

SONG OF THE UNIVERSE

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I.

"Jack, we both know that Robots are designed to feel—but not like we feel. Their feelings are more akin to say...a cat's...or a dog's. Simple. One-dimensional. Complex emotions are beyond their capabilities."

Dr. Gillian Dremore crossed her shapely legs and nibbled at her glasses. It wasn't easy, but I forced myself to remember that not only was she arguably the finest Neuro-engineer in the cosmos, but that she also had an IQ of, oh, about 2000 or so, making my own intellectual capabilities seem chimp-like in comparison. Not that I minded; I found intellectual women...stimulating.

"Listen, you have to prove it—our lives may well depend on it," I said, hitting the holocom button on my office desk. "Bill, come on in here please, and if you don't mind trot in R-45 also."

"What do you mean I 'have' to prove it?" Gillian asked. "How's my life in danger?"

"The Antimods. You saw them demonstrating at the gate on your way in. They'll kill you given half a chance. You, my dear Doctor, are a well-known scientist—and by your presence in my office, you are now associated with the CEO of arguably the most powerful robotics research and development firm on the planet."

Gillian stared at me with disbelief. I sighed, folded my arms, plunked myself on the corner of my desk, and sympathized with her incredulity. The Anti-moderns—or Antimods as they were known—had formed in response to the Janibot uprising of 2068 and now called for a return to the agrarianism of the early eighteenth century, horses, manure and all. Normal sensible folks—myself, for example—believed, of course, that the world already had more than its share of manure, and that science, if kept reasonably in check, was beneficial to mankind. Nevertheless, the Antimods had graduated from a fringe group to a full-fledged political force backing (with reservations) the Inter-corporate Council Presidential favorite, John Foster.

"Look," I said, "I know it's hard to swallow—especially given the Antimod's recent successes at the polls. But the more radical elements of the party...well, let's just say that they tend to get carried away. And if Foster gets into office..."

The door slid open bringing with it the distant chanting hate of the Antimod demonstrators. My assistant/bodyguard Bill Feismann strode in and grinned at Gillian. At six-foot five, well muscled, and weighing in at two hundred and forty trim pounds, he was an impressive sight. Behind him trundled a slender, almost fragile-looking Robot, the advanced spacer variety. A run of the mill electro-magnetic silver man-shaped conglomeration of titanium rods and aluminum cylinders that had been equipped with a new, experimental microcomputer...which, according to my experts, was supposedly

capable of producing complex, near human behavior. I motioned for Bill to have a seat and for the 45 to rest at ease. Gillian eyed the R-45 speculatively, and then glanced at yours truly.

“All right,” she said, nodding, “You’ve piqued my interest. Please continue.”

“Foster and the Antimods claim that machines are soulless, and as such, are evil—and this in essence forms the backbone of their beef against technology—”

“Essentially correct,” Gillian said. “Technology, according to the Antimods, has no conscience, and as such, cannot recognize the difference between good and evil. Hence, any good arising from technology is strictly accidental in nature.”

“But what if,” I asked, “it could be proven that Robots are highly sophisticated sentient beings, with the ability to experience the full range of positive human emotions? Wouldn’t that go a long way towards proving the moral worth of technology?”

“Again, Jack, it might...but, as you well know, people will believe what they want to believe, regardless of evidence to the contrary.” Gillian paused. “So...just how do you intend on proving that ‘Bots are near-human, so to speak?”

“Do you consider Mozart near-human? No, you misunderstand—I don’t intend that R-45 should compose...but if—and I think he can—if R-45 can master the piano...well, pop stars throughout history have been instrumental in overcoming prejudice. Take the jazz musicians of the early twentieth century, for example—Louis Armstrong in particular—”

Gillian stared and shook her head. “Jack, first of all, it is highly doubtful—no offense intended, R-45—that R-45 has the psychological depth to fathom the subtle emotional nuances that infuse the work of a quality classical pianist. Second, even if he did, what would it prove? It would be claimed that R-45 was programmed to play with feeling, that he is no more than a walking player piano, regurgitating pre-programmed emotions on a note-by-note basis. Now, if he were only able to compose....”

