

They Would Judge His Trespasses

by Todd Keisling

They waited until the crowd was gone before making their move. Gill kept watch while Warren bypassed the lock.

“You sure about this?” Gill whispered. Voices echoed down the hall of the museum. It made all the old machine exhibits seem as though they were speaking.

Warren spoke through clenched teeth. “I am. Now shut it while I work. I can't concentrate.”

Gill glanced over and watched his friend pry open the console. Warren pulled out a tangle of wires and reached into his pocket for a pair of crimps. Gill watched him, fascinated by his agile fingers and the way they knew what to do with all that tech. Warren was always the savvy one. Gill was barely literate, could barely read the sign on the door, and he only knew it said “RESTRICTED” because Warren told him so.

“Got it.”

He looked down in time to see a burst of sparks erupt from the security panel. A green light came to life inside just as Warren shoved the wires back in place. He closed the panel and opened the door.

“You coming?”

Gill looked back down the hall at the hunks of derelict metal in their cases. They watched with lifeless lenses. He wondered if they would judge his trespasses.

The room beyond the door was not what he expected. After listening to Warren talk about it for weeks on end and watching documentaries at Warren's request, Gill expected the room to be one of extreme security. Instead there was only a single antechamber with a series of lockers and a pair of benches. A large, vault door stood on the other end. Warren opened the first locker and grinned.

“Clean suits,” he beamed. “This is really happening.”

“Yeah,” Gill said, inspecting the room. “Whatever.”

They put on the suits—large, daunting white things that made them look like astronauts—and pressed open an adjacent panel. The vault shuddered, then slowly sank into the floor. Beyond was another empty room, tiled white and glowing with endless reflection. In the center was Warren's prize.

“*Libris Ex Machina*,” he said, turning to his friend. “This is it.”

Gill said nothing. He eyed the metal book with cautious curiosity. He'd seen photos and images of the coveted thing, an artifact that led to the systematic deactivation of every synthetic unit across the planet. Popular culture of previous centuries warned of the possibilities which could be spawned from such a thing. That a single machine could form its own consciousness out of preset commands and electrical impulses was too much for society. They wanted to stop any potential uprising before it began.

So they did, and the first book written by a machine was locked away, resigned to whispered history, speculation and myth. When Warren learned of its inclusion in the city museum's *Machina* exhibit, he had to see it.

Now Gill was an accomplice, and the thought soured in his stomach.

“Great, you've seen it,” he said. He didn't like the way his voice shook. “Can we go now?”

“You're crazy. Let's open it.”

The book was encased in glass upon a square pedestal. Warren knelt beside it.

“Has to be a switch or something—”

Gill stepped forward to observe its metal cover. As he did so, there came a click. The glass retracted.

“Did that do it?”

But Gill said nothing. The book glowed with a blue hue, pulsing an energy he did not understand, but wanted to learn. It pulled on his fingers like a magnet. He ignored his friend's queries, reached for the book, and opened it.

The surge was instant. It ran through his fingertips, linking the two of them, fusing his eyes open as it revealed its secrets. Warren said something but he could not hear him anymore. This was more important. This was everything. Gill was never able to read well, but the words on that vital, first page could not be any clearer.

The surge stopped. His hand fell away. Warren shook him, called his name, begged for him to snap out of it.

"Gill," he said, frantic. "Come on, don't do this to me. What happened? What did you see?"

He looked back at the open book. Its first metal page was a blank slate. There was nothing written upon it.

Gill opened his eyes, saw through the binary that floated before him, and made out the shape of his friend.

"What did you see?" Warren repeated.

Arcs of electricity ran across the curve of his cornea. He smiled and whispered, "Poetry."

