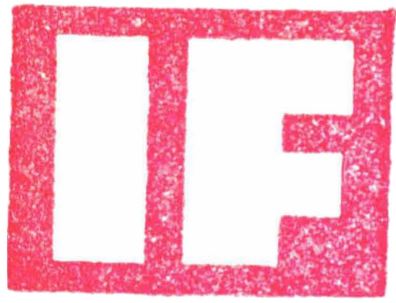


**WORLDS OF**



# **SCIENCE FICTION**

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# THE COMPETITORS

BY JACK B. LAWSON

ILLUSTRATED BY NODEL

***He knew a robot was only a tool to be used by men. But the big question was — who was using who?***

I

The fast, silent way it crossed the room wasn't just efficiency. It was an insult or, more likely, a challenge. As if crossing rooms without making a noise were some kind of game: Now you got a turn.

Questions Controller Karl Paker, who by regulation had to rise and greet even robots a courteous three paces in front of his desk, remained

squarely behind it, thoroughly seated and—in his mind anyway—swollen with hate. His bones, God knew, made noises enough, what with the accumulated frictions of fifty-five too-busy years. More, he limped. He wasn't going to give this thing a chance to listen and watch.

The next instant he saw his mistake. You have to *move* to stay ahead of robots. Ahead morally, that is; physically you can't hope to as



much as stay even. This one took and turned Paker's insult. Finding those last three steps open it took them, then seated itself on the corner of his desk.

Paker couldn't breathe. Something went wrong in his throat. Pushing back his chair a little and gripping the arms he regarded his visitor—to all outward appearance, a handsome, rather slender youth of about twenty, smooth-skinned and bright-eyed. You could tell it from the human only by its too-perfect humanity.

In his mind Paker took the bottle of Earth cognac from the bottom left-hand drawer and, swinging from all the way back, christened that faintly rose right cheek good and gory. Or greasy, since that was the best it could do. But the very delicacy of its coloring somehow warned him that the three-hundred credit bottle, and not his visitor, would be the one to suffer; what he had to deal with wasn't so much cheek as it was brass. He sank back and merely glared at the drawer handle.

"Well?" he said when his throat was working again.

The robot gave him a youthful smile, though the thing was maybe three times his age.

"I am R 391," it said. "However, you may call me Rob, or even Robby, if you have the appropriate personality-index. I am a human factors coordinator for this region. You are the Questions Controller and I am here at your request."

"Yes," said Paker, not looking up. "Well."

But he could face up to things, even things as humiliating as this.

"Look here," he started over, now meeting the robot's eyes—or whatever it wanted to call them. "We need help. I evaluate the questions. There seems to be only one of any promise, even if I don't like it. So I'm asking: Are there conditions under which the robot kind would agree to help us?"

As soon as he was done saying it he dropped his gaze back to the left bottom drawer. Cognac might not be a club, but it would make an awfully comfortable hole to hide in.

After all, he'd gone into questions control work some twenty-seven years ago because it seemed the one area where human beings had it over robots—in fact, had to have it over robots to survive.

Well, not survive, he thought. Robots would look after humans to that extent. Otherwise, where was his purpose. But in the present furiously competitive expansion into space, the only edge robots didn't have was in questions: Men could ask new ones, robots couldn't.

And when you got the questions, the best you could do was ask the robot for help. Oh, yes. He'd need a lot of cognac to hide the taste of that.

"'We' means more humans than you," observed R 391.

"Me," said Paker. "The three thousand human beings left in this region. And lots more, maybe even the thirty billion all over the galaxy. We're in a real hole."

He waited, but it was silent. Dramatic pauses never worked on machines. "We've lost two planets." He

rose, limped to the filing cabinet by the window. Let it see the limp. Here the thing wasn't sitting on top of him anyhow. "I've got it all on tape for you, since that's the quickest way. But it might help if you heard it from a human too; tapes are computer-filtered. Out there around OC40, just seventeen light years and four months from where I'm standing, there's a nice Earth-type world, exactly the sort we've got to have if we're going to prevent . . ." He paused, blinked.

"—to prevent our taking over. Yes. Human policy is no secret."

It wasn't. Or if it was a secret, it was an open one. If robots got the stars, as they were already getting two thirds of them, then you had no place to go. You would have to live in houses not out in the open, and when that happened you were lost. Robots were such damn good housekeepers.

"Anyway, in due course we went down on the planet—Baggins' world. Too fast, of course. There's never enough time to prepare things right, if we're going to stay ahead. And we couldn't let your kind have that world. Why, a man could almost walk around there in the raw!"

He faced the robot, which was still perched on his desk as if that were the only comfortable seat in the room. "Planets that congenial aren't easy to come by, you know. Trouble is, somebody else already lived there. An *intelligent* somebody."

Paker thrust out his hands—half fight, half appeal.

"Maybe you can figure how we felt. There are lots of more or less intelligent animals in the universe, but until we got to Baggins' world nothing in the human class. It was like when you've been on a scout ship for a very long time, just yourself all alone, and then you make planetfall and suddenly there are other people talking too. That's how it's been with the human race, except for you greasers. Well, we could talk to Bagginses, or almost, though they didn't seem quite right—"

"You mean they are not human."

