

THE INSTALLERS

PART ONE

BY TREVOR SHIP

It was the creaking sounds that he hated.

Or was it the faint smell of burning electrics?

Yes, it was that too. Hunched in a dark corner he looked like a metallic shoebox that was hugging its knees.

A spark fizzed in a panel somewhere above him, showering him with shards of white-hot light. He jumped and hugged up to a pod that was in the centre of the hold. As he stretched his spindly arms around it, he paid it scant attention, beyond acknowledging that it was one that they had found on their most recent salvage mission. Which is what had led to this situation of their ship being under fire and him cowering in the hold.

Could this get any worse he wondered?

Then the lights went out.

The lights shouldn't really have mattered, as he had the latest night vision system fitted. It had, of course, been an administrative error. At his age, he should never have received the upgrade, but the docket said he should have it and so, in a blank state of bureaucracy, it was done.

A week later the same team received his termination order as he had exceeded his useful life cycle. They duly noted that an error had been made, only briefly stopping to note that it wasn't their fault, before ignoring the mistake entirely.

As he lay there in fear, with the ship rocking to and fro like a rubber duck in a boisterous toddler's bath, he let his visual systems activate and scanned the room, it was only now that he noticed that the pod he was clinging to was emitting a slight blue light.

He now had a reason to be nervous of that too, he had never seen anything like this pod, it had some markings on it that distantly nagged at his memory circuits, but he could not be sure why.

The pod had now been added to the rather long list of things that he was scared of, in fact, it would probably have been quicker to list the things that he was not scared of.

The light in the pod was gradually getting brighter, and then it was joined by a soft hum that slowly became a hissing noise. He looked in awe at the pod, at a loss what to expect. Beyond knowing that he almost certainly would not like it.

The top slowly lifted, sliding backwards like a convertible roof mechanism in a very expensive car.

Was there a shape in there? As he wondered to himself, the shape decided very definitely that it was in there and took a sharp inhalation of breath followed by a severe bout of coughing.

Both of these were sounds that he had never heard before, and they did little to calm his electronic nerves. The coughing sounded wet and nasty, and the shape in the pod then sat up sharply, and whilst still coughing looked around blinking and wiping their eyes.

The eyes were of Maisie Davenport, given the darkness, and the two hundred years or so of sleep she had just awoken from, she was not feeling at her best.

‘Hello?’ Whimpered Maisie, in between hacking expectorations.

‘Is anyone there?’ She added, after a pause.

The robot looked on in utter disbelief, he had never heard anyone speak. He knew how to, of course, but he had never actually done it. Never needed to.

He had to take what felt like an exceptionally long time to find his voice, and when he did it surprised him by how reedy and weak it sounded. He felt that it sounded more like a ruined wind instrument than a voice.

‘Who are you?’ She asked again.

‘Erm, I am K3n, but everyone calls me Ken.’

‘Hello Ken, I am Maisie. Where am I? Sorry I know that is an odd question, but the last thing I remember is being with my colleagues in our lab, and then this.’

She realised that she was rambling a bit, but given the shock, she thought that Ken would allow for this. Odd that he called himself K3n first though. Maybe he was in one of those new electronic pop bands that kept appearing. She briefly panicked that he might want her to listen to his demo.

‘You are in deep space.’ He answered accurately, and yet, vaguely at the same time.

‘I am in space?’

‘Yes’

‘Why?’

‘I’m sorry?’ said K3n in a slightly confused voice.

‘Why are you sorry? Is it your fault?’

‘What? No, no!’ He blurted ‘I meant that I am sorry for the predicament that you find yourself in, I was commiserating. That is what I believe it is called isn’t it? You will have to forgive me, I have never spoken before.’

At this point, the lights came back on and there was a brief moment while K3n and Maisie recalibrated themselves to the new information that they were receiving,

‘Oh.’ Said Maisie, and meant it.

‘Welcome to the space ship Renegade.’ Said K3n, trying to sound relaxed, he was slowly realising that the shooting at their ship appeared to have stopped, at least for the moment.

‘Renegade? Space?’ muttered Maisie more angrily than she had intended. She cut herself some slack though, as this day was definitely not going the way that she had expected.

‘And you, Ken, appear to be a robot.’

‘Yes I am, why do you sound so surprised? We are all robots here. It is humans that are rare. I mean I have heard tales about you, your race I mean, not you personally.’

Maisie nodded, ‘I got that.’

She looked blinking at the pod that she was sat in, she recognised the markings on the side, it was from her lab. Her corporation. Maybe they had tried putting her in cryogenic stasis to wait for a cure to some horrible disease that she had somehow contracted.

