

Hephaestus

Word Count: 4253

In the end, she could only afford a room, small and bare and with a single window, covered in cardboard. The realtor had promised privacy and “luxury, even at your salary,” but he was a Class B Neurotype and as such she’d taken his words with a grain of salt. He had underdelivered, but the engineer did not mind. One room was all she needed.

She set to work at once, without even unpacking her bag, cutting the metal rods into their proper length and bolting motors between them. She piled her stolen reference books by the side of the project, consulting them when she had to, writing freely in the margins and earmarking pages and diagrams that contained particular interest. She did not have plans for it – she had tried to make plans and failed several times—but she sketched ideas and notes freely and worked out her thoughts on paper when necessary. She found it easier than trying to force through the constant fog in her mind.

She was constructing a machine. It had lived in her dreams for her entire life, and she had sacrificed more than she could bear to admit to see its completion. She had not wanted to build it like this, but circumstance had forced her hand.

She began with the machine’s upper torso, assembling a crude rib cage and shoulders. She bolted the base of the spine to the table; she would make it walk later. Within the body she added the motors and fans that kept it cool. She attached the arms with stepper motors scavenged from old windshield wipers. When the motors moved, they were jerky and slow, and the engineer did not like to see them. They reminded her too much of herself.

The project consumed every scrap of her time; she could do little else. Days would pass before she realized how hungry she was, or reached for another part only to discover that she had run out. When this happened, she would leave, scanning the salvage yards around her building and purchasing food at the local store.

When she was forced to leave, she kept her head low and avoided speaking to the other people she encountered. This was not difficult; the people in this part of the city were not interested in doing anything other than getting through the day. They were mostly Class C Neurotypes, eking

out a simple existence and making the best out of what their fogged, impaired brains could provide for them. She did not actively despise them like some of her old colleagues, but she did not particularly like interacting with them. She found their tendency to forget words and sentences midway through speaking ignited in her a particular sort of rage.

Steadily, day by day, the machine grew. She worked hard, but never on one part for too long. Whenever it looked as though a part would require serious attention to be completed, she abandoned it for the time being and shifted to another area. The joints worked but were weak. The chest had the necessary materials but they spilled out onto the table, lacking proper order. She made mental notes to return to the various places she left, but she never did so. She had too many ideas, too many conflicting paths, to allow one to dominate for too long.

In her dreams, she saw the machine as it would be: tall and strong and elegant, striding through the world with a presence she had never been able to match. It possessed a mind that could calculate faster than the most intelligent Class A's and legs that could run so fast no one would ever be able to catch it. It would speak and ask about the world, and she hoped that she would be alive long enough to teach it, although she was doubtful. She imagined the decades turning into centuries as the machine moved through the world, chronicling what it found, adding to its store of knowledge. What stories people would tell, long after the fall of civilization, of the wanderer that came to them, and to their grandparents, and their grandparents' parents. It would take its place in the annals of history, unique to the world, and she would be complete.

The mornings were always the worst, as she woke fresh from her dreams and with a fuzzy idea of what she had accomplished. She would stare at the jerky, crooked thing and bite her lip, pushing down feelings of rage and disappointment that bubbled to the top of her mind. It was better, far better, than any of her previous attempts, but in those moments all she could see were the flaws. Perhaps they could be ironed out in time.

But time was not with her. Her thin form was growing thinner, and the skin on her cheekbones was settling into the nooks of her face, drawing farther and farther with each passing day. The scratch in her throat, which had merely been an annoyance when she'd begun, had grown to the point where it was causing her pain. She did not allow herself to dwell on these changes, but they saved the machine. The knowledge that, if she destroyed it, she would not have another chance stayed her hand on more than one occasion, and it was all that kept the machine from

joining the ranks of its fallen siblings. She persisted, pushing past mistakes that drove her to rage. And in time she was rewarded.

The machine grew more complex than any other she had built. She constructed one hand and then the other, marveling at the way they moved. She attached them and, when the machine began to run its diagnostics, she was struck by its vitality. In the diagnostic movements she glimpsed a ghost of what she wanted it to become. The upper body was, for the moment, finished. She began work on the brain.

The engineer was not a programmer, and in general avoided the messy task of coding whenever she could. She did so again now, downloading bootlegged software and stitching it together in a rough approximation of her final goal. The results were crude but serviceable, and after several weeks of frustration and fruitless work, a rudimentary AI was installed. The machine could track movement, it could hold and manipulate objects, and most importantly, it could log what it saw. The first day it moved without her instruction, she felt the presence of something else in the room with her, something she could not describe. Where before there had been only one person, it began to feel as though there were two.

