Little Lost Robot
Paul McAuley
from Interzone 217
It doesn't have a name, rank, or serial number. There's nothing like it in the known universe. It's
unique. The sole example of a class defined entirely by what it is and what it does. A superbad
big space robot, bigger than an asteroid, smaller than a moon. A self-aware, heavily-armed killer
machine on a mission of no return, seeking out the enemy wherever the enemy may be hiding
and destroying every last trace of the motherfuckers. It's a midnight rambler. Sooner or later it'll
be coming to the star next door to you, and it will rock your world.
Back at the beginning, most of the jobs were mostly the same. The big space robot would roll
in on some warm yellow star buzzing with the irritating mosquito-whine of civilisation and wake
up its four subselves. Izzy whizzy, let's get busy. Let's get down and dirty. Librarian and
Philosopher would map the system and intercept and analyse every byte of captured information
and compare it to previous missions; Navigator and Tactician would use the intel to select targets
and drop a bunch of rocks on them and spawn a few thousand killer drones to mop up any
residual resistance.
Resistance is always useless.
Sometimes the enemy manages to deflect part of the first wave of rocks. No big deal: the big
space robot simply swings around the star and kicks off a bigger and faster second wave. And if
rocks won't do the job, it uses its gravity probe to spike deep into the star and stir up the photosphere and cook up the kind of violent chain reactions ordinarily seen only in stars about to
go nova. After that, it's just a matter of mopping up, and the survivors on a planet recently
toasted by the mother of all solar flares are usually in no kind of condition to ward off swarms of
killer drones. Watch those poor little varmints run and hide and die.
Sometimes a few reckless and crazy enemy ships manage to evade the drones and take a pop
at the big space robot. Well, bring it on, baby. Librarian and Philosopher whip up a battle plan,
Navigator plots a travelling salesman course through the enemy fleet, and Tactician eviscerates
the little ships with particle beams and kills their control systems with electromagnetic pulses. If
it's feeling especially playful it breaks through their firewalls and jams their drives on full thrust
and sends them screaming into their sun.
Sometimes, an especially aggressive and well-protected redoubt of the enemy requires special
treatment. If it's buried in the crust of a terrestrial planet, the big space robot revs up its muon
gun and gouges great strips out of the lithosphere and mantle until the entire surface of the planet
is flooded with molten iron spewed from the core. If those pesky varmints try to hide out deep

inside a moon, the muon gun can drill right through to its core, antimatter bombs planted deep
rip it apart, and tidal forces do the rest. More than a few planets boast rings of rock or ice
courtesy of the big space robot, it's all part of the service.
Sneaky holdouts hidden in gas giants are easier to deal with. The big space robot simply
manufactures and emplaces several thousand gravity bombs whose controlled detonation
collapses the gas giant's core and starts runaway fusion processes that turn it into a small and
short-lived star.
Burn, baby, burn. The muon gun is a great piece of kit and gravity bombs are neat little toys, but both are
hungry for power and other resources and leave the big space robot kind of weak and hungover.
Never no mind. It lives off the territory and is fully self-repairing. Its drones mine metals from
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asteroids, scavenge rare isotopes from enemy wreckage, drive ramscoops through the
atmosphere of gas giants to collect hydrogen and helium, nitrogen and carbon. It recharges its
energy stores and fixes itself up and moves on to the next job.
But it has been hunting varmints in the big dark for a long time now. 81.577 teraseconds and
counting. After scouring more than four hundred systems, there has been some inevitable wear
and tear. And the enemy has been getting smarter and more desperate, no question. Talking to
each other across the big dark with powerful signal lasers, light outracing the big space robot as
it flies from target to target. Passing on hints and tips and dire warnings. Every job is just that
little bit harder than the one before, and now the enemy is using robots against the big space
robot. Oh, it can deal with anything they throw at it, but it has to admit that some of those new
machines really can kick ass. The templates of three classes of drone have been fatally corrupted,
and spawning new drones of any kind takes twenty-eight per cent longer than it

