“Lost in the Static”

By Marcos Escobar

 She entered my life in a red dress, she left my life in a body bag. Beauty and grace faded away into pain and tragedy. A good deed punished with the flame of compassion extinguished by the cold hand of cruelty. Now I’m left with questions that can’t be answered, now I can only think and let my thoughts take me away, to what should have happened. Repeating this scenes in my head like a film over and over, wishing for a new ending, but there isn’t and never will be. Now here I go again, fading into the past, fading into my dreams…

 “Lost in the static.”

 My name is “TAU-11” or “Tactical Assault Unit Eleven” or “Rust” as I have been fondly named by my friends. An old machine from older time. I’m one of the first-generation of robots to earn their freedom. I left a world where I was only meant to hurt people, now I spend my days trying to help people. I live in a small apartment that doubles as my office. When I tried to integrate into civilian life, first thing I did was become police officer, then after 60 years on the force before I left. Took me another five years before I became a private detective and another year before I got my first real case.

 I rarely get work. For the most people don’t trust a “Machine” to get the job done. But those who know, those who trust me. Know what I’m capable of. Sometimes I’d go months without a single job. Forced to fall onto my retirement funds to keep the lights on. But I never mind, I don’t need a lot. A couple of bottles of liquor and a bed were all I ever needed to feel comfortable so it suits me. That day I was going through another draught, no work in weeks and bored out of my mind, either sleeping at my desk or out in the streets looking for something to keep me entertained. At first that day seemed all the same.

 I was at my desk, back turned to the door, eyes focused on the vast cityscape outside my window. My thoughts towards all the poor souls lost and roaming the cold concrete fortress man had created for itself. And I was stuck in the damned office with nothing better to do. I was just about to down another glass of hellfire whiskey when there was a knock at my door, I caught me by surprised and I ended up spilled half the damn glass onto my shirt.

 “Dammit!” I said underneath my breath, “My apologies, one moment please.”

 I moved quickly as I would, not wanting them to run off before I could make it over to the door. I put on a new shirt and put away the liquor I had on the table. I tried to make myself look as presentable before opening the door.

 She was a tall woman almost reaching my height, with hair as black as the night, eyes as green as grass and a crimson dress simple, but with an elegance to it. She looked surprised by my initial appearance, it seemed she wasn’t expecting a “Machine”, she had nervousness to her hands gripping her brown bag at her side, but she mostly snapped out of it. Whatever it was the brought her here, it was more important than any minor distrust with having to hire an old war bot.

 “Hello mam can I help you.” I asked as calmly as possible trying to ease her obvious nervousness.

 “Y-yes, I here to speak with a Rusty.”

 “That would be me mam.”

 “G-good, um, I’m here to ask for your services.”

 “Certainly mam, step right in.”

 I welcomed her inside and led her over to my desk and the spare seat I had. She looked all around my office, expecting something that wasn’t there. Maybe she had thought I would be living in filth, with scrap all over the floor and empty cans of oil spilling onto the carpet. I was a soldier first and I keep a clean house, for the most part at least. She down in the seat, still nervous, but slowly calming down. I sat in my chair and got out my journal, which had collected a small layer of dust. I took out a new pen, the others having dried up and started writing.

 “So how can I help you miss…” I said trying to get her name.

 “Elizabeth, Elizabeth Foster.”

 “How can I help you with today Ms. Foster.”

 “Well, you see…” She paused for a moment, clenching her purse a bit tighter. “My friend Robert, he… He’s robot like yourself, he works in the same building as me, as a custodian.

 I began to write down the details of her tale, also taking note of her body language.

 “I was about a week ago, I walked into our office building early like usual, because Robert would leave the back-door open and have a fresh pot of coffee for any one that came in early.”

 “What was your relationship with Robert?” I asked politely.

 “Oh, um, we were just friends, Robert is a quiet sort, usually keeping to himself. But he is such a nice man, since I’m a nervous person he kind of helped me keep calm.”

 “Ok, please continue.”

 “Well that morning I walked to the door and it was open and there was fresh pot of coffee ready, but Robert was nowhere to be seen. At first thought he might have just gone home quick to grab something or was working on of the higher floors. But when the day ended I asked around and no one had seen him all day.”

 “Has he ever done anything like this before.”

 “No this was completely out of character for him, so I was immediately worried.” She replied nearly jumping out of her seat...”

 “Hmm, I see. What did you do then? I talked to my manager and he said he hadn’t called in sick or anything, well obviously he wouldn’t call in sick, but you know I mean.”

 “Yeah, what was his response to all this.”

 “Well at first, he told me not to worry, it was probably just an emergency had to deal with. So, I let it go for that night at least.” But then it was another day, then another and now we are here.”

 I could tell she was growing uncomfortable, her emotions were starting to show themselves.

 “Did you contact the police?”

 “Yes, after the third day… But…”

 “What did they say?”

 “Since I wasn’t a relative member I report him as a missing person, they almost brushed it off completely, telling me that he was probably just some dumb bot that probably short circuited and broke down in some dark alley.”

