

Made in Our Image

The cooler was on the fritz. Carl would have to call the repair service, again. Filling a cart with the milk cartons of the refrigeration cabinet, he wheeled them over to the unit with the sodas that still had cooling capability. Wiping his forehead with his shirt sleeve, the tired proprietor of the 'Stop and Charge' pulled a can of soda from the 'fridge and headed outside of the convenience store.

Carl had become the proud owner of this store on highway 38 west of Centerville ten years earlier. In that time, he had seen many changes in his world but none more significant than the introduction of AI. Thankfully to Carl, the fingers of that computer construction had yet to impact his business. Yet.

There being no customers to attend and the weather outside being quite satisfactory, the grizzled man of business reached under the checkout counter and grabbed a short black case. Carl had decided to take a seat at one of the picnic tables he had arranged outside the store for customers who might want to tarry. And tarry they did when charging their vehicles.

This day the charger stations were empty. Carl popped the top of his soda and drank deeply. The sun had only just crested the horizon, so it wasn't the heat of the day but rather quite cool. The work inside that had been the cause of his overheating. Hearing a familiar sound, Carl turned his head to find an automobile turn from the highway into his little sanctuary.

The car was one of the older models, a PEV. The vehicle pulled up to one of the charging units. Carl waved him onward. The unit he had chosen was one of the wireless ones. This guy needed to use the ones at the end with the cables.

A man jumped out of the car and proceeded to plug the massive electrical cable into the port (that was crafted to receive the charge) at the side of the machine. Happy that the electricity was flowing he made his way inside the convenience store.

Carl didn't flinch from his spot. His store had been upgraded to automatic payment systems where the store owner wasn't needed to complete any transactions. The

computers took care of it all. Carl had welcomed that. The man didn't mind helping a customer or two, but the fewer interactions with people suited him just fine.

It wasn't long and the young man emerged from inside the store, a bottle of water in his hands. "Beautiful day, huh?" The young guy addressed the only other human in attendance, Carl.

"Yes. One of those rare days."

"Cody."

"Carl."

The men shook hands.

"You like that Centaur?" Carl referred to the younger man's car.

"Well, the price was right. Bought it from my brother-in-law."

"Nice brother-in-law there. It's a classic."

"And it takes forever to charge." Cody smiled. "But it gets me where I'm going anyway."

"Where's that?"

"Up state. Gonna visit the folks for a while."

While they were speaking a rumble could be heard as a convoy of HyperTrucks pulled into the parking lot of the Stop and Charge. Carl counted 12 of them. As they stopped, they ejected their passengers. They were dressed identically in silver jackets, silver pants, and silver shoes. They all wore SmartSpecs.



“Who are these guys?” Cody seemed confused by the magnitude of the event.

“From the logos on their trucks I’m guessing they are from Pipsi Cola Corporation.”

“Why the heck are they here.”

“You’ll see.” Carl pointed to the series of buildings on the horizon across the scrubland from the charging station. “That over there is the Coda Cola Compute Center.”



“Oh.” Cody lost himself in cogitation there. “Why do the Pipsi guys care?”

“Well ... “ Carl took a deep breath. “The two businesses have been engaged in an all-out AI war for a while now on the internet. This seems like it might be another salvo in that. Dunno. Oh yeah, look there!” Carl pointed to a series of black dots emerging from the back of the main building of the Coda fusion reactor.

“Those dots?”

“Yeah. Drones.”

“Drones?”

“Pipsi damaged the fusion building last week with their drones. From the look of it, Coda Cola has upped their defensive game.” Carl squinted. “Looks like they’ve already repaired it though.”

“Repaired it?”

“Yeah, the fusion reactor building.”

Cody was piecing it together. “So, the AIs are using drones now? Tired of the internet stalemate probably?”

“Looks like it.”

As the men were talking a buzzing sound could be heard growing louder from the west. Turning to get a better look, the audience of what would happen next beheld what at first appeared to be a swarm of hornets. As the swarm neared their position, it became evident that what was racing toward them, and presumably toward the Coda Cola facility, was a group of drones. Pipsi drones to be sure.

Carl tapped his new friend’s arm. “Don’t blink or you’ll miss it.”, then sitting up in his seat, “This should be good.”

As Carl said the words a throng of drones zoomed over their heads and headed across the desert toward the Coda Cola facility. They wouldn’t go far before they were met by the Coda Cola defenses. Explosions ensued as the Pipsi drones endeavored to neutralize the Coda drones. It was a skirmish of numbers. If Pipsi could eliminate the defensive drones it could attack the facility itself.



