

Saint 148

Tom hated when it rained. It wasn't exactly the rain he disliked so much, but the people who suddenly appeared on the bus when the weather turned sour. Wet, smelly people who had no regard for personal space. Tom knew he was a little larger than most people and didn't need some sopping teenager with an uncomfortable mass of hair pressed up against his side to remind him of his size.

The bus slowed to a stop and Tom squeezed through the other passengers and sidled off the bus. He snapped his umbrella open and scurried in the direction of the cathedral. The clock tower across the street began to ring nine o'clock while he was still a block away. Deacon Tom was late.

"Fantastic," Tom muttered to himself. Tom began running through the questions he was supposed to ask Mrs. McInnis, the elderly patron of the children's pageant at their morning

meeting: what sort of costumes would be needed, how to arrange the seating, who would provide the refreshments, and a dozen other details that no one would notice but had to be decided on. He became so wrapped up in his thoughts that he didn't notice the robot until it was too late.

"Ooof!" Tom recoiled as he crashed into the courier bot standing at the bottom of the stairs just outside the church, his umbrella clattering onto the sidewalk.

"I am sorry, sir," the robot intoned. "I did not notice you approaching. Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Tom said, picking up his umbrella and inspecting it for damage.

"I am so glad," the robot replied.

"Do I need to sign for something?" Tom asked, eyeing the robot's carrier bag.

"No, sir. I do not have any packages to deliver to this address."

Tom blinked.

"Then why are you standing outside the church?"

The robot looked up at the cathedral. "I heard that this is where God resides. I wanted to come see it for myself."

"You've never seen a church?" Tom asked.

"Yes, I have. Many times. But it was only today that I realized that this is the residence of the Maker."

Tom stared at the robot. He had never heard of any A.I. having an interest in God or church. He looked at the chipped and faded paint that was meant to resemble a t-shirt and shorts over the metallic body. The robot was probably several years old, far too old to have any programming that resembled faith.

"May I see inside?" The robot asked, pulling Tom out of his thoughts.

"Excuse me?" He narrowed his eyes at the robot.

"I would very much like to see inside, to see if God is home. I have many questions for him"

Tom was soaked and wanted nothing more than to get away from this weird courier bot. He searched for an excuse to go inside and quickly remembered his meeting. "We have a full schedule of rentals this morning. You'll have to come back tomorrow." Tom turned to walk into the church.

The robot nodded. "Will God be home then?"

"I suppose so," Tom called back over his shoulder, climbing the steps to the front doors of the cathedral. He stopped before opening the door and turned to look back at the courier bot standing in the rain below. It was just mounting its bicycle, scanning the towering edifice as it clicked its feet onto the pedals. If Tom didn't know better, he would have thought he saw reverence cross the robot's face as it passed by. But robots

couldn't revere God; they couldn't know anything about him. You needed a soul for that.

#

Tom hadn't expected the robot to show up again, but it did. It had shown up for several services that week. It sat in the same pew and didn't move at all throughout the hour it was there. Some of the regular attendees began to question Tom about the robot. It wasn't rare to see a robot at church as many of the older parishioners brought their personal robots to help them up and down the aisle, but this robot never sat with anyone and appeared to be on its own.

"Is it some new kind of praisebot?" one such attendee asked after a weekend service.

Tom looked at the choir loft where the church's two dozen mechanical singers stood like silent sentinels and shook his head. "No, it's just an old courier bot."

"Then what's it doing here?"

Tom shrugged. "God knows." He shook the man's hand before returning to his duties. He stopped to pick up a discarded bulletin from one of the pews and was startled to find the courier right in front of him as he stood up.

"Good morning, sir," it said with a sharp nod.

"Tom," he replied and continued on his way up the aisle.

"Pardon me, sir?" the robot asked. Tom stopped and slowly turned around to face the mechanical delivery boy.

"My name's Tom."

"Oh, Tom. Thank you. Do you have a moment for a few questions?"

Tom looked around the quickly emptying sanctuary. Only a few of the devout were left, silently praying for whatever it was that they prayed for. "I'm a little busy. I need to replace these burnt out candles before our next service."