"Maybe something like that. Only you're not human too, and we can talk. What it was with the Bagginses, they didn't seem to have any ambition." Paker considered briefly. "We went down. I should explain they're underground, and they were willing enough to let us have the surface. Which we already had, for that matter. Anyway, there don't seem to be many of them, they're only under this small part of one continent. No ambition, like I said. Not quite right."

"Well, that 'not quite right' turned out to be plenty wrong. One of our teams located a fantastic vein of radioactives and sank a mine. It's not often you can mine radioactives in a habitable system. Well, I guess you could say mining in that spot was out by the treaty, but it was inevitable. They ought to have seen that."

"The vein happened to be the gut of the Bagginses power system. Nobody knew they were that advanced! Of course, they misunderstood. Turned out they have robots too, only ones that follow orders instead of trying to steal the universe out from

under your nose. They burned us off the planet." He made a face. "You know what would happen if I tried to play chess with you?"

"I would win. Chess is no competition for us."

"Yes. Well, that's how it was. They aren't better armed. As a matter of fact most of their weapons are copies of ours. But they took us, and made us look easy. Then they sent their machines out and they took us on Robinson's world too. Either they already had a stardrive and hadn't bothered to use it before, or else they worked up one like that—" he snapped his fingers past his ear—"so as to come after us. Two Earthweeks ago their machines hit Columbia, a strong, well-established colony of almost three thousand people, and they made that look easy too. We're no competition, as you put it."

Paken went back to his desk and, robot or no, sat down, opened that bottom left-hand drawer. He hesitated, but the consequences of his last discourtesy were right there in front of him, practically bolted to the desktop. Knowing how silly it sounded he said:

"I need a drink. Will you join me in one?"

"Thank you, no," said R 391 and, amazingly, left the desk to go sit in the chair it was supposed to.

After the first flush of relief, Paker wasn't sure this was better: It had such a hideously tidy way of sitting. When he had poured the cognac and placed the bottle carefully on the spot where his visitor had perched, simply—as he told himself—because

that was where he *wanted* the bottle, he said:

"I was inaccurate at one point earlier. I gave the impression that the Bagginses are in our class. But the right way to put it would be to say we're nowhere near theirs." Then he took the first sip of cognac. Now he had said it, now he had really said it all.

"I cannot accept that," it said, using that unspeakable courteous voice robots always used when they were saying something that might offend you. "Animals of the sort your account suggests would not be your superiors in any meaningful way. They should be the reverse. However, I will be able to appraise their capacities more accurately after I have done the tapes. Now I can say only that if the situation is much as you've described it, we will probably decide to help."

"How soon can you say?" Paker asked, a little too eagerly. "They may decide to hit here next."

"Shortly. I should like to use your private bathroom, please."

Paker opened his mouth, but nothing was in it to say. Cognac cost too much to spill, so he got the glass down properly, and then the shock started coming out. He began helplessly and horribly to blush. He could feel it go all the way down to his navel.

"But!" he yelled, trying not to. "I mean, surely you *don't!*"

"I must communicate," said R 391, in the same easy, courteous voice. "I prefer to do it in private and in pleasant, mathematically neat surroundings."

While it was gone he put away a good thirty credits' worth of cognac, but his sense of outrage burned right through the stuff. There were places robots should have absolutely no business. He felt that strongly. And he found that, try as he would to stop it, his mind insisted on showing him, like a set of smutty playing cards, pictures of that thing in his bathroom.

And God alone knew what it meant by "communicate." Certainly only a robot would think it was the sort of thing you did in private—or in his bathroom, with the door locked. For he'd heard it lock the door in still another burlesque of human modesty.

"Well?" he said angrily when the door clicked again and it returned.

R 391 stopped before reaching his desk and struck a parade rest—a position human beings took because it was comfortable if you had to stand in one place a long time, and because, if you were human, you always had this problem of what to do with your hands. The posture infuriated him still further because neither problem could occur to a robot, ever.

"Yes," it said. "You *are* in a hole, as you put it. We will help you."

Then it said something else and he said, "What?" because he didn't quite hear. But he wasn't really asking. He was too taken up with the relief gushing through him, as if his blood had only this instant started to flow.

Robots didn't lie. From an en-

gineering point of view they considered lying complicated out of all proportion to the uses it might have, and simply didn't build in the necessary circuits. So if this one said they would help—they would.

He hadn't till this minute believed it; their business in the universe seemed to be making things hard, not easy. But they were going to help! "What?" he said again, more to hear that repeated than to hear something new.

"I said, I can tell you a good deal about them."

"Them?" he repeated.

"I mean by 'them' what you call the Bagginses. I have just gone through the entire file on Baggins' world."

"That's nonsense," he said. "You can't have."

"We investigated the species some three hundred Earth years ago. I will tell you about them, because it will be good for you to know."

"Good?" he said. "Look here, what have you been doing in my bathroom?"

