the snow. "Congratulations!" Steffan said. The four robots rose from the drift where they'd concealed themselves when the deer had come into sight, and they crossed the small open field to the sleeping buck. Curanov bent and felt the creature's sedated heartbeat, watched its grainy black nostrils quiver as it took a shallow breath. Tuttle, Steffan, and Leeke crowded in, squatting around the creature, touching it, marveling at the perfect musculature, the powerful shoulders, and the hard-packed thighs. They agreed that bringing down such a brute, when one's senses were drastically damped, was indeed a challenge. Then, one by one, they got up and walked away, leaving Curanov alone to more fully appreciate his triumph and to carefully collect and record his own emotional reactions to the event in the microtapes of his data vault. Curanov was nearly finished with his evaluation of the challenge and of the resultant confrontation - and the buck was beginning to regain its senses - when Tuttle cried out as if his systems had been accidentally overloaded. "Here! Look here!" Tuttle stood two hundred yards away, near the dark trees, waving his arms. Steffan and Leeke were already moving toward him. At Curanov's feet, the buck snorted and tried to stand, failed to manage that yet, and blinked its gummed eyelids. With nothing more to record in his data vault, Curanov rose and left the beast, walked toward his three companions. "What is it?" he asked when he arrived. They stared at him with glowing amber visual receptors that seemed especially bright in the gray light of late afternoon. "There," Tuttle said, pointing at the ground before them. "Footprints," Curanov said. Leeke said, "They don't belong to any of us." "So?" Curanov asked. "And they're not robot prints," Tuttle said. "Of course they are." Tuttle said, "Look closer." Curanov bent down and realized that his eyes, with half their power gone, had at first deceived him in the weak light. These weren't robot prints in anything but shape. A robot's feet were crosshatched with rubber tread; these prints showed none of that. A robot's feet were bottomed with two holes that acted as vents for the antigrav system when the unit was in flight; these prints showed no holes. Curanov said, "I didn't know there were any apes in the north." "There aren't," Tuttle said. "Then-" "These," Tuttle said, "are the prints ... of a man." "Preposterous!" Steffan said. "How else do you explain them?" Tuttle asked. He didn't sound happy with his explanation, but he was prepared to stick with it until someone offered an acceptable alternative. "A hoax," Steffan said. "Perpetrated by whom?" Tuttle asked. "One of us." They looked at one another, as if the guilt would be evident in their identical metal faces. Then Leeke said, "That's no good. We've been together. These tracks were made recently, or they'd be covered over with snow. None of us has had a chance, all afternoon, to sneak off and form them." "I still say it's a hoax," Steffan insisted. "Perhaps someone was sent out by the Central Agency to leave these for us to find." "Why would Central bother?" Tuttle asked. "Maybe it's part of our therapy," Steffan said. "Maybe this is to sharpen the challenge for us, add excitement to the hunt." He gestured vaguely at the prints, as if he hoped they'd vanish. "Maybe Central does this for everyone who's troubled by boredom, to restore the sense of wonder that" "That's highly unlikely," Tuttle said. "You know that it's the responsibility of each individual to engineer his own adventures and to generate his own storable responses. The Central Agency never interferes. It is merely a judge. After that fact, it evaluates us and gives promotions to those whose data vaults have matured." By way of cutting the argument short, Curanov said, "Where do these prints lead?" Leeke indicated

the marks with a shiny finger. "It looks as if the creature came out of the woods and stood here for a while - perhaps watching us as we stalked the buck. Then he turned and went back the way he came." The four robots followed the footprints into the first of the pine trees, but they hesitated to go into the deeper regions of the forest. "Darkness is coming," Leeke said. "The storm's almost on us, as Janus predicted. With our senses as restricted as they are, we should be getting back to the lodge while we've still enough light to see by." Curanov wondered if their surprising cowardice was as evident to the others as it was to him. They all professed not to believe in the monsters of myth, and yet they rebelled at following these footprints. Curanov had to admit, however, that when he tried to envision the beast that might have made these tracks - a "man" - he was more anxious than ever to reach the sanctity of the lodge. * *

