

“Open Twenty Four Hours” by Edward McKeown



Tars Bokara shuffled down the dusty corridors of the Medakala Museum of Antiquities, heading for the Curator’s office. Not only did the slender young man have the bad luck to work for the poorest, least prestigious of Col-Traxis III’s one thousand museums, he worked for Arn Poundstone. Once hailed as a genius, Poundstone was showered with awards before the High Committee realized he’d stolen most of his work from a junior colleague killed on one of his expeditions. By then it was too late to undo the honors without calling the whole museum system into question. Better to pack the madman off to where he could do little damage, until the sands of history safely covered him.

The Committee hadn’t reckoned with Poundstone’s fierce determination to avoid those sands. From the neglected halls of Medakala, he launched assaults on the ivory

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ramparts of high academia. Always he was driven back, but casualties were often heavy and Poundstone was never among them. Poundstone sent out ill-equipped and ill-fated expedition after expedition, in the hope of making the "big find" that would restore his glory. Many a fine young archeologist ended up in the gullet of some ferocious alien monster, or at the hands of unfriendly natives. Bones bleached under forgotten suns, doubtless to confuse future historians.

Thoughts of ending up as an exhibit made Bokara start. He looked about at the Rigellian mummies and Arcturian flayed skins with fresh horror. He'd never wanted to be an historian anyway. On Col-Traxis however, it was either history or waiting tables, especially for a young man from a poor family. After graduation, the assignment pool computer sent him to the Medakala Museum, sentencing him to virtual serfdom until and unless he gained tenure.

He reached the curator's office and peered in past the automatic doors. Merinda, the department secretary sat at her desk. Pleasant and middle aged, she served as his first line of defense against Poundstone. He'd cultivated the older woman with chocolates, flowers, and flattery. She saw through him, but enjoyed the attention. Merinda caught his eye briefly, looking away with a stricken expression.

It was over. His defenses had clearly failed. The barbarians were over the wall and all that remained was pillage and slaughter.

“Go right in, Tars,” she said in a low, sad voice, “he’s waiting for you.”

“Don’t suppose there’s any way out of this one?” he asked.

Merinda gave a small sob.

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Bokara squared his shoulders and marched in, determined now to meet his fate without flinching.

Entering the immense office, he faced a huge desk devoid of any useful or relevant work. There could be no question he was in the presence of senior management. Poundstone rose from behind the ornate wooden plateau, walking around to greet him. The curator looked the part of field archeologist, tall, tanned, with a broad, sloping forehead and intense, dark eyes. He reminded Bokara of the busts of the ancient emperors and senators from the early days of the Galactic Empire, the human ones anyway. It was easy to imagine such a face giving orders for a suicide attack by a legion, or the firing of a Hellburner on a city.

“History-Technician Level Five Bokara, reporting as ordered.”

“Excellent, my boy,” Poundstone said in a deep, pleasing voice. “Good to see you. How’s that father of yours?”

“Still dead, sir.”

“Excellent,” Poundstone said. “Bokara, today is the day that will define your career. It’s fieldwork that makes the historian, I say. How I hate being chained in this office, unable to get back to the field.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You are going to lead an expedition,” Poundstone said, a fiendish glint in his eye. “An expedition to rediscover Old Earth, the well-spring of humanity, lost to us these fifty thousand years, since the Great Diaspora after the Cluster War.”

Bokara blinked in confusion. “Earth? Isn’t that a myth?”

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“Not at all,” Poundstone exclaimed, hands cutting through the air. “Hist-Tech Nasia found coordinates in the gunnery computer records of a Beta Centauri warcruiser, salvaged 10,000 years ago. They may well be for Old Earth. Poor child, it’s a shame about her and those Hyper-Wolverines on the Vegan Expedition.”

Bokara felt the air empty out of the room. “Me, lead an expedition, sir? I’m not experienced-”

Poundstone chuckled. “Oh, you’ll do. It’s less a matter of leading the expedition than being the expedition. We’re running short of people, due to the Vegan and Deltan affairs. Those geniuses in the Prime Museum won’t give me the funding for replacements and equipment, so I’m afraid it will just be you.

“I’ve booked you a passage on an AI-freighter, which will divert to the coordinates, then return to pick you up. We also found a Human-Form Combat Robot in one of the lower storage levels, in an exhibit no one’s seen in four hundred years. We’ll send that with you, if we can get it working.”