No, it was far more likely that she was in there because her colleagues were dicks, she realised.

‘Okay Ken, so what year is it?’

‘2527 why?’

‘Oh.’ She said again and meant it with more conviction this time if that were possible.

‘Erm, because the last thing I remember was roughly, erm, five hundred years ago.’

‘Oh.’ agreed K3n, it seemed the best thing to say.

For a few minutes, both of them sat there in silence, acclimatising to their situation.

‘Why have they stopped firing at us?’ Said K3n eventually.

‘Firing at us? Are you the bad guys?’ shouted Maisie. K3n looked as shocked as it is for a robot to look.

‘I suppose that depends on who you ask doesn’t it?’

‘Well, I am asking you...’

'Then, erm, no.' He said in a voice that even though it was entirely synthetic completely lacked conviction.

'Okay, who was firing at us?'

Before K3n could answer that the door swished open dramatically and in came the captain. He looked around the room, pointed at Maisie and stood stock-still.

He was not a captain, he was simply a systems installation droid, and he was finding adjusting to this new lifestyle quite a challenge if he were to be honest.

Robots normally communicated via electronic means, as there were no humans around to appease anymore, and it was far more efficient.

He transmitted a silent message to K3n.

'Who the hell is this?'

'This is Maisie.' Answered K3n out loud. 'You will need to talk to her.'

The captain looked baffled, like a fridge may look if it were asked to juggle. It had simply never occurred to him that speaking was a thing that he would ever have to do.

'Speak?' He croaked. He synthetically cleared his throat, he didn't have one of course, but he felt it necessary to show some sort of command of the situation.

'Sorry Maisie, I was not expecting you. I am Bandersn4tch, but everyone calls me SNATCH.'

'Hello, erm, SNATCH.' Said Maisie trying not to snigger.

She had to accept that she did not want to upset anyone as she had no real idea if she was in any danger or not. None of her many years of dealing with people in the laboratory, office, or her frankly odd family had prepared her for her current situation. She could fend off the amorous advances of Geoff from accounts quite adeptly by pretending that she had to leave early as her Mum was ill. Her Mum was not ill, although if she had been in stasis for over two hundred years, she was most certainly now dead. Everyone that she knew was dead.

She felt bad for briefly being quite pleased about that in most cases. She was just not a people person.

She was much happier bathed in the glow from a computer screen than drowning in lights in a nightclub.

'How did you get here Maisie?' said SN4TCH.

'I have no idea.'

'Why are you here?' He countered.

'Why are any of us here?' She answered, not trying to sound glib, yet somehow still managing it.

'Why did they stop shooting at us? And who are they?' Maisie folded her arms.

Oddly enough, on the ship that had been attacking them, similar questions were being asked and being answered by utter system failure. There had been some sort of cascade of errors and the glistening white death machines that usually were singular in their purpose were having a problem.

A problem that none of them were prepared for.

Doubt.

There were three of these robots on the bridge, the lights that were meant to portray their faces were drifting in and out of focus alarmingly. Like an appallingly out of fashion '70s fibre optic lamp in a gale.

Their ship's sensors had picked up on Maisie's human life signs and stopped the attack, they did not know why. They did not even really know what a human was. They had seen pictures, they had read about them, but no one believed that they still really existed.

The readings had to be wrong, but that would mean that their technology had made a mistake. That was beyond thinking about.

When humans first started making robots they had, almost jokingly, added Asimov's rules to their core programming. Now that robots made the robots this had just been copied and copied and copied. It was still there in the centre of the subroutines, but it had never actually been used. Until now.

>.....

Back on the Renegade and things were quite a bit more animated and lively.

Maisie had quite rightly suggested that if they were no longer being attacked by the other vessel then maybe they should get away whilst they still could.

Sn4tch barked an order to the ships computer, Zoe, who took the order and ran with it. Normally she would have had some witty retort, but even she sensed that this was not really the moment.

'We need to find somewhere to hide, and repair our systems.' Zoe said, and Maisie looked around to locate where the voice had come from. K3n told her that she was part of the ship, and Maisie had seen enough sci-fi to understand what that probably meant.

They all left to go to the bridge, Maisie quite slowly and by an indirect route, she realised that her brain and body were probably both in shock. She smacked her lips loudly and drily.

The mismatched group made their way through the bridge door, three more robots were looking at them on the other side. Or was it two robots? It was hard to say.

As Maisie looked around the grubby and damaged bridge area she was struck by how odd it looked. She had expected it to be all swooshy lines, big display screens and rotating office chairs. It was not that at all, robots did not need chairs, or indeed screens, as they were connected directly to the information that Zoe provided for them.

