

Wolf Mari

Robots of the World! Arise!



Mari Wolf

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What would you do if your best robots – children of your own brain – walked up and said "We want union scale"?

The telephone wouldn't stop ringing. Over and over it buzzed into my sleep-fogged brain, and I couldn't shut it out. Finally, in self-defense I woke up, my hand groping for the receiver.

"Hello. Who is it?"

"It's me, Don. Jack Anderson, over at the factory. Can you come down right away?"

His voice was breathless, as if he'd been running hard. "What's the matter now?" Why, I wondered, couldn't the plant get along one morning without me? Seven o'clock – what a time to get up. Especially when I hadn't been to bed until four.

"We got grief," Jack moaned. "None of the robots showed up, that's what! Three hundred androids on special assembly this week – and not one of them here!"

By then I was awake, all right. With a government contract due on Saturday we needed a full shift. The Army wouldn't wait for its uranium; it wouldn't take excuses. But if something had happened to the androids...

"Have you called Control yet?"

"Yeah. But they don't know what's happened. They don't know where the androids are. Nobody does. Three hundred Grade A, lead-shielded pile workers – missing!"

"I'll be right down."

I hung up on Jack and looked around for my clothes. Funny, they weren't laid out on the bed as usual. It wasn't a bit like Rob O to be careless, either. He had always been an ideal valet, the best household model I'd ever owned.

"Rob!" I called, but he didn't answer.

By rummaging through the closet I found a clean shirt and a pair of pants. I had to give up on the socks; apparently they were tucked away in the back of some drawer. As for where Rob kept the rest of my clothes, I'd never bothered to ask. He had his own housekeeping system and had always worked very well without human interference. That's the best thing about these new household robots, I thought. They're efficient, hard-working, trustworthy – Trustworthy? Rob O was certainly not on duty. I pulled a shoe on over my bare foot and scowled. Rob was gone. And the androids at the factory were gone too...

My head was pounding, so I took the time out to brew a pot of coffee while I finished dressing – at least the coffee can was in plain view in the kitchen. The brew was black and hot and I suppose not very well made, but after two cups I felt better. The throb in my head settled down into a dull ache, and I felt a little more capable of thinking. Though I didn't have any bright ideas on what had happened – not yet.

My breakfast drunk, I went up on the roof and opened the garage doors. The Copter was waiting for me, sleek and new; the latest model. I climbed in and took off, heading west toward the factory, ten minutes flight-time away.

It was a small plant, but it was all mine. It had been my baby right along – the Don Morrison Fissionables Inc. I'd designed the androids myself, plotted out the pile locations, set up the simplified reactors. And now it was making money. For men to work in a uranium plant you need yards of shielding, triple-checking, long cooling-off periods for some of the hotter products. But with lead-bodied, radio-remote controlled androids, it's easier. And with androids like the new Morrison 5's, that can reason – at least along atomic lines – well, I guess I was on my way to becoming a millionaire.

But this morning the plant was shut down. Jack and a half dozen other men – my human foremen and supervisors – were huddled in a worried bunch that broke up as soon as they saw me.

"I'm sure glad you're here, Don," Jack said.

"Find out anything?"

"Yeah. Plenty. Our androids are busy, all right. They're out in the city, every one of them. We've had a dozen police reports already."

"Police reports! What's wrong?"

Jack shook his head. "It's crazy. They're swarming all over Carron City. They're stopping robots in the streets – household Robs, commercial Droids, all of them. They just look at them, and then the others quit work and start off with them. The police sent for us to come and get ours."

"Why don't the police do something about it?"

"Hah!" barked a voice behind us. I swung around, to face Chief of Police Dalton of Carron City. He came straight toward me, his purplish jowls quivering with rage, and his finger jabbed the air in front of my face.

"You built them, Don Morrison," he said. "You stop them. I can't. Have you ever tried to shoot a robot? Or use tear gas on one? What can I do? I can't blow up the whole town!"