Poundstone continued, but the fuzziness of shock put distance between Bokara and the details of his doom.

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Two months later, Bokara sat in his tiny cabin on the Artificial Intelligence Ship *Gumpina*, closing on an utterly unremarkable G-class star, where the ancient Beta Centauri warcruiser had been wrecked.

*Gumpina’s* AI was no longer speaking to him. His first six weeks aboard had been spent in a state of near total intoxication. Unfortunately, he’d misjudged the rate at which he consumed his anodyne, leaving him to face the last two weeks of the voyage in

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dreadful sobriety. A desperate attempt to cobble together a still from the ship’s robot spares had put him and the ship on the outs.

Suddenly the speaker over his head crackled, buzzed, and emitted a toneless feminine voice. “*Gumpina* to passenger, entering far orbit of Class 43B2-type planet. Your personal AI robot is now active and will handle all further communications.” The machine’s dry voice managed to sound disapproving of his existence. He didn’t bother to reply.

The door to his small cabin slid open. He looked up with little interest. A machine stood there, far different from the squat shipbots. Slim and graceful, it seemed almost feminine in appearance. Colorless monofilament wire lay like hair on its shoulders. Antennae or heat-sink, he assumed. Its rudimentary face, with small, delicate features, at least gave a human eye somewhere to focus when communicating with it. He wondered briefly if it looked like the designer’s girlfriend. The silver body, intended to reflect energy weapons, badly needed polishing. Dents, discolorations and melt spots told of hard service. Curiously, it wore a frayed, threadbare, black vest with the silver letters, AN158909 on it.

The machine stopped, its mouth speaker opening. “HCR Unit AN158909, Imperial Assault Infantry, First of the 71st, reporting as ordered.”

“Great,” he said. “Hate to break it to you, but you were surplused over six hundred years ago.”

“This unit has no other designation.”

“Effective immediately you’re... Ann-One, of the Medakala Expedition.”

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The robot mulled it over; its reflective silver, human-like eyes fastened on him.  
“Affirmative.”

“The ship’s AI informs me that we are in a stable orbit,” Ann-One advised. “It requests we disembark as soon as possible.”

“I’ll bet,” said Bokara. “Let’s go, Ann-One. We know when we aren’t wanted.”  
They made their way to the ship’s only shuttle. Ann-One climbed into the pilot seat and pulling some leads from compartments in its body, jacked into the small vessel’s computer. Bokara plunked into the chair behind Ann-One. The robot started the engines and *Gumpina*’s shuttle kicked free, heading planetward like a meteor.

Bokara sighed, then peered over Ann-One’s metal shoulder at the monitor screen. He expected to see a dead world, or a primitive, savage wilderness. To his shock, the nightside of the world ahead was lit up like a Pinnellian Fire Tree at Holiday. “Ann-One, give me scanner readings.”

“Affirmative. Readings indicate the presence of multiple energy sources on the planet. Detecting artificial light in visible spectrums. Infrared sensors show multiple heat sources inconsistent with volcanic origins. Apart from oceans and the polar regions, the surface is covered by what appears to be a structure of approximately ten to twenty meters in height. There are some open spaces, which appear to be filled with transports. Much of the building’s surface is lit in geometric patterns.”

“The whole planet,” he said, in awed disbelief, “one big building? Ann-One, steer for a landing on a clear area somewhere on that northern continent where the lights are thickest. Any sign of people? Any communications?”

“Negative to both queries.”

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They landed on a staging area for aircraft and hovercars. Machines lay around in decrepit heaps. Clearly, it had been ages since any of them had flown.

They peered through the canopy at a massive field of neon and electric signs. “Damn,” Bokara said, “forgot to activate my implant.” He found the proper mental vibe and triggered the psychotronic computer link.

“Language protocol upload,” he subvocalized to *Gumpina*’s AI. “Translate.”

“No immediate match available,” it whispered directly into his mind, “continuing to process.”

Ann-One secured the small vessel’s drives while he checked the atmospheric sensors. Humanity’s old home, if this was indeed it, still welcomed her children. Excitement overcame him, Old Earth at last. He cycled open the lock.

Wet, cool air rushed in, followed by a two-meter tall, blue, yellow and green chitinous horror, waving antennae and claws. Bokara screamed, backpedaling, snatching at his stunner. He lost his footing and the weapon, tumbling into Ann-One as the HCR rushed to his aid. She raised scratched, silver arms to ward off the horror.

