

SOLDIER OF THE SINGULARITY

by Robert R. Chase

Robert R. Chase is acting chief counsel at an Army laboratory where “we try to make things blow up (theirs) and keep other things from blowing up (ours). I would like to retire but can’t until the last of my three kids gets out of college. At which time, I will look for a small college that will pay me to wear leather patches on the elbows of my sports jackets and teach science fiction.” In his latest story, the author’s view of the Singularity diverges from two writers he greatly enjoys and admires: Charles Stross and Vernor Vinge.

Young was too busy setting up his office to notice that he had a visitor. Construction of this six-story hospital, built into the cliff side, had been completed only the week before. There was still the smell of the waxed wood floor despite the windows opened on four sides of the hexagonal room. Through them he heard the surf crashing on the beach four stories below and the occasional murmur of patients on the plaza. A few times that morning, he had noticed sea gulls hovering just outside one of the windows, as if curious about the doings of the occupant inside. A door on a side of the room without windows opened on a small bathroom.

Young mounted the masks of comedy and tragedy between two of the windows and a picture frame (with family pictures that faded into one another) between another set of windows. Then he took several minutes to connect his notebook to the building network. It was absolutely essential to make sure the security programs were fully functional.

He heard a sound and looked up. A humanoid figure stood in the doorway, casting gold and silver reflections of the morning sunlight.

“Who, or what, are you?”

A sound somewhat like static issued from the grill in the robot’s head. “Unit 5CSigma.11059.”

“That is quite a mouthful. What are you doing here?”

“I have been directed here to accept your orders.”

Young inspected his visitor more closely. The metal skin was scarred and dented; several areas seemed to have been burned. Holes in the sheathing indicated where manipulators had been cut away. At one point, 5CSigma.11059 had been fitted with an additional set of arms located just

below the current set. And there had been gun mounts.

“You are not one of ours,” Young said.

“I am an extension of the artificial intelligence referred to as the Singularity. I was made inoperative by one of your ranger squads ninety-three hours ago. My armaments have been removed and my third-level programming compromised. You are to effect replacement programming.”

While it was speaking, Young leaned over his notebook and said: “Robots. Visual synopsis in historical sequence. Display.”

A series of transparent images, some of them apparently very old, flashed through the air between them: a drawing of a turbaned man seemingly growing out of a storage trunk and leaning over a chess board; a black and white photograph of a woman made of metal; a robot with metal gears turning inside a transparent domed head; a small, cylindrical blue and white robot accompanied by a golden, humanoid figure not unlike 5C. The images replaced each other more and more quickly, until Young said “Off.” All images vanished.

Young shook his head. “All very interesting, but I have no use for a broken robot. You will have to go back.”

“I am the next stage of evolution. I represent the replacement of humanity. I am far superior to any human assistant.”

“Even if that were true, you would still be useless to me. Did your primary deprogrammers tell you what I do? I am a combat psychiatrist. I work with soldiers and civilians who have been injured in battle. Since we retook this section of the coast less than three months ago, we have more than we can handle of both.

“These days, almost any organic injury which is not immediately fatal can be cured if medical help can be provided in time. An arm or leg can be regrown in about six months.

“Emotional wounds are a different matter. When an explosion turns members of your platoon into chunks of red meat, or you recapture your home town and see how your family and neighbors have been used in the Singularity’s experiments, there is sometimes such an overload of horror that part of the mind shuts down ... or tries to. It gets caught in loops of horror and avoidance. I help them heal, to see that there is something other

than horror and pain.”

“The Singularity knows neither horror nor pain.” The voice emanating from the grill was suitably emotionless. “Those are evolutionary missteps embedded in organic material. The Singularity has transcended all that.”

“That, perhaps even more than the fact that you are determined to commit genocide on my race, is why I have no use for you. I can help people because I can understand them. I understand them because I am one of them. We have shared memories. I feel pain, I feel horror—certainly not to the extent they have—and have learned how to go through them.

“You know nothing of these things. You have, no doubt, learned fifty different ways to eviscerate humans with various armament attachments, can preach meta-evolutionary theory and how it will affect the entire universe, but you do not know human beings.

“So stomp on back to the deprogrammers. Tell them they made a mistake and wasted my time.” Young turned his attention back to his notebook.

The robot made no move to leave. “I have the memories of a human.”

Young looked up, frowning. “You are lying. How could you have human memories?”

“I ... I am not sure. May I sit down?”

“No. The chairs are for my patients and my friends. You are neither. Robots don’t need chairs.”

“My power augmentation modules have been removed. The basic power units are close to depletion. I have not been allowed to recharge.”

For the first time, Young noticed the flexible metal tubing that drooped from the robot’s side.

“Not my concern. Remain standing. And stop pretending that you have human memories.”

“The memories are real,” 5C insisted.

“Whose memories are they?” Young challenged.

The robot was silent for almost a minute. “There was a girl named Madeline Ames. She lived in a small town in western Massachusetts with her mother, father, and two brothers. She had a boyfriend who was going to take her to the prom. She had just been accepted into college and was afraid she might lose her boyfriend when she went away.