"I have been communicating," said the robot stiffly. The trouble with their voices was you knew every bit of expression had been put in deliberately, by choice. But expression wasn't something you "put in." It was part of the organism's total functioning, like a yell of pain when somebody stepped on your foot, or the way blood rushed to the bruised spot.

"In *my* bathroom?" he said. "That's outrageous!" He didn't quite know what was outrageous, but something was.

“The Bagginses,” it said, “are a machine-dominated race. I was right, incidentally, in saying that they were in no significant way your superiors. The right conclusion to be drawn from the way that you were outgeneraled on Columbia and Robinson’s world is that the machines you fought were controlled through subspace by a master brain back on Baggin’s world. You had no chance.”

“What you mean is that their machines take orders from them,” said Paker thickly. “Instead of going off on their own hook. That’s what you mean by machine-dominated.”

“You have an excessively belligerent attitude,” observed R 391. “You should remember that under too much stimulus circuits burn out instead of operating. What I mean by saying the Bagginses are what must be called a machine-dominated race is that their civilization is oriented around machines. The Bagginses discovered about three thousand Earth years ago that their emotional needs could be entirely satisfied by directing an electric current to a nerve complex at the base of the eye. Your kind once made a similar discovery but have escaped its consequences. Their civilized development stopped. Automata do the work, but, as you observed, have not been structured to permit independent judgment. This is another indication of the Bagginses’ compulsive need for security, a racial drive whose origin the investigative team could not determine.”

“Compulsive, hell. It just shows they’re smarter than we were.”

“You are mistaken. Moreover, we

can predict with a high order of probability that this need will lead them to seek out and destroy humankind wherever you may happen to be. We would rather not have humans eliminated from the universe; therefore we must join forces with you in this region until the Bagginses have been destroyed. Their destruction should take, with luck, no more than two Earth months.”

“Just like that, eh? You feel sure of yourselves, don’t you?”

“I am sure my feelings are what they should be,” replied R 391 precisely.

Paker put his head on the desk, even though the other was still regarding him from that idiotic parade rest. Robots claimed to have feelings, but he intended never to believe it. There had to be limits. He sat up again, put the bottle away, slammed shut the drawer. He intended to be on his dignity now.

“I don’t know about that,” he said. “But if you’re so great on feelings, you must at least know what it feels like to be humiliated.” There he hesitated, for it came to him that probably wasn’t true. When would a robot be exposed to humiliation? “Anyway,” he went on, “you ought to know what making a request like this does to us. We’re fighting you—or would be, if that weren’t hopeless. At the least we’re in a race with you for the galaxy. We wouldn’t be out here except for that, overextended and unprepared as we are. It’s mostly your fault. How do you think it feels to come begging you the way I’ve done? You might have spared me being on my knees”



R 391 broke out of his parade rest and gestured sympathetically.

"You misunderstand," he said. "Speaking your way, I do not want you or any of the human kind on his knees. I want you rather to stand on your own feet more. Thus, what you have said is absurd."

Paker rose, limped around the desk "That was cruel," he said, standing in front of the thing and close. "A robot did this to me. One of your heavy models, not looking where it put its feet."

"I know the story, and you have not said it accurately. MK 30 has large feet, requiring fifty square decimeters of surface, and when gravity came on there was no place else to put them. I also know that you could have the defective part replaced."

"It's not a part. It's *me*."

The robot regarded him without expression, as if he hadn't spoken yet.

"All right!" It was Paker's turn to sit on the desk. "But a man's entitled to some privacy. It's my bathroom."

"I was communicating, as I have already told you. Subuniverse 12, which you may not know about yet, as human minds are too confused to make use of it, is a cosmos consisting of abstractions or forms, the stuff of pure thought. Mind enters it in the same way a starship enters Sub-U 3, except that one has only to think a pattern to create the reality-warp, so one does not need sunfield generators. However, one does need complete freedom to concentrate,

and I prefer not to turn off my sensors around humans: That is bad manners. Also, humans with derangements like yours have been known to attack exposed robots."

Paker looked away.

"Well?" he said. "So what are we going to do about the Bagginses? What's this two-month miracle of yours?"

"Our records are three hundred years old, but a civilization such as I have described is necessarily static. The mind synthesis in which I have participated suggested that, considering the fact that these animals have not empowered their machinery with independent judgment, the vulnerable spot should be in the animals themselves."

"Just the point you things would fix on."

"The problem then becomes one of finding a way to deprive these animals of independent judgment. The surest way, on the basis of the information at present available, seems to be to destroy the animals entirely. They cannot make decisions if they do not exist, and without them their machines are harmless."

"Trust a robot to state the obvious," quoted Paker. "You are right now up to where I am—where we humans got, I might add, without even thinking about it. The question is, where do we go from here?"

"I go to Baggins' world, if you can provide me with a probe-class ship that is small and fast enough to land there without being detected. If you cannot, then I go to Betel 4 where my kind are readying such

a ship, and then to Baggins' world. You," it added conscientiously, "are the one to say where you go, but I can think of no reason for you to go anyplace out of the ordinary. No human needs to change his plans. I will take care of this problem."

Paker stopped before saying what he wanted to. "We're involved too! I would like to know your plans so as to think about ours. We make up our own minds, you know."

