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**STORIES**

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# Night Of The Robots

by Allen Wilder

illustrated by Emsh

*How many people had been replaced, and were now robots? Rand didn't know — but he did know that the center of the conspiracy had to be located tonight. Otherwise, he and Claudie would be robots tomorrow ..*

**B**ENEATH the raw whiteness of the locker flours Rand knelt alongside the corpse and applied the bit of a tiny powered screwdriver to the place where he'd flaked away the neck skin. He touched a stud on the end of the handle and the bit spun.

The moment the long magnetized screw came out; the man's head fell off and rolled six inches on the concrete.

Rand's eyes showed crow tracks of worry at the corners. His chest was only now beginning to lose the short-breath ache built up during the fight.



Suddenly, the robot's head fell off,  
and...

He cocked his head tentatively, then straightened up with a jerk when his ears detected the sound of too-heavy feet running on cement. Pocketing the screwdriver, Rand hoisted the headless body into the nearest vacant locker and piled the head—upside down with a few stray coils poking out, as it happened—in after it. Then he closed the locker door with utmost stealth and crept off through the deserted rows toward an entrance opposite the one where inhuman feet drummed loudly outside.

There were two emotions in Rand's mind: bitterness at failure, for what he'd thought was one of his valuable contacts—Charlie Nox—had turned out to be another robot. Just another clever mechanical duplicate in the silent, growing army of—how many by now? Rand's second emotion was controlled fright. The rendezvous with Nox had, patently, been a trap, and he was close to being caught in it. Just as he reached the door out of the locker room, there was a crash and the other door, concealed

behind the locker banks, was opened.

**I**NTO THE cool Martian night, Rand went like an animal, making his way with desperate cunning over the blasted blocks of concrete and around the tangled twisty wrecks of old launching pad apparatus. The fence could not be far. A wind stirred the ochre grass that forced its way up between the cracked field blocks. The spaceport had been abandoned years earlier, its operations moved; tonight, it was a vast wasteland of bizarre wrecked metal things writhing upward in silhouette against the two moons.

Rand reached the fence, an eight-foot steel-mesh affair. He glanced back briefly, hefting the force beam taken from his coveralls. The lights in the locker shed—turned on by the bogus Nox—had gone out. In the wind and the whispering grass, clanking black shapes rushed toward him. Rand wondered if the fence were depowered, and knew he had no chance to learn this first. He backed off, ran and leaped high. Just as his fingers caught

the top a swath of light from his pursuers pinned him white-ly.

*"Don't keep running, Rand,"* a mocking voice called. *"We know you, now. Why struggle?"*

**S**O MARIUS HOVE was with them, Rand thought. One human with a force of cleverly-crafted robots who looked and spoke as men, but who killed and functioned as machines—with super-high efficiency and speed. Even as the thought whizzed through his head, Rand was kicking a leg over the top bar, heedless of the light's glare. Force beams began to snap and buzz around him. His leg burned hellishy for a second just before he dropped out of the light. One coverall leg began to smolder. Rand beat it out with his hands as he ran on through the deserted dumpyards surrounding the empty field.

He looked back. The light had winked out by the fence, but they would be coming over, sure enough. Rand's only hope lay in the aerial highway shining like a lighted chain a

quarter of a mile distant. It looped back toward the gleaming pile of Port of Mars. Up and down the hills of the dumpyards Rand plunged, his chest aching again; at last he reached safety of the pedestrian lift tube. Overhead traffic hissed, a sound of sanity. Rand thrust a token in the aperture and leaped into the transparent case. Instantly it rose. Before it shot completely up to highway level, he had a glimpse of perhaps a dozen shapes stirring at the dumpyard fringe. Rand gave a quick, mocking wave to Marius Hove and his mechanical assassins.

**O**N THE highway was temporary respite. Knowing what he did now, he had much to do before dawn rose. He paid the fee for a seat on the pedestrian endless belt, and within half an hour he was in Port of Mars, tapping softly on Claudie Gray's apartment door. Thirty seconds later and he was kissing Claudie, then looking down at her pretty face, stroking her auburn hair as though she somehow

brought normalcy back to the night's madness.

"Poor Rand," Claudie murmured, her gray eyes worried. She led him toward the auto-kitchen, pressed a series of levers, and waited by the chute for the prime beef dinners to come sliding forth fifteen seconds later, red and steamy-hot. "It must have been horrible, shooting down a... a *thing* that looked exactly like Charlie Nox. Tell me about it. You only gave me the barest details when you called, after you got off the endless belt."