* The lodge had only one room, which was all that they required. Since each of the four was physically identical to the others, no one felt a need for geographical privacy. Each could obtain a more rewarding isolation merely by tuning out all exterior events in one of the lodge's inactivation nooks, thereby dwelling strictly within his mind, recycling old data and searching for previously overlooked juxtapositions of seemingly unrelated information. Therefore, no one was discomfited by the single, gray-walled, nearly featureless room where they would spend as much as several weeks together, barring any complications or any lessening of their interest in the challenge of the hunt. They racked their drug rifles on a metal shelf that ran the length of one wall, and they unbolted their other supplies that, until now, they had clipped to various portions of their body shells. As they stood at the largest window, watching the snow sheet past them in a blinding white fury, Tuttle said, "If the myths are true, think what would be done to modern philosophy." "What myths?" Curanov asked. "About human beings." Steffan, as rigid as ever, was quick to counter the thrust of Tuttle's undeveloped line of thought. He said, "I've seen nothing to make me believe in myths." Tuttle was wise enough, just then, to avoid an argument about the footprints in the snow. But he was not prepared to drop the conversation altogether. "We've always thought that intelligence was a manifestation solely of the mechanized mind. If we should find that a fleshy creature could-" "But none can," Steffan interrupted. Curanov thought that Steffan must be rather young, no more than thirty or forty years out of the factory. Otherwise, he would not be so quick to reject anything that even slightly threatened the status quo that the Central Agency had outlined and established. With the decades, Curanov knew, one learned that what had once been impossible was now considered only commonplace. "There are myths about human beings," Tuttle said, "which say that robots sprang from them." "From flesh?" Steffan asked, incredulous. "I know it sounds odd," Tuttle said, "but at various times in my life, I have seen the oddest things prove true." "You've been all over the earth, in more corners than I have been. In all your travels, you must have seen tens of thousands of fleshy species, animals of all descriptions." Steffan paused, for effect. "Have you ever encountered a single fleshy creature with even rudimentary intelligence in the manner of the robot?" "Never," Tuttle admitted. "Flesh was not designed for high-level sentience," Steffan said. They were quiet. The snow fell, pulling the gray sky closer to the land. None would admit the private fear he nurtured. "Many things fascinate me," Tuttle said, surprising Curanov, who had thought that the other robot was done with his postulating. "For one - where did the Central Agency come from? What were its origins?" Steffan waved a hand disparagingly. "There has always been a Central Agency." "But that's no answer," Tuttle said. "Why isn't it?" Steffan asked. "For all intents and purposes, we accept that there has always been a universe, stars and planets and everything in between." "Suppose," Tuttle said, "just for the sake of argument, that there has not always been a Central Agency. The Agency is constantly doing research into its own nature, redesigning itself. Vast stores of data are transferred into increasingly sophisticated