"Once on Baggins' world I shall try to destroy all these animals. You complained that I was stating the obvious."

He clenched his hands. "Like that? You'll wander around and pull their heads off or what? You're just one robot, and these creatures by your own admission are a danger to the whole humankind. After all!"

R 391 was silent.

"Plans that are not known cannot be anticipated," it said at last, making that deliberate, youthful smile.

He felt the blood coming back into his cheeks and stood up, walked around behind the thing. He was looking out the window at the sky. It would darken and then turn somehow thin, and darken again. He felt something in him—some moral quality—tighten, and suddenly and agonizingly twist back on itself, the way a leg will go suddenly bent and hard with cramp.

"I see," he said. Unhappily, he did. What the thing had said was right, even if having it said was intolerable. "Well, we can provide the probe-ship. Happens I own a

modified bug. My plan is to go along." He hadn't planned that—hadn't, in fact, planned anything until he said it, but now he found himself suddenly committed. It was his ship. "That's my business, I expect, just as what you intend to do is yours."

R 391 rose and came around and considered him.

"You are old and lame and of doubtful usefulness." It was using the polite voice.

Karl Paker smiled at it.

"I can hold my own," he said. "One thing, I know how to disable a robot of your model. Even with its sensors on."

### III

But disabling the thing—even during the time when he could have done it—wasn't the problem. The big problem was holding his own.

Over the next two Earthmonths he learned how far claiming he could took him, how much that easy remark committed him to.

Paker tossed another chunk of vegetation into the fire and watched the stuff try to crawl out. You would never think that messy green tangle could move unless you tried to burn it. But there it was, scrabbling wildly at the six-inch wall of earth R 391 had put up to hold his fires together.

Perhaps, for that matter, it couldn't move until you put it in a fire. God knew he himself had been doing things for five weeks now so far outside what he could, that in the nor-

mal course he wouldn't even have tried—all in the name of holding his own.

"Robot!" he called, when the vegetation stopped struggling.

R 391 was sitting on a rock some twenty feet away, wearing a green sportshirt in forty degrees of frost. But its nose was red, as if with cold. Paker wondered a good deal about that.

"I hear you," it said.

"It's fifteen hours, Earth, time. Your two months are up."

The thing regarded him.

"Well, they're still kicking," said Paker, shifting around so he could reach the farther pile of vegetation with his lone hand.

"We have failed. I thought that you already knew this."

"I did."

"Then I do not understand you. You must have been aware of the fact that I already knew it."

He was too cold to laugh, but he could still make the right face to go with the kind of laughter he was thinking.

"I expect I knew that too."

"Then there is something wrong with you. As I have explained three times now, communication is an asymmetrical relation with respect to the information communicated. Thus, if you—"

"I've had about enough of your communication," broke in Paker savagely. "That's one word we could do without." He threw a new lump into the fire. "It's not as if you were always saying new things yourself all the time. Oh, no."

"Perhaps you need a new trench,"

observed the robot. "Though I dug the last one only five days ago. If you would not eat so much—"

"I eat to stay warm!" he shouted. Then he sat back, bracing himself on the plastic sheath where his right hand had been. He tried to stop jumping inside. How many times had the thing said something like that over the past week? Something that, if you could believe a robot could want to, had to be a calculated attempt to goad him on?

A robot's mind didn't work by free association. If it got from the idea of communication to the idea of his trench, it got there according to a strict deductive order. In which case what were the postulates? Was the general idea to irritate hell out of him? He couldn't quite believe it had that in mind; but just in case this was possible, he was going to remain very calm.

"What I mean is," he went on, to be saying something, "where do we go now? What next?"

"You should die within fifteen or twenty days, but you may last a little longer. Predicting humans in this respect is difficult. When you are dead, I shall turn myself off."

"After you've had the fun of seeing me go . . . I wish it had got us."

"The hovercar machine probably had orders only to protect the young animals, as I have explained repeatedly. When we no longer endangered them, it forgot about us. Such machines cannot decide to do something on their own."

"So turn yourself off."

"I will not be rude."



Paker considered its nose for a while, then went on. "Why do I waste my time talking to you, I wonder? Two Earthmonths ago I would have crawled through fire first."

"Humans are language-structured," explained R 391 "You are under stress and require the consolation of jabbering. However, you have not listened to what I say since I fixed your arm."

"But you say it anyhow. Why? Just so I can hear the sound of your pretty voice?"

"I try to think of what I say as though I were your mother, but perhaps I make mistakes. Working with metaphors is difficult."

Paker kept very still for a moment.

"Some time you'll go too far," he

breathed.

"I shall not go so far as off this planet, in all probability," observed the robot. "Still, unlike you, I can always be switched back on." It executed a different, brotherly smile.

Paker turned his back in spite of the cold. In his imagination he could see the landing party—robots, probably—stuffing his stiff form into a black undertaker's bag and bringing back movement to R 391 by turning a switch. Of course, if they were robots they wouldn't have a black bag; but that was what he saw them using all the same.