Wolfing a morsel of the beef, Rand muttered, "I got to thinking, Claudie, riding back here. Charlie Nox must have died days ago—maybe even weeks ago. After all, the I-Sector put both of us on the case last April Fool's"

Rand snorted. "That's coincidence, I know. The chief said so at the time. But it may have been prophetic, too. I-Sector's the fool, right enough." He stared glumly into the girl's eyes. "Twenty-five weeks, with the net result of fifty percent of the assigned force turning out bad. A dou-

ble-agent. Wonder when they took him over, operated." His voice drifted off. His eyes roamed beyond the walls. His mouth had hard determination on it, purpose, a certainty of methodical revenge now.

CLAUDIE put in, "The point is, darling—Nox aside, where are they getting the recruits? Oh, we know the general process: taking human bodies, re-shaping robots into perfect exterior duplicates, sending them back into society to act the part of the real people their masters have destroyed."

"There may be thousands by now," Rand agreed. "And from the beginning, we couldn't start hauling in every person off the street and examining their necks to see if they've got a screw there." Rand shoved his plate aside, no longer hungry. "At least I learned one thing tonight, even if I didn't get the 'valuable information' Charlie was supposed to give me." He repeated the verbally quotation-marked words. "What a trap I was suckered into. In any case, Marius Hove was in the party

that chased me. I recognized the voice."

Claudie's hands gripped the edge of the table, white-knuckles. "Marius Hove? Then it is the Socio-Pragmatist party back of this."

Rand nodded. "They've the money, certainly. And a military coup would be just too easy to pass up—sometimes I think we're too enlightened in this twenty-second century. There's so little need for police or army, a plain power-grabber like Hove has a perfect opportunity. And day by day he builds the force: robots who look like real people. God knows how many women are kissing those murderous iron contraptions every morning, thinking they're kissing their husbands. Or how many little kids look up at their mothers, never dreaming. . ."

Claudie shuddered. "Even you, Rand. You might be. . ."

**R**AND REACHED up suddenly, his hand curved around the back of her neck. "Or you." Then he laughed gently. "Sorry. It was a poor joke." He pulled her forward, kissed her softly.

"Rand, I'm frightened. You'd better stay here. . ."

Doggedly he shook his head. "No, I can't. We have to find the place where they make these robots. It must be somewhere in the city, though we've had no luck. Until tonight. There was one more thing I found at the field, in the pocket of Charlie Nox." From his coverall pocket he produced a tattered slip of plastic on which had been inscribed the words, Van Daam. Claudie held it in her palm for a moment, then returned it thoughtfully.

"Van Daam?" she puzzled. "The Island of Amusement? Could the lab be *there*. . .?"

Rand pushed back his chair wearily, shook his head. "I'm not certain, but I intend to find out. If a recall correctly, Van Daam and his partner Krelig, that breed Martian, are members of the Socio-Pragmatists. I memorized all the names on the rolls when I was assigned this case. Well. " Reluctantly Rand leaned forward and kissed her again. "One of these days, Claudie, they'll learn I'm too

old for field work, and I'll get that desk job, and we'll be married. One of these days."

"Unless Hove or some other wretch like that gets you first. Oh Rand, it frightens me..."

**H**E HELD her close for a moment, reassuring her with words he himself did not believe. Then: "All of a sudden, tonight, I realized something. I *am* ready for a desk. When they shot at me tonight as I went over the wall, I knew it was true. I'd never accepted it before. It makes me feel a little cowardly. Because when this job's over. "

She pressed a finger to his lips. "It takes courage to face up to truth. You're older, that's all. A man of thirty-five shouldn't have white hair; yours has turned in just two years." Silently their gazes locked for a moment, understanding, acknowledging. Then, as though there were absolutely no emotion between them, no aching hunger for peace and a haven from the killing sizzle of a force beam, Rand started for the apartment entrance, saying: "You'll

report in to the chief at I-Sector tonight, then?"

"Yes. That telepathic old lady—the one who fancies herself a medium, third floor rear—is a marvel in times like these. Shall I tell the chief you'll need help?"

"If something happens at The Island of Amusement," Rand replied tartly, "I sincerely doubt whether there will be time for help, and I don't dare carry a transmitter. If they had track units, they could pick me up too easily. No," he said, feigning unconcern, "I can handle it. Bye, darling. Take care, and keep the doors locked. If Hove knows me now, he certainly knows you, too. " And he was gone down the gloomy apartment corridor.