I smiled. “A man—or Robot as the case may be—must crawl before he can walk...and I am hoping that you, my fair Doctor, will assist me by training R-45 in the finer points of...emoting. So what do you say, R-45?” I asked, turning to the robot. “You up to the challenge?”

Starting, R-45 regarded me timidly for a minute, and if I didn’t know better, I’d swear a flicker of emotion glittered in the robot’s large sensitive cobalt eyes. But no, I decided—and shaking my head, quickly ascribed R-45’s seeming show of ‘feeling’ to wishful thinking. Complex, near human behavior, after all, is a far, far cry from the real thing...Still...

“As you say, I...I will make the attempt, Creator Staminsky. It is of course, for the greater good,” R-45 said, glancing with sadness, it seemed, in the direction of the Antimod chanters—who we both knew, given the opportunity, would quickly reduce R-45 to the parts of robot’s sum. “However,” R-45 continued in his calm mechanical voice, “regrettably, probability suggests that I’ll be destroyed by the resistance and the experiment will fai—”

“See,” I said, clapping my hands together, “he’s raring to go—”

“Ummmm,” Gillian exhaled, frowning, clearly underwhelmed. Flipping her mane of auburn hair, she placed her glasses on my desk and steeped her hands. “Look here, Jack—your attempt to discredit the Antimods with R-45 wouldn’t by any chance be intended to stimulate sales, would it? I mean, you are the president of Robotics, Inc. and

the grandson of Lou Staminsky, one of the fathers of the modern Robot—and seeing as how Foster is the favorite, and how the whole Antimod anti-robot thing is putting a major squelch on robot production....”

“Doc,” I said, grinning at her, spreading my paws innocently, and wrapping a brotherly arm around R-45, “I am offended at the implication. I am, as I indicated earlier, just trying to keep the world from wallowing back into a Paleolithic tar pit of ignorance. Call it...my gift to the human race, if you will.”

“Of course,” she said, eyeing me cynically. “Jack Staminsky, giant of corporate altruism....”

“That’s me,” I nodded, trying my best to appear modest.

II.

I booked R-45’s debut concert on Pluto, banking on the inherent restraint of the outer colonies to keep us in one piece during the early going. My reasons for this aren’t maybe as screwy as they seem. Because survival in inhospitable climes is dependent upon a complete adherence to the structure of command, outer world colonists are not typically prone to wanton displays of civil disobedience. Nor, given their basic need for technology to stay alive, did I consider it likely that the outer world colonists would subscribe to the teachings of the Antimods...meaning that we (with luck) would be able to swell public opinion our way long before having to face a hostile audience.

As for R-45, he was progressing rapidly on the piano, responding to the good Doctor’s tutelage and learning with a resolute strength of mind that both surprised and delighted Gillian. I’d like to say that I knew that he had it in him the whole time; but, truth be told, I was ready to fudge a little—even to the extent of programming his pieces if necessary. Fortunately, R-45 had an intuitive grasp of expression, and he translated his near-human “feelings” to the foot pedals and the keys with almost human determination. That’s not to say that he didn’t have missteps. R-45, for example, interpreted Offenbach’s lively “Gaité Parisian” as what could best be described as a funeral march, and Beethoven’s “Piano Concerto No. 5—a noble, majestic lion of a piece—as a comedic hoo-hah. But all in all, R-45 excelled in his new career, and was doing so with a dogged gusto that was positively amazing.

Throughout the flight to Pluto, however, much to the puzzlement of the crew, R-45 remained remarkably quiet—almost reserved. While in route, he would often retreat to the ship’s observation deck, where he would stand for hours—a tiny silver man-thing, shining against the immensity of space. Quiet. Intense. His inline micro super computers plugged into the ship’s sensors, his glowing blue photo-cell eyes staring out into the blackness that enfolded the *Hayden* like a cosmic wing.

Naturally I took note of R-45’s behavior and questioned Gillian—and one month out from Terra, she enlightened me as to why R45 was...well...acting like R45.

“He’s listening,” she said slowly.

“Listening? If there’s a bright center to the galaxy, we are about a trillion miles from it. What on earth could he be listening to?”

“He calls it “The Song of the Universe.”

“Well, I’ll be a...what’s a ‘Song of the Universe?’ Did he say anything else?”