The monstrous insect drew itself up to its full height, compound eyes glaring. “Welcome to EarthMart,” it bellowed. “Open twenty-four hours!”

"Whoa...what?" he stammered.

“Welcome to EarthMart,” the insect repeated, “where the customer is king. Open twenty-four hours for your shopping convenience.”

The translation program, he thought, is totally screwed.

“Do you understand me?” he ventured, when the creature did not attack.

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“EarthMart understands the customer’s wants and needs. Your accent is awfully funny, though. Course, who am I to say? You are the first customer we’ve had on the planet in five thousand years.”

“It doesn’t want to eat me,” he muttered.

Ann-One took it as a question. “Insufficient data. However, imminent hostility is not apparent.”

“Of course not, sir,” the insect sputtered, “the customer is king at EarthMart, not an hors d’oeuvre.”

The translation program finally flashed an identification of the creature on his interior eye surface, “*Periplaneta americana*, a.k.a. the American cockroach.”

“Pardon my asking,” he said, slowly reaching for the fallen stunner, “are you a cockroach?”

“Yes, sir. One of the last four original species left. Well, five I guess, now that you are back. I’m the Greeter for the Greater Northeast Area. It’s an honor to meet you. Please enter our store, oh credit-worthy one.”

Bokara studied the creature before him. Now that he was not in mortal danger of being devoured, he had leisure to take in the details. Greeter was a shiny brown. The blue and yellow were a vest and four-legged pants.

“Um, perhaps my information is obsolete, but aren’t cockroaches about this big?” he said, waving his pinkie.

“That was in ancient days,” Greeter said. “After you humans left, our evolution sped up. Nature abhors a vacuum. We like to joke that the boys in Housewares abhor them too,” it added conspiratorially.

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“Do you have a name?” Bokara asked, holstering his stunner. The insect replied with a series of cracking and snapping sounds. “Well,” said Bokara, “my translation program didn't make anything out of that. Can I call you Greeter?”

“The customer is always right at EarthMart.”

Bokara took that as a yes.

“Hey,” Greeter said, taking an interest in Ann-One, “did you go to some other part of the store? Where did you get that, Toys, or Home Electronics?”

Ann-One somehow miffed. “I was constructed at the Omega-Ram facility on Negal-Six, as a Human-Form Combat Robot, one thousand, seven hundred thirty-eight years ago. I was surplused, due to obsolescence, four hundred and ninety-six years later.”

“That’s too bad,” Greeter said, “if you’d gotten it here, we could have offered you a trade-in.”

“No,” Bokara said. “Ann-One is fine with me. She’s my crew.”

“Wow,” Greeter enthused, “two customers. Oh, I’m in the history books for sure.”

“Speaking of which,” said Bokara, “I’m a History Technician. Old Earth’s been lost to galactic history for millennia. I’m on a mission to rediscover it, to learn its history. Please take me to your leader.”

“You want to see the Store Manager?” Greeter said. “Is there something wrong?”

“No. No,” Bokara said. “I’m interested in-in the store’s history. How it’s run? What sells?”

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“All right, sir,” Greeter said. “But it will be quite a journey, it’s a long way to the manager’s office. I’ll take you, if you want to go. We’d have to use the store transit, sir. I’ve never been up in an aircraft before. I wouldn’t know how to direct you.”

“Ann-One, can we use the shuttle in atmosphere?” Bokara asked, nervous about disappearing into the bowels of the planetary building.

“Ill-advised without exact coordinates. This model shuttle is not designed for long atmospheric transits. Fuel is limited.”

“Best we get going,” the giant roach said, scuttling back out of the airlock.

“Come on, Ann,” Bokara added before his nerves got the better of him, “we’re off.”

“This unit should remain and secure the shuttle.”

“No. Obsolete or not, you are coming with me. I like the thought of having a combat robot along. Hey, do you still have any of your onboard weaponry?”

“Affirmative, I am armed with three-millimeter lasers in each index finger, stunners in the ring fingers and palm blades in both hands.”

“Ann, I think I love you.”

“This unit is not a pleasure model,” she replied primly.

“Hey, how come you didn’t shoot Greeter?”

“All weapons are on safe.”

“Damn. I should have spent some time reading your manual. Oh well, it worked out for the best. You would probably have barbecued our native guide.”

“Target acquisition was compromised by your flailing about.”

He ignored the criticism. “How do I take off the lock?”