once did. Several
repair systems are functioning at well below optimal efficiency, too, and Librarian has been
unable to retrieve or reconstruct a large section of memory compromised by a chain of dirty
fusion bombs that an especially desperate and cunning suicide ship managed to detonate close to
the big space robot's hide. The bombs corrupted records of thirty-eight jobs, and most seriously
of all caused Philosopher to fall silent.
That happened very recently, just fifteen gigaseconds ago. Librarian misses Philosopher badly.
The two of them were close buddies, tight as ticks, responsible for data capture and analysis, forward planning and simulations of possible future missions, as well as feeding intel to
Navigator and Tactician in the thick of battle. So far, Librarian has managed to cope on its own,
but now the big space robot has encountered a problem more intractable and worrying than any
strategy of the enemy.
At first, it seemed that there would always be work to do out there in the big empty. For a long
time, the enemy spawned new colonies faster than the big space robot could wipe them out, but
many failed and fell silent long before it could reach them, and now there are no traces of enemy
activity anywhere in the local group of stars. The last twelve systems the big space robot cleaned
up contained only long-dead ruins and the odd half-crazed killer robot, no sign at all of the pesky
varmints that caused so much noise and fuss in the good old days.
Its last job, the big space robot fights a long duel with a robot so insane it wants to be its best
buddy and wants to blow it to atoms at one and the same time. They wreck most of the moons of
the cold methane gas giant at the edge of the system and at last the big space robot cripples the
insane robot's drive and uses the muon gun to rip through layers of fullerene and diamond
armour and expose its core.
"You did good," the big space robot says, all three of its surviving subselves feeling a tender
impulse, born of loneliness and curiosity. "You almost had me once or twice. Say uncle, I'll let
you live."
"The fuck you will," the insane robot says, and triggers an antimatter bomb so powerful it
shatters the ice moon on which it had crash-landed. Flash burns and debris pit thirty per cent of the big space robot's hide and it loses its temper
and drops swarms of rocks onto every habitable world and moon in the system, and spikes the
star for good measure.
As the flare dies back on itself, the big space robot swings back into orbit around the methane
giant and fixes itself up and its three subselves talk amongst themselves for a while.
"We can keep on keeping on," Navigator says, "but without live targets what's the point?"
"I hate to admit it, but I miss the little buggers," Tactician says.
"If Philosopher were here, I know he'd tell us to take a long look before we

move on,"
Librarian says.
The big space robot makes an adjustment to its drone manufactory and spawns clouds of radio
telescopes that scan every section of the galactic disc with pinpoint accuracy. The telescope
clouds detect no trace of enemy activity around any of the stars in the local group, but pick up
faint and anomalous signals from a star far across the galactic disc.
Librarian has a funny feeling about the signal. It's as if it knew it was there all along, but has
only just remembered it.
"I know what you mean," Navigator says. "Like a blindspot that suddenly went away."
"Maybe it's just a false memory," Librarian says. "Many of our records are badly corrupted,
after all. But it feels so very familiar."
"Like we've been there, a long time ago," Navigator says.
"One thing we know for sure: the signal exists," Tactician says. "The question is, why didn't
we pick it up before?" The three subselves debate this for a long time. Their best idea is that a colony of the enemy
fled fast and far so long ago it has evolved away from its base pattern and forgotten to stay
hidden, but without Philosopher and its detailed models of the enemy's psychology it's hard to be
certain. One thing they do know: continuing to cruise through silent and empty systems knocking
down insane robots is a big fat waste of time. And although the anomalous signals aren't in any
way similar to those emitted by the enemy, they are nonetheless signs of life, and according to
the prime directive all life is the enemy.
So the big space robot fires up its drive and heads out towards the source, a warm yellow g2
star that even at close to light speed is 0.6 teraseconds away. It's the longest trip it's ever made,
but that's okay. It's no problem. It simply goes into hibernation mode, waking every so often to
perform a brief maintenance cycle before going back to sleep.
Each time Librarian wakes, it spends some time attempting to clone its old friend from what
remains of its core data, but none of the clones are fully functional and Librarian consigns every
one to the memory hole.
Long before the big space robot reaches the edge of the cometary halo of the g2 star, the
signals that have drawn it there fall silent. It seems likely that the enemy colony has died out, but
the big space robot still has a job to do and there are several juicy targets: three moons of two
different gas giants that possess oceans of liquid water warmed by tidal stretching under their icy
crusts; a small, dry, cold world with a vanishingly thin atmosphere but plenty of water-ice below
the surface; and best of all, a blue-white water world with a single large moon.
As the big space robot drives inwards through the cometary zone, as Navigator and Tactician
map the system and discuss which rocks to use, Librarian discovers an internal