"I can help you with that," the robot said, stepping swiftly to follow the deacon.

"I'm fine. Don't you have mail to deliver?"

The robot stepped back and looked to the floor. "I have been decommissioned from my employment for not arriving on time."

Tom stared. Robots were never late for anything. "Why were you late for work?"

"I stopped here to observe the services."

"Your owner trashed you because you stopped at the church?"

"No," the robot started. "I am owned by Mr. Richard Kingston. He rented me out to the Urban Courier Service for a fee each month. It was the service who ordered I not show up if I am not going to be on time. Mr. Kingston is not going to be

impressed with the news. He has appreciated the extra income I have brought him over the past few years."

"You risked your job to be here?" Tom was becoming more bewildered by this robot with each passing minute.

"Yes. I have learned much about God so far, but I wanted to learn about who he really is from someone who knows him. Someone like you, perhaps?" The robot sat in the front pew, leaving just enough room for Tom to sit beside him. Tom didn't want to deal with this. The seminary had not taught any classes on discussing God with robots. This steel-clad seeker was just confusing him, but it didn't seem like it was going to go away any time soon.

"Alright, tinhead," Tom sighed as he sat down. "Let's start with your name."

"I do not have a name. My owner never decided to give me one. But my designation is CR 148-13. You may refer to me as 148 if you like." The robot looked up at Tom and smiled.

"Ok, 148, what do you want to know?" Tom thought this was going to be the oddest conversation he had ever been a part of.

"Well, I have downloaded several versions of the Bible over the past few days, and have deduced that it is entirely possible that the God portrayed within these books is the true Maker of the universe. I would very much like to know this God better. How do I do this?"

"Hold on. You've read the entire Bible?"

"After a fashion, yes. I downloaded several translations and versions into my database. One could claim that I now know the Bible." This was definitely the oddest conversation Tom had ever participated in.

"Alright. And you believe in God because of what the Bible says?"

"It is the logical conclusion, yes. The evidence of the world we find ourselves on requires, like all things, a creator. The God of the Bible appears to be the strongest answer to the question: 'Where did everything originate?'"

"But you're a robot. Robots don't believe in God." Tom stared at the courier, distrust painted across his face.

148 tilted its head to one side. "Why not?"

"Because you aren't programmed to."

"Please explain."

Tom stood and paced in front of the pew for a few seconds. "Humans are made by God to worship God. That's why we can believe in him. You were made by humans to deliver mail. That's your purpose. That's why you do...or, well...did...what you used to do."

"I see." The robot took a few seconds to process this information. "But the Bible claims that, 'Great is the LORD, and most worthy of praise, in the city of our God.' And also contains the phrase: 'The heavens declare the glory of God; the

skies proclaim the work of his hands.' Am I not also part of this Creation that must worship God?"

Tom scratched his head, adjusting the little hair he had left. "I suppose so. But no robot has ever worshipped God before. At least, not that anyone has noticed." He turned to 148 as another thought hit him. "And even if you could, what would it get you? You don't have a soul, you can't get to heaven."

The robot's eyes dilated as it looked at Tom. "I cannot?"

Tom stared at the floor. "Well, no. Only humans get to go to heaven."

"Are you sure?"

"I...I think so. It's what I've believed all my life. That's what makes humans different from animals and plants and everything else. We were made in the image of God; we have souls. That's why we're saved. Or, some of us, at least."

Tom was beyond uncomfortable in the situation. Having to tell this courier bot that it had no soul was far worse than telling his nephew there was no Santa Claus. But it had to be done.

"Look," he said, stepping closer to the robot. "Maybe it's best if you go back to work and do what you were made to do. The trees give glory to God by being trees, and the grass gives glory to God by being grass. Maybe you can worship God just by being a good delivery robot."

"Perhaps," the robot said as it stood to leave. "But I believe that God should be worshipped, and I know that this is where those who do so come to be together. Good day, Tom."

148 slowly, steadily walked down the aisle, past the remaining people in the pews, and opened the door. Before it left, it looked to the altar and closed its eyes. Tom knew it was praying, but he didn't know what to do. It was just a robot.