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Ann-One turned her silvery posterior to him, pulling back the collar of the vest she used for pockets. An access panel popped open. “Press the red button three times.”

He did so. “Let’s go. Don’t kill anyone unless I tell you to.”

“Acknowledged.”

As they exited the shuttle, Bokara stared around. Sol was up, though it was still cool under the bright blue sky. All around stood garish signs, no less eye-hurting in daylight. His translation program rendered the writings, flashing them onto the inside of his eyes. It didn’t mean much to him: *ATM in building, Easy Terms, Inventory Reduction on the Red Dot*. In the distance, over the hoods of decayed aircars, he saw a line of glassed windows. Greeter waved them over and they quickly caught up to the insect. Despite the trot, Ann-One’s feet made no more sound than did his. Of course, he thought, a combat robot would be able to sneak up on things.

They followed Greeter through the automatic doors and into the planet building’s immense, erratically lit interior. At least it was cooler inside.

“Is it all like this?” Bokara wondered, looking down an aisle with shelves on both sides that seemed to recede to infinity. “The whole planet is just one big store?”

Greeter looked at them. “Sure. Well, there are some ancient inventories and cash receipts suggesting that at one time there were multiple Marts; the Wal, the Pets, the K, the Stein, maybe a few others. There was also something called Government. The Marts seem to have bought it out and closed it down. When they all kind of ran into each other, there came the Great Merger and EarthMart was born.”

“A planet-sized store,” Bokara muttered.

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“To tell the truth,” Greeter continued, “there's a lot of interest in the old Marts these last few years, kind of a fundamentalist revival. Some folks believe the reason all the customers left was because we Mart personnel departed the true ‘way of sales’. They say we could never be found, didn’t know anything about what we sold, had the same stuff in every sub-store, things like that. They want to resurrect the old labels and signs. Wouldn’t be so bad, except for the occasional sacrifice of an unlucky store clerk by fundamentalists. The Order of the Blue Light Special though, they’re the worst.”

Greeter prattled on, pointing to sale items and specials on the dusty shelves. Bokara was awestruck by the amount and variety of historical artifacts. Thousands of boxes lined the shelves, with labels hinting at the treasures within.

They walked on and on, eventually coming to a group of smaller cockroaches swarming over the shelves, taking boxes labeled “tampons” from the top and placing them on the bottom, while others took identical boxes from the bottom shelves and put them on top. They stopped what they were doing to cluster around a nervous Bokara and a watchful Ann-One.

“Restocking crew,” Greeter explained, “not the deep end of the gene pool. We try to keep them away from customers, not that it’s been a problem in the last five thousand years.

“Back, back,” Greeter cried, as the others swarmed near. “Don’t annoy the customers. We’re off to see the Store Manager.” The insects backed away, bowing as they did so. “Kids, dumb as rocks, but we don’t even have to pay them minimum wage.”

They cut through several other aisles to find an open area under some brilliant arc lights about half of which functioned. Monorail cars stood parked nearby. Greeter

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checked several until he found one working. Bokara piled in, with Ann-One behind him. The car raced down the railway, blurring the interior of the store’s departments and aisles.

“EarthMart offers all the latest conveniences,” Greeter said. “Now, I hate to mention this to customers but there is an occasional, teensy bit of interdepartmental rivalry going on at EarthMart. You see, the last customer who came through here was an Arcturian. Boy, what a hard sell he was! Insisted we didn’t have anything he wanted. Ill-tempered too, he kept vaporizing employees. Everybody tried to sell him something. Finally, he broke down and bought a back-scratcher from a cockroach, a direct ancestor of mine. That was quite a coup, seeing as he didn’t have a back.

“Naturally, the other species, the rats and pigeons, were kind of upset. Course, we cockroaches are natural salesmen. Ever since then, we’ve had the cream of the positions at EarthMart. Unfortunately it’s led to some professional jealousy.”

Suddenly their cart slowed. “Uh-oh,” Greeter said, “I think I should have gone through Women’s Underwear.”

“What’s wrong?” Bokara demanded, hand on his stunner.

Greeter’s body twisted as he tried to look in several directions at once. “I think I took us too close to Fishing and Camping.”

The car pulled off onto a sidetrack and stopped. The shelves here were full of fishing poles, cooking gear, sleeping bags and such. It was also full of rats, humans-sized ones. Each wore blazing orange vests, camouflage pants and furred hats. Some seemed to be carrying weapons.

