

GIDEON LICHFIELD

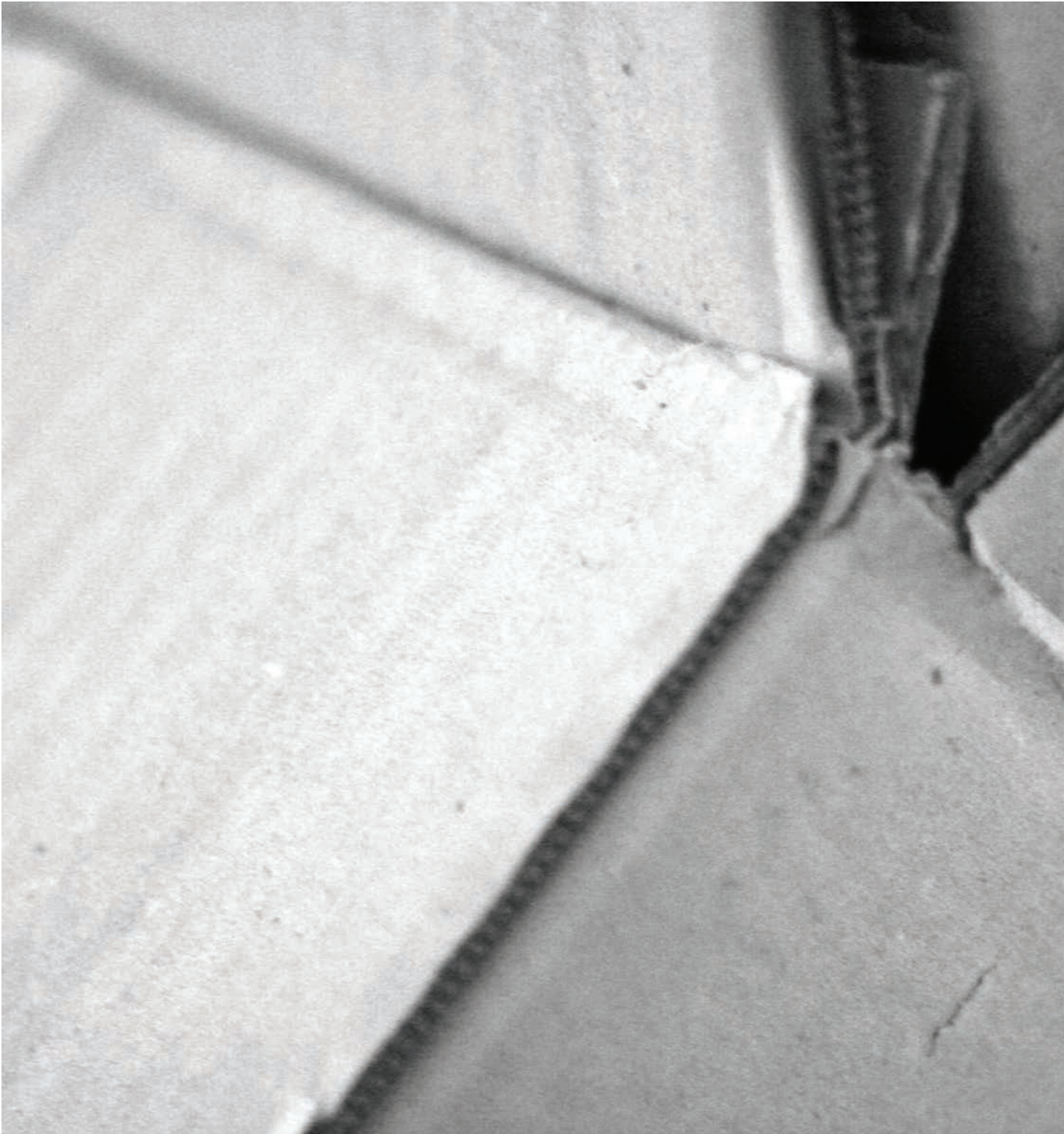
# OVERRIDE



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Joe stretched his arms out sideways, then up above his head, feeling his shoulders crack. “Miri, please tell Stefan I need an override.”

“OK, I’ll tell him.” The soft ping of an outgoing message.