**A**LL THE way across Port of Mars on another endless belt, Rand worried with his problem. *Where* was the laboratory in which Hove's henchmen massacred innocent people and replaced them with robots? The Island of Amusement? Quite possibly. It had a natural in-and-out flow...into



the three-hour Freud Fun House or the long shows in the Psychoanalysis Theatre, or... well, any number of in-and-out patterns. People going in, people seeming to come out hours later, the same; but not really the same. Yet how could he approach it? Try to force the issue by approaching Van Daam or the breed Krelig? No good at all, because he was one man, armed but with whatever wits he possessed and a lone force beam. If...

Suddenly Rand's spine crawled. He took out a packet of placebo cigs, held up the book of permanent matches, struck one, lighted the smoke, replaced the match, and in that instant memorized the face of the person in the fourth seat behind him on the endless belt. He replaced the match pack with its special built-in twenty-power inversion mirror. The intervening seats between his and the fourth behind were empty; all other passengers had climbed off the open belt at the last exchange. Rand was alone with his follower, and the next stop was the exchange for The Island of Amusement.

THE ENDLESS belt whirled along half a mile above the lights of the city, and the Martian night air brushed the sweat on Rand's face into coldness. He reached down and absently scratched his ankle, touching at the same time his shoe heel, into which the I-Sector people had built the detector—a tiny maze of microscopic tubes that picked up the photoelectric field emitted by the eyes of any robot. The detector activated, Rand waited. Ten seconds later a three-centimeter unit sewn deep inside his left ear lobe sent its little *beep* into his head.

A robot, all right. More than coincidence. Marius Hove was on to him, and they were after him, and perhaps they'd lead him straight to the lab...*if*. *If* he could stay alive.

Pretending that his cigaret had gone out Rand used the permanent pack once more. His pursuer was a woman. At least the shell that surrounded the sexless mechanical assassin was formed in the shape of a burly, orange-haired creature with a shapeless thick body, a

massive jaw and powerful arms. She feigned the reading of a news tissue sheet. Rand noticed with a start that only two seats now separated him from his pursuer.

The endless belt glided beneath a dot-perforated sign which spelled out the coming exchange. Far below Rand saw the glitter of The Island of Amusement and rose from his seat, stepping across to the slower passenger aisle. The ersatz matron tossed its tissue sheet to the wind and waddled after him.

**R**AND QUICKLY passed from the passenger aisle onto the canopied area which housed the pedestrian lifts beside the highway. Behind him, heels tapping in a neurotic rhythm, the robot hurried in pursuit, carrying the hundred-odd additional poundage of its false flesh as lightly as a feather. Rand's spine crawled. This was no amateurishly-inept female on his trail, but an oiled, buzzing engine of death unhampered by its outer trappings. Rand deposited his fare and went sailing down the lift tube. The robot had taken the

tube next to the one in which he was riding, and they were scarcely twenty feet apart when Rand dog-trotted toward the light-spangled towers marking the bridge across the sham moat that surrounded the city's mammoth amusement park.

Once through the turnstiles into the gleeful jabber of the crowd, Rand paused a moment to get his bearings. The orange-haired mechanical thing chasing him pretended to loiter at a stand where a vendor hawked Calciburgers for expectant mothers. Rand was startled by a gush of flame and a roar over his shoulder, turned and saw the burning holocaust of a rocket's stern end settling vertically into a launching bed in the middle of a blackened concrete area. A long queue wound along the fence circling the launching area, and a barker on a bull-horn shouted:

"Only a few more spaces left, ladies and gents. Board *The Carousel* for a two-hour rocket trip across the deserts. You say you've never had cash enough to jet to Terra? Never

been in a rocket in your life? Just eleven solars, folks, six solars for the kids, and you get the complete tour—genuine authentic acceleration and deceleration, plus a free-fall side trip above the atmosphere, this voyage only.”

**R**AND WAITED a moment longer, drawn by an inexplicable sense of inner urgency, until the passengers came down the ladders from the gaudily-painted old rocket. Perhaps a hundred people came across the concrete, heading for the concession exit, and by the time the first one had cleared the wire gate, Rand's face was a mask of chill sweat. He moved closer...

...and the three-centimeter unit sewn in his earlobe went wild with beeping.

There wasn't even a single separation between tones. The closer Rand moved to the group coming off *The Carousel*, the shriller the signal became. His mouth tightened with a grim smile of satisfaction, just as a sixth sense warned him that he had neglected his follower. A thick

shape hurled itself through the corner of his field of vision.