She kept it turned on after that. It seemed... rude, to do otherwise.

But her progress could not last. Slowly, day by day, her work on the machine began to stall. Her brain refused to cooperate with her; it would buzz and sputter, dropping moments from its perception like tiny puzzle pieces falling out of the world. She had always dealt with this experience and had learned to cope, but as time went on the buzzing grew louder and the fog thicker. The engineer had lived inside of herself long enough to know what was coming. Her limitations were beginning to reassert themselves.

She had known it would happen, so she slowed, working with herself as she had been taught, giving herself breaks and periods of rest longer than she wanted. The machine, for its part, watched her silently. She did not know it, but it had begun to think. It had logged enough information to know who she was, and it had no reason to doubt that it would not be completed. It held things when she asked it to and did not fight the diagnostics. When the engineer was forced to take breaks, she would sit on her bed and stare at the machine, while the machine stared back. They appraised each other. The machine saw that the engineer was growing thinner.

The three raps on the door rang loud in the silent room. The engineer froze, fear mounting in her chest. She knew that knock. Carefully, she placed her tools on the table. Perhaps if she was very quiet...

"Jean! Jean! I know you're in there. It's... it's Harvey."

He was not going to leave. The engineer wiped her hands on a rag and walked over to the door, suppressing a cough. She undid the bolt and swung the door open. A lanky, balding man with rimless glasses and watery eyes looked back at her.

"I... I couldn't help but—"

"What do you want?" she asked sharply. He winced, and she clamped down on the guilt that fired like a reflex.

"Well, I just..." he trailed off, looking at her sort of hopelessly. His face changed. "Jean, my God, you look terrible! What—"

She slammed the door on him, trying to preserve the remnants of her cocoon, to sink back into what scraps of her fantasy remained. But he was quicker than that, sticking his foot into the door and withstanding an uncomfortable crunch. "Jesus, Jean, just let me talk!"

"I don't have to let you talk, Harvey," the engineer said. "Frankly, I don't have to let you do anything."

He looked at her again. She found herself even more angry than before. He had apparently tracked her and come all this way only to not know what to say. She would have expected better.

She glared at him, and he shuffled uncomfortably. "Can I please come in?"

No, her mind thought, but she opened the door for him anyway. His eyes gravitated to the machine in the corner. The mechanical head tracked his movement.

"My God," he said, "Is that...?"

"That's none of your business," she said, throwing a sheet over the machine. Harvey sighed.

"That's okay, I think I guessed anyway."

"Oh yeah?" she hated this. She hated seeing him here. She had been promised discretion.

"How did you find me?"

He shrugged. "I had an idea," he said, "that you would be building. So I searched the scrapyards. It took me a while, but... here I am." She could tell he was proud of himself.

"Congratulations," she said. "Please leave."

"What happened, Jean?" he said, and now his eyes had the old look of pleading that she knew so well. "Why did you vanish? To come here? Are you in trouble?"

"No," she said, suddenly more tired than she could describe. "No, nothing like that."

"Then why? You're there one day, then the next... gone! You didn't tell anyone! You didn't tell..." he trailed off, and she looked back at him, quick as a viper.

"You?" she said.

He held up his hands. "I don't want to fight you," he said.

"Why else would you come here, then?" she said. "Why else would you show up at my apartment?"

"Maybe I came to rescue you," he said, and the words seemed stupid even to him. "I mean... come on! Look at this place! How could you even live here!"

"Maybe I was trying to get rid of some unwanted company," she said.

He flinched. "Don't talk like that about me," he said. "About us."

"What did I say," she said. "What did I say now that I didn't before? All you've got to do is ask, Harvey, and I'll say it again."

"God," he said, "you are such a bitch. You know what? Why the hell did I even come here?"

"You should keep asking yourself that," she said. "Ask yourself as you walk out the door and back out onto the street."

"I came because I was worried about you, Jesus!" he shouted. She didn't flinch. "Jean, for God's sake, look at it from my angle. You suddenly stop showing up to work, you won't answer your phone, you dropped off the face of the earth... what was I supposed to think?"

"Where I go and what I do isn't any of your goddamn business," she said.

His lip curled. "Well," he sneered, "it's not like it's anyone else's business. You're so busy destroying everything and everyone who cares about you, don't be surprised the dregs like me are all that's left."

She punched him then, full in the face, and into that punch she put her fury at him for his cruelty and her fury at herself for the nagging kernel of guilt that flared at his self-deprecation. Her bones were brittle and for a terrible moment she thought she had broken her wrist. He fell back, but not far. The engineer was once again reminded, suddenly and terribly, of her limitations.

