

The City

(A Robo-Runners Story)

The city had been abandoned for years and its buildings were in ruins. Some leant against each other for support while others had given up and collapsed into the streets. Empty windows stared blindly. Doorways gaped like open mouths.

Through this city of shadows and ruins walked a group of friends, Crank, Al, Avatar and Grunt, travelling in search of a safe place for old robots. A place where robots could be free to live their lives in peace.

A place called Robotika.

"There!" cried Crank, peering into a darkened building. "I *definitely* saw something move that time."

"Don't look at them," whispered Avatar. "Just keep walking."

"What do you mean, *them*?" said Al, hovering in his anti-grav belt. "You said no one lived here."

"Scamp finks somefink lives here," said Grunt.

Scamp, the botweiler, was growling as it glared into the deepening shadows behind them.

"What is it boy?" asked Grunt, patting the robo-dog's head.

"What's following us?"

"They used to be robots, like us," explained Avatar. "But their minds have been infected by a virus. *Now* they are like savages."

"I think we should get out of here before it gets dark," said Al.

The others agreed, but walking through the city took longer than expected. Many of the streets were impassable and the four friends had to keep stopping and making detours.

"I've a horrible feeling that we are being led somewhere," said Avatar.

"We are," said Al. "According to my map, we are heading towards a stadium."

"You didn't say you had a map of the city," said Avatar.

"You did not ask," said Al. "Robots like me are equipped with maps of every known city - *even* this one."

Crank shook his head in disbelief. At times, Al could be *incredibly* annoying. "You useless bucket of bolts," he said. "You could have told us before."

"It doesn't matter now," said Avatar. "We're here."

The four friends had come to a huge flight of steps. At the top stood the stadium, dark and brooding like an ancient fortress.

Well, we've seen the stadium," said Crank. "Can we go back now?"

"I don't fink so," said Grunt. "Look!"

Behind them they could see groups of robot figures staggering over piles of rubble in the darkness as they made their way along the street towards them.

"I think there's a way out of the city at the other end of the stadium," said Al. "Perhaps we can go that way."

"I don't fink we has a choice," said Grunt. "Come on!"

The huge robot lumbered off up the steps with Scamp, the botweiler, close behind.

"But there could be *anything* hiding in that stadium," wailed Crank.

"Would you rather wait here?" asked Avatar.

Crank took one look at the shuffling mass of robots behind them and shook his head. "I'll come with you," he said, running to catch up with Grunt.

At the top of the steps the stadium towered above them against the night sky. As they approached it, a door slowly opened in front of them. Light spilled out onto the steps and a strange looking figure came out.

The four friends stared at the figure. Its head and body were that of an old man, but its arms were robotic. He had blades for fingers and, instead of legs, there was single, roller-like, wheel that crunched and grated on the floor as it moved. On its head it wore a flat cap. "Have you come to play?" it asked.

The friends looked at each other, unsure of what to say.

"Make up your mind," the figure said it said. "I haven't got all night. They're hoping to see a game."

"Oh!" cried Al, excitedly. "Is there going to be a game?"

"That's up to you," said the man. "I'm just the groundskeeper."

"I don't think so," said Avatar. "We're just passing through."

"That's a pity," said the groundskeeper, sadly. "They live for the game. But if you're wanting to get out you just have to cross the pitch."

"Is that all?" said Al.

"That's all," said the groundskeeper, with a smile. "Just don't start the game. Because if you do... you'll have to win... and nobody ever wins against The City."

"Come on den," said Grunt. "What is we waiting for?"

The groundskeeper wheeled his way along a tunnel ahead of the four friends. "This brings us out behind the away team's goal," he said.

"Who's the away team?" asked Crank.

"You'll see," grinned the groundskeeper, as they stepped out of the tunnel and into the open air of the stadium.

From the light of the tunnel, Crank could just make out a large rectangle frame in front of them. There was a piece of netting hanging from the top and he guessed this was what they called the goal. Above them, a starlit night sky shone through the roof, but it still was too dark to see anything else.

Then a single spotlight came on, illuminating the ground in the middle of the pitch.

"What's that?" asked Avatar.

"That's the centre spot," said the groundskeeper. "Head that way and keep going - past the other goal and you're out."

As the four friends made their way across the dark pitch, a faint whispering filled the air.

"It's dem robots," said Grunt, peering into the darkness. "Dey is watching us."

"They're going to be very disappointed," said Avatar. "We're not here to play games."

Crank didn't hear what Avatar said. His attention had been taken by something in the centre of the pitch. A round white shape, sitting in the spotlight.

It seemed to be calling to him. At that moment, nothing else seemed to matter to Crank. Nothing except the ball.

Suddenly, he raced off across the pitch towards it. Avatar, Al and Grunt wondered what he was doing until they spotted the ball themselves.

Avatar suddenly realised what was going to happen. "No!" she yelled.

Al, raced after Crank as fast as his anti-grav belt would carry him, shouting for him to stop. But all Crank heard was the ball calling out him. Calling him to KICK IT!

'THUB'

Crank's foot sent the ball flying into the darkness.

"Yes!" he cried, punching the air. Then something seemed to pop inside his head, and he realised his friends were shouting him.

"What did you do that for?" cried Al.

"Why did I do what?" asked Crank.

"You *kicked* the ball," said Avatar.

Crank looked at his feet in amazement. "I didn't mean to," he said. "It just felt... right."

In fact, it had felt more than right. It had felt *fantastic*, but Crank didn't think the others would understand. He opened his mouth to explain, but as he did the stadium suddenly filled with light and a huge roar went up from the crowd of robots that were watching.

"*Who are you? Who are you?*" they chanted.

With the floodlights on, Crank could see the ball rolling across the pitch. There was no chance of it reaching the other goal though as a huge psyborg was charging towards it.

The psyborg had a human head and one leg - the rest of it was made from robot pieces. With its human foot it skilfully sent the ball flying through the air towards one of its teammates.

The robot friends had thought they were alone on the pitch, but with the lights on they could see that a team of eleven psyborg players had been waiting in the darkness all along. Waiting for the game to begin.

The player with the ball ran straight towards Crank who instinctively stuck his leg out to stop it. The psyborg neatly tapped the ball between Crank's legs and raced past him.

A loud cheer went up from the crowd and they started chanting again.

"*You don't know what you're doing, you don't know what you're doing...*"

"Don't let them score," shouted Avatar.

With his anti-grav belt whining, Al flew past the player with the ball and just managed to reach the goal as he kicked it. The ball touched Al's fingertips, hit the crossbar and flew back through the air towards Grunt.

The huge robot looked at the ball and wondered what to do with it.

"Don't let them get it," yelled Avatar. "KICK IT!"

Grunt kicked it.

The ball whistled through the air, knocking the head of a psyborg that had foolishly tried to head it away, and on towards the other goal.

Scamp raced after it, knocking two more psyborg players out of the way, then he leapt and snatched the ball from the air in his razor-sharp teeth.

Pfffft...

The ball flattened in the robo-dog's mouth and the roaring crowd fell silent. The other team stopped moving and they all stared in disbelief as the robo-dog pushed and prodded the ruined ball with its nose.

"Now what?" whispered Crank.

"Now," said Avatar, "we run!"

Crank and the others didn't need telling twice. They managed to reach the far end of the pitch before the crowd had realised what was going on. As a deafening roar of anger rose up in the stadium, the four robot friends raced outside and started heading away from the city.

"I do not understand why they get so upset over a game," said Al.

"Game?" said Avatar. "That wasn't just a game. That was football."

The End

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