Using his left leg as the pivot, Rand twisted frantically while his hand groped for the force beam in his coveralls. The orange-haired robot struck him like a boulder, crashing him backwards across the mid-way; then the robot's inflexible fingers gripped his wrist. Rand uttered a stricken cry of pain between his teeth and released his hold on the force beam, dropping it on the ground. The robot's other hand swept up and chopped swiftly at Rand's neck so that a moment later the robot had looped an arm beneath his shoulders and was dragging him through the unconcerned crowd in a perfect imitation of a rather large, belligerent wife supporting her drunken husband.

**R**AND'S HEAD whirled and blurred. Ahead he saw and smelled a grimy black alleyway between lighted building, toward which the robot propelled him steadily. The robot shoved him. Rand sprawled face-first in the refuse-littered

mud. He scraggled onto his back in time to see the robot lifting the hem of its skirt grotesquely, to better aim its leaded foot. Rand stared at the foot, dazedly, wondering that anything so cunningly executed, so normal-looking, could weigh three times heavier than it looked. In that instant, counterpointed by a mechanical buzz of triumph from the robot's painted mouth, the foot struck Rand's jaw and smashed him down through endless red chasms into eventual darkness.

*Oh you kid, how's your id? Do you know what Oedipus did...?"*

Rand heard the words scratching at the edge of his conscious mind, growing louder as the tune of the amplified song clarified itself. The jingle was being shouted over a multitrack recording by a well-known vocalist, so that two dozen different sound tracks, some weirdly atonal, blended into a blasting whole that threatened to burst his head. Rand remembered the noise. It was the music from The Freud Fun House.

HE OPENED his eyes, seeing a small lighted office for an instant, with a long, intricate wall control board at one side, on which some lights blinked and others merely burned steady. There was a snap of fingers and the lights went out, replaced by a needle-sharp beam directed to a narrow area that encompassed his eyes. The music rocked the walls of the little room, and when Rand tried to jerk aside from the play of light, the beam followed him.

*Hoo hah hee, look and see, what Krafft-Ebbing did to me...*

Rand waited, perspiring. Close at hand a voice said mockingly, "This is indeed a pleasure, especially so since in the space of a single night I am able to dispose of the last I-Sector agent who could link me with the growing force of artificial creatures wandering over Mars just like normal human beings." The voice chuckled, a brittle sound. "Your friend Charlie Nox was—ah—transformed several weeks ago. I must say you rather damaged him, taking his head off

as you did earlier this evening. But he's repaired now."

"Others know about you, Hove," Rand said. "Several others."

"Don't try to bluff me, Rand," came the cold reply. "What do I care if your chief thinks the Socio-Pragmatists are connected? You're the real link, you and that Claudie girl. Oh, we'll take care of her once we finish with you. Don't bristle so, my friend. What's the matter? Do you find that light so annoying?"

**R**AND FOUND it difficult to control his temper or his reason with the lancing beam directly on his face. Dimly in the darkness he could see lights on the control board—whatever *that* was for—still winking or burning, little red or yellow or white or green insect's eyes. The remark about Claudie had chilled him even more deeply.

Hove seemed to sense his thoughts, for he said: "By this time tomorrow, Rand, you'll be one of our most valuable assets—going about your business, uttering words of reassurance to your chief. Oh, of

course, it won't be *really* you. We'll have flushed you down the lye pits under this island, or burned you up in the fuel chute of *The Carousel*, depending upon where we do the switch. Our technicians are already at work on the outer shell for your robot. It's a rush job, but they're doing splendidly..."

"Then *The Carousel* is your lab?" Rand grated. "You take innocent people, kill them on the rocket voyage, replace them..."

"Of course. Our men can turn out adequate robot replacements in an hour and ten minutes, using assembly line methods."

**"H**OW MANY are there, Hove?"

"Roughly nine thousand. I have been working over three years."

"Nine thousand? That's hardly enough for a military coup. They're not fighters..."

"Oh, but they are. Outwardly, they resembled ordinary members of the masses; but inside, they're wired and waiting for the signal to attack. Their weapons are built right

into special compartments in their stomachs."

Staggered by the horror of it, driven nearly blind by the light in his face, Rand could not reply. In that instant a panel opened, a square of light and a man's shadow were revealed, and then a voice spoke anxiously to Hove: "In the third sector, sir. One of the units has broken down. A traffic patrolman at an intersection. The wiring in his head. . ."