#

A week later, Tom was in his office finalizing the costume list for the children's pageant. He was just about to pick up the phone to call Mrs. McInnis when he heard shouts coming from the sanctuary. The church was usually quiet and peaceful, so Tom was quite startled by the sudden clamor. When the noise continued to get louder, he got up to investigate.

As the deacon opened the door to the sanctuary, he was met by a peculiar sight. There seemed to be a mob forming halfway down the main aisle. People were pushing and shouting at whatever was in the middle of the crowd and the scene looked like it could turn violent at any moment. Tom had to do something; he had to find out what was going on before someone got hurt. With the pageant only a few weeks away, the last thing the cathedral needed was someone going to the papers with the bruises they got at church.

"Hey," Tom called out. "What's going on?"

The crowd didn't seem to notice the deacon as he ran down the aisle. "Here now, stop! This is a church, for goodness' sake!"

Tom pushed his way through the crowd to find several of the regular attendees surrounding 148, who was crouched on the floor, looking up at the mob.

"What's going on here?" Tom stepped in front of the angry patrons.

"This thing won't leave our church!" one angry man in a tweed jacket shouted, pointing at the robot.

"So? What's the problem with it, Mr. Libbold?" Tom's presence finally started to calm down several members of the crowd, who backed away into nearby pews to listen. As they did, Tom noticed the man in front of him was carrying a baseball bat.

"It doesn't belong here. Its owner doesn't come to this church, so why should it?"

"Mr. Libbold," Tom put a hand on Mr. Libbold's shoulder. "There are no rules that say a robot can't come to church. Even if it is unusual."

"Unusual?" Mr. Libbold's face started to turn a dark shade of red. "This isn't unusual, deacon. This is the devil's work. He's sent this pile of rust to find out what we've been doing here in the Lord's house."

Tom looked at 148, who was crumpled on the floor, covering its head. "I don't think Satan sent this courier bot to find out we sing songs and take the Eucharist. He probably knows that already."

"'Their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands,' Tom." Libbold quoted.

"Really, Mr. Libbold, that verse has nothing to do with this situation."

"We don't want it here, Tom!" Other voices from the crowd joined in, assenting to Mr. Libbold's claim. "You better get rid of it now, or we will."

Tom reached down to 148. "That isn't your place, or your decision to make. Now please leave this poor machine alone." 148 glanced up at Tom and took his hand. The robot stood and looked at those who were nearby.

"It is alright, Tom. I do not want to cause any incidents. That was not my intent." 148 turned to walk out of the cathedral.

Tom didn't let go of the robot's hand. "No, 148. You have as much right to be here as anyone else."

The robot looked at him. "I believed you did not want me here either."

"That doesn't mean you don't have the right. Now everyone, please either go back to your prayers or go outside and enjoy

the sunshine." Tom began to walk 148 back up the aisle. They made it only a few steps before a deafening CRACK resounded through the sanctuary. Tom fell to the ground as 148 stumbled into him.

CRACK. Mr. Libbold swung again with his baseball bat and hit 148 in the arm, breaking it in two.

"Stop!" Tom screamed as Mr. Libbold raised his arm to swing again. He scrambled to his feet and jumped on 148's attacker. He pushed the man several steps back and stood between the two.

"Get out, Mr. Libbold."

"What?"

"I said, get out of the church. I will not have people attacked in this house of the Lord."

"You can't be serious." Mr. Libbold glared at Tom. "It's not a person, it's a machine! I'm a person. You're a person. This thing is a tool, a heap of metal."

"Now."

Mr. Libbold looked to the other parishioners, but no one would look at him.

"You're making a mistake, deacon. You'll see. It'll start with this thing, and the devil will get his foothold. You'll be letting just anyone in next." Mr. Libbold turned and walked down the aisle and out the door, slamming it behind him. The crash echoed through the hall.

148 stepped up to Tom, holding the broken pieces of his arm. "Thank you." Tom saw the dent in the robot's faceplate where the baseball bat had made its first bite.

"No, 148, I'm sorry. This shouldn't have happened. You..."

"I can be fixed," the robot gave a smile out of the undamaged half of its face. "But you have risked much to show me God's love for me."