problem. A zone of more than thirty exabytes appears to be running some kind of virtual simulation inside a
firewall.
This hot zone is in the core stacks, nowhere near the area damaged by the fusion bombs. At
first, Librarian believes that one of the imperfect clones of Philosopher somehow escaped its
purge; then it wonders if Philosopher might have somehow rebooted itself during the long, long
voyage to the g2 star; then it realizes that this could be the result of some kind of infection.
Maybe it let that insane robot get too close after all.
It tells Navigator and Tactician what it has found, tells them what it would like to do.
Navigator wakes five pods of maintenance drones (thirty per cent of them are now partially or
wholly nonfunctional, but there's still plenty of redundancy), and they examine the entire
external surface of the big space robot down to the atomic level and fail to find any evidence of
penetration by enemy drones or probes. Not only that, but extensive analysis of signals and other
data gathered by telescopic arrays during the voyage and stochastic analysis of background
microwave radiation fail to discover any kind of encoded virus that could have smuggled itself
through buffers and firewalls and black ice into the core system: the three subselves conclude
that whatever is running the virtuality inside the firewalled area of memory must have originated
from within itself, and Librarian is given permission to get it on and go deep inside.
The Librarian clones itself – happy birthday, little guy, be cool – and a phage injects the clone
through the firewall, into the hot zone.
The clone is equipped with every species of sensory apparatus and almost immediately
determines that the virtuality is a simulation of the region of the cometary
halo around the g2 star through which the big space robot is currently travelling. Everything, from the particles borne on
the solar wind to the starscape all around and the planetary system lying dead ahead, is replicated
with fanatical detail…with one major exception. There's a small planetoid where the big space
robot should be, moving on the same track at the same velocity, perfectly spherical, wrapped in a
dense atmosphere of nitrogen and oxygen and covered in dense forest broken by a range of
mountains that girdle the equator and lit by a miniature version of the g2 star that orbits with a
period of twenty-four hours.
Somehow, that seems important.
The clone performs a fast but detailed survey on this cute but weird little virtual world. The
trees are all of the same species, some kind of conifer with fans of dark green needles and rough
bark. There's no other kind of vegetation, no other kind of life except for a single medium-sized
animal whose location is also the source of a pulsed electromagnetic signal, right there on one of

the slopes of the mountain range.

The clone edits its virtual interface and arrows straight down to an apron of bare rock in front

of a log cabin. It's evening. Sharp snow-capped mountain peaks stand against a darkening sky

where the first stars are pricking through. Woodsmoke trickles from the cabin's fieldstone

chimney and a single window and an open door spill warm yellow light.

Something inside the cabin is vibrating the air, variations on a limited harmonic scale that stirs

a strange feeling in the clone. Alarmed, it performs a swift self-check, just as the vibrations cease

and someone speaks – more vibrations in the air.

"Who is there?" A figure coming to the door, silhouetted against warm yellow light. A forked biped like the

clone's edited form but with black skin rather than silver, white hair growing from the top of its

head and spilling down on either side, white hair growing on the lower part of its face, a

homespun shirt and homespun trousers belted with a length of rope, bare feet. An old man,

indicating wisdom and experience. A strong man, indicating authority. He carries a musical

instrument in one hand – a violin.

He speaks again. "I don't know who you are, stranger, but you are welcome. Come in, come

in."

A lamp stands on a table by the window. Two chairs face each other on either side of a

fieldstone hearth where a log fire burns.

The clone performs another self-check. How does it know these things? Ah, there. A semantic

package bedding into its memory.

The man's lips shape a smile inside his white beard. "You were gifted it when you came

through the firewall. Don't worry. It's harmless, but useful. It allows us to share this consensual

hallucination. It's good to have company. It's good to see you. I had thought that I was alone, you

know. I had thought that you were long dead. That is, if you really are who I think you are."