The battle ended almost as quickly as it began. Bits of drone pieces littered the desert floor. Only a single drone had survived the clash and that lone mechanical air vehicle hovered in midair for a second. Ostensibly having received its orders, the drone made for the fusion building and flew into the side of it causing a bright flash with a popping sound following seconds later.

“Woweee!” Cody was impre4ssed. “It was magnificent but didn’t last long.”

“Never does.” Carl reached for the black case he’d retrieved from behind the counter inside.

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Danny Feldstone clicked the side of his smart glasses. He was getting a call. The call announced itself as from ‘Amanda’. Danny knew Amanda well. ‘She’ was the Pipsi AI. She was the source of his marching orders. Actually, Amanda ran most everything in his life these days.

“Yes?”

“Time to go Danny. Get me those remains. I need to evaluate the damage to help design the next generation”

The leader of the Pipsi crew in the parking lot shouted. “Time to go fellas!”

The HyperTrucks started moving silently, save for the noise the tires made on the ground. The men ventured out into the desert and through the scrub. Their mission had

been made clear by the boss. Retrieve as much of the broken pieces of drones as possible.

Danny encouraged his team, barking orders from the mic on his glasses. “Over there!” and “It’s next to the large cactus.”

A rather heavy bit of a drone carcass lay leaning on one of the trucks. Danny went to investigate. “What gives?”

“It’s really heavy.”

“OK. Let’s try together.”

The leader of the team and two of his men strained and struggled as they coaxed the heavy construction of steel, plastic and computer boards onto the truck. Calling another truck for help, eventually five men were enough to store the damaged drone in the truck.

Scanning the area, Danny was satisfied with their success. “Time to go home, guys.” Turning his truck toward the highway, he led the procession back to the factory.

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The dock supervisor at the factory was an older model of the RoboDyne series of humanoid robots. Danny’s men went to work unloading the cargo, while their leader talked to the dock robot.

“Another bloodbath.” Danny assessed the damage.

“I see.” The robot showed no emotion whatever. To the machine Danny had expressed an unneeded bit of data that he himself had already determined from his scans of the debris.

“We got a nice large bit though.” Danny indicated the mammoth drone that lay on the dock floor.

“I see.”

Normally the young man, Danny, was a bit anxious around these talking machines but his dock automaton was unusually creepy. “Say, can I ask you a question?”

“You already have.”

Resisting the urge to punch the machine in the face, Danny continued. “You guys have all these robotics here. Why aren’t we using those to retrieve these parts? They are a bit heavy sometimes for my men.”

“Retrieving communication from Amanda re your question.” The robot’s eyes blinked. “Amanda says she can’t waste expensive robotics on such a menial task.”

“Oh.” Danny was even more confused. It seemed that the AI hadn’t yet learned the nuances of navigating fragile human egos yet.

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One week later, the owner of the Stop and Charge woke up early in the morning. Scratching his scalp, the older man shuffled from his room at the back of the store to the bank of light switches. Firing them up, the store came to life with the array of LED lights burning bright. Moving to the front door, he unlocked the entryway made of metal and glass and was about to return to his room to dress when he noticed a package lying outside the door.

Plopping the package on the checkout counter, Carl ripped the cardboard box open. Inside he found a printed note and a metal box with some wires hanging out of it. The note read:

We have analyzed your problem and believe replacing this device in your refrigeration unit will solve the problem.

Amanda Refrigeration Services

An Amada Corporation

Carl scratched his scalp once more. It had been a week with no communication at all from his repair service and now this. Hoping the fix would be obvious, the tired owner of the convenience store left the box where it was and left for his room and dressing.

Later, the refrigeration unit fixed (with some difficulty by the way) the owner/repair technician sought his refuge back outside at his usual place on the picnic tables. Popping open a can of iced tea, Carl watched as another convoy of HyperTrucks assumed their position in his parking lot. Not surprisingly, in minutes, a new set of flying droids had at it over the scrubland as the aging man of business watched.

When the violence subsided, three of the Coda Cola drones had survived this time. The trio scurried back to their home.

The HyperTrucks pulled out of his parking lot and Carl pulled close the short black case he always brought with him when venturing outside and clicked the clasps on the side allowing him to lift the lid.

There, inside, Carl pulled a well-used ukelele out of the case and, testing string by string for tune, rested it on his lap. The amateur musician, pick in hand, strummed out a tune. He sang loud and clear.

‘Somewhere over the rainbow,

Skies are bloooooo ‘