

DEXTRE'S PRICE

by Nate French

If it wasn't for Dextre, I wouldn't be here. Honest truth. You tend to remember the people who save your life, and feel a bit of gratitude.

Because of that, I was more than a little obliged when, many cycles later, the saddest looking cyborg I'd ever laid eyes on—Dextre had modified himself with cybernetics, but it didn't look as if it had gone very well—clambered up to my treehouse office and told me he believed someone was trying to kidnap him...

The beginning of the story goes back almost 20 cycles, when I first set up shop as a spy-for-hire. I had been commissioned by an anonymous individual to observe the eminent cybotics engineer, Dr. Archibald C. Schucks, and report on the enhancements he was developing for a number of Logos entities. As the lab was too well-guarded for even a spider, my task was to infiltrate the Schucks' home and see what there was to find.

Still new to the spy trade, I made what can most forgivingly be described as a rookie mistake.

Entering the scientist's home was easy enough. I hung out—no pun intended—above the porch until someone went outside, and I scurried in before the automatic door slid shut.

The inside of the Schucks' household was immaculate. The walls were slick, polished by some sort of pineapple-scented (blech!) high-tech cleaning agent that made it difficult to keep my eight-legged footing. I scrambled back to the upper edge of the doorframe and looked out across the room.

It was a long, narrow, high-tech kitchen. Metallic appliances that seemed too pristine to be

involved with something so menial as chopping and cooking were efficiently integrated with the walls, counters, and cabinets. Cold, shiny, oh-so-shiny surfaces. Ceiling fans. That's fans, plural, all spinning in unison. There was a small dining area—table for two—at the other end of the room, behind which I saw an office featuring several computer monitors, keypads, interface panels, and a drafting desk. That was where I needed to be.

But there, sitting motionless on a chair beneath the table, was a spider's sworn nemesis: Robocat.

What's a Robocat? According to the Logos engineers, it's "the house-pet of the future." All the benefits of the standard cat, with no need for litter and no clawed-up furnishings. It cuddles, it purrs, it catches gruens and mice and bugs.



And this one had perked up, trotted across the kitchen floor, and was gazing at me with hungry, Æmber-enhanced eyes.

This was going to be tricky. Normally, a spider would be able to waltz across a ceiling as if it were a dance floor. However, the overly pineapple-glazed surfaces of the Schucks' kitchen, combined with the heavy circulation from the ceiling fans, made such a crossing perilous. I'd need to employ a bit of a safeguard: webs. I used a strand to connect a tether to the ledge above the door, and leapt up to the corner of a ceiling panel where it connected to the wall. My thought was to use my webbing as a safety line, and cross the slippery ceiling, tile by treacherous tile.

Such was my mistake. The Æmber in the Robocat's eyes glimmered, and I heard a loud whirring from the direction of an adjacent hall. "Auto-Vac 5150, online," a dry mechanical voice announced. A moment later a hovering, self-propelled vacuum cleaner poked around the corner and paused in the doorway, scanning the room. It seemed the fibers in my webbing had activated the home's pest-intruder alert, and the cleaning procedure was engaged.

The Auto-Vac 5150 glided across the room, pausing to dart down at the base of the sink. Its extension hose snaked out and gobbled up a string of fallen bread crumbs.

Then, it turned its unnatural sensors my way.

For every person who is scared of spiders, know this: we spiders are at least ten times more terrified of vacuum cleaners.

As it approached, I retreated, back along my web, hoping to hide at the top of the door.

But I was in the Auto-Vac's sights, and it would not be denied. The machine approached slowly. My options narrowed. I planted several hastily spun strands of webbing along the doorframe, hunkering down to fight the intake. The vacuum came level with my eyesight, an ironclad devil from the mind of a mad inventor. My legs strained against the pull of the whirring, inevitable engine.

It may have only been my imagination, but at the time I could have sworn I saw the Robocat, peering up at us from the floor, lick its mechanical lips.

The Auto-Vac was only inches away, and the pull was growing impossible to fight. Holding on was no longer an option, so I let go, jumped, and clung fast to the tip of the vacuum's hose, above and behind its deadly maw.