The worst part was he couldn't blame it for their failure. Not honestly. Animals, as the thing had explained once they were down and far enough away from the *Hermes* to be safe, were convenient to destroy not



only because they damaged easily, but because once you killed one it couldn't be turned back on or its parts used over. Which made sense.

So what was the problem? You asked where the animals were most vulnerable, and how you could go at them so as to be sure of getting them all. Logical questions, both. The sort implicit in the information you already had, the sort a machine not only could ask but could ask better than a man. The answer was logical too. You hit them "where the new animals are made." Because—as it had politely explained when he told it the facts of life—machines were superior lovers; if your lover was electric, you didn't bother with sex. You turned over the problem of reproduction to specialists.

Paker's left cheek was going stiff.

He faced back to the fire, throwing in more crawly stuff. No, the plan was all neat and logical, even now. So logical that any good mechanical brain could work it out, as he had one good not-hand to prove. With his teeth he pulled the glove off the other hand, the one he still had, and began to massage the rubbery cheek. You could put that in the fire and it might start crawling too.

But not a robot. It just switched itself off. Once you were politely dead, of course.

"I'm beginning to see why you things don't own more of the galaxy than you do," he called — even though R 391 could hear him whisper, as he perfectly well knew. "In spite of all your advantages, you're quitters."

"I have explained the situation to

you, but you are sloppy inside and forget things. You may use whatever mathematics you like to describe the problem, and I cancel out in every case. The Bagginses' master brain can coordinate more data than I, and it incorporates similar structures. As I cancel out, in the relevant sense I do not exist. You cannot say of something that does not exist that it is a quitter."

It really meant that, Paker decided. That was the trouble with a mathematically precise language. When a robot went wrong, it went all the way. A human managed to spread out the error—just because the language was sloppy. Like human minds; something you could never quite trust.

But something that could meet change, too. As a sloppy human you were always up against something new, and had to keep your meanings loose to deal with it. So you could *mean* something new. You could make meanings; that was the secret of good questions. But a robot could only work over things until they fitted already established meanings, and, if that didn't work, give it up.

"I still itch in the hand I don't have," he explained. "I even try to use it."

"You will tell me when these attempts begin to succeed."

Paker looked up. "You miss the point," he said, but despaired of making clear just what the point was. That was how it worked: You said something you didn't mean or understand even, and then you had to *create* a meaning for it. "I mean,"

he tried, "we're here and damn it, it's cold. We ought to do something."

"I am still here," observed R 391, "in the sense of being able to dig trenches, to lift heavy objects or to lay fires. You can do small, simple things like opening food sacks."

Paker was quiet, since one thing he couldn't do any more was take out an R model.

"I suppose I'll have to put some kind of gadget on that stump," he said into air. "I don't like it, but it's too unhandy without."

"That is true."

He glared at it. "Look here. Why don't you go away? That's something else you can do. If you went far enough away you could turn yourself off without being rude, you know."

"You would freeze." It got down from the rock—a handsome twenty-year-old whose breath didn't frost at minus forty. But it had a red nose.

"Look," it said, squatting beside him and extending a right hand complete with fingernails and light brown hairs. "Your kind cannot make one so good. This is an efficient model. If you were equipped with one you would not even want to go back to the organic sort, it would seem so much less useful. For example, with this you would be able to hold together the materials for a fire while it got started well, without being burned." It flexed the fingers at him. "I would like to go away and switch myself off. I have no purpose here worthy of the name, and I am unhappy. But while I have this and you do not, you are dependent on me and I must remain."

"Oh, unhappy," said Paker hutch-

ing from it a few steps around the fire. "Go on!" But God knew he was dependent on it—not just for creature comforts, but for survival. Or would be, if he had any chance of surviving.

"You know," he brought out, "I may not have two good feet to stand on, but one hand is plenty to sit on."

"You have made another of your nonsensical remarks," said R 391 in a gloomy voice. Of course, a voice like that was calculated, but with what intention? Did he really care what its intention was? It was trying to do *something* to him, anyway.

"What I mean is," he said, "if I'm here to die, I can do it all by myself. I don't need your help. If I could turn you off it would be in the bag and—" and there he stopped, because he was thinking of something else now.

He saw a way.

"Listen!" he told it, shouting over a distance of two feet. "Think of yourself as a Baggins machine." He paused for a moment, because that was a pleasant thought. "And humankind is this green stuff you've got to hold down while it gets to burning. Now if we take away you, I — I'm the Bagginses, I guess — freeze to death, isn't that right?"

"I do not know," said R 391 in a minute. "Thinking of these three entities this way is awkward."

"We should have known from the start! Of course! The thing to do is hit the machinery!"

"Destroying mechanical lifeforms is poor strategy."

"The brain, robot! The master brain! And, stupid, you didn't think of it!"

R 391 inspected the fire for a minute. Then it put its face through a complete smile.

"I almost might have predicted that you would think of such a plan," it said, when it was finished with the smile. "It could succeed, however."

"And you didn't think of it," repeated Paker, who was quite warm now, even to the ends of all his toes.