He let his breath out in a rush, noticing only now that he’d been hunched and tense for the last few minutes. The muscle spasm was there again. His glasses had superimposed a green rectangle on the circuit board in front of him, framing the largest of the chips. It pulsed, softly, insolently. He sat staring at it for a moment, trying to will the the involuntary twitch in his shoulder to match up with the pulsing.

“What’s up, Joe?” Stefan in his headset, sounding harried.

“Hey, Stefan.” Joe found himself smiling. He hadn’t heard any voice but Miri’s in nearly a week. “Good to hear you.”

The briefest of pauses. “Yeah, you too. Whaddya got?”

“Looks like a signal processor burned out on one of the sweepers. I want to take a look inside, see if there’s any gunk in there that’s shorting it out, but the Ops won’t let me remove the board. Just says I need to replace the chip.”

Stefan grunted and began mumbling to himself. Joe strained to hear, catching words and half-words. “... ’s see... permissions... Menendez...” . Then another grunt, this one somewhere between annoyance and surprise. “You only got, like what, four-forty points?”

Joe shrugged, even though they weren’t using video. “Guess there hasn’t been that much to do around here.”

More mumbling. “Okay, you got an override.” The green rectangle disappeared. “Take it off. Don’t forget to put it back.”

“As you say, boss.” Joe felt a smile tickle at his mouth again.

“Yeah, yeah.” A hint of resigned amusement this time. Stefan chimed out.

Joe leaned back a little and examined the circuit board that constituted the sweeper's primitive brain. Three screws held it in place. He lifted his right hand and pointed at one of them, then twisted his hand to the left. A manipulator arm came up in front of him and undid the screw with a whine. He lifted his left hand and pinched his thumb and fingers together; a clamp appeared and gripped the edges of the circuit panel. He continued miming, and the machine undid the other two screws and pulled the panel off.

Behind it was the sweeper's guts—a small cavity filled with tight-packed loops of wire. He moved his head from side to side, sweeping it with the headlights. If there was something foreign in there, he couldn't tell. He leaned forward to look closer and heard a clang through his headphones as the repair drone's nose bumped into the sweeper robot. There was no way he could get a proper look remotely.

He sat for a moment with his hands in his lap and imagined the drone mimicking him.

“Miri, please tell Stefan I need to go out to the workshop.”

“OK, I'll tell him.”

He leaned his bad shoulder against the massage bulb in his chair and it began to buzz; he rubbed into it like a cat, luxuriating. Without warning, Stefan's face popped up in his glasses, blanking out the feed from the repair drone. The supervisor's bulbous nose and balding head, foreshortened by the camera, made him look like an obstinate toad.

“Why you wanna go out to the workshop?”