"I have other things to do, Van Daam," came the reply. "Don't annoy me with trivialities. Kill him, of course." The invisible Van Daam blotted out a portion of the control board, and dimly Rand saw one of the yellow lights turn an intense blue color, then go black. Hardly a moment had passed when the panel opened again and someone new arrived. The shadow of the new arrival had a dome-like head. Krelig, the breed Martian, Rand thought.

"Mr. Hove," Krelig lisped in the dark. "The Claudie girl just came through the gates. . ."

RAND UTTERED a startled cry. *Claudie?* Oh, damn her foolish little head for worrying about him, for risking her life following him . . . Hove laughed. "Up with the lights, please." There was a stir in the darkened room. "We must dispose of Mr. Rand so that we may deal with the lady immediately. Oh, this is most fortunate. . ."

Rand squeezed his lids tight closed, so that when the brilliance of the lights pressed against his eyes, he could see a moment later. Hove, a small, immaculately-garbed figure with shining hair and narrow lips, faced him between the Martian, Krelig, in a soiled light blue robe, and the fat, flazen-mustached Van Daam. Krelig held a force beam in his webbed hand. Van Daam stepped to another door, pulled it open. Hove gestured. In there Rand saw a cold operating table waited beneath vast blazing overhead lights.

This was the last desperate moment. The music from the midway yammered against the flimsy walls of the chamber. Rand turned, walked toward

the operating theatre, feeling in his pocket the one object they had left him, the screwdriver. The angle of his body gave him just the fraction of time he needed. His hand dove into his coveralls, yanked the screwdriver free and pressed the stud. The bit whirled. Rand flung the weapon, and dived low.

The screwdriver spun and dug its way into the center of Van Daam's skull.

**K**RELIG wasted no time. His force beam set the wall burning where Rand's head had been a moment before. Rand, running, ripped the screwdriver free with a tug, and Van Daam toppled. Krelig was circling him, trying for a shot, while Marius Hove, hands fluttering, hunted for a weapon. Hove was nearest. Rand flung out his arm, caught Hove's neck in the vee angle, and jerked Hove around before him as a shield. Krelig screamed oaths and waited in frustration, afraid to shoot. In that second Rand knew horror:

Hove's neck had been *too solid*...

Hove was too small and light to struggle effectively. Rand had no trouble flaking away the plastic coating from the back of his neck. The fatal screw was revealed, together with a small brass plate which read, *Interstellar Auto Servant Company, Serial No. 338994256*. Rand pressed his mouth close to Hove's ear: "I've found you out. And Marius Hove is dead, like all the rest, eh?"

"You devil," the robot screeched. "You..."

**R**AND WASTED no time. Though Hove yowled and cursed and kicked, Rand reached up, fitted the bit to the screw head and pressed the button. The screw came out and Hove slumped forward with a series of metallic joint-squeaking sounds. Even as he lifted off the head, Rand wondered where it had all begun. In a mistake, certainly. A mistake someone at the robot company had made inadvertently, creating a too-perfect, too-clever machine. They could check back and Rand felt that records would show, perhaps several years back, a robot disappearing from the factory un-

der mysterious circumstances, apparently under its own power. A robot that had dreamed of being more than a servant, a robot who had killed a powerful man, Hove, and set about planning...

Krelig uttered a hoarse scream, dropped the force beam and fled when Rand held the bogus Hove's mechanical head and let the body fall clanking to the floor.

For long moments Rand's shoulders shook, in sick reaction. Then he stepped to the control board, fighting to overcome his sick horror. He studied the board for five minutes, then began to throw switches. One light winked out. Then another. Then more. Finally the board was dark and—presumably—the robots were dead. But the horror lay in thinking of the nine thousand who had been *replaced*...

**T**HROUGH a maze of paperboard corridors Rand found his way out of the office in the rear of The Freud Fun House, walked up an alleyway toward the shouting midway, still carrying the head of Hove

in the crook of his arm. People paid no attention. They were too concerned by the bodies littered everywhere you looked. Men, women, even children, fallen over in odd mechanical postures.

*I'm too old*, Rand thought. *I want the desk now. I'm too old, and I'm glad it's finished.*

Then, through a tear in the crowd he spotted Claudie Gray. She was searching faces around her and at last she saw him too, and began to run. Rand walked forward rapidly. He dropped the head and left it lying on its side, staring up at the lights. A passer-by kicked it.

Another looked down and emitted an awed exclamation. But the knots around the corpses of the robots—like the knots around nine thousand other corpses all across Mars drew the attention of the curious. Rand put his arms around Claudie and his fingers touched the back of her neck—he froze suddenly. The head of Serial No. 338994256 lay scowling...