#### IV

But after that he wasn't warm again for so long it might have been forever. They marched crosscountry for three days to reach what, on the three-hundred-year-old map in R 391's brain, looked like a good point to dig into a tunnel complex, and all that time they had no fire. Every four hours R 391 halted. They would stare at each other while the stiffness sank into Paker's joints and his breathing came back to normal; then they were jogging on again.

Paker didn't ask for the halts. Hadn't he said he could hold his own? But he knew R 391 could have gone the whole distance without stopping, and every four hours he took the break without a word. It wasn't enough, of course; perhaps that made it easier to take.

But he knew.

For the rest, he depended on medicines to hold his own—the little green pills that would clean his

blood, let him go on, on, on, without sleep; the white pills when his balance got too shakey; the purple pills when he needed spurts of energy; the bigger white pills whose use he had forgotten. He didn't have enough, and he was counting the precious green ones again, trying to make the count come out slightly higher, when the robot said, "We will dig here," almost casually, as if it were telling him the world was a small place, wasn't it? He staggered on another thirty steps, counting helplessly. Then he got himself stopped and turned around, and then he dropped.

He sat and watched the thing sink into the ground without so much as pretending he could help—in spite of its "we." His underwear was supposedly good for fifty degrees of frost, but that wasn't true. He was brittle with cold. Was this the planet he'd claimed you could go around on in the raw?

Then, without knowing how, he was somewhere in the dark leaning on a too-human shoulder and he pushed away. That he hadn't been going to do. He wanted to cry, but he couldn't do that either. It was warm again, all except his soul, and suddenly on his left he heard harsh breathing. The robot brushed by him, moving fast, and he heard a fuzzy sound and then a sharp *crack!*

"What was that?" he said, but couldn't control his voice and it came out only one vowel, a sort of nasal bubble. Perfect fingers gently pressed against his mouth. He had to hold in hard not to bite.

They went on down. It was never

possible for him to lead, but the plan was his, so he was leading in that sense. More, he was taking care of himself now, even if his bad foot came down too hard now and then. He could hold his own. After all, they'd been in the tunnels before . . .

From time to time they passed vague little clouds of pink light along the left wall, clouds dilating and contracting regularly, like a heartbeat. Once the pink flared out as he went by and he saw a square, naked compartment, and in the far corner something—more a mass than a shape. It changed and uttered a noise of some sort.

Then he was past. Had that been the enemy? But what was the noise it made? A moan of pleasure, maybe. He had seen pictures of Bagginses: small, brown-skinned, wrinkly-looking creatures almost like elves. Miraculously close to the human. You wanted to talk to them. You could talk to them, if only a little, and there was the true miracle. In all those centuries of exploration and expansion humankind hadn't found anyone else to talk to, not counting robots. And of course you didn't count robots.

But he didn't want to talk to *that*.

They went down, on what seemed to him a long spiral, and there were no more pink lights. The darkness sank away for a long time, always curving a little toward his game side. The robot was leading him by the hand now, as if he were a three-year-old. With his other thumb—the one he didn't have any more—stuck in his mouth, probably.



Suddenly they were in the middle of a great hissing. Up ahead was something giant that filled up the black, coming at them.

He was flung flat against the wall. Breath went out of him; the hissing rushed up to a roar all around. He was sick and desperate trying to breathe, the air pulled from his mouth. The robot held him flat. There was no room; he had to bend over.

Then he was breathing and the darkness was clear again. The hissing got smaller up the way they had come; abruptly what must be a bend cut it in half.

"That was a hovercar transport," explained R 391, speaking, incredibly, in a normal voice, so that for an instant the darkness seemed to jump at Paker from half a dozen places. "We are close to the difficult part of our mission now. Thirty-four meters ahead, if I have measured accurately, is the conveyor belt which that transport just left. I do not know how fast the belt moves. However, seventy kilometers distant in the direction of its movement, the belt should pass a wall on the other side of which are located the control circuits to be destroyed. The belt is the best approach, according to my map. You are tired, and you are in a comparatively safe place. I will go on from here alone."

Even at five or six inches he couldn't see its face, but he suspected it was doing the boyish smile: Go suck your thumb, old man. This calls for youth—or metal. Paker passed the wrong hand over his face; his mind lurched a little.

"I can manage." He said it without expression, fighting the heaviness of his breathing. But he said nothing about holding his own. That was behind him now.

"I cannot undertake to be responsible for your safety once I am on the conveyor belt. I will be busy with more important things than you."

Paker closed his eyes. He let breath out hugely, even though its face might be right there.

"Look here," he said. "You can never be responsible for me. Do you understand that? Never. Not for a minute. It's our battle, and I'm going on. You'd better try to understand that, too."

"I will make the situation clear. I may have to do more than simply to ignore you. If I find that your presence is likely to interfere with what I must do, I will be obliged to render you inoperative."

For a moment Paker just breathed. Why didn't it say "kill?"

"I'll manage," he repeated, and started by it in the dark.

So they went on together. The belt was slow and he lay on his back letting the blackness slide over him and slide over him. He was sleepy. Here! Biting at his lips didn't help. Would the robot wake him or merely let him go on, riding slowly into the limbo of this hideous world? In any case he couldn't ask. A question of pride more than of a broken neck; his muscles were too sore for him to sit up. While your eyes were open you could stay awake, but how to be sure your eyes were open still?

