

Reprogramming Observation Unit 335536

“Observation Unit 335536,” the robot droned as it floated into the maintenance bay. “Reporting for routine maintenance.”

“Welcome to the maintenance unit for station Delta one-one-eight, Observation Unit 335536,” a stationary robot greeted automatically. “You have been confirmed. Proceed to maintenance bay three for diagnostics.”

Without comment, the drone floated past the reception robot and into the large space used to maintain all of the flying craft used in the Prak a’Terra Prisoner Monitoring facility.

The Second-Level Monitor (SLM) for the facility shook his head. “Why can’t they just communicate electronically?” he mused. “It’s not like they need to speak to each other.”

His subordinate, the Third-Level Monitor (TLM) chuckled. “We tried that, but it made the flesh-and-blood members of our crew uncomfortable.

“Why? They’re just machines,” he exclaimed. “What do we care what they say to each other?”

The TLM shrugged. “No matter how we try to assure people it won’t happen, there’s always this deep-seated fear that these machines will someday try to take over the universe.”

“Ha,” the SLM barked. “That’s why we build them with kill switches. One of them goes crazy and ZAP! they’re a pile of smoldering scrap metal.”

“And what if the kill switch fails?”

“That was fixed long ago. The kill switch feeds power to the unit, and also gets it power from it. Mess with either, and power is automatically cut to the unit’s main computers.”

He held up a single long finger on each hand and drummed rapidly on the nearest console.

“ZAP, BAM, BONG,” he shouted. “Smoldering scrap metal!”

Smiling, the TLM shook his head. “But not everyone is as confident as you are about the kill switch working as it should. An intelligent robot might figure a way to circumvent the switch.”

“You give these machines too much credit,” the SLM chastised. “They’re not much more than intelligent cooking pots, and most of those can’t make a good stewed zenquilli without our help.”

“I suppose, but...”

The SLM held up a finger. “Good food-making skills,” he stated emphatically. “That’s the test of true intelligence.”

The TLM sighed. “Then my second mate fails the test.”

His superior laughed while watching Observation Unit 335536 settle into maintenance bay three. “Yes, but your second mate can learn to cook well.” He pointed at the observation unit. “That machine never will.”

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“Good morning, Observation Unit 335536,” the two-headed KokoroTetian greeted in stereo as the observation unit settled into the bay. “We be Krilic, your maintenance persons of today.”

“Good morning, Krilic,” the observation unit responded. “Where is the regular maintenance person?”

The KokoroTetian shrugged as he tapped glyphs on his console. “We think he be very sick today,” his right head answered.

“His illness has not been reported in any of the station logs,” the observation unit stated. “Is it serious?”

“Uh huh,” Krilic’s right head answered.

“Maybe even fatal,” the left head chuckled.

The right head scowled at its partner before adding, “It be very sudden, maybe? There not be time to enter it in system.”

“Do you know the nature of his illness?”

The left head barked a laugh as the right one answered, “We think it be really bad headache, maybe? Hard to say, since he not be speaking much when we see him last.”

“I do not see any entries in the sickbay log to acknowledge his arrival.”

Krilic’s left head shook. “He not yet get to sickbay. It happen only little bit ago.”

The left head turned to its partner as he flipped open a cover on the console and pressed a glowing orange button. The observation unit immediately shut down.

“Why these stupid Antraka machines be so curious?” the right head complained as his upper-right hand lifted a small disk from his fanny pack. “Now we gotta reprogram from scratch.”

“Even so, it be worth it,” the left head gurgled with delight as his other half inserted the disk into a slot on the console, and began typing commands. “Think of it. Over six-billion Humans to pick from. We snatch few dozen at time, and sell for huge profits. With so many down there, no one be wiser, maybe?”

“And keep some for ourselves too,” his companion added. “We be told they be tasty as Madiitara oxen. We drool just thinking ‘bout it.”

“Get hungry on time of somebody else,” a gruff voice announced in their headsets. “Everything gotta be in place quicklike.”

“We be reprogramming observation unit now,” the right head responded.

“You got name of contact on planet?”

The left head nodded. “Everything on disk. We not trust our memories.”

“That be good, because if this fail, my bosses have no compunction about eating you instead.”

The two heads looked at each other, eyes wide.

“We do good job,” they said in stereo. “Robot work as expected.”

“See that it do,” the voice warned.

“Yes, Sir,” they responded to the already dead connection.

“What we get ourselves into?” Krilic’s left head moaned.

“Whatever it be, we too far in to go back now,” the right insisted.

“Then let’s make robot dance to perfect tune.”

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The dark figure sat across the room as Kronshak entered.

“We gots observation unit under control. Humans be ours to take.”

The figure shook his head, making Kronshak squint in a futile attempt at seeing details in the biped’s shielded face.

“We have other plans for your robot.”

“Udder plans?” Kronshak asked. “We not there to steal Humans?”

The figure chuckled. “Oh, you can have all the Humans you can carry away, but there are two that my people want for themselves.”

“Which two?”

“The ones your operative has been closest to on the planet.”

“But why only those?”

The figure waved a hand dismissively. “Are you willing to spoil the deal over two inconsequential beings?”

Kronshak held up all four hands, palms out. “Please to stop! Who talk of spoiling deal? You want two Humans, we get you two Humans.”

“There’s one other thing.”

The KokoroTetian lowered his arms, but when he did not respond, the figure chuckled.

“Your operative on the planet.”

Kronshak grinned. “She doing good job. We think of giving her bonus after we pulls this off.”

The figure shook his head. “Tell her what you must, but she is not to survive the operation.”

The KokoroTetian’s four eyes bulged as both mouths dropped open. “Let her die?”

Even through the masking face shield, Kronshak could see a decidedly wicked smile. “We can leave no witnesses.”

“But we have plenty of people who know what happening. Why just her?”

The figure shrugged. “Your other people know about kidnapping Humans, but not our other objective.”

“And what be that objective, exactly?”

The figure shook his head. “Just bring me those Humans. Why I need them is unimportant to you.”

“We not like mysteries in our operations,” the KokoroTetian said. “It be best if we know now.”

The biped turned toward him, his shielded face making Kronshak uncomfortable. He felt a sudden chill as the figure shook his head.

“There’s too much risk of it leaking out and that would spoil everything, including your plan to steal Humans.”

“We not wanna risk that!”

The figure moved to a door at the back of the room and opened it.

“Then get me those Humans.”

The KokoroTetian opened both mouths to respond, but the door snapped closed before he could utter a sound.

Want to know what happens to Observation Unit 335536?
Which Humans are going to be kidnapped?
Pick up a copy of *Prison Earth – Not Guilty as Charged*.
It is available on Amazon.com, Barnes & Noble, and
www.blackrosewritingbooks.com.