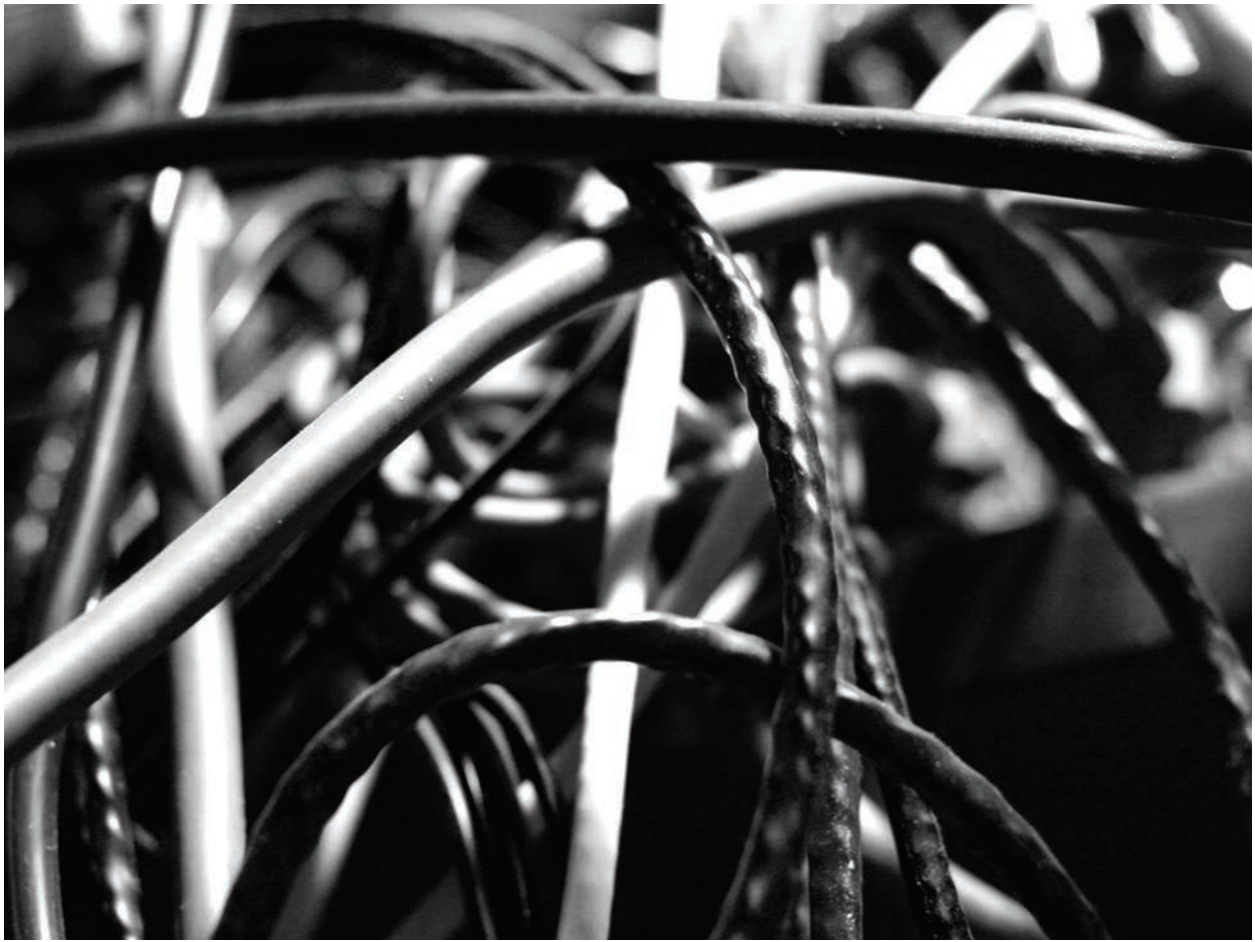
“I can't see into the sweeper through the drone. Need a proper visual.”

Stefan sighed and leaned back. “Forget it. No way I'm giving you an override for a physical inspection as well. Just change the chip like the Ops says.”

“And if the Ops is wrong?”

“Then it'll burn out again and we'll know we got a problem. Right





now we don't know, right? We don't know, we don't do. I can't send a guy with less than 600 points out on his first floor visit without I gotta good reason."

Joe waited. Stefan blinked at him, looking even more toad-like.

"OK, boss, you're the boss." Stefan snickered and raised his hand in what looked like the beginning of a wave, then flicked his fingers. The window blinked out, and Joe was left staring again at the cavity full of wires. He breathed in as deep as he could, trying to make his vertebrae crack. Then he exhaled and reached up with his left hand to put the panel back in place.

““ Wait, don't they let you carry points over from your last gig?” Dev asked.

Joe sloshed his glass from side to side, trying to make the liquid reach the top without splashing out. “Nah. Every place has different systems. You start from zero each time.”

“Why?” In Dev's gentle, curious voice the query seemed to have an almost philosophical nature.

“It's an insurance thing. If something goes wrong they can say, ‘hey, this guy had, like, 1,500 points on our system, but he still screwed up, so it's his responsibility.”

Dev frowned, twiddling a stirrer. “But I

thought you had, what, a 4.8 average?”

“Those aren’t points. That’s my rating. Each time I finish a gig I get a rating. A high points score helps me get a good rating. That’s what gets me the next gig. Without those ratings I’d be working, I don’t know, some shitty deep-cleaning job, the really nasty ones the machines can’t handle. Or lugging supplies in the back of a place like this.”

Joe looked around the bar. The booths were all full, but the noise cancellers reduced even raucous laughter to a soft chuckle. It made him feel as if he and Dev were sitting in a room with invisible walls, looking out at a world that couldn’t see them back. Most of the people looked to be like him and Dev—young, probably in servicing or some other semi-professional job, paid well enough to spend it on cocktails in a place like this. Behind the bar itself, the proprietor lounged in front of rows of multi-hued bottles, her tight platinum curls catching the pink and blue of the lights. She was laughing at something one of her regulars had said as she leaned across and thumbed an order into the drink-maker. The laugh was a barely audible tinkle. Joe had a momentary vision of what was on the other side of that wall of softly lit bottles; a cold, aseptic storage room, under a fluorescent glare.