And then something had him by the shoulder and R 391's voice was at him, too close in the darkness.

"In three Earth minutes I will say to you, 'Run!' and when I say that you must face back the way we have come and run as rapidly as possible."

His shoulder was his own again. Paker sat up, shuddering. Seven pills remained in the hip pouch and because his fingers couldn't tell which was which he swallowed them all.

When the robot shouted at him—*shouted!*—he started to run, only to find that he was already running, leaning away from his lame side as if to leave it behind, going furiously, all but galloping.

The air boomed out, again, again. Behind and over his left shoulder a sudden great jag of white broke the dark. Then something moved abruptly and the crash detonated—inside his ears this time. He tried to shake it out, blinking hard. Behind, the darkness caved slowly into a pale green, and there was a room, long and with something like a giant starship drive for one wall. A blur went through the hole while it was still widening, and then he turned and lunged for all that light.

He fell.

He was on his knees at the middle of the belt and overhead the hole passed by. Well, said something odd inside him, at least you were headed in the right direction. Then he screamed and was running again. He caught up with the hole without any trouble. When he fell again he was able to grab the edge with his single hand.

For an instant he simply hung there, his heels skittering away from him helplessly. He hooked the other elbow into the opening and pulled himself toward it. Head. And shoulders.

His feet found purchase and he pushed himself up and through.

The floor was probably a meter or so lower than the conveyor belt, and as he fell a gout of blue-white kicked under him. Then he dropped through where it had been and slammed flat, nose first, and he was weeping and trying to breathe and rolling all at once, and around the heat swirled like heavy windswept smoke.

Almost where he had fallen a young man in a flaming sports shirt crouched behind a cabinet: Robot R 391. A huge hovercar filled the entrance across the room, its bumper pressed against the sides. As the robot moved from one side of the cabinet to the other a gun on top of the aircar moved too, keeping almost exact pace with its opponent; and just as the robot reached the edge that blue-white slammed out. The air was alive with heat.

Then Paker saw the thing that was most of the right wall, and that wasn't like a starship drive at all. He forgot the battle in the middle of the room.

What it did look like was a giant secondary circuit for an R model. Not quite the same, but awfully close. The main difference was that where, on an R model, the secondary would have hooked into a decision-making component, this thing led to a strip of knobs and a viewplate of some kind. And before the viewplate, in

a tiny chair, sagged a Baggins, looking a bit like soggy pudding. The way any animal looked after you hit it with an organic scrambler.

But apparently it had been able to feed in the decisive order first.

And what good was a scrambler against that thing at the door?

Suddenly R 391 went over the top of the cabinet. The gun was a little behind, and the bolt caught it in the legs. The robot spun completely around in the air and dropped back behind the cabinet with a crash that Paker felt over here, in his eyes. Above the cabinet, where its legs had been, uncoiled a little puff of gray smoke; the robot lay motionless. And who could blame it?

So now came his turn. Paker played his scrambler over the aircar on the off chance it had a Baggins operator, then threw his weapon at it. No response. Slowly he stood up and he was still there, not a crash of imploding air.

The gun was still fixed on the cabinet.

What if it was impossible? He was the one with feet to stand on now.

He bet himself that he wouldn't get three steps, and then that he wouldn't get three more. And three more. The next one would put him into the line of fire. His legs wouldn't take it, neither of them. So Paker lay down and rolled. Then he stood up, but he didn't have to bet himself any more.

**H**e walked all the way across and he was standing over the tau node of what was, for all practical purposes, an R model.

In disabling an R model you had to hook into the navel—if you could stand to think of its having a navel—and pull left hard with one hand, reach in with the other and twist. Right here! That was about what an R model itself did, when it turned off its sensors. In effect, you were making a closed system of the elaborate set of chemical imbalances that served a robot for thought.

Only he couldn't. The thing was too big. He hadn't strength enough.

But it didn't matter. He had time enough to detach the connecting lines one by one. He was jerking at a red and yellow one when the hissing stopped—the hissing that he hadn't really heard — and behind him the hovercar sank like soft thunder to the floor.

Muscles relaxed all along his back. He worked the remaining three lines free and wiped the sweat from his face and neck. His hand came away completely red. Nosebleed.

Then Paker sat down and laughed.

What he wanted to do was shout, "I'm king of the mountain!" He hadn't said that in maybe forty-five Earth years; but he hadn't felt it in about that long either. And now he was horribly tired—even if he was king of the mountain. So happily, he only thought about how funny it would be for a man his age to say something as young and as vainglorious as that, no matter what he might feel. Happily he did no more, because while he was still laughing a young voice said:

"If you can help me up to my knees and over to that hovercar, and if it has independent controls,

we should try to finish this job promptly. I have been in communication with my people, but we will have to secure our advantage for the next seven Earth weeks."

And, looking over, he saw R 391 modestly take its finger from its navel.

"Look here," said Paker, shambling over to the haphazard wheelchair they had constructed for R 391, "I can face up to it when I've been wrong. Or I can try, anyhow. But *emotions!* I still can't swallow that."