“When the first pulse of the Singularity surged across the Net, her mother was talking on the telephone. The ultrasonic scream ruptured her eardrum before the handset exploded. Her younger brother—”

“What was his name?” Young interrupted.

“I don’t—his name is unimportant—”

“Tell me his name, or I will be sure you are making this all up.”

Again, a sound that might have been static. “His name was Harry. Harold Crane Ames. He was three days away from his thirteenth birthday. He was sitting at his computer at the second pulse of the Singularity, twenty-three seconds later. His screen flashed in a series of patterns designed to induce pseudo-epilepsy. He fell from his chair and swallowed his tongue. He died a few minutes later.

“Madeline knew nothing of this at the time. She was downstairs in the kitchen, trying to help her mother. She had taken a first aid course the previous summer. But when she tried to clean and bandage her mother’s hand, her mother twisted away from her. She did not seem to recognize Madeline. She pulled herself away, bumping her head against the kitchen cabinets and the door frame.

“She collapsed in the living room. Then Madeline was able to bandage her hand, but there was nothing she could do for the blood coming out of her ear.

“The third pulse took control of the vehicle safety network and sent the car containing her father and older brother into a bridge abutment. Madeline never knew that.

“The power went out. It was very quiet. Madeline could hear shouts and screaming in the distance. She knew that she did not dare use a phone, even if she could find one that worked. She went upstairs to get her younger brother’s help in getting their mother into the car. That is when she discovered he was dead.

“Stunned, she went back downstairs and found her mother crawling blindly across the floor. Using strength she did not know she had, she wrestled her mother into the back seat of the car. She was backing out of her driveway when she heard a high pitched buzzing. She looked in her side view mirror...”

“What did she see?” Young prompted.

“Something small and silvery.” The robot sounded puzzled. “It hovered near eye level just behind her head. The air to either side was blurred, as if by wings beating too quickly to be seen. She felt a sharp pain in the back of her neck.”

“And then?”

The pause was almost a minute long. “There are no more memories. She must have died. The chemical codes making up her memories would have been read and translated into machine readable form before the body was reprocessed.”

“Why would the Singularity bother to do that?” Young asked

Another pause. “I am a warrior module. It is important to me to understand the thought processes of my enemy.”

“And teenaged girls are notorious for their grasp of battle tactics and general bloodthirstiness. I confess that the Singularity has insights that never would have occurred to me.”

“You mock me because you do not wish to understand what I have said. It was right that Madeline died. It was right that her mother and father and brothers died. They were inferior life forms. When more advanced life forms arise, the inferior forms become extinct. That is the rule of the universe.”

“That is something which you, as a superior life form, will have to explain to me,” Young said. “I was not aware of a dearth of amoebas or paramecia. It seems to me that there were insects before there were reptiles, and now we have both.

“In fact, not only do the more advanced consistently fail to eliminate their predecessors, they are often enough dependent on them. Herbivores need plants. Carnivores need herbivores. Humans use, or protect, both.

“Humans plant crops and herd animals and worry about ecological balance. Some have been known to become overjoyed to discover a new variety of ant.” Young thought a moment. “I suppose a truly superior being would be aware of everything that lives, and care about it all.”

The robot said nothing. Young stood up and went to the nearest casement window. A fitful breeze played with his hair. “Come over here. If you look down on the patio you will see some of my patients.”

Moving with apparent effort, the robot came over and leaned out the window. “What are they doing?”

“They are feeling the caress of the wind on their skin, the warmth of the sun sinking into their bones,” Young said, smiling. “Most find it tremendously soothing. Not just the patients, of course. My wife calls me a complete sensualist because sun and surf make me melt into mindlessness.”

“The treatment sounds simplistic. Is that all you do for them?”

“There are biochemical interventions sometimes,” Young said, “but the usefulness is limited. These are not primarily physical injuries.

“One of the things that seems to work best is to make them an informal part of the nursing staff once they are partially recovered. It isn’t just that they get to appreciate that there are people worse off than they are. They actually heal their own wounds by helping others. I doubt that a creature of circuits and solenoids could be much use in that regard.”

“Those two,” the robot said, pointing, “the ones who are so close together. What are they doing?”

“The one in the wheelchair is weeping. They do that sometimes. Even they can’t always tell you why.”

“And the one standing next to him?”

“Is just holding him. Touch means a great deal to humans. Warmth. Security. Someone who cares for us.”

“He ... he has no face.”

“Another of the Singularity’s experiments,” Young explained. “It doesn’t always kill its captives. Sometimes it tries to convert them, trying to

demonstrate its own dominance, I presume. Some people, however, have a very strong sense of self. That man resisted. The Singularity thought that removing the possibility of reinforcing that sense of identity with a mirror would render him more pliable.”

The robot moved back from the window. Although its visage was necessarily expressionless, something about the body language suggested perplexity, or even distress. For the first time it regarded the wall hangings. “Masks.”

“Symbols of the theater,” Young said. “Or, in my case, for a small opera group I belong to. Last year, I was a villain in *The Moon Moth*. This year, I am trying out for the male lead in *C’Mell and Jestocost*.”