repositories every fifty to a hundred years. Isn't it possible that occasionally the Agency loses bits and pieces, accidentally destroys some of its memory in the move?" "Impossible," Steffan said. "There are any number of safeguards taken against such an eventuality." Curanov, aware of many of the Central Agency's bumbles over the past hundred years, was not so sure. He was intrigued by Tuttle's theory. Tuttle said, "If the Central Agency somehow lost most of its early stores of data, its knowledge of human beings might have vanished along with countless other bits and pieces." Steffan was disgusted. "Earlier, you ranted against the idea of Second Awareness - but now you can believe this. You amuse me, Tuttle. Your data vault must be a trove of silly information, contradictory beliefs, and useless theorizing. If you believe in these human beings - then do you also believe in all the attendant myths? Do you think they can only be killed with an instrument of wood? Do you think they sleep at night in dark rooms? Sleep like beasts? And do you think that, though they're made of flesh, they cannot be dispatched but that they pop up somewhere else in a new body?" Confronted with these obviously insupportable superstitions, Tuttle backed down from his entire point. He turned his amber visual receptors on the snow beyond the window. "I was only supposing. I was just spinning a little fantasy to help pass the time." Triumphant, Steffan said, "However, fantasy doesn't contribute to a maturation of one's data vault." "And I suppose that you're eager to mature enough to gain a promotion from the Agency," Tuttle said. "Of course," Steffan said. "We're only allotted two hundred years. And besides, what else is the purpose of life?" Perhaps to have an opportunity to mull over his strange theories, Tuttle soon retired to an inactivation nook in the wall beneath the metal shelf on which the guns lay. He slid in feet first and pulled the hatch shut behind his head, leaving the others to their own devices. Fifteen minutes later, Leeke said, "I believe I'll follow Tuttle's example. I need time to consider my responses to this afternoon's hunt." Curanov knew that Leeke was only making excuses to be gone. He was not a particularly gregarious robot and seemed most comfortable when he was ignored and left to himself. Alone with Steffan in the lodge, Curanov was in an unpleasantly delicate position. He felt that he, too, needed time to think inside a deactivation nook. However, he did not want to hurt Steffan's feelings, did not want to give him the impression that they were all anxious to be away from him. For the most part, Curanov liked the young robot; Steffan was fresh, energetic, obviously a first-line mentality. The only thing he found grating about the youth was his innocence, his undisciplined drive to be accepted and to achieve. Time, of course, would mellow Steffan and hone his mind, so he did not deserve to be hurt. How then to excuse oneself without slighting Steffan in any way? The younger robot solved the problem by suggesting that he, too, needed time in a nook. When Steffan was safely shut away, Curanov went to the fourth of the five wall slots, slid into it, pulled the hatch shut, and felt all of his senses drain away from him, so that he was only a mind, floating in darkness, contemplating the wealth of ideas in his data vault. Adrift in nothingness, Curanov considers the superstition that has begun to be the center of this adventure: the human being, the man: 1. Though of flesh, the man thinks and knows. 2. He sleeps by night, like an animal. 3. He devours other flesh, as does the beast. 4. He defecates. 5. He dies and rots, is susceptible to disease and corruption. 6. He spawns his young in a terrifyingly unmechanical way, and yet his young are also sentient. 7. He kills. 8. He can overpower a robot. 9. He dismantles robots, though none but other men know what he does with their parts. 10. He is the antithesis of the robot. If the robot represents the proper way of life, man is the improper. 11. Man stalks in safety, registering to the robot's senses, unless clearly seen, as only another harmless animal - until it is too late. 12. He can be permanently killed only with a wooden implement. Wood is the product of an organic lifeform, yet it lasts as metal does; halfway between flesh and metal, it can destroy human flesh. 13. If killed in any other way, by any means other than wood, the man will only appear to be dead.

In reality, the moment that he drops before his assailant, he at once springs to life elsewhere, unharmed, in a new body. Although the list goes on, Curanov abandons that avenue of thought, for it disturbs him deeply. Tuttle's fantasy can be nothing more than that - conjecture, supposition, imagination. If the human being actually existed, how could one believe the Central Agency's prime rule: that the universe is, in every way, entirely logical and rational?

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"The rifles are gone," Tuttle said when Curanov slid out of the deactivation nook and got to his feet. "Gone. All of them. That's why I recalled you." "Gone?" Curanov asked, looking at the shelf where the weapons had been. "Gone where?" "Leeke's taken them," Steffan said. He stood by the window, his long, bluish arms beaded with cold droplets of water precipitated out of the air. "Is Leeke gone too?" Curanov asked. "Yes." He thought about this, then said, "But where would he go in the storm? And why would he need all the rifles?" "I'm sure it's nothing to be concerned about," Steffan said. "He must have had a good reason, and he can tell us all about it when he comes back." Tuttle said, "If he comes back." Curanov said, "Tuttle, you sound as if you think he might be in danger." "In light of what's happened recently - those prints we found - I'd say that could be a possibility." Steffan scoffed at this. "Whatever's happening," Tuttle said, "you must admit it's odd." He turned to Curanov. "I wish we hadn't submitted to the operations before we came out here. I'd do anything to have my full senses again." He hesitated. "I think we have to find Leeke." "He'll be back," Steffan argued. "He'll return when he wants to return." "I'm still in favor of initiating a search," Tuttle said. Curanov went to the window and stood next to Steffan, gazing out at the driving snow. The ground was covered with at least twelve inches of new powder; the proud trees had been bowed under the white weight; and snow continued to fall faster than Curanov had ever seen it in all his many journeys. "Well?" Tuttle asked again. "I concur," Curanov said. "We should look for him, but we should do it together. With our lessened perceptions, we might easily get separated and lost out there. If one of us became damaged in a fall, he might experience a complete battery depletion before anyone found him." "You're right." Tuttle said. He turned to Steffan. "And you?" "Oh, all right," Steffan said crossly. "I'll come along."