The home's A.I. system—for lack of a better term—freaked out. The lights on all the panels in the kitchen began to flash, the ceiling fans accelerated to their highest setting, and the Robocat was mewling like you wouldn't believe. The hovering vacuum, myself on board, spiraled down toward the cat, which reared up on its hind legs to swat at me.

I closed my eyes, praying to the Architects that I would come back in a favorable form, and braced for the worst. My exact prayers weren't answered, but at that moment the door slid open and the young boy Dextre—eight cycles? nine?—came back inside, saw the commotion, and called out, "Computer! Full pause!"

The effect was instantaneous. Robocat froze in mid-swipe, eyes suddenly dim. The Auto-Vac stopped thrashing about and the intake shut off, but its anti-grav safeguard prevented it from crashing to the floor and damaging itself. Even the ceiling fans stopped.

"What in the seven pits of Dis is going on in here?" Dextre muttered, and then, as he looked more closely at the Auto-Vac, noticed me hanging on for dear life. "Really guys? All this ruckus over a spider?"

Robocat's Æmber eyes looked abashed. "Here, spidey-spidey," Dextre sang, holding out his hand. Trusting my ability to read people in these situations, a skill all spiders develop at an early age, I scurried forward onto his open palm. He brought me close to his face, studying my colors. "Far out!"

"I suppose I should thank you most kindly for saving me from my apparent doom," I said.

"Whoa! You can talk?" I gave the boy credit for not dropping me.

"Sure. As can you."

"Are you a robot? One of Dad's new toys?" he asked me.

"No, I'm a real spider."

From the look on his face, I couldn't determine whether he was surprised, enchanted, or disappointed. Probably all three.



"So who do you think is trying to kidnap you? And why?" I had been expecting something like this for a while.

"Remember what happened to Dad?" Dextre asked in reply. "I think it's happening again."



I spent plenty of time in that house over the next few weeks. The job itself was slow, as most surveillance jobs tend to be. There was one perk, however: I got to know young Dextre.

It was hard to not feel sorry for him. He spent most of his time alone, pushing toy action figures on the floor, making up adventures about heroes and villains. His mother had passed away when he was an infant, and Archibald was a professional scientist who worked long hours in the lab. Dextre cried in the morning when Dad left for work, and when he came home at night and the boy wanted to play or hear a story, his father was often too tired, too busy, or both.

So I talked to the boy. In part to while away the long, empty hours when Dr. Schucks wasn't around and in part because I felt bad.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" I asked one rainy afternoon.

He was playing with toy robots on the floor. They were seeking to rescue one of their brethren from a large web I had spun for Dextre in the corner of the room the day before.

"A cyborg. Like Dad."

Now that was interesting. I knew that Dr. Schucks worked in the field of cybotics; I did not realize that he had also been enhancing himself, and there was nothing in the notes I had copied from the home office that would suggest such behavior. Generally, when people kept their enhancements a secret, there was a reason for it.

"Do you know what he's doing to himself?"

"He's making himself stronger. Faster. Smarter. To fight the bad guys when he's done." I wasn't sure if this was the children's version, as explained by his dad, or a story the boy had dreamed up himself.

"What bad guys?"

"The ones who come into the house every couple weeks to check on him."

Apparently, my client wasn't the only one interested in Dr. Archibald C. Schucks.



"Are the bad guys back?"

"Heh. 'Bad guys.' I'm an adult now. I know that they were Martians."

I nodded, wondering what else he knew.

"But yes, they've been coming around to check on me," Dextre continued. "To see if my enhancements are ready, as they say. Not the same ones that came to check on Dad when I was a kid. But close enough."



I had seen the abduction, such as it was, and it wasn't exactly what Dextre had been led to believe.

After maintaining my surveillance for a couple of weeks, I had grown familiar with the patterns of life in the Schucks' home. I knew that Dr. Schucks would sometimes talk shop via cyberlink with his colleagues before retiring for the night, and I had set up above the mirror in his night-chamber, hoping to eavesdrop on any such conversation.

