

The Prototype

By John D. Quick

Back aches, fingers hurt, and my eyes feel like they've been baked in a smelting shop for the past ten hours. I gotta get a new fucking job, Jindan Relequy thought to himself as he wiped the sweat from his eyes.

Jindan stretched and leaned back over the small console in front of him. A soft grunt escaped his lips as he pulled the protective goggles back over his eyes and picked up another small piece of wire. With surgical precision, he attached it to the proper connection points on the circuit board resting on the console and gently soldered it in place like he was a doctor stitching up a patient.

Not that doctors actually sutured anyone anymore. Not in the grand old year 2295, when medical science had advanced to the point that all they had to do was push a button to allow the small nanotech devices to reattach a severed limb as good as new.

Jindan grunted again as he soldered the opposite end of the wire to its proper point. *Some things haven't changed, though. They still need someone to build those damn NT units. Lucky me.*

But it wasn't healing units for NanTech Incorporated he was working on deep into the wee hours tonight. It was a PARU – Personal Assistant Robotic Unit. He actually considered it a bit ironic that he was here tonight piecing together the prototype of the Mark VII unit – after all, the entire damn project *was* his idea.

Relequy had gotten the idea from an old motion picture that had been re-released on holovision almost 20 years ago. It was an old movie from the twentieth century called *Star Wars*. As soon as Jindan saw the protocol 'droid See-Threepio, he had known he would be responsible for building such a device one day. He devoted his life to the study of Artificial Intelligence Techniques and Miniaturized Robotics. A basic class in anatomy had rounded out his preparation, and his job here at Planetary Cybertron had been the final piece of the puzzle.

He smiled as he remembered how amazed he had been that no one had tried the idea in the 300 years since the movie had first been released. He pitched the idea to his supervisor, assuming he would be given a meeting with the top brass to start development on the project.

Jindan's smile slowly faded as he remembered the treachery that followed. Months passed without hearing a whisper on the project until the day that his supervisor got a transfer – to be the lead developer on the PARU line.

The young man jerked from his reverie as he faintly heard a soft giggle. *What the hell*, he thought as he quickly scanned the small workshop for intruders. Finding himself alone, he shook his head to clear the cobwebs and bent back to the task at hand.

He carefully set aside the completed circuit board and reached for the final component. As he assembled the device by rote, he allowed his mind to wander once more.

The project had been underway for quite some time before Jindan managed to get transferred onto it as a measly assembler. Much to his displeasure, his former supervisor was now in charge of his new supervisor. But at least he was on the project. He could take some pleasure in that.

Until the Bald Old Bastard realized just what kind of time bomb Jindan could turn out to be, that is.

Relequy's teeth clenched involuntarily as he remembered the meeting. The Bald Old Bastard had called him into his office to discuss Jindan's future opportunities within the project. He went in believing fully that this was the moment he would be rewarded for his ideas. Nothing could have prepared him for the reward he got, though.

The Bald Old Bastard expressed in no uncertain terms what Jindan could expect while working under him. By the time the meeting was over, Jindan felt as if his asshole

had tripled in size, and ended up taking the rest of the day off so his co-workers wouldn't see the tears streaming down his face. The Bald Old Bastard had even had the nerve to tell Jindan that he was nothing more than a common liar and had never said one word about the PARU project at any point in time. Whether the old fuck believed it or not was not something Jindan cared about greatly. The senseless reaming he had received for simply breathing had been more than enough for one lifetime.

Jindan paused in his work to consider whether he had really heard a second giggle just now, or if it was just his mind playing tricks on him. After deciding he was just overworked, he shrugged it off and went back to what he was doing.

For almost ten years now he had toiled away for the company – more than half of that time had been spent on the PARU assembly lines. He shuddered to think that the last five long years had been spent acquiescing to every idle whim the Bald Old Bastard had deigned to bestow upon him. And for what? A few measly dollars in his pocket twice a month? Fear of losing his job? Fear of jail time seemed more likely since he doubted that the BOB's casual statement about Jindan's being suspected of industrial sabotage was just an idle threat.

Pride, maybe?

Yeah, right. Pride was just a vague notion; something he had heard other people sometimes felt when they started living out their dreams and fantasies. He'd surrendered

any consideration of pride during that agonizing meeting six years prior. The Bald Old Bastard had made damn sure of that.

A tight smile crossed his face as he snapped the now-finished component onto the circuit board and began the detailed task of installing the whole works into the hollow head cavity of the PARU. Now all that was left was to download the “Updated Features Programming” into the completed prototype.

Jindan gave a startled jump as he heard a loud cackling laugh fill the room. He leapt to his feet and spun around, searching for the source of the sound. Finding nothing amiss, he sat back down, amazed at how nervous he seemed to be tonight. In retrospect, it *had* to be his mind playing tricks on him. Hell, nothing else made sense, especially considering that the laugh had sounded remarkably like his own.

He pulled the keyboard over and attached the data transfer cable to the PARU’s information uplink port. As he flipped open the small internal display screen, he found himself wondering why there seemed to be something special about the upgraded AI package he had completed programming earlier and was now downloading. He shook the thought away as he typed the commands to run the data transfer.

After starting the transfer, he leaned back and reflected while waiting for it to complete. Tonight was just one more in a long line of indignities he had been tasked to endure since that damned meeting. He knew that as the lead developer, it was the Bald

Old Bastard's job to prepare the prototype. He also knew that the BOB *hated* to work late. Of course, if he had started work on it back when the new revision was given the green light, he wouldn't have had to force Jindan to stay and cover his ass for him.

For some strange reason, he couldn't shake the feeling that this would be the last time it would happen.

A soft beep signified the completion of the data transfer. With a nod, Jindan typed in one last command recognition string – he couldn't help but think of it as a trigger string – and let out a long sigh. He pulled the data cable and snapped the prototype's access hatch closed. Jindan stood and stretched, glancing up at the timepiece on the wall as he did so. Four fifteen. Just enough time to catch an hour nap before the Bald Old Bastard showed up to start his day by questioning Jindan about the key features of the new prototype. After all, it wouldn't make much sense for the damn thing's creator to know absolutely nothing about the fucking thing.

Leaning back in his chair, Jindan finally managed to shake off that familiar maniacal laughter that chased him into sleep.

Jindan found that for some reason, he couldn't help but smile as he stepped out of the Planetary Cybertron building and lit up a smoke. Try as he might, he could not explain it. True, the meeting with the Bald Old Bastard had gone well. The ignorant fuck

actually seemed pleased with Jindan's work for a change. He didn't seem to understand why Jindan laughed like a fucking loon after telling him that the upgrade package was especially magnificent, but, then again, neither did Jindan himself.

Must be lack of sleep, Jindan thought. But if no sleep made him feel this happy – this damn *good!* – then maybe he should try it more often. Jindan smiled as he realized that the Bald Old Bastard should be getting ready to give his presentation about now. He also discovered that he actually felt like whistling. Chalking that up to the lack of sleep as well, he shrugged and gave in to the urge.

He was a block away and still whistling when the top of the Planetary Cybertron building exploded into a hellish ball of fire.

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