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Their torches cut bright wounds in the darkness but did little to melt through the curtain of wind-driven snow. They walked abreast around the lodge, continuing a circle search. Each time that they completed another turn about the building, they widened their search pattern. They decided to cover all the open land, but they would not enter the forest even if they hadn't located Leeke elsewhere. They agreed to this limitation, though none - not even Steffan - admitted that half the reason for ignoring the woods was a purely irrational fear of what might live among the trees. In the end, however, it was not necessary to enter the woods, for they found Leeke less than twenty yards away from the lodge. He was lying on his side in the snow. "He's been terminated," Steffan said. The others didn't need to be told. Both of Leeke's legs were missing. "Who could have done something like this?" Steffan asked. Neither Tuttle nor Curanov answered him. Leeke's head hung limply on his neck, because several of the links in his ring cable had been bent out of alignment. His visual receptors had been smashed, and the mechanism behind them ripped out through the shattered sockets. When Curanov bent closer, he saw that someone had poked a sharp object into Leeke's data vaults, through his eye tubes, and scrambled his tapes into a useless mess. He hoped that poor Leeke had been dead by then. "Horrible," Steffan said. He turned away from the grisly scene, began to walk back to the lodge, but stopped abruptly as he realized that he should not be out of the other robots' company. He shuddered mentally. "What should we do with him?" Tuttle asked. "Leave him," Curanov said. "Here to rust?" "He'll sense nothing more." "Still-" We should be getting back," Curanov said, shining his light around the snowy scene. "We shouldn't expose ourselves." Keeping close to one another, they

returned to the lodge. As they walked, Curanov reviewed certain disturbing data: 9. He dismantles robots, though none but other men know what he does with their parts * * * "As I see it," Curanov told them when they were once again in the lodge, "Leeke did not take the rifles. Someone - or something - entered the lodge to steal them. Leeke must have come out of his inactivation nook just as the culprits were leaving. Without pausing to wake us, he gave chase." "Or was forced to go with them," Tuttle said. "I doubt that he was taken out by force," Curanov said. "In the lodge, with enough light to see by and enough space to maneuver in, even with lessened perceptions, Leeke could have kept himself from being hurt or forced to leave. However, once he was outside, in the storm, he was at their mercy." The wind screamed across the peaked roof of the lodge, rattled the windows in their metal frames. The three remaining robots stood still, listening until the gust died away, as though the noise were made not by the wind but by some enormous beast that had reared up over the building and was intent on tearing it to pieces. Curanov went on: "When I examined Leeke, I found that he was felled by a sharp blow to the ring cable, just under the head - the kind of blow that would have had to come suddenly from behind and without warning. In a room as well lighted as this, nothing could have gotten behind Leeke without his knowing it was there." Steffan turned away from the window and said, "Do you think that Leeke was already terminated when ...?" His voice trailed away, but in a moment he had found the discipline to go on: "Was he terminated when they dismantled his legs?" "We can only hope that he was," Curanov said. Steffan said, "Who could have done such a thing?" "A man," Tuttle said. "Or men," Curanov amended. "No," Steffan said. But his denial was not as adamant as it had been before. "What would they have done with his legs?" "No one knows what they do with what they take," Curanov said. Steffan said, "You sound as if Tuttle's convinced you, as if you believe in these creatures." "Until I have a better answer to the question of who terminated Leeke, I think it's safest to believe in human beings," Curanov explained. For a time, they were silent. Then Curanov said, "I think we should start back to Walker's Watch in the morning, first thing." "They'll think we're immature," Steffan said, "if we come back with wild tales about men prowling around the lodge in the darkness. You saw how disdainful Janus was of others who had made similar reports." "We have poor, dead Leeke as proof," Tuttle said. "Or," Curanov said, "we can say Leeke was terminated in an accident and we're returning because we're bored with the challenge." "You mean, we wouldn't even have to mention - human beings?" Steffan asked. "Possibly," Curanov said. "That would be the best way to handle it, by far," Steffan said. "Then no second-hand reports of our temporary irrationality would get back to the Agency. We could spend much time in the inactivation nooks, until we finally were able to perceive the real explanation of Leeke's termination, which somehow now eludes us. If we meditate long enough, a proper solution is bound to arise. Then, by the time of our next data-vault audits by the Agency, we'll have covered all traces of this illogical reaction from which we now suffer." "However," Tuttle said, "we might already know the real story of Leeke's death. After all, we've seen the footprints in the snow, and we've seen the dismantled body Could it be that men - human beings - really are behind it?" "No," Steffan said. "That's superstitious nonsense. That's irrational." "At dawn," Curanov said, "we'll set out for Walker's Watch, no matter how bad the storm is by then." As he finished speaking, the distant hum of the lodge generator - which was a comforting background noise that never abated - abruptly cut out. They were plunged into darkness. With snow crusted on their chilled metal skins, they focused three electric torches on the compact generator in its niche behind the lodge. The top of the machine casing had been removed, exposing the complex inner works to the elements.. "Someone's removed the power core," Curanov said. "But who?" Steffan asked. Curanov directed the beam of his torch to the ground. The others did likewise. Mingled with their own footprints were other prints similar to but not made by