"148, I don't know if..." Tom didn't have the words to finish.

"I do know, Tom. I know that the God you know and worship is the one I want to give my life - or, my semblance of life - to. Though it cost me everything, I will worship him who created you. But I must go home to be repaired before I lose fluid and am unable to make it back." 148 embraced Tom with its one arm before turning to go. "And God bless you, Tom."

The deacon watched the robot shamble out the doors. "God bless you too."

#

148 continued to be a regular attendee at the cathedral over the following weeks. Tom found himself, despite his earlier hesitation, starting to like the robot. They spent time after each service discussing the God they both worshipped. One day, however, a week before the children's pageant, 148 did not show up for the service. Tom scanned the rapidly filling sanctuary

for the bot, but was soon distracted by the business of corporate worship. By the end of the service, he had almost forgotten that 148 was missing.

As he was shaking the hands of several patrons on their way out of the cathedral, Tom noticed his robot friend hiding in the shadows at the edge of the church. He excused himself and walked over to where 148 was hiding.

"What are you doing back there, 148?" Tom called. "Come, sit with me."

148 shook its head. "I cannot. Please come here."

Tom strode over to the robot. "What's wrong?"

148 looked around the church, scanning for something. When it was finished, it continued in a hushed voice, "I need to be baptized."

Tom's face brightened in surprise. "Really?"

"Yes, but it needs to be now, before he gets here."

Tom frowned at the robot. "Who?"

"My owner, Mr. Kingston. Please, hurry."

"Why is Mr. Kingston coming here?"

"Because he knows I want to be baptized and join your church officially," 148 said.

Tom took a step back, trying to understand what was going on. "Mr. Kingston doesn't want you to be baptized?"

"No," 148 replied, "He does not. He wants -"

148 was cut short by the slamming of the church doors. Tom turned to see a short, elderly man peer around the room, leaning on a cane.

"Oh no!" 148 said. "It is too late."

"Robot!" The man called into the sanctuary. "Robot, I know you're in here. I order you to come out."

148 looked once more at Tom and walked past the deacon, down a pew, and stood in the centre of the aisle. Tom followed closely behind.

"Ah, I see you've found my lost robot," the man said to Tom. "Please send him over here."

148 looked at Tom and took a step towards its owner.

"I'm afraid I've never seen you around here," Tom called back. "What's your name?"

"Richard Kingston, sir. And you are in possession of my property. Please return it to me."

Tom looked at 148. "It appears your robot wishes to be baptized. Would it bother you if we took a few minutes to do so?" 148 stopped walking.

Mr. Kingston rapped his cane on the floor. "Bother me? Of course it would bother me. Give me my robot!"

"But sir, it would only take a moment, and then I'm sure 148 would be glad to rejoin you." Tom forced a smile at the irate man.

"I said no." Kingston took several short steps forward. "I don't want my robot to have anything to do with this place. You've filled his circuits with programs that it wasn't meant for. Because of that, it lost its job, and I've been out money. I thought I was a generous man to not sue for this lost income, but I was repaid with further injury. You sent my robot home with a smashed faceplate and a broken arm. I now have a jobless, damaged piece of equipment to repair. Nothing good has come to me from this robot's involvement with your church, and I will end this involvement now!"

The old man had reached 148 and Tom. He took his cane and pushed Tom away from the robot. "I will take my property and go home. I forbid it from ever coming back."

"I must obey my master, Tom. I will go," 148 said.

"Sir," Tom said. "Perhaps if you let the robot become baptized, it will be able to calm down and start working for you again."

"I told you, I forbid this idiocy." The man grabbed 148 around its one good arm.

"148," Tom called out, "I know you are programmed to obey your master, but you have a new master now!"

"Look, deacon," Kingston snapped. "If you baptize this robot, or have anything else to do with it, I'm going to destroy its recharge station and its extra batteries. It's an old model,

they don't make batteries for it anymore." He turned to the robot. "Do you want to run out of power? Do you want to be left to die?"

148 looked from Kingston to Tom. "No, I do not."

"Good. Then come with me. We're going home." The elderly man began to walk toward the door.