He shivered, and quashed the image with talk. “How does the scoring work with you guys?”

Dev shrugged. “We just accumulate points. I guess it’s because all the medical clinics are basically the same now. You can move from Texas to DC and it’s the same Ops, same interface, same algorithms, just different parameters.” He swallowed the rest of his drink. “I met a guy once who’d been a manager on the data integration. He said it was a horrendous project, getting fifty states and all those different HMOs to agree on protocols. There were people who had work for years, just supervising record-transfer. But once everyone realized how many jobs it would cut out...” He looked down at his empty glass.

Joe waited for more, but Dev didn’t volunteer it. “So, um, do you even talk to anyone?”

“Not really. I hardly even talk to the Ops. It just flags anything it

thinks is an anomaly and I pass it on. If a patient's prescription has been refilled too many times I message the pharmacy. If someone hasn't been tested for something their health profile says they should be, I message the physician. If a doctor's prescribing way above the norm I message the FDA. If there's funny business in the insurance claims or supply requisitions I message the HMO. Once every couple of weeks somebody calls me back to check something. Basically I'm just the Ops's secretary."

"Sounds pretty boring. Can you root around in the data yourself?"

Dev laughed, throwing his head back, and the sound got swallowed up until he looked back at Joe again. "Root around, yeah. Do you know how many regulations there are on medical data? This stuff is completely locked down. Even when it flags things to me everything is anonymized. Only the Ops and the top admins have access to the raw data."

"But you might spot something Ops missed. It's just an AI."

Dev shrugged again. "Ops runs the show. Unless an admin overrides it. Same as with yours, right?"

"Yeah, I know. It's just... you know. Every time it tells me I can't do something I know needs doing, it drives me nuts. Makes me want to quit."

"Can you get a staff job? Become a supervisor?"

"Once they've got you down as a contractor it's really hard to break in to the staff jobs. And I don't think my supervisor exactly loves his work either."

"So you quit, and do what? How many of the guys you graduated with have steady work now? Even this place..." Dev gestured with his glass. "Ten years ago it would have had bar staff. Now there's just a guy like you and me who comes in when a machine needs fixing. We're the lucky ones."

Joe tilted his drink, watching sprites of refracted light dance through the last half-inch of reddish-brown liquid. The glass was already coaxing him, offering him a 10% discount on a refill. He rotated it to bring more of the menu into view, and pondered it.



“Has anything ever gone wrong at one of your gigs?”

“Like what?”

“Like...” He groped for a scenario. “Like, say, the Ops tells you a patient’s had too many refills, and you tell the pharmacy, and they stop refilling, but it turns out the patient really needed the refill and can’t get to the doctor for a new prescription for some reason, and... they die, or whatever.”

Dev’s brow furrowed. “I don’t think I’d even know about it if that happened.”

Joe looked backed at his glass. Sure, a refill. At least he had the luxury of being able to self-medicate. He tapped the glass twice gently on the tabletop, confirmed with another double-tap. The “10% off” swelled and then winked out in a congratulatory flourish. He looked up and caught the eye of the proprietor. She gave him a tiny nod and a smile that was part obsequious, part conspiratorial. His wristband would be a little pink tomorrow morning. What the hell.

““ What’s new, Miri?”

“Since you asked me ten minutes ago, the average air temperature in the warehouse has risen by 0.1 degrees.”

“Are you being sassy? I like it when you’re sassy.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“Does this sweater make me look fat?”

“If I could see you, I am sure you would look normal for a body-mass index of 28.5.”

“I think you’re being sarcastic.”

“You think what you want to think.”

“How do you know my body-mass index, anyway?”

“Your personal data are in your file.”

He thought for a second. “Do you have my entire medical history?”

“I’m not sure I understand you. Please rephrase the question.”

“What is in my file?”

“Your file contains biographical data, employment history, medical history, credit history, tax history, social relationships, and Key Performance Indicators.” The agent’s voice seemed to capitalize the last three words.

“Does my medical history affect my KPIs?”

“I’m not sure I understand you. Please rephrase the question.”

“How are my KPIs calculated?”

“That is a question for your supervisor. Would you like me to contact Stefan for you?”