any robot: those same, strange tracks that they had seen near the trees in the late afternoon. The same tracks that profusely marked the snow all around Leeke's body. "No," Steffan said. "No, no, no." "I think it's best that we set out for Walker's Watch tonight," Curanov said. "I don't think it would any longer be wise to wait until morning." He looked at Tuttle, to whom clung snow in icy clumps. "What do you think?" "Agreed," Tuttle said. "But I suspect it's not going to be an easy journey. I wish I had all my senses up to full power." "We can still move fast," Curanov said. "And we don't need to rest, as fleshy creatures must. If we're pursued, we have the advantage." "In theory," Tuttle said. "We'll have to be satisfied with that." Curanov considered certain aspects of the myth: 7. He kills; 8. He can overpower a robot.

* * *

In the lodge, by the eerie light of their hand torches, they bolted on their snowshoes, attached their emergency repair kits, and picked up their maps. The beams of their lamps preceding them, they went outside again, staying together. The wind beat upon their broad backs while the snow worked hard to coat them in hard-packed, icy suits. They crossed the clearing, half by dead reckoning and half by the few landmarks that the torches revealed, each wishing to himself that he had his full powers of sight and his radar back in operation again. Soon, they came to the opening in the trees that led down the side of the valley and back toward Walker's Watch. They stopped there, staring into the dark tunnel formed by sheltering pines, and they seemed reluctant to go any farther. "There are so many shadows," Tuttle said. "Shadows can't hurt us," Curanov said. Throughout their association, from the moment they had met one another on the train coming north, Curanov had known that he was the leader among them. He had exercised his leadership sparingly, but now he must take full command. He started forward, into the trees, between the shadows, moving down the snowy slope. Reluctantly, Steffan followed. Tuttle came last. Halfway down toward the valley floor, the tunnel between the trees narrowed drastically. The trees loomed closer, spread their boughs lower. And it was here, in these tight quarters, in the deepest shadows, that they were attacked. Something howled in triumph, its mad voice echoing above the constant whine of the wind. Curanov whirled, not certain from which direction the sound had come, lancing the trees with torchlight. Behind, Tuttle cried out. Curanov turned as Steffan did, and their torches illuminated the struggling robot. "It can't be!" Steffan said. Tuttle had fallen back under the relentless attack of a two-legged creature that moved almost as a robot might move, though it was clearly an animal. It was dressed in furs, its feet booted, and it wielded a metal ax. It drove the blunted blade at Tuttle's ring cable. Tuttle raised an arm, threw back the weapon, saved himself - at the cost of a severely damaged elbow joint. Curanov started forward to help but was stopped as a second of the fleshy beasts delivered a blow from behind. The weapon struck the center of Curanov's back and drove him to his knees. Curanov fell sideways, rolled, got to his feet in one well-coordinated maneuver. He turned quickly to confront his assailant. A fleshy face stared back at him from a dozen feet away, blowing steam in the cold air. It was framed in a fur-lined hood: a grotesque parody of a robot face. Its eyes were too small for visual receptors, and they did not glow. Its face was not perfectly symmetrical as it should have been; it was out of proportion, also puffed and mottled from the cold. It did not even shine in the torchlight, and yet yet ... obvious intelligence abided there. No doubt malevolent intelligence. Perhaps even maniacal. But intelligence nonetheless. Surprisingly, the monster spoke to Curanov. Its voice was deep, its language full of rounded, softened syllables, not at all like the clattering language the robots spoke to one another. Abruptly, the beast leaped forward, crying out, and swung a length of metal pipe at Curanov's neck. The robot danced backward out of range. The demon came forward. Curanov glanced at the others and saw that the first demon had backed Tuttle almost into the woods. A third had attacked Steffan, who was barely managing to hold his own. Screaming, the man before Curanov charged,