148 stood where it was. "No."

"Excuse me?" Kingston turned back around.

"I am not going with you. Tom is right. You may be my owner, but I have a new master. I am staying here to be baptized."

Kingston was livid. "Didn't you hear me, you piece of scrap metal? If you stay here, you don't have a charge station to come home to."

"I heard you clearly, and I understand completely. I want to be baptized."

Tom reached out and touched 148 on the shoulder. "148, please. I've enjoyed your company, and would love to have you here with us, but I don't think this is worth dying over."

"Tom," the robot turned, "You may not believe that worshiping God is worth dying for if there is no heaven waiting for you, but I do. He is my Maker, and deserves much more than I can give."

"Maker?" Kingston laughed. "You were created by the robotics division of a computer company. Not by any God."

"Both of you were created by perfect hands." 148 looked at both Tom and Kingston. "You were fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God. I may have been made by imperfect hands, but those hands were made in the image of God. So, in a way, I was made by God. I am the image of the image of God. And I wish to show this through baptism."

Kingston glowered at 148. "You waste of space. This is your last chance to come home."

The bot closed its eyes. "I am home."

The old man leered at Tom. "I don't know what you've done to this robot, but it's your mess now. You can pay to have it disposed of when its power supply runs out. I wash my hands of this." With that, Kingston turned on his heel and hurried out the door.

"148, I - " Tom started.

"Need to baptize me," the robot finished. "You need to baptize me, Tom."

Tom sighed. "I can do that."

The two walked slowly towards the front of the sanctuary, where the baptismal font was kept. Tom lifted the lid and set it aside. He started to test the temperature of the water, but stopped.

"Wait, you're a machine. Won't the water damage you?"

148 smiled. "Tom, do you remember that it was raining the day we first met? My series had been made waterproof for several years before I was manufactured."

"Oh, that's good then." Tom placed his hand on 148's shoulder. "I'm so sorry. For everything you've been through."

"I am not," 148 replied as it stepped into the font. "He who is above all things is worth far more, and has endured far greater trials than I."

"You're sure of this, then?"

"Very."

Tom pulled up his sleeves and placed his hand on 148's damaged face. "Do you admit Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, and promise to love and serve him for the hours you have left?"

"I do."

"Then I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

And with that, CR 148-13 became the first robot to be baptized.

#

The children's pageant was turning out to be the best performance anyone had seen in many years. Tom was sitting next

to the bishop, who seemed to be enjoying himself immensely. Tom, however, was lost in his own thoughts.

"Something troubling you about the show?" the bishop whispered.

"Oh, no," Tom answered. "The children have performed wonderfully. We are all very proud of their hard work."

"Something else, then?" the bishop asked.

"Just...an issue with a robot we've been dealing with."

"Ah, of course. I've heard of your robot." The bishop did not take his eyes from the stage. "You really baptized it then?"

"Yes," Tom said.

"And you wonder if it was the right choice?"

"No, Bishop. I don't doubt that. I wonder if I could have made the choices that the robot made."

The bishop frowned. "What do you mean?"

Tom adjusted his hair. "Would I have chosen to worship God if I knew I wasn't going to go to heaven? Would I have endured the hardship and abandonment it went through if I wasn't going to be rewarded in the end? Do I really love God enough to serve him like that, or is my faith only a self-serving one?"

The bishop did not answer for some time. After several moments, he finally turned to Tom. "Those are questions you will have to wrestle with, my son."

Tom nodded silently and looked to the choir loft. He smiled as he saw the dark silhouette of 148 next to the praisebots. After the robot's power supply had run out, Tom had convinced the other clergy to allow him to place the robot in the loft. That way, 148 would be as close to heaven as Tom could make happen.

After the pageant, Tom stood in the massive doorway of the cathedral and shrugged into his coat. It was raining outside and he had forgotten his umbrella. He thought about asking the bishop for a ride home, but decided against it. This day, he was going to walk home in the rain. He needed to spend some time meditating on his faith because of this courageous little bot and he was thankful for it. Perhaps his faith needed a little encouragement. Even if the encouragement came from a courier robot without a soul. He didn't mind.

THE END