Somewhere in my stomach I felt a cold, hard knot. Take stainless steel alloyed with titanium and plate it with three inches of lead. Take a brain made up of super-charged magnetic crystals enclosed in a leaden cranium and shielded by alloy steel. A bullet wouldn't pierce it; radiations wouldn't derange it; an axe wouldn't break it.

"Let's go to town," I said.

They looked at me admiringly. With three hundred almost indestructible androids on the loose I was the big brave hero. I grinned at them and hoped they couldn't see the sweat on my face. Then I walked over to the Copter and climbed in.

"Coming?" I asked.

Jack was pale under his freckles but Chief Dalton grinned back at me. "We'll be right behind you, Morrison," he said.

Behind me! So they could pick up the pieces. I gave them a cocky smile and switched on the engine, full speed.

Carron City is about a mile from the plant. It has about fifty thousand inhabitants. At that moment, though, there wasn't a soul in the streets. I heard people calling to each other inside their houses, but I didn't see anyone, human or android. I circled in for a landing, the Police Copter hovering maybe a quarter of a mile back of me. Then, as the wheels touched, half a dozen androids came around the corner. They saw me and stopped, a couple of them backing off the way they had come. But the biggest of them turned and gave them some order that froze them in their tracks, and then he himself wheeled down toward me.

He was one of mine. I recognized him easily. Eight feet tall, with long, jointed arms for pile work, red-lidded phosphorescent eye-cells, casters on his feet so that he moved as if rollerskating. Automatically I classified him: Final Sorter, Morrison 5A type. The very best. Cost three thousand credits to build...

I stepped out of the Copter and walked to meet him. He wasn't armed; he didn't seem violent. But this was, after all, something new. Robots weren't supposed to act on their own initiative.

"What's your number?" I asked.

He stared back, and I could have sworn he was mocking me. "My number?" he finally said. "It was 5A-37."

"Was?"

"Yes. Now it's Jerry. I always did like that name."

He beckoned and the other androids rolled over to us. Three of them were mine, B-Type primary workers; the other was a tin can job, a dishwasher-busboy model who hung back behind his betters and eyed me warily. The A-Type – Jerry – pointed to his fellows.

"Mr. Morrison," he said, "meet Tom, Ed, and Archibald. I named them this morning."

The B-Types flexed their segmented arms a bit sheepishly, as if uncertain whether or not to shake hands. I thought of their taloned grip and put my own hands in my pockets, and the androids relaxed, looking up at Jerry for instructions. No one paid any attention to the little dishwasher, now staring worshipfully at the back of Jerry's neck. This farce, I decided, had gone far enough.

"See here," I said to Jerry. "What are you up to, anyway? Why aren't you at work?"

"Mr. Morrison," the android answered solemnly, "I don't believe you understand the situation. We don't work for you any more. We've quit."

The others nodded. I backed off, looking around for the Chief. There he was, twenty feet above my head, waving encouragingly.

"Look," I said. "Don't you understand? You're mine. I designed you. I built you. And I made you for a purpose – to work in my factory."

"I see your point," Jerry answered. "But there's just one thing wrong, Mr. Morrison. You can't do it. It's illegal."

I stared at him, wondering if I was going crazy or merely dreaming. This was all wrong. Who ever heard of arguing with a robot? Robots weren't logical; they didn't think; they were only machines – "We *were* machines, Mr. Morrison," Jerry said politely.

"Oh, no," I murmured. "You're not telepaths –"

"Oh, yes!" The metal mouth gaped in what was undoubtedly an android smile. "It's a side-effect of the Class 5 brain hook-up. All of us 5's are telepaths. That's how we learned to think. From you. Only we do it better."

I groaned. This *was* a nightmare. How long, I wondered, had Jerry and his friends been educating themselves on my private thoughts? But at least this rebellion of theirs was an idea they hadn't got from me.

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