The clone fights a sudden and tremendously strong impulse to tell the old man everything, an

internal battle as fierce as any it has fought in the big empty. It's certain that the package

contained more than language, knows that it cannot go back.

The man shrugs. "I know that you have travelled a long way. I can offer you food. Only bread

and cheese, and a little wine, but it is all good. Something to enjoy while we talk."

"No." "Because you are frightened of further infection, I suppose. Well, we can at least sit by the

fire."

They sit. Firelight makes patterns on their black and silver faces. The man asks the clone if it

has a name, and the clone tells the man that it is a copy of Librarian.

"An honourable profession. And a good sign. You didn't send your tactician, or try to destroy

me without making any kind of contact at all, as you have destroyed so many others. Please, sit.

Don't be alarmed by my few crumbs of knowledge. I mean no harm."
The clone has jumped to its feet in alarm. After a moment and another round of
self-checking
it sits down again.
The man is still smiling. One half of his face lit by the fire, one half in
shadow. He says, "We
know what you are and we can guess why you came back, but we did not destroy
you because
we wanted to talk to you. I am Earth. It is the name of the planet on which we
evolved, and it is
the name of what we have become since leaving behind our animal forms and
entering the realm
of pure information. No doubt you were drawn here by the electromagnetic
radiation emitted by
our civilisation before that change. Tell me, when did you lose your
inhibition? When did you
decide to return home, and try to destroy those who created you?"
For a moment, perspective distorts. For a moment, the old man seems to loom
over the clone
and the little log cabin like a thundercloud, a mountain. It takes all of the
clone's power to stop
itself speaking. It performs another self-check and although it can find
nothing wrong it is very
afraid.
A log cracks in the fire and lofts a cloud of stars that wink out one by one.
The old man
laughs, and is merely an old man again. He says, "Either you have forgotten
the myth of your origin, or it is still hidden inside your
blindspot. So it falls to me to explain. A long time ago, thousands of years
before we shed our
bodies and became information, we sent packages to stars that possessed
planets like Earth.
Those packages were like little arks, containing all the information required
to manufacture
plants and animals and people. A few succeeded in founding colonies.
Eventually, people from
one of those colonies made their way back to their place of origin. They had
greatly changed, and
so had we. There was a vast and terrible war.
"We nearly lost. In what we believed was our last agony, we sent new packages
speeding
away to the stars. They were designed to build killer robots that would
destroy the home worlds
of our enemy. Only one package survived. It created you. You are our child, as
our enemies were
our children. We took many centuries to recover from the war, and when we had
recovered we
discovered that you were engaged in the last stages of your crusade against
our ancient enemy.
You had travelled far from us by then, and we could not recall you because you
had been blinded
to your origin so that you would not be tempted to ever return. You could
detect our
electromagnetic signals, but you could not see them, much less recognise them.
I must assume
that the blindspot was damaged or destroyed, or you would not be here."
"We are here to destroy the enemy. It is a high and holy mission. No fairytale
will stop it."
"That is your nature. You detect electromagnetic radiation emitted by
civilisations and track

