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PACKRAT

In a rocky canyon on the southern edge of Lion's territory, Packrat ran for its life.

Packrat was a small Construct, only a few metres tall, with a long silvery tail and a round fat body. Its 'fur' was made of steel and fibre-optic cables, a grey-brown colour to blend into the landscape, and its large metal ears twitched as it ran. Packrat wasn't big, but it was fast, and it leapt and scrambled over the loose stones as it tried to escape.

Behind it was a Construct no one had seen before.

Misko stared at it from her seat, strapped into Packrat's deck, while the crew worked and sweated and heaved to get more speed. The Construct chasing them wasn't big like Lion, or even Wolf or Puma. But it charged towards them in a terrible way, as if its anger made it bigger. It

had a wide head with flaring nostrils, a long thick neck, four strong legs with fierce claws, a tail that ended in a heavy club, and two stubby wings on its back. The wings were almost useless and should have looked silly – but all Misko felt as she stared at it was fear.

On board Packrat, Tinker bellowed orders and glanced back nervously. Tinker was the Chief, and Misko knew he would get them out of trouble. He always did. Short and round, with a wide brown moustache, he looked a bit like a rat himself, and sometimes joked about it. He was always joking.

Except now.

“I reckon it’s Dragon,” he muttered.

“How can it be?” asked his second in command. “It’s too small. And why would Dragon be all the waydown here? And isn’t Dragon painted all red and green?”

They raced over a small hill and charged down the other side, back into the canyon. The Construct followed. It *did* look like a dragon, Misko thought. But it wasn’t brightly painted. It was pale grey, with black markings. Those were the colours of Jackrabbit, another Construct from further west...

“What do they even *want*?” Tinker demanded. “We’ve not nicked anything of theirs, have we?”

The rest of the crew shook their heads.

It made no sense. Packrat wasn’t a threat to anyone. These lands belonged to Lion. Packrat was just a bodger, a tiny Construct that scurried between townships, trading for parts and food. Everyone smiled when Packrat turned up with new trinkets and bits and bobs, ready to buy and sell and then be on their way.

“Scurry!” shouted Tinker. “Scurry, little Packrat!”

Misko remembered she was supposed to be helping. She closed her eyes. Around her, or below her, she could feel the beat of Packrat’s metal heart: *boom-boom, boom-boom, boom-boom*. The song of Packrat. Like all Constructs, Packrat’s power came from the crew themselves. Misko could feel it. She poured her own faith into it.

Scurry, little Packrat! Scurry!

Packrat bounced and jostled and speeded up with a burst of energy. But behind them, the terrible enemy kept going. Its crew were hidden. Packrat’s deck was open to the sky, but Dragon’s had a heavy metal cover over the top. Somehow, the fact that they couldn’t see *who* was chasing them was even more scary...

“Aim for the Narrow!” shouted Tinker. “We’ll try to lose them there!”

The crew concentrated, and Packrat skidded and

slipped through a tiny gap between two tall columns of stone. Dragon chased. The gap was so tight that it barely made it through, and its metal sides screeched as they scraped the rocky walls. But it didn't stop – and now it was *gaining*. Misko could hear its thudding claws close behind. *Scurry, little Packrat! Scurry!*

“Hold tight!” shouted Tinker. “Hold—”

Then a shadow flitted overhead, and something *crashed* into the enemy and knocked it sideways. Misko yelped. Packrat kept running, but behind them, Dragon had been thrown to the ground by ... by...

“What's *that* now?” muttered Tinker.

Something was hammering at Dragon's side, a Construct even smaller than Packrat but somehow ferocious. Its shape was hard to make out. It had a heavy head and long tusks like a boar. But hadn't it flown down over them? Dragon twisted and struck back, and the new Construct went tumbling but landed well. And now its head looked different – a long muzzle, pointed ears, sharp teeth. A wolf?

Packrat stopped. Misko knew they should run, use this distraction to escape. But what was going *on*? Dragon paused. It didn't seem to know either. Before it could recover, the strange new Construct leapt at its back and

gripped with sharp claws and teeth, holding tight.

“Now!” bellowed a fierce voice, and someone jumped off the Construct's deck and landed on Dragon's back. It was a boy, and he was holding a metal device the size of a dinner plate with a cable stretching behind. He slapped it down on to the surface of Dragon's back and it stuck there.

“Clear!” he roared, scrambling back. There was an electrical crackling noise, and a smell of burning, and then—

And then Dragon collapsed into the dirt like a puppet with its strings cut.

The boy rolled away and landed gracefully on the ground. His arm flashed in the sunlight, as if it was made of metal. He was panting but seemed unharmed. Behind him, his Construct settled and two more figures came out – a girl and a younger boy. The girl was flicking switches on a device in her hand.

“It worked!” the younger boy shouted.

The Packrat crew stared at them. They seemed to be the only crew – no adults, just them. And their Construct was very strange. Misko was sure it had been flying, but it didn't have wings now. And its body had changed, too. But that was impossible...

Tinker stepped up next to Misko and gazed at Dragon. “What in the moon...?” he murmured.

Something was happening. Dragon was still lying there, apparently broken, but now its armoured panels were falling away. The huge heavy head was shrinking, the tail collapsing in on itself. The legs became thinner, the back ones longer, and its ears stretched out. As the Packrat crew watched in amazement, the transformation completed. Dragon was gone, and another Construct lay there instead.

“It’s *Jackrabbit*,” said Tinker in astonishment.

Now they could see the deck and the crew sitting in their harness seats. But there was something odd about them. They were all wearing headsets, black loops over their heads, and they were blinking and looking around as if they’d just woken up.

A woman at the front peered up at them. Misko recognised her – it was the leader of the Jackrabbit Construct. She seemed bewildered. Misko didn’t understand – Jackrabbit was friendly, normally. Why would they attack? And how had they become *Dragon*?

And now Misko realised there was something else on deck. Three somethings. They looked like the mechanical Ants that roamed wild across the land, but different

somehow. Wild Ants were about a metre long, but these were almost twice as big, with grey arms and gripping pincers. They weren’t moving.

“Get them!” shouted the boy. He and the younger one leapt up on to the Jackrabbit deck and rushed towards the strange Ant machines, holding zapper guns, firing at one, then another, disabling them. But the third one had staggered back to its feet and started to move...

A hammer smashed into its head, and it slumped back to the deck. The Jackrabbit leader stared down at it, panting. Her face was a mix of disgust and fury.

For a few seconds, nobody moved. The scene fell silent – just the hard breathing of the crew, and the settling of gears and servos, and a thin wind through the canyon.

Tinker shook his head. “I don’t understand any of this,” he muttered. He called out, “What’s going *on*, Jackrabbit?”

And now, for the first time, the girl from the other Construct spoke.

She was thin, with brown skin and black hair pushed up in spikes. She was holding a device of some type – the kind of thing used by the Tocks, the people on board who made the Constructs work. She wasn’t tall, but there was

an aura of authority about her. Her eyes were glaring, her face drawn into a scowl.

She looked angrier than anyone Misko had seen in her whole life.

“War,” she said in a clear, hard voice. She checked her device and shut it down, then stared up at Tinker and the Packrat crew.

“What’s going on is war.”