 I could sense in the disgust in her voice at the comment, she obviously not a fan of such a mind set and cruelty. I made sure to make note of that.

 “But that’s not all.” She continued. “He isn’t the only one, the entire area has had a multiple, um, robots go missing. But no one is doing anything about it. No one seems to care… well most people.”

 I finish my notes and close the journal.

 “So, you want me to find him, or the very least find out what happened to him?”

 She had been staring down at her bag for a moment, looking back up to me as I inquired the nature of my potential work.

 “Yes! Exactly, I’m not only concerned with Robert, but all the missing people. No one is doing anything, and I fear something terrible will happen if no one does anything.”

 I pulled out a drawer from my desk and removed the false bottom to it, pulling out a special bottle of liquor I reserved for when I get a job. I poured myself a glass then I offered her one. She hesitated, but accepted hands shaking as she pulled the glass closer.

 “Very well then, here’s hoping for a successful rescue.”

 I tossed it back, barely a second before I had the entire gas dripping into my internal engine. She downed hers faster then me.

 “T-thank you, I was uncertain that I would find anyone willing to take up this job, I understand you might have specific interest in this case though. How much will I owe you?”

 “Don’t worry about that know. Just worry about helping get this mystery solved and your friend back safe and sound. Now where do you work.”

 She pointed me towards a mixed district a few miles away from my office. It was a chaotic mess of offices, family run restaurants and the occasional discount shop. I wasn’t terribly familiar with the area. However, I did have one contact close by I could rely on. Luck enough I owed me one or two favors for a couple of tight spots I got him out of.

 His name is Felix, a young kid, use roll with a gang called the “Neon Jackals”, he gave me some important info that landed some of their leaders in jail after his brother was killed by one of them during a drunken rage. They set out a hit on him and kept him safe until the entire gang faded into a mere memory after months of infighting and self-destruction. He knows these streets better then anyone, if there is anything you need to now, he can tell you or at the very least point you into the right direction. I could usually find him hanging out around an old Pizza place, so that’s where I went.

 The outside was brick and mortar, one of the oldest buildings still standing in the city, a remnant of age long gone, just like me. The interior reminds me of the old Italian restaurants I’d see in old movies. Like usual I find him listening to music and eating pizza in a booth in the corner, trying to draw something. He doesn’t notice me, I walk up to the counter and pie a fresh pie and walk over, placing on the table. It catches his attention.

 “Oh, hey Rust, what’s the old warbot doing on this side of town.” He says grabbing a fresh slice, still chewing the last bits from his last one.

 “I need some information, calling in one of my favors.”

 “Fine with me.” He says scarfing down the next slice. “What do you need?”

 “A bunch of bots have gone missing in the area, I assume you’ve heard.”

 He wipes his face clean, “Yeah, it’s weird they just up and vanished, no sign of a struggle, no oil, nothing,”

 “What do you know about it?”

 “Well it’s mostly been reserved in this district, everyone outside it seems to be fine.”

 “Any similarities.” I take a slice myself and begin eating it. He always gives me a weird look when I do this.

 “Uh, nothing significant, the only constant is that they all live around here or work.”

 “Any word on the model types?”

 “Hmm, well now that you mention it, they were all worker bots, none were combat models like you. The biggest one from what I heard was industrial, meant to carry cargo containers.”

 “Has there been any response from police.”

 “Not a word. You probably know this more than anyone, but the police still don’t see bots as people. Couldn’t give two shits what happens to them so long as they don’t have to deal with it.”

 “Then that leaves me to do everything my damn self.” I sigh, taking my flask out of my trench coat and taking a swig. “Just like when I was on the force.”

 “Might have luck asking around, there is always someone looking, even if they don’t admit it.”

 I collect myself and head to the door. “Thanks for the info. And keep working on those sketches, my eyes aren’t that damn big.” He choked on a slice a bit, and I walk out.

 I spent the rest of the day asking around. Stopping anyone and everyone that I can find in the area that might even have caught a glimpse of the lost robots. I tried to write down every detail, but most of it is vague memories and fabricated realities, or less commonly rude comments about bots to which my only reply is smoke from internal engine. What I could gather for the most part is that most of them vanished with not a soul in sight, or so I initially thought.

 Down an alley freshly wet from the moisture runoff from the cooling systems above, was an old drunk sleeping in his own black throne. An almost comfortable looking pile of old trash bags and card board boxes. I prodded his pile with my foot gently, with no response. He simply fell deeper into his pile. I sighed and went for a swig from my flask, the sound of the lid popping off stirs him from his stupor. Of course, it did. He reached into the pile and raised a glass. I poured about half into it. He drank it with no resistance, like it was water.

 His memory was vague, but at the time, something was better then nothing. Told me about one night he saw a robot walking down the street, they stopped for a moment, looked as if they were confused. Someone in a hoodie was following behind, after a moment they fell over. The guy in the hoodie caught him, and helped to a nearby car before driving away. Asked for the model and plates, he said the plates weren’t there. But the car was a newer model, barely anyone had one, who ever it was, they made good money. I gave him fifty and started walking.