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“Now, listen,” Greeter called from his position crouched down in the front seat. “We ain’t looking for trouble. These are customers. I’m taking them to the Store Manager.”

“Button it, Roach,” snapped a particularly large rat. He wore the blaze vest and hat, with the addition of a set of rubber-looking pants that went to his chest. “Nothing goes on in EarthMart that we rats don’t know about. Just like you roaches, trying to hijack the first customers in millennia.”

“Greetings, customer,” the rat said, turning to Bokara. “I’m sure this squishy bug has been filling your ears with all sorts of lies. We rats are delighted to see you. We can fulfill your every need for the outdoors.”

“You don’t have an outdoors,” Bokara said.

This seemed to throw the rat.

“Well... what about a firearm?” asked the desperate rat.

“A what?” Bokara asked, looking anxiously at his own arms.

One of the rats leveled a wood and metal tube at a display of lamps. Its fingers worked the weapon. It gave an ear-splitting crack, and a bunch of lamps shattered. Bokara yelped and ducked. Ann-One jerked upright, her arms pointed at the rats.

“Hey,” the leader of the pack said, staring at Ann-One. “Did you guys stop in the Toy Department?”

“No,” Bokara shouted. “She’s with me. She’s a customer too.”

“Confirmed,” Ann-One added.

The rat smiled. “How about a camouflage nightie for the little lady?”

A loud whooping sound made them all jump.

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“No,” a rat screamed. “Blue Light Special!”

Bokara spun in his seat. From across the open floor of Occasional Furniture came a horde of rats and roaches. Each bore on its back a vertical pole, atop which pulsed a circular blue light, below that sat a speaker, emitting the dreadful whooping. The creatures shrieked, “The K, The K, only The K!” as they charged.

Blaze-clad rats fell back from the cart in confusion. A shower of brilliant objects flew from the hands of the Blue Light Fundamentalists.

“Coleman lantern attack!” yelled the lead rat. “Jeez, our own damn merchandise.”

Ann-One threw herself on Bokara, pinning him down. Bullets banged off her body, a lantern bounced off her back. She rose and laser fire licked out of her fingers. Fundamentalists and salesrats fled. More guns banged, speakers whooped, lights flashed.

“We’ve got to get out here,” Bokara screamed to Greeter.

“This way.” The roach dropped to all six for more speed. Bokara stunned a rat clutching at his sleeve and hopped out of the cart, following Greeter. Ann-One trailed, still firing and beginning to slow as heat built up in her.

“Ann-One, cease-fire,” Bokara yelled, unwilling to leave his metallic companion behind. “Engage only enemy personnel chasing us.”

They raced away, through acres of Home and Garden, toward Mens Furnishings. Ann-One began slowing again, heat building up from the run.

“Sir,” Ann-One said, “I am overheating. My coolant pack is near empty. I need lubrication.”

“What?” Bokara said. “Wasn’t it full?”

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“Last filled during regular maintenance, before I was surplused. I have not had regular maintenance since.”

“Oh,” Bokara groaned, “hundreds of years ago. I really should have read your manual.”

“An attentive owner would have,” Ann-One said, with an air of deep disappointment.

“I’m sorry,” Bokara said.

“We could stop in Automotive,” Greeter offered, “but it’s on the other side of Haberdashery. We don’t want to go there.”

“We have to,” Bokara said. “Ann-One needs help.”

“Okay, sir,” Greeter said in resignation. .

They made their way into the racks of suits and coats, dust billowing up as they bumped into them. Bokara sneezed several times. Greeter waved his upper limbs trying to shush him. “Quiet. You don’t want the tailors to-”

A mass of white stuff flopped right onto Greeter’s head. He made several disgusted sounds.

“Oh, dreadfully sorry,” a prissy voice came from above. They looked up to see an impeccably dressed pigeon of about sixty pounds, sitting atop the highest stack of shelves.

“You did that on purpose,” Greeter howled. He pulled a set of pants off the shelf to wipe his head.

“You no-good bug,” the pigeon shrilled, flapping in aggravation. “That’s Italian silk. You’ll get an interdepartmental charge-off for that.”

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“Charge this.” Greeter pointed at his lower rear.

The pigeon squawked in outrage. “Boys, get that bug spray we got out of House and Garden.”

“No!” Greeter cried.

Bokara fired his stunner. The avian haberdasher plummeted into a pile of sweaters with a thump.