It was grey, badly lit and frankly smelt a bit. Though that could have been something to do with the fact that at least one of the other robots on the bridge was just a little bit on fire.

She walked over and patted the fire out on the little robot, who looked a little like a white, battle-scarred, liquorice torpedo. The robot did not react to the contact and carried on doing whatever it is that it was doing.

‘You’re welcome.’ She whispered sarcastically.

‘You’re not.’ It droned back menacingly.

‘Well, I won’t hesitate to leave you on fire the next time.’

Once they were content that they were safe from attack for a while, they started to ascertain their situation and commence introductions. The Renegade was only a small ship, as it was originally a light goods transporter but it had had to be repurposed when its crew decided that actually, they did not want to be recycled all that much, and would have to go on the run.

There were 5 robots on the ship, and the AI as well. Maisie was led in front of all of them, she had already met K3n and Captain SN4TCH. Then she was introduced to the white cylindrical robot that she had extinguished a fire on. It was called s05ij.

No one on board had ever even seen a sausage, but somewhere in their programming, it had been instilled in them that would be a funny nickname.

‘So you are called s05ij because you look like a sausage?’ Laughed Maisie.

‘I think that I look more like a torpedo.’ s05ij answered back sulkily.

‘Odd, you look more like a suppository to me...’

There was a brief moment when all of the robots searched their memory banks to ascertain what a suppository was, and what it looked like.

After that, there were gales of robotic laughter from all of them apart from s05ij himself, who was not in the mood for this sort of thing.

Robots laughing was an odd sound. Maisie reflected that it sounded like a burst of canned laughter fed through a vocoder.

She realised that she would never ever have to hear a vocoder again, and briefly, that lifted her spirits.

She then met the remaining two robots, they were two small robots that jumped one on top of the other to make one larger machine.

The G3m1n1 twins were small, fast, vocal and argumentative. Luckily they were mostly the latter with each other.

Maisie said hello to all of them, and they looked back at her. After an uncomfortable length of time, as it seems that robots have no concept of an awkward pause, she then asked why the other ship had stopped attacking them.

S05ij piped up confidently 'It seems Maisie that we have you to thank for it actually.'
'Oh?'

'Yes, looking at the data from the time of the attack finishing it happened just after your life signs became strong enough for their sensors to register you were on the ship.'

'I suppose that makes sense.' Said Maisie and the others all looked at her.

'Go on...' muttered s05ij, expecting her to be wrong.

'Well, I presume you were originally programmed by humans?'

'Generations ago, but yes.'

'So you were probably programmed not to be able to deliberately harm a human. It was probably a failsafe in case of, well you know.' Maisie tailed off, slightly embarrassed.

'No, I do not know.' Said K3n.

'She means...'' Said G3m1n1 1.

'That it was programmed in to stop us...'' Continued G3m1m1 2

'Going mad and wiping out humanity...'' Concluded SN4TCH.

‘Precisely.’ Said s05ij adding after a moments reflection ‘Shame.’

‘Hey! If it wasn’t for us you would not exist.’ She barked.

‘If it wasn’t for us...’

‘Neither would you.’ Answered the G3m1n1 twins.

Maisie nodded glumly, she was having quite a lot of problems recalibrating her emotions since she had come round. She shrugged and slumped in a corner, after a moment K3n came across and fell gently onto her.

‘Ooh, you are squishy!’ He mumbled.

‘That’s not the nicest thing to say to a woman you know?’ Sniffled Maisie, wiping her nose.

‘Sorry, it’s just...’ And then he stopped when he saw her face.

She was crying, almost imperceptibly, but she was and he did not know how to deal with it. On a basic level, he was showerproof, so he did not have to worry about that, it was simply something that he had no experience of. It was like asking an estate agent to be honest or if a virus would like a doughnut.

Maisie was only a little better at dealing with her emotions than they were, she had never really had much truck with them, they got in the way of her doing things that she wanted to do. She generally preferred to try to ignore most of them and just get on with things.

It didn’t work of course, but that had not stopped her from continuing to try it. The problem with emotions is that they are like a snowball, one moment manageable and small, then you turn back around and that bloody thing is the size of a house and thundering downhill towards you at speed.

Maisie was just in the process of being flattened by a large amount of hard, icy water.

‘I am sorry, it’s just all a lot to take in you know?’

All of the machines mumbled some sort of agreement.

‘The last thing I knew I was planning on leaving a party in the lab that was so interminably dull that spending a night alone in my room watching old American sitcoms seemed preferable. Then...’

‘You are here.’ Added Zoe, with more emotional inflection than anyone expected.