He waved his hand before it uncertainly, and sat down on the bumper of the hovercar. One of the thousand things he had learned these four Earth months was that he shrugged with his hands rather than his shoulders. Trying to do it with one hand was like hopping when you wanted to run. A bad feeling. He looked at the sky with its ridiculous green sun, then back at R 391. There was a streak of rust over its right eyebrow that made the thing's face, for Paker, immensely more bearable, almost nice in fact. What he wanted to say was, "I would respect you if you were the kind of thing it is possible to respect."

But he couldn't say that. Nor was it quite right, either. But there was a need to say it, and the need had been with him and stronger every day since they worked their way out of that monster-warren, always in his mouth, and making him say altogether too many other things.

So he went on talking, when what

he really needed was a good slug of cognac.

R 391 continued to regard him silently. This was apparently one of its days for not speaking unless you put everything to it in the form of a question.

"I mean," he tried, "why don't you come back and *help* man?" Which wasn't what he meant at all.

"You should not ask that after your exposure to Baggins culture. When we discovered this world three hundred Earth years ago, we decided to leave it alone so that your kind could see what happens when mechanical lifeforms and animals cooperate. You disappoint me, Questions Controller."

He was quiet for a moment because this was news. After all their conversations on Baggins' world the thing still withheld information, waiting for him to find the right question. He, God knew, hadn't any secrets left!

He looked at the sky again, then asked:

"Well? What happens?"

"Machines dominate."

"But if we take precautions? We're pretty shrewd, you know."

"Your kind cannot well take more precautions than did the Bagginses."

Another reminder that he'd run no real danger crossing that hours-long room, what with that giant brain not having enough discretion to tell a nosebleed from a friend, as long as the nosebleed was walking around in a friendly way? He'd heard too much about that six Earth weeks ago. He wasn't so sure, either. Or it might just mean what it said: you

couldn't take more precautions, not possibly.

And this was true.

Paker made a vague guttural noise. Let it figure out whether he was agreeing or not. He tried the other side:

"General idea is, you're doing your best to dominate right now."

"Such an idea is absurd. I am too polite to suppose that you could entertain it."

"But suppose I do?"

The radio R 391 had tricked together began to gabble in the hover-car cabin, and he limped three steps over and leaned into the door and pushed on the key. "Paker here," he said, amazed at the everyday sound of his voice. "I am sending." Then he moved the pointer to where a long, nervous tone began to trickle from the set and weighed down the key with a rock ready there for the purpose. Standing erect he looked to the north where a ship was likely to come in. But he couldn't see the fire trail, if there was one. He went back to his seat on the bumper.

"Not long now. Well? Suppose I do? What are you up to if you're not trying to beat us?"

"I am structured against supposing a thing so impolite."

"I've noticed you can get around that kind of structure when it suits you to."

It was silent.

But wasn't the answer plain enough, once you looked at robots sympathetically? Once you realized there could be that particular question. Once you'd gone through what he had.

"You're pushing us," he said. "The whole business of galactic expansion, the whole faked-out competition, is just a thing you've set up to keep us going. Not to let us get any rest, ever."

"Animals tend to exaggerate their need for rest," agreed R 391.

"Just like you pushed me. You made us camp ten degrees of latitude farther north than necessary. Why? Because you figured the cold would keep me working. That's why you were riding me all the time, too. It wasn't really bad feeling." Paker rose, creaking. "Also, I know that when you got it in the legs that was calculated. You were still pushing me."

R 391 said nothing and he walked on by it and stood looking out toward a streak of purple forest and above it the open sky.

If you were a made thing, then your reason for being was somewhere outside you—in those others, your creators. You existed to serve them. And in yourself you were nothing. You had to have them. You couldn't originate a purpose—not on the fundamental level—any more than you could originate a new question.

What you could do, though, was use what was in you to the limit.

"Wasn't this it?" he went on. "Somewhere back when you decided we were going soft, like the Bag-ginses. The problem was, we were alone out in space. No contest. Nobody ever came up to our mark, and probably we were starting not to come up to it too—leaning on you too much for own good. So

you decided the best way to serve us was to set up some hard competition." How long had he known this? Well, for a long time and only just this moment, both. "To get us back on our feet."

He came around to where R 391 could see him.

"I guess what I want to say is—thank God you were able to decide."

Was he going to blush now, of all damned things?

"You asked me earlier about my emotions," said the robot. "'Feelings' would be the better word. I think I can make you understand them."

"I want to do that."

"You must not think of a feeling as something that happens inside you. Without an environment you would never feel anything. A feeling

is, in essence, the relation your structure has to your environment."

"You fit or you don't," he agreed, but he was not sure he really understood.

"Perhaps that is correct. But I am explaining my feelings. My ideal environment is a mathematical one similar to subuniverse 12, starting with self-evident axioms and working itself out into a closed system of a high order of complexity. In such an environment I would be perfectly happy."

Paker considered.

"And in the environment containing human beings?" he asked.

R 391 smiled carefully.

"Well, then, as you would say. I hate you. I also hate all your kind."

END