FERROMAGNETISM

Strange attraction.

BY D. A. XIAOLIN SPIRES

“I could never understand your return to nativism,” said Gramps. He sprayed his joints with silicone fibre and waited as they stiffened into rubbery cords. In an instant, the cords vanished.

“Gramps, you know not to use that stuff in front of me,” I said, feigning a cough I hoped was convincing. The smell of strange ether filled the workshop as I dressed the heavy-elemental skin on the dense skull before me.

Gramps waved the spray bottle in the air, almost toppling my prized tin of Atomic Number *^#~ powder.

“Watch your hands,” I said, throwing him a warning glance. “I had to emerge at the Castaway Cluster to get that. It’d take me months to earn enough tickets to disembark in that region again.”

“Intrauniversal travel,” he snorted. “A waste of time. All the amazing things lie beyond.” Gramps now held the spray to his spindly, metal legs. A tingle excited my face. I wheezed.

“Allergies to extrauniversal matter don’t exist. It’s a scientific fact,” he said. “Your body doesn’t have any negative interactions with it.” He gave his feet a few spritzes.

“Maybe in your generation. Who knows what discoveries are still to come. All I know is that the stuff is toxic,” I croaked out a few spasmodic air expulsions for good measure. Gramps shook his head, but pushed the button that spread a sealant over the spray nozzle.

“There, happy now?” he said, setting it down.

I nodded. For a moment, quiet filled the workshop as I lowered the laser down over the disembodied head. A groan escaped the specimen as I affixed the rest of the body that I had dragged over. Gramps turned in my direction and watched.

I latched on the head with clamps. Something felt tight as it caught. A rush of the parts, head and neck met each other, as if in longing.

The bot, yet another copy of me — young and ductile rather than the creaky copy Gramps consisted of — exposed its sensory orifice to the world as it lifted its alloy covering. Its sensory cavity was round and luminous, with a smooth bead within, turning about in wide scans of the room.

I felt a tugging sensation from deep within pulling me towards it. I studied its face, scanning in

detail its vulnerable sensory bead, with a tenderness I’ve never experienced before. I could feel myself approaching its body, putting my limb on one of its own, one metallic arm to another, an expression of homologous intimacy. I’ve never felt so connected to any of my progeny before.

Its sensory bead shone with a kind of

awareness nonexistent in newborns.

Gramps whistled.

“What did you do to it?” I whispered at Gramps. He looked away. An unreadable expression.

He turned back to the newborn, as if unable to help himself.

“Oh, nothing,” he said. His pursed face suggested otherwise. He blinked aside his alloy covering, exposing a dilated sensory bead of his own.

“I’ll take it apart —”

“You wouldn’t,” said Gramps.

“You want to test me?” I started to unhinge a lower joint. A pain shot through my own.

“I just inserted a variable that instilled uncertainty.”

“A variable?”

“Yes, like I did to you.”

My hands stood still as I grasped its lower joint. “What’re you talking about?”

“You, your impassioned will and fire. Your grit and persistence. All from just a bit of magnetism.”

“Magnetism? Wait, *magnetism*? That requires, what is that substance called? *Iron*. But that’s —”

“Yes, extrauniversal material.”

“— illicit. Are you kidding? It’s in me?”

Gramp’s sensory bead transmitted a deliberate sheepish expression.

“If so, that makes me a —”

“You’re a mutt alright,” he proclaimed, in a voice too loud. He was proud of himself.

I could feel my joints pull towards my workmanship, my exact duplicate, with an uncanny sensitivity I had never encountered towards my creations before.

“I put in an opposing magnetic force in this one. You’ll feel what the other universe calls ‘parental affection.’”

I looked into this copy, at its sensory bead that mirrored my own. No wonder Gramps went crazy after my father died. I saw now that he must’ve implanted something like this into himself. I felt a sickness pass through me as I realized my very being violated the nativist dictum. A mutt. Its very notion made me want to disgorge liquid alloy.

Gramps shifted his leg, grabbed the silicone spray and spritzed its strange twining tendons onto both his bottom limbs. He was allowed to use that stuff; he was grandfathered in for use of restricted materials.

I felt the wrenching feeling that drew me to my newly born copy. I grabbed the bottle. I shook it. It rattled. I spritzed the newborn’s legs, chest, face and even its sensor with a generous dose. The spray had no properties from Atomic Number * to Atomic Number *##@%~. It was a wrongful substance. The silicone twisted into fibres before vanishing into thin air, an invisible net whose purpose seemed to offer structural support.

The copy closed its eyes and — was I imagining it? Or did it let out an approving sigh?

“The magnets interact with the silicone, making it hard to trace,” said Gramps. He patted his great-grandson’s head. “No one will be any the wiser.”

“Except me,” I said. I sprayed my own face, wondering how many times Gramps must’ve applied similar spray to me without my knowing. “A bastard child of a bastard son.”

“The best there was,” said Gramps, his sensory bead registering faraway longing. He got up with what looked like renewed vigour and tucked the spray bottle away into a dark recess of the otherwise brightly lit workshop. ■

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