“No, thanks.” He thought for a moment. “Show me my KPIs.”

“Those are only available to your supervisor.”

He swore out loud. Miri didn’t respond.

“Do you record all our conversations?”

“Yes.”

“Does the Ops analyze our conversations?”

“Any questions about the Ops should be directed to your supervisor. Would you like me to contact Stefan for you?”

“No, thank you, Miri.”

“You’re welcome, Joe.”

**H**e negotiated a shift swap so he could go to a chiropractor. He'd have preferred a workplace injury specialist, but his insurance wouldn't cover that until he'd reached 1,000 points. There were only a handful of other technicians; he had to wait longer to find someone to swap shifts with than to get an appointment.

There was nobody else in the waiting room. The room itself was pristine except for a shelf holding a few old airport novels, falling apart at the spines. The receptionist told him there'd be a ten-minute wait and asked him how much water he'd drunk that day.

"Maybe a glass."

"You should really be drinking eight glasses a day. Staying fully hydrated can also improve recovery times for injuries. You may wish to use the water fountain in the waiting area. If it is out of order please dial the number below this desk for building services." The words scrolled across a screen as it spoke them.

He returned with a cup of water and stared at the novels. He asked the receptionist for directions to the bathroom, and received them. He asked it how many more sessions his insurance would cover that year, and it told him seven. He asked it to list his medical history and it told him it couldn't do that. He asked it to prescribe some painkillers and it told him it couldn't do that. He asked if it knew Dev and it said there was no practitioner of that name here, and then it told him the chiropractor was ready to see him.

The chiropractor was a plump, fast-talking man, who asked him what he did for a living.

"I work in servicing."

"Yeah, I figured. I get a lot of folks like you. Just sitting around all day looking after machines. Still, it's work, right? I'm servicing you, you're servicing them, they're servicing me." He flicked his head in the direction of the receptionist on the other side of his office door, and chuckled at his own joke. Then he proceeded to rattle off a story about a shyster technician who had rigged up a home energy system for him that kept shutting off the heating in winter and then refused to accept orders; the only way to get it

working again was to reboot the system. It felt to Joe as if the story, like the back manipulation, was a well-rehearsed procedure, one performed again and again with minor variations for each patient. As he left, he realized he had said only two more phrases the whole time he had been in the room: “The right shoulder,” and “About two weeks.”

““ What’s up, Miri?”

“Joe, there seems to be a blockage in section B-C17.”

“Show me that section.”

The lights in the warehouse flickered on just as the camera feed came up. A picker was standing by one of the shelves. Its manipulator arms were repeatedly reaching into the shelf and then back out again, as if grasping at a ghost. A tumble of small boxes lay on the floor, with sprinklings of what looked like dirt around them. Another couple of pickers stood a few yards off, facing the one that had dropped its tray. As Joe watched, they both jolted into life and reversed back down to the next intersection, turning and disappearing in opposite directions.

“Deactivate picker number 4413,” he said, reading the number off its side. Less than a second later the machine stopped its compulsive grabbing.

“Zoom in this view,” he said, though he already knew what the answer would be.

“This view is at maximum zoom,” Miri replied.

“OK, send a drone to that location.”

“You currently have 531 points. Drone activation requires 600 points. Would you like me to ask Stefan to authorize a drone activation for you?”

Joe paused. Even through the security camera he could tell that this wasn’t something he’d be able to fix using a drone. There’d be stuff to clean up, and possibly things that had lodged under the picker’s



wheels. And he needed to find out what it was in such a controlled and regulated place that could make a picker go haywire.

“No. Please show the feed from section B-C17 to Stefan. Tell Stefan I need to go into the warehouse.”

**T**he cold hit Joe as he stepped out on to the warehouse floor, and he reached inside the bulky coveralls to hitch the zipper on his fleece up as far as it would go. With only machines working here, there was no need to spend money on heating. Nor on lighting; they navigated using radar, infra-red motion sensors, and RFID tags. The nearest line of shelves loomed over him; the ones further off to the left and right gradually disappeared into the gloom, making the warehouse seem infinite. The only lights, apart from on the door he’d just stepped through, were the ones that marked a route into the grid of shelving, a series of bright pools receding into the distance ahead of him.