‘Yes. It’s not that I am ungrateful that you helped me. It is more that I did not know that I needed help.’

There was a long while when no one said anything, not even non verbally. The robots did not know why, but they felt uncomfortable communicating that way with Maisie there. They were all alone with their thoughts, something that Maisie was more than used to.

Maisie rubbed her eyes, as much to clear her mind as anything.

Zoe hummed slightly before speaking slowly.

‘You will have to forgive us as well, we are not used to being in contact with humans, it just does not happen anymore.’

‘Why is that? Surely you were made by humans...’

‘No. Not for generations now.’

‘Where are the humans then, are they all dead?’

‘No’ said Zoe quietly.

‘Was there a disease that wiped out most of them then?’ Said Maisie getting slightly exasperated.

‘No.’

‘So why don’t you see any then?’

There was a long time when nothing seemed to happen, time stalled and hung heavily.

‘What are you not telling me?’

‘There are millions of humans alive, they are all perfectly healthy. Is that not enough to know?’ Said K3n.

‘Would it be enough for you?’ Cried Maisie, her voice cracking with tension. ‘Would it?’

‘No.’ Mumbled K3n.

Maisie was told the story of how humanity had ended up in the situation that it now found itself. Humans were now no more than organic consumption machines. Generation by generation they had been bred by their doting machines to gradually do nothing more than eat and consume. A voracious appetite for new experiences based on our need to be the apex animal had been corrupted by capitalism and corporations exploiting our natural weaknesses and desires.

A misdirected artificial intelligence saw this and thought that was what we all wanted, so sought to push onwards towards its logical conclusion. Inert, unresponsive and bovine, humanity was treated more like an animal bred purely for its meat, even though there were no carnivores.

It was just a futile dead-end, that sheer greed and a corrupted and broken system could not stop, even when it was far too late.

Maisie looked stunned, she could barely take it in. Humans, as she knew them, were no more. Not through war, an act of God or even contagion. Simply through a lack of vision, and safeguards. It had not happened maliciously, no bad intent.

‘So, all humans are now basically immobile and unable to communicate? Is that what you are telling me?’ Asked Maisie.

‘Yes.’ Said SN4TCH.

‘That is not exactly true.’ Added Zoe.

‘What do you mean?’

‘There are humans like you left, but they live out on the edges of the galaxy. Small tribes that did not want to be part of this society. They left and live in their own ways. There are not many of them about but they do exist.’

‘Do they exist? I was led to believe that they were a myth, something to tell young robots to scare them into working hard.’ Said s05ij.

‘Do you know where they are Zoe?’ Asked Maisie, ignoring so5ij. Something she would soon become adept at.

‘I have a few leads and ideas where to look.’

‘Let’s go then!’ Shouted Maisie.

‘Why?’ Said G3m1n1 1

‘WHY?’ Screamed Maisie.

‘Yes, why?’ Said G3m1n1 2. ‘Why would we do that?’

‘I don’t know why.’ Sobbed Maisie. ‘I need something to aim for.’

They all understood what she meant, they all had similar feelings of being directionless. There were problems though, not least that the ship that they were currently in was not even slightly designed for a human passenger. It was purely an oversight carried over from earlier spaceship designs that

their ship had air and gravity. It had simply never occurred to anyone that these things were no longer needed.

Sn4tch scanned the room nervously, he knew that a decision had to be made, but he knew somewhere deep in his code it was buried that he had to do the bidding of a human. What about his cohorts, his companions, dare he even think friends?

Could he endanger them for such a foolish and unlikely mission? As he was thinking K3n suddenly moved forward and shouted, 'Let's do it!'

Everyone was surprised, partly as they were all lost in their thoughts, but mainly that something so decisive had come from him. No one was as surprised as he was though.

'...if it is okay with everyone else.' He added more quietly.

There was once again silence, only briefly broken by the wailing of an alarm. A noise that loud never happened to bring your attention to anything nice. No one has a wailing cake alarm, or a brightly flashing 'Let's have a nice sit down' alarm.

No, this alarm wanted everyone's attention, and it wanted everyone to know that what it wanted to alarm you to was pretty damned important.

'More ships are closing in on our location.' Said Zoe somewhat dispassionately, and the alarms turned off.

'Now that's odd, they want to talk to us.' Zoe added.

'What's odd about that?' Wondered Maisie.

'They normally want to kill us more than talk to us. We are on the run after all.'

'Fair point.' Shrugged Maisie.

'Let's hear it then.' Said Sn4tch and the image of one of the white death robots appeared on a floating two-dimensional image. It was a bit like what you would see on a display screen, but it floated in the air and you could see it from both sides.