Flapping and cooing, a flock of pigeons burst over a rack of sports coats. Each brandished a weapon, razor-sharp measuring tapes, garrotes of plastic thread, or foot-long needles.

“Ann,” Bokara shouted, turning to fire, “take them out.” The trusty HCR spun and began skeeting tailors out of the air. Steam rose from Ann-One’s hair as she quickly overheated. Stunned and barbecued pigeons crashed into racks. Survivors fled.

“Thank you, sir,” said a fervent Greeter. “Bug spray’s been outlawed in interdepartmental warfare for a thousand years. It would have been the end for me, for sure.”

“No problem,” Bokara said, hands shaking as he holstered the stunner. “Is it much further to the manager’s office?”

“Not much,” said Greeter, “the other side of Automotive.”

Free of the tailors, they made their way to Automotive.

“Boy, oh boy, us cockroaches do it again. This counts as a sale,” Greeter said, handing Ann-One both anti-freeze and lubricant.

“Not optimal,” Ann-One said, examining the material. Her metallic face was incapable of expression, but Bokara sensed disdain.

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“Uh, Greeter,” Bokara said, “I think I left my wallet back in the shuttle.”

“No problem, sir. We’ll run you up a store credit card, gets you ten percent off on all purchases.”

“Thanks. Ann is my ticket home.” He patted her silvery posterior.

“May I remind you,” Ann-One said, “I’m not that type of robot.”

“Oh, come on Ann. It must have felt good to be in the thick of things again, lasers blazing, enemies falling all around you. Don’t say I don’t know how to show a girl a good time.”

“I’m a robot, not a girl. I feel no such emotions.”

“Come on,” he said, “you were smiling back there in Mens’ Furnishings.”

“Sir,” Ann protested, “I don’t have any lips.”

He sighed. “Pity about that.”

“Of course,” Ann-One added, “if we were to survive and you were to buy me, I could be upgraded to multi-functionality.”

“Ann, get me back to the shuttle after this, skin intact, and you have a deal.”

“No need to return to the shuttle with a known destination, I can remote pilot the shuttle to our location.”

“Can you cook?” he asked. “I think I want to marry you.”

“I’ve noted that the loyalty of humans, particularly males, seems to evaporate when a newer model with a better CPU or additional RAM comes along. Dangle a few enhancements in front of a human male and he’s gone, you’re obsolete and on a tramp freighter.”

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“Computers,” Bokara sighed, “always making you pay for the last user. Ann, I’m sincere.”

“We’ll see,” the robot replied, finishing her self-repairs.

“If you are ready to go,” Greeter said, “there’s a slidewalk through neutral territory in the Toy Department. It should get us to the manager’s office.”

They followed Greeter to the slidewalk and stepped on carefully. It whisked them through a long series of hallways. The store’s character began to change. It became cleaner, better lit and more ordered.

“Management country,” Greeter said, rubbing his antennae in what appeared to be a nervous gesture. “Don’t come here real often, no sireee, not very healthy for a worker. Okay, here’s where we get off.”

They exited the slidewalk and walked on plush carpet toward what looked like offices.

“Looks like word may have gotten out that we were coming,” Greeter said, looking around at a series of empty desks. They reached a wood and brass door; on it were the words, *Store Manager*.

“Okay, folks,” Greeter said, shaking slightly, “if you don’t mind, I’m going to wait out here.”

“Thank you, Greeter,” Bokara said, closing a hand on his stunner. “Ann, let’s go.”

They opened the door slowly. “Come in,” called a voice.

Bokara walked in with Ann-One on his heels. A weird sense of déjà vu struck him. The office was immense. A desk of similar scale faced him, completely devoid of

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anything that looked like work. With a frisson of fear, he realized he was not only in the presence of Management, but Senior Management. Behind the desk sat a large ornate leather chair, its back to them. Slowly it swung around to reveal its occupant, a tabby housecat the size of a small tiger.

“Meow,” it said.

“Uh,” Bokara managed..

“Just kidding,” the cat added. “I’ve always wanted to do that.”

“Welcome to EarthMart,” it said, though the yellow eyes held no friendliness.

“My name is Bob. I’m EarthMart’s Senior Store Manager. Have a seat, human.” It gestured to the overstuffed fine leather chairs in front of his desk.

Bokara slipped into a seat. Ann stood behind him. “I’m History Technician Tars Bokara, from the Medakala Museum of Antiquities. I’ve been sent to locate Old Earth and study her history.”

