

Bonds of Steel

By Colin Dugan

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Somewhere in Northeast America

The traveler raced through the woods, and he considered his choices. What chased him could easily turn him into a gross stain in the ground. He could just escape now. On the other hand, killing it would reward him handsomely. Quickly thinking, he turned to face his adversary.

The mutant's body was a misshapen horror, with bones pointing outward under pale, stretched skin. Sharp, pointed quills stuck out of its back, and its gleaming, bloodshot eye was like a watchful sentry. Elongated, bony arms stuck out here and there, reaching out as if asking for help. Drool leaked out of large, gaping mouth with filth ridden gums and jagged teeth. Mangled, small legs slowly dragged forward. Overall, it seemed to rely on its arms for mobility, use them to hold itself up and drag itself forward. It moved with surprising speed, quickly closing in on the fleeing traveler. Initially pulling out his knife, the traveler hesitated. What if the creature's blood was acidic? To kill the mutant, he may lose a good knife. Then, from the corner of his eye, he saw it. Large machinery was attached to the thing's chest, with wires running into its malformed body. To be exact, what the thing was wearing was a bionic accelerator. Seeing this, the traveler made up his mind. Deciding against the risks, the traveler swiveled around and charged forward, plunging his knife into the creature's chest. Blood spewed out like a rocket, coating his knife and hand.

Victory was his! The mutant was dead and he was unharmed! Wait...where was that subtle stinging in his hand coming from? Glancing at his hand, he recoiled in shock at what he saw. Nausea filled him, and his legs buckled as he witnessed the horrible sight before him. Acid had already melted the knife to slag, and his hand bubbled as the skin was slowly eaten away. Suddenly, a sharp pain coursed through the traveler's arm. Swearing, he pulled out the knife and tumbled to the ground, letting out every word and curse he could think of. Reaching for his med kit, he pulled out a vial of blue liquid and poured its contents on his hand. Slowly, the pain subsided. Well, now he knew-the mutant's blood was acidic. He stood up, ignoring the throbbing in his hand. He needed to get moving. His friend was going to show up sooner or later. "And by friend, he thought, I mean the only person around who I can talk to without getting my face ripped off." The traveler heard the familiar greeting of a motorcycle's hum as his friend emerged from the forest. Walking forward, he went to meet his companion.

The motorcycle was unwavering and unfriendly, designed specifically to outrun and defend from raiders, mutants, and pretty much everything/everyone else that meet you. As he came to

a stop, the angered expression he wore only deepened. Hopping off, he walked towards the traveler. "What were you thinking, Clink?" said the other. "You could've been killed."

"Relax, Steel said Clink, his voice dripping with acrimony. I managed to get something out of it, so I thought you'd be a little more appreciative."

"Yeah, and you got a melted knife and a burned hand out of it," said Steel. "We can't afford this right now!"

For what seemed like eternity, Clink stayed silent. Sighing, Steel said, "Okay, okay. I'm sorry. This was a good find. Let's just get out of here before someone finds us."

Nodding to him in a calm manner, he walked over to the mutant and tore the accelerator out of the thing's chest. He then slowly trekked back to the motorcycle, walking this way and that. Hopping in, they took off to make camp for the night. Slowly they approached a thick woods. Large, lush evergreens were scattered here and there, with pines and oaks filling in the rest. Some might find it unnatural, but in this changed world, it was Tuesday. Finding an enclosed clearing in the woods, they set up a fire. For a while, nothing was said. There was quiet. Finally, in a desperate attempt to break what had been brought upon them by stress, Steel said, "So, what's your favorite movie?"

"What?", said Clink, confounded at this question.

"Your favorite movie, stupid, I'm asking you what your favorite movie is," said Steel.

After complimenting this for a few minutes, he said "Back to the Fut—I mean, The Matrix.

"Wow, real original, pal," said Steel, his voice laced with sarcasm.

"Oh, stick a sock in it."

"I mean it! The mere fact that The Matrix is your favorite movie suggests something is wrong with you."

"Oh, wow, big talk from the guy that plays Call of Duty: Black Ops 16 every single second he gets."

"So?!? I least I play something that stayed alive for for decades instead of something that died after the first flippin movie!

"Touché Steel, Touché."

"Alright, well *my* favorite movie is Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back."

“I guess that’s fair.”

“Right? I think it’s an amazing film.”

“It really is.”

“Yeah, you know it.”

Silence again, though this time it was calm. After a few minutes, Steel took Clinks find and attached it to their “project”. While he let it integrate for a few minutes, he said “So, what’s your favorite food.”

“Easy, said Clink. Ramen”

“Ah, I would go with pizza.”

“Oh, remember the time we had that Pizza Ramen?”

“Yeah, that was really weird, but also really good.”

“Definitely one of the weirder foods we’ve eaten.”

“Totally.”

“One of the only good things to happen to us.”

“Yeah, kinda stinks that noodles covered with sauce and cheese was one of our more pleasant memories.”

“Well, I mean, mutants, raiders, psychos, and what remains of government and armies want us dead, “repurposed”, enslaved, or eaten.”

“Yeah, it’s rough, bit at least we have some stuff to hold on to. Like our high scores in Pac Man: The Next Generation and Call of Duty: Black Ops 16, respectively.”