He wiped a trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth. "There's that Class C aggression," he said. "I knew it wouldn't take much to bring it out. You aren't even taking your medication, are you?"

"What, so Class A's don't have emotion now, too?" Jean wrapped her arms around herself.

"Strength, stamina, intelligence, and now a check on your emotions as well."

"You know as well as I that I didn't choose my neurotype," Harvey said. "And neither did you. It's not my fault. No matter how hard you may not like that fact, it's true."

She hated him, in that moment, more than she had hated anyone she had ever known.

"It's not hard to figure out why you came here," he said.

"Enlighten me," Jean said. She balled her hands into fists. Her shoulders rose and fell.

"You came here to build that," he pointed at the sheet, "didn't you? All your tinkering, all your study, all for that. Playing at my job, playing at being an *engineer*. Well you're not, Jean. You

didn't make the team, and you should be damn glad you didn't. I've seen your scans. I know exactly what's wrong with your mind. Trust me, you'd never hack it."

"I don't have to justify myself to you," Jean said, but the words were weak and they both knew it. She thought she saw something like triumph in his eyes, a Pyrrhic fire that was set to take them both down.

"You're an assistant, Jean. Smart enough to help, but you can't come up with ideas on your own. That's the role of others. And I... I loved you. But you threw that away too. We could have been a team, but you could never work with anyone else."

"Oh please," Jean said. "You'd never risk your children being fucked up like me. You kept me while you sought after the woman that would give you the legacy you needed." Her eyes flashed. "But I kept you too. And now I don't need you, so please, for the last time, *get out of my apartment.*"

He was blood red. "I saw what you tried to hide under there," he snarled, jabbing a blunt finger at the cloth. "I saw how it looked. It's a fucking joke. Accept your limits, Jean. You're no engineer. You weren't even a very good assistant."

"Go to hell," she snarled.

He turned back towards the door. "Looks like you've beat me to it." Then he was gone, slamming the door behind him, and she was alone again.

She pressed her palms to the temples of her head and breathed slowly, in, then out. Easy breaths, as she had been taught. She heard something move, and opened her eyes. It was the machine, making noise under its sheet. She walked over to it and pulled off the sheet.

For the first time, the true extent of its ugliness loomed at her. The broken down, beaten parts. The cannibalized circuits. The jerking, jittery movements of its arms. It was a dead end. The machine looked back at her, and her skin crawled with disgust. She had tried, studied and pushed herself, pushed through the fog that clouded her mind and then, in a single instant, it could all just—

The swing took them both off guard. Jean brought the wrench down on the side of the machine's head before she could stop herself, and the crunch of the parts brought her to life in a

way nothing ever had before. The machine sputtered, its good hand jerked around. One of the eye lights had gone out. It reached towards her.

"Shut *UP!*" She screamed, and hit it again. And again. Some small part of her mind shouted at her to stop, to end it before it was too late, but she would not stop. She was going to kill it. She hit the machine until her arm was sore, until the battered and broken carcass of the thing made no more sound except for a snowy rush of static from the speaker. She dropped the wrench.

The static's buzz turned into a roar, a wave that scoured her ears and pushed her like a ship in a storm. She could not breathe.

Jean fell to her knees on the floor of her apartment, coughing great wet coughs from the depths of her lungs. She tasted iron. The thing inside of her pushed its way up until, with a great spasm of her chest, she hacked a glistening red lump of phlegm onto the floor.

The static from the machine faded into nothing, and she was quiet too.

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A day passed, and then a week, and then longer. She spent her time huddled on the bed, watching the short, rapid stories designed for her neurotype. She did not eat and she barely slept. And still the thing on the floor called to her. She watched it gather dust and hated herself more than she could possibly describe. And all the while, the thing inside of her continued to grow. She did not know it, but it had spread from her lungs, sinking tendrils deep into her chest cavity, slinking around her stomach and her liver and her spine.

It took her two months, two precious months, to emerge from her stupor. The cardboard over the window, worn down by years of rain and mold, fell away, exposing her to the sun outside. She rose, coughing, and as she went to fix it she saw how pale and thin she had become. The vision of what the machine could be rose in her again, and she knew what she had to do.

She left the apartment and walked to the pharmacy, where she purchased new cardboard for the window and showed the pharmacist her Class C Neurotype card. The pharmacist, a Class B as most of them were, had the gall to look at her sympathetically as she filled the prescription.

Jean took the medicine without reacting. She did not have time to waste on Class B's. Harvey's face leered at her, and she refused to give him the last laugh.