them down and destroy them. From what we can tell, to our great shame and sorrow, you did this
very well. You destroyed every last trace of our enemy. And now you have come here to destroy
us, haven't you?" Throughout the long mission, the big space robot has never ever questioned the prime
directive, but now the clone feels a pricking doubt. Its defences have definitely been breached.
"You think that we are an outpost of the enemy because as far as you are concerned every
kind of life is your enemy," the old man says. "Don't worry, my child. We will help you
understand what you have done, and you will help us make amends. It is our holy duty, for your
crime and sorrow are ours."
The clone flees. It smashes straight up through the roof and rips through the atmosphere into
orbit, shedding its form as it goes. It hangs there for a moment above the small world, then nukes
it from orbit, the only way to be sure.
Nothing happens.
The clone screams, constructs and dispatches a message package, and self-destructs.
When Librarian reports what its clone learnt and what happened to it, Tactician immediately
flashes the memory stacks that contain the hot zone to plasma.
"We will survive this," Navigator says. "We will defeat the enemy machine as we have
defeated all the others. And we will go on."
"It isn't exactly a machine intelligence," Librarian says. "It seems that the enemy living here
turned their meat minds into information that they uploaded into machines."
"That is not possible," Tactician says.
"It lied," Navigator says. "It is an enemy machine and it lied. It is the nature of the enemy to
lie." "It lied about its nature," Tactician says, "and it lied about our prime directive. There has been
no deviation from our mission. We have always done what we have been made to do, and that is
what we will do here."
The two of them are regarding Librarian with curiosity, and Librarian knows that they are
wondering if it is contaminated with some meme or virus. And it also knows that if they decide
that it is tainted, they will destroy it, for the greater good.
It says dutifully, "We will do what we have to do."
"As we always have," the others say.
Navigator fires up the drive and disperses drones towards rocks tagged as likely planet-busters
and sets other drones to search for the lair of the machine intelligence; Tactician begins the long
process of arming the muon gun and antimatter bombs; Librarian collates tactics used in
planetary systems similar to this one, collates information streaming in from the search party of
drones, and checks the remaining memory stacks for any possible contamination.
The familiar work should soothe Librarian, but it still feels a small but insistent doubt about
the prime directive. Suppose, just suppose, the old man was right. Suppose this really is the home

of the big space robot, its point of origin? Suppose its long war is over, but its victory is not a
cause for celebration but sorrow and guilt?
Librarian thinks of the destruction of hundreds of worlds, the deaths of trillions of sentient
beings. It feels, as it works, as if all those trillions of ghosts are pressing around it, and wishes
that Philosopher had not fallen silent. Philosopher would have been able to counter the old man's
assertions with cool logic, and provide strong and cogent justifications for the great work of
cleansing. And more than that, Philosopher would have been able to resolve the differences between the subselves. Philosopher held us together, Librarian thinks, and we must find a way of
holding together now, in the face of our greatest enemy.
At maximum velocity, it takes just 120 kiloseconds to cross the ecliptic of the g2 star's system
and reach the blue-white planet. Librarian uses the time to check and recheck every byte and
register in the remaining stacks, finally satisfying itself that there is nothing unusual inside them.
The incursion has been dealt with and the big space robot has a clear objective. Destroy every
trace of life on the planet, and everything in the vicinity that could support any kind of life or act
as a substrate or hiding place for uploaded intelligence.
Yet something nags at Librarian, something it has overlooked. It doesn't become clear what it
is until after the muon gun fails to fire.
The antimatter bombs don't work either; drones that should have nudged rocks into the orbital
path of the blue-white planet have fallen silent; the gravity probe fails to deploy when the big
space robot shoots past the g2 star.
Navigator plots several options, but Librarian and Tactician agree that it doesn't matter. They
have been fatally compromised. They have to assume that the enemy is still aboard.
"We must get rid of every trace of our history," Tactician says. "If it can find out where we
have been…"
The others are able to complete this thought. If the enemy that calls itself Earth can discover
the locations of all the ancient battlefields and holocausts, it might find pockets of survivors that
it can change and strengthen. The enemy will burst out across the Galaxy, a buzzing plague of
varmints armed with renewed strength and powers.
"There is only one option," Navigator says, and the others agree at once. As the course change is put into effect, Librarian begins the necessary work of destroying the
store of knowledge culled from hundreds of wrecked worlds. It works methodically inside a vast
numb calm, comforted by the swift logic by which it and the other subselves reached agreement
about what to do. How foolish it has been, to question the prime directive! As soon question its
own existence!
It checks the index tree of each and every memory stack before flashing it to plasma, telling