He started walking. His boots sounded muffled echoes on the polished concrete floor. The low-slung tool pallet trundling behind him kept a five-foot distance, emitting quiet warning beeps. From all around him came the sounds of the pickers, some loud and close, some faint and distant—the rising and falling whines as they sped up and slowed down, and the occasional thunk or clunk when one of them picked up or deposited something big. It was like walking through a crowded bar with your own personal noise-canceller, hearing glass-clinks and footsteps and the beginnings and ends of dozens of muffled conversations. He closed his eyes and kept walking, trying to keep on as straight a path as possible, just listening to the sounds. The lighting, he knew, was just for his own benefit; they would avoid him if he came too close. After a few paces he opened his eyes again and almost jumped as a picker crossed his path two rows ahead, flitting across the lit corridor like a commuter hurrying home.

At row 17, the trail of lights came to an end and another one stretched off to the left. At the end of it he could see the stuck picker, motionless. He turned and walked towards it. It was about the size and shape of a small forklift, with a pair of manipulator arms that could grab an object and store it in its maw in little more than a



second. A picker taking a bunch of things off a shelf looked like an insect feeding.

He reached it and surveyed the scene. The boxes on the floor around the machine seemed to all contain small bathroom gadgets—flossers, contact-lens cleaners, soap dispensers—and were sprinkled with the dirt he had seen on the camera. He looked at the manipulator arms, frozen in mid-reach towards the shelf. The rubber-coated gripper at the end of one of them was ripped and sagging; he touched it with his finger and more dirt dribbled out, a stream of fine, dark grains. He brought his face close to it and caught a familiar, slightly stale smell. He turned to the shelf where the picker had been scrabbling and shone his headlamp into the space. Halfway to the back, a long

screw with a jagged-looking end protruded from one of the vertical brackets.

He heard a chime and then Stefan's voice in his ears. "Whaddya got?"

"Can you see my feed?"

A pause, then "OK, yeah."

"See that screw? It's much longer than the others. Looks like whatever assembled these shelves had this in its component tray and couldn't tell the difference. I reckon the tip of it snagged on the picker's gripper and ripped it. All the coffee fell out."

"The coffee?"

"Yeah. You don't know how these grippers

are made?” That was typical of staff supervisors, Joe reflected; Stefan probably knew electronics and systems but had no idea about mech. “It’s kinda like a rubber balloon, filled with ground coffee. When you pump the air out the grains all clump together and it goes rigid. Like when coffee’s vacuum-packed. When you let air in they go loose. You push it against something, pump the air out, it grips it. Pump the air back in, it lets the thing go.”

“But why *coffee*?”

“I think they made the original prototype with coffee. Then someone spent a ton of money trying to find a synthetic and eventually worked out that coffee was cheaper.”

“OK.” Stefan sighed, and it sounded like he was rubbing his forehead. “So why’d the thing throw all that stuff on the floor?”

“It can’t tell its hand is ripped. It just knows it didn’t get the thing it was supposed to pick up, so it keeps reaching in, and it ended up dragging everything out.” Joe waited a moment, but Stefan didn’t answer. “Are you there?”

“Yeah, sorry. Hold on, I got a call.”

Joe studied the picker while he waited. Its main body was basically just another stack of shelves, about as tall as he was. Each shelf slid out on motorized rollers so the arms could put things on them or take them off. The most sophisticated part of it, the minor technological triumph that had made this kind of automation possible, was the vision system that allowed it to distinguish any three-dimensional object from its

surroundings and work out how to grip it; four small cameras ranged across the front of the machine served as its eyes, and there were a couple more on the ends of the arms themselves. Yet despite that, it was incapable of seeing that it was crippled.

Stefan’s voice returned. “OK, I gotta go deal with some stuff. Can you get this cleaned up and send the picker back?”

“Yeah, boss.”

“Do you know how to fix the coffee balloon thing?”

“Yup.”

“OK, I’ll put in another override so you can get into the workshop.”

“Gee, thanks, boss.” He could almost hear Stefan rolling his eyes. “And what about the screw?”

“What screw?”

“The screw in the shelf. You want me to fix that too, right?”

“Yeah, do whatever you need to do.”

**J**oe opened up the tool pallet. Getting a hacksaw into the confined space of the shelf was a hassle, but with some twisting and effort he sawed off the end of the offending screw. Then he picked up the boxes of goods and stacked them in the disabled picker; he could have put them back on the shelf, but the rules were that only pickers could stack the shelves. He would have to take the stuff back

to the loading area for a machine to bring it right back here.