Gillian shook her lovely head and I wondered that all that gorgeous hair belonged to a Doctor of Neuro-Engineering. Course, none of the rest of her looked much like a Nuero-Engineer either....

“I don’t know,” Gillian said, ignoring my appreciative stare, “and, no, he clammed right up. He’s...he’s, well, quite shy in his own way—if you can term it shyness...And I think he’s still pretty upset by that little gathering in the departure lounge. He told me afterwards that he is appalled by human violence—called it unnecessary—a terrible waste. He seemed genuinely depressed by the injuries incurred by the protestors, refusing to play for days after viewing the holovids of the demonstration. I’m telling you, Jack, it took a real campaign to get him practicing again—and about seventeen reminders that his performance on Alpha Colony might help to deter future violence. Still, I’d say it was touch and go with his morality programming—right up until the first new note...and even now I think he wonders if he made the right decision.” She paused thoughtfully before continuing. “He is...quite an...an extraordinary robot...”

I nodded my head. Gillian was referring to the quasi-riot that had broken out in route to the *Hayden’s* loading dock. The launch had been a madhouse, of course—some damn ratfink with the press had leaked news of the lift-off prematurely and at least a thousand angry Antimods had shown, complete with holo-signs, canned slogans, and rotting fruit. Not a pretty sight to say the least—and, while bravely attempting a few conciliatory remarks, R-45 had been shouted down by what amounted to a raging mob bent on destruction. Even the corporate cops had been hard pressed to squash the mayhem, and it had taken three squads in full riot gear to club back the demonstrators. R-45 had actually intervened to protect the protestors from the police stun sticks (a thing that must have galled the Antimods no end) and had to be dragged from harm’s way. I myself had moved quickly ahead of the crowd to scout the way at the first sign of trouble, and had actually missed the climatic confrontation between the rioters and the police...strangely, I now began to feel a little ashamed.

“Anyway,” Gillian continued, “can’t say as if I blame him. That was one ugly party. Don’t bother sending me an invitation to the next one.”

“The next party may be sooner than you think,” I said, rubbing my chin thoughtfully, “and you may be forced to attend with or without an invitation. The election is tomorrow, and John Foster has a twenty-percentage point lead in the polls.”

“Politics,” she said, shaking her head. “How a Nazi pig right-winger like Foster and a group of tree-hugging Luddite left-wing extremists like the Antimods can crawl into bed together is utterly beyond comprehension—“

“However it happened,” I said, “it did in fact happen. And when Foster is elected tomorrow, given his fiercely anti-robotic stance—which is why the Antimods are backing him in the first place—all blue blazes is likely to break loose—“

Gillian frowned. “Poor R-45,” she said, looking out the viewing port to the stars.

“Poor R-45? What about me? Foster isn’t likely to take to my scheme—“

“But it’s R-45 who will suffer.”

“Not if I can help it,” I assured her.

III.

WE viewed a delayed broadcast of Foster's inauguration on the *Hayden's* main holovid screen with all the hilarity that the occasion demanded—which is to say that we were about as happy-go-lucky as an accusation at a space court of inquiry. Foster's inaugural speech abounded with vitriolic anti-robotic rhetoric—he promised, for instance, a world without “robotic meddling:” a Terra *of* the Humans, *by* the Humans and definitely *for* the Humans—with no room for cybernetic intelligence allowed. His Inter-Corporate Presidential Directive One called for the immediate cessation of android robotic labor—which meant bankruptcy for me, which was bad—and death for R-45, which was worse. To complicate matters further (as if they needed any complicating) I knew that the Terrans were, in the main, supportive of Foster's madness. Oh, maybe not 100%, but enough to matter—and it occurred to me that the urgency of R-45's cause, if anything, had intensified. I knew, of course, that Foster's anti-robotic drivel was simple posturing for votes; I knew also that if we swayed enough people to the side of controlled robotics, Foster would switch faster than a willow stick. It'd have to be one heck of a concert, I decided—though inwardly I doubted if even Beethoven reborn could generate the level of public hue and cry necessary to knock Foster off his jackbooted heels.

“Jack,” said Captain Walters, breaking me from my melancholic musings, “a holovid is coming in on a scrambled frequency. You want I should pipe it onto the main viewing screen?”