“Yeah, we’re like two awesome guys from movies who just mess around, certainly beats my old job.”

“Same here.”

Just then, the two heard a small beep. Looking over, the two friends found the their creation had accepted the accelerator and was ready to be completed. Walking over, The two took out large metal suitcase. Opening it, it contained parts unheard of by most. Taking out what

was similar to a wrench, Steel loosened the bolts holding the center together and opened the hatches. Tiny, complicated parts were put perfectly into place, and with the addition of the accelerator, things would go even better than expected. Removing what appeared to be a small, glowing metallic ball, he inserted it into the things chest. Wires came to meet the ball, wrapping their thin, wavelike metal strands around the ball. Energy began to flow through the wires, and the hatches shut. The creation began to shudder and shake as it began to activate. "Alright, that's it, said Steel."

"You sure?" said Clink.

"Yep. All we have do now is wait for it to activate."

"I'm still surprised on what you decide on as a power source, considering it brought about...well you know what happened better than I do."

"Yeah, everyone always refers to it as the end, or The Great Halt, or the Day Earth changed. I prefer to call it, "The beginning of a new era."

"Really, why?"

"Every major event causes the beginning of a new era in history. Sure, things may seem bad now, but one day, we'll be remembered as survivors, the pioneers of an old age!"

"Yeah, no one's gonna care that we made an artificially intelligent robot if mutants kill us first."

"But, that's we are. It's impressive, because this way we're preserving our own culture in the sense of the world."

"Yeah I guess so, but, we're not that different from humans anyway."

"Well God made man in his image, and man made us in...his image?"

"So is man like our God or something?"

"I guess so, but we don't regard mankind as that."

"I thought the whole purpose behind this is that we can prove that we can create our own culture, race, and people, and that we don't need to depend on humanity for our people's creation."

"That's exactly why we're doing this, although I think we should remember not to forget humanity initially created us and not regard them as something lower than ourselves."

“Well, we’re the lower ones. At least humans are actually alive. What do we have?”

“We have our intelligence, our personality, our video game scores, our favorite foods, our wisecracks, our thoughts, and that one’s the most important. The fact that consider your own existence is the proof that you have one.”

Nodding at the notion, Clink walked over to check the robot. Just their luck! The download and integration was complete! Their robot was opening its eyes. Gradually, it creaked its eyes open, slowly looking up in the process. The soft glow of the campfire cast a dim light of a Clinks face, slowly opening a mechanical smile.

Asking in a small voice, it said, “Where am I what’s going on? Are you my creators or something?”

A grin opening on his metallic face, Clink said, “That’s right! I’m Clink, this is Steel, and you are Scrap!

“Why am I called Scrap?” he said

“Because you’re made of scrap parts, obviously. Anyway, something you should know about the world is-“

“Yeah, Yeah, some great event changed the world, blah, blah, blah, I was created to prove something, blah, blah, blah, we’re going on adventures now blah, blah, blah, *God* I get it!

“Wow. For the equivalent of a 12 year old, you have a major attitude.

“Well, you two idiots programmed me, so that’s your own fault.”

“Oh, be quiet! If you already know so much, I guess there’s no need for us to talk, then!

The trio then went to bed. Waking up, they walked forward the end of the trees. They were heading for a long lost metropolis for their next adventure. The mood seemed more calm and peaceful than the night before. Scrap seemed more social, for one thing. He seemed genuinely interested in getting to know his creators. As Scrap got to know them better, he seemed to show some interest in Steels’ console. Taking it, he quickly beat his high scores, earning the livid robots’ wrath. However, after a time, Scrap seemed to grow quiet, something bothering him, a somber thought perturbing the robots new mind. He came to a stop.

“Scrap, what’s wrong?”said Clink

“Something’s bothering me,”said the young bot.

“Well, What is it?”

“Well...are we alive?” said Scrap, his voice cracking with doubt and trepidation

Unnerved, Steel went to answer, but Clink interrupted. Cracking open a soda, he said “You know, that’s a complicated question. People always wonder if there a defying point to be alive when sentience comes into play, but I have a theory. Life is all about finding a good way to enjoy it, in sense it’s about the journey. But no one ever really follows this, so maybe...maybe there’s no such thing as one true life. Maybe we can only get as close to it as we can”

“Clink, What the heck are you on about?” said Steel.

“I dunno, man, soda makes me philosophical, let’s just go.”

Hopping on the motorcycle, they took off to what was once a sprawling utopian city but had since fallen into a ruins. A large building the travelers knew as The Empire State Building was said to still stand there, crooked and tall. They heard a settlement was founded at the base. Perhaps they could find some more companions once they reached it. Or perhaps they would be unfriendly. One way or another, they were heading off to parts unknown.

Feeling comfortable, Scrap said “Thanks, Clink. I’m feeling better about our existence now.”

Smiling, Clink said “No problem Scrap. We’re not so different after all, humans and robots. We play video games, we try to survive, we even eat food!”

Thinking for a moment, Scrap said, “Hey, Clink, why can we drink and eat food? Why were we created to do that?”

Clink curtly replied “Who cares?! It’s awesome!”