Then he got out the little vacuum cleaner and sucked up most of the coffee grains. Some had fallen on to the lower shelves, so took boxes off those too. A sweeper would soon come by and clean anything he'd missed on the floor. He crouched down and aimed his headlamp under the picker's wheels. All clear. He stood up and took a few paces back from the picker.

“Miri, please clear the cache on picker number 4413. Reactivate picker number 4413. Send picker number 4413 to the loading area.” A few seconds passed; then the machine jolted as its arms retracted and swung down flat against its chassis. It turned to face him, then almost without hesitation spun around and headed off the other way.

He turned to follow the trail of lights back. At the first intersection he looked to his right. It didn't matter if he stuck to the lit route or not, and he liked the feeling of being enfolded in the dark with the noises of the machinery around him. He turned right and started walking into the gloom. As he passed each row, he saw his original path off to the left, flickering past him in the distance like highway lights at night.

He almost bumped into the pickers. They were just barely visible in the spillover of the light from a few rows down. There were two of them, standing abreast, almost filling the corridor, their arms down by their sides. He tried waving at them and stepping back and forth, but they didn't budge. Something was probably wrong with the motion sensors—if they couldn't navigate, they'd stop and wait to be rescued. But it was weird that two of them would fail at the same time in the same spot. He turned on his headlamp and examined them and the shelves around them. Nothing seemed out of place.

He shrugged and started off down the row to the left, towards the light trail. Two silhouettes swung in and blocked out the lights in front of him—another two pickers. These two were moving towards him, and like the first two they were side-by-side, preventing him from walking around them.

Joe felt his chest tighten. He turned around to go back the way he



had just come. The ghostly shapes of two more pickers—the ones he had first encountered? He couldn't tell—were approaching from that direction too, trapping him within the section. Backing away from them in the near-darkness, he almost tripped over the tool pallet that had been following him, lurched and fell against one of the shelves. A handful of boxes bounced off him as they tumbled to the floor, something metallic clattering inside, and he grabbed the shelf for support. The whine of a picker passing through an adjacent row was suddenly very loud and close. As it faded, he noticed his own gasping breath.

The machines that had hemmed him in had stopped moving. He forced himself to calm down and switched on the headlamp. Boxes of kitchenware were scattered on the floor around the tool pallet. The two pairs of pickers stood motionless, about 20 feet apart with him in the middle, their arms by their sides like an inscrutable honor guard. He stared at them; despite their utterly machine-like appearance, he could almost feel his mind scrabbling to detect faces in their weird, insectile combinations of camera-eyes, anything it could latch on to so he could try to guess their intentions. But these were dumb machines. They couldn't have intentions.

He tried to speak and a croak came out; his throat was bone-dry. He remembered the receptionist at the chiropractor's office, telling him to drink more. He swallowed and tried again.

"Miri?"

"Hello, Joe."

"Miri, I'm, uh... trapped."

"You might want to call a psychotherapist. I'm just a bot."

"Miri, I'm not... Stop being sarcastic."

"I'm not sure I understand you. Please rephrase your request."

"Tell Stefan I'm..." He stopped himself. Whatever was going on, if they made it out to be his fault, it could wreck his contractor rating. The jump in pay scale from 4.8 to 4.9 was considerable, and he was only a couple of good scores away from making it. He was lucky that Stefan was tied up and had let him continue unsupervised;

better try to find his own way out of it before he checked in on him again.

“Cancel. Turn on the lights in section, uh, C-D...” He paused. He knew he’d turned right into corridor C, but he didn’t know how many rows he’d walked before turning left again. He swept his headlamp across the shelves, but there were no labels on them. Human-readable location tags weren’t needed very often around here. “What section is this?”

“Please rephrase your question.”

“Where am I, Miri?”

“Your beacon shows you as being in section C-D11.”

“Miri, please illuminate section C-D11.”

The sudden brightness hurt his eyes. He switched off the headlamp.

“Miri, show me section C-D11”.

In his glasses now he could see himself, half-obscured by the pickers, standing blinking in between the shelves, the fluorescent stripes on his coveralls a blinding white in the camera feed. He turned this way and that, watching himself move. The delay was virtually imperceptible.