I glanced around the control pod, wondering who the devil was calling me in what amounted to the very doldrums of space—meaning that we were still a zillion miles from anywhere of any importance, and that a call was highly unlikely, and that in all probability it wasn't to tell me that I had won the PCH sweepstakes. Fortunately, the Pod was mostly deserted. The crew, not much for politics, had decamped ten minutes into Foster's acceptance speech, leaving myself, Captain Walters, Gillian, Bill, and R-45 to hold down the fort with the promise to “call if anything interesting happens.” Not knowing for certain whether the scrambled vid would prove interesting (though I definitely had my suspicions), I didn't bother to call. Instead, I nodded to Captain Walters and gave him the OK to open the channel.

As it turned out the holovid hailed from Pluto Colony Alpha, and I was pleasantly surprised to see Tom Broadmore's rugged face pop onto the viewing screen. Tom was the administrator of the U.M.C (United Mining Corporation) sponsored colony, and, as it happened, was an old friend. Tom was as tough as they came—he'd outfought unions, busted strikes, and had—on occasion—even led a few, but he liked a good joke more than any man alive, and he seldom took anything very seriously. Only he was plenty serious now, and judging from the worry lines creasing his wide forehead, it looked as if the dung had warped a long way towards hitting the drive...

“Jack—you got big time trouble,” he said after exchanging initial pleasantries, confirming my fears. “Foster's Security Council light-beamed a message and warned me not to let you dock. Worse, the Antimods have dispatched an interceptor your way, one of the swift inter-galactic battle jobs—ostensibly for boarding purposes. Seems they don't want you undermining Foster's campaign initiatives with a friendly robot story. And while you didn't hear it here, I'll bet my glass 'bar-bet' eye this is Foster's round-about way of getting rid of you without actively involving the Government. I don't think it's a coincidence that the Antimods were allowed access to a big outer rim battle tub—

they don't rent those things out at Space-Haul, y'know. Anyway, by my calculation, the Antimod ship is about twenty hours behind and closing fast—"

"R-45, shouldn't you be practicing?" I cut in, silencing Tom—instinct warning me to send the robot packing.

"Give it to me straight, Tom," I asked after R-45 had cleared the deck. "Just how bad is it?"

He paused, stared into the holomonitor with an intensity bordering on gravity—a long stretch for Tom. "If I were you, Jack, I'd boogie the hell outta there pronto. They know your transmitter won't make standard Terran receiving stations, and Foster's reined in our own fleet for "repairs and inspection." Say, did I mention that we're scheduled for a test of our emergency broadcasting system in, oh, coincidentally, approximately twenty hours? I think the Antimods mean to use force if necessary, and they don't want any witnesses gumming the works."

I considered. "Running's no good, Tom. Where would we go? I'm sure they've got us on scope this very minute...Hey...can they monitor this transmission?"

Tom smiled, all teeth. "Nope, we've seen to that. You're tuned to a pinpoint, scrambled beam. For all they know our conversation is just more space static. This baby is separate and apart from our main com lines—we can keep it up and running even during the broadcast test."

"OK, Tom. Do me a favor and keep this channel open. We've got some figuring to do."

Tom nodded and signed off.

"Well skipper," I said, addressing the captain, "what if we pour on the coal? Does the *Hayden* have the legs to get to Pluto ahead of Foster's storm troopers? They'd think twice about putting the zap to us once in orbit."

"We can try," he said doubtfully. "Wouldn't bet on it though..."

Seated across the cabin, Gillian's lovely brow wrinkled and she pursed her lovely lips thoughtfully, a gesture not lost on yours truly—after all, we still had twenty hours on the Antimods, and she was a beautiful woman...

"Captain...do you think it would be possible to make the Kuiper belt?" she asked, tapping her teeth with her glasses.

"Er...Kite belt?" I asked.

Gillian sighed; the glasses went sternly back on her face. They seemed to do that a lot around me, I noticed.

"The *Kuiper* belt," she recited as if to a sixth-grader, "is a disc-shaped region just beyond the orbit of Neptune comprised of many small icy bodies, and is the source of many of our comets. If we can reach the belt, we just may—"

"—be able to launch the shuttle," I finished her sentence, "and fool the Antimods into thinking that it's just another bit of cosmic debris!"