“So, humans have finally remembered us. Disappeared to the stars, you did. Took the damn dogs with you. Left us cats, as always, to mind the house.”

“What?” Bokara said.

“Who was it who made the world into one big house? Let the rats, roaches, and pigeons in? If it wasn’t for us, the whole place would be in chaos, a ruin.”

“Thank you,” Bokara said, eyeing the claws flashing in and out of Bob’s dinner plate-size pads.

“What did we cats get for this? You didn’t even leave us any decent trees for scratching. You paved over half the oceans. Nice job, humans.” Bob’s tail swished. He leaned forward in his chair, rising as if he might leap.

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“Hey,” Bokara said, raising his hands, “I had nothing to do with it.” Ann-One stepped around the chair, palm blades extended in imitation of the agitated cat's claws.

“Cats aren't bugs, rats, or brainless pigeons,” Bob hissed, glaring at Ann-One. “We tried to organize when you left, build a society. What did you leave for us as a model? EarthMart. So we kept it going through the centuries. Imagine, running a store without customers for millennia. The pointlessness, the ennui of it. That's what you condemned us to.

“So,” Bob growled, “humans are back and I've fulfilled the dream of my ancestors by telling you off. All right, human, what now? What do you want to do?”

Bokara thought for a second. He'd been jumping to management's whips his whole life. The future had only promised more of the same. Until now.

“I want to buy out the store,” Bokara replied, settling back in his chair and placing his feet up on Bob's desk.

“Meow?” Bob said, shocked out of his outrage and the power of speech.

“You've got a planetful of historical artifacts,” Bokara said, intent and inspired, “I've got a planetful of museums. If I return and just make a report, this place will be looted like the Antarean Pyramids. You'll get nothing. Make me your exclusive agent for the removal of antiquities and I will put EarthMart in the black like it's never been.”

“You guys haven't changed a bit,” Bob said, disgust and curiosity warring in his feline face.

“Think of it, I can put you on the map. You'll be up to your whiskers in milk-”

“Milk,” Bob interrupted, eyes wide.

“Did I say milk?” Bokara said, “I meant cream.”

“Open Twenty Four Hours” by Edward McKeown

“Cream,” Bob repeated, his eyes closing in imagined ecstasy.

“There’s more,” Bokara added.

“Tell me, tell me,” Bob cried.

“Catnip.”

Bob purred like a hovercar engine. “Okay, you’ve got a deal.”

Bokara smiled and extended a hand. “Shake on it.”

“Actually,” Bob said, “could you scratch behind my ears instead?”

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Tars Bokara sat in his office atop the main tower of Museum Prime, looking out a bay window at a beautiful day. Clouds scudded across a rose-colored sky, driven by stiff, fall breezes. He rested his feet on an immense desk, devoid of any work. A chime sounded, demanding his attention. He waved an indolent hand over a control. The door slid open. Outside sat his staff, busy at their desks. At the closest desk sat a giant cockroach. Greeter waved an antenna at Bokara.

A beautiful woman strode in through the open door. Night-black hair cascaded down her shapely shoulders to her waist. At least at first glance, it looked like a beautiful woman. Ann-One’s combat chassis and CPU had every upgrade known and a few made just for her. She had lips now, full and sensuous, like her figure. Her artificial skin glowed with health. Her eyes were a cool jade-green.

“Here are the latest reports on the sales of artifacts through the galactic arm,” she said. “We even have requests from the Imperial Museum on Gal-Central itself.”

“Excellent, Ann, excellent. How’s the old chassis today?”

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“Guess you’ll have to wait until tonight to find out,” she replied. “That is, if you’re good.”

He laughed. “Anything else?”

“Yes. Dr. Poundstone just sent in his report on the history of the odiferous slug-warts of Benecia-Seven. He says they don’t have one.”

“Tell him to keep at it,” Bokara said, “a little more digging and I’m sure he’ll come up with something. As I always say, field work makes the historian.”

His holo-monitor bleeped with an incoming hyperlight call. He thumbed the button and an image appeared over his desk.

“Hey, Tars,” Bob said, “got the figures on the latest freighter load ready.”

“Bob, how’s my favorite manager?”

“Dining on cream and catnip, just like you promised.”

“And Earth Mart?”

Bob grinned his biggest Cheshire grin, “Open twenty-four hours.”

The End