During a long, obscure discussion regarding the merits and drawbacks of a variety of different neurotransmission fluids, everything changed.

There was an explosive flash outside the window, followed by a low, murmuring hum, and an eerie, sickly green light seemed to creep into the room.

"I've gotta run," Dr. Schucks announced to his colleague, and cut the connection.

Moments later, a section of the wall began to glow with a similar green light, and three squat, beady-eyed Martian soldiers, armed with ray guns, stepped through.

"You have failed us, Doctor." They spoke as one.

"I need more time." Archibald stood up from his desk and opened his hands to stress the point.

"We have gifted you the *Æ*MBER, as requested by Ozmo, and you have squandered it. Where is the weapon?"

"There is no weapon. Yet. I need more time."

"If there is no weapon, there is no time. By Martian law, ordinance 1004381.2, we may now name our price."

"This is my home. Martian law has no jurisdiction here."

"Under Martian enforcement, there is only Martian law. We name our price: Dextre." The hairs on the back of my spider-legs stood up.

"I'm not giving you my son. Name a different price."

"Martian law, ordinance 1004387.6. Once a price has been named, it cannot be changed, only delayed."

"Great. How do I delay the price? And can we make that an indefinite delay?"

"Martian law, ordinance—"

"Skip the damn ordinance and get to the point."

"A price can only be delayed until it has reached full maturity. And only by full surrender of the indebted."

"What does that mean."

"It means we take you, now, and come back for Dextre when he becomes an adult."

"You can't just—"

"Yes, Doctor, we can." The lead Martian raised its ray-gun.

"No, no, don't shoot. I don't want to traumatize the boy. I'll come peacefully."



"You always have been wise."

Two of the Martians stepped forward, one to each side of Dr. Schucks, and latched on to his wrists with Martian laser-coils. As they led him toward the glowing wall and (I presume) the Martian ship beyond, the doctor called out to me, with words that I will never forget:

"Spider – I know you're there. I was the one who commissioned you and set up your contract to watch my home, knowing my son would need you. Do what you can to protect him, and all that I have discovered is yours."



It was the same kitchen, only now it was mine, inherited from Dr. Schucks. Well-kept, and still shiny and meticulous after all these years. Robocat was a faithful friend, and the Auto-Vac had been upgraded to a safer, superior model. Same table, same chairs, same ceiling fans. But I was a much different spider, thinking back on how I had gotten here.

Dextre was gone. Don't worry, the Martians didn't get him. I had nearly 20 cycles to plan—and wasn't about to let that happen.

After the abduction of his father, I had helped Dextre from afar, as a spider is best situated to do. Downplaying the exact details as to what had occurred—to avoid scaring the boy—I contacted his aunt, so that he would have an adult in his life. I forged documents in his father's name to ensure that he was well-situated among the Logotarians and received a proper education. I helped him through the let-down of his first round of cybernetic enhancements, which without fail do not live up to the magical, transformative expectations that young cyborgs often carry.

When the Martians started coming around again, as I knew they would, we did what we had to do. With their spaceships and ray-guns and mysterious technology, there was only one surefire means of protecting Dextre from abduction: he would have to join an archon and gain its protection.

It was difficult, at first, finding him a suitable place. Dextre is not a warrior, not an athlete, not even a scientific genius. He was a cyborg-in-progress, who had not yet even begun to tap the potential of his modifications. Most archons would not even give him a second look.

But not all archons are single-mindedly obsessed with winning the strange ritualized contest surrounding the Vaults. Some feel that opening a single Vault with a surprising band of misfits, outcasts, and underdogs will make its contents far more valuable than what they'd find in dozens of different Vaults that were taken with a team of world-beaters. They believe that the way a Vault is opened is somehow related to what's inside. In short, some archons find value in hard-luck cases like Dextre. Misa, Scavenger of the Fragile Garden, was such an archon. She felt that Dextre was the perfect fit for her team, and he has traveled with her ever since.

And so the story concludes, happily enough, if not entirely happy. But one fact still haunts me.

The Martian price remains unpaid.