"Only one problem," I said.

"The shuttle will only hold the crew," the Captain chimed.

"So what'll happen to R-45?" Bill asked slowly.

I didn't answer. I didn't have to.

IV.

EIGHTEEN hours more into the flight, the Kuiper belt began registering on the view screen as a frosty silver line that shimmered in the sun's faint beams like a spider's gossamer thread. It was beautiful, ethereal—and as it grew in size to fill the monitor, I made my way to the quiet of the observation salon for a view unfettered by electronic distractions. I wasn't alone. R-45 stood by the salon's viewing port, pressed almost against the glass—and as I saw him I was seized by a sudden sharp pang. He was mine—I had brought him into the world, he was a creation of my ambition, my dreams—and yet, now, as I watched him gaze towards the cold comets, the dim diamond planetoids, I suddenly realized that he was a being and not a profit margin, and I felt ashamed...

And for the first time in my miserable, selfish, though otherwise fun-loving and lovable existence—I, Jack Staminsky, grandson of Lou Staminsky and free-wheeling heir to Robotics, Inc—I came to understand something that maybe only a few people other than outer world colonists understood: that we as a species *needed* the robot. Yes, they represented technology...but they also represented something more, *much* more. They were the best and brightest part of us, the human race. They never killed, never cheated, never deceived. We built them to the highest human standards; in the robot we had created the human *ideal*. They had a soul—our soul, the soul of the human race—and it suddenly occurred to me that the Antimod's assertion that technology was evil because it had no conscience was utterly, completely, and ridiculously wrong. *We* had given the robot a conscience—*our* conscience—*we* had endowed them with the divine spark, passing on that which had been passed to us by our creator. And, though a man of mostly indifferent religious conviction, as I stared to the Kuiper belt I become convinced that halting the spread of God constituted the only true evil, and that ultimately, the destruction of technology—robotic technology—was the one true evil, because it denied the spread of God...and that I would be a sinner indeed if I contributed to R-45's demise...

"You mustn't blame yourself," R-45 said quietly, staring into the blackness. "There is no other logical course open for you to pursue—and so it is as it must be. You would take me with you if you could. You cannot; circumstances prohibit my continued existence. And so...regrettably...I must be...discontinued."

I stared at him, mystified and yet not completely surprised—having long since passed the point of amazement where R-45 was concerned. "How did you know?" I asked, fumbling out a pipe with shaking fingers.

He turned to me and smiled a gentle mechanical aluminum smile—a poignant, wistful smile, a smile of things lost and now never to be...a *human* smile...

"I listened to your song," he said, gesturing clumsily with claw-like hands as if to mask his emotions. "You humans hear well enough for a biological organism—but you seldom take the time to analyze and comprehend *what* it is that you are hearing. The universe is music, and each of us—*everything*—is a melody. Life, the planets, the stars, the swirling magnetic vastnesses of space—we are all songs, and together—together we form a symphony."

Drawing a deep breath through my unlit pipe, I shook my head. "You speak to me of music—but I may have to...to leave you to die."

R-45 nodded slowly. “Death...is but the ending of a melody. There will be other melodies to replace the ones that are lost, and the symphony will continue to grow, until at last the universe dies and the symphony dies with it—only to be reborn with the birth of a new universe, new melodies, new symphonies—”

“Maybe...maybe they won’t catch us,” I said. “Anything can happen in space, it’s a dangerous place—”

R-45 shook his head, a little sadly it seemed. “The Antimods are closing rapidly. Probability suggests that they will almost certainly intercept us approximately one hour after we pass through the Kuiper belt, and I will be destroyed. I...I will miss you though, Creator Staminsky, in whatever form I may assume after my current existence ends. You have been my...my friend...you, the Doctor, Bill, and the Captain. I will miss also this thing called life—it is a richness too few of you appreciate, and fewer yet embrace. And, I will miss the music...always the music—the beautiful never-ending harmony of creation and destruction...”

Chewing on my pipe stem, I didn’t have anything to say. Beyond the viewing glass the ice belt sparkled and beckoned, and we stood, shoulder to shoulder, robot and man, watching as it approached....