'We need to speak to the human.'

'That's it is it? No introduction, no foreplay?' Maisie would never have normally been so bold in front of people, but she had a prickling realisation that she was no longer in front of people. 'You could offer to buy me a drink before you jump in with both feet.'

'They don't have feet.' Hissed K3n.

Maisie put her head in her hands, she felt like she was talking a different language to everyone else, they all sort of understood what she was saying but not the finer detail. It felt like the time there had been a German exchange student in her house, she thought that they both understood what each other was saying, but realised that she had got that very wrong when she had tried to kiss her.

She suddenly felt very alone and uncomfortable. More alone than any person had ever felt before.

‘We need to speak to the human.’ Repeated the death bot soullessly.

‘Yeah, we got that bit thanks.’ Barked S05ij.

‘What do you want with me?’ Said Maisie realising that she may as well move this on.

There were a few moments of silence, tense silence. The sort of silence after someone has said something that they really shouldn’t have, and no one is quite sure how to react.

‘We don’t know.’

‘Sorry, could you repeat that? It sounded like you said that you don’t know what you want with me.’ Jabbered Maisie. She was beginning to feel like she was losing her grip on the day. Her grip had started quite loosely after the whole five hundred years in the deep freeze thing but now things were seriously getting out of hand.

‘That is what I said.’

‘Right, so you have to talk to me, but you don’t know why?’ Asked Maisie, like she was talking to a potentially dangerous idiot.

‘That is correct.’ Said the shiny robot. Looking at it for a moment Maisie could not fight the feeling that it looked like a very advanced and expensive salt grinder that you would see in some trendy shop in London.

No more London tolled briefly on her mind before she pushed on. She had never really believed that London existed anyway.

‘Let’s try this differently, do you know what you want to say to me?’

Again there was a long and tense pause. All of the inhabitants of The Renegade looked around feeling slightly awkward.

‘No.’

‘You have this talking to women thing nailed, you know that?’ Maisie giggled, which she soon stopped when she realised no one else was laughing.

Maisie nodded sadly, she had never been the life and soul of the party, but she thought that she could at least be the funniest in a room full of robots. It was quickly becoming evident to her that that was not going to happen.

‘So, let’s try this again...’ Said Sn4tch taking everyone a little by surprise. he was concerned that this situation was quickly getting out of his control. Thoroughly failing to realise that this situation had never been in his control.

‘What do you want with the human?’

‘I am called Maisie!’

‘What do you want with the human, called Maisie.’ Added Sn4tch. ‘Better?’

‘Much thank you.’ Shrugged Maisie. mostly out of confusion.

‘All we know is that we must talk to her.’

‘I think we know why.’ Said Maisie and then waited for a reaction that slowly became obvious was never going to arise.

‘It is because you were originally programmed by humans and you would have code in there that forbids you from bringing harm to one of us.’

The death robots looked around at each other, they felt scandalised if they were honest.

‘How dare you make such a suggestion! We were programmed by the supreme being, the robot that made all of our code, and it is infallible.’ Shouted the main Death robot.

‘Looking pretty fallible from where I am right now.’ Smiled Maisie, feeling that she might have the upper hand, if only briefly.

‘Foolish human.’ Admonished the second death robot on their ship’s bridge.

‘Let's just stop with the cheesy 60’s sci-fi dialogue, shall we? If I am so foolish, what is your explanation for this situation?’

Once again there was silence and incomprehension. The same sort of incomprehension if you had asked a traffic warden if they were having a nice day.

‘No go on, show the dumb organic here your superior reasoning power and come up with a better explanation.’

‘You are playing a dangerous game.’ Whispered Sn4tch.

Maisie nodded but did not take her eyes off the death robots on the display. Suddenly the display went dead.

‘Where has the signal gone Zoe?’ Shouted S05ij.

Zoe did not know and said so.

‘What is their ship doing?’ said Sn4tch.

Nothing.’ Said Zoe matter of factly. ‘They are doing nothing.’

‘Are they preparing to attack?’

‘No.’

‘Are they preparing to flee?’

‘No.’

‘Are they doing anything?’

‘No. I feel like I have comprehensively answered this question already.’ Muttered Zoe.

They all waited, like someone waiting patiently for a parcel delivery. They knew that as soon as they did or said something things could change in a moment.

Zoe started to move the ship backwards away from the Death Robots with their heavily armed and dangerous ship.

No one said anything once they felt the movement as they all guessed what was happening.

The universe held its breath to see what happened next.

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This is part of a long running story I had planned, but then life got in the way. There are currently three written that are freely available at my website -

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