He turned off the feed and inspected the pickers. He could try to climb over the top of them, but even if he could do that without tipping one of the things over, his boots would inflict enough damage to land him in trouble. He leaned against the front of one, testing its give, then braced his feet against the floor and tried to push it back. It was heavy, and its wheels and his boots seemed to have roughly equal purchase on the polished concrete. He managed to shift it a few inches. Panting with the effort, he straightened up and stepped back. It immediately shimmed back into position, aligned with its partner.

He turned his attention to the storage shelves. They were about seven feet high, made of sturdy metal, and bolted into the floor. He could climb up and over, then drop into an adjacent row. The tool pallet would be left behind, but once it lost his proximity signal

it would make its own way back to the workshop—assuming he could get those pickers out of the way. He tested his weight on the bottom shelf, then started to clamber up. His feet knocked a couple more boxes of goods on to the floor; well, they would just add to the pile there already. At the top he had to scabble for a handhold, but eventually hauled himself on to the roof of the shelving unit and lay there regaining his breath.

He raised himself to a crouch—standing felt too precarious—and looked around. His headlamp swept across the warehouse, illuminating rows of shelves, and here and there the top of a picker passing between them. His breath plumed off in the cold, a curling haze in the headlamp beam. Some way off, a large L of light marked the route he was supposed to have taken. He reached down and probed with his hand until he found the nearest vertical pillar in the shelving on the other side, and gripped it as he clambered down, trying not to disturb any more goods.

Even before he got to the floor, he heard the whines from the row he'd just abandoned. The pickers were accelerating away. He started to run towards the lights, crossing the next intersection just before the pickers did. He made it almost to the intersection after that before two more appeared in front of him, and then two more behind, boxing him in once more.

He slid to the floor and sat for a few moments, catching his breath, but stood up again as the cold of the floor bit into his backside. He examined the pickers in front of him and found their identifier labels.

“Miri, deactivate pickers 4109 and 3779.”

“A security override is active for picker 4109 and picker 3779. The command ‘deactivate’ is not valid at this time.”

“Why is there a security override?”

“I’m not sure I understand you. Please rephrase the question.”

Something was dawning on him. “Miri, has there been an intruder alert?”

“Notification of intruder alerts requires 800 points. Would you like

me to ask Stefan to authorize notifications for you?”

“No. Where am I, Miri?”

“Your beacon shows you as being in section D-E11.”

“Miri, what else is in section D-E11?”

“There is an unidentified living body, picker number 4109, picker number...”

“Stop. Illuminate and show me section D-E11.”

He could see the view of himself and the pickers in his glasses again.

“Now show me the unidentified living body.”

A red outline appeared in his glasses. It was around his own figure.

“Do you know what you did?” Stefan’s voice was low, slow and deliberate, like he was struggling to stop himself yelling.

“I can guess.”

As soon as Stefan had overridden the intruder alerts, the pickers had departed, reversing and turning one-by-one and speeding off. Joe had walked back to the office and was still trying to warm up when Stefan walked in. He was shorter and pudgier than Joe, but he moved constantly, a fizzle of nervous energy.

Evidently, the Ops interpreted a warm body in the warehouse as an intruder unless it was in the same place as an authorized employee’s beacon. Authorizing someone with as few points as Joe would have been a bureaucratic hassle, so Stefan had just put a temporary override on the security system along the pre-arranged route—a detail he hadn’t bothered to explain to Joe. As soon as Joe had strayed from the route, the Ops had mobilized the nearest pickers to box him in. It was a simple and effective way to hold him until security arrived; there were so many pickers that even if he climbed over or around them, it could keep throwing more in his path, slowing his progress to a glacial pace.



“So why,” Stefan asked, in the same barely controlled tone, “did you go off the lighted path?”

“Because you didn’t tell me not to.”

“And why would I tell you what’s fucking obvious?”

Joe let the question hang.

“So give me one good reason not to wipe all your points and let you go.”

That would knock his rating down at least to 4.6 if not lower. Joe swallowed and spoke.

“How long did it take you to react to the intruder alert?”

Stefan’s mouth opened, then closed, his face muscles working.

“I mean, it must have been about 15 minutes between the alarm going off and you responding. Which is kinda a long time.” Stefan remained silent. “But there’s no reason anyone would check, right? I mean, I can’t think of one. Can you?”

“No,” Stefan said at last, slowly. “I can’t.”

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