plowed the end of the pipe into Curanov's chest. The robot fell hard. The man came in close, raising his bludgeon. Man thinks, though he's of flesh ... sleeps as an animal sleeps, devours other flesh, defecates, rots, dies He spawns his young in an unmechanical manner, although his young are sentient He kills ... he kills ... he overpowers robots, dismantles them, and does monstrous things (what?) with their parts He can be killed, permanently, only with a wooden implement ... and if killed in any other manner, he does not die a true death, but at once springs up elsewhere in a new body As the monster swung his club, Curanov rolled, rose, and struck out with his long-fingered hand. The man's face tore, gave blood. The demon stepped back, bewildered. Curanov's terror had changed into rage. He stepped forward and struck out again. And again. Flailing with all his reduced strength, he broke the demon's body, temporarily killed it, leaving the snow spattered with blood. Turning from his own assailant, he moved on the beast that was after Steffan. Clubbing it from behind, he broke its neck with one blow of his steel hand. By the time Curanov reached Tuttle and dispatched the third demon, Tuttle had sustained one totally demolished arm, another smashed hand, and damage to the ring cable that, luckily, had not terminated him. With any luck, the three robots would survive. "I thought I was finished," Tuttle said. Dazed, Steffan said to Curanov, "You killed all three of them!" "They would have terminated us," Curanov said. Inside, where they could not see, he was in turmoil. Steffan said, "But the prime directive from the Central Agency forbids the taking of life-" "Not quite," Curanov disagreed. "It forbids the taking of life which cannot be restored. Which cannot be restored." "These lives will be restored?" Steffan asked, looking at the hideous corpses, unable to understand. "You've seen human beings now," Curanov said. "Do you believe the myths - or do you still scoff?" "How can I scoff?" "Then," Curanov said, "if you believe that such demons exist, you must believe what else is said of them." He quoted his own store of data on the subject: "If killed in any other way, by any means other than wood, the man will only appear to be dead. In reality, the moment he drops before his assailant, he springs at once to life elsewhere, unharmed, in a new body." Steffan nodded, unwilling to argue the point. Tuttle said, "What now?" "We continue back to Walker's Watch," Curanov said. "And tell them what we found?" "No." "But," Tuttle said, "we can lead them back here, show them these carcasses." "Look around you," Curanov said. "Other demons are watching from the trees." A dozen hateful white faces could be seen, leering. Curanov said, "I don't think they'll attack us again. They've seen what we can do, how we have learned that, with them, the prime directive does not apply. But they're sure to remove and bury the bodies when we've gone." "We can take a carcass along with us," Tuttle said. Curanov said, "No. Both of your hands are useless. Steffan's right arm is uncontrollable. I couldn't carry one of those bodies all by myself as far as Walker's Watch, not with my power as reduced as it is." "Then," Tuttle said, "we still won't tell anyone about what we've seen up here?" "We can't afford to, if we ever want to be promoted," Curanov said. "Our only hope is to spend a long time in some inactivation nook, contemplating until we've learned to cope with what we've witnessed." They picked their torches out of the snow and, staying close to one another, started down toward the valley once more. "Walk slowly and show no fear," Curanov warned. They walked slowly, but each was certain that his fear was evident to the unearthly creatures crouching in the shadows beneath the pine trees. They walked all that long night and most of the following day before they reached the station house at Walker's Watch. In that time, the storm died out. The landscape was serene, white, peaceful. Surveying the rolling snowfields, one felt sure that the universe was rational. But Curanov was haunted by one icy realization: If he must believe in specters and other worldly beings like men, then he would never again be able to think of the universe in rational terms.

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