They needed to be close by, taking a bot offline or not across the city was to dangerous of a proposition for four people, let alone one. There were few robots in this area, so one out in the open was a prime target. I started planning calculating, suddenly that’s when things started to fade into the static. My vision started to become like static, a mess of pixels with no true form. I felt my programming start crash and systems start to seize, then my back up system came online. I regained my composure for a moment. My military hardware started kicking in.

I felt someone grabbing at my sleeve. Reflex kick in, I go for an elbow to the ribs. They jump back. My right eye was still clouded by static, I couldn’t get a good look at them. They pull their right arm back and leap forward. I spin with a heavy hit to the side of my head. I fall to my ease, systems are going haywire. Alerts and warnings begin to obscure my vision. Not here not like this. I feel a hit to my back knocking me onto my non-existent gut. My vision starts to fade to static again.

I have one shot, I hadn’t used them in years, but it was my only chance. I flip on the rockets in my legs and send myself flying down the street. It only took a few moments before I crashed into wall. My systems start to recover, I got up and turned to face my attacker, drawing my pistol from my coat. The coat is tarnished and stained, my pants are on fire.

I see them, in hoodie, getting into a and exotic car. I start running, a normal bot would be stuck in a shop for days recovering. But me, I used to fall out of planes, behind enemy lines. They thought they could knock me down, all they did was piss me off. I called Elizabeth on my internal radio, tell what’s going on and to notify the police. I needed someone to know where I was in case I bit it in our next fight.

I can hear her start panicking, trying to call the police, she told me she was on her way. I told her to stay away, I wished she had listened to me. They were fast in their car, but the crowded streets and tight corners made his getaway difficult. I put my chassis into overtime to keep up with them. Felt like I was back in the heat of combat, I had to force my military systems to stay offline.

Eventually they arrived at their destination, an abandoned factory. Getting out of their car they immediately start firing of shots at me. They were becoming desperate, I had them corned. They rushed inside, and I followed. It was maze of tight corridors and collapsing steal. The kind of place you when you don’t want anyone to know what you are doing. I hear their breathing, heavy frightened, whatever it was they were doing, I was worth killing for.

I try to be as quiet as possible walking deeper and deeper into the factory. Soon I found the horror show they had created. Wall to wall were the mangled and cut up remains of the bots they had taken. Broken down and taken apart piece by piece in neat little assembly line. I heard of these people, hoped never to meet one. Kidnapping robots and selling their parts on the market. If a hell existed for us, this was the closes thing you would ever so to it on earth.

I tread carefully, keeping careful eye on my surroundings, I noticed a second-floor catwalk. I thought I spotted movement and started walking towards a nearby set of stairs, but was stopped by a missed shot. I ducked behind some crates. The shot meant for my head, their hands are shacking, they were scared, it was perfect. I fired of two shots above the cat walk, then rushed the stairs. I nearly make it to the top when they cut me off and fire another round into my shoulder. My arm goes limp for a moment. They try to fire another, but they are empty. They started running again and I followed. I fire warning shots, but no good.

I had to do it the old fashion way. I throw my coat to the side and let my old programming kick in. My systems begin repairs and my movement increases. I was so used to walking around like a normal person, that returning to my old self felt alien to me. I leapt into the air, jumping over pushed over tables and crates. They reload and begin firing again, I’m too fast and they are too shaken. I leap on more time and try to tackle them onto the ground, they hit me right in the side, and I hit them knocking their gun across the catwalk.

They pull something out of their jacket as I’m trying pick myself off the ground. My systems went offline, I was out of power. The static returns, I’m dazed running out of potions. Electricity pops from a stick in their hand, they charge at me, hitting me across the head again, then the side and head again. Then they kicked me to the ground. They rushed over to the gun, I force myself to my feat. They aimed right at me, then I feel myself falling, then bang. I hit the ground again before the barrel even raises. I look back to where I was standing and their she is, Elizabeth, drenched in crimson. A face of pain and sorrow, she collapsed onto the ground before I could even react. I rushed over, shake, but it was too late. Straight to the heart, dead before it even left her body.

No, no this wasn’t supposed to happen. My systems are back online, rage fuels me. A blade slides out from my forearm, dusty and stained from the last day it was used. I move with incredible speed. They were in shock and didn’t see me coming. My hands grasped their neck, my blade was at their throat. I said one thing.

“Why?”

Their response.

“I don’t know.”

The hood fell back, and I saw her face. Elizabeth’s face. I was shocked, I turned around and saw her body was still there. Then back at her killer. What was this, what was all of this. But I never got my answer, because the police arrived. They accessed my memory and confirmed what had happened. She was Elizbeth’s sister. She was selling parts on the market on the cheap end. I don’t know why Elizabeth wanted to stop her, or why she brought me into this mess, or why she thought my life was more than hers. But I’ll never get the answers to my questions and that just how it is. My memories are plagued by static, a constant reminder of that day. Sometimes I feel myself wanting to get lost in it all, but I can’t there is more work to be done. There are more souls still out there in need of my help, until my work is done, I can’t…

“I can’t get lost in the static.”