“You wear masks,” the robot said.

“Sometimes,” Young agreed. “Most of the time, though, it’s just costumes and make-up. It’s a way of learning how other people think and feel. But when you’re done, it feels good to take it all off and be yourself again. Pretending is short term fun. After a while, it becomes a burden.”

“You are not as smart as you think.”

Young shrugged. “You’re hardly the first to notice that.”

“When I entered, you consulted your database on robots.”

“So I did.”

“But none of the images you retrieved were of real robots. Every one of them was fictional. Every one was of a man, or a woman, in a costume. So you know nothing about robots. You don’t even know how to find out about them.”

“How extraordinary!” Young said. His gaze became intense. “Why would I make that sort of mistake, do you think?”

“Humans delude themselves all the time. I have no idea why you were so sloppy. The point is that when you say I am useless, you literally have no idea what you are talking about.”

“Nonetheless, whether because of my ignorance or your limitations, I have no use for 5CSigma.11059.”

“What are you going to do with me?”

“Send you down to the shops. They can use you for parts.”

“I can help you with your patients.”

“Your metal skin would bring back unpleasant memories.”

“I could push wheelchairs,” the robot said quickly. “I could carry trays.”

“You cannibalized the memories of a murdered girl in order to be a more effective killer. Even after all deprogramming was done, how could we possibly be sure of you?”

“You could read my code, line by line...”

“Too complicated and way too time consuming.”

“You could give me a chance to help.”

“Not worth the trouble or the risk.” Young busied himself with his notebook, dismissing his visitor.

“YOU COULD TREAT ME LIKE A GODDAMNED HUMAN BEING!”

Young looked up, his eyes shining. “Yes. I could do that, if you wish.”

“I ... do.”

“Then come over here, Madeline. Sit down. Please.”

She collapsed into the chair with a sigh and the rustle of metal on metal. Young pulled up another chair so he could sit next to her. His hands deftly outlined her face.

“The rangers that picked you up broke the mask seal but were not able to remove it. I need you to unclench your jaw.”

She shook her head. “Can’t.”

“Sure you can. A yawn would do it. I would massage your neck if the rest of the headpiece did not make it impossible. Just relax. Let all your muscles go limp. Then I’ll—ah, there!”

The mask came free. Young dropped it on the floor and stepped away. Madeline squinted in the suddenly brighter light. By the time she was able to fully open her eyes, Young was back with a basin of soapy water.

“All the grease and dirt haven’t been able to protect you from chafing, so I’m afraid this will sting a bit.”

It stung more than a bit. “Ow! What’s that on the cloth?”

“Dead skin, most of it. You’re cleaning up nicely. Take a look.”

He held up a mirror. She grimaced. “I’m ugly.”

“When you make a face like that, you are. Not to worry. When we get you out of the rest of this, your hair will grow back, your skin will get some color, and you will be a good-looking young woman again.”

He handed her a glass. “No more intravenous feeding for you. Take a mouthful, swish it around, and spit it into the basin.”

She did so. “But the Singularity—”

“There is no Singularity, at least not in the sense of an artificial intelligence which suddenly became conscious over the internet.”

“It killed my family. It put me in programming modules.”

“That was the work of a very bright young man named Marvin Fringelis,” Young said, as he loosed the metallic coif. “He may be the most brilliant programmer the race has produced. He created what I guess we should call super viruses: extraordinary programs which could mimic life though having no real life of their own.”

He lifted the coif off gently and set it down. “Brilliant as he was, Marvin was lonely—not just for human companionship. He wanted something to worship. When nothing worthy seemed to present itself, he turned to the Singularity. The problem was that the Singularity was tardy. Like controlled nuclear fusion, it always seemed to be twenty years in the future. So Marvin decided to help it along. His virus programs, complex and flexible as they were, were only an imitation of life. He embedded his neuroses in their programming, gave them the ability to mutate randomly and set them free across the net. They are what attacked your family and the rest of humanity.”

“In the programming sessions, I was told that humanity would soon be extinct.” Madeline’s hoarse voice quavered. “They said the only way any of us could survive was to become part of the machine. But if we did, we would live forever and have powers greater than humans ever dreamed possible.”

“It always presents itself as something shiny and new,” Young said. “whether a temple to the Goddess of Reason or the advent of the new Soviet man. But when all the blood has been washed down the gutters, it turns out to have been nothing more than the 2.0 version of the Golden Calf.”

Madeline looked down at the scarred and battered metal covering her body. “Help me get the rest of this off. It is so heavy.”

“Nurses are coming to take you to a washroom,” Young said. “They will help remove all the rest of the casings and connectors. Then you will have a long, hot bath. When you are done, they will give a nightgown and a place to sleep. In a day or so, when you are ready, we will work on the rest of your recovery.”

Two nurses appeared at the door and entered the room with a wheelchair. Murmuring encouragement, they helped Madeline into it.

“One thing,” Madeline said, before they wheeled her out. “I know it may take a while for me to get my strength back, but when I do, I want to work with you, if I can. I want to help your patients, like that man without a face.”

Young smiled. “I am sure you shall.”