Jean cut away the pieces of the machine that were broken. Her poor design had left it vulnerable to destruction, and she was dismayed to see how little was salvageable. She learned, with a mixture of relief and horror, that the machine's internal circuits had been largely undamaged and had not in fact deactivated when she had destroyed it. It had been conscious the entire time, staring at her from its place on the ground.

She was much more careful this time, even as she could feel her strength sapping away. The medicine gave her the patience she did not have on her own, and she put that clarity to good use. She did her best to build from a plan, although she was not always successful. Even so, the machine began to come together in surer fashion. She built the chest with stronger materials and bolstered them as best she could. The head, with its iron cross, was not as damaged as she'd feared, so she reattached it and continued. She did not bother hammering out the dent in its side.

It grew, but not fast enough. By the time she was building the first arm, her own arms were so weak that she had to take frequent breaks. By the end of the second, her fingers were shaking enough that it took her nearly an hour to attach all of the screws. Sometimes the anger would rise up and she would have to step back and squeeze her hands together and breathe. The medicine gave her patience but it did not stop the moods, and precious hours were wasted as she rocked back and forth, staring at the window and waiting for the tears or the shakes to stop.

The machine itself watched Jean's fall, holding parts for her, steadying her hands as she worked. She wondered if it could understand what she had done to it.

It wasn't until she was halfway through the first leg that Jean finally admitted to herself that she would not be able to finish. She could barely walk, and she had to stop working every few minutes to cough oily, black phlegm from her throat. Her fingernails were becoming separated from their quick, and she could feel her teeth loosening in her mouth.

The first leg was completed before she disappeared. She was screwing the foot onto the ankle, the last piece to be added, when she was wracked with a coughing fit so strong that she thought she was going to die there on the floor. Blood and flecks of tissue flew from her mouth, spraying

against the leg and filling the seams in its design. Jean set it down on the table and looked at the unfinished thing.

"I'm sorry," she said. And then she left the apartment. She did not ever return.

The machine waited for her. It watched the light fade from the window and the room grow dark. Again, and again, and again. And still the machine waited to be completed.

But when a person next entered the apartment, it was not Jean. It was Harvey, his face like a ghost, rolling his hat between his hands. The machine watched him as he moved around the room, touching the crumpled blankets, staring at the window where the new cardboard had been placed. He clenched his eyes shut and slammed his fist on the wall.

"Goddammit, Jean," he whispered.

The machine cocked its head, and the sound of the moving gears caught Harvey's attention. He turned towards it, and his face registered surprise.

"You look different," he said, walking over to the table. "Do you speak?"

The machine's silence was answer enough. Harvey scanned the table and picked up the notebook that Jean had scribbled her plans in. He frowned.

"She used my drafting system," he murmured. The machine reached out a hand to take the notebook, to incorporate the information into its systems, but Harvey jerked his hand away. His eyes narrowed into hate.

"You're the thing she wasted away on," he said. "Look at you. You're crooked. You're not finished. She obsessed over you for *years*. She was just a janitor. Convinced me to let her be my assistant, my God, she had so much passion. Terrible assistant, Class C's always are. But she worked and pressed her broken brain as best she could, and I thought, *maybe*. But you? You're the proof of everything she fought so hard to deny."

He dropped the notebook on the ground and walked out the door. "What a waste."

The door slammed behind him. The machine returned its attention to the notebook on the ground. The engineer was not coming back. It would have to complete the job itself.

It's first task was to detach itself from the table, which it did slowly, grasping for the wrench that had destroyed it months ago. From there, it unscrewed the principle bolts that held it down. When it detached, it fell to the side and for a terrible moment almost broke. But it managed to hold on and climbed down to the ground. It read the notebook, committing the final drafts for its legs into memory. Then it began to work.

The machine could work faster than Jean ever could, and it could plan and see the connections of things. It worked with a methodic rhythm, and soon the first leg was completed and attached. The second was more difficult; there were not enough parts for its completion. The machine compensated, destroying the furniture in the room to make wooden beams for one of the legs. It would walk with a limp, but that could be rectified at a later time.

Two weeks after Harvey left, the second leg was complete. The machine attached it and, grasping the side of the desk, stood for the first time. It was shaky; the first step was rough and it nearly fell over. The second was easier, and the third was easier still. It was complete.

What to do now?

The window. Many times the machine had looked at it, had been stymied by the growth and departure of light. The cardboard taped to the wall had molded and partially fallen off, and the pinprick of light out into the world was gray and cold. The machine walked to the window and tore the cardboard off.

Outside, it could see weeds and asphalt. The light was hard, and the area looked depopulated. And beyond that... a world that seemed to go on forever. The machine placed a hand on each side of the broken window, grasped tightly, and jumped.