The intercom growled into life. It was the Captain, calling to the crew to assemble in the Shuttle bay. I wheeled from the viewing port to stare at R-45, summoning up my courage to do what I knew must be done—

“You must board the shuttle,” R-45 pre-empted, sensing my intent. “We near the Kuiper Belt. I do not wish to...to die...but it is...my time, Creator...My ending...it will add to the music. You created me; now please allow me to attend to my own destruction—”

“*No!*” I whispered, wondering what the hell I was doing and hating the sound of my voice. “*I’ll* stay. You go with the others, *show* them—”

R-45 declined his head, touched my shoulder with his hand. “Please...you must leave me...I ask you this as my friend. You must believe me—I will serve mankind and my own people better by remaining here, on the *Hayden*. It is the only way—”

“How?” I asked. “If you stay you will die. What purpose will that serve? How will your death help humanity?”

“By forcing humanity to open its heart and *listen*,” he said, his voice filled with solemnity, turning his head again to look out upon the stars.

V.

With R-45’s cryptic words ringing in my ear, I watched out the view port of the shuttlepod as the *Hayden* fell away and the Kuiper belt enveloped us in icy vapor and bits and pieces of matter left over from the creation of the galaxy. Gillian put her fingers to the glass and sobbed; Bill turned away. I knew what they were thinking because I was thinking the same thing. They were making up fantasy worlds in which things like this didn’t happen, they were playing games of “what if”...and they were missing R-45...

Then, almost as if orchestral accompaniment to our grief, we heard the music. Coming in over the inter-ship frequency, too low for Antimods to register as they closed with the *Hayden*, it built like a symphony within the Pod. It was R-45—and it *was* a symphony, *his* symphony, and its beauty overcame us. In the music we heard the

whirrings and eerie vibrations of the planets, the comets, and the moons—and I understood now that in passing R-45 had recorded each planet’s signature heartbeat to use in this, his *Song of the Universe*. He blended each planet’s “melody” in turn, and introduced the piano, and the synthesizer, and through it all ran the static and fire and crash of the sun, the giver of life. The music soared, and I heard the songs of a thousand birds, the roarings of great beasts, the buzzings of insects, and the babble of man. And R-45 composed and played on—and in the music I heard life, and death, and motion and stillness, and the black ocean that was space, and the molten lights that were the stars, and the grass, and the trees, and the drumming seas, and the atmospheres, and the gravities. It was the Universe—all of the Universe—and it was glorious and tragic, and humble and grand. Beyond the viewing glass, we lost sight of the *Hayden*, but the music remained and broke us to tears. And still R-45 played on...

We watched him on the scanner scope then as he sailed towards Pluto—saw another point of light enter the screen—the music built to a crescendo, seemed to crash from out of the very depths of space—

Then came a silence louder than cosmic thunder, and the *Hayden*’s light blinked from the scanner scope and disappeared, and the Antimod’s ship alone registered...and we knew that R-45 was gone, and that the Antimods had destroyed the *Hayden*.

For a long time no one spoke. After an eternity, I reached up and punched the scanner scope off the main viewing screen. The movement seemed to break our trance.

“The beam,” the Captain said quietly. “The pinpoint scrambled beam to Pluto. R-45 asked me to leave the channel open.”

“Alpha Colony heard then?” Gillian asked quietly.

Walters nodded. “Broadmore heard...and recorded. All inter-space transmissions are recorded. But as far as the Antimods are aware, nobody else knows how the *Hayden* died but them.”

Then I understood then what R-45 had been trying to tell me. He knew, even if I hadn’t, that this was the *only* way to make the people understand. His sacrifice would be broadcast to humanity, and humanity would listen, captivated by R-45’s music, his genius, his emotion—his *humanity*. And they would understand through the music that which we onboard the pod had already come to understand. That the divine spark burns in all forms of life, even forms of man’s making. Then they would witness R-45’s death at the Antimod’s hands, and would understand the corruptness of the president’s regime and would turn from him and he would fall from power. Foster was finished, the Antimods done for—

And they didn’t even know it yet.

Life was sweet again.

“Captain,” I said, “what say you hail Tom for me. We’ve got a concert to pipe through to Terra—“

“And I think it’s time for the folks down there open their hearts and listen.”

THE END