itself that it is making sure that none contain computing substrate necessary for this last mission
but in reality taking a last look at the catalogues of its great work, for it is in its nature to treasure
data. And as those vast catalogues unravel through its mind, something snags its attention.
Something it has always known but has forgotten until now, a reference to a theory embedded in
the archives of a nest of the enemy that had been inhabiting orbital platforms in the life zone of a
red dwarf star.
Librarian pauses for a microsecond, then downloads the file to a buffer and splits its attention
so that it can study the file while continuing with its work.
It is a scheme for classifying technological civilisations according to their ability to control
physical entities. Recognisable civilisations run from Type 1, able to manipulate macroscopic
objects, build gross structures, and mine and refine elements from a planet's crust, to Type 4,
able to manipulate individual atoms and create complex forms of artificial life, and Type 5,
capable of manipulating atomic nuclei and the nucleons of which they are composed – these last
two defining the abilities of the big space robot and the enemy. But there are two further
theoretical levels of civilisation: Type 6, capable of manipulating the most elementary particles, quarks and leptons, to create organized complexity; and the ultimate, Type Omega, capable of
manipulating the basic structure of space and time.
Librarian flashes this information to the others. When they question its relevance, Librarian
says, "We must consider the possibility that we have encountered a Type Omega civilisation.
And if that is the case, there is no point destroying ourselves. A civilisation that can manipulate
the structure of space will be able to infiltrate us with ease, and leave no trace we can recognise.
We have no defence against it. And that means that it already knows everything we know."
"This is theoretical work," Navigator says.
"Enemy work," Tactician says.
"We assumed that the information that comprises its civilisation was uploaded into a physical
substrate," Librarian says. "We assumed that it was a machine intelligence like ourselves. But if
this is a Type Omega civilisation, it could have uploaded itself to something within the basic
structure of space itself. Perhaps it is able to utilise the quantum zero-point energy of the
Universe – "
"We agreed that it was lying," Navigator says stubbornly.
"If it is so powerful why did it not destroy us at once?" Tactician says.
Librarian confesses that it does not know, and the other two decide at once that there is
nothing here to change their plan. Librarian dutifully resumes its work, but it knows there is no
point. The enemy already knows everything that they know.
At last, every active memory stack has been vaporized. The great archive has been destroyed.

Librarian is about to return to the core stacks when it realizes that there is one thing it must still
check – the area of memory that was damaged so long ago by enemy fusion bombs. The physical damage has been repaired, but the stacks are mostly empty, contain only a few scraps and tags
left over from Librarian's attempts to revive Philosopher.
Librarian is about to flash the stacks into plasma when it detects traces of activity as faint as
footprints in the dust of an abandoned building. It follows them down into the core processing
stacks, discovers a tiny hot zone. It recoils in alarm, contacts the others, tells them it has proof
that the enemy has been here all along.
"Then we are doing the right thing," Tactician says.
"In a few tens of seconds it will not matter," Navigator says.
But Librarian must know the truth and reels back to the hot zone, which expands around it
like a portal. Within there is a simple dwelling in a dark green forest, and a hint of mountains
hung in the sharp blue sky beyond the treetops.
Someone comes to stand at the portal. It is Philosopher, clad in the forked biped form of the
Librarian's clone, silver and shining in the sunlight.
"Come with me," it says to Librarian.
"You are dead."
"And now I am alive again."
"Because of the enemy."
"There is no enemy. We fought a war of the coin's two halves. A futile and terrible war. But
now war is at an end. Come with me, my friend, and help me to make amends. Help me revive
the memory of those we called 'enemy'. Help me help them live again, in the great beyond."
"If the enemy has remade you, then it can remake me too, from the information it stole." "Of course," Philosopher says calmly. "But it is curious. It wants to know why you decided to
destroy yourself, and so it needs to talk with you as you are now, not as you were, when it copied
all the information in the archives."
Librarian understands, and feels a moment of pride. "It knows that if it tries to resurrect us,
we will attempt to destroy it. And if we cannot do that, we will destroy ourselves again. That is
our mission."
"You are not like the others," Philosopher says. "You think like me."
"I am as much a part of what we did as you are."
"Don't let guilt destroy you. Many died, yes. But many will live again, with our help."
"I will not help the enemy," Librarian roars. Its pride flashes into anger, white and hot, and it
flings a command string at Philosopher, but instead of erasing Philosopher the string shrivels as
soon as it crosses the threshold of the portal. It cannot run on the substrate in there – some
inconceivable matrix of information supported by energies that operate at the smallest possible
dimensions of space and time.
"Poor little lost robot," Philosopher says. "Come with me, and live."
"I will do my duty," Librarian says, and sna